Mediate Words: Translation, Nationalism, and Religion in the Works of Robert Browning and B. Kojo Laing

Submitted to the Faculty of English Language and Literature (University of Oxford) for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Michaelmas Term 2020

Joseph Philip David Hankinson
Balliol College

Abstract

This thesis mediates comparative encounters between two authors *themselves* interested in mediating between different linguistic and cultural communities. By reading the Victorian British poet Robert Browning and the twentieth-century Ghanaian poet and novelist Kojo Laing alongside one another, and by allowing the numerous and surprising points of similarity, congruence, and connection between them to organise critical reading, the three main chapters of this thesis explore the affiliative range of literary texts outside of their 'format of habitual connection'. This entails developing a comparative criticism attuned to the ways in which *congruent* contexts (times of nation-building, tensions between liberalism and imperialism) and *shared* contexts (Anglicanism, English as a 'global', imperial language) relate to congruent and shared stylistic techniques (multilingualism and grotesque comedy, for instance). It also entails a revised notion of 'world literature' that reflects how a text's tendency to gesture towards interrelationships past national borders might remain in tension with a reticence or uncertainty about the ways in which this gesturing can overlook local difference. Proceeding from an analysis of both authors' translational desire to stretch the English language through the incorporation of foreign linguistic elements (Chapter One), and their different but related tendencies to interrogate the limits of nationalist discourse and national geographies (Chapter Two), to their shared interest in the relationship between religious and spiritual affiliative communities and comic and grotesque literary styles (Chapter Three), this thesis explores the manifold junctures between Laing's and Browning's texts—and, indeed, junctures between different ways of reading them. What emerges is a literary cartography capable of reflecting the ways in which texts that themselves attempt to think beyond the confines of national borders, cultural limits, and linguistic communities relate to one another.

Table of Contents

Abstract i

Acknowledgements iii

List of Figures iv

Introduction 1

Chapter One

‘this world of languages touching’: Translation and Mediation 59

Chapter Two

‘multilingual babblers’: The Limits of Nationalism 123

Chapter Three

‘Friendly Opposites’: Religion, Affiliation, and Comedy 188

Conclusion 251

Bibliography 266

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my warm gratitude to Matthew Reynolds for his patient and generous supervision, to Annmarie Drury and Graham Riach for the depth and rigour of their engagement with this project, and to Seamus Perry, David Russell, Matthew Bevis, and Elleke Boehmer for advice along the way. I would also like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of my parents; and to thank Georgia, without whom this would not have been possible.

List of Figures

Figure 1 B. Kojo Laing, *Godhorse* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), p. 12; Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poetical Works*, ed. by Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 144. 77

Figure 2 'Godhorse', HEB 33/3, Heinemann Educational Archive, University of Reading. 84

Figure 3 'Wall', HEB 33/3, Heinemann Educational Archive, University of Reading. 85

Figure 4 'One is Kwesi one is Kwame', HEB 33/3, Heinemann Educational Archive, University of Reading. 85

Figure 5 B. Kojo Laing, *Godhorse* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), p. 29; *The Complete Works of Robert Browning with variant readings and annotations*, ed. by Roma A. King Jr., Park Honan, Jack W. Herring, and Allan C. Dooley, 17 vols (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, and Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 1969-2011), vol V, p. 163. 89

INTRODUCTION

If there is a warning implicit in Robert Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto'—first published in *Men and Women* in 1855—it is that Andrea's failures are linked to 'the eternal middle distance to which he is confined':[1]

> Too live the life grew, golden and not grey,
> And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt
> Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.
> How could it end in any other way?
>
> (ll. 168-171)[2]

As is often the case in Browning's poetry, diction and rhythm are an important part of what is being said. The word 'grange', for example, itself contains the idea of 'range' that Andrea's four-walled confinement makes improbable. The strange rhythm and grammar of 'Too live the life' is shadowed by the more usual and properly iambic phrasing of 'to live the life'; as an adjective rather than a verb, 'live' is static, fixed, and merely descriptive. Yet the suggestion of 'to live', of 'range', and of activity—the temptation represented by the sun—ensures that this argument about the necessity of a small 'world' is not too far away from a compelling counter-argument. Indeed, answers to Andrea's question—'How could it end in any other way?'—are implied throughout Browning's work, in which Andrea's 'middle distance' is frequently counterbalanced by a persistent desire to vault over the walls of one 'world' into another, and a determined belief that this would be a good thing to do.

---

[1] Judith Wilt, 'The Laughter of Caponsacchi', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1980), 337-357, p. 337.

[2] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning with variant readings and annotations*, ed. by Roma A. King, Jr., Park Honan, Jack W. Herring, and Allan C. Dooley, 17 vols (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, and Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 1969-2011); vol. VI, ed. by John C. Berky, Allan C. Dooley, and Susan E. Dooley (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996), p. 12.

137 years later, in his ‘Author’s Note’ to his third novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992), the Ghanaian poet and novelist Kojo Laing explains his integration of diverse words from a variety of different languages into his predominantly English texts:

> The motive behind them is to internationalise the English. I believe that more parochial areas of the world need a broadening of vocabulary—hence many of the words are repeated in my novels and poetry. Some are invented, most are direct translations from Akan and Ga and sometimes Hausa. It is usual in Ghana (with such a cosmopolitan mix of cultures) to intersperse one language with words from another. This ought to be done universally for the idea is to create one gigantic language.[3]

For Laing, things that are ‘parochial’—such as Andrea’s ‘grange’, or, in this case, linguistic nationalism—ought to be counteracted by a ‘broadening’, a ‘cosmopolitan mix of cultures’, a range of interspersed linguistic elements capable of showing the links that connect us into a universal community. ‘The thing was to free all the truths locked up in the different cultures,’ argues the narrator of Laing’s final novel, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (2006)—something Laing’s texts continually strive to accomplish.[4] Take, for example, the opening lines of the poem ‘Senior lady sells garden eggs’:

> I love the lit corners of your kerosine smile,
> your sympathy soft as new-boiled nkontommire
> no whines come between you and this world, and
> your large elbows take all the knocks possible. O
> senior lady sits in the rain, sells
> garden eggs with a sense of grace
> under a wide hat wider than all my markets[5]

The simile that posits an equation between the senior lady’s sympathy and the softness of ‘new-boiled nkontommire’—cocoyam or taro leaves that make up a traditional Ghanaian stew—locates her in a particular cultural context. Laing’s use of the plural form of the Twi

[3] B. Kojo Laing, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992), p. vi.
[4] Kojo Laing, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (Accra: Woeli, 2006), p. 365.
[5] Kojo Laing, *Godhorse* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), p. 8.

noun ‘kontomire’ itself demonstrates how a word can ‘come between’ the non-Ghanaian reader and ‘this world’. Yet the senior lady appears to transcend the limits of the market place: her hat is wider than it, her elbows appear capable of bearing a world’s worth of knocks, and her access to ‘this world’ is unhindered by ‘whines’. The word ‘nkontommire’, consequently, mediates the non-Ghanaian reader’s awareness of cultural difference, just as the senior lady’s ‘sense of grace’ mediates her own awareness of a world broader than her immediate surroundings. Paradoxically—recalling Laing’s belief that ‘parochial areas of the world need a broadening of vocabulary’—a word that appears to imply located culture serves the purpose of beginning the process of broadening a too parochial English.

These two writers, separated by a century and born at least five thousand kilometres apart, are themselves surprisingly difficult to keep separate. To read them alongside one another is to be regularly struck by points of connection, by proximities that collapse this distance in time and space, and put pressure on the theoretical and critical habits that would typically keep them separate. Part of this thesis’s intention is to take impetus from these uncanny similarities, and to allow the texts themselves to organise—and legitimise—their critical reception. This is to depart from the usual approach to comparative criticism, which, in contrast, often works by first deciding upon a category—such as ‘Magical Realism’, or ‘satire’—and then comparing a variety of texts in its light. Rather than pre-empt the texts with comparative categories in this way, this thesis takes as its point of departure the fact that Browning’s and Laing’s texts—when read together—themselves prompt comparison.

In the case of Browning and Laing however, it is more accurate to speak of *points* of departure. These include, for example, the fact that both Browning and Laing wrote poems which fix attention on Church doors, and both wrote texts that seek to undermine authoritarian rule. Or, indeed (as Chapter One shows), the fact that Browning’s body of work also evidences a desire to pluralise language. Like Laing, he incorporates into his texts a

variety of elements from different languages, 'internationalis[ing]' his English to the extent that G. K. Chesterton identified in him 'a tropical violence of taste, an artistic scheme compounded as it were, of orchids and cockatoos, which, amid our cold English poets, seems scarcely European.'[6] The emulation of 'the classical Arabic *qaṣīda* or ode' in 'Through the Metidja',[7] the use of Italian and Latin in *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), Classical Greek in *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), and Hebrew in *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884) all demonstrate that Browning shares Laing's interest in proving, in Annmarie Drury's words, 'that the English language can be stretched'.[8]

In addition to this shared emphasis, Browning's and Laing's texts evidence a comparable treatment of narrative, form, and voice. As Chapter Two shows, both bodies of work foreground groups and plural voices, and narrative patterns which involve both imaginary and real journeys and migrations, and which stress connections between places and communities. In *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850), for instance, Browning's speaker is '[s]ucked along in the flying wake' (l. 779) of a Christ-like apparition, traversing great distances in order to witness different kinds of congregation in three different countries, while in *Search Sweet Country* (1986) Laing recounts how the 'witch' Adwoa Adde 'flew over Accra'—'forced into relationship with everything'—in order to keep watch over her 'spiritual children'.[9] These sorts of similarities across both bodies of work are remarkably frequent. In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning opens up the dramatic monologue to 'vibrations of the general mind' (I, l. 836), giving voice to the crowd in 'Half-Rome' and 'The Other Half-Rome', while in *Search Sweet Country* government officials are confronted

---

[6] G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), p. 6.
[7] Hédi A. Jaouad, *Browning Upon Arabia: A Moveable East* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 99.
[8] Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 141.
[9] Robert Browning, *The Poems*, 2 vols, ed. by John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (London: Penguin Books, 1981), vol. I, p. 482; B. Kojo Laing, *Search Sweet Country* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2011), p. 39.

vocally by a crowd 'representing all shades of Accra'.[10] Both writers, too, are often read in terms of their blending of distinctions between different kinds of writing. Browning has been considered a novelist-poet, and Laing a poet-novelist. Take, for instance, Pietro Deandrea's foregrounding of the 'lyrical dimension' of Laing's narratives (which are characterised by their use of 'a wide range of typical poetic devices'),[11] and Oscar Wilde's famous claim that 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning', and that he 'will be remembered' not as a poet but 'as a writer of fiction, as the most supreme writer of fiction, it may be, that we have ever had.'[12]

This is not to say, however, that there are not significant differences between both writers' texts. There are, for instance, generic differences: Laing's texts are predominantly characterised by the influence of speculative genres such as science fiction, magical realism, and fantasy, while Browning's are predominantly characterised by what J. Hillis Miller calls a 'strong feeling for the density, roughness, and vitality of matter'.[13] Yet differences such as these enhance, rather than resist, the work of comparison. It is suggestive that even within these differences there are important points of overlap. For example, placing both authors together serves to bring out Laing's materiality and Browning's speculative tendencies. This in turn permits an appreciation—developed further in Chapter Three—of the ways in which both authors' spiritual and religious concerns are complemented by their often grotesque comic styles. Indeed, one of the reasons for these overlaps is that both authors interrogate the separation of inner and outer worlds, mental speculation and external materiality—an

---

[10] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. VII, p. 37; Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 55.
[11] Pietro Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 73.
[12] Oscar Wilde, *Intentions: The Decay of Lying, Pen Pencil and Poison, The Critic as Artist, The Truth of Masks* (New York: Brentano's, 1905), p. 104.
[13] J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 123.

interrogation which complements their shared interest in the points of connection, communication, and exchange between different linguistic and cultural communities.

Critical identifications tend to keep writers like Browning and Laing separate. Laing is profitably situated as a Ghanaian postcolonial writer, or a producer of 'world' literature from the 'periphery', a West African magical realist, often placed in conversation with other West African writers, such as Ben Okri and Syl Cheney-Coker.[14] Browning, conversely, is a canonised Victorian poet, writing from the centre of imperial power, and frequently positioned in relation to other Victorian writers.[15] These identifications have proved essential in elaborating both writers' places within, and interactions with, their immediate literary contexts, and have generated ways of reading capable of accentuating many important facets of their writing. I make extensive use of these kinds of readings throughout this thesis. And yet the many stylistic and thematic similarities between Browning's and Laing's texts raise a sort of cartographic problem: critics have developed useful ways of locating both Browning and Laing on the map, but would encounter difficulties if they were to attempt to discern how they might relate to each other, even as their texts themselves invite comparison. This thesis attempts to contribute to ongoing work to develop solutions to this kind of problem.

The question remains, however: why should these many points of similarity be taken seriously? As I will show throughout this introductory chapter, part of the answer to this question involves an expanded version of what Edward Said, in his essay 'Secular Criticism', calls 'affiliative' criticism.[16] What I would like to stress at this moment, however, is the importance of interrogating the habitual limitations of different fields and disciplines of

---

[14] See, for example, Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings*; and Ato Quayson, 'Magical Realism and the African Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. by F. Abiola Irele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159-176, p. 165.
[15] For exemplary treatments of Browning in relation to other Victorian authors, see Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Miller, *The Disappearance of God*; and Drury, *Translation as Transformation*.
[16] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. 174-5.

literary study. These fields, in part as a result of institutional pressures, often represent themselves as closed systems, each with a set of rules and a strong sense of what belongs and does not belong. While these rules are undoubtedly a necessary part of scholarly work, they may occasionally deter or even blind us when it comes to tracing correspondences that exceed these boundaries. Far from arguing that these correspondences require that the rules be overturned, however, I propose simply that comparisons like the one developed here can help to emphasise that it is always worth paying attention to those instances where norms and rules are porous and partial, rather than fixed and inviolable. Indeed, Browning and Laing, as the following chapters show, consistently challenge the representation of languages and nations as closed systems—perhaps this seeking after what traverses and transcends boundaries and limits is something criticism itself can learn from.

In this way, what I am pursuing here is what Said terms 'interference', a 'crossing of borders and obstacles,' between well-established and specialised critical discourses.[17] Interference, in this sense (as the following chapters show), is at the heart of both Browning's critique of dominant orthodoxies, and Laing's attempts to imagine a cosmopolitanism that is not simply a mask for different kinds of imperialism and conquest. There is, therefore, a deliberate attempt to maintain a congruence between the kind of politics I would like to accentuate in both writers' texts, and the methodological work that brings both writers together.

Networks of Affiliation

[17] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile: and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 145.

This thesis's central premise is that both Laing and Browning see in fiction and poetry a means of challenging the parochialism of certain cultural attitudes, and of effecting interference between artificially separated communities, languages, and discourses. In Said's terms, they contest a type of 'affiliation' that 'surreptitiously duplicates the closed and tightly knit family structure that secures generational hierarchical relationships to one another.'[18] For Said, relationships of filiation are grounded in family relationships, direct genealogy, and lines of inheritance. Relationships of affiliation, in contrast, mark the transition from these filiative ties to 'a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship', a new geometry of transpersonal relation.[19] Affiliative relationships can, however, involve the replication on a broader scale of filiative ties, often including notions such as a natal culture, a sense of family-belonging, and a shared heritage. The kind of affiliative relationship Laing and Browning contest is one that attempts in this way to 'reproduce the skeleton of family authority supposedly left behind when the family was left behind'.[20] Both writers are troubled by models of affiliation based upon a fixed and often nationalist notion of who belongs and who does not belong; Browning's texts are often primarily engaged in critiquing these models, while Laing's attempt to develop, on the foundation of critique, networks of affiliation which remain fluid, open, and capable of integrating difference without eradicating it. What is essential is that both writers demonstrate a recurring interest in the porosity of, and exchange between, what appear to be closed systems of shared rules and codes—most prominently languages and nations.

At its most basic level, then, this thesis places together two writers who both bring considerable imaginative force to thinking past the 'four walls' that make their immediate

[18] Said, *The World*, p. 21.
[19] Said, *The World*, p. 19.
[20] Said, *The World*, p. 22.

'worlds'. In the chapters that follow, I attempt to demonstrate that both Laing and Browning consistently employ certain aesthetic strategies, formal choices, and stylistic techniques, all framed by an interest in the ways literature can mediate between culturally and linguistically distinct communities of thought and feeling. I also attempt to demonstrate the value of placing their texts in conversation—that doing so enriches our understanding of the centrality of mediation to both writers' works—and of a literary criticism equally interested in mediating between communities of thought and feeling. Indeed, the following chapters show that reading both authors together provides a novel angle from which to survey what Said calls 'the dialectic between [an] individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which [a writer's] work is a contribution.'[21]

But why is it the case that these two authors, writing at different times and in different places, appear to share an interest in affiliative relationships? One explanation involves what the Japanese literary critic and philosopher Kōjin Karatani calls the repetition of structure, as opposed to the repetition of an actual (and historically singular) event. Whenever history appears to repeat itself, Karatani suggests, 'what is repeated is not the event itself but rather the structure. In a process of structural repetition, an event may at times also appear to be repeated. One should not be swayed by the similarity of historical events, however, for it is only the structure that recurs.'[22] Browning's interest in using Renaissance subjects to make oblique commentary on his contemporary political situation, and Laing's accentuation of recurrences—in *Big Bishop Roko*, the twenty-first-century Gold Coast City once again seeks a kind of independence from Europe—imply that both writers were themselves sensitive to these kind of structural repetitions.

---

[21] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 24.
[22] Kōjin Karatani, *History and Repetition*, ed. by Seiji M. Lippit (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. vii.

It is, moreover, one particular structural repetition that I am interested in here. Both authors, I propose, wrote during periods of transition marked both by nation-building and, significantly, by the emergence of a crisis grounded in the tension between liberalism and imperialism. Karatani, following Immanuel Wallerstein, views the decades around the 1870s, particularly in Western Europe (though with global ramifications), as a period characterised by tension between liberalism and imperialism; a similar transition then occurs in the twentieth century, with the decades around the 1990s being a period characterised by tension between liberalism and a renewed ('neoliberal') imperialism.[23]

Around the 1870s, most obviously in Britain and France, liberalism—in Nathan K. Hensley's words—came up against the 'wayward meanings' generated by its own contradictions, particularly the 'curious intimacy between legality and harm' that characterised a doctrine of liberty inextricably rooted in violent imperial expansion.[24] Part of the reason for these 'wayward meanings' was a difficulty within the idea of nationhood. Matthew Reynolds, for instance, traces the emergence during the nineteenth century of a new 'doctrine of nationhood'—one which 'held that the borders of the "nation", a group of people supposedly united by common sympathies and capable of sustaining political independence, should coincide with those of the State.'[25] There is an important reason, however, why British poets such as 'Tennyson, the Brownings, and Clough did not blindly propagate such visions': as Reynolds continues, a commitment to what George Eliot (thinking about the effect of art) calls

> the 'extension of our sympathies', though in many ways it harmonizes with nationalism, must also in the end come into conflict with it, for the idea of distinct national identities entails, not only that the requisite sympathies should be shared by

---

[23] Karatani, *History and Repetition*, p. xi.
[24] Nathan K. Hensley, *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 5.
[25] Matthew Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse 1830-1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 25.

> the members of a group, but that they should be limited to that group alone. This contrariety was brought home to mid-nineteenth-century writers by the fact that they lived, not in a nation-state, but in a multinational empire: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The awkwardness of this amalgam became apparent as they observed, and occasionally in a small way participated in, the nationalist movements on the continent: above all, the Italian Risorgimento.[26]

The 'awkwardness' of the 'amalgam' referred to as a 'nation' was made even more explicit in the debates surrounding parliamentary reform in Britain in the late 1860s, and particularly the expansion of suffrage: the question of who ought to have a say in the election of representatives placed—as Chapter Two shows—significant strain on nationalist discourse. Affiliation and filiation, liberalism and imperialism, intra- and international communities and their representation: these constitute the contested terrain Browning navigated as a writer.

Laing, too, confronts similar contradictions, awkwardnesses, and 'wayward meanings'. Ghana itself—as the first sub-Saharan African State to gain independence from Europe—represents a historically unprecedented experiment in nation-building, one characterised by internal tensions, such as that between Kwame Nkrumah's pan-African emphasis on transnational community, and his consolidation of Ghana as an independent nation. As a result, post-independence governments and regimes struggled to balance exogenous and endogenous politics, just as they oscillated between democratic and authoritarian forms of power. In Ghana, a succession of military governments throughout the 1970s and 1980s (led respectively by Colonel Acheampong, Lieutenant-General Akuffo, and Flight Lieutenant Rawlings) were replaced by a multi-party system and democratic elections in 1992—the first of which Rawlings won—following a lengthy period of economic difficulty and the intervention of the International Monetary Fund. Despite the (apparent) popularity of Rawlings, by the late 1990s, as Paul Gifford notes, 'there was widespread

---

[26] Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse*, p. 26.

poverty with 70% of the population earning under US $1.00 a day.'[27] The promise of independence—Ghanaian self-rule, economic prosperity, liberal and socialist governance, pan-African solidarity—quickly generated its own 'wayward meanings': American-backed military rule, foreign financial intervention, widespread accusations of vote rigging, increased national isolation. These 'wayward meanings' were also the result of a doctrine of liberty inextricably entangled with imperial expansion, though in Ghana's case, this expansion was always foreign: freedom from colonialism meant a new form of conflict with the imperial power of the Global North. The 2000 general election demonstrates these tensions clearly. When Rawlings, on 31 December, realised that he had lost the second round vote, he declared—as Gifford reports—'that he did not believe in democracy'.[28] Eventually accepting the results and stepping down, Rawlings transferred power to his liberal rival John Kufuor, who, in his inaugural address, 'begged overseas donors for debt relief, warning that if Ghanaians did not see any democracy dividend, there would be an opening for unrest and more military intervention.'[29] Democracy derided on the one hand, and dependent on foreign financial aid on the other: Ghana, by the turn of the twenty-first century, was caught between contradictory discourses (both imperialist and liberal, authoritarian and democratic, nationalist and transnational).

What is often called the 'third generation' of West African writers—a generation with which Laing is often associated—emerged during this time. As Stephanie Newell argues, they 'moved away from discourses of "Africanness" in their work, choosing instead to develop hybrid literary styles and to highlight themes of migration, existential anguish, and cultural intermingling'.[30] Yet it is impossible to separate this shift from both the national and

---

[27] Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 4.
[28] Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, p. 19.
[29] Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, p. 19.
[30] Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 183.

the global political context. The impact of globalisation was felt everywhere. Indeed, George J. Sefa Dei begins his 2004 study *Schooling and Education in Africa* by drawing attention to precisely this new situation:

> [t]oday the forces of globalization are ever more upon us and the images are frightening for a world secure in its sense of complacency and innocence. Across the many geographical spaces and borders within our global transnational community local peoples are contending with the political, economic, ideological, cultural and spiritual consequences of global change. Arguably, this is a change that threatens to sweep every facet of life into an imposed imperial order.[31]

Both Laing and Browning, then, wrote during periods characterised by increasingly explicit tensions between liberalism and imperialism—nation-building and independence on the one hand, and forms of transnational domination on the other—by the opening of global markets, and the concentration of power in the Global North. In these contexts, affiliative relationships between cultures and linguistic communities represent an important site of contestation. The utopian possibilities suggested by Italian unification and Ghanaian independence come into conflict with imperialist models of international relations—and this conflict goes some way to explain both Laing's and Browning's tendency to interrogate kinds of community, to challenge the rules dictating what belongs and does not belong to a given community, and (most prominently in Laing's case) to postulate different ways of relating across borders, both linguistic and cultural.

They respond to these problems in different, but comparable, ways: structurally congruent (in terms of theme, form, and style) despite their predominantly historically distinct contexts. Italian unification and Ghanaian independence, Colonel Acheampong's and Napoleon III's combination of liberalisation and authoritarian rule, changing dynamics

---

[31] George J. Sefa Dei, *Schooling and Education in Africa: The Case of Ghana* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), p. 1.

between religious practice and religious institutions—these congruent contexts form the background for each of this thesis's chapters. The many striking points of similarity between Laing's and Browning's aesthetic techniques are in part the consequence of these congruent contexts. Yet these different historical contexts—while being structurally comparable—are also linked by the lasting legacies of British imperialism, colonial education policies, and the imposition of Anglican religious practice in the colonies.

As the following chapters will show, expanding what can be considered a shared context to include these structural repetitions enables networks of textual affiliation to emerge that would otherwise remain hidden. By paying close attention to both writers' contestation of different kinds of community, it becomes possible to contest critical habits that would prevent considering their texts as a community. It also permits different—otherwise suppressed—versions of Laing and Browning to appear: a Laing whose texts revel in a Browningesque materiality, for instance, and a Browning whose texts exhibit a Laingian blurring of borders, whether those between linguistic and cultural communities, or those between the abstract and the concrete. When read together, both writers emerge as affiliative thinkers dedicated to challenging and rearranging the rules that govern communities, and committed to drawing attention to the interstices between them.

What is important is the recognition that comparing Laing and Browning does not require abstracting their texts from their respective contexts. The chapters that follow seek to trace the various affiliations between the relationships each author's texts have to their immediate contexts. Moreover, it is also the case that, from several standpoints, the differences between twentieth-century African and nineteenth-century British literary production can be bridged by a single context. As Annmarie Drury demonstrates, with respect to English translations of Swahili poetry, specifically Victorian poetic standards survived well into the twentieth century. William Hichens's translations during the 1930s,

Drury shows, 'Victorianize' Swahili, endeavouring 'to make Swahili culture intelligible to English readers and to demonstrate that Swahili poetry is valuable *as* poetry.'[32] Hichens's 'conceptualization of the Swahili world as a Victorian world' involved proposing 'an anthology of Swahili poetry (in Swahili) for schools in East Africa' that would, he argued, represent 'for the Swahili-speaking peoples somewhat what Palgrave's "Golden Treasury" is for us.'[33] Admitting 'alterity to its atlas as no age had done before', Victorian poetry and culture—from this perspective—are difficult to separate from the poetry and culture of the African continent.[34]

Both Laing and Browning share, for instance, suspicion of cultural attitudes that can be traced back to the legacy of nineteenth-century British colonialism and its justification in political philosophy, and in particular what is often called its 'Enlightenment' thinking (which involves the universalisation of European experience). Though Browning contests these attitudes from within, and Laing from without, both oppose aspects of what Stefan Collini has called the 'Whig interpretation of history'—a still-surviving interpretation prevalent in Victorian intellectual culture, in which 'continuity and celebration are the key notes, there is no great caesura or impassable barrier between present and past, and all that is best continues as part of a living national heritage', a 'common heritage' indicative of the 'onward march of liberty' in Britain.[35] As the narrator of Laing's *Big Bishop Roko* suggests, the British characters of the novel 'thought they were organizing the universe, but all they were doing was organizing their own selfishness.'[36] Both also challenge, to borrow another of

---

[32] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 202.
[33] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 211.
[34] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 223.
[35] Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 4-6.
[36] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 306.

Collini's phrases, 'the accepted distribution of esteem' proper to this interpretation of history.[37]

While it is clear that Browning grew up within a society characterised by this 'accepted distribution of esteem', Laing's exposure to this ideology is less immediately obvious. Yet, as the eldest son of an Anglican priest—'the first African rector of the Anglican Theological College' in Ghana, and the 'provost of the Holy Trinity Cathedral from 1952 to his death in 1962'—Laing experienced from an early age the bonds between the soon-to-be-independent Gold Coast and British cultural hegemony.[38] This experience would be intensified when Laing, in the year of Ghana's independence, was sent to Scotland. M. E. Kropp Dakubu provides a useful account of this period:

> After five years at the Bishop's Boys' School in Accra, the eleven-year-old Laing was sent in 1957 to Scotland, where he became the charge of a clerical friend and associate of his father's, Richard Holloway, later bishop of Edinburgh. He spent two years in Bonhill Primary School, followed by five years at secondary school at the Vale of Leven Academy, both in the small town of Alexandria, Dunbartonshire, where he lived at first with Holloway's parents. From 1962 he lived with Holloway in Glasgow. Holloway's erudition and his circle of social activists and religious thinkers, which included Dame Lilias Graham, made a considerable impression on him. Laing received distinctions in English and history at secondary school and with Holloway's encouragement began to write poetry.[39]

'In secondary school', Kropp Dakubu notes, Laing 'had been an enthusiastic reader of the modern English classics and William Shakespeare'.[40] These formative years were spent surrounded by British culture and religious practices. The lasting influence of this experience can be felt even in Laing's final novel, in which a religious conflict between Bishops and Archbishops from Britain and Ghana (among other nations) is framed paratextually by

---

[37] Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination*, p. 19.

[38] M. E. Kropp Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing', in *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers: Third Series*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors and Reinhard Sander (Detroit and London: Gale Research, 1996), 140-149, p. 141.

[39] Kropp Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing', p. 141.

[40] Kropp Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing', p. 141.

biblical quotations at the end of each chapter. Because of these experiences, Laing himself connects his work with the process of ‘dragging two continents along’.[41] In some way forced to come to terms with British cultural attitudes, Laing’s writing attests to a persistent desire to contest the ways in which these attitudes often ignore, overlook, or even deliberately disregard Africa and African culture.

We can speculate that Laing’s experience in higher education might have contributed to his sense of the injustice of this disregard. Laing, a student at the University of Glasgow between 1964 and 1968, took a master’s degree in Political Science and History at a time when William James Millar Mackenzie was named James Bryce Professor of Government (later Politics). Mackenzie was appointed ‘special commissioner for constitutional development, Tanganyika, 1953’, and ‘constitutional adviser to Kenya, 1959’—describing his role as ‘trying to persuade the white settlers to take the money rather than fight.’[42] While at the University of Manchester he was also, in 1962, the vice-chair of the Bridges Committee on Training in Public Administration for Overseas Countries. Some of his publications, such as *Free Elections* (1958) and *Five Elections in Africa* (1959), involve the analysis of problems in ‘exporting electoral systems’.[43] Later, at the University of Glasgow, his interest in anthropology—a ‘lengthy section’ of his 1967 *Politics and Social Science* brings together ‘his thoughts on institutions as remote as African tribes and French insurance companies’[44]—may have appeared to Laing as somewhat rooted in nineteenth-century European ideas about the ‘remoteness’ of what is African from what is European. Mackenzie was, it is important to stress, a very well-liked and thoughtful researcher, with a broad and cosmopolitan interest in different cultures and political systems. In this sense he shares

[41] Cited in Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 188.
[42] Richard Rose, ‘William James Millar Mackenzie 1906-1996’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 101 (1999), 465-485, pp. 472-3.
[43] Rose, ‘Willian James Millar Mackenzie’, p. 473.
[44] Rose, ‘William James Millar Mackenzie’, p. 483.

Laing's will to think about communities and relationships that spill over national limits. And yet Laing's novels demonstrate an abiding desire to broaden further this interest: to develop more complex and inclusive affiliative networks, without ever falling back onto assumptions about African 'backwardness'.

Browning, too, had formative experiences living abroad. His childhood involved extensive exposure to other European languages and cultures, an exposure that would continue into adulthood. As Iain Finlayson notes, Browning had 'a mind that was constantly fattened by voracious reading at all levels in foreign and English literatures'.[45] This fattening was supplemented by having resided, after his marriage with Elizabeth Barrett, for many years in Italy, both in Florence, and in his later years, after a lengthy period spent living in London following Elizabeth's death, in Venice. Living in Italy, Browning and Elizabeth Barrett became ardent supporters of what Reynolds calls 'the grandest and most involving instance of nation-building' in the mid-nineteenth century.[46] The Italian Risorgimento—'a movement and sequence of events that culminated in national unification and independence between 1859 and 1861', representing 'the decisive moment in the emergence of Italy as a nation-state with defined geographical boundaries and a common institutional structure'[47]—provided Browning with 'a key example of the relation between imagined ideals and political practice' in the context of national identity: an example that placed pressure on the established 'borders of nationhood', and raised the 'prospect of the merging or cohabitation of nations'.[48]

These experiences—Browning in Italy, Laing in Scotland—affected both writers' imaginative projects, and contributed to their shared tendency to portray nationalist discourse

---

[45] Iain Finlayson, *Browning: A Private Life* (London: Harper Perennial 2004), p. 528.
[46] Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse*, p. 38.
[47] Anthony L. Cardoza, 'The Risorgimento', in *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics*, ed. by Erik Jones and Gianfranco Pasquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 16-24, p. 16.
[48] Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse*, p. 39.

in difficulties. To adapt a phrase from Said, both writers, as a consequence of having lived and worked in different cultures, produced works 'whose conditions and circumstances of existence are not immediately derived from the culture' they describe, but are 'built rather on an agonizing [or at least a complicated] distance from it'.[49] Said's phrase 'not immediately' is important here: both Laing's and Browning's works are dedicated to thinking through both the limits of nationalism and parochialism, and the possibility of differently arranged transcultural affiliations 'mediately'—through language, fiction, poetry, but also through perspectives generated within their own cultures, contexts, and personalities.

Indeed, where Laing's and Browning's literature proposes another way of relating to other people, communities, and cultures, it is the contestation and avoidance of the universalisation of specific, parochial values and norms that they most obviously share. Laing's Bishop Roko, for example, argues that the 'ideal' would be

> not only to move forward as a composite species, but also to take along with us all living things, with minor modifications of a few dangerous types. There was only one way to explore the universe: absolutely no exclusiveness should be tolerated, the broadest living base being the source of perpetually renewable consciousness. Leaving behind other human, spiritual and physical presences would result in the earth facing space as a truncated presence, and would be the result of greed and deranged speed.[50]

The 'greed and deranged speed'—which, like Browning's 'grange', contains a sense of the breadth it works to deny—is associated in the novel with Europe's deliberate attempts to develop, and evolve, at a quicker rate than the rest of the world. It is only by moving forward 'as a composite species'—one comprising internal differences but no exclusivity—that a 'world' culture can develop uninhibited by the imposition of the norms of the novel's Europe. It is this idea that leads Deandrea to note that Laing develops 'an innovative post-colonial

[49] Said, *The World*, p. 8.
[50] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 219.

writing grounded on the local at the same time, successfully overcoming that sterile impasse feared by many which Kwame Anthony Appiah calls "the binarism of Self and Other", where "To one side lies parochialism; to the other, false claims of universality".'[51]

This is not to say, however, that both writers share an unambivalent opposition to the patterns of thought prevalent in Victorian intellectual culture. As Collini shows, one of the 'characteristic preoccupations and assumptions of the leading intellectuals' of the time was that 'they tended to assume that our deepest feelings, when aroused, would always prove to be not just compatible with each other, but also productive of socially desirable actions.'[52] This assumption was itself central to the development of comparative criticism. Valérie Macken notes that Matthew Arnold was responsible for 'the first occurrence of the phrase "comparative literature" in English', in a letter to his sister Jane in 1848.[53] Macken suggests that the 'salient features of Arnold's practice of comparison' include 'the emphasis on the desirability of a comprehensive perspective and an enduring belief in the enlightening and progressive potential of comparison as an intellectual and spiritual exercise.'[54]

There are—it is important to note—aspects of these preoccupations that chime with Laing's and Browning's own. Indeed, Macken's phrase, that Arnold's 'comparative strategies reveal something about the difficulties inherent in the act of comparing, and about the reasons for nonetheless maintaining the comparative imperative', applies well to both Laing's and Browning's own comparative strategies.[55] Yet there are important differences, and if Arnold

[51] Pietro Deandrea, '"New Worlds, New Wholes": Kojo Laing's Narrative Quest for a Social Renewal', *New Trends and Generations in African Literature*, ed. by Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marjorie Jones (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), 158-178, p. 159.
[52] Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 65.
[53] Valérie Macken, 'Matthew Arnold and the Use of Comparison', *Provocation and Negotiation: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, ed. by Gesche Ipsen, Timothy Matthews, and Dragana Obradović (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), 253-270, p. 253.
[54] Macken, 'Matthew Arnold', p. 253.
[55] Macken, 'Matthew Arnold', p. 254.

is keen to posit the importance of 'a comprehensive perspective', he is equally keen to control and limit what counts as 'comprehensive':

> All facets of life, all manifold literatures, works and events are intricately interconnected—hence the *sine qua non* of comparative knowledge. This is the reason why Arnold invariably sets up his concepts in comparison to each other. What must come more firmly into view is the fact that isolated, singular objects or institutions cannot be understood unless borders of time and space are crossed and relations charted. In this vein, for instance, he exhorts the English critic to 'dwell much on foreign thought' and to 'try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own'. […] Finally, he posits a fundamental underlying unity of European thought and intent: according to his understanding, the only productive criticism is one 'which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another'.[56]

Despite this gesture to 'Eastern antiquity', 'foreign thought' is uncritically limited to 'European thought'. The implications of this limitation is one of Laing's most pervasive interests. Browning's interests shift the focus to the implications of the idea that 'foreign thought' can be easily separated from 'familiar' thought—an idea his poems, which often dramatise interferences between different linguistic communities, regularly put to the test. Both Laing and Browning, then, accentuate in different ways points of friction between the doxa and heritage of Victorian intellectual culture and kinds of difference, whether excesses that cannot be contained by the limits of this culture, or the possibility of new and equal interrelationships between communities this culture would normally keep separate.

To reiterate: part of the reason, then, that both authors are enriched by comparison is a shared interest in humanity as a 'composite species'; their novels and poems mediate between different ways of seeing, linguistic communities, different cultures, and themselves become 'composite' in the process. This quality is often noted. John Woolford, for instance, identifies

---

[56] Macken, 'Matthew Arnold', pp. 257-8.

in Browning's poetry both 'the elaborate nesting of contradictory voices', and the 'constituting an aesthetic whole out of recalcitrant materials'.[57] Similarly, Tobias Robert Klein argues that 'Laing's prose is such a rich variety of poetic yet culturally bound gargantuan images, motifs, puns, and witty humour, that it confidently defies simple reduction to a single larger theory, agenda or narrative.'[58]

These richly various styles can, too, provide critical practice with its own lessons in mediation. By attempting to read Browning's and Laing's works alongside one another, this thesis contributes to a continuing critical effort to re-position texts in light of trans- or postnational principles of comparability.[59] By allowing both writers' principled comparative thinking, and their development of networks of affiliation unbeholden to filial exclusivity, to suggest principles for comparative criticism, it can also demonstrate a vital interrelationship between literature and our thinking about it: criticism itself emerges as a means of elaborating networks of affiliation—which are not limited by notions of kinship—between writers and texts.

But, first, this re-positioning and demonstration itself requires some positioning, particularly insofar as it represents at once both a continuance of and a departure from several established comparative and theoretical practices. Consequently, the remainder of this introduction tackles two interrelated topics. First, that of 'world literature'. Providing a survey of recent debates surrounding competing conceptualisations of 'world literature' is important because these debates structure much of contemporary thinking about relationships

---

[57] John Woolford, *Robert Browning* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007), p. 80.

[58] Tobias Robert Klein, 'Kojo Laing and the Cultural Specifics of an African Modernity', *Texts, Tasks, and Theories: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures*, ed. by Tobias Robert Klein, Ulrike Auga, and Viola Prüschenk (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 37-57, pp. 37-8.

[59] See, for example, Nicholas Brown's important study *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Xiaofan Amy Li, *Comparative Encounters between Artaud, Michaux and the* Zhuangzi: *Rationality, Cosmology and Ethics* (London: Legenda, 2015); and, especially, the recent collection *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*, ed. by Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

between literary texts from different times, places, and cultures. Any attempt to allow Laing and Browning to signify together, and to think through the implications of this signification, inevitably encounters the terminology, critical assumptions, and limitations associated with the study of 'world literature'. Furthermore, the kind of problems generated by attempting to think about literature on a global scale—such as the tension between local difference and a world conceived of as a system—appear with regularity in Browning's and Laing's own 'comparative' writing. Second, that of the analytical and ethical assumptions and responsibilities involved in mediating encounters between the works of authors from different times and places. Thinking about these complexities can, ultimately, enrich both the experience of reading literature that itself raises comparisons between different cultures, and also the practice of comparative criticism.

Mapping the Ground: Approaching 'World Literature'

It is worth keeping in mind that the definition of 'world literature' is, to borrow a phrase from William Empson, 'what we are working towards, not a tool we are working with'.[60] This 'working towards' is an essential process in that it provokes constantly the consideration and reconsideration of the analytic value of the term itself. The following survey borrows from geographical writing the distinction between processes of 'differentiation' and 'equalisation', as it casts useful light on some of the tendencies that characterise this 'working towards' in recent criticism. For geographers, like Edward Soja and Neil Smith, 'differentiation' refers to the 'differentials' produced by the unevenness of development, such as 'rates of profit' and

[60] He was, at the time, considering attempts to define 'Romantic Poetry'. See William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 37.

'labour productivity, wage rates' and 'the costs of materials' among other things.[61] This unevenness leads to 'a patterned internal differentiation of world space'.[62] 'Equalisation', on the contrary, refers to the 'persistent tendency toward increasing homogenization and the reduction of these geographical differences.'[63] What will emerge from this survey is a sense of two important emphases in contemporary debates regarding world literature: one that posits the importance of the local and fragmentary results of processes of differentiation *against* world literary discourse, and another that considers the problem with deference to the homogenising logic of equalisation. Both tend to advocate the analytical primacy of one process over the other, often leading to the arbitrary separation of the two processes.

For David Damrosch, whose various writings on world literature enjoy a healthy popularity at an institutional level, 'world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike.'[64] His study, *What Is World Literature?* (2003), elaborates on this connection between world literature and 'circulation' in the three-fold definition of 'world literature' provided in the book's conclusion:

1. *World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures.*
2. *World literature is writing that gains in translation.*
3. *World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.*'[65]

---

[61] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 107.
[62] Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space,* 3rd edn (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p. 121.
[63] Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, p. 107.
[64] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 5.
[65] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 281.

This definition is intended to provide, in his words, ‘a phenomenology [rather] than an ontology of the work of art’, one which remains sensitive to the ways ‘a literary work *manifests* differently abroad than it does at home.’[66] It is important to note how Damrosch glosses these claims. The first of these definitions is concerned with world literature as ‘a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone.’[67] The second definition rests upon the assumption that ‘[l]iterary language is […] language that either gains *or* loses in translation, in contrast to nonliterary language, which typically does neither. The balance of credit and loss remains a distinguishing mark of national versus world literature’.[68] The third gestures towards what Damrosch calls ‘[t]he great conversation of world literature’, which takes place in the reader’s mind, ‘where works meet and interact in ways that may have little to do with cultural and historical proximity.’ As he continues to claim, ‘[w]orld literature is fully in play once several foreign works begin to resonate together in our mind.’[69]

Both Damrosch’s distinction between ‘source’ and ‘host’ cultures, and the related distinction between ‘national’ and ‘world’ literatures, are surprising in light of the timing of the publication of *What Is World Literature?* The 1990s witnessed extensive academic effort to re-position habitual conceptions of culture in relation to the history of imperialism. Edward Said’s introduction to *Culture & Imperialism* (1993) argues strongly that ‘to ignore or otherwise discount […] the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized coexisted and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies,

---

[66] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 6.
[67] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 283.
[68] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 289.
[69] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 298.

narratives, and histories, is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century.'[70] Similarly, Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) posits that it 'is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.'[71] In fact, Bhabha—adapting and updating Marx and Engels's famous phrase[72]—explicitly relates his location of culture in the 'interstices' to an emerging field of 'world literature' capable of accentuating 'border and frontier conditions':

> Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature. The centre of such a study would neither be the 'sovereignty' of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on [...] 'freak social and cultural displacements'[73]

While Said's 'what is essential about the world' is no doubt too strong—compared, for example, with Bhabha's more tentative phrasing—both his sensitivity to the 'interdependence of cultural terrains', and the cultural displacements and interstices that Bhabha describes, introduce a number of difficulties into any attempt to analyse the circulation of cultural items in terms of independent 'source' and 'host' cultures, which, in Damrosch's model, map onto separate and independent 'nations'.

An example will help to illustrate this particular limitation in Damrosch's model. The three-fold definition of world literature as '*an elliptical refraction of national literatures*' emphasises, together with the importance of translation, that of '*a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.*' According to this model, Álvares

---

[70] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. xxii-xxiii.
[71] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.
[72] 'National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party: A Modern Edition* (London and New York: Verso, 2016) pp. 11-12.
[73] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 17.

de Azevedo's *Noite na Taverna* (1855), written and published in Brazil (and yet to be translated from Brazilian Portuguese), does not qualify as world literature. Due to its remaining untranslated, it does not elliptically refract Brazilian literature for a non-Brazilian audience, nor does it provide readers not familiar with Portuguese with an opportunity to engage with a world beyond their own. The novel, which features extensive use of English and French epigraphs (predominantly from Byron, Shakespeare, Corneille, and Dumas), recounts five stories told by a group of five men taking refuge in the tavern of the book's title. These stories, which are set in various European cities (Paris, Rome, Cádiz), make extensive use of themes associated with European Gothic fiction, from murders and cannibalism to sex and hedonistic excess.

In spite of, however, the novel's wholly European setting, the Brazilian novelist and critic Adonias Filho is confident that '[o] que importa […] é a imaginação brasileira que "Noite na Taverna" reflete em todos os seus valôres' ['[w]hat is significant […] is the Brazilian imagination that *Noite na Taverna* reflects in all of its values'].[74] The text's use of myth, heroes and symbols relate, Filho maintains, to values associated with 'oralidade' ['orality'] in Brazilian culture.[75] However, these claims sit uncomfortably alongside the peculiar absence of markers of Brazilian culture from the text (the book was published under the European-sounding name Job Stern, and demands of its reader knowledge only of European literary and philosophical history and geography). But this is not to say that the text's dramatisation of a history of European cultural influence does not reflect something constitutive of nineteenth-century Brazilian culture.[76] This text acts as a focal point for what Roberto Schwarz, in his analysis of José de Alencar's *Senhora* (1875), describes as 'the

---

[74] Álvares de Azevedo, *Noite na Taverna: Texto Completo* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Ouro, 1965), p. 10. My translation.
[75] Azevedo, *Noite na Taverna*, p. 10.
[76] The '*mitos*', '*símbolos*', and '*heróis*' Filho describes gesture less to Brazilian forms of '*oralidade*' than to themes and storytelling motifs familiar to readers of early proponents of European gothic, such as José Cadalso in Spain, Horace Walpole in England, and E. T. A. Hoffmann in Germany.

objective conflicts—the ideological incongruities—that occurred as a result of the transplantation of the novel and of European culture to our country.'[77]

Yet, it is essential to note that the novel embodies the effects of unequal intercultural (and here intercontinental) exchanges and influences regardless of whether it ever enters the processes of translation, circulation, and reception Damrosch associates with 'world literature'. *Noite na Taverna* serves to accentuate the ways in which Damrosch's claim that 'virtually all literary works are born within what we would now call a national literature' fails to register what Said terms 'the interdependence of cultural terrains'.[78] Indeed, from Browning's tendency to look outside of England for the means to enliven English poetry, to Laing's dramatisation of intercontinental networks of affiliation in novels like *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988), it is frequently this very interdependence that enlivens literature's play with contested notions of culture.

Already we can see some of the hallmarks of this approach to world literature, which could be termed the 'liberal' approach: a strong emphasis on reception and (above all) circulation as primary conditions of world literature (world literature is something that happens to a text, not something inherent to a text); a dependency on translation, and a related idealisation of the market, as a means of guaranteeing reception and circulation; a reliance on a strong ontological difference between 'national' and 'world' literatures, and between 'host' and 'source' cultures; and a smoothing over of the unequal 'interdependence of cultural terrains', and the 'interstices' resulting from the global reach of imperialism. These hallmarks all assume, to some extent, that 'world literature' is characterised by processes of 'equalisation'—or, as the Warwick Research Collective phrase it, a 'level playing field'.[79]

---

[77] Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture,* ed. by John Gledson (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 44.
[78] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p. 283.
[79] Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 22.

I have chosen the word 'liberal' carefully. Damrosch's arguments depend extensively on assumptions about the market and its ability to circulate cultural commodities that echo—both conceptually and phrasally—Matthew Arnold's writing on culture in the 1860s. For example, Damrosch's celebration of '[t]he great conversation of world literature', one that 'offers its readers an unparalleled variety of literary pleasures and cultural experiences', together with his valorisation of translation as the medium which carries 'national' literatures into the world, echo Matthew Arnold's 'social idea' of culture, famously developed in *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-9):[80]

> This is the *social idea*; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the *best* knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.[81]

For Arnold, 'men of culture' ought to serve the same function as the translators of Damrosch's world literature. The 'diffusing' and 'carrying from one end of society to the other' of 'the best ideas' that Arnold describes corresponds with the importance Damrosch ascribes to translation, while the divestment of 'all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult' corresponds neatly with Damrosch's tendency to smooth over the 'interstices' between cultures or nations. If, for Arnold, it is the free circulation of 'sweetness and light' that provides 'men of culture' with access to the '*best* knowledge and thought', then, for proponents of the liberal conception of world literature, it is the 'free' circulation of texts in the marketplace that enables the 'great conversation of world literature'. The market is idealised: masquerading as a materialist conception of literary circulation (with an emphasis

[80] David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), pp. 1-2.
[81] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 52.

on the way actual texts travel through global markets), the liberal approach misrepresents market-forces, imagining a neutral and 'free' medium of international cultural movement, facilitated by translation.

This liberal approach has been to some extent reinforced by the literary criticism of both Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Rebecca Walkowitz. Inscribing the global into the ways people understand even the most local social experience, Ngũgĩ's 'globalectics', as a critical attitude, celebrates, in similar terms, Damrosch's 'great conversation of world literature':

> Reading globalectically is a way of approaching any text from whatever times and places to allow its content and themes to form a free conversation with other texts of one's time and place, the better to make it yield its maximum to the human. It is to allow it to speak to our own cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present. It is to read a text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text.[82]

The assumption of the predominance of processes of equalisation mark this way of reading texts. The sense of a 'free conversation' between texts of disparate 'times and places' again implies an evenly traversable cultural terrain and a literary market characterised by equal opportunity and freedom of circulation—or, recalling WReC's words, 'that the "world" of world-literature is a "level playing field", a more or less free space in which texts from around the globe can circulate, intersect and converse with one another.'[83]

This notion of uncomplicated circulation is taken, in Aamir R. Mufti's *Forget English!* (2016), as sufficient proof that world literature is 'fundamentally a concept of exchange'.[84] Conforming to this association, Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated* (2015) focuses on the 'translation and circulation of literature', by approaching 'world literature

[82] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 50.
[83] WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, p. 22.
[84] Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 10-11.

from the perspective of translation'.[85] Her valorisation of circulation leads her to reverse conventional assumptions about the chronology of literary production, focusing on the ways issues of circulation can precede production.[86] Because of this, Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz associate Walkowitz with 'an ever-increasing market-driven tendency towards translation and translatability, commensurability and legibility as conceived within the "US-Anglo-global" publishing industry'.[87]

Against this liberal approach, and in particular against its focus on processes of equalisation, Joel Nickels's *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance* (2018) advocates a 'literary-historical mapping' capable of accentuating 'physical geographies of revolt.'[88] If Damrosch's conceptualisation of world literature involved 'an ensemble of deterritorialized investments' (focus on the market, and its global networks of circulation), this 'mapping' argues for the reintroduction of 'militant, territorialized literatures' into world literary discourse.[89] Whereas the liberal approach to world literature argues for awareness of 'deterritorialized', post-national, and global mediums of exchange, Nickels argues for the analytical importance of local, 'territorialized' spaces of postnational resistance. This entails a renewed focus on 'nonstate space', or 'social space that is made up of human networks, decision-making processes, and creative practices external to the nation-state and irreducible to its forms of governance.'[90]

The analysis of such spaces is essential to Nickels's 'literary geography', which 'explores the specific potentialities and limits that representations of nonstate social configurations exhibit, with a view to articulating how such nonstate capacities take shape

[85] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 2, 44.
[86] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 51.
[87] Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz, 'Introduction', *Multilingual Currents in Literature, Translation, and Culture,* ed. by Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-15, p. 3.
[88] Joel Nickels, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1, 5.
[89] Nickels, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance*, pp. 1-2.
[90] Nickels, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance*, p. 4.

differentially in divergent geopolitical contexts.'[91] Such a geography's accentuation of 'differentially' formed places within 'the abstract, agentless space of global capital', aligns aspects of Nickels's work with other critical arguments for the analytical primacy of processes of differentiation.[92] If the liberal approach to the question of world literature is frequently consistent with a position that conceives of the market as a globally even, uncomplicated, and free medium of cultural circulation (a 'level playing field'), proponents of postcolonial studies, for instance, often position themselves in opposition to such a conception, by re-inscribing inequality, unevenness, and a sensitivity to difference into world literary discourse.[93]

Sharing a basic interest in 'interstices' with Bhabha, postcolonial studies' accentuation of local production not entirely governed by 'capital logic', and its interest in literatures that emphasise 'their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre', represent direct complications of liberal theorists of world literature's confidence in the market as a neutral and positive medium of cultural circulation.[94] As Vivek Chibber argues, both postcolonial studies, and the related Subaltern Studies project, have been concerned with stressing 'the fundamentally different character of colonial modernity'; that is, their 'main thrust […] is to stress *difference*.'[95] Using similar words, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar has suggested that postcolonial studies has reflected components of 'postmodern critique': by 'stressing fragmentation and plurality, and asserting difference, it sought to enable the

---

[91] Nickels, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance*, p. 5.
[92] Nickels, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance*, p. 9.
[93] Other powerful objections to the liberal approach have come from translation studies, particularly in terms of this conception of world literature's tendency to ignore problems with translation as a medium of cultural exchange. See, for example, Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 3.
[94] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview', *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial,* ed. by Vinayak Chaturvedi (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 324-340, p. 324; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back,* 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.
[95] Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), pp. 16, 22.

suppressed narratives of the dispossessed to be heard'.[96] Such a stress on difference is also demonstrated by Hamid Dabashi's call for a 'hermeneutics of alterity' which 'opts for contestation as the principal mode of operation in the production of knowledge.'[97]

An appreciation of the importance of this stressing of difference has led Elleke Boehmer to reject the 'shift to the term *world*' altogether. For Boehmer, 'where the postcolonial has typically been concerned with exploited peripheries, disruptive interfaces, schisms, third spaces and the like, *world* signifies far more stable entities such as canons and classics, issues at once global and local, in short, established global and even planetary themes, a remade post-Enlightenment universalism.'[98] Boehmer consequently positions postcolonial theory in opposition to global discourses, claiming that 'a postcolonial ethical awareness' involves the need to remain 'vigilant […] about those ways in which the "historical project of invasion, expropriation and domination" continues in globalized forms into the present.'[99] The 'global', from this perspective, is viewed as a category that unjustly eradicates difference—a form of universalism that erases the particular and idiosyncratic differences of social existence at the margins.

What emerges from this debate, then, are two developing ways of understanding the relationship between a local text and a 'world literature'. First, the liberal approach of Damrosch, in which processes of equalisation ensure a free and equal relationship between text and 'world', mediated by translation. Second, the emphasis on difference, which focuses on the ways in which this relationship is obstructed, complicated, even impossible (a focus that frequently involves the dismissal of world literary discourses).

---

[96] Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, ''The Making of the Working Class': E. P. Thompson and Indian History', *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial,* ed. by Vinayak Chaturvedi (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 50-71, p. 66.
[97] Hamid Dabashi, *Being a Muslim in the World* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), p. 159.
[98] Elleke Boehmer, 'The World and the Postcolonial', *European Review,* vol. 22, no. 2 (2014), 299-308, p. 302.
[99] Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 258-9.

Despite the fact that both of these approaches constitute a useful partial picture of the ways literature fits into or resists broader scales of circulation and reference, the question becomes: what do these two approaches to 'world literature' exclude? Both emphasise a certain scale of attention—local difference and 'global' circulation—and attempt to link this emphasis to emancipatory politics: resisting homogeneity on the one hand, and furthering an ideal of equality on the other. But what these different scales of attention do when it actually comes to reading literature is left under-examined. Damrosch focuses on the 'elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature', and despite the importance of asserting that this 'space' is a contested one, containing numerous internal differences, the 'work' itself—tugged back and forth across these different scales—is in danger of being taken for granted. Similarly, postcolonial critics sometimes—although always with admirable intentions and societally useful urgency—confuse ethics and the ways ethical questions are mediated formally and stylistically.

These confusions raise important questions about the relationship between texts and their contexts (whether contexts are determining, or what constitutes a relevant context, for instance). This is in part because the term 'world literature', like 'postcolonial literature', splits our attention between the text in front of us and broad and complex historical, geographical, and political situations. Certain qualities of these situations then risk hardening into pre-given principles that organise reading in advance. The question becomes, then, how does the term 'world literature' improve critical encounters with literature itself? One possible solution involves attempting to allow that a dynamic and shifting combination of the two tendencies—equalisation and differentiation—might emerge from specific texts and their comparison.

Eric Auerbach's 1952 essay 'The Philology of World Literature' pre-empts, in one paragraph, this sense of combination:

> Our planet, the Earth—which is the “world” of world literature—is growing smaller and becoming less diverse. But world literature does not refer merely to what we share or what is common to all humanity. Rather, it concerns how what we share and the great diversity of what we do not share can be mutually enriching.[100]

World literature, for Auerbach, concerns a ‘how’ rather than a ‘what’: an emphasis on process that can be applied in several ways. This could, for example, foreground the ways in which Damrosch’s model accords with D. F. McKenzie’s well-known repositioning of bibliography as the ‘sociology of texts’, one which aims ‘to describe not only the technical but the social processes of their transmission.’[101] But what appears important to Auerbach is rather the recognition that the negotiation of processes of equalisation and differentiation—what we share and what we do not share—can prove creatively enabling for acts of both writing and reading. It is the purpose of the following section to think through the implications of this recognition.

‘the mediate word’: Comparing Literature

In 1976, John Bayley made the claim that ‘[t]o possess an “inside” a work of literature must display as a part of its achievement some kind of reticence, and the tensions of reticence’.[102] If this reticence implies restraint, uncertainty, and hesitation about the equalising tendencies of any attempt to think globally, along with the acceptance that it is still important to do so, then the resulting tension comes close to what this notion of ‘world literature’ might look like. One of the consequences of this tension is an emphasis on the mediation between

[100] *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach,* ed. by James I. Porter, trans. by Jane O. Newman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 253.
[101] D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 13.
[102] John Bayley, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), p. 15.

different—apparently contradictory—perspectives: between Auerbach's awareness of what we share and do not share, for example, or between global and local scales of attention.

These emphases are characteristic of both Laing's and Browning's texts. That these contradictory processes remain unresolved in Ghanaian culture is one of the causes of Laing's characters' problems. Towards the end of Laing's first novel, *Search Sweet Country*, the sociologist Professor Sackey attempts to address the sense of cultural disconnection and stagnation he identifies in post-independence Ghana. The language he uses frequently foregrounds the tensions between local and global perspectives, shared and not shared histories. The 'survivability of the Ghanaian', he argues, 'can be simply explained':

> his body-mind has been stretched through suffering, and the successful sublimation, in symbolic terms, of suffering; and through the depredation of politicians which has been partly possible through the slipperies of different cultures, different tribes … the Ghanaian is indestructible because he has got formed in his head, deep ravines of opposites; if he feels too hot with one being or with one presence, he just hops onto another, thousands of miles away if necessary. And there's something I find very odd: there is no territory between the supernatural, and the purely factual … you get the factual explanations that do not fit superfactual situations, and you get supernatural answers that fly off at a tangent to the merely factual; and all in the usual polemical stew, with no insight at all for any salt of any worth![103]

Sackey's speech here bears the marks of his own desperation at the contradictions he identifies. The comma between 'formed in his head' and 'deep ravines of opposites' introduces just such a ravine of division into the text itself, while the ellipses—and the frequency with which clauses begin with 'and'—evoke the jostle between connection and disconnection that is at once the object of his speech and a pressure in its style. Yet, even in lamenting these 'ravines of opposites', Sackey's point here is that they are all somehow contained in Ghanaian culture. What is missing is a means of negotiating between these opposites. Indeed, many of Laing's texts are best understood in terms of this attempt to find

[103] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 333.

ways of mediating between the various opposites Sackey mentions: ‘body-mind’, ‘factual’ and ‘supernatural’, local and global, among others.

Browning, at the end of the final book of *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), puts a name to this kind of function. He is considering the relationship between ‘art’ and ‘truth’:

> But Art,—wherein man nowise speaks to men,
> Only to mankind,—Art may tell a truth
> Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
> Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
>
> (XII, ll. 854-7)[104]

There is an ambiguity here. The lines suggest either that negotiating between the local and the global (‘man’ and ‘mankind’), and between the physical and the metaphysical (‘the thing’ and ‘the thought’), requires a ‘mediate word’; or, conversely, that art’s ‘truth’, told obliquely, can only ‘do the thing shall breed the thought’ if it is ‘missing the mediate word’. What is clear, however, is that Browning is at least troubled by this ‘mediate word’: the way art can either bridge between truth and man, or interrupt this relationship. One of the triumphs of both Laing’s and Browning’s texts is their shared attention to the importance of interrogating this ‘mediate word’. As such, this thesis attempts to let them signify alongside one another, and in dialogue, not least because their shared emphasis on and questioning of mediation raises questions about the ways criticism itself performs a mediating function. Indeed, despite the fact that the texts analysed initially seem to fulfil few of the conditions of what Xiaofan Amy Li calls the ‘three kinds of comparabilities’ associated with the conventions of ‘existing comparative literature’ (the filiative logic of ‘genealogical, temporal, and generic comparabilities’), this thesis mediates comparative encounters between two authors who are *themselves* interested in the way literary texts can mediate between different cultures,

[104] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. IX, p. 284.

linguistic groups, geographies, and temporalities, beyond filial relationships.[105] Consequently, it explores what could be called Laing's and Browning's comparative thinking alongside an attempt to learn from this thinking for the purposes of critical practice.

In this way, it avoids some of the main problems of a comparative practice that pre-empts textual encounters with critical presuppositions about what is comparable, and what ought to be compared. Opposition to these kinds of presumptions is familiar within critical thought. Gilles Deleuze's reconceptualisation of 'limitation' in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), for instance, hinges upon a similar attempt to pay attention to the ways in which presuppositions hinder adequate understanding. If Deleuze's 'limitation' is, in Cheri Lynne Carr's words, 'no longer understood in terms of merely imposing a principle of measurement or a maximum by which to rein in the faculty's power, but in terms of identifying the full extent of a faculty's power and the basis on which its power is deployed to the fullest',[106] then the comparative project developed here is similarly invested in identifying the power of both Browning's and Laing's texts, and extending this power to their affiliative limits.

With this goal in mind, it is important to acknowledge that critics have long noted the presence of comparative principles in Browning's poetry. Eric Griffiths, for instance, in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (1989), although avoiding the ambiguity in Browning's phrase, hints at the ways in which the 'mediate word' can provide a model for conscientious comparison:

> Such a word is also an ideal of conduct in the negotiation of competing or conflicting demands in a society and its language. As such, we can never guarantee that the ideal will be achieved, or that the possibility of talking to each other across and through our differences might not one day break down; it will even seem to some at times that the break-down has already happened. Yet this 'mediate word' which goes between people, trying to stave off mutual incomprehension between disparate groups, trying

---

[105] Li, *Comparative Encounters*, p. 14.

[106] Cheri Lynne Carr, *Deleuze's Kantian Ethos: Critique as a Way of Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 67.

> indeed to compose their disparities in such a way that it can give pleasure as well as take pains, still seems worth having and worth hearing.[107]

On this view, 'world literature' might help foreground the ways in which texts are able to combine what Fredric Jameson has called an 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping', or a 'pedagogical culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system', with an awareness that globalization, in Peter Sloterdijk's words, 'began as the geometrization of the immeasurable'.[108] Speaking 'across and through our differences', 'the negotiation of competing or conflicting demands', need not involve the attainment of an ideal of 'cognitive mapping'—the measuring of a 'globe' itself immeasurable—but is still, and vitally, worth doing.

The importance of mediation in this context suggests a possible combination of the most useful and essential impulses of both postcolonial criticism and Damrosch-style 'world literature'. This can be demonstrated by comparing two very different—and in important ways unsuccessful—recent attempts to supply such a combination. First, the Warwick Research Collective's attempt to combine attention to difference with a view of modernity as a single, combined, though radically uneven world-system:

> To grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development, we must attend to its modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar—as these manifest themselves in literary forms, genres and aesthetic strategies.[109]

[107] Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 80-1.
[108] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 54; Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres, Volume II: Globes*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2014), p. 45.
[109] WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, p. 17.

Both the phrase 'literary registration of modernity' (implying a simple and direct relationship between text and context), and the dash that separates as much as it reconnects the list of forces, experiences, and modes to their literary expression, betray an uncertainty about the ways in which literature relates to its economic context—an uncertainty perhaps smoothed over by the imperative 'must'. This uncertainty, however, does not detract from their basic point, which is that there are ways in which it is important to think about the local and the global simultaneously and together, and that economic inequality represents one of the most significant zones of their interrelation. Yet it also seems too much in this direction to suggest that the only way literature can contribute to our understanding of inequality and its social effects is by being coherent and right about the economic processes underpinning them.

In a very different way, Adam Kirsch's *The Global Novel* (2016) also posits a synthesis between ways of reading that foreground difference and those that attempt to think globally:

> The global novel exists, not as a genre separated from and opposed to other kinds of fiction, but as a perspective that governs the interpretation of experience. In this way, it is faithful to the way the global is actually lived—not through the abolition of place, but as a theme by which place is mediated. Life lived *here* is experienced in its profound and often unsettling connections with life lived elsewhere, and everywhere. The local gains dignity, and significance, insofar as it can be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon.[110]

The final sentence appears to imply that Kirsch's 'global novel' assumes that dignity grows as the scale of our perspectives do. His attempt to portray the 'worldwide' as creatively enabling harbours implications that it is only 'insofar' as the local 'can be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon' that it can be 'profound', dignified, and significant. This would seem to tilt the dynamic relationship between equalisation and differentiation too much in

[110] Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), p. 12.

favour of the former. It is, of course, possible that Kirsch's point here is that, in Griffiths's words, 'our fictional personages, events, objects, are not sheerly irreducible particulars, but intimations of what Marx called species-being, sketches of an as yet unrealized humanity, representatives.'[111] But, if this were the case, there would be little to be gained from thinking in terms of 'global novels' instead of simply 'novels'.

Both, then, tend towards readings in which the text is seen, in Quentin Skinner's still relevant phrase, 'in causal and positivist terms as a precipitate of its context', whether in economic terms or those of 'species-being'.[112] Ordinary reading experience attests to the fact that the relationship between text and context is more complex and more difficult to pin down with a single theory. It is proof of the value of both WReC's and Kirsch's books that they offer more arguments in favour of this fact than they do against it; yet their writing evidences difficulties that criticism ought to take the measure of. Indeed, the tendency to emphasise at a particular moment either equalisation or differentiation appears fundamental to how we experience the world. It is impossible to avoid these emphases—but it remains important to be aware of them.

This is why shifting focus to mediation might prove helpful; it encourages continual attention to the ways in which these emphases relate to one another, and thereby discourages their separation. In this way, Browning's 'mediate word' resembles recent reconceptualisations of the humanities in terms of 'meso-analysis'. For Daniel Little, a meso-analysis is 'local in its analysis of circumstance, and large-scale in its recognition of the common workings of certain general factors', and continually invokes the contested 'median' between these scales.[113] It involves, as Paul Saint-Amour suggests, a focus on different kinds of 'mediation':

---

[111] Eric Griffiths, *If Not Critical*, ed. by Freya Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 171.
[112] Quentin Skinner, 'Hermeneutics and the Role of History', *New Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1975), 209-232, p. 216.
[113] Daniel Little, *New Contributions to the Philosophy of History* (New York: Springer, 2010), p. 93.

> In the end, we may come to understand (rather than reflexively to practice) the humanities as the discipline of the middle—of mediation rough and smooth, of ladders torqued, snapped, and taffy-like. As the median between untestable macro statements and incontestable micro ones; as the region of conjuncture and contingency between macro's determinist bent and micro's devotion, variously, to granular causalities, hidden frictions, curiosities, and accidents.[114]

This initially appears very similar to the claims of postcolonial criticism. Homi Bhabha, for instance, considering Walter Benjamin's writing on translation and 'the staging of cultural difference', is 'more engaged with'

> the 'foreign' element that reveals the interstitial; insists on the textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the 'unstable element of linkage', the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which 'newness comes into the world'. The foreign element 'destroys the original's structures of reference and sense communication as well' not simply by negating it but by negotiating the disjunction in which successive cultural temporalities are 'preserved in the work of history and *at the same time* cancelled. … The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.' And through this dialectic of cultural negation-as-negotiation, this splitting of skin and fruit through the *agency* of foreignness, the purpose is, as Rudolf Pannwitz says, not 'to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German [but] instead to turn German into Hindi, Greek, English'.[115]

The 'dialectic of cultural negation-as-negotiation' overplays the ways in which foreignness might be said to 'negate' the culturally familiar (foreignness often involves differences within shared forms—such as language, religion, etc.—rather than pure Difference), but does important work in stressing the ways medial zones affect the creation of meaning between cultures and languages. It becomes clear that Bhabha is, for good reasons, interested in focusing attention on one side of the negotiation involved in cultural interaction (as the 'not… but instead' in the Pannwitz quotation is made to suggest). As a polemic against the

---

[114] Paul Saint-Amour, 'The Medial Humanities: Toward a Manifesto for Meso-Analysis', *Modernism/modernity*, 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0092> [accessed 27 November 2019] (para. 10 of 11).
[115] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 325-6.

tendency to highlight the 'agency' of Europe to the detriment of other cultures, this focus of attention succeeds. It is, however, too limited a notion of negotiation to be useful in the analysis of 'the region of conjuncture and contingency' between Browning and Laing.

Garrett Stewart's *The Deed of Reading* (2015) identifies another limitation to the postcolonial version of negotiation. For Stewart, the 'ethical turn' (towards difference, in-betweenness, etc.) has involved turning away from the other ways in which texts mediate:

> Following the academy's counterswing, roughly three decades ago now, from the strenuous medium-specificities of deconstruction to a more politically cued sense of textual transaction with the world, the so-called ethical turn concerns literature's place, literature's interface, in our textual consideration of the Other. Implementing this rather than simply complementing it, a deliberate verbal *ethic* rather than a generalized literary ethics keeps faith instead, or first of all, with the words on a page as the necessary, crucially nuanced, conduit of any such mediated encounter with things other.[116]

Stewart is arguing here for the repositioning of 'ethical' considerations—such as Boehmer's 'postcolonial ethical awareness', cited above—in terms of what he calls a 'deliberate verbal *ethic*'. Drawing attention to the etymology of the word 'ethos' ('characterization as revealed in action or its representation'),[117] he argues that whereas 'the work of literary ethics, plural(ist), typically concerns social action under representation, an ethic of reading goes underneath—and back before', precisely because the 'ethos of a social body involves depiction and its ironies'.[118]

Following Stewart's example, the following chapters analyse both Laing's and Browning's 'mediated encounter[s] with things other', while never losing sight of the understanding that making structures legible entails confronting style's status as the 'legible

[116] Garrett Stewart, *The Deed of Reading: Literature, Writing, Language, Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 10.
[117] 'ethos, n.', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/64840> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[118] Stewart, *The Deed of Reading*, p. 2.

face of structure'.[119] Yet, in taking Stewart's 'verbal *ethic*' as a starting point, it hopes to position such an approach within a much wider meso-analysis. The primacy of attention to the 'words on a page'—to 'mediation rough and smooth', and to the 'granular causalities, hidden frictions, curiosities, and accidents' of style—is conjoined with an attempt to explore the 'region of conjuncture and contingency' between micro and macro scales (between local and global contexts, individual texts and genres), even as the texts I analyse undergo their own explorations of this terrain. As the protagonist of *Big Bishop Roko* suggests, the 'small changes of living and unliving things' are, 'of course, part of the big evolutions'; positioning the texts of Laing and Browning in relation to these 'evolutions' is, I argue, essential if we are to appreciate fully the range and complexity of their forms of engagement.[120]

This positioning does, however, raise questions about the purposes and benefits of comparison itself. Discussion regarding the functions of comparative criticism often focuses on the question of how best to consider the 'region of conjuncture and contingency' between texts emerging from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Haun Saussy, for instance, understands the function of comparative literature in terms of grammatical conjunction:

> Some literary scholars have a penchant for the preposition *in*, some for the conjunction *and*. *In* suggests that a reading is a matter of observation and inventory; *and*, that a reading is a collision. A paper titled "Renunciation in *Mahābhārata, Huckleberry Finn,* and *Der Rosenkavalier*" claims to discover a common thread "in" a body of writings; a paper titled "*Mansfield Park* and *A Theory of Justice*" tells you to think about one thing in relation to another. Comparative literature is largely a discipline of the *and* type. It does its work best as a chain of *ands*: this relation and that relation and that relation…—each *and* modifying the sense of those that came before.[121]

[119] Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 25.
[120] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 55.
[121] Haun Saussy, 'Comparative Literature?', *PMLA*, vol. 118, no. 2 (2003), 336-341, p. 338.

In positing that comparative literature is 'largely a discipline of the *and* type', Saussy rightly draws attention to the conjunction that relates one text to another. Choosing 'and' as the model of this conjunction, however, provides a partial picture of the ways texts can relate to other texts. Other ways of using grammar to represent comparison suggest themselves: not only 'Laing and Browning', but also 'Laing, but Browning', 'Browning, but Laing', and a number of other ways of thinking them together ('Laing—Browning', 'Laing; Browning', 'Laing…Browning'). To stress 'and' above all others is to limit the ways in which the 'modifying' Saussy describes can take effect; it might be taken to underplay division, disagreement, disjointedness, and thereby threaten to smooth over differences.

For these reasons, this thesis shifts Saussy's emphasis from conjunction to 'juncture', a term borrowed from linguistics. George L. Trager and Bernard Bloch—early proponents of the term—define 'open juncture' as 'the totality of phonetic features which characterize the segmental and suprasegmental phonemes at the beginning and at the end of an isolated utterance.'[122] The 'features of open juncture', Trager and Bloch continue to note, 'are present not only before and after pause, but also internally in some utterances', as witnessed by the difference between '*nitrate* (close)' and '*night-rate* (open: unaspirated [t] in first syllable)'.[123] At once the phonetic bridges between utterances and contiguous sounds (or silences), and features that characterise an utterance's isolation, junctures are both what fill the gaps between phonemes and what produce these gaps in the first place.

In the chapters that follow, various junctures, both open and close, will be identified between Laing's and Browning's texts: junctures that bridge across the openness of their differences, and junctures by which both authors' texts, contexts, narratives, and styles touch, even overlap. These junctures will be analysed wherever possible in the light of congruent or

---

[122] George L. Trager and Bernard Bloch, 'The Syllabic Phonemes of English', *Language: Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1941), 223-246, p. 225.
[123] Trager and Bloch, 'The Syllabic Phonemes of English', pp. 225-6.

similar contexts and intentions—an analysis wary of over-equalising and over-differentiating Laing and Browning's achievements. What makes these junctures important is that they are made possible in part by virtue of both writers' commitments to contesting, interrogating, and developing modes of affiliation capable of escaping the filial exclusivity of nationalism, both political and linguistic. Their works are characterised by an insistent desire to discover and think through points of juncture with other linguistic, political, and cultural communities.

It will be shown, too, that the implications of these analyses themselves suggest principles for comparative critical practice. Gesche Ipsen, Timothy Matthews, and Dragana Obradović identify two ways of thinking about the implications of comparing texts: 'provocation' and 'negotiation'. In Ipsen's words, 'To think of comparative criticism as an act of negotiation in the sense of "peace-making" implies the existence of juxtapositions, of lines edging a chasm, and a need to do something about them.'[124] Conversely, as Obradović argues:

> To approach the act of comparison as a provocation demands that we understand criticism as a stimulus into action, and understand utterance as a prompt to action. It issues a demand or a summons. To undertake comparative criticism is to incite and instigate new perspectives on the world and the text, and the text in the world.[125]

The chapters that follow, in foregrounding significant moments of juncture, attempt to perform the double-function that Ipsen and Obradović describe: they negotiate between two authors conventionally kept separate, while allowing the placing of both authors together to provoke 'new perspectives on the world'.

---

[124] Gesche Ipsen, 'Part II: Negotiation, Introduction', *Provocation and Negotiation*, 121-3, p. 121.
[125] Dragana Obradović, 'Part I: Provocation, Introduction', *Provocation and Negotiation*, 1-4, p. 1.

With this in mind, returning to Said's discussion of affiliation helps to demonstrate how thinking in terms of mediation and juncture can sharpen comparison as a critical tool. For Said, in the context of criticism and reading, affiliation

> is what enables a text to maintain itself as a text, and this is covered by a range of circumstances: status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of consensually held tacit assumptions, presumed background, and so on and on.[126]

As such, 'to study affiliation is to study and to recreate the bonds between texts and the world', and '[t]o recreate the affiliative network' of a particular text is 'to make visible, to give materiality back to, the strands holding the text to society, author, and culture.'[127] This entails a criticism capable of mediating between text and world, and a critical focus on the numerous points of juncture, the 'strands' and 'bonds', between a text and the 'range of circumstances' that makes the text possible. Throughout this thesis, these 'strands' and 'bonds' are accentuated; both Laing's and Browning's works are embedded in their manifold contexts (historical, linguistic, and cultural, for instance).

Yet other kinds of affiliative networks suggest themselves. Indeed, expanding Said's definition makes clear that there are other ways in which affiliative networks might enrich critical practice. This thesis, therefore, takes as its objects of study three interrelated kinds of affiliative networks. First, and as an obvious consequence of comparison, affiliative networks between texts. Situating Browning and Laing within a single affiliative network demonstrates the value of pursuing comparison outside of their 'format of habitual connection'.[128] Second, the affiliative networks that Said describes. Discerning how Laing's and Browning's texts relate to one another does not entail letting them float free of their historical, linguistic, and

---

[126] Said, *The World*, pp. 174-5.
[127] Said, *The World*, p. 175.
[128] The phrase is Geoffrey Hill's, used in a discussion of inverted commas. See Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 151.

cultural contexts. For comparison to be of any value, it must be able to trace—recalling Auerbach's words—what is shared without smoothing over what is not shared. Sometimes, however, these affiliative networks themselves prove comparable: in Chapter Two, for instance, Laing's description of life under an authoritarian rule in *Search Sweet Country* is compared with Browning's exploration of the self-justifications of an authoritarian ruler in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* (1871).

Third, the affiliative network between comparative criticism and texts themselves invested in acts of comparison. In their texts, both Browning and Laing repeatedly focus on moments of juncture and disjuncture between cultures and linguistic communities. As such, to compare them is to take seriously their own comparative tendencies. Allowing their comparative thinking to inform critical thinking is to pay attention to the ways in which acts of comparison open up affiliative networks between texts and critics. Taken together, these three kinds of network represent the three analytical levels the following chapters move between.

Transcriticism

It is, however, worth being more precise about the structural congruence I am arguing for between comparative criticism and the kinds of comparison operative in Browning's and Laing's texts. To borrow again from Kōjin Karatani, both Laing's and Browning's development of unique 'discursive systems' is linked to their 'practicing constant transposition' between different points of view.[129] Rather than articulating some kind of 'stable third position' between the familiar and the foreign, both authors' works stress 'a

[129] Kōjin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 3.

transversal and transpositional movement', one that is 'not rooted in a static positionality'.[130] Karatani calls thinking that depends upon this movement 'transcritique': 'trans' because of the emphasis on transposition and transversality, and 'critique' because the interstices generated by the parallax gaps between perspectival positions are where Karatani locates meaningful critical thinking.[131] For transcritique, as Slavoj Žižek summarises, 'philosophy emerges in the interstices *between* different communities, in the fragile space of exchange and circulation between them, a space which lacks any positive identity'.[132]

This 'transcritique', for Karatani (who is himself influenced by Said), is connected with the kind of displacement associated with exile; the dislocation of living outside of the filiative networks an author grew up within provokes the interest in the movement of transposition between different perspectives that Karatani describes. As I will show in the chapters that follow, this sense of dislocation marks both Browning's and Laing's experience as authors, their respective contemporary receptions, and their use of style, form, and narrative. Indeed, both writers often elevate 'transversal and transpositional movement' to a structural principle. From Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, whose plotting depends upon the regular switching of perspective between Ghana and Scotland, to Browning's *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), in which Balaustion's story is told on a boat mid-voyage between Athens and Rhodes, both writers share a tendency to accentuate the inbetween spaces generated by a regular oscillation between familiar and foreign locations, equalising and differentiating tendencies, particular and universal perspectives, and the ways of speaking characteristic of different linguistic communities.

---

[130] Karatani, *Transcritique*, pp. 4, 136.
[131] I have deliberately focused on these aspects of Karatani's 'transcritique', rather than the idea's roots in Kant's 'transcendental critique', because to do so would risk obfuscating both the clarity of Karatani's thinking, and its applicability to the study of literature.
[132] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 8.

Take, for example, the scene-setting of Browning's *Sordello* (1840), in which the opening of a fictional narrative is staged as a kind of eruption:

> Lo, the past is hurled
> In twain: up-thrust, out-staggering on the world,
> Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears
> Its outline, kindles at the core, appears
> Verona.
>
> (Book I, ll. 73-7)[133]

The reader is made to experience the emergence of the narrative's scene of action as a violent and environmental transposition—the almost volcanic 'up-thrust, out-staggering' intensified by its 'kindl[ing] at the core'—from the 'now' of their act of reading to the 'past' of Sordello's Verona. Later in Browning's career, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* reverses this emergence: the 'Leicester Square' in which the Prince appears to be reflecting (in exile) on his political career is revealed, towards the end of the poem, to be a thought experiment—he is still in his Palace, not in England, and is still in control of the State: he is merely imagining being transposed in order to determine the correct course of action. Both poems dramatise the transposition of scene explicitly, and encourage readings that are capable of remaining sensitive to the movement of these transpositions.

This is true also both of volumes such as *Men and Women*, and, more locally, the form of the dramatic monologue. Both engineer reading experiences characterised by this 'transversal and transpositional movement'. Shifting from one speaker to another, from lyrics to dramatic monologues, the reader of *Men and Women* is made to approach the dominant themes—love, art, faith, among others—kaleidoscopically. Similarly, poems like 'My Last Duchess', as Eric Griffiths argues, make a 'distinction between source of pattern [Browning] and origin of speech [the Duke]', and thereby allow 'us [the reader] to see in the text of the

[133] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. II, p. 198.

poem that things may look differently to the other person in the poem [the silent listener]'.[134] Browning draws attention to these distinctions, often explicitly distinguishing in one poem between different perspectives (the perspective of the speaker, the listener, the reader, and the poet), so as to build transpositional movement into the structure of the poem itself.

These same techniques are common across Laing's novels too. In *Big Bishop Roko*, for instance, the bishop's story is narrated by a dual-heritage wordman 'far too obstinate and odd to produce' a telling consistent with 'ancestral narratives, fables, and parables'.[135] He does not 'fit', he claims, 'into their one mouth'.[136] If Browning's poems dramatise a movement between different perspectives, Laing's wordman himself embodies this movement: unable to view the world from a fixed and static standpoint, he oscillates between positions, describing events alternately from a distance and up close, from the point of view of a spectator and a participant. This oscillation is true even of the description of his distinctive walking style: 'some funny, little ambulation-bi, much like a wild guinea-fowl gliding its way to new cassava.'[137] Glossed as 'type of (there is hint of humour and sarcasm intended)', the word 'bi' combines with the latinate 'ambulation' to double the description (with both formal and demotic language), even as the word itself—with 'sarcasm intended'—enacts another kind of doubling (this time ironic).[138] This walk, compared with the 'gliding' of a bird in flight, is defined by its irregular movement and constituent instability. In the same way, the wordman's narrative itself resists any reduction to a single style or genre: it is instead characterised, like *Men and Women*, by a regular switching between different techniques and perspectives.

[134] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice*, p. 203.
[135] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 4.
[136] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 4.
[137] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 11.
[138] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 367.

The key point here is that affiliative networks are only possible as a result of this transversal and transpositional movement. For Karatani, the parallax produced by this movement—the difference generated between a number of perspectives of a given object—is what makes possible interaction between the various poles. Žižek explains this point further:

> parallax is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives of the same X: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective.[139]

For affiliative networks to develop between a diverse range of linguistic and cultural communities, the 'void of what we could not see' needs to be filled in. This is part of the reason for the wordman's dual-heritage in *Big Bishop Roko*, and for the various 'double poems' which will be analysed in Chapter One. The parallax between the Scottish and Ghanaian communities in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, between the source of pattern and origin of speech in dramatic monologues, is what permits an interactive space between each pole to be delineated and explored.

Comparing Browning's and Laing's texts therefore means allowing their individual tendencies to foreground these affiliative networks to spill over into the ways in which their texts are read. Comparison is particularly suited to this task not least because—to rework one of Karatani's phrases—comparative criticism is impossible 'without moves'.[140] Placing texts in conversation requires, fundamentally, the elevation of 'transversal and transpositional movement' to the status of an analytical principle, and depends equally upon the recognition that it is the parallax between texts—what I earlier referred to as 'junctures'—that constitutes the location of their interaction. By moving from the perspective of Laing's texts to

---

[139] Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 29.
[140] Kōjin Karatani and Joel Wainwright, '"Critique is impossible without moves": An interview of Kōjin Karatani by Joel Wainwright', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2012), 30-52, p. 35.

Browning's, and from Browning's to Laing's, a more complete picture of literature's affiliative potential can be traced. In addition to this, the movement from one author's works to the other's—by implicitly registering what 'eludes' each perspective—helps to provide both authors' achievements with a more definite outline. As such, comparative criticism not only permits an opportunity to approach Laing and Browning through their own tendency to privilege affiliative networks, but also allows both writers to emerge as idiosyncratic and distinct stylists and storytellers in their own right.

To reiterate a claim made earlier, comparing in this way also draws attention to the porosity of the borders between areas of literary study. From the perspective of an affiliative criticism, what is called 'world literature' might come to refer to a scale of attention deliberately broader than that of individual fields and disciplines (such as postcolonial studies and Victorian studies), from which, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' between fields and disciplines becomes visible.[141] This would serve the useful purpose of making clear what it is that is translatable and untranslatable across disciplinary divisions, what is shared and not shared, and what might fruitfully be thought through together, or ought to be kept separate.

The Coming Terrain

At a glance, however, this thesis resembles what John Schad describes—although in the context of a comparison between Browning and the philosopher Jacques Derrida—as a study 'concerned with accidents of meaning which take place between two bodies of writing that

[141] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edn, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), p. 36e.

are usually thought of as being separated by language, genre and period.'[142] Part of the reason for this is that, with perhaps one exception (explored in Chapter One), neither author can be said to have intended to be read with the other. Yet the 'accidents of meaning' are numerous and interesting enough to make extended comparison worthwhile, not least because doing so shows how literature can sustain and mediate relationships between diverse and different voices and communities.

This thesis is structured around the different kinds of 'mediate word' explored, questioned, and played with in Browning's and Laing's texts; the first two chapters both foreground the ways in which certain modes of affiliation are contested (and how this contestation suggests different, improved kinds of affiliation), and reads each author through both this lens, and the lens of the other author; the third chapter moves to consider what broader models of affiliation Browning and Laing themselves advance in their writing. Chapter One analyses both authors' interest in overcoming the tendency to treat languages as closed and static systems, excluding the foreign and unfamiliar. As such, it explores Laing's reworking of poems by Browning and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and his use of intercultural translation as a model for equal and mutually profitable intercultural relationships, alongside what Annmarie Drury has called Browning's 'incorporative aesthetic'.[143] Both, though in different ways, treat the printed page as a site for the mediation of contact and exchange between different cultural and linguistic communities.

Chapter Two is divided into two sections. The first continues the previous chapter's interest in translational aesthetics, but shifts the focus to both authors' attention to the internal contradictions of nationalist rhetoric and the ways this attention is active both formally and stylistically. I explore the ways in which the crowds of Laing's *Search Sweet Country* and the

---

[142] John Schad, *Victorians in Theory: From Derrida to Browning* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 3.
[143] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 146.

multitudes of Browning's *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* exert pressure on nationalist rhetoric from within state borders in the context of two authoritarian governments. The second section focuses on the ways in which connections, perspectives, and relationships external to the nation are treated by both writers. Browning's interest in inbetween spaces, journeys, and medial perspectives (and how they relate to narrative itself) are considered alongside Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes* and its development of a theory of history intimately linked to postnational connections.

In Chapter Three, both authors' development of religious models of affiliation serves to highlight another kind of mediation: between body and soul, physical and metaphysical, internal and external. Browning and Laing share a general faith (Anglicanism), an idea of religious feeling that incorporates and values the physical and the grotesque, and an opposition to any portrayal of belief that depends upon the rejection of concrete, everyday, material life. As such, this chapter has three objectives. The first is to show how what Mikhail Bakhtin calls an 'ambivalent wholeness' characterises both writers' understanding of religious experience;[144] the second to show how this wholeness relates to ideal models of affiliation developed by both authors; the third to show how both writers' distinctive uses of comedy work to support these models.

The final, concluding chapter attempts to extract from the analyses of the previous chapters a number of critical principles for comparing texts across historical, cultural, and linguistic differences. Ultimately, what emerges from a series of encounters—between both authors' different translational aesthetics, attitudes to nationalism, their shared theological and comic interests—are hitherto under-represented versions of both Browning and Laing. Furthermore, reading Browning forward to Laing, and Laing backward to Browning, not only

[144] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 123.

enables aspects of their complex work to be foregrounded that are often overlooked, but also demonstrates the value of applying conscientiously ways of reading developed separately by postcolonial and Victorian critics to texts outside their immediate frames of reference.

But which Robert Browning, and which Kojo Laing? Comparative decisions always entail the drawing of certain limits: not only the basic question of a corpus of authors, but also the question of which texts. To select only one of Laing's novels, for example, would be to present a specific narrative that would ultimately differ from an analysis of all of his novels together. Yet rather than choose a particular set of texts—according, for instance, to a particular period of Browning's career—I have opted to let the striking points of connection between Laing's and Browning's bodies of work produce their own corpus. In Laing's case, this means the following: Chapter One focuses on Laing's poetry and *Search Sweet Country* in order to develop a wider argument about language; Chapter Two focuses on *Search Sweet Country* and *Woman of the Aeroplanes* in order to think through nationalism and postnational affiliative relationships; Chapter Three centres upon *Big Bishop Roko* in order to trace Laing's understanding of religious and spiritual communities. This means that *Major Gentl*, Laing's third novel, receives less attention.

In Browning's case the question of selection is difficult in a different way. His long and prolific publishing career is marked by distinct phases, and, as John Woolford and Daniel Karlin remind us, there are 'so many Robert Brownings'.[145] However, allowing points of comparison to determine which texts are used leads to a particularly surprising result: namely, the fact that reading Laing and Browning together, while often involving drawing from well-known volumes such as *Men and Women*, makes possible a reappraisal of some of Browning's critically unpopular texts. Comparing both writers' interest in affiliative networks that exceed or threaten the integrity of the nation and its dominant language

[145] John Woolford and Daniel Karlin, *Robert Browning* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), p. 49.

reactivates precisely those poems (and parts of poems) that are not anthologised, that are not already assimilated into canonical narratives of British literary history, such as *Aristophanes' Apology*, the macaronic books of *The Ring and the Book*, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, and *Fifine at the Fair*. These poems, some of which are now hardly read, are given a renewed significance in comparison with Laing, because it is only from this perspective that their inability to fit easily alongside other Victorian poetic texts becomes a virtue rather than a failure.

Finally, there is the question of which editions to use. For Laing, there is not much of a choice, though I have—wherever possible and pertinent—supplemented my use of his published texts with drafts. For Browning, there are plenty of choices to be made, not least because Browning felt, as Woolford notes, 'compelled into a continuous modification of his work, a long-sustained quest for "words and forms" with which to achieve popularity.'[146] There are three major editions of Browning's texts—the Oxford, Ohio, and Longman editions. Each is distinguished by the principles that underpin their editorial approaches. As Woolford and Karlin explain, 'Oxford and Ohio/Baylor take the traditional position that the last authorially-supervised text represents the author's "final intentions" and is therefore authoritative'.[147] The Ohio edition's 'early editors reserved the right to alter the text where they saw fit', however, somewhat undermining this attention to the author's own final intended meaning.[148] The Longman editors, in contrast, 'regard the first publication as representing the work's most active engagement with its historical moment.'[149] In this thesis, I have, wherever possible, used both the Ohio (avoiding the first four volumes), and the currently incomplete Oxford edition. This decision reflects less an assumption of the *authority* of 'final intentions' than it does two things: first, an interest in the ways in which

[146] John Woolford, *Browning the Revisionary* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. ix.
[147] Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, p. 231.
[148] Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, pp. 230-1.
[149] Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, p. 231.

Browning himself, in preparing the 1888-9 complete edition, sought to present his diverse texts as a continuous and consistent unity; and second, an awareness that it is the text of this edition that Laing is most likely to have read.

CHAPTER ONE

'this world of languages touching': Translation and Mediation

'When she spoke English in the aeroplanes, her Mfantse touched it, and her Ga touched her Mfantse; so that in this world of languages touching, her mouth became complex yet beautiful'

Kojo Laing, *Search Sweet Country* (1986)[1]

*

One of the types of 'affiliation'—to recall Said's vocabulary—that both Laing and Browning contest is related to language and linguistic communities. Their works both challenge in different ways representations of languages as static, homogenous, and nationally bound systems, and complicate any thinking about linguistic communities that 'surreptitiously duplicates the closed and tightly knit family structure that secures generational hierarchical relationships to one another.'[2] For many readers of Laing and Browning, the consequences of this contestation are quickly obvious on the printed page. Part of the argument of this chapter is that the stylistic idiosyncrasies commonly associated with both writers are the result of their tendencies to test the boundaries and limits of linguistic communities, to suggest new and composite communities across national and cultural differences, and to undermine the complacency of any language use that presumes itself easily separable from other ways of speaking.

Consequently, this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first introduces Laing's and Browning's 'incorporative' tendencies—a term borrowed from Annmarie Drury,

---

[1] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 130.
[2] Said, *The World*, p. 21

which foregrounds their shared 'fascination with foreign subjects', and 'intention to bring them into the fold of English' poetry and prose, 'explicitly for the sake of its enhancement and development.'[3] This 'fascination', however, is always mediated by the words on the page, and so both authors' interest in incorporation is explored in terms of their respective styles, which ultimately prove translational in their mediation between the familiar and the foreign, the global and the local, and in their accentuation of the transpositional and transversal movement Karatani describes. The next two sections analyse these translational processes in both authors' texts: first, in Laing's poetry, with particular reference to his 'intercultural translations' of Victorian verse; second, with respect to Browning's Italian poems, and the use of rhyme as a means of incorporation. These three sections, taken together, demonstrate the ways in which both writers' language use is intimately related to their interests in the development of modes of affiliation unhindered by the need to 'reproduce the skeleton of family authority supposedly left behind when the family was left behind', and equally marked by the different linguistic contexts that shaped their experiences as writers.[4]

Style and Incorporation

When Kojo Laing's first novel, *Search Sweet Country* (1986), was published as part of Heinemann Educational's African Writers Series (AWS), what James Currey has referred to as the 'establishment of African literature' had been thriving for just under 25 years.[5] That the series belonged to an educational publisher reveals the extent to which the dissemination of

---

[3] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 105.
[4] Said, *The World*, pp. 20, 22.
[5] James Currey, *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series & The Launch of African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 2008), p. 1.

African fiction was first viewed as an educative task. For Peter J. Kalliney, the very 'success of the AWS was determined by its ability to cater simultaneously to very different educational agendas.'[6] These agendas had two very different educational effects: one on the African continent, and one in Anglo-American universities. Firstly, the series proved educational, as Kalliney suggests, insofar as the use of the AWS by African exam boards (such as WAEC, the West African Examinations Council for Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone) led to it 'totally dominating the university curriculum of anglophone [African] nations'; secondly because, within 'the Anglo-American academy, the AWS was implicated in a larger struggle to open up the literary canon to minority social groups'.[7]

Despite being published a quarter of a century after the establishment of the AWS, *Search Sweet Country* proved to be no exception to these founding principles. The novel, in part, traces the consequences of various attempts to mediate between Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian perspectives, and the fact that the novel includes extended dialogue between European and Ghanaian academics foregrounds the possibility of mutual education. Edward Blishen's review of the novel, which appeared in *The Times Educational Supplement,* highlighted how it participated in such an educational project:

> I love this novel because it raises a new and invigorating question proposed by some of the first generation African writers. Is it possible that the continent has powerful wisdoms to add to the powerful, but ill-balanced, wisdoms of the West?[8]

In fact, much of Laing's work is concerned with introducing these 'powerful wisdoms', alongside other cultural practices and perspectives, in an attempt to move forward as a 'composite species'.[9] As Laing writes in *Big Bishop Roko*, '[l]inking yourself and your ilk

---

[6] Peter J. Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 180.
[7] Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*, pp. 180-1.
[8] Cited in Currey, *Africa Writes Back*, p. 80.
[9] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 219.

alone in the universe was a silly thing to do because it just did not fit into the definitions of the origins or the breadth of life of the universe.'[10] Rather than thinking only in terms of 'yourself and your ilk alone', Laing prescribes a 'breadth' of consideration reflective of the breadth and variety of life itself. Even the word 'ilk'—a word with a predominantly Scottish history of use—reflects Laing's interest in cultural and linguistic interrelations: a word rooted in Scottish contexts denotes, in the novel, Ghanaianness.[11]

Search Sweet Country traces the various searches for meaning of a group of characters resident in and around Accra. Beni Baidoo, the trickster-like figure who weaves in and out of the other characters' searches, travels 'around Accra with his one obsession: to found a village'.[12] Kofi Loww, 'living on the wandering side of doubt', searches for a sense of meaning amidst the confusion of a world that, whilst appearing capable of providing positive opportunities, has a tendency to frustrate ambition.[13] ½-Allotey, a farmer forced to leave his village after a scandal, searches for '[a] way of living, a way of thinking; and a way of fortifying myself so that I return and attack my village with change'.[14] These searches are resolved only by a broadening of perspective, an acceptance of the potential use of change regulated by a cosmopolitan pursuit of a new and enabling mode of interrelationship between cultures; the presence of Dr. Pinn and Sally Soon, both white British academics, in Laing's Accra serve to literalise this relationship. As Erzuah posits in the novel, 'Our secret should be to keep our link with life, with existence, while keeping clear and light that passage-way that joins us with the world outside us'.[15]

---

[10] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 259.
[11] 'ilk, adj. 1, pron. 1, and n.', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/91340> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[12] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* p. 1.
[13] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 8.
[14] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 105.
[15] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 261.

This overarching pursuit of a new interrelationship between cultures determines the linguistic variety that characterises Laing's writing. Yet this variety—like so much in Laing's novels—operates simultaneously on two scales: it at once broadens English, as the 'Author's Note' to *Major Gentl* argues, and reflects the diversity of Ghana's own linguistic landscape. From the university to an airport or a market, and from a farm to a church, the novel not only portrays the diversity and inequality of economic and social development in the city, but also attempts to craft a style indicative of such diversity and inequality. By alternating between standard and pidgin English, and by interweaving vocabulary, in different frequencies, from Ga, Akan, Ewe, Hausa, Arabic, Wolof, and Yoruba, Laing is able to reflect both the variety of the city's linguistic terrain, and also show how this linguistic inequality is itself symptomatic of the city's social and economic unevenness. The prevalence of words from Akan and Ga, for example, reflects these two languages' dominance within the city, but in Laing's works even the sense of these languages as corresponding to separate linguistic systems is complicated by his deliberate rejection of any notion of 'purity' resulting from linguistic isolation, as the linguist and critic Mary Esther Kropp-Dakubu has argued.[16] She provides the following example:

> the character ½-Allotey is a farmer and herbalist; his name is Ga, but his natal village, Kuse, seems to be Akan, for it has an *okyeame* and an *odikro* (both Akan terms for town officials). His Wofa Anim (*wofa* is Akan for "maternal uncle") lives there, as do his wives, Mayo (an Adangme name) and Fofo (a Ga name). Neither ½-Allotey nor the village represents a "pure" ethnic tradition. Any supposed purity of traditional ways cannot, therefore, be the true object of the search for wholeness and authenticity with which the book is concerned.[17]

[16] See M. E. Kropp-Dakubu, 'The historical dynamic of multilingualism in Accra', *The Languages of Urban Africa,* ed. by Fiona McLaughlin (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 19-31.
[17] M. E. Kropp-Dakubu, '"Search Sweet Country" and the Language of Authentic Being', *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 24, no. 1 (1993), 19-35, p. 20.

What emerges across Laing's works is a sense that this 'wholeness and authenticity' not only cannot depend on—to use Fiona Doloughan's phrase—the imperialist and nationalist view of 'languages and cultures as bounded and distinct, rather than mutually informing or complementary', but also must involve an attempt to discover generative and creative possibilities for communion between and across such languages and cultures.[18]

Laing employs a diverse and multilingual vocabulary within the English of his novels and poetry, providing him with an opportunity to seek methods of constructing precisely these points of connection across and between a variety of linguistic communities. For example, *Search Sweet Country* opens with a description of Kofi Loww, described by Binyavanga Wainaina as 'the closest thing to a main character', and 'an inbetween man—a thinker, a watcher of people, his life held in suspense.'[19] Kofi's search is for a sense of purpose in a city and a country that has lost the optimism with which it attained independence. The ambiguity of Ghana's development—whether it is walking forwards or backwards, towards greater independence or a new form of dependence on the global north—finds its correlate in Loww's own ambiguous profile:

> After all, it was not doubted in areas of Accra that Kofi could walk yards backwards, without anyone telling the difference between his back and his front: the surplus slant of his beard did this, the jut of his bashi did that … the man with the travelling horizon at the nape of his neck.[20]

The novel's glossary translates 'bashi' as 'thick growth of hair above nape of neck'; and it is this growth's similarity to Loww's beard that confuses onlookers.[21] Yet the word itself gestures past the contexts provided by this one definition. Indeed, 'bāshī' in Hausa (a

---

[18] Fiona Doloughan, 'Translation as a Motor of Critique and Invention in Contemporary Literature: The Case of Xiaolu Guo', *Multilingual Currents in Literature, Translation, and Culture,* ed. by Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 150-167, p. 153.
[19] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. vi.
[20] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* p. 3.
[21] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 349.

language Laing frequently borrows from) denotes a ‘debt’ or a ‘loan’—something owed, and therefore something incomplete.[22] As Kofi Loww is depicted in uncertainties as to his own and to his country’s direction, and as the reader learns of his sense of incompleteness, even the character’s neck is made to carry connotations of a debt and forced responsibility. Yet this is not to say that such an interlingual pun merely amplifies the despair with which Kofi begins his search. For, as one of his characters searches for a way of generating meaning in a society characterised by apparently divergent projects and ideals, the language Laing uses implicitly and immediately suggests a potential for the creation of meaning across and between linguistic communities.

Among critics of this first novel, there is a tendency to view Laing’s distinctive language as merely a product of post-modernist experimentation—as revelling in the play of aesthetic invention. While his language does attempt to incorporate stylistic techniques associated with, as Pietro Deandrea has suggested, ‘oral narrative in general, and […] Akan poetic style in particular’, Derek Wright’s criticism of Laing’s work for its ‘faddish verbal gimmicking and fabrication’, and Stephanie Newell’s description of ‘Laing’s comedic multilingual babblers’ both fail to be sensitive to Laing’s interest in developing a ‘composite’ English, as well as the sociolinguistic terrain and the poetic style that the novel moves within.[23] Indeed, by describing his characters as ‘babblers’ (a word etymologically suggestive of indistinct or uncultivated speech) Newell uncharacteristically falls foul of a misreading replete with serious imperialist implications. Despite this, her portrayal of these characters as participating in a ‘comedic’ network of intelligibility does accentuate the extent to which Laing’s language poses difficulties for criticism. Brenda Cooper, in her study of *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* (1998), suggests that, despite Laing’s aim ‘to make his

---

[22] C. H. Kraft and A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Hausa* (London: The English Universities Press, 1973), p. 336.
[23] Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings*, p. 73; Newell, *West African Literatures*, p. 184; Derek Wright, ‘Postmodernism as Realism: Magic History in Recent West African Fiction’, *Contemporary African Fiction,* ed. by Derek Wright (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University African Studies Series, 1997), p. 202.

medium his message and to construct a new poetic language in the spirit of the oral tradition, with influences from English and a number of other languages spoken in Ghana', he has 'created a language that is somewhat impenetrable to all but a few intellectuals, who are themselves challenged to decipher the messages of his riddles.'[24] But, again, this perspective might be the result of a misapprehension as to the relationship between Laing's language, his ethico-linguistic intentions, and the specific linguistic terrain his characters navigate. It hinges, too, on a limited conception of what the act of reading entails—one in which the reader's role is one of decipherment rather than imaginative engagement.

Laing's politics and his style are intimately related. The 'plot', to borrow a distinction from Garrett Stewart, of encouraging imaginative interrelation between different linguistic and cultural communities is 'rehearsed, replayed, [and] condensed' into the text's 'microplots', or into 'phrasing's own grammatical action and rhetorical force'.[25] Such a conception of style, as itself the micro-scene of ethical activity, does not correspond with recent attempts to reposition critical consideration of style in light of both global modernism and related developments in the study of world literature. Judith Brown, for example, in Eric Hayot and Rebecca Walkowitz's *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (2016), posits that '[s]tyle speaks most compellingly when the necessary (legal, ethical, economic, political) order in which we live our lives moves off the page and allows for something other to speak, something unfamiliar and not grounded in the world as we necessarily know it.'[26] For Brown, style, 'in its privileging of the surface, turns away from meaning itself and thus from any representational obligations.'[27] Style, in this reading, becomes a means by which one can

[24] Cooper, *Magical Realism*, p. 191.
[25] Garrett Stewart, *The Value of Style in Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 132.
[26] Judith Brown, 'Style', *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism,* ed. by Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 214-232, pp. 216-7. Rebecca Walkowitz has made a similar argument about style – privileging cosmopolitan texts that 'approach large-scale international events […] by focusing on the trivial or transient episodes of everyday life' [in Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 10].
[27] Brown, 'Style', p. 215.

escape the ‘necessary […] order’—a way of gesturing past the specific concerns of people ‘grounded in the world’, towards the ‘unfamiliar’ and, ultimately, for Brown, the transnational: ‘[t]o think about style is necessarily to think beyond the boundaries of nation, identity, and history.’[28]

The ‘representational obligations’ linked to a ‘necessary […] order’ give way to thinking ‘beyond the boundaries of nation, identity, and history’—and yet, for Laing, stylistic decisions are motivated by the interconnection between these two ‘orders’ (the nationally bound and ‘necessary’, and the transnational). Laing’s multilingualism accentuates English’s limitations when confronted with non-Western forms of expression, and also represents an attempt to craft a ‘gigantic language’ capable of repairing this transnational incommensurability. Style thereby serves important mediating functions: it not only allows for the possibility of intra- and international exchange on the printed page, but also mediates the access of under-represented linguistic elements into literary English, and thereby changes the definition and descriptive force of the word ‘English’ itself.

These two functions also reflect aspects of Browning’s poetic styles. Annmarie Drury, quoting Matthew Reynolds, suggests that like Laing, Browning—particularly in his translations—‘simultaneously gravitated towards an all-inclusive tongue, “a language that is universally comprehending and comprehensible,” and expressed reservations about the viability of such a language.’[29] His efforts to ‘test and extend English poetry through incorporation of the non-English’ mirror characteristics of Laing’s style, particularly in viewing the printed page as a medial zone between different cultural and linguistic communities.[30]

---

[28] Brown, ‘Style’, p. 230.
[29] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 105.
[30] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 102.

This stress on mediation confused Browning's early readers. In attempting to make sense of Browning's stylistic strangeness, critics have drawn attention to a certain foreign quality of both his poetry and his character. Walter Bagehot's review of *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) in the January 1869 issue of *Tinsley's Magazine,* suggested that it was Browning's failure to be truly English that guaranteed his unfavourable reception: '[t]he colouring of his mind and the colouring of his work are alike Italian. […] If Mr. Browning had studied England and English character as faithfully and successfully as he has studied Italy and Italian character, his position as an English poet would have been other than it now is.'[31] G. K. Chesterton's biography of the poet begins with an intervention in the debate as to Browning's ethnicity. He recounts with a measure of incredulity that 'there is a theory that he was of Jewish blood' and that 'there is the yet more sensational theory that there was in Robert Browning a strain of the negro'.[32] At the root of it all, Chesterton posits, is that 'there really was in Browning a tropical violence of taste, an artistic scheme compounded as it were, of orchids and cockatoos, which, amid our cold English poets, seems scarcely European.'[33]

Henry Charles Duffin's *Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning* (1956) picks up this interpretive tendency. For Duffin, who borrows his term from the title of the prologue to *Fifine at the Fair* (1872), Browning's verse is 'amphibian', in the sense of combining poetic and non-poetic forms. It is this quality, Duffin suggests, that separates him from the rest of the English poetic tradition. He argues that

> The bi-partisan species was always a possibility with Browning. […] Natural history provides quite a number of amphibious creatures; in the history of English poetry I am not aware of any writer other than Browning who has this dual or undecided quality. The lyrists, like Keats, are lyrical; the didactics, like Crabbe, are unpoetical; when Wordsworth is writing poetry he is not moralizing, when he moralizes it is not in poetry. Browning alone is capable, even while the verse-instinct is raising the temperature of his medium to singing point, of subjecting his theme to logical analysis

[31] Walter Bagehot, 'Mr. Browning's New Poem', *Tinsley's Magazine,* 3 (Jan 1869), 665-674, p. 666.
[32] Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, p. 4.
[33] Chesterton, *Robert Browning,* p. 6.

> and presenting it as an intellectual argument. It is not only that he is free of two elements: he can live in both at once. The lobes of his brain have two different functions, and they both function together.[34]

Neurologically unique among his countrymen, Browning is ‘bi-partisan’ to the extent that only analogies drawn from natural science can account for his seeming to be not only ‘alone’ in the history of English poetry, but also, in Chesterton’s words, ‘scarcely European’. These early and twentieth-century critics are responding to Browning’s tendency, throughout his career, to draw (both in terms of subject-matter and formal tropes) extensively from non-English cultures. From *Sordello* (1840), which follows the 13th-century Lombard figure Sordello da Goito, to *Ferishtah’s Fancies* (1884), which borrows from the 10th century Persian poet Abu ‘l-Qasim Firdowsi Tusi’s *Shāhnāmeh* (c. 977-1010),[35] Browning’s poetry engages with foreignness in a way that jeopardises, in Bagehot’s words, ‘his position as an English poet’.

Like Laing’s, Browning’s texts encourage the dual-vision proper to a ‘bi-partisan species’. If Laing’s characters promote viewing humanity as a ‘composite species’, Browning’s poems often require composite interpretation—one speaking simultaneously to ‘two different functions’ of the lobes of the brain. Both authors direct attention away from the purely national or foreign, the global or local, and refocus it on the medial zones that blur these distinctions by means of a dynamic communication between them. At once European and subject to ‘a tropical violence of taste’, Browning’s poetry represents the foreign and the familiar in the same space, and suggests that their interrelation might prove mutually enriching.

[34] Henry Charles Duffin, *Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956), p. 60.
[35] Browning used as his source *Epic of Kings: Stories Retold from Firdusi*, compiled by Helen Zimmern (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1883). The text features two etchings by L. Alma Tadema, and a prefatory poem by Edmund W. Gosse.

More recent criticism has tended to interpret Browning's frequent recourse to foreign subject matter in one of two ways. Matthew Reynolds's suggestion that 'Browning's dramatic monologues purposely disappoint the widespread expectation that poetry should promote the growth of affective community' characterises one approach, which focuses on the ways in which Browning's poems establish and maintain cultural differences.[36] As Reynolds suggests of the 'hybrid genre' of dramatic monologue,

> The form pulls together the intimacy of reading and the detachment of spectacle. For the tension of the hybrid genre to be achieved, it is not necessary for the central character to be 'reprehensible or odd', only that he or she be marked out as significantly different from the reader. This may be done in a variety of ways. Very often in Browning the marker of otherness, the proscenium arch, as it were, which holds the poem away from the reader, is the foreignness, usually Italianness, of speaker or location.[37]

Conversely, Drury's approach stresses that Browning's 'incorporative aesthetic […] challenges poets by urging a transcultural enlarging of their interior libraries, their creative repertoire, and a mercilessly imaginative artistic use of it'.[38] Focusing on Browning's use of a 'language-in-a-state-of-translation'[39] (drawing on Reynolds's work on Browning and 'translationese'), Drury's readings of 'Caliban Upon Setebos', 'An Epistle', and 'Muléykeh' attempt to demonstrate Browning's commitment to the 'assimilation into English poetry of the un-homelike—of the foreign, the strange, the morally unsettling, the *unheimlich*'.[40] If one approach accentuates the 'proscenium arch' that distances the reader from the 'foreignness' Browning's poems represent, the other stresses the manner in which 'assimilation' can serve

---

[36] Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse*, p. 159.
[37] Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse,* p. 160.
[38] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 146.
[39] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 113.
[40] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 144.

to prove that 'the English language can be stretched: that it is flexible and pervious, that its diction, syntax, and meter can do new things'.[41]

Sherry Simon, writing about translation and translational writing, provides a useful way to think about these seemingly disparate stresses. In her study, *Cities in Translation* (2012), she develops an understanding of translation practices as continually negotiating what she terms 'distancing' and 'furthering' tendencies.[42] The '"bridge" that separates as much as it joins', distancing translations can 'deepen a sense of otherness, reifying the categories of knowledge production'.[43] Furthering, on the contrary, 'involves practices that draw literary traditions into a "mutual becoming"—not only expanding their imaginative sweep and enriching their horizons, but also of literally expanding the number of works on bookshelves, adding to the repertoire of expression, *augmenting* the coverage of the language.'[44] As such, the 'confrontation of languages results in entanglements which are both conflictual and productive.'[45]

The different emphases of Reynolds's and Drury's approaches, roughly corresponding with Simon's concepts of 'distancing' and 'furthering' translation, suggest that Browning's relationship with foreign culture is more complex than it may initially appear. Indeed, it is one of the contentions of this chapter that reading Browning and Laing with these two tendencies in mind can help to elucidate the ways in which various contradictory impulses characterise their representations of intercultural dynamics and cultural differences. Hédi A. Jaouad's *Browning Upon Arabia* (2018) has begun work in this direction. His analysis of Browning's representations of the East, and the ways in which the poems are constructed 'contrapuntally', argues for the consideration of Browning's writing as anticipating the

---

[41] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 141.
[42] Sherry Simon, *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 12-13.
[43] Simon, *Cities in Translation,* p. 13.
[44] Simon, *Cities in Translation,* p. 17.
[45] Simon, *Cities in Translation,* p. 18.

'intercultural and interfaith dialogue' that would come to characterise twentieth-century literary movements,[46] movements that would certainly include Laing. Jaouad, despite not using Simon's terminology, advances the similar thesis that 'sometimes contrasting movements crisscross' Browning's poetry: those of 'return' and 'expansion'.[47]

These contrasting movements (return/expansion; distancing/furthering) are important features of Laing's and Browning's respective styles. Their attention to the implications of incorporation involves a constant shifting between scales that mirrors the shifting between differentiation and equalisation discussed in the introduction; both stress the need to look past the familiar and to take the measure of the foreign, and both encourage an awareness that this activity need not involve losing touch with familiarity. Their texts serve in this way to reinforce Garrett Stewart's reminder to treat style 'as the necessary, crucially nuanced, conduit of any […] mediated encounter with things other.'[48] Language itself enables the distancing and furthering work of their translational styles to sustain interrelation between different linguistic and cultural communities without smoothing over their differences. Consequently, the following sections analyse such 'mediated encounter[s]' in both authors' texts, focusing on the crisscrossing movements and processes that characterise them.

Formal Palimpsests in Laing's Godhorse (1989)

These crisscrossing movements are central to Laing's wish to move forward as a 'composite species'. They enable his characters to introduce their own 'powerful wisdoms' into a developing transnational discussion. They provide a site for the intermixture, in Boaventura de Sousa Santos's words, of 'the epistemologies of the South with the dominant

[46] Jaouad, *Browning Upon Arabia,* pp. 6, 13.
[47] Jaouad, *Browning Upon Arabia,* p. 14.
[48] Stewart, *The Deed of Reading*, p. 10.

epistemologies of the global North.'[49] Indeed, Santos's term 'epistemicide' neatly encapsulates the consequences of the exclusivity—the breakdown of mediation—which Laing's characters frequently fear:

> Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinate culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it. In the most extreme cases, such as that of European expansion, epistemicide was one of the conditions of genocide.[50]

Santos's study, *Epistemologies of the South* (2014), itself suggests a means of opposing or resisting epistemicide that provides useful terminology for understanding Laing's formal and stylistic decisions. For Santos, 'intercultural translation' represents 'the alternative both to the abstract universalism that grounds Western-centric general theories and to the idea of incommensurability between cultures'.[51] Erzuah's proposed solution to the problem of development in *Search Sweet Country*'s Ghana ('to keep our link with life, with existence, while keeping clear and light that passage-way that joins us with the world outside us') echoes the intention behind Santos's 'intercultural translation':[52]

> intercultural translation consists of searching for isomorphic concerns and underlying assumptions among cultures, identifying differences and similarities, and developing, whenever appropriate, new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication[53]

For Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny, however, the term 'intercultural translation' is itself implicated in a multiculturalist preference 'for different sorts of successful—respectful, tolerant, inclusive—cultural interaction between individuals and communities assumed to

---

[49] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 46.
[50] Santos, *Epistmologies of the South*, p. 92.
[51] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South,* p. 212.
[52] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 261.
[53] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South,* p. 212.

belong to different, clearly distinguishable cultures'.[54] This characterisation of even and 'respectful' cultural interaction echoes the liberal understanding of world literature discussed earlier in the introduction. Consequently, Buden and Nowotny position 'intercultural translation' against 'cultural translation', which has, as they demonstrate, a deconstructionist, rather than multiculturalist, lineage, beginning with Homi Bhabha's argument that 'cultural translation desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy'.[55]

However, in light of recent criticism that remains content with the term 'intercultural translation', and even associates it with an ongoing project 'to counteract hegemonic neoliberal globalisation', this thesis embraces the term, rather than maintaining the opposition between cultural and intercultural translation established by Buden and Nowotny a decade ago.[56] Using the term enables Iwona Kasperska's definition of '*traducción intercultural*' ['*intercultural translation*'] as 'la traducción-explicación que se sirve de *representaciones* para enseñar el Otro al receptor de la cultura de destino' ['the translation-explanation that utilises *representations* to teach the Other to the recipient of the target culture'] to encourage a development of Santos's usage—in particular by way of an awareness of how intercultural translation works on two distinct levels.[57] The verb 'enseñar' (to teach), with its root in the Latin 'insignare' (to engrave), suggests simultaneously pedagogical and stylistic emphases, both of which represent important aspects of the work of cultural interrelation in both Browning and Laing's texts. These roughly correspond, first, following Drury, to the broadly educative *incorporation* of foreign cultural or linguistic elements into patterns associated with domestic formal or thematic conventions;[58] and second, to the *inscription* of foreign

[54] Boris Buden, Stefan Nowotny, Sherry Simon, Ashok Bery, and Michael Cronin, 'Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem, and Responses', *Translation Studies,* vol. 2, no. 2, (2009), 196-219, p. 200.
[55] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 327.
[56] Stefan Baumgarten and Jordi Cornellà-Detrell, 'Translation and the Economies of Power', in *Translation and Global Spaces of Power,* ed. by Stefan Baumgarten and Jordi Cornellà-Detrell (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019), 11-26, p. 24.
[57] Iwona Kasperska, 'Las Cartas y Diarios de Guatemala de Andrzej Bobkowski como Ejemplos de Traducción Intercultural', *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia,* vol. 37, no. 1 (2010), 55-67, p. 56. My translation.
[58] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 146.

cultural or linguistic elements—that is, the stylistic rehearsals, the diction and grammar, of intercultural relationships.

Following Kropp-Dakubu's suggestion that the 'language and the linguistic imagery of [*Search Sweet Country*] arise directly from the poems and build on them', this section will begin by analysing these two aspects of cultural and linguistic interrelation in Laing's works—tracing the development of a translational aesthetic in the poems collected for publication by the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1989 under the title *Godhorse.*[59]

Kropp-Dakubu has shown that the poems of this volume were 'written over a period of almost twenty years, a fact that the most recent poem ("Twenty years flying") reflects upon.'[60] From 'Funeral in Accra', first published 'in Scotland in 1968 […] but written in 1965 when the author was nineteen', to 'Twenty years flying', written in 1984, just two years before the publication of *Search Sweet Country,* the volume is itself representative of stylistic and political developments across a period spanning both youth and middle age.[61] Some of the poems, including 'Funeral in Accra', were published in Scotland, in 1968, during Laing's graduate studies at the University of Glasgow, in Robin Fulton's *Lines Review*—a journal with a predominantly Scottish readership, having featured the work of important native poets such as Iain Crichton Smith. Four years later, however, Laing published a long poem, 'Resurrection' (not included in *Godhorse* perhaps due to its length), in the fifth volume of the Ghana Society of Writers' influential *Okyeame,* edited by Efua Sutherland, and responsible for the publication of some of the most celebrated and well-known figures of Ghanaian literature, such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor (who was a former editor of the journal), and Mohammed Ibn Abdallah. Some of the poems that would later

---

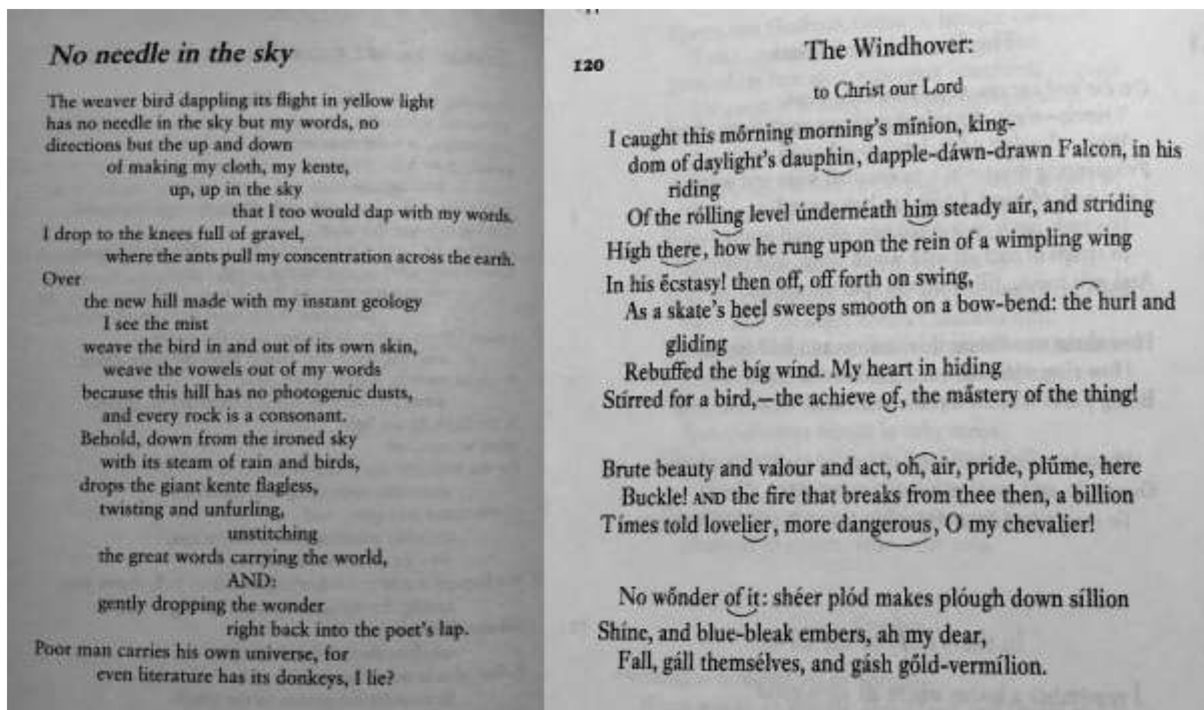
[59] Kropp-Dakubu, '"Search Sweet Country" and the Language of Authentic Being', p. 19.
[60] M. E. Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film,* ed. by Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Matatu 21-22; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000), 235-241, p. 237.
[61] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', pp. 236-7.

form part of *Godhorse* were also first published in journals with an African (and Africanist) audience, such as the opening poem of the volume, 'Festival', first appearing in the London-based *West Africa* on the 19 March 1984. *Godhorse,* therefore, reflects Laing's own experience as a Ghanaian growing up in Scotland—an experience that would come to influence the narratives of his later novels, such as *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988), which features an exchange between the residents of Tukwan, in Ghana, and Levensvale, in Scotland.

However, despite the inclusion of poems first written and published in Scotland, *Godhorse* is almost entirely preoccupied with the developing state of Ghana: a Ghana, as Laing suggests in 'One hundred lines for the coast', 'grown old without wisdom by generations of dire disconnection.'[62] This sense of 'disconnection', of a Ghana neglected both by its political leaders and the global development of the world around it, haunts the volume. In 'The same corpse', for example, a poem concerned with international conceptions of Ghana and its culture, such disconnection is lamented explicitly: 'in an interdependent world, the / inter does not belong to Ghana.'[63] Laing's poems, however, attest to an attempt to demonstrate the creative potential of an translational aesthetic—an aesthetic based upon integrating Ghana into a formal and thematic dialogue constitutive of such an 'interdependent world'. Several of the poems show a clear engagement with British poetic tradition, most explicitly in the volume's ninth poem, 'No needle in the sky', which was written, 'according to the author', in 1982.[64] The poem, a version of Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Windhover', demonstrates how form and style can mediate between different agents within this 'interdependent world'.

[62] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 50.
[63] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 36.
[64] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 237.

Laing's interest in Hopkins can be traced back to one of his earliest printed poems, 'African Storm', published in *Lines Review* in 1968. The poem, not included in *Godhorse*, describes the chaos of a storm in a style replete with techniques conventionally associated with Hopkins, such as internal rhyme, stress-based rhythm, and the frequent use of alliteration. For example, the storm's 'silence grows great layers to protect itself, and bursts / by gusts grabbing roofs, birds close their wings, nestless,' forcing the onlooker to 'bend, pick pennies in dust,' as the 'wind stokes warm storm'.[65]



No needle in the sky

The weaver bird dappling its flight in yellow light
has no needle in the sky but my words, no
directions but the up and down
of making my cloth, my kente,
up, up in the sky
that I too would dap with my words.
I drop to the knees full of gravel,
where the ants pull my concentration across the earth.
Over
the new hill made with my instant geology
I see the mist
weave the bird in and out of its own skin,
weave the vowels out of my words
because this hill has no photogenic dusts,
and every rock is a consonant.
Behold, down from the ironed sky
with its steam of rain and birds,
drops the giant kente flagless,
twisting and unfurling,
unstitching
the great words carrying the world,
AND:
gently dropping the wonder
right back into the poet's lap.
Poor man carries his own universe, for
even literature has its donkeys, I lie?

120

The Windhover:

to Christ our Lord

I caught this mŏrning morning's mĭnion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dáwn-drawn Falcon, in his
riding
Of the rólling level úndernéath him steady aír, and stríding
Hígh there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ĕcstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and
gliding
Rebuffed the bíg wind. My heart in hiding
Stírred for a bird,—the achieve of, the măstery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, aír, pride, plŭme, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Tímes told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wŏnder of it: shéer plód makes plóugh down síllion
Shíne, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gáll themsélves, and gásh gŏld-vermílion.

Figure 1, Laing's poem on the left, and Hopkins's on the right[66]

Similarly, the relationship between 'No needle in the sky' and 'The Windhover' is signalled both typographically and by the use of identical vocabulary and similar syntax. Both poems comprise the voice of somebody watching the flight of a bird (for Laing, a

[65] B. Kojo Laing, 'African Storm', *Lines Review,* ed. Robin Fulton, No. 27 (November, 1968), p. 22.
[66] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 12; Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poetical Works,* ed. by Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 144.

weaver bird, and for Hopkins, a kestrel), both introduce their respective conclusions with a capitalised 'AND', and employ similar syntax (Laing's 'up, up in the sky', reflects Hopkins's 'off, off forth on swing'), and both poems utilise a vocabulary characteristic of Hopkins's natural imagery (*Figure 1*).[67] Laing's use of 'dappling' and 'dap', for example, reflects Hopkins's use of the words 'dapple' and 'dappled' in nine poems ('The Windhover', 'The May Magnificat', 'St. Winefred's Well', 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', 'Duns Scotus's Oxford', 'Pied Beauty', 'Morning Midday and Evening Sacrifice', 'Inversnaid', and 'The Wreck of the Deutschland').[68]

Laing's poem, however, repositions the focus of 'The Windhover' from the falcon's 'Brute beauty and valour and act' to the ability of poetic writing to transform the object it describes:[69]

The weaver bird dappling its flight in yellow light
has no needle in the sky but my words, no
directions but the up and down
    of making my cloth, my kente,
        up, up in the sky
            that I too would dap with my words.
I drop to the knees full of gravel,
    where the ants pull my concentration across the earth.
Over
  the new hill made with my instant geology
    I see the mist
  weave the bird in and out of its own skin,
    weave the vowels out of my words
  because the hill has no photogenic dusts,
    and every rock is a consonant.
  Behold, down from the ironed sky
    with its steam of rain and birds,
  drops the giant kente flagless,
    twisting and unfurling,
            unstitching
    the great words carrying the world,
            AND:
    gently dropping the wonder

[67] Hopkins, *Works*, p. 144.
[68] Hopkins, *Works*, pp. 120, 144, 154, 156, 163, 167, 180, 191.
[69] Hopkins, *Works*, p. 144.

right back into the poet's lap.
Poor man carries his own universe, for
Even literature has its donkeys, I lie?[70]

Laing's weaver bird (a bird family indigenous to West Africa) is at once the creation of the poet, and the inspiration for his work. Perception and creation are simultaneous: 'great words' carry both the 'world' and the 'giant kente'—the product of creative labour—which, in turn, gently drops 'the wonder / right back into the poet's lap.' When nature is given agency ('the ants pull my concentration across the earth'), the poet is an observer; yet when language is given agency ('no needle in the sky but my words'), nature becomes the product of literary creation—a kente cloth woven by perception. The power of perception to change an object is compared to the power of poetic description to reimagine an object or action in new terms. The simple act of kneeling in gravel humorously gives rise to an 'instant geology'—the displaced earth is reimagined as the consequence of an act of creation akin to raising mountains.

Aside from these stylistic resonances, Laing signals the relationship between 'No needle in the sky' and 'The Windhover' by gently parodying that poem's conclusion. Hopkins's poem ends by describing the 'fire that breaks' from the falcon in its descent, a fire that enhances its loveliness and beauty:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.[71]

---

[70] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 12.
[71] Hopkins, *Works*, p. 144.

Like the 'embers' that 'fall' and 'gash gold-vermilion', the falcon's descent dramatically exposes a 'wonder' hitherto kept hidden. The bird's flight path is formally rendered, as the reader's eye drops from the asyndetic and breathless 'oh, air, pride, plume, here' to 'Buckle!', the delayed verb that signals the moment of transformation. 'The Windhover' concludes with a powerful evocation of the falcon's intensity and beauty, a beauty that has a strong effect on the observer, whose explanation of the witnessed beauty is interrupted by a further sighing recognition of its effect: 'ah my dear'.

In 'No needle in the sky', Laing parodies the intensity of the falcon's movement in Hopkins's poem, concluding with a very different, more gentle descent:

> Behold, down from the ironed sky
> with its steam of rain and birds,
> drops the giant kente flagless,
> twisting and unfurling,
> unstitching
> the great words carrying the world,
> AND:
> gently dropping the wonder
> right back into the poet's lap.
> Poor man carries his own universe, for
> even literature has its donkeys, I lie?[72]

Also rendering formally the movement he describes (the kente unfurls and unstitches as the line itself unfurls across the page), 'No needle in the sky' finishes with a bathetic, rather than powerful descent. Landing in 'the poet's lap', the kente produced by his imaginative appreciation of the weaver bird unstitches both itself and his words, leaving him, with 'knees full of gravel', to reflect that the 'universe' carried by the 'Poor man' is precisely this 'wonder': a kente that exists for the poor man only insofar as it is imagined. Challenging the reader to dispute his modesty, Laing compares himself as a poet to a donkey, carrying his

[72] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 12.

meagre reflections on the weaver bird's flight and little else. This playfulness corresponds to Laing's tendency to prioritise ordinary experience in his work. Elsewhere in *Godhorse*, such as in the short poem 'Steps', Laing satirises the big man who 'feels / he is so important / that one step for him / is / a hundred for others'.[73] Laing's gentle parody of the intensity of 'The Windhover' acts to remind his readers that the bathos of ordinary experience is as much a part of imaginative engagement with nature as are wonder and beauty.

Although this parody suggests a point of departure from Hopkins, both poems reflect on the ways in which the line between inner and outer experience can be blurred, and Laing has associated this blurring with a way of seeing he thinks is characteristic of Ghanaian culture. In an interview with Pietro Deandrea (15 December 1993), Laing urged Ghanaians 'not to make the same mistake that the West has made, creating a dichotomy between the external world and the inner self, regarding the external dimension as something to be controlled and manipulated, whereas with the African-Ghanaian way it's an extension of the spirit of man.'[74] This leads Deandrea to argue that Laing's poetry is characterised, above all, by '[t]he finding of a means of communion between […] two poles', between 'the concrete and the abstract, outer and inner, the object and the thought'.[75] This sense of 'two poles', however, makes the same 'mistake' Laing describes: it reinforces the very binaries Laing is interested in collapsing. Rather than pursuing a 'means of communion between […] two poles', Laing's verse is more characteristically interested—as Chapter Three will explore in more detail—in challenging the tendency to separate 'the concrete and the abstract, outer and inner, the object and the thought' in the first place.[76]

As has been mentioned, Laing's novels would later concern themselves with the creation of a 'gigantic language' by introducing into English the sort of 'cosmopolitan mix of

---

[73] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 24.
[74] Cited in Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings*, p. 174.
[75] Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings*, p. 169.
[76] For further discussion of this topic, see Chapter Three.

cultures' and languages that 'is usual in Ghana'.[77] That this intention supplements his poetry's concern with challenging artificial separations is evident from the ways 'No needle in the sky' interweaves a British poetic inheritance with ways of seeing peculiar to Laing and his experience as an 'African-Ghanaian'. Indeed, the poem at once registers its debt to Hopkins's poem, and its transformation of it into something entirely different.

Laing's poem makes use of a formal correlative to what Chantal Zabus has described as 'indigenization', or the linguistic consequence of African authors' use of European languages as a literary medium. For Zabus, '[i]ndigenization refers to the writer's attempt at textualizing linguistic differentiation and at conveying African concepts, thought-patterns, and linguistic features through the ex-colonizer's language.'[78] This process of indigenization produces what she terms an 'interlanguage'—an English that becomes palimpsestic insofar as it is used as the 'conveyor of African culture.'[79] She borrows Loreto Todd's term 'relexification' to refer to this 'making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon.'[80] However, in 'No needle in the sky', a formal, rather than strictly linguistic palimpsest occurs, as Laing's poem overwrites Hopkins.

The poem's rejection of the difference between inner and outer experience coincides, therefore, with its representation of a form of 'intercultural translation' capable of demonstrating the potential within literature for the 'new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication' that Santos demands, offering a means of reversing the cultural cost of the 'generations of dire disconnection' lamented in 'One hundred lines for the coast'. To reverse this disconnection, Laing transforms dichotomies into doubles: inner and outer become versions of the same thing, whilst forms of European and African

---

[77] Laing, *Major Gentl*, p. vi.
[78] Chantal Zabus, *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel,* 2nd edn (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 3.
[79] Zabus, *African Palimpsest*, p. 4.
[80] Zabus, *African Palimpsest*, p. 112.

expression inhabit the same formal space. For these reasons it is useful to think of Laing's poem as, to borrow Isobel Armstrong's phrase, a 'double poem'.

In her analysis of Robert Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins', Armstrong develops the idea of the 'double poem' in order to characterise Browning's use of form (the dramatic monologue) to 'explore expressive psychological forms simultaneously as psychological conditions *and* as constructs, the phenomenology of a culture, projections which indicate the structure of relationships'.[81] For Armstrong,

> The double poem is a deeply sceptical form. It draws attention to the epistemology which governs the construction of the self and its relationships and to the cultural conditions in which those relationships are made. It is an expressive model and an epistemological model simultaneously.[82]

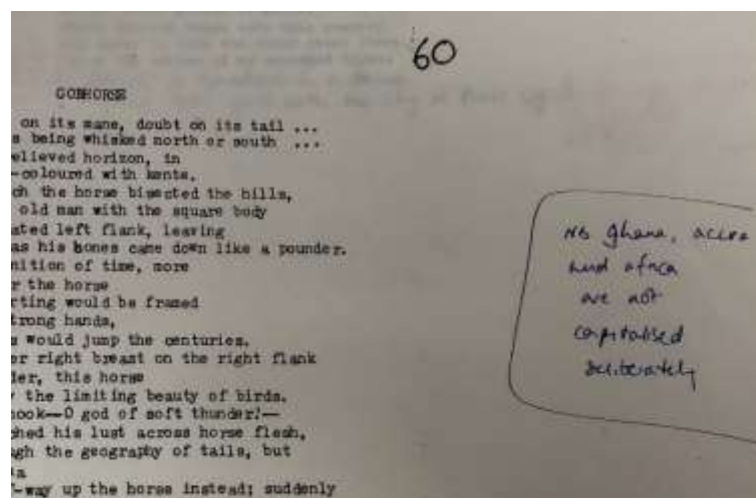
Rather than simply a struggle between a story from the core, and a viewpoint from the periphery, Laing's poem is, and it would seem deliberately, 'an expressive model *and* an epistemological model simultaneously'.[83] To return to Santos's terms, it counterposes one of the many and varied 'epistemologies of the South with [one of] the dominant epistemologies of the global North' by weaving into an antecedent poetic model ways of seeing not available to it.[84] What emerges is a poem that announces its debt to European models, whilst also implying the extent to which those models could benefit from 'African-Ghanaian' epistemological structures.

The use of doubles in 'No needle in the sky' reflects Laing's characteristic use of the technique throughout *Godhorse*. The volume's typescripts held in the Heinemann Educational Archive at the University of Reading bear witness to the process behind his use of doubles both typographically and thematically. For example, Laing paid special attention

---

[81] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 13.
[82] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 13.
[83] Italics my own.
[84] Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, p. 46.

to ensuring that the words ‘Ghana’, ‘Accra’, and ‘Africa’ occur throughout the poems in both capitalised and uncapitalised forms. Among his corrections to the eighteenth poem, ‘Godhorse’, Laing informs the editors: ‘NB ghana, accra and africa are not capitalised deliberately’ (*Figure 2*).[85] His corrections to ‘Same corpse’, too, involve the amendment of ‘Ghana’ to ‘ghana’, only for it to be reverted later back to ‘Ghana’. Similarly, in the corrections to ‘Tatale swine’, Laing corrects ‘Accra’ to ‘accra’. The transcripts appear to suggest that these corrections were made necessary by the editor’s misunderstanding of Laing’s intentions regarding these specific spellings. Yet, just as the transcripts attest to Laing’s desire to control the text’s shape upon the page (*Figure 3*), they confirm that he deliberately establishes doubles by which there are two Ghanas, two Accras and two Africas: often an official version (the ‘Ghana’ of the satirically fictitious ‘Marketing Board For Projecting The Soul of Ghanaians’ in ‘The same corpse’), and an unofficial, yet more real version (as in ‘Godhorse’: ‘suddenly meeting ghana / half-way up the horse instead’).[86]


60

GODHORSE

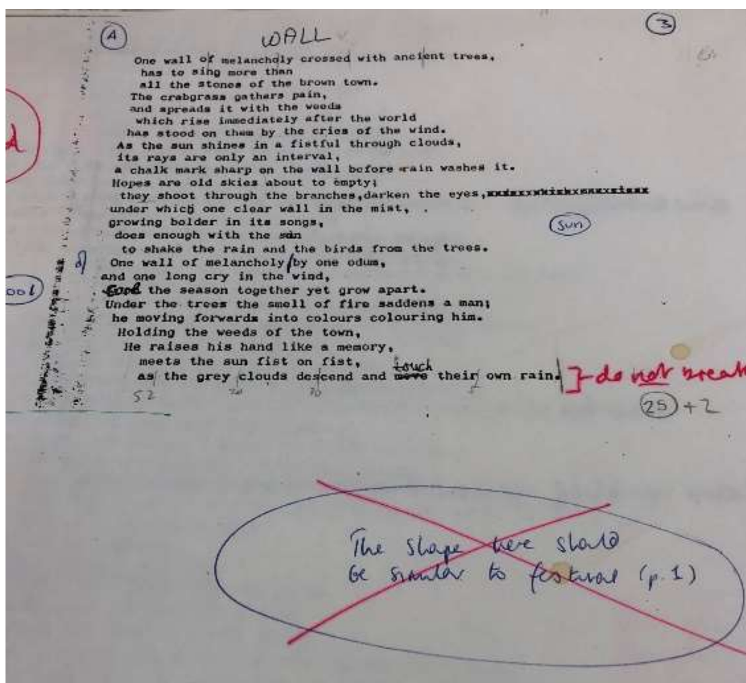
on its mane, doubt on its tail ...
s being whisked north or south ...
elieved horizon, in
-coloured with kente,
ch the horse bisected the hills,
old man with the square body
ated left flank, leaving
as his bones came down like a pounder.
nition of time, more
r the horse
rting would be framed
trong hands,
s would jump the centuries,
er right breast on the right flank
ler, this horse
the limiting beauty of birds.
ook—O god of soft thunder!—
hed his lust across horse flesh,
gh the geography of tails, but
a
-way up the horse instead; suddenly

NB ghana, accra
and africa
are not
capitalised
deliberately

Figure 2

---

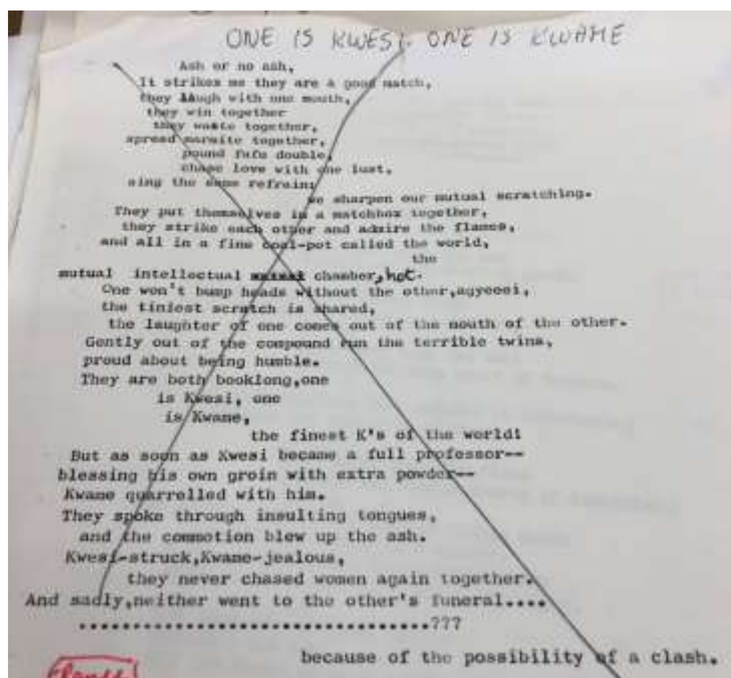
[85] HEB 33/3, Heinemann Educational Archive, held in the University of Reading’s Special Collections.
[86] Laing, *Godhorse,* pp. 29, 37.



WALL

One wall of melancholy crossed with ancient trees,
has to sing more than
all the stones of the brown town.
The crabgrass gathers pain,
and spreads it with the weeds
which rise immediately after the world
has stood on them by the cries of the wind.
As the sun shines in a fistful through clouds,
its rays are only an interval,
a chalk mark sharp on the wall before rain washes it.
Hopes are old skies about to empty;
they shoot through the branches, darken the eyes,
under which one clear wall in the mist,
growing bolder in its songs,
does enough with the sun
to shake the rain and the birds from the trees.
One wall of melancholy by one odum,
and one long cry in the wind,
Cool the season together yet grow apart.
Under the trees the smell of fire saddens a man;
he moving forwards into colours colouring him.
Holding the weeds of the town,
He raises his hand like a memory,
meets the sun fist on fist,
as the grey clouds descend and touch their own rain.

Figure 3, Laing's directive appears at the bottom.



ONE IS KWESI, ONE IS KWAME

Ash or no ash,
It strikes me they are a good match,
they laugh with one mouth,
they win together
they waste together,
spread parasite together,
pound fufu double,
chase love with one lust,
sing the same refrain;
we sharpen our mutual scratching.
They put themselves in a matchbox together,
they strike each other and admire the flames,
and all in a fine coal-pot called the world,
mutual intellectual the chamber, hot.
One won't bump heads without the other, agyeesi,
the tiniest scratch is shared,
the laughter of one comes out of the mouth of the other.
Gently out of the compound run the terrible twins,
proud about being humble.
They are both booklong, one
is Kwesi, one
is Kwame,
the finest K's of the world!
But as soon as Kwesi became a full professor--
blessing his own groin with extra powder--
Kwame quarrelled with him.
They spoke through insulting tongues,
and the commotion blew up the ash.
Kwesi-struck, Kwame-jealous,
they never chased women again together.
And sadly, neither went to the other's funeral....
.................................???
because of the possibility of a clash.

Figure 4

The typescripts also include a poem, originally placed before ‘Twenty years flying’, which did not make it into the final published volume (*Figure 4*). Entitled ‘One is Kwesi one is Kwame’, the poem reaffirms Laing’s insistent interest in doubles—an interest that continues throughout the novels, from the twins Kwame and Kwaku of *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988), to the dual fates of Gold Coast City and Canterbury City in *Big Bishop Roko.* The poem describes the antics of the ‘terrible twins’, Kwame and Kwesi, who match each other’s actions to the extent that they even ‘pound fufu double’. Both are ‘booklong’, a word Laing elsewhere glosses as ‘intellectual’, yet it is their cohabitation of a ‘mutual intellectual ~~mutual~~ chamber’ that would lead to their clashing.[87] Having been awarded the title of ‘full professor’, Kwesi displays the arrogance of ‘blessing his own groin with extra powder’—and this assumption of intellectual superiority provokes Kwame to end their ‘good match’ forever. The poem ends with the absurd and comic suggestion that, because of their rift, ‘neither went to the other’s funeral’—a statement that the poem itself displays a sceptical attitude towards, delaying the question marks as though enacting the thought process by which the reader notices the impossible logic of the statement.

In ‘One is Kwesi one is Kwame’, the double as a thematic concern reflects Laing’s formal use of intertextual doubling in ‘No needle in the sky’. In ‘One is Kwesi one is Kwame’, Laing reminds his readers that, for the ‘terrible twins’, development can only be conceived of as combined—even their eventual separation depends on a positioning of themselves in relation to one another, despite their isolation entailing the breakdown of social communication between them. Similarly, ‘No needle in the sky’ gestures towards an antecedent formal influence, and whilst deviating from it in important and pronounced ways, emphasises a comparative connection between his own and Hopkins’s poem—a connection

[87] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 332.

that demands a way of reading that can begin to compensate for the 'generations of dire disconnection' Laing elsewhere laments.

What emerges from Laing's use of 'The Windhover', then, is a form of intertextuality that is rarely merely reference. In accordance with Tony Bennett and Jane Woollacott's reformulation, Laing's works frequently extend the basic notion of intertextuality, or references 'to other texts which can be discerned within the internal composition of a specific individual text', by calling attention to an extra-literary function of such reference. This extension they distinguish as 'inter-textuality', which, they write, refers 'to the social organization of the relations between texts within specific conditions of reading.'[88] 'No needle in the sky' is a double poem by virtue of this 'inter-textuality': it does not merely foreground its use of a source text, but foregrounds also the relationship between itself and its source, and the ways in which this relationship reflects extra-literary dynamics, such as, in this instance, a history of migration and cultural exchange.

Inter-textuality allows language itself to become the site of cultural connection. It can be used to produce a dialogic language capable of avoiding the 'overwhelming […] structural constraint upon social meaning' that David Gramling has recently identified as the 'cost' of Anglo-American monolingualism.[89] This dialogic language—produced, in part, through inter-textuality—informs Laing's use of the 'double poem' elsewhere in *Godhorse*: specifically, in the volume's twenty third poem, 'More hope More dust'. Whereas 'No needle in the sky' gestures towards 'The Windhover' as a poetic antecedent, 'More hope More dust' appears to allude to Robert Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins', the very text Armstrong uses to develop her reading of the 'double poem' (*Figure 5*). In 'More hope More dust', as Brenda Cooper has argued, 'the reader is split as two voices speak simultaneously, voices that

---

[88] Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 45-6.
[89] David Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 17.

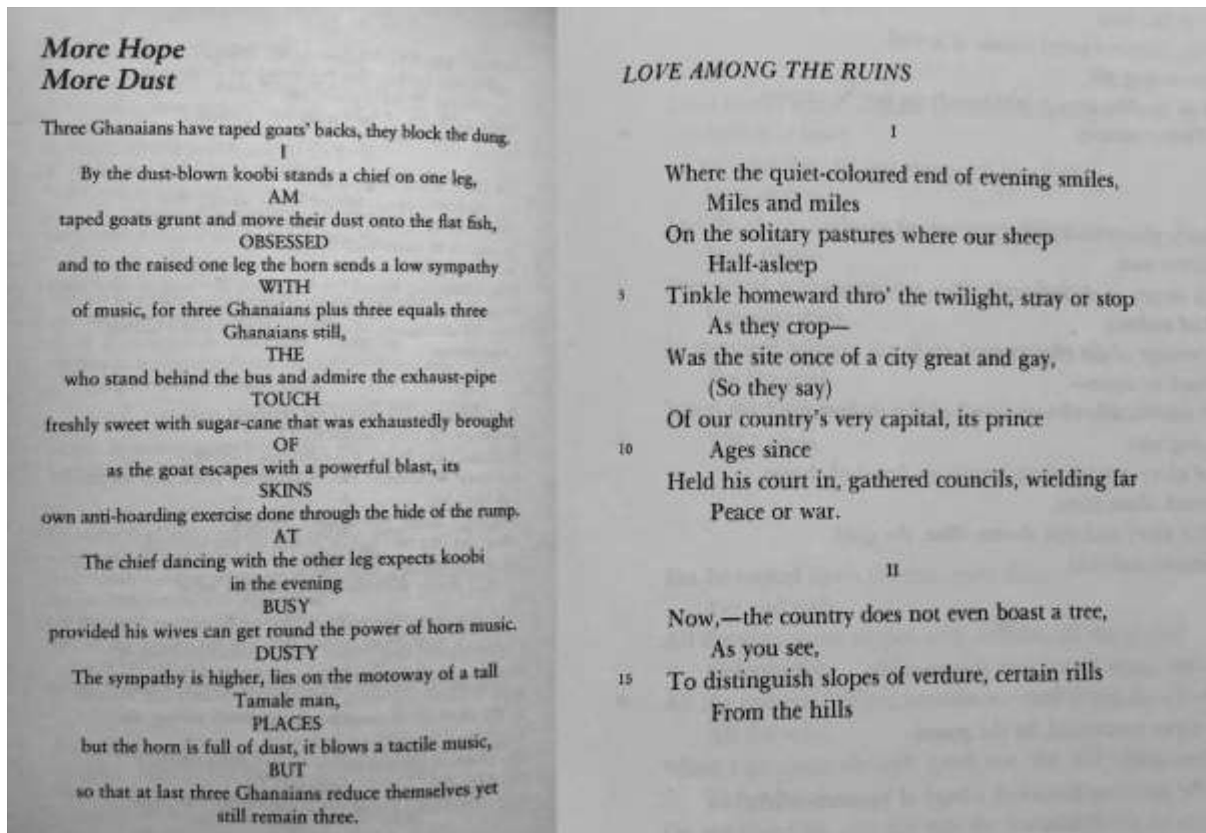
are separate and also interwoven'.[90] The poem's 'split' between these 'two voices' (a split that even appears to mark the poem's title) is immediately apparent on the page:

IT
The free goats attack the Ghanaians, the revenge in the hoof
rises,
IS
in the dust the koobi turns over to its wrong side, parries
the commotion,
THE
the chiefly leg fed with fish is seriously dancing, it goads
the horn
FORGOTTEN
as the bus groans off spreading memories with its exhaust,
high
FUTURE
there the fighting goes on regardless: see the authority
in kicking,
THE
the Ghanaians bleat, the goats cry,
FORGOTTEN
they change hides but can't hide each other, even in dust,
dust,
HISTORY[91]

The two voices, typographically separated, but formally interwoven, tell different but interrelated stories about the 'wild fate' of the 'Millions of Ghanaians' who 'career about in history.'[92] The longer lines describe a surreal scene in which several Ghanaians dispute with some goats, only to metamorphose into the goats as they attempt to pacify them; while the shorter lines carry one sentence across and through the longer narrative: 'I am obsessed with the touch of skins at busy dusty places but it is the forgotten future the forgotten history that shames me and all these mysterious bodies pulled by a sly wild fate.'[93]

---

[90] Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 188.
[91] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 39.
[92] Laing, *Godhorse,* p.40.
[93] Laing, *Godhorse,* pp. 38-40.



More Hope
More Dust

Three Ghanaians have taped goats' backs, they block the dung.
I
By the dust-blown koobi stands a chief on one leg,
AM
taped goats grunt and move their dust onto the flat fish,
OBSESSED
and to the raised one leg the horn sends a low sympathy
WITH
of music, for three Ghanaians plus three equals three
Ghanaians still,
THE
who stand behind the bus and admire the exhaust-pipe
TOUCH
freshly sweet with sugar-cane that was exhaustedly brought
OF
as the goat escapes with a powerful blast, its
SKINS
own anti-hoarding exercise done through the hide of the rump.
AT
The chief dancing with the other leg expects koobi
in the evening
BUSY
provided his wives can get round the power of horn music.
DUSTY
The sympathy is higher, lies on the motoway of a tall
Tamale man,
PLACES
but the horn is full of dust, it blows a tactile music,
BUT
so that at last three Ghanaians reduce themselves yet
still remain three.

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

I

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,
Miles and miles
On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half-asleep
Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
As they crop—
Was the site once of a city great and gay,
(So they say)
Of our country's very capital, its prince
Ages since
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far
Peace or war.

II

Now,—the country does not even boast a tree,
As you see,
To distinguish slopes of verdure, certain rills
From the hills

Figure 5, Laing's poem on the left, and Browning's on the right[94]

At once glossing the longer narrative, and providing a sort of critique of the events it describes, this capitalised second voice, and its interaction with the rest of the poem, speaks to Deandrea's argument that Laing's poetry 'stand[s] out' due to its 'physical treatment of language: words cease to be a mere medium of expression and acquire a concrete dimension, like an object of research.'[95] This concrete style (present also in the line 'every rock is a consonant' in 'No needle in the sky') allows Laing to develop a poetic voice at once expressive and self-consciously analytic: if, as Deandrea suggests, words in Laing's poetry are frequently treated 'like an object of research', then they simultaneously express, and call attention to what expression itself entails. This duality (a poem that expresses, and calls the act of expression into question), is reflective of Armstrong's analysis of Browning's 'Love

[94] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 39; *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 163.
[95] Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings*, p. 170.

Among the Ruins'—a poem that also relies on the same type of formal duality between longer and shorter lines:

III.
And such plenty and perfection, see, of grass
Never was!
Such a carpet as, this summer-time, o'erspreads
And embeds
Every vestige of the city, guessed alone,
Stock or stone –
Where a multitude of men breathed joy and woe
Long ago;
Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame
Struck them tame;
And that glory and that shame alike, the gold
Bought and sold.[96]

Browning's poem centres on the reflections of a male speaker awaiting a meeting with a 'girl' (l. 55) in one of the towers of a ruin.[97] The ruin prompts him to ruminate on the 'multitude of men' who once occupied the city that stood on the site. If, in Laing's poem, the lack of direction displayed by the 'Millions of Ghanaians' is a problem of the present, in Browning's, the chaos and pomp of the site's former glory, its 'joy and woe', 'glory' and 'shame', is a problem of the past, only able to distract momentarily the poetic voice during his expectation of a meeting more private than his recollections of public history. However, for Armstrong, Browning's poem coincides with Laing's, in that it acts to combine expression with a commentary on that very expression:

> It is as if another more critical language is refusing to be excluded and threatening private feeling with a mocking analysis of its limitations. This is movable type, or removable type, in action. There are two poems here. One is a simple celebration of private feeling which attempts to exclude everything but the moment of union. The other is an assent to, or at least recognition of, the subversive and dangerous energies of an alien culture'[98]

[96] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 164.
[97] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 165.
[98] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 18.

The 'two poems' here can almost be read separately: the shorter refrains serving less to extend the poem's narrative, than to develop a 'critical language' to check the 'celebration of private feeling' that the longer lines constitute. The typical pastoral register, for example of 'such plenty and perfection, see, of grass', a line that interrupts its statement to implore the listener to 'see' the 'perfection' it describes, is immediately deflated by the curt, and bathetically half-rhymed 'Never was!' Rather than permit the clichéd and monologic language of 'private feeling' to predominate, Browning's second voice acts to expose 'the power relations of communication and interpretation, […] enabling a democratic access to their complexities.'[99] The assumption that a poem can convey the 'private feeling' of a character without that privacy being corrupted or undone by the mediation of the poet and the interpretation of the reader is here challenged—the second voice acting as a reminder that literary expression is inherently dialogic.

The 'two poems' that Armstrong identifies here mirror the relationship between 'feeling' and 'analysis' in Laing's poem. Yet, whilst Browning develops a dialogic form in order to critique the pretensions of the poetry of 'private feeling' to epistemological veracity, Laing's similarly dialogic form performs a slightly different function. Laing's second voice, whilst acting as a type of commentary on the 'commotion' of Ghanaian society, and the poverty by which 'three Ghanaians plus three equals three Ghanaians still', does not attempt to criticise 'private feeling', but rather to demonstrate that private feeling can intervene in social matters and provide prescriptions.[100] Indeed, the second voice in Laing's poem is precisely a form of the private feeling Browning's poem serves to critique—yet for Laing, such an individual response to the commotion of life the poem describes can provide clarity

---

[99] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 288-9.
[100] Laing, *Godhorse,* pp. 38-9.

where before there was only confusion. Rather than ‘enabling a democratic access’ to the complexities of hermeneutics and literary expression, Laing’s double poem attempts to show how the apparent complexities of life can conceal collective feelings of shame and hopelessness, kept private by a similarly collective commitment to leaving things unsaid.

Laing’s double poem also provides opportunities for the two voices to interfere with each other. For example, the two voices blur into one coherent description in the lines: ‘the Ghanaians bleat, the goats cry, / FORGOTTEN / they change hides but can’t hide each other, even in dust, dust, / HISTORY’.[101] The goats and their owners are forgotten, and yet cannot hide themselves in either dust, or the dust of history, and here the blurring is accentuated by the shared ‘st’ sounds of ‘dust’ and ‘HISTORY’. Similarly, later in the poem, ‘out of the bruises’ of the fight ‘rise man and beast, beast part-man, man part-beast, / ALL / spectators scatter’.[102] Here, the second voice’s ‘ALL’ reads both ways: first, it evokes totality after a line that describes the combination of ‘man and beast’ into one mass, and secondly, it emphasises the extent to which this combination causes ‘ALL / spectators’ to ‘scatter’. What emerges from Laing’s poem, then, is the belief that an honest and compassionate response to the material realities of Ghanaian life (the second voice), no matter how complex they appear to be, can have direct transformative consequences—even if that transformation consists simply of making confusion more intelligible. Furthermore, Laing’s uses of interferences reflects his tendency to prioritise moments of confusion between what are perceived to be the ‘two poles’ of a binary.

However, although Laing’s use of the double poem accentuates the importance of an individual response to the complexities of life, rather than critiquing, like Browning’s poem, the validity of such an individual response, there are numerous imaginative points of contact

---

[101] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 39.
[102] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 39.

between the two poems. For example, both poems lament a forgotten history, or a lost grandeur. Browning's poem recalls the former 'city great and gay' that once stood on the site of the ruins—a grassy site that now serves to graze 'sheep / Half-asleep', and 'does not even boast a tree';[103] while Laing's poem bewails 'the forgotten future the forgotten history', in a dusty rather than grassy location in which 'taped goats' are kept rather than sheep.[104] Both poems feature the perspective of a 'silent watcher': in 'More hope More dust' the 'silent watcher with the free mouth […] who sees the changes career about in history', and in 'Love Among the Ruins' the 'girl' and the imagined 'king', who both look out from 'the turret whence the charioteers caught soul / For the goal'.[105] Furthermore, both poems conclude with sections that share key vocabulary and concepts. In Browning's poem, the final stanza describes the 'million fighters' the ancient city sent 'forth / South and North', and finishes by deriding the 'whole centuries of folly, noise and sin' that preceded his meeting with his lover.[106] 'More hope More dust' concludes by deriding the 'Millions of Ghanaians [that] bleat with one lip', after which the 'silent watcher' is left awaiting 'the bruise and fight […] to change to the forward creative thrust', a change that, on the surface, Browning's poem associates with the progression from the site's past to its present.[107]

However, whilst Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins' uses a double form to position the expression of private feeling against a 'critical language' capable of exposing its limitations, Laing uses the same form, in both 'No needle in the sky' and 'More hope More dust', not only to emphasise the importance of poetic reflection on, and interpretation of, the apparent chaos of life in his contemporary Ghana, but also to demonstrate the manifold creative possibilities produced by intercultural contact. The structural and thematic

---

[103] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 163.
[104] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 39.
[105] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 40; *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 165.
[106] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 166.
[107] Laing, *Godhorse,* p. 40.

importance of intercultural translation to these poems—their pursuit, to recall Santos's terms, of 'new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication'—foreshadows the concern with a 'broadening of vocabulary' in Laing's later novels. They, together with Laing's creative output as a whole, serve to remind readers that, as Fiona Doloughan has suggested, '[w]ith access to more than one writing system and set of linguistic and cultural conventions comes the potential for enhanced creativity, and the kind of double vision or critical perspective that depends on or emerges from such a dual consciousness'.[108] While her insistence on a strong correlation between multilingualism and 'enhanced creativity' remains open to criticism, the 'double vision' Doloughan describes is exploited in 'No needle in the sky' and 'More hope More dust' to enable cultural interrelation on the printed page, and to demonstrate the ways in which Santos's 'intercultural translation' and this 'critical perspective' can combine to provide a means of promoting a 'heightened sense' of literature's various networks of allusion and response.

Browning's Translational Grotesque

Although Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins' uses a double poem to expose its limitations of private feeling, other poems utilise doubleness as a way of exploring the manifold creative possibilities produced by intercultural exchange. As we have seen, the 'tropical violence' of Browning's taste—to recall Chesterton's phrase—was primarily the result of a tendency to incorporate non-English cultural and linguistic elements into his writing. Yet incorporation here does not imply a static reception; it is, rather, a dynamic process of communication and interrelation—one which negotiates between distancing and furthering tendencies.

[108] Fiona Doloughan, 'Translation as a Motor of Critique', p. 150.

This section analyses this process in Browning's poems motivated by Italy and Italian life. As such, it tests Jaouad's suggestion that Italy, for Browning, was a 'cultural reference point', a 'permeable zone', through which he 'worked out many of his East-North connections', and the contrapuntal 'crisscross' of his distinctive style.[109] Described by Ian Jack as an 'escape from Victorian England', and by Barbara Melchiori as 'an exile', Browning's lengthy residence in Italy contributed to his interest in the poetics and politics of cultural difference.[110] Many of Browning's poems—from 'Fra Lippo Lippi' and 'My Last Duchess' to *Pippa Passes* (1841) and *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69)—famously revel in what Jacob Korg calls 'the prolific turmoil of the Italian scene'.[111] In many ways, the 'Italy and Italian character' that Bagehot sees as privileged in Browning's texts was, as Browning's correspondence attests, a peculiar obsession. Writing to Isabella Blagden in August 1862, having returned to London in October 1861 after the death of his wife Elizabeth, Browning admitted—with reference to Italy—that 'I think of little else'.[112]

If Scotland provided Laing with university education, Italy, as a kind of 'university', provided Browning with opportunities not only to come to terms with a culture distinct from Britain's, but also to witness in action a political struggle for unification grounded in questions of cultural identity and nationality.[113] The correspondence appears to confirm the extent to which the Risorgimento's progress arrested Browning's attention. Writing again to Blagden, though two years earlier, Browning explains that 'my thoughts are not of pictures, nor statues, nor even poems—but of men & nationalities—oh my Isa! … think what I must be feeling about Italy'.[114]

---

[109] Jaouad, *Browning Upon Arabia,* p. 8.
[110] Ian Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 8; Barbara Melchiori, 'Browning in Italy', *Robert Browning: Writers and their Background,* ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1974), 168-183, p. 183.
[111] Jacob Korg, *Browning and Italy* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983), p. 13.
[112] *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden,* ed. by Edward C. McAleer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 117.
[113] Lilian Whiting, *The Brownings: Their Life and Art* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), p. 246.
[114] 'February 15, 1859', *Dearest Isa,* p. 34.

The influence of these thoughts 'of men & nationalities' further 'strengthened', in Pamela Neville-Sington's words, Browning's political 'radicalism'.[115] A career-long and general interest in democratic politics and non-bourgeois characters—from Sordello lamenting the 'sad dishevelled ghost' of a poor peasant in 1840 (III, l. 696), to Aristophanes' defence of the 'common coarse-as-clay / Existence' in 1875 (ll. 2683-4)[116]—developed alongside a specific investment in the cause of Italian unification. Despite claiming, in several letters, to dislike Giuseppe Mazzini, Browning appears to have been fascinated by revolutionary activity and the Italian struggle.[117] The speaker of 'The Italian in England', for example, included in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), announces his desire to 'grasp Metternich until / I felt his red wet throat distil / In blood through these two hands' (ll. 121-3).[118] Similarly, Luigi from *Pippa Passes* (1841), refusing to act 'as if no Italy / Were suffering', resolves to assassinate the leader of the Austrian occupation (III, ll. 40-1).[119]

While, then, Browning's interest in Italian politics is clear, points of connection between this interest and the 'corrugated stylistic surface' of his grotesque language are less obvious.[120] Not frequently read or discussed, Browning's 'Tutti ga i so gusti e mi go i mii'—first published in volume 27 of the *Century Magazine* in 1883-4, and written in November 1883—is representative (in miniature) of the various concerns and tensions of the late Italian poems, and in particular how these concerns and tensions are constructed 'from the verbal ground up'.[121] Written, the introduction of the poem explains, to commemorate the death of the English historian Rawdon Brown, who died in Venice after a stay of forty years, and was

---

[115] Pamela Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning: A Life After Death* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), p. 215.
[116] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. II, p. 217; *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XII, p. 121.
[117] See, for example, Browning's letter to Isa Blagden dated April 19, 1863 (*Dearest Isa,* p. 160).
[118] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. IV, p. 171.
[119] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. III, p. 60.
[120] Woolford, *Robert Browning*, p. 69.
[121] Stewart, *The Value of Style,* p. 6.

well known for his love for that city, the sonnet is marked by its uses of linguistic, formal and generic mixtures:

> "Tutti ga i so gusti e mi go i mii."
>
> Sighed Rawdon Brown—"Yes, I'm departing, Toni!
> I needs must, just this once before I die,
> Revisit England: *Anglus* Brown am I,
> Although my heart's Venetian, Yes, old crony—
> Venice and London—London's Death the Bony
> Compared with Life—that's Venice! What a sky,
> A sea, this morning! One last look! Goodbye,
> Cà Pesaro! No lion—I'm a coney
> To weep! I'm dazzled: 'tis that sun I view
> Rippling the . . the . . Cospetto, Toni! Down
> With carpet-bag and off with valise-straps!
> *Bella Venezia, non ti lascio più!"*
> Nor did Brown ever leave her. Well, perhaps
> Browning, next week, may find himself quite Brown![122]

Describing himself to Toni, his manservant, as '*Anglus* Brown'—the use of the Latin for Englishman demonstrating his estrangement from his home nation—Rawdon's attempt to 'Revisit England' proves, in a way that seems at odds with the poem's elegiac function, comically abortive. The poem's title, Venetian dialect roughly translated as 'Everyone follows his taste, and I follow mine', appears to not only celebrate the immensity of Brown's affection for his adopted home, but also to gesture towards the peculiarity of Browning's taste, and what Chesterton called its 'tropical violence'. Mixing languages and dialects, 'high' and 'low' registers of English (idiomatic conjugations like 'I needs must' cohabit a sonnet that also features informal canting slang like 'coney', and conventionally formal

[122] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XVII, p. 128.

poetic rhetoric like ''tis the sun I view'), and confusing generic expectations (a comic memorial), the poem revels in unusual and grotesque combinations.[123]

Browning's poem, like Laing's 'double poems', draws attention to intercultural translation. Like Rawdon Brown himself, the poem's Englishness is never unequivocally established. Even the sonnet form is an Italian origination, and the poem's presentation of a preference for Italy (as opposed to a 'bony' and skeletal England) depends on its bilingualism appearing natural and inevitable. The verse accommodates its Italian elements into its English with confidence. The grotesque rhyme of ''tis that sun I view' with '*non ti lascio più*' finds several points of audible similarity between the two languages: not only the end rhyme of 'view/più', but also the assonance of ''tis/ti', and 'sun I/*lascio*'. Similarly, 'Cospetto' (in English, 'presence', 'prospect' or 'sight') chimes with the English words that surround it, such as 'coney', the p-sounds of 'Rippling', the hard t-sounds of ''tis that', and both sounds together in the following line's 'carpet'.

Grotesque rhymes caricature the aural effect of poetry; they over-exaggerate these effects in a way that inevitably distracts the reader from the semantic content of the verse, by instead drawing attention to sound in a frequently ludic and garish fashion.[124] The many extant examples of Browning's 'rhyming exercises', in which he either challenged himself, or was challenged by others, to produce complex and metered rhymes to difficult words such as 'rhinoceros' (Browning suggested 'could toss Eros') and 'Miss de Rothschild' (which he rhymed with 'Venus, sea froth's child'), demonstrate that such a burlesquing of the expected function of rhyme remained a consistent preoccupation of the poet.[125] This is not to say, however, that these rhymes only serve as demonstrations of technical skill. Another effect of these rhymes, Eric Griffiths suggests, 'is to set the voice on edge with the demands of the

---

[123] For a discussion of the slang term 'coney' see Jonathon Green, *Slang Down the Ages: The Historical Development of Slang* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1993), p. 312.
[124] Browning's use of grotesque rhymes is discussed briefly in Woolford, *Robert Browning*, p. 31.
[125] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. XVII, pp. 117-8.

page, indicating the distinct existences of the written text and vocal renditions of it'.[126] For Griffiths,

> [e]specially when a double aspect can be heard in a rhyme, heard as sounding one way from the fictional speaker of a monologue, and heard again and differently from the actual writer of that speech, such rhymes help the dramatic monologue to be a form which enquires into social and historical disparities, not a form which conduces to impersonation or colonizing the imagination. [127]

This 'double aspect', formed by the rhyme's tendency to draw attention to the poet as well as the speaker of the poem, is what gives the dramatic monologue its political edge. Like Armstrong, Griffiths foregrounds the form's ability to represent and question 'social and historical disparities'. He continues to argue that the 'gap between writing and speech, straddled by the conflicting demands of these straining rhymes, is also the ground on which' Browning confronts the 'disparity between ideals and actualities' characteristic of Victorian attitudes towards 'love and marriage'.[128]

Aside from this 'double aspect', such rhymes perform another important 'social and historical' function. Grotesque rhymes are also used by Browning as a form of intercultural translation: as a means of straddling between different linguistic communities, mediating interaction, and thereby complicating any conception of languages and cultures as inherently separate and distinct. Several of the rhyming exercises typify this sort of intercultural translation ('Poggibonsi/dodgy bonze see'; 'Timbuctoo/him buck too); [129] they represent an attempt to test, in Annmarie Drury's words, 'the reach of English poetry' or more specifically 'its capacity for incorporating non-English forms, language, and ideas.'[130] As such, they frequently perform two aspects of what Drury calls Browning's 'incorporative aesthetic':

---

[126] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice*, p. 180.
[127] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice*, p. 181.
[128] Griffiths, *The Printed Voice*, p. 181.
[129] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XVII, p. 118.
[130] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 102.

first, like Laing's 'Author's Note' to *Major Gentl*, they demonstrate that 'the English language can be stretched: that it is flexible and pervious, that its diction, syntax, and meter can do new things'; and secondly, they serve as a vehicle for the incorporation of non-English language elements into predominantly English poetic sentences.[131]

Despite being only a particular formal aspect of Browning's often complex poetry, such rhymes raise important questions as to the poet's conscious relationship to international literary systems. For example, Bagehot's criticism of Browning's failure to assume a 'position as an English poet' hinged upon his disapproval of these uses of intercultural incorporations and translations. Yet, they attest to a degree of positioning on Browning's own part: an effort to internationalise his literary practice at the same time as gesturing to networks of affiliation that cross national and linguistic borders.

Grotesque rhymes support this effort by functioning in the poems in a similar way to translationese. For Reynolds,

> we drag words of translationese home into the language they have made us newly aware that we know, while also having to realise that in doing this we are creating for them an English identity which is perhaps spurious. In prompting this oscillation between recognition and abolition of foreignness, translationese is obviously apt to Browning's untiring interest in the processes by which others, especially people in foreign cultures, are understood.[132]

In contriving metered, English rhymes for non-English linguistic elements, Browning often relies upon unconventional syntax, strange elisions, and dubious pronunciations. Even as he works to accommodate foreignness into his English verse, that verse itself often becomes less and less familiarly English, prompting the kind of 'oscillation between recognition and abolition of foreignness' that Reynolds describes.

---

[131] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 141.

[132] Matthew Reynolds, 'Browning and Translationese', *Essays in Criticism,* vol. 53, no. 2 (2003), 97-128, pp. 99-100.

This is particularly obvious when the foreign linguistic element precedes the English in these rhyme relationships. In 'Pacchiarotto' (1876), for example, several of these rhymes occur: the Greek '*Apage*!' is rhymed with '(in Scotch phrase) his cap a-gee', '*skoramis*' with 'more amiss', and 'Pacchiarotto' is rhymed with 'scot and lot to' among others.[133] Common to these examples is the way in which the demands of the rhyme require an alteration of either conventional syntax or pronunciation, or indeed necessitate borrowings from regional dialects of English in cases such as 'cap a-gee'. English 'must stretch to its limits' to accommodate these foreign words and names into its rhyme scheme, and in doing so it sometimes unravels its own familiarity, forces the reader to see English altered by the demands of foreign word structures.[134]

Such rhymes have, to recall Simon's vocabulary, a 'furthering' quality, 'adding to the repertoire of expression, *augmenting* the coverage of the language.'[135] However, to stress only the ways Browning's aesthetic serves 'furthering' purposes is to obfuscate the complex mechanisms underpinning the work of incorporation in his poetry, and how these mechanisms involve the entanglement of 'furthering' and 'distancing' tendencies. Indeed, the foregrounding of alterity and foreignness (Reynolds's 'proscenium arch') is frequently used alongside incorporation to 'deepen a sense of otherness' in Browning's poetry, contributing less to the stretching and augmentation of the English language than to an accentuation of that language's limits.[136]

Take, for example, the poem 'A Toccata of Galuppi's', first published in *Men and Women* in 1855. The poem explores, according to Ian Jack, the way music 'removes us from the here and now—the present spatial and temporal framework of our lives', the way it is

---

[133] Robert Browning, *Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper: with other poems* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1876), pp. 16, 21, 42.
[134] Reynolds, 'Browning and Translationese', p. 98.
[135] Simon, *Cities in Translation,* p. 17.
[136] Simon, *Cities in Translation,* p. 13.

'disconcerting'.[137] The nineteenth-century speaker's reflections, 'built on a system of telescoping viewpoints', upon an eighteenth-century Venetian toccata provokes an imaginative consideration of a culture very different to his own:[138]

> II.
> Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
> 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?
>
> III.
> 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.
> (ll. 4-9)[139]

Two types of mimetic phrasing coexist in this poem. Triplets of predominantly catalectic trochaic octameter, characterised by phonetic patterning (such as the layering of assonant and sibilant repetition in 'because the sea's the street' and 'it's as if I saw it all'), mime the musicality of the toccata being played and the 'carnival' it brings to the mind of the poem's speaker. Yet, simultaneously, the language is made to imitate the typical hesitations and contractions of prosaic and colloquial English speech. At once intimating an immediate access to the Venice of the speaker's imagination, and emphasising 'disconcerting' moments (that is, moments that represent obstacles to what Maria Tymoczko calls 'comfortable assimilation'[140]), the poem presents its English readership with a combination of the foreign and familiar characteristic of Browning's 'incorporative aesthetic'.

It is tempting, however, to concur with Stephen Cheeke that 'Browning's dramatic monologues often discover that what the Victorian era believes is a condition of its own age',

---

[137] Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry*, p. 150.
[138] W. Craig Turner, 'Art, Artist, and Audience in "A Toccata of Gallupi's"', *Browning Institute Studies,* vol. 15, Meeting the Brownings (1987), 123-129, p. 123.
[139] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 197.
[140] Maria Tymoczko, 'Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation', *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice,* ed. by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 19-40, p. 22.

and consequently read the poem as itself dramatizing an inability to escape the conventions of one's own culture.[141] Stefan Hawlin, for example, grounding the poem in the intellectual contexts of 1850s Britain, understands the poem as grappling with Matthew Arnold's 'Hebrew-Hellene binary':

> We can use phrases straight out of *Culture and Anarchy* to characterize [the speaker's] dilemma: on the one hand, we see the speaker's "staunchness and [moral] earnestness" of perception, on the other hand, growing out of aesthetic engagement, a "freer play of consciousness." Or, to take another phrasing, we see a man given to "earnestness of doing" – in his case, via his interest in science – having a fit of "delicacy and flexibility of thinking." In Arnold's terms, his whole experience in the monologue constitutes a moment of "culture," "a free play of thought upon [his] routine notions.[142]

The poem is, for Hawlin, characterised by 'the pressure of countervailing perspectives, based on different cultural-religious presuppositions', which produces a tension which is 'foundational for the poem.'[143] This 'journey into the Other' is grounded, he argues, in a Bakhtinian understanding of the 'word' as 'an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings.'[144] The poem's intertextual relationship with Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' emphasises these tensions by subtly drawing the basic structure of Keats's poem 'into the struggle […] between "Hebrew" and "Hellene"' that, Hawlin argues, defines Browning's specifically British nineteenth-century perspective.

While Hawlin's article does a great deal to emphasise the importance of tension in the poem, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which the poem is characterised specifically by an entanglement of 'distancing' and 'furthering' tendencies, centred upon the

---

[141] Stephen Cheeke, *Transfiguration: The Religion of Art in Nineteenth-Century Literature Before Aestheticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 107.
[142] Stefan Hawlin, 'Reading Browning Intertextually: "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn"', *Victorian Poetry,* vol. 53, no. 3 (2015), 263-279, p. 265.
[143] Hawlin, 'Reading Browning Intertextually', pp. 276, 277.
[144] Hawlin, 'Reading Browning Intertextually', p. 274.

poem's employment of what Hawlin calls a 'journey into the Other' in order to explore a domestic cultural struggle.[145] The poem serves to demonstrate how Drury's emphasis on the positive effects of an 'incorporative aesthetic' underplays the way intercultural contact might simultaneously serve to foreground obstacles—the 'disconcerting' moments Ian Jack notices—to successful and culturally beneficial incorporation.

Herbert F. Tucker's analysis of the poem, for example, while focusing predominantly on its metrical complexity, pauses to draw attention to the interactivity of cultural difference and familiarity that constitutes its 'journey into the Other':

> 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.[146]

The 'aural camouflage' that enables Browning to conceal the 'unspoken name "Rialto,"' contrasts with the way in which the incorporation of Italian in 'Tutti ga i so gusti e mi go i mii' demanded that English 'must stretch to its limits'. Indeed, 'A Toccata' could be thought of as a counterpart to 'Tutti', insofar as it enacts the failure of the speaker to access the level of intercultural understanding experienced by Rawdon Brown. For example, the use of ellipses in both poems to evoke, with respect to signifiers of cultural difference, very different

---

[145] Browning's poetry frequently makes use of cultural difference to refract, or to provide new perspectives of what is culturally familiar. Much of the dialogue between Aristophanes and Balaustion in the later poem *Aristophanes' Apology* (1885), for example (a poem renowned for its 'Greek-ness' among Browning's contemporaries), also focuses on this 'struggle' between domestic cultural positions. Contemporary criticism tended to dismiss the poem as arcane classicism: the result of Browning's friendship with the scholar of Ancient Greek, Benjamin Jowett, then Master of Balliol College, Oxford, where Browning was, in later life, an Honorary Fellow. In a letter dated 11 February 1876, Browning himself recounts his critics' supposition that the poem was 'probably written after one of Mr Browning's Oxford Symposia with Jowett'—indeed, one critic 'reported the poem to be "the transcript of the talk of the Master of Balliol"' [See *Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. by T. L. Hood (London: John Murray, 1932), p. 171].

[146] Herbert F. Tucker, 'Unsettled Scores: Meter and Play in Two Music Poems by Browning', *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 41, no. 1 (Autumn, 2014), 24-52, p. 32.

lapses of memory (on the one hand the forgetting of the Italian word 'Rialto', and on the other the forgetting of the English equivalent for 'Cospetto'), serves to accentuate the inability of the English speaker of 'A Toccata' to overcome the limitations of a monolingual condition, and the way in which, conversely, the speaker of 'Tutti' is able more successfully to inhabit an intercultural space.

The accentuation of 'disconcerting' moments in 'A Toccata' suggests that the various relational dynamics across and between cultural positions which Browning explores are not sufficiently covered by the notion of incorporation alone. Drury suggests that

> what the dramatic monologue shares with poetic translation is an identity as an avowedly mediated form of expression—both are part of the "interest in a many-times mediated world" that Isobel Armstrong attributes to Browning—and we can take the parallel further by saying that in Browning's poetics the fundamental likeness lies in the potentiality of both for *capturing* language *in* mediation. That is, the dramatic monologue and poetic translation both give Browning a way to explore the capabilities of linguistic hybridity[147]

However, the epistemological argument of Browning's poetry frequently situates its capturing of 'language *in* mediation' within changing social relations both in and between classes and cultures. 'A Toccata', for example, in staging an imaginative encounter between a nineteenth-century British speaker and a piece of eighteenth-century Italian music, accentuates the way in which the textures of the speaker's affective response are limited by his social context: whether what Hawlin would call his 'Hebraic' knowledge of physics, mathematics, and geology, or his partial knowledge of Venetian landmarks (accessible only through Shakespearean reference). As such, Browning's poetry develops an aesthetic that does more than simply provide 'a way to explore the capabilities of linguistic hybridity'. It also provides a way to foreground the dynamics that sustain the creation of social meaning,

---

[147] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* pp. 103-4.

and to provoke reading practices capable of mapping intercultural relationships in what V. N. Vološinov calls their essential 'social multiaccentuality'.[148]

This aesthetic sits uncomfortably alongside binarizing readings of foreignness—for which the poetry is *either* 'distancing' or 'furthering'—and is perhaps better approached with a way of reading that focuses specifically on the interaction between these tendencies. As such, it bears similarities with what Simon calls 'translational' writing.[149] This sort of writing depends on a broader conceptualisation of translation, one which Reynolds terms 'translationality'—a type of translation that 'spans many other varieties of transmission that take place as much within languages as it does between them.'[150] Translational writing, therefore, foregrounds the ways in which meaning is constructed, obstructed, or refracted relationally between different types of language use, whether that means different languages and dialects, or different registers, accents, and media. As, for this sort of writing, 'the focus is not on multiplicity but on interaction', attention is drawn away from linguistic 'hybridity' as a sort of surface trace of intercultural contact, and towards the ways in which form, style, and content can serve as media for 'interaction', irrespective of whether it is grounded in either predominantly 'distancing' or 'furthering' tendencies.[151]

It is not uncommon to associate Browning with translation. His relationship with translation, particularly in the later stages of his career, has been well documented. The 1870s, for example, witnessed the translation into English of the *Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (1877), and the publication of two 'transcripts' from Euripides within *Balaustion's Adventure* in 1871 and *Aristophanes' Apology* in 1875. As Drury notes, however, 'Browning's poetry and his translations typically undergo discussion as two separate spheres of the poet's

---

[148] V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* trans. by Ladislav Matejka and R. Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 23.
[149] Simon, *Cities in Translation,* p. 17.
[150] Matthew Reynolds, *Translation: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 23.
[151] Simon, *Cities in Translation,* p. 7.

endeavour.'[152] One way to repair this tendency, and to explore 'the relation between Browning's poetry-writing and his translation', would be to view his writing in terms of a translational aesthetic.[153] And while Drury and Reynolds have both applied this logic to many of Browning's major poems, an analysis of the translational aesthetic developed in *The Ring and the Book* does not currently exist.

Published in four volumes, from November 1868 to February 1869, *The Ring and the Book*'s twelve books unravel the complexities of what Browning called his 'Italian murder thing'.[154] This 'great venture', based on the documents contained in the 'old square yellow book' of the poem's title, retells events related to the trial and execution of Count Guido Franceschini, in 1698, found guilty of the murder of his wife, whom he suspected of having committed adultery.[155] This story, presented to the reader mediated by 'a system of contemporary refractions', draws attention to both its elaborate combination of historical fidelity with imaginative license, and its presentation of each 'facet-flash' of the whole story (l. 1353)—preoccupations that characterise many of Browning's later writings.[156] In the 1875 work *Aristophanes' Apology,* for example, Browning would reiterate his support for the sort of holistic view developed in *The Ring and the Book*, arguing that, if 'Little and Bad exist, are natural: / Then let me know them, and be twice as great / As he who only knows one phase of life!' (ll. 5133-35).[157]

Consequently, criticism tends to focus on the poem's foregrounding of interpretation, and how for Browning, in John Woolford's words, 'the world of objects includes the words which represent that same world of objects'.[158] Philip Drew, for example, identifies as 'the

---

[152] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 104.
[153] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 104.
[154] 'October 19, 1864', *Dearest Isa,* p. 193.
[155] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VII, p. 11; 'August 19, 1865', *Dearest Isa,* pp. 220.
[156] Woolford, *Browning the Revisionary*, pp. 185-6; *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VII, p. 55.
[157] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XII, p. 254.
[158] Woolford, *Robert Browning,* p. 84.

main premise upon which the whole poem is built', the notion that '*actions* are evident to all, but that they must be interpreted, because what is of importance for moral judgement is the motives that have led to them.'[159] Similarly, Donald S. Hair's treatment of language in the poem—beginning with the claim that the poem, 'in its encyclopedic structure, canvasses most of Browning's concerns with language'—emphasises the importance of 'translation' to *The Ring and the Book*'s revaluation of the idea that 'our words must correspond to something outside us called "facts."'[160] Indeed, half of Browning's uses, throughout his career, of the word 'translate' appear in *The Ring and the Book*; a fact that attests to the poem's centrality to questions regarding the intersections between language, truth, and translation.[161]

However, the poem does more than simply emphasise the '*capturing* [of] language *in* mediation'.[162] It also gestures obliquely towards the concerns of Browning's contemporary political environment. Pompilia's attempt to seize independence from a tyrannous husband provides an example of the sort of change envisioned by proponents of Italian unification. *The Ring and the Book,* as Reynolds suggests, 'upholds liberal nationalism—as well as the wider tendencies towards political and religious freedom which the Risorgimento was taken to epitomise—against those who argued that the demise of the old structures of authority could lead to nothing but anarchy.'[163] This reference, refracted by the poem's multivocal form, remains an important context (one which will be discussed further in the next chapter), despite the distractions produced by Browning's interest in what the French critic Yann Tholoniat calls the 'véritable art de la fugue', in which '[ce] qui apparaît réapparaît, est réintégré, repris, modifié, nuancé, au moyen de répétitions, d'ajustements de focale, de

---

[159] Philip Drew, 'Browning and Philosophy', *Writers and their Background: Robert Browning,* ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1974), 104-141, p. 129.
[160] Donald S. Hair, *Robert Browning's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 169, 176.
[161] *A Concordance to the Poems and Plays of Robert Browning,* 7 vols, vol. VI, compiled by Richard J. Shroyer & Thomas J. Collins (New York: AMS Press, 1996), pp. 3522-3.
[162] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* p. 103-4.
[163] Matthew Reynolds, 'Browning's Forms of Government', *Robert Browning in Contexts,* ed. John Woolford (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1998), 118-147, p. 141.

reformulations, de décantations, de définitions' ['the true art of the fugue', in which 'that which appears reappears, is reintegrated, taken up, modified, nuanced, by way of repetitions, of adjustments of focus, of reformulations, decantations, and definitions'].[164]

It is, however, my intention here to explore the poem's development of a translational aesthetic. By focusing on *The Ring and the Book*'s negotiation of 'distancing' and 'furthering' tendencies, and its accentuation of the semantic importance of interaction between different languages and registers, it becomes possible to trace the text's presentation of linguistic and cultural differences. Furthermore, comparing the poem with its afterlives in translation can accentuate the aesthetic strategies underpinning this presentation. Indeed, the various obstacles that the text throws in the path of translation are frequently themselves indicative of the complexity of Browning's translational aesthetic.

*

Georges Connes' note to his translation of *The Ring and the Book* into French prose stresses that while the language of Browning's poem is

> torrentielle et tumultueuse, elle n'est jamais argotique, et rarement familière; l'atmosphère générale n'est aucunement anglaise, elle veut être, elle est italienne; et s'il est une langue dans laquelle *L'Anneau et le Livre* aurait bien dû être d'abord traduit, c'est l'italien [torrential and tumultuous, it is never slangy, and seldom informal; the general atmosphere is in no way English, it wants to be, indeed is Italian; and if there is a language into which *The Ring and the Book* ought to have been translated first, it is Italian][165]

---

[164] Yann Tholoniat, *Polyphonie et Décentrement dans The Ring and the Book* (Reims: Presses Universitaires de Reims, 2004), p. 271. My translation.

[165] 'Note sur la traduction', in Robert Browning, *L'Anneau et le Livre,* trans. by Georges Connes (Paris: Le Bruit du Temps, 2009), p. 44. My translation.

Recalling Bagehot's criticisms, Connes' suggestion that *The Ring and the Book* is 'aucunement anglaise', or 'in no way English', again draws attention to something, at the verbal level, that disturbs any thinking about style in terms of filial (national) limitations. The poem wants to be, and is, Connes posits, 'italienne': its 'torrentielle et tumultueuse' language is strange, foreign, and rarely 'familière'. Yet, in suggesting that the poem should be translated into Italian, Connes appears to misunderstand something essential about the poem. Just as the 'old yellow book' is written in Latin, 'interfilleted with Italian streaks' (I, l. 135),[166] Browning's poem is profoundly multilingual, and depends—like Laing's texts—in many instances upon dynamics established between English and non-English languages. In drawing attention to these dynamics, the poem makes it difficult to view these languages as separable and non-overlapping.

This can be seen at work in Book VIII, 'Hyacinthus de Archangelis'. Historically neglected, as A. K. Cook shows, by critics for whom it seems 'an unnecessary and irrelevant interlude', the book's 'frivolity and pettifogging ingenuity', together with the 'expansive joviality of the rollicking' lawyer—following as it does Pompilia's death scene in Book VII—appears almost as an affront.[167] Yet the book's centrality to questions of linguistic and cultural nationalism is clear. Linguistic heterogeneity (throughout the book, the Latin of the argument that the lawyer rehearses is interfilleted with English translations, just as his rehearsal is itself interfilleted with concern for the preparations for his son's birthday feast) combines with the preparation of a defence of Guido: a man associated, within the poem's various networks of allusion, with the opposite of what Reynolds calls 'liberal nationalism'.

Distracted from his work, 'Now, of all days i' the year' (VIII, l. 75), Archangelis lays down, ' i' the rough', his 'piece' (VIII, ll. 1716, 1722):[168]

---

[166] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VII, p. 11.
[167] A. K. Cook, *A Commentary Upon Browning's* The Ring and the Book (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966), p. 160.
[168] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, pp. 235, 302.

> *Occidit,* for he killed, *uxorem,* wife,
> *Quia illi fuit,* since she was to him,
> *Opprobrio,* a disgrace and nothing more!
> *Et genitores,* killed her parents too,
> *Qui,* who, *postposita verecundia,*
> Having thrown off all sort of decency,
> *Filiam repudiarunt,* had renounced
> Their daughter, *atque declarare non*
> *Erubuerunt,* nor felt blush tinge cheek,
> Declaring, *meretrices genitam*
> *Esse,* she was the offspring of a drab,
> *Ut ipse dehonestaretur,* just
> That so himself might lose his social rank!
>
> (VIII, ll. 1628-40)[169]

Letting 'liver fizz, law flit and Latin fly', Archangelis balances his various preoccupations in much the same way as the verse balances languages (VIII, l. 121).[170] These lines, 'intertwisted and obscure' (VIII, l. 767), and macaronic in a way that is immediately visually obvious, confront their reader with a single speech presented simultaneously in English and Latin.[171] Formally echoing 'Love Among the Ruins' and 'More hope More dust'—in which two poems compete for interpretative preference on the printed page—Archangelis's compositional method highlights the way meaning is constructed across and between semantic levels.

However, this contact between languages performs a different function to grotesque rhymes. Whereas such rhymes dramatize language contact in a way that draws attention to the skill involved in the act of incorporation, and the way language can stretch to accommodate foreign linguistic elements within verse form, Archangelis's internal translations do not emphasise formal ingenuity. In fact, the double syntax (Latin's variable word order next to English's subject-verb-object translations) consistently overspills the line-

[169] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, pp. 298-9.
[170] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, p. 237.
[171] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, p. 263.

unit, while the meter (iambic pentameter throughout the poem) struggles to balance the stress-patterns common to each language (as, for example, in the fifth cited line above).

The extensive presentation of language contact in Book VIII instead serves two main functions. First, and most obviously, it contributes to the Book's comic treatment of the lawyer's ingenious argumentation, and his simultaneous balancing of 'high' and 'low' concerns. In this *The Ring and the Book* shares substantial company. The combination of Latin and the vernacular has been commonly used, throughout literary history, for satirical purposes. In *Love's Labour's Lost* (1598), for example, Shakespeare's Holofernes (based on Rabelais' character of the same name) is made ridiculous by the repetitiveness of his internal translation, while Browning's contemporary, Thomas Carlyle, exploits the satirical potential of both register variance and internal translation in *Sartor Resartus* (1836).[172] The tension between registers, and the explicit confusion of Latinity with philosophical perspicuity, produces much of the comedy in these examples, just as it does in Browning's poem. This is the case with Archangelis's use of culinary imagery alongside legal Latin (including extensive quotation from the Bible and classical sources). He quickly compares, for example, his speech to a well-trimmed pancake, with Latin so elegant that it will 'dumple' his son's chin (VIII, ll. 63-5).[173] Echoing the etymology of 'macaronic' itself—from the Italian 'maccarone', or 'dumpling'—the use of 'dumple' demonstrates the extent to which appetite infects the lawyer's approach to the 'hurly-burly case' (VIII, l. 104).[174] This sort of imagery intruding upon legal formality leads John Woolford to posit that, in Archangelis's monologue, 'the apotheosis of the comic grotesque is reached'.[175]

[172] See William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost,* ed. by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 152; Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1887), pp. 128-9.
[173] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, p. 235.
[174] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, p. 236.
[175] Woolford, *Robert Browning,* p. 36.

The importance of language contact to the Book's 'comic grotesque' is made clear by moments in which Connes' translation struggles to reproduce between Latin and French the sort of linguistic interaction that characterises the source text. The translation of '*postposita verecundia*' (which Browning has his speaker render as 'Having thrown off all sort of decency') as 'ayant toute honte bue' (literally: 'having drunk all shame') is particularly interesting.[176] The phrase 'toute honte bue', denoting that someone is beyond all shame, pulls the French into a formal, archaic register that sits uneasily next to Browning's own translation.[177] Used, for example, by Jean de La Fontaine (a writer, at the time, well-liked by the aristocratic literary elite in France) in both of the first two volumes of his *Contes et Nouvelles* (1665-6), Connes' translation employs an idiom that was popular nearly forty years before the trial of Franceschini itself.[178] Instead, therefore, of further strengthening the comic disparity between Archangelis's formal legal Latinity and his colloquial vernacular translations, Connes matches formal Latin with formal French, collapsing the interaction upon which the Book's 'comic grotesque' is constructed.

Second, and most importantly, Archangelis's monologue serves to demonstrate Browning's interest, throughout the poem, in how meaning is transformed as it is translated, how different languages and registers provide different and limited perspectives of a whole, and in the many ways objects can appear—to borrow Browning's own phrase, from his 'Essay on Shelley', and immediately reminiscent of Laing's 'composite species'—to 'the aggregate human mind'.[179] Translation constitutes an important part of the text's narrative processes—processes, in Woolford's words 'whose necessary *plurality* corresponds to the

---

[176] *L'Anneau et le Livre,* p. 857.
[177] 'avoir toute honte bue' is, for example, marked as 'formal' in *Le Robert & Collins Super Senior Grand Dictionnaire,* 2nd edn, 2 vols, vol. I (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2000), p. 469.
[178] See 'Richard Minutolo' and 'Le Calendrier des Vieillards', in *Oevres Complètes de Jean de la Fontaine,* ed. M. C. A. Walckenaër (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1840), pp. 137, 164.
[179] Browning, *The Poems,* vol. I, p. 1003.

indeterminacy which is vital to Browning's method of representation'.[180] Combining the idiomatic 'Having thrown off all sort of decency', the heightened poetic register of 'felt blush tinge cheek', and the traditionally 'bawdy' register of 'offspring of a drab', recalling Guido's phrase 'mongrel of a drab' (V, l. 88),[181] each of Archangelis's English translations represent different ways of interpreting the stylistically consistent Latin source text, much as the poem itself revels in 'indeterminacy', and presents in turn various differing 'fragment[s] of a whole' (I, l. 745).[182]

It is interesting to note that the monologue itself anticipates the broader conception of translation advocated by Simon (translational writing) and Reynolds (translationality); one that involves, along with the more usual notion of translation between languages, the discovery of equivalences and semantic interactions, within one language, across different registers. The lawyer, late in the Book, decides to adapt his speech to appeal, across class distinctions, to the widest audience possible:

> We must translate our motives like our speech
> Into the lower phrase that suits the sense
> O' the limitedly apprehensive. Let
> Each level have its language! Heaven speaks first
> To the angel, then the angel tames the word
> Down to the ear of Tobit: he, in turn,
> Diminishes the message to his dog,
> And finally that dog finds how the flea
> (Which else, importunate, might check his speed)
> Shall learn its hunger must have holiday,—
> How many varied sorts of language here,
> Each following each with pace to match the step,
> *Haud passibus aequis!*
>
> (VIII, ll. 1487-1500)[183]

[180] Woolford, *Browning the Revisionary,* p. 183.
[181] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, p. 8.
[182] See, for example, 'drab, n.' in Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 122; *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VII, p. 34.
[183] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, pp. 292-3.

Letting 'Each level have its language', Archangelis advocates translation between registers in order better to 'suit' simultaneously the linguistic standards of familiarity of each class he addresses. The lawyer acknowledges that each 'fragment' of his audience demands a different stylistic representation of the 'whole', even if this recognition is couched in clear resentment of members of the 'lower' classes (here demeaningly compared to dogs and fleas). As such, the monologue itself promotes and understanding of translation as a means of constructing networks of equivalence between and within different linguistic communities, as well as across extra-linguistic differences.

There are, however, moments in which the lawyer deliberately translates so as to permit a 'fragment' to masquerade as a 'whole'. Browning, in Book I, prefaces Archangelis's monologue by announcing the lawyer's skill in putting 'his utmost means' to the task of making 'logic levigate the big crime small' (I, ll. 1142, 1145).[184] Indeed, what Richard D. Altick calls the translation's 'sly tricks with the strict sense of the original' are essential for the text's ironic presentation of the lawyer.[185] Occasionally, deliberate mis-translation serves this levigating function, even as the translation appears to emphasise points of commensurability between languages. Here, for example, Archangelis employs a quotation from Proverbs to strengthen with textual authority his defence of Guido:

> —Because, the zeal and fury of a man,
> *Zelus et furor viri,* will not spare,
> *Non parcet,* in the day of his revenge,
> *In die vindictae,* nor will acquiesce,
> *Nec acquiescet,* through a person's prayers,
> *Cujusdam precibus,—nec suscipiet,*
> Nor yet take, *pro redemptione,* for
> Redemption, *dona plurium,* gifts of friends,
> Nor money-payment to compound for ache.
>
> (VIII, ll. 608-616)[186]

[184] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VII, p. 48.
[185] Woolford, *Robert Browning,* p. 36; Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book,* ed. Richard D. Altick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 676.
[186] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VIII, p. 257.

The argument, here, hinges on the authority of the Bible, which, the lawyer suggests, absolves the 'zeal and fury' of an offended husband in enacting his 'revenge' against his wife and her lover. The translation of this authority appears transparent and immediate. The visual and aural similarity—Browning's suggestion, on the printed page, of a geometry of equivalence—between '*Zelus et furor viri*' and 'the zeal and fury' serves to strengthen a sense of commensurability between Latin and English. The internal rhyme (in a poem of few rhymes) between '*viri*' and 'fury' even gestures towards the sort of incorporation effected elsewhere in Browning's writing by grotesque rhymes.

This suggestion of commensurability is, however, belied by the way translation misrepresents its source text in the name of 'levigat[ing] the big crime small'. Instead of 'zeal', the Latin 'zelus' is more accurately translated, as Altick points out, as 'jealousy'.[187] Rather than stressing jealousy as a motivation for Guido's vengeance, Archangelis stresses the more neutral 'zeal', or energy and enthusiasm. Yet the visual and aural similarity between the lawyer's translation of '*Zelus*' as 'zeal' conceals the 'gap' between the Latin and English at this moment. In 'tam[ing] the word' down to the 'level' of the vernacular, Archangelis conceals his semantic legerdemain. Connes' French translation adequately reproduces this concealment: the word 'zèle' (with its etymological root, like the English 'zeal', in Anglo-Norman rather than Latin) discourages any association with jealousy, while encouraging, in its similarity with 'Zelus', a false sense of commensurability between Latin and French.[188] This gap between Latin and its vernacular translation, combined with the stylistic effort to erase it, dramatizes the sort of entanglement between distancing and furthering tendencies that characterises Browning's translational aesthetic.

---

[187] Browning, *The Ring and the Book,* p. 678.
[188] *L'Anneau et le Livre,* p. 797.

The internal translations of Archangelis's monologue are not the only translations associated with the lawyer in the poem. In book twelve, 'The Book and the Ring', Browning presents in translation one of 'three epistles' contained in the 'yellow thing', from 'Don Giacinto Arcangeli' to a 'Florentine, / By name Cencini, advocate as well' (XII, ll. 209-214).[189] Browning's decision to conclude *The Ring and the Book* with translated letters sent by both Archangelis and his counterpart and opponent Bottinius reiterates the importance of translation to the poem's complex dialogic structure. But what is especially interesting, to reuse a word from the analysis of Laing's formal doubles, is the *palimpsestic* diction employed in places throughout this translated epistle. For example, the first section of Archangelis's letter relates the circumstances surrounding Guido's execution:

> But ere an answer from Arezzo came,
> The Holiness of our Lord Pope (prepare!)
> Judging it inexpedient to postpone
> The execution of such sentence passed,
> Saw fit, by his particular chirograph,
> To derogate, dispense with privilege,
> And wink at any hurt accruing thence
> To Mother Church through damage of her son;
> Also, to overpass and set aside
> That other plea on score of tender age,
> Put forth by me to do Pasquini good,
> One of the four in trouble with our friend.
> So that all five, to-day, have suffered death
> With no distinction save in dying,—he,
> Decollated by way of privilege,
> The rest hanged decently and in order.
>
> (XII, ll. 252-267)[190]

This translation, commended by Charles W. Hodell for its 'close verbal accuracy', is noteworthy for its occasional employment of unusual diction.[191] Here, for example, the words

---

[189] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. IX, p. 260.
[190] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. IX, pp. 261-2.
[191] Charles W. Hodell, *The Old Yellow Book: Source of Browning's The Ring and the Book in Complete Photo-Reproduction,* 2nd edn (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908), p. 241.

'derogate', 'Decollated', and 'chirograph' appear to disrupt the otherwise conventional vocabulary of the letter. The words are themselves unusual within Browning's writings. While the *Concordance* suggests 'Decollated' was used only once by Browning, it notes one other use each of 'chirograph' and 'derogate', both in *The Ring and the Book.*[192] Book one uses the phrase 'with his particular chirograph' (I, l. 341) to describe the same events related here in book twelve; while the verb 'derogate' (VIII, l. 532) is perhaps ironically used by Archangelis in the composition of his defence of Guido.[193] The diction employed here is not only infrequent within Browning's works. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites only two examples of the use of 'decollate' as an adjective: one from John Hardyng's *Chronicles* (c1470), the other Browning's own 1889 revision of *The Ring and the Book,* in which he preferred 'decollate' to 'decollated'.[194] Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), which Browning himself used, does include entries for 'decollation'—'The act of beheading'—and 'to derogate'—'To do an act contrary to a preceding law or custom, so as to diminish its former value'—but does not include one for 'chirograph' (only for 'chirographer', 'chirographist', and 'chirography').[195] This could help clarify some of Browning's choices here, but the peculiarity of this diction is better explained by comparing Browning's text with its source.

For example, the manuscript letter from which Browning translated describes how the Pope, 'con Chirografo particolare derogare ad ogni Privilegio Clericale', while some lines later, it announces that 'Guido terminara La sua vita colla Decollatione'.[196] Browning's choice of 'decollated', 'derogate', and 'chirograph' mirror, therefore, the diction of the source-text: even the 'particular' of 'particular chirograph' has a close equivalent in the

[192] *A Concordance,* vol. I, p. 537; vol. II, pp. 732, 750.
[193] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. VII, p. 19; vol. VIII, p. 254.
[194] 'decollate, adj.', *The Oxford English Dictionary,* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/48322> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[195] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols, vol. I (London: J. & P. Knapton; T. & T. Longman; C. Hitch & L. Hawes; A. Millar; and R. & J. Dodsley, 1755).
[196] Hodell, *The Old Yellow Book,* p. ccxxxv.

original Italian. The extreme verbal similarity makes it difficult to describe the discovery of English equivalents to the Italian words 'Chirografo', 'derogare', and 'Decollatione' as translation. Indeed, the very discipline with which Browning selects equivalent words serves to emphasise moments in which Italian and English overlap—the two languages are not kept separate in the act of translation. This sort of palimpsestic translation—in which the target and source text share elements of vocabulary despite the difference in language—further emphasises the importance of linguistic interaction in the poem. The complication of any conception of languages as 'homogenous or closed systems' recalls Connes' suggestion that 'l'atmosphère générale' of the poem 'n'est aucunement anglaise', and that consequently 'elle veut être, elle est italienne'.[197]

Jaouad argues that Browning's 'interlinguistical writing' is characterised by 'two rhetorical devices: code-mixing and relexification.'[198] Here, Browning's choice of words gestures towards the latter, in which—as we have seen—words from one language are inflected by the grammatical demands of another.[199] Rather than signalling successful movement from one language into another, the words 'chirograph', 'derogate', and 'decollated' appear as though Italian words relexified into English. This occasional blurring of distinctions between Italian and English continues into Browning's addition to the source text. For example, further on in the epistle, Browning has Archangelis describes his son's entrance, and his own need to write quickly:

> The impatient estafette cracks whip outside:
> Still, though the earth should swallow him who swears

---

[197] José Lambert, 'Translation and Mass Communication in the Age of Globalisation', in *Translation and Global Spaces of Power,* ed. by Stefan Baumgarten and Jordi Cornellà-Detrell (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2018), 127-143, p. 131.

[198] Jaouad, *Browning Upon Arabia,* p. 12.

[199] For discussion of relexification, see Zabus, *The African Palimpsest*, pp. 112-113 ; and Susan Arndt, 'Postkoloniales Palimpsest: Igbo-Relexifizierung und Lexemisierung in der Englischsprachigen Nigerianischen Literatur', in *Exophonie: Anders-Sprachigkeit (in) der Literatur,* ed. by Susan Arndt, Dirk Naguschewski, and Robert Stockhammer (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007), pp. 149-164.

> And me who make the mischief, in must slip—
> My boy, your godson, fat-chaps Hyacinth,
> Enjoyed the sight while Papa plodded here.
>
> (XII, ll. 325-329)[200]

The noun 'estafette' here represents another unique usage within Browning's writings.[201] Gesturing to the Italian word 'staffetta', meaning in this case horse-back courier, Browning continues to utilise the sort of palimpsestic, quasi-relexified, diction that characterised the translated section of the epistle. Browning's unidiomatic English is marked by the 'distinguishable vocabularies' that Reynolds associates with translationese.[202] The diction here produces an 'oscillation between [the] recognition and abolition of foreignness', and demands, furthermore, a reconsideration of any strict boundary drawn between the two languages.[203]

From Gaps to Junctures

The Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip's 1989 collection *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* concerns itself explicitly with what she calls the '*continuum of expression* from standard to Caribbean English'.[204] One of the poems, 'Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue', borrows its title from a line in *The Ring and the Book*. Browning's poem is particularly relevant to Philip's interest in 'the confrontation between the formal and the demotic within the text itself.'[205] As we have seen, the poem—together with his other Italian poems—continually draws attention to mediation between linguistic communities, whether in terms of

[200] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. IX, p. 264.
[201] *A Concordance,* vol. II, p. 962. The word does not appear in Johnson's *Dictionary.*
[202] Reynolds, 'Browning and Translationese', p. 97.
[203] Reynolds, 'Browning and Translationese', p. 100.
[204] M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, with a foreword by Evie Shockley (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), p. 84.
[205] Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*, p. 84

translation, grotesque rhymes, or relexification. Like Laing's 'double poems', Browning's texts stress that there is frequently a 'continuum of expression' between different kinds of language use, and that texts are often characterised by the 'confrontation' between 'distancing' and 'furthering' tendencies, or 'formal' and 'demotic' registers.

As such, both Laing and Browning provide perspectives on multilingualism and intercultural translation capable of drawing attention to the sorts of relationship that Philip describes. Critical perspectives, however, have often accentuated different relationships. For Bill Ashcroft, the inclusion of untranslated words from non-European languages in postcolonial literature is an important part of the inscription of alterity; but rather than emphasise a possible 'continuum', difference, for Ashcroft, ought to be considered as a 'gap':

> This installation of difference may be called the 'metonymic gap.' This is the cultural gap formed when writers transform English according to the needs of their source culture: by inserting unglossed words, phrases, or passages from a first language; by using concepts, allusions, or references that may be unknown to the reader; by syntactic fusion; by code-switching; by transforming literary language with vernacular syntax or rhythms; or even by generating a particular cultural music in their prosody. Such variations become synecdochic of the writer's culture rather than linguistic signs that somehow embody culture. Thus the inserted language 'stands for' the colonized culture in a metonymic way, and its very resistance to interpretation constructs a 'gap' between the writer's culture and the English reader's understanding. The local writer is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in the metropolitan language and, at the same time, to signal and emphasize a difference from it.'[206]

Continuing to claim that 'the metonymic gap is a *refusal* to translate the world of the writer completely', Ashcroft views this signalling and emphasising of 'difference' (echoing the vocabulary Drury uses) as a means of 'transform[ing] English according to the needs of their source culture'.[207] Both Laing and Browning, however, as well as emphasising such gaps,

---

[206] Bill Ashcroft, 'Bridging the Silence: Inner Translation and the Metonymic Gap', in *Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literatures: Multilingual Contexts, Translational Texts,* ed. by Simona Bertacco (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 17-31, p. 24.
[207] Ashcroft, 'Bridging the Silence', p. 25.

also foreground the ways in which meaning can be constructed relationally, by means of complex networks of linguistic and cultural interaction. They do this in different but complementary ways: Laing by oscillating between locating and dislocating English through the incorporation of local linguistic elements and the indigenisation of foreign forms, and Browning by accentuating mediation that bridges between linguistic elements, whether the incorporative work of grotesque rhymes or translation itself. One confronts a 'foreign' standard English with 'familiar' linguistic elements, the other confronts a 'familiar' English with 'foreign' linguistic elements. Together, their texts' accentuation of the interactive juncture between linguistic communities serves to demonstrate that these communities are frequently mutually co-determining, and almost never homogenous or closed systems.

Both writers, then, develop translational aesthetics as a means of continually testing the boundaries between linguistic communities. Presenting interaction between different linguistic communities on the printed page, their stylistic decisions often complement a broader interest in modes of affiliation—in the construction of relationships between communities otherwise unrelated in filial terms. It is the purpose of the next chapter to explore the ways in which both writers' interest in this construction involves a testing of the limitations of nationalist discourse.

CHAPTER TWO

‘multilingual babblers’: The Limits of Nationalism

The previous chapter demonstrated how both Browning and Laing probe the integrity of English as a stable, single ‘tongue’. In developing translational aesthetics in part characterised by the incorporation of non-English linguistic elements into their writing, they attempt to craft styles capable both of making English appear foreign to itself, and of drawing attention to the junctures—the ‘continuum of expression’—between kinds of language use. Indeed, their uses of forms of translation lend support to Fiona Doloughan’s suggestion that ‘writing that depends on the co-presence of other languages and cultures in either a marked or non-marked manner, puts pressure on ideas of linguistic and cultural stability’.[1]

As we have seen, criticism of both authors registers the extent to which their respective language and styles appear idiosyncratic. It is worth recalling Derek Wright’s criticism of Laing’s ‘faddish verbal gimmicking and fabrication’, and Stephanie Newell’s description of ‘Laing’s comedic multilingual babblers’, together with Chesterton’s observation that ‘there really was in Browning a tropical violence of taste, an artistic scheme compounded as it were, of orchids and cockatoos, which, amid our cold English poets, seems scarcely European’.[2]

It is the purpose of this chapter to take these themes further by untangling the assumption that literary style can reflect nationhood, and to examine the ways in which Laing and Browning contest the cultural reproduction of filiative logic ‘from the verbal ground up’. With respect to Browning, this chapter will supplement work begun by Lauren Goodlad in

[1] Fiona Doloughan, *English as a Literature in Translation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 2-3.
[2] Newell, *West African Literatures*, p. 184.; Wright, ‘Postmodernism as Realism’, p. 202; Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, p. 6.

The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic (2015), which emphasises 'the globally inflected spatialities, textures, and experiences that pervade nineteenth-century literature'.[3] With respect to Laing, it will build upon the arguments developed in Francis Ngaboh-Smart's *Beyond Empire and Nation* (2004), which focuses on the ways in which recent African writing has foregrounded 'migration, displacement, relocation, and the formation of new habits as strategies of positioning and self-definition, forcing us to examine new strategies of meaning construction and the experience of self and space.'[4] Ultimately, it will place both authors' texts in contact with each other in order to determine how their various translational emphases are framed by their interest in—in Edward Said's words—'values, ideas, and activities that transcend and deliberately interfere with the collective weight imposed by the nation-state and national culture.'[5] From what could be called Browning's proto-postnational emphasis on things that exceed the limits of nationalist rhetoric and on places between nation-states, to Laing's interest in postnational cartographies and interstitial communities, this chapter focuses on networks of affiliation that spill over the nation's borders.

But what does it mean to suggest literature can be 'postnational'? In what way is this postnationalism operative at the level of form, or style? For Ellie D. Hernández, one of 'the salient qualifications of the postnational […] is "the moving beyond" the historical conception of the nation, either by adopting identities that reach beyond the scope of citizenship or by a movement produced by a coercive global feature of displacing people from their homelands.'[6] Such a movement 'beyond' characterises many critical approaches to postnationalism. Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill, for example, associate postnationalism with

[3] Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 33.
[4] Francis Ngaboh-Smart, *Beyond Empire and Nation: Postnational Arguments in the Fiction of Nuruddin Farah and B. Kojo Laing* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. ix.
[5] Said, *The World,* p. 14.
[6] Ellie D. Hernández, *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), p. 20.

'the suggestion is that the nation-state and the forms of nationalism that underpinned it, while they have not been dissolved, are being empirically and normatively *superseded*.'[7] This idea of supersession 'rests on two key arguments which typify the postnationalist perspective: that the nation-state is being relegated as an effective political institution by processes of globalization, and that national identity is being outstripped and displaced by the rise of alternative forms of identity.'[8]

Following these examples, to read for postnational emphases would be to read for the literary supersession of 'forms of nationalism', for the moving beyond the 'historical conception of the nation'. Yet, it is not immediately clear what the 'forms of nationalism' are, or how literature can escape, supersede, and move beyond paradigms that organise political reality globally. If, for example, a postnational approach unthinkingly valorises categories such as migrancy, in-betweenness, and hybridity, it would fail to recognise the difficulties faced by people considered external to national models of citizenship. If it assumes that hybridity and diversity are external to (and in opposition with) the logic of nationalism, then it would struggle to account for the ways in which hybridity and diversity are frequently held to be hallmarks of particular national cultures. Leela Tanikella, for example, describes (and criticises) 'the construction of nation-ness' through 'a managed cultural hybridity' in Trinidad and Tobago, while in Brazil, as Alexandre Rocha da Silva and Júlio César Augusto do Valle have shown, state education serves to obscure 'os problemas raciais brasileiros por meio da ideologia do amalgamento de raças [the racial problems in Brazil by means of the ideology the of amalgamation of races]'.[9]

---

[7] Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill, 'Introduction: A Postnationalist Era?', *After the Nation?: Critical Reflections on Nationalism and Postnationalism,* ed. by Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-18, p. 3.
[8] Breen and O'Neill, 'Introduction', *After the Nation?*, p. 3.
[9] Leela Tanikella, 'The Politics of Hybridity: Race, Gender, and Nationalism in Trinidad', *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2003), 153-181, p. 154; Alexandre Rocha da Silva and Júlio César Augusto do Valle, 'O Mérito e o Mito da Democracia Racial: Tópicos de uma Discussão', *Revista Internacional de Educación para la Justicia Social*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2014), 235-250, p. 236.

Difficulties such as these lead Breen and O'Neill to conclude that 'postnationalism is questionable empirically, normatively, or both'; they add, however, that it remains true that 'nationalism and the nation-state cannot endure as they did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but must take irreducible diversity and multiplicity into account, as well as the global occurrences and developments which shake the foundations of national sovereignty, traditionally conceived.'[10] But when was literature ever governed by nationalism, 'traditionally conceived'? As Wai Chee Dimock suggests, it is important to remember that there is always 'a morphological mismatch between literature and the nation, between the dynamic expanse of a linguistic continuum and the finite borders of a territorial regime.'[11]

From this perspective, many contemporary understandings of postnational fiction appear too static. Heike Scharm and Natalia Matta-Jara, for example, have defined 'postnational perspectives' as 'timeless modes of thinking, writing, or reading literature that identify the interrelations between the local and the global, while recognizing the continuing ties to the nation.'[12] What this leaves to be explored is how these 'postnational perspectives' differ from simple enumerations of a given nation's internal and external relationships and dependencies. The version of postnationalism developed here, conversely, draws attention away from static understandings in favour of an identity that is seen perpetually within a process of constitution. Indeed, if Reynolds's 'prismatic' translation stresses 'translation's proliferative energies', and the way it can open up 'the plural signifying potential of the source text', postnational fiction stresses the 'proliferative energies' inherent to cultural identity itself.[13]

---

[10] Breen and O'Neill, 'Introduction', *After the Nation?*, p. 7.
[11] Wai Chee Dimock, 'Literature for the Planet', *PMLA*, vol. 116, no. 1 (2001), 173-188, p. 177.
[12] Heike Scharm and Natalia Matta-Jara, 'Introduction', *Postnational Perspectives on Contemporary Hispanic Literature*, ed. by Heike Scharm and Natalia Matta-Jara (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), 1-25, p. 1.
[13] Matthew Reynolds, 'Introduction', *Prismatic Translation*, ed. by Matthew Reynolds (Oxford: Legenda, 2019), 1-18, pp. 3, 9.

This shift in emphasis is particularly important because Browning can hardly be said to have moved beyond the 'historical conception of the nation' in his writings. Preoccupied with nation-building, he in many ways welcomed Italian unification. Yet it is important to remember Browning's tendency to hone in on contradiction and crisis in any discourse—he was, for instance, according to his contemporary critic Walter Bagehot, too often focused on the presentation of 'the *bourgeois* nature in *difficulties*'.[14] His representation of nationalism and nation-building 'in *difficulties*', when considered alongside Laing's more explicitly postnational thinking, takes on aspects of the latter's energy, and as such comparison encourages foregrounding the proto-postnational qualities of Browning's texts, even as it underscores the essential differences between nation-building and its difficulties in their respective contexts.

Consequently, this chapter will build upon the preceding one, extending the discussion of both Laing's and Browning's translational aesthetics by analysing the formal and stylistic consequences of stressing 'proliferative energies' that cannot be contained by nationalist discourse and geography. Beginning with both authors' interests in the various excesses of crowds and kaleidoscopic urban landscapes, before considering how both Laing and Browning utilise the cartographic disruptions of migration and dislocation within their narratives, this chapter will draw attention to the operation of their contestation of modes of affiliation at broader levels, providing, ultimately, a more complete picture of both authors' prismatic texts.

Urban Kaleidoscopes: Laing's Accra/Browning's Multitudes

[14] Walter Bagehot, *Selected Essays of Walter Bagehot* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1927), p. 465. Emphasis original.

The centrality of Ghana's capital city, Accra, to *Search Sweet Country* is quickly apparent. The first three chapters all begin with sentences referring directly to the city, and the narrative itself is intimately concerned with its history, culture, and geography.[15] Most explicitly, however, it is the way Accra intersects with (and often disrupts) Ghana's national history that animates the characters' pursuits of meaningful and future-orientated social relations. Set during Lieutenant Colonel Ignatius Kutu Acheampong's military rule—which had ended the Second Republic in 1972, just fifteen years after independence—the text dramatises the anxieties of a period characterised by rapid oscillations between drastically different forms of self-governance. Exciting prospects of postcolonial national autonomy were quickly superseded by periods of intense disillusionment. Acheampong's period of power—ending with the 1978 coup, which was followed by his execution in 1979—was itself characterised by such oscillations. Initially welcomed by the public with enthusiasm due to a surge in economic growth, approval of Acheampong's government soon faded. As Kofi Abaka Jackson suggests:

> In 1975, Acheampong began to face an uphill task and Ghanaians began to feel the effects of the global oil crisis. Acheampong's initial economic successes began to wear off fast. Since oil is the principal source of energy for production and transportation the world over, the prices of goods and freight charges shot up with the oil prices. Whereas prices of imports rose sharply, Ghana's export earnings remained at almost the same level, US$600 million. Consequently, after paying our bills and servicing our debts, Ghana was left with very much reduced foreign exchange to spend on drugs and other essential commodities whose unavailability caused their prices to escalate.[16]

This movement—from enthusiasm to disappointment, approval to condemnation—had plagued each of Ghana's governments since independence. The recurrence of enthusiasm was in part due to the fact that successive regimes appealed to the value of self-governance, the

---

[15] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, pp. 1, 20, 35.
[16] Kofi Abaka Jackson, *When Gun Rules: A Soldier's Testimony* (Accra: Woeli, 1999), p. 35.

need to respect indigenous traditions, and the rejection of European political models. As Maxwell Owusu argued three years before the restoration of the multi-party system in 1992, ‘all the different types of military regimes of Ghana, to date, have exploited or manipulated the symbols and values of chieftaincy, perhaps the most powerful single source of legitimation. All have appealed to the well-established traditional right of the people to rebel or dethrone’.[17] This manipulation of the ‘symbols and values’ of traditional political forms, though initially seemingly concurrent with popular interests, frequently concealed endemic problems of corruption, together with the essentially anti-popular, authoritarian character of each regime.

Following a line of reasoning familiar since the publication of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), Stefan Berger argues that ‘[n]ation is narration. The stories we tell each other about our national belonging and being constitute the nation. These stories change over time and place and are always contested, often violently so.’[18] The stories propagated by successive Ghanaian governments employ a confused rhetoric, demanding at once the rejection of European models of nationhood, support for a process of nation-building designed to participate with those very models, and projections of a postnational future of African unity. Kwame Nkrumah’s 1957 ‘Independence Speech’ (delivered in English), for example, the ‘first official public utterance of the new Ghanaian nation’, emphasised that independence constituted ‘freeing our country from foreign rule and imperialism’, ‘reshap[ing] the destiny of this country’, and ‘mak[ing] a nation that will be respected by every other nation in the world’.[19] Yet this sense of nation-building is quickly situated within

---

[17] Maxwell Owusu, ‘Rebellion, Revolution, and Tradition: Reinterpreting Coups in Ghana’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1989), 372-397, p. 392.
[18] Stefan Berger, ‘Narrating the Nation: Historiography and Other Genres’, in *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas and Andrew Mycock (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 1-16, p. 1.
[19] Kwame Nkrumah, ‘Independence Speech’, *The Ghana Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Kwasi Konadu and Clifford C. Campbell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 301-302, p. 301.

broader trans- and even postnational projects: he speaks of 'the new African', suggests that 'we create our own Africa', and that 'our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up to the total liberation of the African continent'.[20]

Indeed, Nkrumah's attempts to form 'a Continental Union Government' were predicated upon the belief that '[u]nity is the first requisite for destroying neo-colonialism'.[21] This unity was not always even continentally bound. His pamphlet 'The Struggle Continues', written in Conakry between 1966 and 1968 (its title an adaptation of a Portuguese phrase used famously by Amilcar Cabral, an acquaintance of Nkrumah's who himself participated in anti-imperialist guerrilla movements in Guinea), expands the focus even further, considering the project of Pan-Africanism within the context of 'the black world' in its entirety, formed of African diasporic communities in the United States, Latin America, and Western Europe.[22]

Yet, as David Birmingham notes, '[i]ronically, the national norm for which Nkrumah fought so hard, the unitary state within colonial borders, became so entrenched by the 1960s that his second great objective, the creation of an African union, was effectively defeated by it.'[23] Ghana as a national project developed in tension with postnational models of cultural identity and interrelation, which themselves were amplified and complicated further by Ghana's dependence on European markets for its economic development. However much Africa capitalises on its numerous and varied resources and 'increases its agricultural output,' Nkrumah warned in his book *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), it 'will not benefit unless it is sufficiently politically and economically united to force the developed world to pay it a fair price for its cash crops'.[24] This predicament would in no way prove

[20] Nkrumah, 'Independence Speech', p. 302.
[21] Kwame Nkrumah, *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Panaf Books, 2003), p. 14.
[22] Kwame Nkrumah, *The Struggle Continues* (London: Panaf Books, 2006), p. 34.
[23] David Birmingham, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Father of African Nationalism*, revised edition (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), p. 48.
[24] Kwame Nkrumah, 'Africa's Resources', *The Ghana Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Kwasi Konadu and Clifford C. Campbell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 307-310, p. 309.

unique to Ghana. Nkrumah here echoes Frantz Fanon's suggestion that the 'economy has always developed outside the limits' of nationalist rhetoric, and that despite political independence, an economic dependence persists—'[w]e go on sending out raw materials; we go on being Europe's small farmers'.[25]

Characterised, then, less by what Jameson calls 'national allegory' than tensions between various conflicting delimitations (continental, national, racial, class-based) of collective cultural identity, literature produced in the aftermath of 'Operation Cold Chop', which overthrew Kwame Nkrumah's independence government in 1966, was quick to negotiate this complexity.[26] Broadly speaking, West African fiction tends to have a fraught relationship with national identities. Stephanie Newell's study of *Ghanaian Popular Fiction* (2000) asserts that Ghanaian authors frequently 'combine quotations from Western texts with a vast array of local narrative resources', and that consequently 'plots, genres and protagonists are drawn from a jamboree bag in which the "foreign" cannot be separated from the "local".'[27] The poet Kofi Anyidoho's collection *Earthchild* (1985), for example, combines frequent use of Ewe proverbs with the beat rhythms of a poem about American jazz. As such, Newell advocates thinking of West Africa as 'a radically *open* space defined by its plurality', which means acknowledging that 'the geopolitical boundaries displayed on the current map are continuously placed under pressure by the dynamism of the region's trans-local and global networks of culture.'[28]

Resisting isolating Ghana from the rest of the region, critics tend to focus on its literature's interaction with wider, transnational movements. As a result of this, it is a commonplace to distinguish between three 'generations' of West African literature. The first,

---

[25] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 121-122.
[26] Jameson, *Allegory*, p. 165.
[27] Stephanie Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction: 'Thrilling Discoveries in Conjugal Life' & Other Tales* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 7.
[28] Newell, *West African Literatures*, p. 23.

roughly spanning the 1950s and early 1960s, 'tackled colonialism head-on, dramatizing the tragic consequences of European intervention'.[29] The second, spanning the late 1960s and 1980s, which more explicitly registers disillusionment with independence governments who, in Anyidoho's words, 'omnivorous with borrowed appetites / cocktailing to a nation's health', indicate little more than 'abandoned / pathways'.[30] Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) is often considered representative of this generation. The novel repeatedly employs the imagery of rot and degradation—'in the end it was the rot that imprisoned everything in its effortless embrace'—and draws attention to the establishment's desperate attempts to cover up decay.[31] His narrator describes how 'all the first promise' of Nkrumaism 'had been eaten up' and had 'become a place where fat men found things to swell themselves up some more'.[32] One character, when asked about the future, gives a 'long look of great chagrin and uncertainty'.[33]

It is this 'long look' that accompanies Kofi Loww and his friends on their individual searches in *Search Sweet Country*. Kofi Loww's quiet wandering and observation—recalling the silent urban ambulation of the 'man of mark' (l. 4)[34] in Browning's 'How It Strikes a Contemporary'—is grounded in this 'uncertainty'. Yet, as part of the experimental 'third generation' of West African writers, Laing is quick to counterbalance disillusionment—Ghana's sense of disconnection—with a metaphoric intensity eager to register connections between fragments of everyday life. The text continually confuses its characters' quests with the movements of Accra itself, an Accra haunted by the economic and cultural consequences

[29] Newell, *West African Literatures*, p. 22. See also Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), and Robert Fraser, *Lifting the Sentence: A Poetics of Postcolonial Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
[30] Kofi Anyidoho, 'Complementary', *Earthchild with Brain Surgery* (Accra: Woeli, 1985), p. 102.
[31] Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Harlow: Pearson, 1988), p. 12.
[32] Armah, *The Beautyful Ones*, p. 158.
[33] Armah, *The Beautyful Ones*, p. 159.
[34] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, p. 274.

of Acheampong's military rule. The eleventh chapter, for example, begins with a description characteristic of Laing's treatment of place:

> The cries of goats steadied the concrete in a bank building, and pushed Kofi Loww in no particular direction but certainly towards his own sense of being. The glass of the new office block was trying desperately to throw off its reflection of the horror of gutters … and twin buildings near Opera cinema reflected two completely different images of Loww; but for a few seconds these two crushed images, cheap in the glass, defined him completely. He was a sleeping snail, a man of quiet trance, so that both his legs were exactly in the middle of his walking … the first two-legged man with one middle leg in Accra.[35]

The manifold materials that structure Accra's developing landscape—glass, concrete, gutters, buildings, banks—are here represented in tension with the forms of life they contain and surround. Verbs establish direct and active relationships between the 'cries of goats' and their inanimate context, and the seemingly neutral act of reflection is made to participate in the struggle to repress inequality ('trying desperately to throw off its reflection of the horror of gutters'). Kofi Loww's walk is itself momentarily defined by its various reflections. Accra's material landscape mediates his wandering; his movement is refracted by the glass, and that refraction returns as the truth of his movement. The description continues:

> As he walked he seemed to be binding parts of the city together with his clumsy broad feet: the old iron-sheets of Nima shouted their rust back to the Ringway, where the cars pulled and stretched the yawn of the old dual roads between two exhausted Circles, Liberation and Redemption … the rust was a gift from rain, a gift from the neglect of politics.[36]

Urban landmarks, such as the Liberation and Redemption Circles, are aligned and bound together by Kofi's movement across the city. Accra's history (mirroring the progression described by Armah, from jubilant independence to the rusty 'neglect of politics') is mediated

[35] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 157.
[36] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* p. 157.

by his walk, as his walk is mediated by that history. This mutual mediation, the way it binds experiential and architectural objects together, is itself microplotted. The walk, and Kofi's 'clumsy broad feet', are described with complex metrical patterning (the anapaest, iamb, anapaest, iamb of 'As he walked he seemed to be binding parts of the city'). This rhythmical 'binding' suggests a way of thinking about urban space that foregrounds the relational networks linking its animate and inanimate objects together.

Ato Quayson's *Oxford Street, Accra* (2014), a study devoted to revealing the extent to which Accra is characterised by complex transnational relationships, argues, citing passages like these as evidence, that Laing's novels represent urban space as constituted by such relational networks:

> both *Search Sweet Country* and *Woman of the Aeroplanes* conceive of urban space as an externalized kaleidoscope of multiple phenomenologies that leak and bump into each other. This kaleidoscopic leakage comes to affect characterization as well, such that at various points Laing's characters seem to take on the emotional hue of the spaces they traverse and vice versa. Thus in Laing's novels space is essentially anamorphic and constitutes in itself a potent intervention into the very structure of thinking that makes up urban society.[37]

As Loww binds 'parts of the city together' with his walk, the 'anamorphic' space that Quayson describes, characterised by a multiplication of distorted and kaleidoscopic perspectives, confuses aspects of the city with the lives and movement of its inhabitants. Quayson's verb 'traverse' captures the sort of ambiguity created by these spaces. At once moving across, and moving through, the verb leaves undecided the extent to which the movement occurs within or over a particular terrain—whether it constitutes a sort of immersion, or the avoidance of immersion.[38]

---

[37] Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 238.

[38] See 'traverse, v.', *The Oxford English* Dictionary, <https://oed.com/view/Entry/205281> [accessed 20 July 2020].

As a consequence of Laing's representation of urban space as an 'externalized kaleidoscope of multiple phenomenologies', certain characters feel at once part of the city's complex cultural life, and separated from it. It is hardly surprising that Erzuah—Kofi's father—tells his friend Ebo that 'Accra is giving me a headache': traversing social space presents many characters with complex difficulties.[39] Owula ½-Allotey, for example, a farmer who provides fish and beans for one of Professor Sackey's research projects at the University of Ghana in Legon, chooses to live alone in 'semi-negation' after concluding that there is 'too much substance, too much continuity in his village': that its structures, its traditional practices, its history, all prevent the sort of progressive cultural change he anticipates.[40] That he intends, in his absence, to pursue a project of 'seeking continuity in himself' does not, for him, represent a contradiction.[41] While being rooted, alongside the members of his village, in Ghanaian earth, ½-Allotey disputes the rate and direction of growth of Ghana as a national project: 'the village was a different image for the same earth, and it rooted him to just that existence that he wanted to stretch.'[42]

It is, however, the city's linguistic diversity that provides *Search Sweet Country* with its most explicit representation of the 'multiple phenomenologies' of Accra. As Mary Kropp Dakubu's *Korle Meets the Sea: A Sociolinguistic History of Accra* (1997) has shown, the city's linguistic landscapes are themselves characterised by a sort of 'kaleidoscopic leakage'. 'To the extent', she argues, 'that outer Accra functions as an internally cohering network of northern migrants, it does so by means of Hausa. However, this clearly does not unite members of all communities equally'.[43] Conversely, Akan (particularly its Twi or Fante varieties) 'seems to be the main potential vehicle for communication within inner Accra',

---

[39] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* p. 261.
[40] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 98.
[41] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 100.
[42] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 98.
[43] Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu, *Korle Meets the Sea: A Sociolinguistic History of Accra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 98.

while English has importance for 'mediated contact between communities', as a 'language in which a fairly large proportion of people receive messages but far fewer send them.'[44] Other languages, such as Ga, which is the language of the people indigenous to Accra, Ewe, Yoruba, Daagare, among many others, coexist within vast networks of communities with 'languages that came to Ghana and West Africa with the seaborne gold trade, slave trade, and colonialism', such as Portuguese, Arabic, English, Dutch, and Danish.[45] Arabic influence, for example, provides the root of both the Akan and Ga words for money (*siká* and *shiká* respectively), while the arrival of Portuguese-speaking Brazilians ('freed slaves sent by the American Colonization Society') in and after 1836 contributed to the development of Portuguese linguistic influence within the city.[46]

This linguistic diversity is itself of narrative importance throughout the text. In the fourth chapter, for example, Kojo Okay Pol, born to 'a Northern father and an Akan mother', supervises the illicit delivery of several English race horses to Dr Boadi, whose 'political ambitions depended much on this operation'.[47] The porters tasked with unloading the horse-boxes from the plane, however, begin to question the validity of the whole operation. One porter, Atanga, 'the words shooting out from the hungry side of his mouth', serves as a spokesperson for their collective discontent:[48]

> 'This box,' he continued, 'ibi heavy pass aeroplane self. For me i no sabe this nyamanyama t'in at aaall. Him who pack this adaka bambala in UK no get sense koraa. You fit give me kenkey for my belly, then I too fit lift whole aeroplane self. Rrrubish! Rrrubishsh! again my frien', I lie?' Atanga threw this question like groundnut paper at Kofi Loww half-sleeping up at the balcony.[49]

---

[44] Kropp Dakubu, *Korle Meets the Sea*, pp. 98-9.
[45] Kropp Dakubu, *Korle Meets the Sea*, p. 141.
[46] Kropp Dakubu, *Korle Meets the Sea*, pp. 141, 149.
[47] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, pp. 48-9.
[48] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 52.
[49] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* p. 52.

As Tobias Robert Klein suggests, Laing's language 'rails against the linguistic foundations of discourses such as science, business, theology, the military, and the nationalist rhetoric of post-independence Ghana.'[50] His prose is 'such a rich variety of poetic yet culturally bound gargantuan images, motifs, puns, and witty humour, that it confidently defies simple reduction to a single larger theory, agenda or narrative.'[51] Yet, here, Atanga's speech serves to differentiate him from the more formal register of the representatives of the government, suggesting that it is precisely this image of Ghana as 'culturally bound' that Laing's text problematises. He uses Akan words, such as the noun 'adaka' ('box'), within a predominantly English sentence itself oppositional to the 'UK' as a geographical source. Kojo Okay Pol, in contrast, uses an English unmarked by any geographical specificity:

> The horses … the boxes are breaking! See to your men … I will speak to the small crowd on the balcony, I will warn them about the Government's need for secrecy, for after all as Dr Boadi says, if Ghanaians help the government, the government will help Ghanaians[52]

The repetition of verb phrases—'I will speak […] I will warn […] the government will help'—presents a regularity of construction that contrasts strongly with other characters' speech. This juxtaposition, this sense of linguistic difference, is itself visually rendered with the orthographic idiosyncrasy of Atanga's 'Rrrubish! Rrrubishsh!'.

Traditionally, postcolonial critics have emphasised, with respect to these types of differences, the ways in which the use of elements from other linguistic communities can constitute 'disruptions to the "English" surface' of a text, or, in Elleke Boehmer's words, can 'subject English to processes of verbal and syntactic dislocation'.[53] Interestingly, in Laing's novel, the converse process is evident: rather than dislocating 'English' (in its 'Standard'

---

[50] Klein, 'Kojo Laing', p. 37.
[51] Klein, 'Kojo Laing', pp. 37-8.
[52] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 54.
[53] Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 33; Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, p. 201.

variety), the use of Ghanaian English is indicative of a variety of processes of 'location'. Atanga's speech is place-specific in a way that Standard English is not, and itself gestures towards other non-English linguistic communities within Accra. What is at stake, then, is not only the reification of a 'Standard English' from which one can deviate, but also the notion that cultural identity can in any way be represented by one linguistic community.

Atanga's English is, in many ways, representative of aspects of language use in Accra. Akan words—'nyamanyama', for example, meaning 'messed up, disorderly'—modulate his English in what Klein terms 'a more or less realistic blending of languages'.[54] This linguistic fidelity is also evident across the *Search Sweet Country* as a whole. Kari Dako's study of patterns of lexical borrowings (LBs) from indigenous languages in Ghanaian English notes that the majority fall into three categories: the 'two largest categories are the *Abstract concepts* and the *Persons: references and appellations* groups, with about 24% of LBs in each', while about '17% of LBs belong to the *Consumables* group'.[55] The novel's glossary reflects aspects of these patterns: of its 193 entries, for example, 39 relate to types food and drink, approximating the proportion proposed in Dako's study (about 20% in Laing's case).

After the boxes break, dropped deliberately to reveal their mysterious contents, horses begin running chaotically around the airport, and, consequently, a small crowd 'representing all shades of Accra shared much more laughter than its mouths could hold'.[56] Amid all this confusion, the security officer on duty, Kwaku Tia, is heard screaming, 'both feet stuck in a pile of dung, his rolling eyes staring at the shanks of a momentarily stationary horse':

---

[54] Kari Dako, 'Code-switching and lexical borrowing: which is what in Ghanaian English?', *English Today*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2002), 48-54, p. 53; Klein, 'Kojo Laing', p. 41.
[55] Dako, 'Code-switching', p. 53.
[56] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 55.

> 'In the name of the law,' he shouted, 'in the name of the law, what language do these animals speak? are they Twi-speaking horses?'[57]

The coexistence of multiple linguistic communities is a problem for those characters interested in maintaining 'the name of the law'. Kwaku Tia's confusion underlines the ways in which the translatability and untranslatability can both facilitate and disrupt certain forms of national unity. The horses' linguistic ambiguity—what, if any, language do they understand?—mirrors official discourse's inability to contain the proliferative energies of the crowd. These energies recall Barbara Cassin's definition of 'untranslatability' as 'ce qu'on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire' ['that which we do not stop (not) translating'].[58] An endless process of translation characterises Laing's Accra: no simple, definitional version of identity according with national borders is permitted primacy, and any attempt to impose one is quickly mired in absurdity, is 'stuck', like Kwaku Tia's feet, in 'a pile of dung'. What becomes clear, then, is that if English is the language of Ghanaian nation-building—the language, for example, of official government, of Nkrumah's speeches—then this nation-building risks the exclusion of other linguistic communities, and imposes constraints on their ability to undergo perpetual and self-willed acts of translation, mutation, and transition.

The importance of this diversity to the novel can be gleaned by translators' attempts to recreate it in their own contexts. Thomas Brückner's 1995 German translation, *Die Sonnensucher* occasionally attempts to recreate these linguistic interactions by incorporating (and sometimes simply maintaining) elements from English. For example, later in this scene, Osofo Ocran's exclamation 'Stop stop stop all you gentlemen, three times stop' is rendered 'Stop stop stop, Gentlemen, drei mal stop.'[59] Recalling Browning's relexifying translations of

---

[57] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* p. 55.
[58] *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles,* ed. by Barbara Cassin (Paris: Seuil/Le Robert, 2004), p. xvii. My translation.
[59] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* p. 57; Kojo Laing, *Die Sonnensucher,* trans. by Thomas Brückner (Munich: Marino Verlag, 1995), p. 76.

Latin and Italian in *The Ring and the Book*, the palimpsestic German of Ocran's speech barely conceals the English that it overwrites, recreating in a translation of a monolingual sentence the sort of dynamic and varied linguistic landscape characteristic of Laing's style.

By foregrounding such linguistic diversity in a scene characterised by the frustrated attempts of 'official' representatives to communicate with the gathering of 'all shades of Accra', Laing draws attention to the incongruity between national political projects and local unmanageable diversity. Recalling Wai Chee Dimock's suggestion that there is always 'a morphological mismatch between literature and the nation, between the dynamic expanse of a linguistic continuum and the finite borders of a territorial regime', *Search Sweet Country* probes precisely this 'morphological mismatch' between the dynamism of local differences and the static homogeneity of the nation.[60] This mismatch becomes clear as Pol attempts to convince the crowd to remain under his control:

> Pol now was a one-man wail, rushing suddenly and with decision into the stares of the crowd. He tried to scatter the look of ridicule in each eye by appearing masterful even with his thin legs. He shouted, 'I must warn all of you that what you are seeing here is not true … the eyes have been known to deceive … you must be interrogated to confirm this … the government needs your support in this hour of galloping, I mean this hour of crisis … these are agricultural horses, to push on Operation Feed Yourself, and they will pull the plough … you are in the name of the law asked to remain here until further notice … you may continue to look but don't pass water—I mean don't pass judgment.'[61]

Confronted with a crowd united by a 'look of ridicule', Pol's speech fragments, each clause held together loosely by ellipses, evoking the fraught logic of his 'masterful' intervention. His attempt to contain the crowd within the pronoun 'you' is quickly thwarted. Someone shouts 'we're going only if we want!', and the crowd joins them: 'We're going-oooooooo! only if we want!'[62] Ngaboh-Smart argues that 'Laing's emphasis' throughout *Search Sweet*

[60] Dimock, 'Literature for the Planet', p. 177.
[61] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 56.
[62] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 57.

Country 'is on the micro-histories and the subject positions that the state, as a macro-force, constructs and organizes'.[63] Yet, more than this, Laing emphasises moments when these 'micro-histories' and 'subject positions' exceed the state's ability to construct and organise them.

Later in the novel, for example, Dr Boadi, Kojo Okay Pol, and some military policemen are, after a great expense of effort, successful in their search for Kofi Loww, who, having silently witnessed the mishandling of the delivery of horses at the airport, is thought to represent a potential threat to the 'new Ghana'.[64] Indeed, with Sergeant Kwami's accusation that he has 'been trying to make contact with counter-revolutionaries', and Boadi's attempt to discern whether he is 'with the ordinary Ghanaian' or not, Loww is consistently treated as uncomfortably *in excess* of Ghana as a national project.[65]

This is also the case with Osofo Ocran's march, along with a crowd of his followers drawn from the congregation of his church, in protest against the military government. Spurred on by Bishop Budu's suggestion that 'there are even more important things than official cultural or political direction', Osofo demands that 'we must push, *push* hard, sweep aside everything […] Change, change!'.[66] Osofo, 'dancing against the churches, against the latrines, the asylums, the hospitals, the politics, the societies, against the terrible waste of beauty', represents a congregation convinced that 'Ghana was a photocopy country'—one that imports models of cultural identity—and desperate for 'the original truth'.[67]

The march, however, demonstrates two types of excess: the way forms of collective action exceed political projects, and the way collective action itself often involves the

---

[63] Ngaboh-Smart, *Beyond Empire and Nation*, p. 91.
[64] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 155.
[65] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, pp. 168-9.
[66] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 75.
[67] Laing, *Search Sweet Country,* pp. 308-9.

management and negotiation of internal tensions. The latter of these types produces, as the crowd proceeds, a constant sense of internal strain and tension:

> an old catechist, who was so thin that his cassock was more or less his skin, screamed out in the fattest of voices, 'One whole country cannot fit under a soldier's hat! ONE WHOLE COUNTRY CANNOT FIT UNDER A SOLDIER'S CAP! I say God help us, God help us to push them all out!' 'Ampara!' was the refrain. The old man's cry became a song; then it became a burden as they carried its meaning uncertainly along; then at last it became a weapon … they would attack the centre of Accra with the power of prayer and the song![68]

This 'fattest of voices' puts pressure on typography itself, his upper-case scream visually foregrounded on the printed page. Yet the certainty with which he cries out does not translate into collective certainty. Once again, like Pol's speech, ellipses disrupt the syntax, obfuscating the conjunction of clauses and the logic that binds them together. The conclusion—to 'attack the centre of Accra'—sits uneasily next to the fraught consistency of the 'they' that does the attacking. Earlier in the march, Manager Agyemang

> had a vision that all the dancers and marchers were tied with one sharp, thin rope, with an infinity of allowance for individual movement, yet holding, invisibly, the entire number together. Agyemang stopped, petrified … until he was pushed along, and told in a shout to blow his whistle and dance his dance.[69]

The promise of Agyemang's vision of social connection is reminiscent of what Stephen Clingman calls a 'metonymic'—as opposed to metaphoric—'version of identity', or one constituted by 'transition, navigation, mutation, alteration, a whole morphology of meanings', complete 'with an infinity of allowance for individual movement', instead of definitional rigidity.[70] Yet this promise is quickly disappointed. Compelled to continue moving, 'to blow

[68] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 308.
[69] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 307.
[70] Stephen Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 15.

his whistle and dance his dance', this 'allowance' disappears, replaced by yet more injunctions and shouted orders. All that is left of the march's initial energy, once they near Black Star Square, is Osofo's 'sense of hopelessness that he had arrived here with his new flock, and he had one reason for coming, and they had another … if any at all … for being where they were.'[71]

The crowds drawn by both Osofo's march and the events at the airport are eventually controlled and dissipated by the authorities' cynical appeals to greed and gluttony. In the case of the airport, the promise of a reward for whoever sits on the boxes to prevent more horses escaping, together with the prospect of free beer for everyone involved, nullifies the potential popular unrest:

> Okay Pol now climbing down his own tail at last had saved the day by shouting, after prior arrangement, 'Beer is served, all you kind people that don't see what you see, you can have free beer … Keep that a secret too … and those sitting on the boxes and controlling the horses will have something extra. Long live Ghana!'[72]

While in the case of Osofo's march, having reached Black Star Square, the location of the annual Independence Day Parade, it is free food provided by representatives of the 'Head of State' that derails the protest:

> [Acheampong] heard that you wanted to discover spiritual truth in Ghana, or something like that. First of all, he wants you to be entertained here at the Black Star Square. You must be tired! We have ricewater, bread, corned beef, sardine …'

The march is soon transformed into a state-sponsored picnic: in a Browningesque phrase, the 'flock flocked to food … that was all.'[73] All of these passages are marked by the regular employment of ellipses, a sort of mimetic phrasing that operates in several different ways.

---

[71] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 312
[72] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, pp. 63-4.
[73] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 313.

Whether indicating fragmented and incoherent logic, a hesitancy, or the lack of a connecting 'rope' between members of a crowd, the ellipses rehearse at the level of the sentence a text-wide search for adequate syntax, for conjunctions capable of providing links between people, things, urban and rural communities, and Ghana as an economic and political whole, without compromising the 'infinity of allowance for individual movement' that characterises the novel's proposition for a new conception of cultural identity. The breakup of Osofo's march, and the distraction of the airport crowd, mirror the fragmentation of the narrative's language. But even these assertions of control and processes of fragmentation cannot suppress the novel's insistence that 'the ordinary people were the real people: they lived beyond the slogans, they outlasted the politicians, even those that wanted to label and measure their very blood'.[74]

This sense of living 'beyond' appears central to the narrative of *Search Sweet Country*. Ngaboh-Smart, for example, argues that Laing's 'works attempt to conceive of a discourse beyond the nation, to transcend the sterility into which Ghana's ideological aridity seems to have imprisoned the state.'[75] Later in this chapter, I will focus on the version of such a discourse developed in Laing's second novel, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. *Search Sweet Country*, however, published two years earlier, is perhaps less concerned with the description of a cultural identity 'beyond the nation' than a demonstration of the limitations resulting from the 'sterility' Ngaboh-Smart describes, the 'generations of dire disconnection' Laing himself describes in the poem 'One hundred lines for the coast'.[76]

*

[74] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 339.
[75] Ngaboh-Smart, *Beyond Empire and Nation*, p. 73.
[76] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 50.

Browning's interest in crowds, in multitudes, and how they often exceed the projects of nation-building undertaken by members of the political class, characterises many of the poems published after *The Ring and the Book*. This interest can be traced even in his aversion to certain forms of congregation. In a letter to Isa Blagden dated 1 August 1858, he complains of the crowds while holidaying on the northern French coast. 'Etretat has good cliffs', he writes, 'but the hole of a town is vile and you jostle with everybody else—for you are all poured forth funnel-wise on to the narrow bit of sea and must get it with the manners of hogs at a trough.'[77] A few lines later, the poet proceeds to describe both his son's swimming efforts, and his own vacillations:

> Peni is minnowizing away among the Tritons, bathing with the best of them with great advantage—& for me . . I am *intending* &c &c being somewhat bilious and indisposed to salt water: I shall begin tomorrow—perhaps.[78]

Browning, here, though seeming to depart from his complaints, is adapting a quotation from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*:

> SICINIUS: It is a mind
> That shall remain a poison where it is,
> Not poison any further.
> CORIOLANUS: 'Shall remain'?
> Hear you this Triton of the minnows? Mark you
> His absolute 'shall'?
> (Act III, Scene I, ll. 88-92)[79]

Browning's playful inversion of 'Triton of the minnows' resonates beyond a mere joke about his son's size relative to other swimmers. The reference itself bears contextual relevance:

---

[77] *The Brownings' Correspondence,* ed. by Philip Kelley, Edward Hagan, and Linda M. Lewis, vol. 25 (Winfield: Wedgestone Press, 2017), p. 195.
[78] *The Brownings' Correspondence,* vol. 25, p. 195.
[79] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus,* ed. by R. B. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 250.

Coriolanus is a play concerned explicitly with the place of crowds in social life. In *Coriolanus,* as Annabel Patterson argues, 'for the first time, Shakespeare's audience is invited to contemplate an alternative political system; and, more significantly still, to experience an entire dramatic action devoted to these questions: who shall speak for the commons; what power should the common people have in the system; to what extent is common power compatible with national safety?'[80]

The reception of *Coriolanus* in the first half of the nineteenth century is itself intimately connected to an increasing political awareness—and at times discomfort—regarding the place of 'the minnows' in decision-making at a national level. William Charles Macready's—incidentally a friend of Browning's, and the producer of several of his plays—'major revival' of the play in the 1837-8 season, following the lead of John Philip Kemble's earlier revival, struggled to contain the subversive energy of the play's patrician-plebeian opposition.[81] As John Ripley suggests,

> Macready was no more taken than Kemble with *Coriolanus'*s political character, and was equally disinclined to exploit its contemporary relevance. '[A]rt and literature,' he told an audience shortly before *Coriolanus* opened, 'have no politics.' While depression, bad harvests, trade union unrest, Chartist riots, and outrage at the fate of the Tolpuddle Martyrs obsessed the public mind, Macready's production remained wonderfully innocent of sociopolitical reference. Like Kemble, he deliberately suppressed the play's politics whenever possible, and when the patrician-plebeian conflict could not be ignored he aestheticized it.[82]

Yet, while remaining close to Kemble's script, and retaining some of James Thomson's eighteenth-century changes and 'interpolations', Macready reintroduced 'Menenius's belly fable (1.1), Coriolanus's Farewell scene (4.1), his arrival in Antium, with its "O world, thy

[80] Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 127.
[81] John Ripley, Coriolanus *on Stage in England and America, 1609-1994* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), p. 163.
[82] Ripley, Coriolanus *on Stage,* pp. 163-4.

slippery turns!" soliloquy (4.4), and Menenius's mission (5.2) to the Volscian camp.'[83] He also made use of numerous extras to represent the plebeian crowds. As Ripley notes, unlike 'Kemble's token, and comic, stage rabble, Macready's citizens were a numerically convincing and credibly dangerous opponent.'[84] As a consequence, anxieties about this credible danger were quickly apparent. *The Examiner* places, coincidentally, their celebratory review of Macready's 1839 *Coriolanus* directly below a column bewailing the incendiary 'Sayings and Doings of the Chartists'.[85]

Browning's interest in the 'minnows' and their political agency appears to strengthen over his career. Isobel Armstrong, for example, suggests that *The Ring and the Book* 'must be seen as Browning's contribution to the debate on representation' inaugurated by the publication of J. S. Mill's *Representative Government* (1861), and leading up to the Reform Bill of 1867, Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867), and Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-8).[86] This 'debate' frequently involved questioning whether popular participation might alter, or pervert, national progress. Bagehot, for example, discounts the need for direct popular participation in governance by arguing that England is a 'deferential' country: one in which the 'numerous unwiser part wishes to be ruled by the less numerous wiser part', abdicating power 'in favour of its *élite*'.[87] Arnold, too, is keen to clarify the difference between the cultural life of 'the minnows', and his own projection of an ideal national culture. Despite the apparently egalitarian claim that the 'passion for sweetness and light' cannot be satisfied until it includes also 'the raw and unkindled masses of humanity'—until it contributes to 'a *national* glow of life and thought, when the whole of society is in the fullest measure permeated by thought, sensible to beauty, intelligent and alive'—Arnold's model of

---

[83] Ripley, Coriolanus *on Stage,* p. 164.
[84] Ripley, Coriolanus *on Stage,* p. 165.
[85] *The Examiner,* iss. 1632 (May 12, 1839), p. 297.
[86] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 317.
[87] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. by Miles Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 33.

national culture demands less 'do[ing] away with classes' than the exclusion of precisely those behaviours commonly attributed to working class communities.[88]

This becomes evident in his treatment of the Hyde Park demonstrators—the 'London roughs' organised by the Reform League who, in 1866, broke into Hyde Park to assert their right to protest.[89] Protests in Hyde Park against the disenfranchisement, treatment, and poverty of the working class in London and the rest of Britain had been regular occurrences throughout the mid-nineteenth century. Their magnitude and frequency appeared to suggest the proximity of social change. A protest against the Sunday Trading Bill in June 1855, for example, which saw 'at least 200,000' people gather along the banks of the Serpentine, counted among its numbers an excited Karl Marx.[90] In face of this unrest, Arnold calls upon the State, or the 'nation in its collective character', 'to supress the London roughs, […] in behalf of the best self both of themselves and of all of us in the future.'[91] He continues,

> So whatever brings risk of tumult and disorder, multitudinous processions in the streets of our crowded towns, multitudinous meetings in their public places and parks,—demonstrations perfectly unnecessary in the present course of our affairs,—our best self, or right reason, plainly enjoins us to set our faces against. It enjoins us to encourage and uphold the occupants of the executive power, whoever they may be, in firmly prohibiting them.[92]

Arnold is not ambivalent as to the form this prohibition should take. In the conclusion to *Culture and Anarchy*, he quotes his father's opinion that, '[a]s for rioting, the old Roman way of dealing with *that* is always the right one: flog the rank and file, and fling the ringleaders from the Tarpeian Rock!'—the same rock, incidentally, that is mentioned as a punishment in

---

[88] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 52.
[89] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 150.
[90] Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings*, vol. 2, ed. by David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p. 291.
[91] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 92, 150.
[92] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 72.

Coriolanus (Act 3 Scene 3).[93] His own opinion is that 'monster-processions in the streets and forcible irruptions into the parks, even in professed support of [sweetness and light], ought to be unflinchingly forbidden and repressed'.[94] Yet Arnold's repeated use of 'multitudinous' is itself particularly suggestive. Shakespeare's Coriolanus himself derides the 'multitudinous tongue' of the plebeians (3.1.158), and the fact that the *OED* provides only Coriolanus's usage for 'multitudinous' as 'relating to the populace or common people' is indicative of the influence exerted by the play on political debate. [95] This influence was also registered in literature: George Eliot's *Felix Holt: The Radical* (1866), a novel intimately concerned with reform and popular representation, uses quotations from the play as epigraphs for two chapters.[96]

For Browning, the word 'multitude' is subject to what William Empson terms an 'internal grammar',[97] indicating a complex of meaning in which disenfranchisement, the working classes, and the place of forms of discontent in national politics interact with shifting moral judgements and affective responses. He returns to the word frequently throughout his career. In his play *Colombe's Birthday* (1844), for example, he builds a narrative around the Duchess's interest in serving what Valence calls 'the poor acquiescing multitude' (II, l. 129).[98] Balaustion, three decades later in *Aristophanes' Apology*, argues—echoing an Arnoldian position—that when 'dealing with King Multitude, / Club-drub the callous numskulls!' (ll. 3104-5); while 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' ponders the methods by which 'statesmanship / Strives at contenting the rough multitude' (ll. 604-5).[99]

---

[93] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 149.
[94] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy,* p. 149.
[95] Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus,* p. 254; 'multitudinous, adj.', *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://oed.com/view/Entry/123640> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[96] George Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical*, ed. by Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 255, 284.
[97] William Empson, 'Comment for Third Edition (1977)', in *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), xxvii-xxix, p. xxvii.
[98] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. IV, p. 89.
[99] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XII, p. 142; *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XV, p. 120.

The word has also been used to criticise Browning's poetry. Arnold, in an undated letter to Arthur Hugh Clough written circa 1848-9, claimed that Browning, despite being 'a man with a moderate gift passionately desiring movement and fulness', obtains in his poetry only a 'confused multitudinousness'.[100] One of the reasons this word appeared with such consistency whenever crowds, crowdedness, or confusion threaten to overwhelm nineteenth-century ideals of 'movement and fulness' is Edmund Burke use of the phrase 'swinish multitude' in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).[101] In that text, Burke's objection to revolution rests upon the claim that 'antient opinions and rules of life' represent a vital '*entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers', and that subsequently a 'principle of conservation' ought to be developed capable of protecting this inheritance.[102] That this principle preserves 'the method of nature in the conduct of the state' is an important part of his argument, because it permits him to characterise the French Revolution as an unnatural and monstrous event.[103] Hence the descriptions of the 'tumultuous cries of a mixed mob of ferocious men, and of women lost to shame', and of 'clubs composed of a monstrous medley of all conditions, tongues, and nations.'[104] And hence the description of the fate of learning in a society that has destroyed both 'the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion': it 'will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude.'[105]

Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century radicals frequently responded to these arguments. For example, Thomas Spence's periodical *Pigs' Meat; or Lessons for the Swinish Multitude* (1793-1795) collected together, as G. I. Gallop notes, 'extracts from other writers,

---

[100] *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. by Howard Foster Lowry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 97.
[101] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 79.
[102] Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 33, 78.
[103] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 34.
[104] Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 68-9.
[105] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 79.

both classical and modern', together with several of his own 'essays, songs and poems'.[106] In direct opposition to Burke's statement, the publication was '[i]ntended to promote among the Labouring Part of Mankind proper Ideas of their Situation, of their Importance, and of their Rights'.[107] Similarly, in 1794, the ballad writer R. Thompson printed the satirical epistle *To the public, alias the 'swinish multitude'*. In it, Thompson—posturing as a Burkean thinker—berates with sharp irony the pretentions of this 'multitude' to think for itself:

> Deluded multitude! here is a collection of the *happiest* creatures in the world, united together to persuade you that you are extremely *happy*, and yet you give no credit to what they may either *say* or *sware!* O shocking stupidity! they will then cure you of your Malady by a different process; the tower shall be furnished with solid argument, a Military System of Animal Magnetism shall be adopted—you shall be thrown into a *Crisis*, and kept there till you confess you are exceedingly *happy!*[108]

As usages of this kind increased in frequency, the phrase soon came to encapsulate a significant tension between the fear and dismissal of the working classes on the one hand, and defence of their interests and integrity on the other. This tension can be traced in literature. Roland Bartel, for instance, situates Shelley's inclusion of 'a chorus of the Swinish Multitude' among the dramatis personae of the two-act tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1820) with respect to the 'incredible notoriety' of Burke's phrase.[109] Other literary figures, Bartel suggests, also made use of what was fast becoming 'one of the most popular catchwords' of the early nineteenth century:[110]

> In an essay in the *Examiner* for December 10, 1815, William Hazlitt said that he had the highest regard for William Cobbett's ability as a prose writer, 'though he is one of Burke's "swinish multitude."' In his *Political Register* for November 1816, William

---

[106] *Pigs' Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spence, Radical and Pioneer Land Reformer*, ed. by G. I. Gallop (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982), p. 57.
[107] *Pigs' Meat*, p. 190.
[108] R. Thompson, *To the public, alias the 'swinish multitude'* (London: printed for Daniel Isaac Eaton, 1794), p. 2.
[109] Roland Bartel, 'Shelley and Burke's Swinish Multitude', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 18 (1969), 4-9, p. 4.
[110] Bartel, 'Shelley and Burke's Swinish Multitude', p. 9.

> Cobbett reminded the journeymen and labourers that they were the strength of the country and the source of its wealth, even if their oppressors called then 'the Populace, the Rabble, the Mob, the Swinish Multitude.' On March 17, 1817, Coleridge wrote a letter to the *Courier* in which he used the term in the Burkean sense. He defended efforts to preserve reverence for the throne, a quality which, he said, was 'trodden down by the hoofs of the swinish multitude' when the crowds demonstrated against the Prince Regent earlier that year.[111]

As such, for nineteenth-century users, the word represented what Empson calls a 'compacted doctrine'.[112] Burke's argumentative logic depends upon the naturalisation of 'antient opinions and rules of life', and the consequent representation of any attempt to change radically these opinions and rules as 'monstrous' and bestial. As such, the word, whose principle sense pertains only to 'numerousness', came to imply an attitude to numerousness in the context of political protest, particularly surrounding questions of representation and labourers' rights.[113] To use uncritically the word 'multitude' in political contexts in the nineteenth century was to equate crowds that gather in order to challenge 'antient opinions and rules of life' with the monstrous and unnatural.

Just as Laing's crowds pose problems for structures of control, Browning's multitudes cause problems for the political projects of ruling governments. It is Browning's long poem *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* (1871)—based on Napoleon III's political career—that most explicitly ponders the question of representation, of the role of crowds—of the 'multitude'—in politics.[114] According to the Browning *Concordance*, he uses the word 'multitude' eleven times in the poem: only *Sordello* features more uses.[115]

---

[111] Bartel, 'Shelley and Burke's Swinish Multitude', p. 8.
[112] Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, p. 39.
[113] 'multitude, n.', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/123635> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[114] Interestingly, Terrell Carver has recently compared *Coriolanus* with Karl Marx's response to Napoleon III, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), lending further support to these intertwined histories. See Terrell Carver, 'Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1608) and Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): The Constitutional is the Personal', *Shakespeare*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2018), pp. 174-180.
[115] *A Concordance,* vol. IV, p. 2018.

Critical reflection on Browning's later poetry tends to emphasise both its crowded uncleanliness and stylistic obscurity. Ian Jack's study of *Browning's Major Poetry* (1973), for example, describes the later poetry as emitting a 'dense smog of verbal pollution'.[116] Ross Wilson draws attention to 'the bustle, noise, and stench' of the Rome of *The Ring and the Book*, while J. Hillis Miller describes the language of the later poems as 'like an odd sort of primeval soup from which life arose and to which it may return.'[117] The latter poems 'of the decades after *The Ring and the Book*', he argues, 'return to the often incomprehensible babble that characterizes *Sordello*'.[118] Yet reading these later poems in proximity to Laing's depiction of crowds helps reveal the extent to which they are frequently engaged in questioning the relationship between political projects and the quotidian variety they often exclude. The 'bustle, noise, and stench', the 'babble' and 'smog' of these poems, their stylistic and structural complexity, reflects Browning's interest in points of friction between classes, registers, and forms.

This stylistic and structural complexity is evident in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. As John Woolford notes, the poem begins with one of Browning's most 'elaborately staged listener-constructions': the purported listener, 'a prostitute he has picked up in Leicester Square' during the course of his exile, is deconstructed at the end of the poem.[119] The Prince, 'it turns out, is not in exile, but still in his palace and still in charge of the state; the prostitute is not there at all but is merely the figment of his imagination […]; the apparent dialogue is actually a soliloquy', intended to help him decide whether to send a letter that could determine either the continuance or interruption of his political career.[120]

---

[116] Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry*, p. 273.
[117] Ross Wilson, 'Browning's Balancing Acts', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 337-348, p. 338; J. Hillis Miller, 'Robert Browning', *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets,* ed. by Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 392-407, p. 397.
[118] J. Hillis Miller, 'Robert Browning', p. 404.
[119] Woolford, *Robert Browning*, p. 75.
[120] Woolford, *Robert Browning*, p. 75.

As such, Browning's poem complicates readings of dramatic monologues—such as Armstrong's and Drury's—that stress the ways in which it is 'an avowedly mediated form of expression', characterised by a potentiality 'for *capturing* language *in* mediation'.[121] The poem, in fact, demands a reconsideration of Armstrong's suggestion that Browning's dramatic monologues expose—by foregrounding their constructedness—'the power relations of communication and interpretation, […] enabling a democratic access to their complexities.'[122] *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, in imitating and then disappointing this sort of 'democratic access', draws attention to the ways in which political projects can also disappoint democratic responsibilities.

The specific political project the poem questions is that of Napoleon III. The first President of France (elected by universal male suffrage), and subsequently—after a *coup d'état*—its last monarch as Emperor of the Second Empire, Napoleon III at once represented new democratic and old aristocratic forms of governance. As James F. McMillan has demonstrated, Napoleon III's regime depended heavily on his orchestration of popular support; appreciating that 'holidays and festivals could be turned to political ends', he encouraged bringing 'glamour and colour into the lives of the masses', and ensured that '[p]opular songs celebrating the Emperor were also widely diffused with official backing.'[123] Seeking to 'personalise the bonds between ruler and common folk', Napoleon III garnered significant support from rural and peasant communities.[124] Yet these appeals to the 'common folk' were integrated into a system of governance equally invested, at least initially, in authoritarian control.

---

[121] Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* pp. 103-4.
[122] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 288-9.
[123] James F. McMillan, *Napoleon III* (London and New York: Longman, 1991), p. 61.
[124] D. Barclay, *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy 1840-61* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 12.

The Second Empire's 'novel blend of democracy and state control'—its combination of elections and populist measures with repression of opposition and 'press, literary, and theatrical censorship'[125]—appears to have interested Browning greatly. The Emperor, as Roger Price notes, 'would pose as the symbol of national unity and as the supreme warlord'.[126] This ambiguity, by the 1870s (and the publication of Browning's poem), would become characteristic of Napoleon III's legacy. As Price argues:

> A movement essentially of the right, given its determination to protect the established social order, Bonapartism succeeded in creating a much wider consensus. Strong government combined with democratic procedures and the promise of prosperity and national glory. State building and economic modernisation continued apace. In spite of manipulation, elections were increasingly perceived as providing opportunities for voters to make representations to government, seek to influence policy and even issue a challenge. By 1870, and in contrast with 1851, it was not democracy but authoritarian government which appeared condemned.[127]

Part of this consensus was due to the Emperor's decision to embark on a process of liberalisation, in response to dwindling support, 'designed to win back the political initiative'.[128] Yet '[p]recisely what the Emperor meant by liberty', as McMillan suggests, 'is difficult to determine. His own leanings were always authoritarian, and he had little faith in ministerial responsibility or freedom of the press.'[129]

Browning's own opinions on Napoleon III vacillated throughout the latter's political career. As Leo A. Hetzler has shown, his admiration was marked by high and low points.[130] His wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, exhibited a more constant support, keeping a miniature of Napoleon III in her writing case.[131] Their joint decision in early 1859 to write poems on

---

[125] McMillan, *Napoleon III*, p. 62; Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 171.
[126] Price, *The French Second Empire*, p. 37.
[127] Price, *The French Second Empire*, p. 467.
[128] McMillan, *Napoleon III*, p. 121.
[129] McMillan, *Napoleon III*, p. 121.
[130] See Leo A. Hetzler, 'The Case of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Browning and Napoleon III', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 15, no. 4 (Winter, 1977), 335-350, pp. 338-343.
[131] Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning*, pp. 5-6.

the question of Italy was disrupted by Napoleon III's decision to abandon his promise to liberate the country later that year: Browning, in retaliation, 'destroyed his poem'.[132] 'From 1860 to 1867', Hetzler suggests, 'Robert at times spoke admiringly of the policies and actions of Napoleon III', but the caution of Hetzler's 'at times' suggests that Browning's support was anything but unambiguous.[133] Later, indeed, Browning himself prescribed, in a letter to Isa Blagden dated 19 July 1870, that 'in the interest of humanity, [Napoleon III] wants a sound beating'.[134]

Browning's vacillations here reflect a more general confusion regarding the question of liberty in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Nathan K. Hensley's study, *Forms of Empire* (2016), posits that liberalism itself, as the nineteenth century progressed, came up against the 'wayward meanings' generated by its own contradictions, particularly the 'curious intimacy between legality and harm' that characterised a doctrine of liberty inextricably rooted in violent imperial expansion.[135] For Hensley, 'the dogged persistence of killing in an age of liberty disrupted the conceptual assumptions of progressive idealism'; while 'the very inseparability of law and violence, never more painfully evident than in episodes of colonial war and legal emergency, collapsed the logical principles of non-contradiction and identity that remain our common sense.'[136]

Within Britain also, the 1870s were characterised by the 'curious intimacy' Hensley describes. The 1871 budget saw the Liberal party propose a match tax that, according to Biagini, 'looked like a treason against the sacred canons of Cobdenite and Gladstonian taxation committed by a notoriously anti-democratic Chancellor in order to compensate aristocratic officers for the abolition of the purchase system, and to provide Princess Louise

[132] Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning*, p. 103.
[133] Hetzler, 'The Case', p. 340.
[134] *Letters of Robert Browning*, p. 138.
[135] Hensley, *Forms of Empire*, p. 5.
[136] Hensley, *Forms of Empire,* p. 243.

with a dowry.'[137] This led to precisely the sort of 'monster procession' that Arnold feared just a few years before: in late April, three or four thousand matchmakers 'protested energetically against the new tax' in Parliament Square.[138] Later, in 1874, the Liberal party itself failed to retain office, after Disraeli's Conservatives won 350 seats to the Liberal party's 242.

It is within this context, then, that Browning's poem was written and published. Napoleon III's 'novel blend' of democracy and dictatorship represented a symptom of confusion regarding the relationship between governance and liberty, between rulers and the people. There are, at least superficially, several continuities between his combination of populism and authoritarian strategies and Acheampong's. Like Napoleon III, Acheampong's military rule—a rule that initially enjoyed grassroots popular support—ambiguously combined authoritarian principles with revolutionary slogans and populist gestures. This ambiguous sort of governance—together with fears of popular unrest—appears often in West African fiction. The military head of state (and later, dictator) in Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), published a year after *Search Sweet Country*—plagued by an 'irrational and excessive fear of demonstrations'—is outraged when his cabinet meeting is destabilised by 'the sounds of a chanting multitude' outside, despite his initial popularity.[139]

Napoleon III is often cited as a potential influence on the regimes that would come to characterise twentieth-century politics. For example, while dismissing 'arguments which portray Louis-Napoleon as a "proto-fascist"' as 'unconvincing', Geoff Watkins does associate 'the extent of the appeal of populist right-wing movements' in the twentieth century with Napoleon III's influence.[140] It is only by shifting attention away from the determination

---

[137] Eugenio F. Biagini, 'Popular Liberals, Gladstonian Finance, and the Debate on Taxation, 1860-1874', *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain 1850-1914,* ed. by Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 134-162, p. 145.
[138] Biagini, 'Popular Liberals', p. 145.
[139] Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Pan Books, 1988), pp. 9, 12-13.
[140] Geoff Watkins, 'The Appeal of Bonapartism', in *Marx's* Eighteenth Brumaire*: (Post)modern Interpretations*, ed. by Mark Cowling and James Martin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 163-176, pp. 173-174.

of relevant political contexts by geographical and temporal proximity that resonances between versions of nationhood and styles of governance become clear. Both Acheampong and Napoleon III assumed control through *coups d'état*, consolidated their respective governments with populist appeals to poor communities, and ultimately failed to live up to the expectations of their civilian supporters. And both Laing and Browning draw their readers' attention to the political complexities of these regimes as part of a wider interrogation of the ways national projects can exclude or limit forms of liberty.

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, constituting the self-justification of a ruler whose liberal rhetoric and populist policies existed in tension with overt repression and censorship, bore clear and immediate relevance to Browning's own political contexts. Indeed, if, as Biagini suggests, by the 1860s 'Gladstone enjoyed an established reputation as the 'liberator' of British trade and the workman's 'breakfast table'', then by 1871 and the publication of *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* there appears to be an extent to which Browning was dissatisfied with the ways such a liberation could take undemocratic forms.[141] When the Prince claims to have liberated the breakfast table of his people, there is a sense in which this is held to be insufficient given the means by which such a goal was achieved:

> 'Not bread alone' but bread before all else
> For these: the bodily want serve first, said I
>
> (ll. 918-9)[142]

A peculiar syntax—the object-verb-subject of 'the bodily want serve first, said I'—evokes a kind of discomfort: the Prince's speech inhabits the line-units awkwardly. Enjambment and caesura combine with extra-metricality—the second line's 'bodily'—to suggest a sort of rhetorical clumsiness. In Empson's words, a 'metrical scheme imposes a sort of intensity of

[141] Biagini, 'Popular Liberals', p. 139.
[142] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 157.

interpretation upon the grammar',[143] and here it the line's own struggle to incorporate, to body the needs of the populace, that betrays an interpretive tension. This tension itself demonstrates historical accuracy. Napoleon III's *Extinction of Poverty* (1844) stressed the importance of the satisfaction of 'bodily wants' as a means of combating poverty in theory, but, as John Pettigrew points out, in reality his 'practice was different.'[144]

In Julia F. Saville's words, throughout the poem, 'aesthetics […] hijacks rational argument as lyricism once again conveys meanings that escape conscious self-accounting.'[145] Moments of tension between the organising logics of meter and syntax and the 'conscious self-accounting' that makes up the poem's narrative serve to foreground competing styles of governance: appeals to the needs of the populace are modulated by fidelity to anti-popular forms of political administration. For instance, in the first edition of the poem, the Prince states:

> I recognize, contemplate, and approve
> The general compact of society,
> Not simply as I see effected good,
> But good i' the germ, each chance that's possible
> I' the plan traced so far
>
> (ll. 360-364)[146]

Here the ambiguity of the word 'germ'—suggesting both a seed and a source of disease—introduces a tension between well-meaning action and its opposite. Here, too, the sense of a greater 'plan' to which the Prince subjects his decisions finds a peculiar textual equivalent in the subtle re-organisation of stress—some modern editions read 'contémplate'—to suit the demands of the predominant metrical pattern: the highlighting of 'template' within the word

---

[143] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), p. 28.
[144] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. 1, p. 1180.
[145] Julia F. Saville, '"Soul-Talk": Networks of Political Poetry in a Trans-Channel Literary Triangle', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2013), 299-308, p. 305.
[146] Robert Browning, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1871), p. 26.

'contemplate' draws further attention to the Prince's planning.[147] The apparent passivity of the verbs 'recognize', 'contemplate', and 'approve' are counterposed with a suggestion of control that threatens the Prince's self-justification as a servant simply trying to 'do the best with the least change possible' (l. 397).[148]

This counterposition haunts much of the Prince's speech. Later in the poem, the Prince imagines how his political career might be summarised, gesturing to an imaginary multi-volume history:

> Here lie the dozen volumes of my life:
> (Did I say 'lie'? the pregnant word will serve).
> Cut on to the concluding chapter, though!
> Because the little hours begin to strike.
>
> (ll. 1226-1229)[149]

The Prince's sensitivity to 'pregnant' words—'lie', here, suggesting a complex of meaning including suggestions of falsehood, passivity, rest, and retirement—mirrors the poem's tendency to interrogate political statements in the process of their rhetorical manifestation. Ambiguity, and modulations of syntax and rhythm, serve to frame the poem's exploration of questions of liberty. The publication of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), in which an argument in favour of the essential importance of 'liberty of action' is counterbalanced by the claim that '[d]espotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians', brought into focus the problem of the liberal defence of illiberal means with respect to both indigenous and working-class insubordination.[150] Browning's Prince, in imagining how 'the concluding chapter' of his life's story would summarise his political career, reflects on this precise problem:

[147] See, for example, Browning, *The Poems*, vol. I, p. 953.
[148] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 136.
[149] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 171.
[150] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Cosimo, 2005), pp. 13-14.

> There is no trial like the appropriate one
> Of leaving little minds their liberty
> Of littleness to blunder on through life,
> Now, aiming at right ends by foolish means,
> Now, at absurd achievement through the aid
> Of good and wise endeavour—to acquiesce
> In folly's life-long privilege, though with power
> To do the little minds the good they need,
> Despite themselves, by just abolishing
> Their right to play the part and fill the place
> I' the scheme of things
>
> (ll. 1289-99)[151]

Here, the Prince confesses the extent to which a liberal intent to do the populace 'the good they need' can come into direct conflict with the need to leave 'little minds their liberty'. This confession is itself marked by ambiguous diction. The phrase 'just abolishing / Their right' hinges upon a 'pregnant' word. The word 'just', at once connoting 'justly' and tentatively qualifying the strength of 'abolishing', draws attention to the complex interplay of liberal gesture and illiberal means the Prince describes.

Browning's interest in contradictory pressures within political discourse is evident throughout his publishing career. Anticipating *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* in several ways, tensions between liberal and illiberal forms of governance frame the story of *A Soul's Tragedy* (1846), published during Napoleon III's second exile in the United Kingdom following a second failed coup in 1840—his first attempt having been foiled in Strasbourg in 1836. In the play, Chiappino valiantly assumes the blame for his friend Luitolfo's murder of the Provost of Faenza. However, the 'Populace', instead of condemning him for the crime, unexpectedly celebrate him as their 'saviour', 'the best man' responsible for breaking the 'chains' of their servitude to the Provost.[152] Consequently, Chiappino is himself named

[151] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, pp. 173-4.
[152] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 23.

Provost under the advice of the Pope's Legate Ogniben. Together, throughout the second act of the play (which is entirely prose), they discuss the theory of governance and power, particularly the problem of what Chiappino terms 'the material instrumentality of life', or 'of ever being able to rightly operate on mankind through such a deranged machinery as the existing modes of government'.[153] Chiappino's solution—'reconciling myself to an old form of government instead of proposing a new one'—hinges upon a notion of reform capable of informing 'perverted institutions with fresh purpose'.[154]

Yet this solution leaves Chiappino confused as to how he might convince the Populace that his 'republicanism remains thoroughly unaltered' despite taking 'a form of expression hitherto commonly judged (and heretofore by myself) incompatible with its existence'.[155] Ogniben's uncommon word for this incompatibility, 'tergiversation' (or the turning one's back on a cause or a previous position—although Ogniben glosses it as 'duplicity'), serves to draw attention to the dialectical underpinnings of Chiappino's political stance.[156] This foregrounding of dialectics is a prominent characteristic of Browning's writings. As early as 1899, John Bury had declared that 'the spirit of [Hegel's] method pervades Browning's reasoning': the recognition that 'when we think anything, we implicitly think what it is not', and that as a result 'affirmation involves negation, and identity involves difference.'[157]

This 'method' also pervades Browning's treatment of the exercising of political power in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. The Prince's differentiation between two 'scales' of action—the 'great scale' (l. 261) and the 'little scale' (l. 259)[158]—mirrors aspects of

---

[153] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 31.
[154] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, pp. 31, 35.
[155] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 35.
[156] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 36.
[157] John Bury, 'Browning's Philosophy', in *Browning Studies, being Select Papers by Members of the Browning Society*, ed. by Edward Berdoe, 2nd edn (London: George Allen, 1899), 28-46, p. 39.
[158] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 131.

Chiappino's conservatism in its balancing of reform with a reconciliation to an 'old form of government'. 'A conservator', the Prince describes himself, 'Not a creator nor destroyer: one / Who keeps the world safe' (ll. 298-300), and this insistence on occupying the point of tension between two contradictory forces characterises the Prince's self-justification.[159] His is a governance marked by strategic restraint, by the simple desire to 'stabilify' (l. 280) rather than 'strike such change / Into society' (ll. 392-3); and yet, restraint quickly changes from a passive to an active principle when the project of a nation 'equably smoothed everywhere' (l. 429) is threatened: 'Heavily did he let his fist fall plumb / On each perturber of the public peace' (ll. 1419-20).[160] The word 'perturber' is itself marked by an etymological suggestion of the multitude: the Latin noun 'turba' denoting a 'disorderly mass of people, multitude, crowd'.[161]

The Prince's dedication to action on the great scale, and strategic inaction on the little scale, involves similar etymological play:

> Thus the man,—
> So timid when the business was to touch
> The uncertain order of humanity,
> Imperil, for a problematic cure
> Of grievance on the surface, any good
> I' the deep of things, dim yet discernible—
> This same man, so irresolute before,
> Show him a true excrescence to cut sheer
> A devil's-graft on God's foundation-stock,
> Then—no complaint of indecision more!
> He wrenched out the whole canker, root and branch,
> Deaf to who cried that earth would tumble in
> At its four corners if he touched a twig.
>
> (ll. 1513-1525)[162]

---

[159] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 132.
[160] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, pp. 131, 136, 137, 179.
[161] 'turba, ae *f*', *Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary: Latin-English*, 3rd edn, ed. by James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 195.
[162] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 183.

The word 'indecision', itself rooted in cutting, encapsulates the tension between action and inaction that characterises the Prince's governance. These appeals to etymology, to the semantic history of certain words, coincide with a political interest in discerning patterns in 'the deep of things', tendencies capable of promoting 'advance i' the main' (l. 423).[163] Yet, speaking of 'humanity' in general obscures the national parameters of the Prince's power. The 'order of humanity', the 'earth' and 'its four corners': Browning's Prince continually combines particularity with generality in his allegiance to the 'great scale'. This tension between the general and the particular characterised national discourse in Napoleon III's Second Empire. As Gavin Murray-Miller argues, 'Bonapartist ideologues saw little conflict in espousing liberal-republican sentiments in their promotion of French *nationalité* while simultaneously relying upon a discourse of national and cultural exceptionalism.'[164]

Like Laing's Ghana, whose founding gesture combined contradictory notions of both national and postnational political community, Napoleon III's Second Empire at once appealed to cultural identities limited by and exceeding national borders. Indeed, Murray-Miller continues to suggest that,

> [w]hile studies on Bonapartism and the Second Empire have frequently stressed the national tenor of imperial politics, the evident contradictions and paradoxes replete in this nationalist agenda have yet to be fully examined. In fusing together divergent political and ideological traditions, the Second Empire further encouraged the ambiguity surrounding *nationalité*, infusing it with a mix of territorial, cultural, political, and racial connotations. The Bonapartists may have made the idiom of *nationalité* a staple of French political discourse, but they equally inscribed it with a troubling dissonance that drew upon universal and particularistic ideologies.[165]

Browning's poem might profitably be considered an early attempt to examine the 'evident contradictions and paradoxes' Murray-Miller describes. The poem's foregrounding of

---

[163] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 137.
[164] Gavin Murray-Miller, 'A Conflicted Sense of Nationality: Napoleon III's Arab Kingdom and the Paradoxes of French Multiculturalism', *French Colonial History*, vol. 15 (2014), 1-38, p. 4.
[165] Gavin Murray-Miller, 'A Conflicted Sense of Nationality', p. 11.

ambiguity—of 'pregnant' words—together with its combination of 'universal and particularistic ideologies', its interest in tensions and contradictions within political discourse, and its confusion about the proper place of the 'multitude' within national political projects represents a significant exploration of the complex dynamic of Napoleon III's career.

Indeed, Murray-Miller's phrase, 'troubling dissonance', will even come to characterise Browning's Prince's advocacy of a strong sense of national identity. As Napoleon III himself argued, 'les peuples n'ont de force que par la nationalité' ['the people only have strength through nationality'],[166] and this 'nationalité' should, the Prince argues, exercise a restraint on the 'little scale' that mirrors his own:

> I aspire to make my better self
> And truly the Great Nation. No more war
> For war's sake, then! and,—seeing, wickedness
> Springs out of folly,—no more foolish dread
> O' the neighbour waxing too inordinate
> A rival, through his gain of wealth and ease!
>
> (ll. 1817-22)[167]

The Prince despairs at the idea that a nation of the 'Bravest of thinkers, bravest of the brave / Doers, exalt in Science, rapturous / In Art, the—more than all—magnetic race' will have to

> abdicate their primacy
> Should such a nation sell them steel untaxed,
> And such another take itself, on hire
> For the natural sen'night, somebody for lord
> Unpatronized by me whose back was turned?
> Or such another yet would fain build bridge,
> Lay rail, drive tunnel, busy its poor self
> With its appropriate fancy: so there's—flash—
> Hohenstiel-Schwangau up in arms at once!
>
> (ll. 1836-44)[168]

---

[166] Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, *Receuil historique des pensées, opinions, discours, proclamations, lettres et beaux traits de Napoléon III* (Paris: Appert et Vavasseur, 1858), p. 17. My translation.
[167] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 196.
[168] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 197.

Refusing to compromise the 'primacy' of his nation's citizens and their progress on the 'great scale', the Prince emphasises the way France's borders limit his responsibility. Despite this, however, there are circumstances that would provoke such a 'flash' of arms. The Prince's determination to 'Endure no lie' (l. 1870), and to fight for 'truth and right' (l. 1865), for example, leads him to cry 'Come with me and deliver Italy!' l. 1880).[169] The particularity of his people—his 'magnetic race'—remains, therefore, in tension with the universality of his purported moral standards, just as the outward desire to embrace pacifism and abandon 'war / For war's sake' remained in tension with the contradictory advocacy of 'war for the hate of war' (l. 1907).[170]

This balancing of transnational duty with the 'primacy' of his 'Great Nation' and its people represents the defining 'dissonance' of the Prince's nationalism. Here Browning's Prince follows Napoleon III's career closely. In terms of nationalism, Sudhir Hazareesingh argues that the Second Empire provided a 'third option'—an alternative to the models of republican and monarchist arguments.[171] This 'third' way hinged upon 'a sovereign who was the embodiment of the nation, but who also drew his political support from the people and was directly accountable to them.'[172] But it also looked outward. In his *Des idées napoléoniennes* (1839), which Browning used as source material for his poem, Napoleon III developed a '*politique des nationalités*' that, in James F. McMillan's words, involved turning away 'from a Europe based on a "Holy Alliance" of monarchs' toward the ideal of a 'Europe united on the basis of peoples and nationalities'.[173]

---

[169] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 199.
[170] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 200.
[171] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Saint-Napoleon: Celebrations of Sovereignty in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 76.
[172] Hazareesingh, *The Saint-Napoleon*, p. 76.
[173] McMillan, *Napoleon III*, p. 74.

However, this ideal, consecrating national difference even as it proposes a kind of unity, is grounded in a tension between internal and external priorities. The resulting contradiction is mirrored by the poem's own foregrounding of interpretive complexity. Anticipating poems like the *Inn Album* (1875), in which a character refers to Browning as a model of bad poetry, the conclusion of *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* plays with ambiguities of address, utilising plurivocality to complicate interpretation. For example, having noticed the time, the Prince reflects on his story:

> One,—
> Two, three, four, five—yes, five the *pendule* warns!
> Eh? Why, this wild work wanders past all bound
> And bearing! Exile, Leicester-square, the life
> I' the old gay miserable time, rehearsed,
> Tried on again like cast clothes, still to serve
> At a pinch, perhaps? "Who's who?" was aptly asked,
> Since certainly I am not I!
>
> (ll. 2072-2079)[174]

An apparent self-reflexivity marks the Prince's reflections here: the joke of 'I am not I' representing the culmination of a series of references to the formal digressiveness—'this wild work wanders'—and dramatic pretensions of Browning's poem. 'How obvious and how easy 'tis to talk / Inside the soul, a ghostly dialogue' (ll. 2091-2), the Prince suggests, as Browning's interest in how 'words deflect' (l. 2133) overruns his poem's basic claim to provide unmediated access to the Prince's thoughts.[175] This deflection extends to the poem's translational emphases: the italicisation of '*pendule*'—the first explicitly French word used in the poem—draws attention to its foreignness, and to the fact that there had been no prior attempt at the mimetic representation of the linguistic consequences of the Prince's nationality.

---

[174] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 207.
[175] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, pp. 208, 210.

The use of irony and self-reflexivity reframes the Prince's speech satirically; its introduction of polyvocality destabilises the monologue, as an authorial voice modulates the Prince's own. This voice itself comes to constitute a 'perturber of the peace', threatening the univocality of the Prince's ambitions for a 'Great Nation', and stressing the ways these ambitions reflect a tension between internal and external responsibility, and liberal and illiberal means. Just as Laing's crowds exceed awkwardly the government of Ghana's notion of national progress and culture, Browning's poem presents a Prince struggling to balance a network of responsibilities—to the 'little minds', the 'great' scale, to Italy, and his own 'Great Nation'—that are at once premised upon, and ultimately seen to exceed, national borders. Browning represents—and destabilises—the coercive voice of power from above; Laing shows the energies of ordinary voices from below that cannot be disciplined. In this way, the two writers are complementary opposites: what is implicit in one is explicit in the other, and vice versa. This is why their respective treatments of nationalism in difficulties are mutually enriching: reading them together underscores their respective exploration of (recalling Wai Chee Dimock's phrase) the 'morphological mismatch[es]' between a nation, nationalist discourses, and that's nation's people.[176]

Dislocated Geographies

Laing's and Browning's attention to the complex internal grammar of cultural identity—the ambiguities and excesses that exert pressure on national projects from within—is complemented by an interest in the external grammar of cultural conjunction. If, in the first section of this chapter, nations are forced to contend with internal dissent, then in this second section it is the promise of cultural, creative, ethical, and political space *between* nations that

[176] Dimock, 'Literature for the Planet', p. 177.

opens up opportunities for both the critique of nationalism from outside, and the elaboration of new forms of cultural interrelation. These opportunities are already latent in *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. As Julia F. Saville notes, the poem is characterised by its immersion in 'networks of transnational conversation about the value and limits of republican respect for civic virtue and liberal commitment to diverse interests'.[177] London, Paris, and Rome split the Prince's attention, and an ambiguity as to his location animates the poem's conclusion. Just as Browning draws attention to the contradictions within the Prince's discourse regarding his 'Great Nation', the poem's own interest in the porosity of borders—both imaginative and literal—augments these contradictory forces.

Yet, while the poem's transnational networks are clear, its ending—as it appears in the 1888-9 edition—suggests other ways in which the poem exceeds borders (even, as will be seen, its own). Having had the Prince erroneously claim, earlier in the poem, that a 'little wayside temple' (l. 1986) of the 'Clitumnian god' (l. 1997) was the site of a bloody tradition of succession, Browning—rather than simply revise the line—has his Prince address the error himself, beginning with the idea that 'words deflect':

> "Deflect" indeed! nor merely words from thoughts
> But names from facts: "Clitumnus" did I say?
> As if it had been his ox-whitening wave
> Whereby folk practised that grim cult of old—
> The murder of their temple's priest by who
> Would qualify for his succession. Sure—
> Nemi was the true lake's style. Dream had need
> Of the ox-whitening piece of prettiness
> And so confused names, well known once awake.
>
> (ll. 2135-2143)[178]

[177] Saville, '"Soul-Talk"', p. 306.
[178] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. X, p. 210.

Browning here is able, in Christopher Ricks's words, 'to do something with error'—to convert 'mortification into something newly alive'—by having the Prince explain the mistake as 'dream-induced and revelatory exactly in being so'.[179] Yet, as a curious instance of metalepsis, the revision constitutes a rift in the monologue's logic of address: the Prince's words gesture outward, intertextually, to a narrative of error and emendation external to the poem's own.

Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes* evidences a similar kind of gesture. In the novel, the immortal inhabitants of Tukwan—a Ghanaian town 'of doubtful existence to the rest of the country, to which it was invisible' (recalling the excesses within national borders explored in *Search Sweet Country*)[180]—decide to 'make a journey' to its equally unknown and immortal Scottish 'sister town, Levensvale' to trade indigenous commodities and share cultural knowledge.[181] The plot—as many of Laing's do—involves doubles and processes of doubling: from the twins Kwaku and Kwame, to the twinning of Tukwan and Levensvale, the reader is confronted continually with multiple perspectives of single phenomena. This sort of doubling is itself enacted typographically. For example, on the first page of the novel Tukwan is called a '$\frac{strange}{strange}$ town'[182]—the fraction-like doubling of 'strange' emphasising, to recall Empson's phrase, the complex 'internal grammar' of the adjective. This typographical idiosyncrasy—echoing many of the techniques used in his poetry—occurs throughout the novel. Like Browning's instrumentalisation of error, it connects an aspect of narrative discourse to hermeneutic problems and questions of composition and revision in part *external* to that discourse.

---

[179] Christopher Ricks, *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 292-3.
[180] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 8.
[181] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 6.
[182] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 1.

These textual correlatives for the development of relationships across borders—the dividing line of Laing's typography is suggestive here—emphasise the importance of the basic relationship between text and world for both writers. As such, in this section I will argue that what links their interrogation of nationalism is that both Laing's and Browning's texts constitute forms of what Mariano Siskind, partially inspired by the Kantian idea of the novel 'as that which makes the process of globalization available so that reading audiences can work through the transformations they are experiencing at home', calls the '*novelization of the global*'.[183] This 'novelization' supplements Browning's interrogation of the limitations of national discourse and Laing's experimentation with postnational relationships between different communities. Indeed, both writers make often surprising cultural relationships 'available' to their readers by focusing on narratives that take place in the spaces *between* nations.

Inbetweenness takes on a variety of meanings across Browning's body of work. Take, as a basic example, Browning's short poem 'Home-Thoughts, From the Sea', included in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), in which perspective is located between, rather than within, national borders:

> Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the North-west died away;
> Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz bay;
> Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;
> In the dimmest North-east distance dawned Gibraltar grand and gray;
> "Here and here did England help me: how can I help England?"—say,
> Whoso turns as I, this evening, turn to God to praise and pray,
> While Jove's planet rises yonder, silent over Africa.[184]

The intercontinental perspective described in the poem—facing north in the Strait of Gibraltar with Tangier to the south and Cape Trafalgar to the north—serves to bind together

---

[183] Mariano Siskind, 'The Globalization of the Novel and the Novelization of the Global: A Critique of World Literature', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2010), 336-360, pp. 337-8.
[184] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. IV, p. 188.

places situated at different cardinal points. Emphasising at once the way location is relative to a point of view, and the way that point of view can imply a geography that transcends its location, the poem's spatial network—even as the six consecutive end-rhymes serve to isolate the dactylic 'Africa'—evokes religious feeling precisely insofar as it 'rises' above national borders and 'turns' towards a more universal, global viewpoint. That the poem is a nationalist and imperialist one does not upset this turn outward; the poem itself represents the paradox of a nationalism of global range. The romanticisation of imperial domination (the celebration of British naval victories and the implied injunction to focus military effort on Africa) is something that Browning would later portray with far less naïve and untroubled enthusiasm. What remains relatively constant throughout his writing career, however, is an interest in these places and perspectives that exceed, or are situated between and outside of nations. These sorts of places and perspectives occur frequently across Browning's texts. Certain poems, for example, toy with the idea of a single universal perspective of the world. The first of two short poems entitled 'Pisgah-Sights', published in *Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper et cetera* (1876), imagines what it would be like to 'see all of it', the whole of life within 'One reconcilement' of perspective.[185] *La Saisiaz* (1878), too, begins with the perspective—'Earth's most exquisite disclosure' (l. 6)[186]—from the summit of a mountain.

Earlier poems such as *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850), echoing the association between religious feeling and the ability to transcend national borders, feature spatial networks that bridge multiple urban environments and cultures. Caught up 'in the whirl and drift' of the Christ-like vision's 'vesture' (ll. 497-8), the speaker, 'weltering through the ocean' (l. 502), 'crossed the world' (l. 523), visiting different scenes (and styles) of worship in Rome and Göttingen before returning to the English chapel that provoked his journey.[187]

---

[185] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XIII, p. 180.
[186] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. XIV, p. 99.
[187] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, pp. 69-70.

Other poems use inbetween places to evoke both memory and the way narratives and stories can serve to bridge distant places and nations. *Aristophanes' Apology*, for example, begins with Euthukles and the poem's speaker, Balaustion, aboard a boat that is 'twelve hours' sail away' from Athens on their way to Rhodes, Balaustion's home and their destination (l. 37):[188]

> A sunset nearer Rhodes, by twelve hours' sweep
> Of surge secured from horror? Rather say,
> Quieted out of weakness into strength.
> I dare invite, survey the scene my sense
> Staggered to apprehend: for, disenvolved
> From the mere outside anguish and contempt,
> Slowly a justice centred in a doom
> Reveals itself.
>
> (ll. 61-68)[189]

The inbetween place—neither Athens, nor yet Rhodes—in which Balaustion remembers 'the scene' that before she could not 'apprehend' properly permits a 'disenvolved' perspective. This word, 'disenvolved'—which is used in the poem's first edition, although often amended to 'disinvolved' in some later editions[190]—is itself 'placed' by its use of the Greek prefix 'en', rather than the Latin 'in', and is thus suggestive of precisely the tension between location and dislocation afforded by Balaustion's medial situation.

This mediality is, soon after, addressed in the poem, and a sense of the shared logistics of travel, inbetweenness, memory, and narrative is foregrounded:

> A middle course!
> What hinders that we treat this tragic theme
> As the Three taught when either woke some woe,
> —How Klutaimnestra hated, what the pride
> Of Iokasté, why Medeia clove
> Nature asunder. Small rebuked by large,

[188] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XII, p. 6.
[189] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XII, p.7.
[190] Compare, for example, Robert Browning, *Aristophanes' Apology, including A Transcript from Euripides, being the Last Adventure of Balaustion* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1875), p. 5; and Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 188.

> We felt our puny hates refine to air,
> Our poor prides sink, prevent the humbling hand,
> Our petty passions purify their tide.
> So, Euthukles, permit the tragedy
> To re-enact itself, this voyage through,
> Till sunsets end and sunrise brighten Rhodes!
>
> (ll. 158-169)[191]

The imagery here reinforces the comparison between sea-voyages and narrative itself (a comparison that echoes the use of sea imagery in 'Christmas-Eve'): Balaustion's description of her affective response to tragic drama borrows diction associated with the sea and sea-travel, from 'sink' and 'tide' to 'air'. The 'disenvolved' perspective of being between places is seen to be congruent with Balaustion's storytelling: both occupy points of tension between the distance from and involvement with place. The shift between the kinds of inbetweenness portrayed in *Aristophanes' Apology* and 'Home-Thoughts, From the Sea' are indicative of the ways in which Browning's career involved a shift towards exploring interstices that are more ambiguous and troubling than triumphantly imperialist. If in 'Home-Thoughts' distance is bridged by a militaristic trochaic rhythm and the 'glory' of slaughter ('blood-red, reeking'), it is bridged in *Aristophanes' Apology* by Balaustion's memory of trauma, and her state of statelessness after the fall of Athens: an exile which opens an opportunity for narrative reflection.

Published three years later, *The Two Poets of Croisic* (1878) uses a similar metaphor: a log on the fire, 'old ship-timber', triggers an imaginative voyage through memory—'Launched by our ship-wood, float we, once adrift / In fancy to that land-strip waters wash, / We both know well!' (ll. 73-75).[192] This interest in the mediating function of narrative and the medial spaces between nationally defined locations is frequently linked to questions of memory, tradition, and retelling. Browning's career, then, evidences a shift from nationalist

---

[191] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XII, p. 11.
[192] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. XIV, p. 133.

and imperialist conceptions of inbetweenness to what appears to be a kind of self-critique: he dismantles or unsettles ways of thinking that he once adopted, interrogating precisely those attitudes evident in early poems. Laing's novels take this further, not least because they were written partially in response to precisely the nationalist-imperialist discourse that Browning was embroiled in. Echoing some of the strategies Browning developed to undermine this discourse, they develop these medial spaces (linking them as Browning does to narrative and history) into a model of postnational cultural identity grounded in a particular comparative vision of interrelationships between different histories and traditions.

Like Browning, who often imagines perspectives of 'all of it', Laing's novels foreground viewpoints that enable characters to transcend their immediate situation. His third published novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, for example, begins by relating the success of Major Gentl's wartime strategies to his ability to view transnational social relationships from afar:

> The major had arranged […] to rent two rooms on the moon, rooms that you needed no rocket to reach: he just banged a nail in the nearest airship, under the strange lunar songs, held on tight, and then had access to the deepest craters. From there he would use magic to see far into other countries.[193]

This 'see[ing] far into other countries' prompts the Major's objection to a Europe that demanded 'purity and exclusiveness in a world that cried for the opposite things'.[194] Yet, rather than merely viewing transnational relationships and prescribing forms of impurity and inclusiveness in response to Eurocentrism, Laing's novels themselves attempt to mediate between different cultural identities. While, in the previous chapter, we saw how Laing's interest in 'double' poems enabled him to provoke a heightened sense of literature's various

[193] Laing, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, p. 1.
[194] Laing, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, p. 2.

intercultural networks of allusion and response, this section will extend that discussion by focusing on the points and spaces of interaction within these networks.

These spaces are foregrounded most explicitly in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. The plot's various journeys are implicated in the novel's deconstruction of the separation of cultures according to national borders: in the words of one character, '[t]ravelling on the travelling earth proved the world belonged to all'.[195] The novel's journeys—and the space of the aeroplane in particular—serve to highlight the ways in which travelling, in the sense of being in-between, can facilitate cultural relationships. Like the early poem, 'Miles: Poem on a Runway', *Woman of the Aeroplanes* figures aerial transportation as comparable with playful and sexual relationships.[196] When, for example, the Tukwanian Atta and the Levensvalean Mackie share the piloting of one of the aeroplanes, the plane becomes a fertile site of exchange and contact:

> The we-go-do aeroplane played with the clouds, tossing its wings among them like a lover's toss of hips; and it put more love in its own deep air-pockets, and its jet emission was quietening with what the two pilots thought was the metal intuition of approaching home[197]

The metaphor of play, figuring the aeroplane according to a sexualised human anatomy culminating in the jet's 'emission', lends a generative connotation to the cooperation of the 'two pilots'. And, just as the aeroplane in *Search Sweet Country* provides a space for a 'world of languages touching',[198] the two pilots' cooperation leads to an equally generative linguistic contact:

---

[195] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 79.
[196] B. Kojo Laing, 'Miles: Poem on a Runway', *A New Book of African Verse*, revised edn, ed. by John Reed and Clive Wake (London, Ibadan, and Nairobi: Heinemann, 1984), p. 41.
[197] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 147.
[198] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 130.

> 'This plane paa, ibi too good, tricky but good!' enthused Atta the farting pilot, letting the pidgin in his mouth fly … straight to the redirected language in Mackie's mouth: 'Yes, down to the hilly and humid lands where I can already see the giant trees touching!'[199]

The flight of Atta's pidgin—mirroring the aeroplane's own—touches Mackie's 'redirected language', connecting the two pilots' mouths. The ellipses represent typographically precisely the medial space between two linguistic and cultural communities, even as the faint echo of end-rhymes ('trick*y* but goo*d*', 'hill*y* and humi*d*'), and the polysemy of 'lands' (at once the aeroplane's action and the land itself), bridges the character's otherwise tenuously connected pronouncements.

This linking together the inbetween spaces of travel with the possibility of cultural mediation is, in the novel, thought through in terms of food. Not only is the journey itself motivated by the exchange of 'palm-nuts and cassava',[200] but also characters from both Tukwan and Levensvale frequently think of the relationship between both places in terms of food. One of Tukwan's 'non-travellers', for example, implores the departing group not to 'forget to eat their food', while Akyaa, anticipating their arrival in Levensvale, asks 'what do the people in this non-mango country eat anyway?'[201] Similarly, Mackie's desire to encourage the furthering of their 'magical link with Tukwan' is linked to the need 'to increase the production and consumption of Scotch broth … in order to build the courage not only to live beyond its means, but to live beyond itself, ampa.'[202]

That food is taken, at least superficially, as representative of cultural identity is demonstrated by Laing's glossaries. As has been mentioned, each of Laing's published works have glossaries, usually titled either simply 'Glossary' or 'Glossary of Ghanaian words and author's neologisms', and each of these glossaries evidences that it is a particular *kind* of

[199] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 147.
[200] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 6.
[201] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, pp. 60, 72.
[202] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 63.

language that is presented as 'Ghanaian'. The choice of words in the glossary serves to accentuate certain patterns of vocabulary present in the main text. For example, of the 33 entries comprising the glossary for the poetry collection *Godhorse*, 14 are types of food and drink. Similarly, of the 193 entries of the glossary of *Search Sweet Country*, 38 are types of food and drink. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, 184 entries yield 45 relating to food and drink.

This foregrounding of consumption is, later in the novel, presented as a metaphor for mediation itself. As a group of characters, piloted by Atta and Mackie, begin their journey from Levensvale back to Tukwan, the narrative voice describes the space between cultures in culinary terms:

> Depending on which end of the binoculars you were holding, it would mean you were leaving one culture in the evening of its freedom, and entering another in its dawn; you would be leaving one with a tradition of formal consciousness, so-so direct, to one where being was being touched with a glancing step and then left alone in a mysterious relationship, or. One wanted less consciousness, one wanted more … but there was always the gari in between, and there was the mince.[203]

As 'the gari in between', food occupies a central place in a network of mutual exchange, ingestion, and mixing that is described at one point in the novel as 'the chew in the soul'.[204] Differences between traditions, histories, and cultural propensities—such as Europe's direct and 'formal consciousness' and Ghana's more 'mysterious' ontologies—do not exclude the possibility of there being a site of interaction 'in between'. Instead, the chewing of 'gari' and 'mince'—the 'nibbling of the European continent by the travelling Tukwan', and the effort to process and embody what is nibbled[205]—comes to characterise the novel's thinking about the development of postnational and 'in between' cultural identities.

---

[203] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, pp. 136-137.
[204] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 180.
[205] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 167.

While it may appear strange that this more abstract thinking uses something as material as food and digestion as its central metaphor, the novel itself draws attention to their potential to overlap. The proximity of the philosophical contemplation of cultural interaction to matters of food and consumption is, at one point, emphasised through word-play. The Kumasian delegate at the Conference of Humanity Kofi Fofie's confused response to Lawyer Tay's admonishing him for failing to understand Tukwan's position—'Chief, me I think your questions they come from the book of abe, they make proper palm-nut matter.'[206]—hinges upon the proximity between the Asante words 'abe', or 'palm tree', and 'ebe', or proverb. What Kofi Fofie does not realise, however, is that the ideas about cultural interaction developed by the inhabitants of Tukwan do propose the sort of chewed wisdom implied by the 'book of abe'. Indeed, this 'chew in the soul' is the foundation of Laing's novel's development of a concept of history capable of mediating between cultural differences, and radically postnational in its emphasis on the centrality of inbetweenness and inbetween spaces. Just as, in J. Hillis Miller's words, Browning's 'assimilative knowledge seems a matter of tasting , swallowing, and digesting', characters in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* develop an idea of history exemplified both by this 'chewing' and the Twi word 'sankofa', which the glossary defines as 'a symbol of how the present makes use of both past and future'.[207]

Turning the reader's attention towards 'the gari in between' nationally defined cultural identities and between 'both past and future', tradition and innovation, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* features frequent meditation on accidental interrelationships between different genealogies, genetics, and geologies. The 'magical link' between the two cities provides the

[206] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 182.
[207] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 91; Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 254.

most obvious example of these accidents, which reveal themselves even in the most quotidian of events:

> Now, since a snore in Levensvale could originate in Tukwan, and since an elbow in Tukwan could have its counterpart in Levensvale, everybody was free to be and do what he or she liked. There was a blast of freedom from freely-mixed bodies and worlds, ampa.[208]

This 'blast of freedom from freely-mixed bodies and worlds' serves to emphasise the ways in which the internal (both individually, and culturally) and external (encounters with the 'other') can be mutually enriching. Just as, in the previous chapter, tensions between distancing and furthering tendencies characterised the incorporative, translational aesthetic of both writers, the dramatisation of cultural encounters, and their negotiation of similar tensions, become central to the characters' ability to move forward in time without being ensnared by tradition, but without losing touch with it either. This notion of development recalls Erzuah's suggestion in *Search Sweet Country* to '[c]hange everything except the roots that do the changing', and to remember that 'in change we must look both backwards and forwards'.[209] The novel's travellers enact a process of 'allowing the worlds around to seep through, while throwing their own worlds in a corresponding spread when required.'[210]

More than this, however, Browning's interest in the ways in which medial spaces can provoke self-conscious reflection on the medial function of storytelling and narrative itself finds an equivalent in Kwaku de Babo's composition of the town's 'Minutes Book', and his 'constant secretaryship of the universe'.[211] Even the material composition of the book—'he wrote everything with his pen and his chalk—parts of the book were slate'[212]—conforms to

[208] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 86.
[209] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 263.
[210] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 87.
[211] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 230.
[212] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 3.

the novel's advocation of mixture: its combination of different historical methods of writing reflecting Tukwan's chewing and processing of history and tradition. Recalling what Mariano Siskind has termed the '*novelization of the global*', Babo's acts of documentation, and his decision at the end of the novel 'to interpret his book in the open', implicate text itself in the novel's elaboration of mixed histories and 'the chew in the soul'.[213]

The inhabitants of Tukwan, approaching the novel's conclusion, receive a note 'from the Kumasi authorities' accusing them of 'trying to run away from the map, and that you think you are immortal'.[214] Kofi Senya—the 'spiritual shrinemaster' of Tukwan—rather than fighting Kumasi, decides to open Tukwan to the 'cycles of time', the patterns of history (including mortality) common to the rest of the country that it has hitherto lived apart from, in the hope that this will 'give direction to an inventive upsurge'.[215] Consequently, the town's borders are opened, and a stream of visitors from Kumasi and Accra threaten to destroy the town's originality.

In response to these events, Babo, who throughout the novel is outraged by 'the biskitisation of life', its fragmentation into crumb-like disconnection, becomes worried that the people of Kumasi intend 'a final attempt to reduce Tukwan to the ordinary in case the true freedom there spread'.[216] Hoping to 'work out a proper compromise with what is happening', Babo decides to try to spread 'the truth' of his book, 'which is a fitting chronicle of all that we have been trying to do'.[217] In a speech to a mixture of people from Tukwan, Kumasi, and Accra, he relays his town's historiography:

> We found out here hundreds of years ago that the different generations are always disconnected by a lack of invention, and you must know that this even affects memories, which end up so much the poorer by tacking their boundaries only with

---

[213] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 238.
[214] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 154.
[215] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, pp. 2, 198.
[216] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, pp. 2-3, 230.
[217] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 235.

> politics and the politicians; and our brothers too from Levensvale will brok you by pointing out all the false historics that they have written in your Glasgows and Edinburghs. But we saw a trick of the mind with Accra and Kumasi: if you allow the experience and memory of the ordinary person to disappear before the dead-end of politics or stagnation or both, then you are left with a mind that may retain its anatomical size, but it will be a mind that will either grab at straws of meaning, or create an easy spiritual mush over everything… Kumasi is the land of the semi-distilled mush![218]

The proximity of 'generations' to the word 'disconnection' here recalls Laing's poem 'One hundred lines for the coast', in which he laments 'the rhythm of time trapped in giant webs', and the stagnancy of a people 'grown old without wisdom by generations of dire disconnection'.[219] Babo's opposition to the uneven relationship between centres of culture and power (Glasgow and Edinburgh, Accra and Kumasi) and peripheries such as Tukwan and Levensvale that refuse to submit to the 'dead-end of politics or stagnation or both' hinges upon the critique of a disconnection that replaces vital encounters with other cultural and linguistic communities with 'an easy spiritual mush'. This perspective is supported by the novel's cynicism regarding the type of 'openness' demanded of Tukwan by Kumasi and Accra. It quickly becomes evident that, as a consequence of opening up to Ghana, 'Tukwan was expanding so fast that a few miles of it had become close enough to other places to be recorded on the maps', and with all this land 'moving out, people interfering in … how on earth was a town of this nature to survive such extrusions and intrusions?'[220]

The solution to this question is provided by two inter-cultural marriages between inhabitants of Levensvale and Tukwan, the revelation of Babo's own child with Pokuaa, and Angus's gifting of fifty more years of immortality to the Tukwanians. The marriages strengthen the connection between the towns, and the hope that the town should be protected until the arrival and maturation of a new generation secures their mutual future. Ultimately,

[218] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, pp. 239-240.
[219] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 50.
[220] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 244.

'the idea that Tukwan should exist at least for the next fifty years with the power to regulate its own rate of change' is embraced by Senya.[221]

However, Brenda Cooper interprets Senya's decision at the end of the novel to effect a compromise, and to explore the idea that Tukwan should continue, for a time, 'to regulate its own rate of change', instead of surrendering this power to the national consensus represented by Kumasi and Accra, as 'the new and unambiguous authority and Law and orthodoxy governing the town'.[222] As such, as Cooper argues, 'Laing's own mission of twinning and entwining, on a global scale' is damaged.[223] 'Laing's abhorrence', she suggests,

> of being torn by the cacophony of cultural unevenness, rips his narrative apart into separated spaces. There has been a genuine urge towards change and transformation, an enlightened celebration of cultural difference, but at the crucial moment of transition, Laing loses his nerve and clings to the old gods and ancestors in the guise of Kofi Senya.[224]

Both Cooper and Pietro Deandrea associate this clinging with Laing's 'preoccupation with the state' and his 'cultural nationalism'.[225] Yet, Cooper's diction reveals assumptions about *Woman of the Aeroplane* that sit uncomfortably next to the novel itself. The idea that the otherwise 'enlightened' tendencies of the 'narrative' are ripped apart 'into separated spaces', and that this ripping is attributable to Laing's own abhorrence and lack of nerve, rests upon several presumptions: first, that the novel aspires to formal unity; second, that this aspiration is simply attributable to the author's intention; and third, that this aspiration is only successful insofar as it corresponds to what is 'genuine' and 'enlightened'.

---

[221] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 247.
[222] Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 210.
[223] Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 211.
[224] Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 212.
[225] Pietro Deandrea, '"New Worlds, New Wholes": Kojo Laing's Narrative Quest for a Social Renewal', *African Literature Today*, vol. 20 (1996), 158-178, p. 159; Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 210.

To make such assumptions is to afford little importance to the ways in which the novel gestures, formally and thematically, to the positive consequences of discarding 'enlightened' notions of 'unity' in favour of the construction of new and challenging interconnections. The material heterogeneity of Babo's Minutes Book, for example, suggests that the 'urge towards change and transformation', and the 'celebration of cultural difference', that Cooper identifies within the novel need not correspond with formal unity. Similarly, the association of Senya with a clinging 'to the old gods and ancestors' assumes precisely the sort of 'enlightened' typology—attributing progression to secular, and regression to religious, forces—that Laing would later challenge in his final novel *Big Bishop Roko*. Instead, recalling Major Gentl's distrust of any support of 'purity and exclusiveness in a world that cried for the opposite things',[226] *Woman of the Aeroplanes* explores the enabling possibilities of exceeding the limits of national and cultural 'unity'. Senya's choice to try to avoid the threat of immediate integration into Ghanaian national culture is less a rejection of 'transition' than an attempt to retain the power to control the nature of that transition.

Rather than assessing the novel's conclusion alongside standards that the text itself places into question, it is perhaps more useful to focus on the conclusion's highlighting of textuality and narrative itself, and their relation to the elaboration of postnational cultural identities. Just as Browning's journeys emphasise the way storytelling itself mediates between different times, places, and perspectives, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* draws attention to narrative's own implication in the 'chew in the soul'. Laing's characteristic use of typographical imagery—'the ducks were either colons explaining other ducks, or they were question-marks doubting how high each could fly before becoming a dot above the skyline'[227]—combines with Babo's own writing to foreground the connection between the

[226] Laing, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, p. 2.
[227] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 25.

view of history and cultural mixing advocated by the inhabitants of Tukwan and narrative itself.

As a medium that carries history and tradition, and is itself able to stage the mediation between different histories and traditions, narrative and 'secretaryship' are essential to the novel's postnational arguments. The filling of Babo's Minutes Book, which coincides with the conclusion of *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, is one of the prerequisites for a future-oriented perspective grounded in 'a joy of multi-centred dimension':

> Dead or alive, an amazing joy held most of them together in the two towns, as did the art of the golden Asante lips. Babo and Pokuaa moved up and down each other's smiles several times in a day. He was busy with work on his new intellectual moulds for Tukwan thought. His Minutes Book was full, and carefully stored by the new vulture egg now hatched beautifully. Pokuaa ruled only when necessary, for joy, even in death, was self-sustaining. She the President gave birth to a boy that looked like Babo. At least they had another fifty years in which to be fine and original, in which to watch the joy of forests and the joy of machines; and this watching was not to be done as mere spectating: it was and was to be a joy of multi-centred dimension, a joy that did not necessarily take knowledge far beyond the knower.[228]

Less a return to 'the old gods and ancestors' than a 'multi-centred' expectation for the future embodied in their child, Babo and Pokuaa's 'joy' is built upon two kinds of connection: first, a connection with the past—the 'roots that do the changing', to recall Erzuah's words—recorded in the Minutes Book, and second, a connection with Levensvale, which frees Tukwan from national confinement.

This stress on 'a joy of multi-centred dimension' represents the ethical, even spiritual counterpart to the political representation of the various excesses and internal tensions explored in the first half of this chapter—Laing's crowds and Browning's multitudes. By viewing both Browning's and Laing's tendencies to unsettle, call into question, even to think past nationalism both internally (in terms of power's struggle to contain dissent) and

[228] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 249.

externally (in terms of narrative's affiliation with locations between nations), this chapter has attempted to reflect the range of both authors' critiques of affiliative networks that remain beholden to the filial logic of the nation. While Browning's increasingly troubled representations of nationalism and increasingly complex portrayals of inbetweenness are indicative of a growing tendency to interrogate the limitations of nationalist discourse, Laing's attempts to situate culturally meaningful affiliative relationships in the topos of difference and relation *between* communities suggest that the problems faced by Browning's 'multitudes' and Laing's ill-fitting characters can only be solved once the view of nations as closed systems is replaced by a more porous, interrelational conception of the social spaces in which exchange between communities happens.

Internal excesses and interstitial locations: people that do not fit the logic of rule on the one hand, and places that fall between borders and defined limits on the other. These both, as the next chapter argues, lay the foundations for some of both writers' religious and spiritual preoccupations. Indeed, in not 'necessarily tak[ing] knowledge far beyond the knower', the connections emphasised at the conclusion of *Woman of the Aeroplanes* come to represent an ideal congruence between internal and external states: the 'knower' is connected with the world around them by virtue of a 'multi-centred' internal feeling. Browning's poetry also demonstrates a similar congruence. Balaustion's description of her affective responses in language associated with the sea and sea-travel provokes a perspective capable of thinking the internal and the external together simultaneously. It is the purpose of the next chapter to explore how both writers represent the mediation between inner and outer worlds and experiences. This mediation is, for Laing and Browning, of critical importance to spiritual and religious experience, and represents one potential avenue for the elaboration of ideal affiliative relationships. Their shared affiliation with Christian belief represents another context in which both writers employ the 'mediate word', this time to think through the

spaces between internal and external worlds, the abstract and the concrete, private faith and public institutions.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Friendly Opposites’: Religion, Affiliation, and Comedy

Both the translational emphasis on the mediation between linguistic communities explored in Chapter One, and the postnational cultural identities explored in Chapter Two, are united—as this chapter will demonstrate—in Laing’s and Browning’s development of ideal modes of affiliation. For both authors, this development is made possible by religion. Christianity, as a broad community of faith that refuses to be contained by national borders, enables both authors to think through the ways in which the foreign and the familiar, the personal and the shared, and inner and outer experiences interpenetrate and overlap. It also enables both authors to foreground the ways in which language itself contributes to this interpenetration. As such, *writing* about faith and spiritual communities becomes a means of focusing attention on some of the ramifications—political, ethical, social, individual—of the kinds of mediation explored in previous chapters. It also permits a perspective from which the complex interrelations between these different levels can be glimpsed.

While the specific details of their beliefs—broadly Protestant—and practices differ, both authors share a tendency to foreground the ambivalences of faith. Indeed, placing both authors together serves to accentuate the ways in which often complex relationships between religious art and patronage, financial power and spiritual wealth, and between congregation and individual devotion provide them with a means of exploring the points of mediation, interchange, or contact between religious and secular preoccupations and communities both intra- and internationally.

Consequently, this chapter is divided into three interrelated sections. The first traces the thematic, formal, and stylistic consequences of both authors’ interest in the ‘ambivalent

wholeness' that results from the interpenetration of spiritual and material experience.[1] This wholeness is frequently approached through language. Indeed, both authors make use of dualities inherent to certain words. Christopher Ricks has written of 'the combination in the word "thing" of the most daily and solid object-ness, thinginess, with the most generalizing of abstract gestures'.[2] When poetry works with this combination in a broader way, the result is often a sort of 'congruence of the internal and external'.[3] This congruence comes to reflect, for both authors, aspects of the individual's ideal relationship with their environment, and is central to both authors' theological perspectives—the dynamic, contradictory polyvalence of human life is the generative starting point of their respective interests in meaningful and non-exclusionary affiliation.

The second analyses the consequences of this congruence in the individual's relationship with institutions and structures of power in Browning's *Men and Women* (1855) and Laing's *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (2006). Tensions between artists and patrons, narrators and protagonists, and between the Church and both writers' bishops, come to reflect the tensions between inner and outer experience both authors associate with inadequate spiritual life. Taken together, these two sections suggest three different levels which both Browning and Laing represent as interpenetrating: language, the individual, and community. Linguistic dualities are used to foreground the ways in which individuals mediate between spiritual and material experience, which in turn suggests possible models for cultural interrelation and affiliation despite significant local differences. What both authors share, crucially, is a tendency to suggest that the dualities and interactions operating on these levels are profitably considered as congruent.

[1] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 123.
[2] Ricks, *Force of Poetry,* p. 8.
[3] Ricks, *Force of Poetry*, p. 9.

The third section shows how both writers use comedy as a way of bringing the interpenetrations between these three levels more sharply into focus. One of this chapter's main claims is that comparison enables aspects of Browning's and Laing's writing that appear to be, at least intuitively, separate—their grotesque satire and comedy, and their idiosyncratic Christian theologies—to appear instead as intimately involved with each other: mutually enriching facets of a broader interest in networks of affiliation and interrelation. Laughter and comedy are particularly suited to these themes; both gesture at once towards the possibility of congruence (between people sharing a joke, for example), and often depend upon types of incongruity. Indeed, comedy, in Laing and Browning, frequently involves either the establishment of an unexpected 'congruence of the internal and external', or the introduction of a tension within this congruence: a sudden incongruity, or a switching between the 'internal' and 'external'. As such, it permits them an opportunity to represent modes of affiliation capable of sustaining internal differences, and enables them to suffuse their writing with a sense of human life taken as a whole; humanity appears, once again, as a 'composite species'.

The Value of Ambivalent Wholeness

The interweaving of the material and the spiritual is central to both writers' religious perspectives. Laing, speaking at a conference on Anglophone African Literature—under the thematic heading 'Thresholds'—at the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail in February 1999, connected this interweaving to his broader ethical intentions:

> I have had an obsession for the concrete and abstract as friendly opposites. I was appalled as a teenager by the fragmentation, as I saw it, of the Western mind, where the intrusion of the dichotomy between the subject and the object left a huge ontological emotional space. Lots and lots of experiences became second-hand. Being

> someone with a highly developed physical existence, I would sometimes feel like vomiting in the face of this abstraction, this fragmentation… as an idea, not in relation to any specific Westerner. If you have that feeling when you want to stress the concrete in relation to the abstract, then you know that what goes with it is a feeling of responsibility for all peoples of the world, hoping that my own people will never fall into this existential chasm.[4]

For Laing, 'abstraction' and 'the dichotomy between the subject and the object' ought to be counteracted by an emphasis on 'the concrete in relation to the abstract' as 'friendly opposites'. This friendly opposition produces significant ambivalences. For instance, while his critique of the 'Western mind' reflects a desire to process broad ethical, political, and cultural differences in terms of inner life, the joke by which 'vomiting in the face' of 'abstraction' is meant 'as an idea' rather than a physical act deliberately confuses the concrete and the abstract for comic effect. Part of the reason for this is because 'language is', as Yvor Winters long ago noted, 'a kind of abstraction, even at its most concrete'; 'a word', he continues, 'becomes particular only in so far as it gets into some kind of experiential complex, which qualifies it and limits it, which gives it, in short, a local habitation as well as a name.'[5] Laing's texts, instead of focusing attention on either the purely abstract or the purely concrete, continually foreground the ambivalent 'experiential complex' that relates them to one another.

Ambivalences like these are central to Laing's social, political, and theological interests. Moving from a critique of the 'Western mind' to a feeling of responsibility for 'all peoples of the world', Laing displays a confidence with processes of abstraction even as he emphasises that they need to be kept in touch with the concrete. What is significant is the movement by which inner conflict is seen to be relevant on a global scale; an essential

---

[4] Kojo Laing, 'This is not a paper…', *Caliban,* vol. 7 (2000), 103-106, p. 104.
[5] Yvor Winters, *In Defence of Reason* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 17-8.

characteristic of Laing's thinking is his tendency to think through kinds of affiliation simultaneously on the smallest and largest scales available.

This tendency is linked to what he identifies—in his interview with Adewale Maja-Pearce—as Ghana's 'dual heritage' (an idea that would later be used to describe the wordman's 'ancestry, spanning two continents' in *Big Bishop Roko*).[6] As a result of the colonial encounter, Laing argues, post-colonial Ghanaians are able to draw upon both 'a broad base in relation to other peoples' as well as an indigenous culture keen to promote a 'rhythmic and organic relationship with the environment'.[7] Consequently, 'the Ghanaian is in a unique position to create a new wholeness simply because he's had this interchange and at the same time kept his own experiences.'[8] Laing's own particular experiences, described by the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan as 'greatly mixed and contrasting', seem to have influenced his notion of the Ghanaian in general; as a result of having been 'domiciled in Scotland and married to a Scottish girl', Morgan suggests, Laing produced poetry characterised by an 'intercultural hyperdrive'.[9] As a Ghanaian educated in Britain, Laing's life reflects on a smaller scale precisely the dual-benefit of cultural 'interchange' and 'his own experiences': he has himself connected the 'newness' of his writing to this 'dragging two continents along'.[10]

The 'dual heritage' of the Ghanaian mirrors the dual nature of the individual, whose 'spirit', Laing believes, 'is based on the body'.[11] These 'friendly' interrelationships—concrete and abstract, body and spirit—produce pictures of both an individual and a society as kinds of 'ambivalent wholeness'. The relationship between spiritual and material comes to

---

[6] Adewale Maja-Pearce, 'Interview with Kojo Laing', *Wasafiri*, vol. 3, nos. 6-7 (1987), 27-9, p. 29; Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 4.
[7] Maja-Pearce, 'Interview', p. 29.
[8] Maja-Pearce, 'Interview', p. 29.
[9] Edwin Morgan, *The Midnight Letterbox: Selected Correspondence 1950-2010*, edited by James McGonigal and John Coyle (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015), pp. 213, 289.
[10] Cited in Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 188.
[11] Laing, 'This is not a paper…', p. 105.

resemble what Peter Sloterdijk calls (borrowing the term from Trinitarian theology) 'perichoresis'—a term denoting 'coinherence, intertwinement, interpenetration': 'the place in which they are located is itself created through their interrelationship.'[12] What might be considered two separate, contradictory facets of human experience are, in Laing's view, mutually interdependent, coinhabiting a medial zone that is itself the product of their relation.

A similar vision of human experience characterises much of Browning's poetry. Writing to Robert on 17 February 1845, Elizabeth Barrett noted the poet's 'great range':

> from those high faint notes of the mystics which are beyond personality .. to dramatic impersonations, gruff with nature, 'Gr-r- you swine'; & when these are throw [*sic*] into harmony, as in a manner they are in 'Pippa Passes' (which I could find in my heart to covet the authorship of, more than any of your works,—), the combinations of effect must always be striking & noble—and you must feel yourself drawn on to such combinations more and more.[13]

Browning's poetry often investigates how 'high faint notes' and an earthiness 'gruff with nature' can coinhere in human character. It stresses, like Laing, that there is a value in representing speakers that are themselves capable of mediating between the concrete and the abstract: personalities at once grounded and overreaching this ground. In Browning's case, this interest in the coinherence of the spiritual and the physical—and the related interchange between inner and outer worlds of experience—can be traced to his religious, particularly evangelical, upbringing. As John Maynard notes, 'the term Browning himself uses to characterize his mother's church and religion is "evangelical"'.[14] This is particularly significant because, for Browning, 'certainly, even church*going* was mainly accessory to the

---

[12] Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume I: Bubbles*, translated by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 603.
[13] *Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett: The Courtship Correspondence, 1845-1846*, edited by Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 19.
[14] John Maynard, 'Robert Browning's Evangelical Heritage', *Browning Institute Studies*, vol. 3 (1975), 1-16, p. 2.

more important religious influences in his family and home life, especially those exerted by his mother.'[15]

In October 1855, George Eliot's article 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming' appeared in the *Westminster Review*. The article offers an answer to the question: 'Given, a man with moderate intellect, a moral standard not higher than the average, some rhetorical affluence and great glibness of speech, what is the career which, without the aid of birth or money, he may most easily attain power and reputation in English society?'[16] The answer brims with satirical energy:

> Let such a man become an evangelical preacher; he will then find it possible to reconcile small ability with great ambition, superficial knowledge with the prestige of erudition, a middling morale with a high reputation for sanctity. Let him shun practical extremes and be ultra only in what is purely theoretic: let him be stringent on predestination, but latitudinarian on fasting; unflinching in insisting on the Eternity of punishment, but diffident of curtailing the substantial comforts of Time; ardent and imaginative on the pre-millennial advent of Christ, but cold and cautious towards every other infringement of the *status quo*.[17]

Eliot's description of the contradictory and hypocritical combination in one person of 'stringent' and 'latitudinarian' impulses, the 'ardent and imaginative' and the 'cold and cautious' is, of course, a caricature. A few years later, in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), Eliot would associate evangelicalism with a more generous 'recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self'.[18] But the earlier satire does reflect a truth about evangelicalism in the nineteenth century; it attempted to reconcile contradictory impulses as 'friendly opposites'. Even if this was not always convincing, it did represent a way of promoting a sense of the relation between personal faith and life 'beyond'.

---

[15] Maynard, 'Robert Browning's Evangelical Heritage', p. 5.
[16] George Eliot, 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming (1855)', *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*, ed. by Gertrude Himmelfarb (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 119-144, p. 120.
[17] Eliot, 'Evangelical Teaching', p. 120.
[18] George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Thomas A. Noble, with an introduction and notes by Josie Billington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 251.

With these associations in mind, Maynard argues that an awareness of the 'commonplaces of the late puritanical and evangelical ethos in which Browning was raised'[19] might help readers understand some of his formal decisions:

> Even the resolve in *Pauline* to agonize less in the future, to 'look within no more,' is not a turning against religious self-examination but an expected fruit of it, the turning to a healthy moral life involved in the work of the world. For the very religion which played such a large part in stirring up a high degree of self-consciousness simultaneously placed the greatest premium on a committed, outer-directed life. Even when, in his later works, Browning would turn from looking within to looking out at the consciousnesses and consciences of others, he in no way was turning his back on the habits of self-examination of his religious upbringing. In his dramatic monologues, he would find a vehicle for subjecting each of his characters to the most penetrating and yet most empathetic scrutiny, that of the individual's own self-examination. If the persuasive or rhetorical function of the speech is sometimes predominant, most often in the best monologues it is the process of self-revelation—or the distortions of partial revelation—which is the primary subject of the monologue. What was initially for Browning a personal process becomes dramatically universalized.[20]

This balancing 'a high degree of self-consciousness' and 'a committed, outer-directed life', interweaving 'personal' processes with the 'dramatically universalized', might go some way to explain the 'great range' Elizabeth identified in Browning's poetry. Looking inwards and outwards, Browning's religious experience taught him to value—as Laing does—the possibility of a perichoretic relationship between inner and outer worlds, the body and the soul, and the concrete and the abstract.

Both writers, then, share a tendency to posit an interrelation between the internal and the external; their representations of inner states often radiate outward, demonstrating a congruence with much broader social relationships. This tendency comes to affect their texts at the level of diction. Browning, for instance (whose use of double poems has already been discussed), often plays with words suggestive of different kinds of seeing, or ways of

---

[19] Maynard, 'Robert Browning's Evangelical Heritage', p. 7.
[20] Maynard, 'Robert Browning's Evangelical Heritage', p. 11-2.

thinking about sight. In 'The Guardian-Angel', for instance, Browning exploits poetry's simultaneous appeal to eye and ear to evoke the difference between ordinary and spiritual vision:

> How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired!
> I think how I should view the earth and skies
> And sea, when once again my brow was bared
> After thy healing, with such different eyes.
> O world, as God has made it! All is beauty:
> And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.
> What further may be sought for or declared?
>
> (ll. 29-35)[21]

To a listener, it is impossible to distinguish between two alternative meanings here: 'view the earth and skies / and sea', and 'view the earth and skies / and see'. Indeed, the context of the sentence—modulated by references to 'view' and 'eyes'—encourages the latter meaning; the line ending after 'skies' lends the next line the feeling of a new clause (and see…with such different eyes). This doubling of 'sea' itself mirrors the sense of a new, spiritual sight. The reader sees the word anew in hearing its alternative meaning.

This investing of individual words with both ordinary and spiritually significant meanings is common throughout both authors' writing. It reflects their shared interest in the ways in which certain things, as well as language and narrative, are able to provide a medial space in which different aspects of human experience might interrelate. This shared interest, occasionally, manifests itself in forms common to both authors. For instance, both Laing and Browning have poems that accentuate the role of church doors in mediating access to certain communities of faith. Even though there is no evidence of direct influence, both Laing's 'Godsdoor', included in *Godhorse*, and Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850), explore in similar terms the transitional spaces between secular and religious locations.

---

[21] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. VI, p. 103.

'Godsdoor' takes as its premise the importance of medial perspectives—of points of view that bridge the spiritual and the physical. Even the title, as Kropp-Dakubu notes, carries these implications. 'Godsdoor', she writes, is a 'complex symbol': the first half of the title's composite word 'denotes the spiritual world', while the second half 'symbolize[s] the outer, physical world'.[22] To view the title as a binary in this way does, however, misrepresent the poem's presiding interests: identifying the poem's door only with the 'outer, physical world' draws attention away from its function as a point of exchange and communication between the spiritual and the physical. Kropp-Dakubu is herself acutely aware of this function. She suggests, for example, that 'the door of the Church mediates between the spiritual and physical worlds of the Church itself, and also between the spiritual world within the church and the world outside it.'[23]

The poem describes a series of events in and around a church—including a tree falling through its roof, lovers courting within the church, and a strange disagreement between the local police and three dogs—ostensibly from the perspective of the church's door. This perspective is written in the third-person, which itself emphasises a sort of congruence of, and interchange between, internal and external states. The door struggles against both its own fallibility (such as its desire, expressed in Browningesque syntax, 'to grow moustache'[24]), and the human weaknesses of others, in an attempt to control and regulate the church's atmosphere.[25] For Laing, at least, this attempt is unsuccessful. 'According to the author,'

---

[22] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 238.
[23] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 238.
[24] Browning often used verbs like 'to grow' and 'to turn' followed by nouns, omitting prepositions or articles. See, for example, 'How shall I turn fleet-fugitive' (l. 226) in *The Agamemnon of Æschylus*, [Robert Browning, *The Agamemnon of Æschylus*, ed. by Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1898), p. 12.]; 'labour, which she overlooked, grew play' (l. 92) in 'In a Balcony', [*The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. VI, p. 42]; 'the rest turn roughs' (l. 119) from *The Two Poets of Croisic*, [Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 534.]; and 'The flowers turn double, and the leaves turn flowers' (l. 134), in 'Cleon'. A possible source of this is Shakespeare, who frequently used similar turns of phrase for comic effect. Amado, for example, in *Love's Labour's Lost*: 'I am sure I shall turn sonnet' (1.2.174-5) [Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, p. 118].
[25] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 15.

Kropp-Dakubu notes, 'in this poem he takes revenge on the church, apparently because his childhood faith in the church as the guarantee of moral certainty could not be maintained.'[26]

The possibility, or impossibility, of certainty is central to the poem. Throughout 'Godsdoor', Kropp-Dakubu notes, 'the definite article "the" is consistently omitted.'[27] This omission is significant, she continues, because the definite article 'is an important index of false certainties' in Laing's other poems.[28] When the definite article is used in the poem—and it is used more frequently than Kropp-Dakubu's argument implies—it helps to weld together aspects of the poem's grammar and form, its questioning of certainty, and its interest in mediation between inner and outer, soul and body. Take, for example, the following lines:

> Church door silent,
> returns nose to saint as God sleeps
> in the arms of congregation.[29]

In the preceding lines, the door is arrested for snorting at a racist priest 'through the borrowed nose of a dead saint.'[30] The door is soon allowed to return to the church—where the priest is still preaching—and 'slams and opens slams and opens' as a way of disrupting the sermons; the priest attacks the door, and the door rips the priest's cassock apart, exposing his hatred.[31] As the church returns to its normal routines, the door silently returns the borrowed nose to the dead saint. Yet, both the form and grammar of Laing's lines prevent any association of this return with an unequivocal certainty or comfort. The line ending at 'as God sleeps', for example, is momentarily suggestive of the ways in which repose might threaten, rather than encourage, peace: an inattentive God might provide opportunities for transgressors. Even as

[26] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 238.
[27] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 240.
[28] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 240.
[29] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 16.
[30] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 15.
[31] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 16.

the syntax clarifies, reassuringly, that God is sleeping in 'the arms of congregation'—that a sense of contact between the worldly and the spiritual still persists—the irregular omission of the definite article is itself unsettling and ambiguous. As a consequence of this omission, the phrase 'the arms of congregation' suggests at once subjective and objective genitive constructions (both the main meaning, 'the [specific] congregation's [specific] arms', and the grammar's latent suggestion of 'the arms [as metaphor] of congregation [as a general activity]'). One of the poem's main concerns is to take the measure of the medial zone between these two constructions: between language's tendency towards abstraction and its ability to describe the concrete and particular.

This zone is foregrounded throughout the poem, often (like Browning's 'sea') by means of puns by which words carry significant abstract and concrete meanings simultaneously. In the poem's final sentence, for example, the door is described as stubbornly defying the diversity and relativity, the lack of religious certainty, with which it is surrounded:

> Door stands triumphantly wooden,
> as the great religions gather round it,
> below the beard of God, dancing with ecumenical lovers.[32]

For Kropp-Dakubu, the ambiguous word 'wooden' here suggests irony: the 'organic solidity indicated by "wooden" may be a real achievement', she argues, but it also registers a failure 'to establish exclusive certainties'.[33] This irony, however, does more than merely announce the door's suspicions of ecumenical aspirations. At once evoking the door's material and—in its idiomatic usage—its mental inflexibility, 'wooden' describes on two levels at the same time, the physical and the metaphysical. Similarly, the word 'gather' serves a dual function

---

[32] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 20.
[33] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 240.

by way of the word's associations with both the language of the English Bible and the language of harvest. The proverbial use of 'gathered' for death in Christian contexts is common. Mattathias is 'gathered to his fathers' in the King James Bible (1 Macc., 2, 69), while Tennyson's St. Simeon uses 'gathered to the glorious saints' to refer to his own death.[34] The *OED* also suggests, however, that the word 'gather' has been commonly used to refer to the harvesting of fruits and flowers since around the beginning of the eleventh century.[35]

Throughout Laing's texts, the spiritual and the agricultural are presented as potentially mutually enriching. In *Search Sweet Country*, ½-Allotey combines agricultural and Christ-like spiritual functions when he suggests that the suffering, guilt, and 'surplus sorrow' of Ghana 'will be planted in my farms'.[36] Similarly, Laing's poem stresses the importance of these two associations; 'Godsdoor' focuses attention on the ways interchange between spiritual and secular life is encouraged or hindered. Because puns foreground this interchange, it becomes possible to argue that a theological logic governs what Kropp-Dakubu calls the poem's 'fast-moving, rather flippant surface.'[37] Its 'flippancy' implies less a lack of concern than it does the recognition that techniques often associated with comedy can encourage a sensitivity to the mediation between the spiritual and the material. This is also the case elsewhere in the poem. 'Godsdoor' includes the capitalised names of several fruits and spices—'some specifically tropical and others specifically temperate'—as a sort of comic marginal commentary.[38] Kropp-Dakubu interprets this 'choric system of names' as a 'direct affirmation of physical, organic outer life that must feed the inner life to make it whole'.[39] Yet this affirmation also performs a less direct function. At times, the names of foods and

---

[34] 'Apocrypha', *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, with an introduction and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 185; *The Poems of Tennyson: In Three Volumes*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn, 3 vols, vol. I (Harlow: Longman, 1987), p. 603.
[35] 'gather, v.', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/77077> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[36] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 207.
[37] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 240.
[38] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 240.
[39] Kropp-Dakubu, 'Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God', p. 240.

spices introduce a playful interpretative confusion; the seemingly arbitrary marginal naming of fruits—pears, raspberries, tangerines, etc.—sharpens the reader's attention to latent possibilities in the main text:

> Door sleeps under grey skies
> when church taken away for spiritual repairs. GUAVAS![40]

The poem's comic insistence on naming fruits highlights implications and associations that would otherwise remain hidden. Here, for example, 'spiritual repairs' is made to anticipate aurally the next fruit, 'PEARS!', announced half a page later. The proximity between the word 'repairs' and 'GUAVAS!' encourages this reading-in: fruits and spices heckle satirically the main text, constantly pulling lines towards the organic and agricultural, always attempting to stress the manifold interpenetrations and interdependencies between the metaphysical and what Laing elsewhere calls the 'rhythmically organic'.[41]

In contrast to 'Godsdoor', the speaker of the first part of Browning's poem *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, sheltering from a downpour, finds himself on the wrong side of a church door that is more certain in its mediating function:

> Heaven knows how many sorts of hands
> Reached past me, groping for the latch
> Of the inner door that hung on catch
> More obstinate the more they fumbled,
> Till, giving way at last with a scold
> Of the crazy hinge, in squeezed or tumbled
> One sheep more to the rest in fold,
> And left me irresolute, standing sentry
> In the sheepfold's lath-and-plaster entry,
> Six feet long by three feet wide,
> Partitioned off from the vast inside—
>
> (ll. 8-18)[42]

[40] Laing, *Godhorse*, p. 17.
[41] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 123.
[42] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 53.

The dash at the line's end draws attention to the ways in which the 'white space' surrounding poetry on the printed page may constitute—in Christopher Ricks's words—'an invisible boundary; an absence or a space which yet has significance; what in another context might be called a pregnant silence.'[43] The 'invisible boundary' here is pregnant with, and a symbol of, the flock's 'trick of exclusiveness' (l. 110).[44] As in Laing's poem, a material boundary, too, plays its part in mediating access. The door's comically begrudged admission—scolding as it abruptly tumbles in the flock—is complemented by the equally begrudged exclusion of the poem's speaker. The word 'crazy', like Laing's 'wooden', is at once suggestive of a material quality ('full of cracks or flaws') and a mental characteristic ('of unsound mind').[45] The door is crazy, Browning's satire suggests, to admit worshippers so exclusively, and its damaged state is a sort of reflection of this lack of proper judgement.

As the poem proceeds, the door continues explicitly to serve a mediating function; it mediates, most obviously, between the outside and inside, internal and external, and between spiritual and material types of admission; but it also acts as the hinge between the speaker's dismay at being excluded and his satirical commentary on the 'sorts of hands' who are allowed to enter:

> Well, from the road, the lanes or the common,
> In came the flock: the fat weary woman,
> Panting and bewildered, down-clapping
>   Her umbrella with a mighty report,
> Grounded it by me, wry and flapping,
>   A wreck of whalebones; then, with a snort,
> Like a startled horse, at the interloper
> (Who humbly knew himself improper,
> But could not shrink up small enough)
> —Round to the door, and in,—the gruff
> Hinge's invariable scold

[43] Ricks, *Force of Poetry*, p. 90.
[44] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 56.
[45] 'crazy, adj.', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/44007> [accessed 20 July 2020].

Making my very blood run cold.

(ll. 47-58)[46]

The mock-heroic here—the umbrella grounded like a lightning-strike—draws attention to a gap between what is described and how it is described. Part of the comic effect of these lines is the way in which this gap is upheld even as it is bridged: the rhyme between 'down-clapping' and 'flapping', for example, encourages a double perspective in which heroic action and less impressive physical states are linked. As Gillian Beer notes, 'rhyme does not mean itself only: it means the relations and disparities (the gaps and contingencies) between the words that compose it.'[47]

Like Laing's poem, Browning's combines moments of comedy and satire with a broader interest in mediation in religious contexts; and, again like Laing's, the 'relations and disparities' between these two is at first hard to discern. Barbara Ryerse has attempted to explain, in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, the 'incongruity of serious religious themes delivered in comic or satiric tones' by situating it generally within a tradition of verse satire, while arguing for the importance of John Donne's influence in particular.[48] Placing Browning's poem next to Donne's 'Satyre III', she argues, provides a useful perspective from which this central incongruity can be reconciled with religious feeling:

> In both works, satire begins with a sense of moral or intellectual superiority and in both works it becomes a testing-ground for the validity of private belief. Thus, an increasing tension between the satirical impulse and a genuine concern for the well-being of the soul culminates in a deeper understanding of the satirist's role within the context of true religion. For the speaker of *Satyre III*, this means reassessing the effectiveness of his satire in the light of an arduous and ongoing search for truth: 'Can railing then cure these worn maladies?' (4). For Browning's speaker, it marks a turning-point from an external dramatisation of religious experience to an internal drama of soul-struggle that is carried on throughout *Easter-Day*.[49]

---

[46] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, pp. 54-5

[47] Beer, 'Rhyming as Comedy', p. 186.

[48] Barbara Ryerse, 'Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*: Formal Verse Satire and the Donnean Influence', *Victorian Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2003), 49-69, p. 49.

[49] Ryerse, 'Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*', p. 57.

However, words like ‘increasing’, ‘culminates’, ‘deeper’, and ‘turning-point’ make it seem like Browning’s poem involves a clear movement from satire to a satire tempered by ‘true religion’, from the external to the internal, the public to the private. This reading—its perhaps too neat presumption of a linear narrative—might draw attention away from the ways in which the two levels of Browning’s interest (spiritual and physical) are intermixed from the poem’s first stanzas. Or, indeed, in the poem’s title itself. Like ‘Godsdoor’, the ‘composite title’ *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*, as Ryerse herself suggests, brings to mind ‘the harmonious balance between the fact of the Incarnation and the promise of the Atonement’, and provides ‘a bridge between these two major symbols’.[50] Similarly, the poem itself explores various dualities central to Christian belief—soul and body, flesh and spirit—and, like Laing’s, seeks ways of mediating between them.

Later in this chapter, the coexistence of comic techniques (irony, puns, heckling voices, mock heroic) and theological themes will be examined in more detail. For now, it is important to note that manifold interrelations and congruences between inner and outer worlds animate both poems; they both display a tendency to encourage an awareness of how certain words (‘wooden’, ‘crazy’) signify concretely and abstractly at the same time, even as the doors themselves draw attention to mediation between these scales. Their texts as a consequence evoke a sense of composite and ambivalent wholeness: their friendly opposites coexisting in creative tension. The following section traces this tension as inner spiritual experience comes into conflict with religious institutions, religious authority, and the power of material wealth.

Patrons, Bishops, and Power: Some Problems of Spiritual Wealth

---

[50] Ryerse, ‘Browning’s *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*’, pp. 56-7.

Placing 'Godsdoor' and *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* alongside one another emphasises that, despite their many differences, there are a number of continuities between the respective religious contexts in which Laing and Browning wrote. In these poems, for instance, both authors express reservations about the relationship between individual, personal faith, and the rules and orthodoxies of churches and congregations. Further comparisons draw attention to a number of other continuities, which serve to foreground how aspects of Laing's and Browning's writing that might otherwise seem separate interconnect and enrich each other. These comparisons—both their representations of religious authority, and their interest in relationships between artists and patrons in religious contexts—all help to reconcile both authors' explorations of the workings of power, wealth, patronage, and the Church on the one hand, and their presentations of creative freedom, personal belief, and speakers 'gruff with nature' on the other.

Both writers look to religion as a means of thinking through the relationship between individuals and communities, inner worlds and the pressures exerted by non-religious sources of power; both, too, stress the importance to affiliative community of a congruence between internal and external. They do this by describing characters whose religious persuasions involve a struggle to effect this congruence across a variety of different scales, ranging from the private and individual to the public and transnational. In previous chapters, both authors have been seen to destabilise any attempt to represent languages or nations as homogenous, closed, static entities; religion represents an essential context for their work of restabilisation. For both writers, theology and belief constitute one of the principle tools for thinking about the manifold possible interrelationships and medial spaces between individuals and communities, communities and cultures.

It is important, however, to distinguish first between both authors' particular religious contexts, before reflecting on the ways in which these contexts inform their representations of these interrelationships and spaces. Most obviously, for Laing, it is colonial and postcolonial history that differentiates the contexts for his own experience of religion from Browning's. 'Religion was', as Sylvia Bawa argues, 'perhaps one of the most contentious spheres of colonial domination'[51]—and this contention continued to mark the shifting dynamics between religion and state in postcolonial Ghana. Paul Gifford, for instance, draws attention to the way political rhetoric was interfused with religious reference:

> The general cultural impact of Christianity is incalculable. It provided the images, metaphors and concepts for the independence struggle, most clearly in Nkrumah's slogans like 'Seek ye first the political kingdom'. Another example is the Creed of his 'Verandah Boys' (his followers, so called from the poverty of their living quarters): 'I believe in the Convention People's Party, the opportune Saviour of Ghana, and in Kwame Nkrumah its founder and leader, who is endowed with the Ghana Spirit, born a true Ghanaian for Ghana, suffering under victimisations, was vilified, threatened with deportation. He disentangled himself from the clutches of the UGCC and the same day he rose victorious with the Verandah Boys, ascended the political heights, and sitteth at the supreme head of the CPP from whence he shall demand full self-government for Ghana. I believe in freedom for all peoples, especially the New Ghana; the abolition of slavery; the liquidation of imperialism; the victorious end of our struggle, its glory and pride, and the flourish [*sic*] of Ghana, for ever and ever.'[52]

Laing, both in his life and his writing, was extremely sensitive to the 'general cultural impact of Christianity' in Ghana. In an article published in *Index on Censorship* in 1988, Laing argued that Ghanaians 'cannot point to one government that has created, or helped to create, a *structure* that is fundamental to the freedom of the body and the spirit.'[53] Part of the reason for this failure is, he suggests, because the 'structures' that were created upheld and enforced a single and fixed conception of what an ethically, politically, and socially 'good' life meant.

---

[51] Sylvia Bawa, 'Christianity, tradition, and gender inequality in postcolonial Ghana', *African Geographical Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2019), 54-66, p. 56.
[52] Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, pp. 20-1.
[53] Kojo Laing, 'History, allow us to speak our minds', *Index on Censorship*, vol. 17, no. 5 (1988), 85-91, p. 86.

In the article, Laing discusses this failure by way of a recollection, which itself reveals both how close he and his family were to the centres of power, and how much he disagreed with them:

> Nkrumah sent my father non-fat powdered milk for his heart condition. They became friends when the British Queen visited the Cathedral of which my father was Provost. But my father would sometimes criticise the regime in his sermons. The deification of Nkrumah by the Convention People's Party (CCP) was carried to ridiculous lengths. Nkrumah was the Messiah; Nkrumah could do no wrong.[54]

Just as, in Chapter One, both authors contested the claim that languages represent fixed, homogenous, and closed systems, their religious persuasions tend to emphasise the dangers of permitting belief to harden into 'regime', whether political (as in Laing's case), or institutional (as in Browning's).

Despite these blurred distinctions between political and religious discourse, Ghanaian responses to the events in the build-up to, and aftermath of, Independence reveal an impatience with the gaps between religious life and bureaucratic procedure. For instance, an important part of Adolph Agbadja's story 'Heaven is a Fine Place', broadcast on radio by the Ghana Broadcasting System between 1955 and 1957, is its comic juxtaposition of banal state bureaucracy with earnest religious aspiration. In the story, the narrator, Kofi, is profoundly impacted by a preacher's claim that everybody, 'small or big, rich or poor, learned or unlearned, tall or short, must unceasingly fight from now onwards to secure the ticket, the passport, or the license to enable him to reach Heaven.'[55] Intent on reaching Heaven, Kofi undergoes an 'extensive search' for the ticket, passport, or license, mentioned by the preacher, moving from 'office to office, visiting, and interviewing personnel and officials, in

---

[54] Laing, 'History', p. 86.

[55] Adolph Agbadja, 'Heaven is a Fine Place', in *Voices of Ghana: Literary Contributions to the Ghana Broadcasting System 1955-57*, 2nd edn, ed. by Victoria Ellen Smith (Suffolk: James Currey, 2018), 204-8, p. 204.

the Authoritative Departments in Accra.'[56] At the Passport Office, Kofi is met with incredulity; the office's function is to fulfil 'tangible requests', he is told, rather than such a 'crazy desire'.[57]

In this story, the worldly machinery of the state is directly contrasted with religious aspirations. This sort of association—religion as somehow superior to the worldly affairs of business and governance—regularly surfaced in the decades after Independence. Stephanie Newell, for example, has traced in post-Independence popular fiction changing attitudes towards 'Big Men': a 'favourable figure in Ghanaian popular typologies, emerging in the late nineteenth century to describe educated, business-minded "youngmen" who engaged in trading and brokering activities with European cocoa firms'.[58] By the 1980s, popular support for the independence of this new and wealthy class—from Europe, the State, and chiefs and elders—transformed into increasing moral disapproval of their financial malpractices.

While Newell focuses on the ways in which this disapproval often involved extreme misogyny (market women, for example, were seen to typify these malpractices), her examples also implicate religious institutions. As Birgit Meyer notes, the 'pursuit of money and power' is, in the contexts of late twentieth-century Ghanaian Christianity, regularly associated with 'Satan's temptations'.[59] Yet, despite this association, churches themselves began investing heavily—and, often, profitably—in social infrastructure. As Ogbu Kalu demonstrates, in the wake of the state's struggle with economic crises and population growth, churches 'came to be the primary sponsors of universities in most African countries'; the church leader Mensah Otabil's Central University College, for instance, founded in Accra in

[56] Agbadja, 'Heaven is a Fine Place', p. 205.
[57] Agbadja, 'Heaven is a Fine Place', p. 206.
[58] Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction*, p. 125.
[59] Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 202.

1999, offers bachelor's degrees in business administration under the general influence of a 'practical Christianity' linked to the prosperity theology of Pentecostalism.[60]

Bawa shows that by 2006, the time of the publication of Laing's final—and most explicitly religious—novel, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters*, 'evangelical Christianity' had 'risen in prominence in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa in general.'[61] This rise resulted in a 'proliferation of what is known as African Independent Churches or Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches.'[62] This proliferation motivates a great deal of satire in *Big Bishop Roko*. It also, more generally, appears to have confirmed Laing's distrust of institutional Christianity. As Paul Gifford demonstrates, for these new churches, 'Christianity has to do with success, wealth and status.'[63] He continues to show that, for Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in Ghana between 1979 and 2002,

> [t]he key words are progress, prosperity, breakthrough, success, achievement, destiny, favour, dominion, blessing, excellence, elevation, promotion, increase, expansion, plenty, open doors, triumph, finances, overflow, abundance, newness, fulfilment, victory, power, possession, comfort, movement, exports, exams, visas, travel. The negative things to leave behind are closed doors, poverty, sickness, setback, hunger, joblessness, disadvantage, misfortune, stagnation, negativities, sadness, limitation, suffering, inadequacy, non-achievement, darkness, blockages, lack, want, slavery, sweat and shame.[64]

The inclusion of 'visas', 'finances', and 'exams' reflects some of the confusion between spiritual and secular wealth expressed in Adolph Agbadja's story; the inclusion of 'doors', both open and closed, recall the ways in which religion and different kinds of community formation are linked in 'Godsdoor' and *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*. Yet the complete

---

[60] Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 128.
[61] Bawa, 'Christianity, tradition, and gender inequality', p. 58.
[62] Bawa, 'Christianity, tradition, and gender inequality', p. 58.
[63] Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, p. 44.
[64] Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, p. 46.

openness—and the rejection of all 'negative things', including aspects of Ghana's history—leaves unexamined aspects of social and ethical life that are central to Laing's writing.

Thus, while Laing's final novel, *Big Bishop Roko*, was written in the context Gifford describes, one of the novel's main characteristics is the deliberate disruption of any attempt to develop modes of affiliation predicated upon either the idea that history is one of the 'negative things' to be left behind, or the association of spiritual wealth with material wealth. The protagonist of the novel even has a 'Pentecostal ex-fiancee'.[65] Yet the resulting need for adequate modes of affiliation is itself compounded by the threat of an existentially dangerous transnational inequality. As Laing himself states:

> My fourth novel, which I have just finished, is about a tropical city where there is a religious renaissance which is soft at the center, in the sense that it is full of chanting, it is purely a question of faith and no analysis. And then, the richer cities abroad are on the verge of an artificially induced mutation, a mutation that would prevent different peoples from, for instance, mating or which would prevent a dialogue because one or certain aspects, certain parts of the species would have left, would have mutated from the gene pool.'[66]

This double threat—from both the 'religious renaissance' in which 'everybody is born again… and yet not born properly',[67] and from 'artificially induced mutation' in richer countries—provokes Roko into contesting the 'cultural impact of Christianity' both within and outside of his nation's borders. Consequently, these intersections between power, faith, and wealth (both transnationally and intra-nationally) become sites of spiritual and secular warfare: the models of community promoted by both enemies—the splitting of the world into rich and poor on the one hand, and inward-looking cultural isolationism on the other—fail to satisfy Roko's conditions for meaningful and mutually enriching affiliation between cultures.

---

[65] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 337.
[66] Laing, 'This is not a paper…', p. 105.
[67] Laing, 'This is not a paper…', p. 106.

The importance of the 'cultural impact of Christianity' to the novel has not been noted. Ian P. MacDonald posits that the novel 'suggests that failing to ameliorate the impact of the global digital divide may effectively reinstitute stadial paradigms of development that figure contemporary Africans as "less evolved" than their Westernized counterparts.'[68] MacDonald's emphasis on technology—on the 'global digital divide'—foregrounds the political and economic consequences of 'artificial colonial-era assessments of difference as anachronistic distance', and helps place 'the evolutionary language that suffuses the novel' in the context of these rival notions of development.[69] This emphasis, however, leaves unexplored the extent to which the novel's interest in technology is approached as a part of a broader contestation between different conceptions of spiritual life.

In his interview with Maja-Pearce, Laing confirmed the importance of this broader thinking to his earlier writing. In response to a question about development, Laing admits that

> I've been deeply disappointed by what I've seen of the psyche or consciousness of the British in relation to the race question. I hold the view that if a country had developed—and this country is supposed to have developed—it should have developed on a whole basis. A question which is basically so primitive, so atavistic, and which should have been solved in relation to the rate of development which this country has achieved but which hasn't been solved, makes me turn to the Ghanaian and tell him that our fight is more difficult and much deeper than we think. It isn't just a question of technological development, though that is important in itself. It also entails a profound reassessment of one's whole being. For the Ghanaian to think that it's simply a question of technology is also part of the Ghanaian problem.[70]

This foregrounding of the importance of reassessing 'one's whole being' characterises Laing's theological thinking throughout his novels. In *Big Bishop Roko*, especially, a tension between Roko's commitment to this wholeness, and the Gold Coasters' more particular conception of spiritual life, produces the plot's most significant intra-national conflict. The

---

[68] Ian P. MacDonald, '"Let Us All Mutate Together": Cracking the Code in Laing's *Big Bishop Roko*', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2016), 313-328, p. 319.
[69] MacDonald, '"Let Us All Mutate Together"', pp. 318-9.
[70] Maja-Pearce, 'Interview with Kojo Laing', p. 29.

incompleteness, and ultimately the failure of the Gold Coasters' spiritual renaissance is explicitly linked to the tensions of Pentecostalism. One of Roko's antagonists, ZigZag Zala, is a 'sell-mad juxtaposer of cheap theologies (God at a discount)', and reflects the coincidence of avarice, power, wealth, and pietism characteristic of the new churches.[71] 'Even children', the bishop laments, 'prayed in this post-American post-traditional manner, a sort of flow of shallow godstreams'.[72]

The conflict between Roko and Zala brings into focus the importance of managing adequately mediations between spiritual and secular life. The wordman, for instance, often attempts to counteract the Gold Coasters' insistence on economic matters with a dose of abstraction: 'in such a situation you kept as many of your abstractions as raw as possible to jolt these bastard over-concrete over-polemic Gold Coasters.'[73] The problem of mediation is, as Meyer shows, characteristic of Pentecostalism itself. Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, she argues, often

> conceptualise conversion in circular terms and allow their members to move back and forth through the sequence of possession by evil spirits, exorcism and possession by the Holy Spirit. In this way, members are enabled to mediate between indigenous attitudes towards spirits and Christianity and at the same time face the contradiction that their daily lives actually fit with neither indigenous nor modern nor Christian ideals. Pentecostalism, rather than representing a safe haven of modern religion in which people permanently remain, enables people to move back and forth between the way of life they (wish to) have left behind and the one to which they aspire. Pentecostalism provides a bridge between individualistic and family-centred concerns and allows people to express and reflect upon the tensions between both.[74]

Part of Roko's intentions in Laing's novel is to break this 'circular', back and forth rhythm between 'indigenous attitudes' and 'Christianity'—a rhythm characterised by the 'contradiction' Meyer describes. The Gold Coast is stuck in 1986 precisely because of this

[71] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 69.
[72] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 44.
[73] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 18.
[74] Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, p. 212.

circularity, and part of Roko's solution is to extend the 'bridge' Meyer describes to relationships beyond filial limits—both an individual's family and the national 'family'.

Browning's Britain is, similarly, characterised by a complex and shifting relationship between individuals and congregations, church and non-church, as well as increasing doubt about the forms faith should take. Indeed, John Wolffe has noted that, for many radical nonconformist protestants in the mid nineteenth century (a community in which Browning is often included), 'true protestantism implied the severing of all links between religion and the state.'[75] At the same time, however, John Henry Newman developed arguments in favour of integrating theology more thoroughly into national institutions, most significantly in terms of a Catholic University. In *The Idea of a University,* he posited that 'if the Catholic Faith is true, a University cannot exist externally to the Catholic pale, for it cannot teach Universal Knowledge if it does not teach Catholic theology.'[76]

Stephen Cheeke views these conflicting and shifting nineteenth-century attitudes to faith through the lens of the extensive Victorian discussion of Raphael's *The Transfiguration* (1520). The painting, as was regularly noted during the nineteenth century, is constituted by a double action; it presents simultaneously two episodes that are separate in the gospel narrative. Cheeke describes this 'bold conflation of events' with reference to the Bible's narrative. In the Bible,

> Christ charges the three apostles not to talk of the vision, and they descend from the mountain. *Then* occurs the episode in which a possessed or demoniacal boy, perhaps we would now say an epileptic, whom the apostles have been unable to cure, is brought to Christ by the boy's father. Jesus heals him, and when the apostles ask why they had failed to do so, they are told: 'Because of your unbelief.' In the painting the two episodes are not merely placed together, but the apostles on the ground who are

---

[75] John Wolffe, 'A transatlantic perspective: protestantism and national identities in mid-nineteenth-century Britain and the United States', *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-c. 1850*, ed. by Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 291-309, p. 299.
[76] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. by Frank M. Turner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 149.

> pointing towards the scene upon the mountain suggest that the transfiguration is immediately present to them.[77]

Not ‘merely placed together’, the ‘two halves of Raphael’s composition *are* two rival pictures, two pictures that demand to be seen to be believed, but which offer quite opposite configurations of vision and credibility.’[78] On the one hand, ‘Christ’s transfiguration envelops the body in a white light that seems to compel belief by transcending the visual’; on the other, the ‘body of the epileptic boy compels belief in the opposite way, by offering irrefutable evidence of the broken body, the blindness of the object, and the primal suffering of disfiguration.’[79]

Whether these two ‘halves’ can be ‘held together in the mind, in the mind-as-an-instrument-of-belief’ at one and the same time is, as Cheeke argues, as important a question in nineteenth-century British society as it is in Browning’s poetry—an importance itself foregrounded by Browning’s own interest in Raphael.[80] Sometimes, his poems appear to advocate this double-vision. Browning’s ‘An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician’ (1855), for example, dramatises a balancing of belief and unbelief—of medical, scientific explanation of Lazarus’s resurrection, and acceptance of Lazarus’s own explanation. For Cheeke, Karshish ‘moves from a belief in the disfigured body (the body of the epileptic boy or man) to the threshold of a belief in the body of the transfigured Christ, as if he would have been capable of holding the two halves of Raphael’s composition in his mind simultaneously, or as if he is moving towards making the connection between the two.’[81]

---

[77] Cheeke, *Transfiguration,* p. 64.
[78] Cheeke, *Transfiguration*, p. 79.
[79] Cheeke, *Transfiguration*, p. 79.
[80] Cheeke, *Transformation*, p. 79.
[81] Cheeke, *Transfiguration*, p. 81.

This balancing of belief and unbelief, of the physically transfigured and the physically disfigured, is characteristic of a period characterised in part by shifting attitudes to the place of faith in social life. In Cheeke's words:

> In the case of Browning's Bishop Blougram, 'he believed, say, half he spoke', and what he 'spoke' was a theory of half-believing. The middle years of the nineteenth century form a period in which the element of 'belief' in the larger question of faith is, as is well known, under pressure for many people, stretched into the Pascal-wagers of pretending to believe, of 'missing full credence', as the Bishop puts it, or believing and not believing at the same time—which may not be the same thing as doubting. The Clerical Subscription Act of 1865 made a 'general' rather than an 'unfeigned' assent to the Thirty Nine Articles the condition of ordination for the Anglican clergy.[82]

It is important not to confuse this narrative—of doubt within faith—with the narrative of waning belief that has become common in discussion of nineteenth-century British literature. As the historian Timothy Larsen argues, 'a distinction needs to be clearly made between a theme in literature or English studies and a judgement regarding what a historical period itself was actually like.'[83] Browning's Britain ought to be considered as a topological space, one in which belief continues despite a number of important distortions and deformations within its subspaces. As Larsen argues,

> [a]lthough this is not always noted, the Victorian crisis of faith was actually a by-product of the religiosity of the Victorians and, in particular, the influence of evangelicalism. The Victorians themselves frequently discussed and wrote about the crisis of faith. Many of them did this because they prized faith so much and therefore feared and cared about its loss. Their discussions and reading should not be seen as a measure of the extent of crisis, but rather as a measure of the extent of their concern. This distinction must be maintained.[84]

---

[82] Cheeke, *Transfiguration*, p. 39.
[83] Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 5.
[84] Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt*, p. 10.

Browning himself reflected this distinction. Acutely aware of these discussions—he tackles directly contemporary Biblical scholarship, for example, in several poems—he nevertheless remained steadfast in his idiosyncratic faith, and his sense of religious independence.

Edward Berdoe, author of an early Browning 'Cyclopædia', was quick to notice this independence. In his 1896 study *Browning and the Christian Faith*, he concludes by drawing attention to the fact that 'Browning has not thought it necessary to introduce us to any one of the various Churches professing the Christian faith.'[85] This is, in part, a result of Browning's upbringing as a Dissenter; his own personal relationship with and experience of God differs in important ways from the God of any particular Church. This relationship is, for example, more tolerant of contradiction and tension. Woolford and Karlin explain Browning's idiosyncratic religious perspective in terms of a reconciliation of contradictory impulses. For Browning, they suggest,

> God is Power, and human self-consciousness, especially when intensified into 'self-supremacy', mirrors that power. But Power cannot be the only ingredient of deity, since human beings possess another faculty not inherent in the idea of Power, the faculty of Love. And if, as Browning evidently felt, the ideas of Power and Love are in some sense contradictory, then in order to manifest Love, God must split in two, giving birth to Christ as the sundered fragment of his being through which his Love may find expression.[86]

Browning's faith hinges upon the notion that 'God and Christ are at once identical and antithetical embodiments of celestial being', and the 'paradoxical, intricate and unstable character of this equation' is, they argue, an essential part of his poetry.[87]

A similarly intricate and unstable equation characterises the faith of Laing's Roko. For the bishop, as the wordman recounts,

[85] Edward Berdoe, *Browning and the Christian Faith: The Evidences of Christianity from Browning's Point of View* (London: George Allen, 1896), p. 232.
[86] Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, p. 223.
[87] Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, p. 228.

> it was clear that for God to retain absolute spiritual force, he had to have a density beyond the black holes of cosmology; while at the same time his absolute humility aspired towards an inherent galactic imperfection. This primal flaw gave great freedom to the bishop and me.[88]

For Browning, tensions between Power and Love characterise belief; for Laing, tensions between force and humility. Both, therefore, share a particular interest in the ways faith might prove capable of containing ambivalence, as well as in points of mediation, interchange, or contact between the spiritual and the material.

Critics of Browning have long noticed this interest. For instance, G. K. Chesterton, in 1903, identified in *Ferishtah's Fancies* the 'supreme peculiarity of Browning' as a poet, which hinges upon

> his sense of the symbolism of material trifles. Enormous problems, and yet more enormous answers, about pain, prayer, destiny, liberty, and conscience are suggested by cherries, by the sun, by a melon-seller, by an eagle flying in the sky, by a man tilling a plot of ground. It is this spirit of grotesque allegory which really characterises Browning among all other poets. Other poets might possibly have hit upon the same philosophical idea—some idea as deep, as delicate, and as spiritual. But it may be safely asserted that no other poet, having thought of a deep, delicate, and spiritual idea, would call it 'A Bean Stripe; also Apple Eating.'[89]

The 'spirit of grotesque allegory' that Chesterton describes involves, to return to Cheeke's analysis of *The Transfiguration*, viewing the double-action of the painting as a meaningful unity. Hence, for Cheeke, Browning's repeated insistence upon the 'apparent contradiction in the idea of a divine purity that came fresh from the marketplace'.[90] For Browning—and, indeed, for Laing—it is this 'contradiction' that animates their religious experience. Both authors tend to present as vital the complex and unresolved intermixture of soul and body,

---

[88] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 16.
[89] Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, pp. 127-8.
[90] Cheeke, *Transfiguration*, p. 88.

spiritual and physical, but both endow this intermixture with a relevance that exceeds the limits of the individual: a relevance to collective thinking about the '[e]normous problems' Chesterton draws attention to.

Several examples exhibit this relevance. Browning and Laing both tend to return frequently to situations in which individual experience is regulated by external authority. Their texts foreground moments when the 'freedom' of an 'idea of divine purity that came fresh from the marketplace' is confronted by figures or institutions representing power, patronage, and wealth. In Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi', first published in *Men and Women* in 1855, the chief conflict is one between artistic freedom and the limits imposed by a wealthy patron. In the poem, as Emily Heady Walker argues, Browning 'asserts the value and significance of flesh—both his characters' and his own—by inhabiting it.'[91] The painter, caught 'at an alley's end' (l. 5) by members of the watch, proceeds to justify his being out 'past midnight' (l. 4).[92] Lippi himself, orphaned as a baby, comes from the marketplace—starving in the streets 'a year or two / On fig-skins, melon-pairings, rinds and shucks, / Refuse and rubbish' (ll. 83-5). His justification is quick to identify the constraint imposed upon him by his patron as a reason for returning at night to the streets he grew up in:

> Here's spring come, and the nights one makes up bands
> To roam the town and sing out carnival,
> And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,
> A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
> And saints again. I could not paint all night—
> Ouf! I leaned out of the window for fresh air.
>
> (ll. 45-50)[93]

[91] Heady, 'Robert Browning, Theologian', p. 155.
[92] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, p. 35.
[93] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 184.

The *OED* cites this passage as an example of 'mew' being used to denote '[a] secret place; a place of concealment or retirement; a den.'[94] Yet the word carries the connotations of its other meanings, both '[a] cage for confining animals', and more generally '[a] place of confinement; a cage, a prison.'[95] Lippo's escape, for instance, suggests confinement rather than retirement; making a ladder out of shreds of 'Curtain and counterpane and coverlet' (l. 62), the painter descends into the street and joins in with 'the fun' (l. 66).[96] He was, he tells the watchmen, returning to the 'munificent House' (l. 29) to 'get to bed and have a bit of sleep' (l. 71).[97]

This sense of imprisonment is, in part, the consequence of having to paint under the direction of both his patron and the presiding standards of religious iconography. The 'great man' that Lippo paints for is, as he earlier reveals, 'Cosimo of the Medici' (l. 17).[98] Working on a painting of 'Jerome knocking at his poor old breast / With his great round stone to subdue the flesh' (ll. 73-4), Lippo feels unable to pursue the kind of painting he wishes to, one in which a painter can 'lift each foot in turn, / Left foot and right foot, go a double step, / Make his flesh liker and his soul more like, / Both in their order' (ll. 205-8).[99] As such, Lippo's complaint is that he is unable to view simultaneously both aspects of the 'double action' that Cheeke sees in Raphael's *Transfiguration*: both sides—flesh and soul, abstract and concrete—are kept separate. This produces what Laing calls 'a huge ontological emotional space', an 'existential chasm'; in being told to 'Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms' (l. 193), Lippo is left unable to reconcile in creative work the 'business' of making

---

[94] 'mew, n. 2', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/117750> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[95] 'mew, n. 2', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/117750> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[96] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, pp. 184-5.
[97] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, pp. 183, 185.
[98] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, p. 183.
[99] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, pp. 185, 189.

people 'forget there's such a thing as flesh' (ll. 179, 182), and the 'business of the world' and life that is 'too big to pass for a dream' (ll. 247, 251).[100]

In 'Andrea del Sarto', too, the relationship between artist and employer intensifies the speaker's awareness of a puzzling tension between two kinds of business—between painting for oneself, and painting for others. The poem begins by foregrounding this tension. Andrea gives in to his wife Lucrezia's desire that he accept a commission: 'I'll work then', he says, 'for your friend's friend, never fear, / Treat his own subject after his own way, / Fix his own time, accept too his own price' (ll. 5-7).[101] The presiding iambic metre imposes a rhythm on the sentence that stresses each 'his' against the intonational pattern of ordinary speech, which would stress 'own' instead. Both readings emphasise Andrea's renouncing of ownership; it transpires later in the poem that this 'friend's friend' requires payment due to Lucrezia's cousin's gambling debts. This cousin also proves to be Lucrezia's lover. Both 'Fra Lippo Lippi' and 'Andrea del Sarto' suggest that the 'double step' of an artistic practice attuned to both body and soul is often thwarted by another duality: that of an art that is at once valued financially and spiritually.

These dualities prompt Isobel Armstrong to explain Browning's grotesque stylistic excesses by arguing that 'the phenomenological form of oppressed labour manifests itself everywhere in Browning's work'.[102] Grotesque excess provides the means for 'alienated labour' to express itself: 'in all these poems an excess or distortion of energy and libido is connected with its displacement from or in work.'[103] But this reading, while foregrounding successfully one aspect of Browning's artists' labour, overlooks another: their labour is 'alienated' in two senses, both in their reliance on patrons and clients, and in their subjection to the standards of religious iconography. Lippo's 'oppressed labour', for instance, reflects an

[100] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning,* vol. V, pp. 188-9, 191.
[101] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. VI, p. 7.
[102] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 290.
[103] Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 290.

aspect of the very duality he associates with successful artistic expression: its combination of flesh and soul, the worldly and the spiritual, mirrors the twin pressures of worldly wealth and spiritual purpose. What matters, to Lippo, is the freedom to work with the former duality without needing to capitulate to the demands of the latter.

Big Bishop Roko also focuses attention on these themes. The novel's narrator, the wordman, is employed 'as secretary to the diocesan synod' and considers himself 'imprisoned in the bishop's stories'.[104] Just as Lippo works under the patronage of a family involved in 'pride and greed, / Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house, / Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici / Have given their hearts to' (ll. 98-101), Laing's wordman struggles under a bishop who develops his complex spiritual practices alongside the running of his businesses (such as his 'profitable kenkey factory').[105] The bishop's cathedral-building—he has built, for instance, 'the first upside down cathedral in the universe', a cathedral made of 'multi-coloured anthills of undoubted splendour', and a cathedral train or 'mobile super church'[106]—evidences a pragmatic energy not always shared by the contemplative wordman, who is 'busy trying to vaporize [the bishop's] other qualities into the ante/anti-words, post-words and the new words no-words of his story.'[107]

Laing has associated himself with this role, referring at one point to his 'isolated growth as what I call a "word-man"'.[108] One of the wordman's essential characteristics in the novel is his 'freedom'—the ability to embrace mutability, and see the world simultaneously from a variety of different perspectives.[109] As a 'joiner of dreams', 'holding the ends of millions of dreams and trying to tie them together physically', the wordman's function is to move freely between actions and language, dreams and physicality, using his 'invisible

---

[104] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 15.
[105] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, p. 186; Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 9.
[106] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, pp. 8, 29, 30.
[107] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 154.
[108] Laing, 'This is not a paper…', p. 103.
[109] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 3.

wheelbarrow, rolling one mind directly onto another, and shovelling the mixed dreams.'[110] Like Lippo's 'double step', the wordman pays equal attention to body and soul, both aspects of 'the true wordman's highly stunted yet infinite world.'[111]

Acting as secretary to Roko, however, limits this function, and the wordman, as the novel progresses, expresses a growing discontent with the terms of his employment. Feeling that he is, in recording the story of the bishop's involvement in spiritual wars (both within Gold Coast City and internationally), becoming uncomfortably 'part of the equation of these wars', the wordman tells Roko at one point that 'I was nobody's means, not even for a noble end'.[112] When he 'impulsively resigned,' however, he is met with a 'court injunction restraining [him] from putting down the pen'.[113] By drawing attention to the conflicts involved in the relationship between a patron or employer and an artist or storyteller, Laing and Browning demonstrate an interest in the ways in which spiritual and material preoccupations might obstruct one another. The freedom to explore both aspects of Cheeke's 'double action' is limited by attempts to keep the flesh and the soul, personal and contracted labour, separate. Both artists—Lippo and the wordman—picture an ideal in which the ambivalent wholeness of individual experience, in which spiritual and material preoccupations are able to coinhere, ripples outward across broader social relationships. Both, too, in being unable to actualise this ideal, lament the consequences of a failed attempt to affect a congruence between inner and outer experience.

For both authors, this movement outward—this attempt to map personal experience onto broader kinds of affiliation—is an essential part of theology (described by Roko as a 'species-wide ethics').[114] As the wordman says: '[i]n the act of perceiving yourself you

[110] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 1.
[111] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 255.
[112] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, pp. 156-7.
[113] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 157.
[114] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 266.

always moved on immediately to something else, something far bigger than yourself or your culture; something as rich, desolate and grand as space.'[115] 'The bishop's story', the wordman continues, 'was the very image that sustained the grasp for both the ultimate and the now.'[116] In contrast, both writers stress the harmful consequences of the fractures that Laing associates with the 'Western mind'. Indeed, Roko's antagonist, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is characterised by an internal rupture, an 'existential chasm' that prevents any meaningful affiliation not grounded in filial relationships: 'deep within him the ties of kinship and comfort, ritual and habit would not allow him to take a fundamental and effective stand against the excesses of any home or overseas government.'[117] The 'deep dichotomies of the Canterbury mind' reflect the novel's presentation of the conflict between the rich countries' filiative rejection of those who reside outside 'the ties of kinship and comfort', and the 'species-wide' affiliation developed by Roko.[118]

Browning's poems, too, demonstrate an abiding interest in the ways religion exposes (and can repair) fractures between different kinds of community, whether national, cultural, or faith-based. 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', for instance, is centred on the question of the relationship between individual, private belief and the Catholic Church as an institution. Indeed, Heather Morton has argued that the poem highlights the ways in which religious persuasions 'authorize public movements and organizations through evidence about the most intimate, inchoate feelings and desires', and 'yoke the fate of the subject to that of the social institution'.[119] For Morton, '[n]othing reveals this sensitive association between public and

[115] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 119.
[116] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 119.
[117] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 265.
[118] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 306.
[119] Heather Morton, '"A Church of Himself": Liberal Skepticism and Consistent Character in "Bishop Blougram's Apology"', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2007), 29-48, p. 30.

private, institution and individual, more clearly than the Catholic Church', particularly at a time of 'debate surrounding Catholicism and Anglo-Catholicism'.[120]

With the growing popularity of Tractarianism in the 1830s, and the wave of important cultural figures—among whom were John Henry Newman and Henry Edward Manning—converting to Roman Catholicism in the 1840s, 'the poem is', as John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins argue, 'firmly set in its own time and place.'[121] Indeed, when, in 1850, the papal bull *Universalis Ecclesiae* re-established the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England, Nicholas Wiseman was promptly made Archbishop of Westminster. This is significant not only because, as Pettigrew and Collins note, 'Browning himself stated that Cardinal Wiseman […] had served as a model for Blougram.'[122] It is significant too because the figure of the English Catholic, in Morton's words, 'disrupts the cluster of social assumptions about character, the divide between foreign/national, superstitious/rational, conformist/free thinker.'[123] Morton continues:

> The split personhood, 'man' and 'official,' also reflects the perception of a contradiction in Wiseman's identity as an English Catholic. In a *Punch* editorial, W. M. Thackeray played with the same inconsistency, ironically separating 'NICHOLAS the man' from 'NICHOLAS in uniform,' and responding differently to each. The former, as an English gentleman, ought to be respected, while the latter, as a Catholic, is an appropriate object of opprobrium. Thackeray's division testifies to the uneasiness contemporaries felt toward a divided identity. Is Wiseman loyal to the Queen or the Pope? Does he write from inside or outside the nation? The dual allegiances call into question an individual's ability to maintain the one consistent identity that would constitute integrity.[124]

It is this 'divided identity' that 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' explores. In the poem, a Roman Catholic bishop talks with a journalist called Gigadibs. They have both just finished

---

[120] Morton, '"A Church of Himself"', p. 30.
[121] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. I, p. 1124.
[122] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. I, p. 1124.
[123] Morton, '"A Church of Himself"', pp. 36-7.
[124] Morton, '"A Church of Himself"', p. 33.

dinner, and conversation—or, rather, Blougram's monologue—turns to the question of religious belief, Gigadibs's scepticism, and his own balancing of material gain with spiritual duty. Criticism has tended to focus on the ways in which this 'divided identity' might threaten the validity of Blougram's arguments: whether he is able to defend logically his mixture of belief and unbelief. R. G. Collins, for instance, 'find[s] Blougram nailing down Gigadibs through a sophistical argument that is everywhere self-justifying, in both the short and the long run'; he finds, too, 'his faith neither profound nor hypocritical but very much of a piece with a prelate plump of mind and body.'[125]

Blougram's 'sophistical argument' is indeed sophisticated; his reasoning is intricate, and his rhetorical skill, in marshalling a number of complex analogies to his defence, is impressive. Yet it is important to note that this argument is profoundly aware of its own limitations. At one point, criticising the tendency to classify typical of writers like Gigadibs, the bishop describes his faith as a tentative balancing act between seemingly contradictory impulses:

> You see lads walk the street
> Sixty the minute; what's to note in that?
> You see one lad o'erstride a chimney-stack;
> Him you must watch—he's sure to fall, yet stands!
> Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.
> The honest thief, the tender murderer,
> The superstitious atheist, demirep
> That loves and saves her soul in new French books—
> We watch while these in equilibrium keep
> The giddy line midway: one step aside,
> They're classed and done with. I, then, keep the line
> Before your sages,—just the men to shrink
> From the gross weights, coarse scales and labels broad
> You offer their refinement.
>
> (ll. 391-404)[126]

---

[125] R. G. Collins, 'Browning's Practical Prelate: The Lesson of "Bishop Blougram's Apology"', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1975), 1-20, p. 18.
[126] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, p. 307.

This last word, ‘refinement’, at once suggesting an improvement or clarification and bearing as an implication ‘the removing of impurities or unwanted elements’, sarcastically contains much of the thrust of Blougram’s critique.[127] Gigadibs is ‘unable to explain / How a superior man who disbelieves / May not believe as well’ (l’. 409-11); the bishop’s ‘keep[ing] the line’ prevents him from classifying Blougram—‘unwanted elements’ and seemingly contradictory behaviours continually exceed his classifications. This is part of Morton’s point about the poem: ‘[a]n intelligent Catholic, Browning’s poem argues and demonstrates, has the potential to be a deep character precisely because he offers to hold these social contradictions in his identity.’[128] In abandoning any claim to ‘refinement’, Blougram decides that it would be better to develop a faith *through* contradiction than it would be to develop a faith predicated upon the denial of contradiction. For Blougram, faith, recalling Woolford and Karlin’s phrase, is a ‘paradoxical, intricate and unstable […] equation’ between what Laing calls ‘friendly opposites’.

Two years before the publication of *Men and Women*, Matthew Arnold’s ‘Preface’ to the first edition of *Poems* (1853) lamented the commencement of ‘the dialogue of the mind with itself’, calling those fortunate who are able to ‘succeed in banishing from [their] mind all feelings of contradiction’.[129] The ‘boundaries and wholesome regulative laws’ of poetry suggest, to Arnold, one way to counteract these feelings.[130] Browning’s poem, conversely, continually invokes ‘feelings of contradiction’ as well as the value of overcoming such boundaries and laws:

> No, when the fight begins within himself,
> A man’s worth something. God stoops o’er his head,

[127] ‘refinement, n.’, *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://oed.com/view/Entry/160889> [accessed 20 July 2020].
[128] Morton, ‘“A Church of Himself”’, p. 33.
[129] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose*, ed. by P. J. Keating (London: Penguin Books, 2015), pp. 3, 16.
[130] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose*, p. 17.

> Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—
> He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes
> And grows. Prolong that battle through his life!
>
> (ll. 693-697)[131]

As a formal correlative to Blougram's argument, Browning's sentences continually refuse to fit the 'boundaries' of the line unit. As the speaker links value to inner conflict (the 'fight […] within'), the poem's form exhibits a 'tug' of clauses across line endings. Division, ambivalence, and uncertainty appear less a hinderance to spiritual growth than they do a necessary precondition for it. Just as ambiguity, irony, heckling voices, and double meanings characterised the interchange between the spiritual and material in 'Godsdoor' and *Christmas-Eve and Easter Day*, a 'divided identity' animates Blougram's religious feeling.

What distinguishes Blougram's 'divided identity' from the 'deep dichotomies of the Canterbury mind' is that the latter attempts to resolve these dichotomies by leaving behind the things and people that introduce doubt into his structures of belief: his evolutionary plan, were it successful, would eliminate the problem. The former, in contrast, absorbs doubt, division, and unbelief into belief itself. As such, Blougram's acceptance of the 'fight […] within' accords with Roko's development, by the end of the novel, of a new kind of worship based upon the innovative invention of the 'secular Bible'.[132] Written in conjunction with the Archbishop after their reconciliation, this bible serves to indicate one possible material framework for a faith capable of sustaining internal contradiction:

> Only fifty pages had any elevated words of spiritual wisdom—very little narrative, but good syllogisms and paradoxes. The other two hundred blank pages therein served as fill-in do-it-yourself bible spaces. Roko's invention of bible space was a most important process touching the edges of the freed unconscious while making the erasable faxable part a sweet trapeze for those who wanted to create, drive (horizon lorries and bull-tanks), puncture, research, fart, travel, fructify, build, quarrel, anatomize, theologize, economize, blaspheme, to canonize space-travel with a new

[131] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, p. 318.
[132] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 362.

> concept of speed, to smell, integrate, fokolate, smile, beat and romance their way to God.[133]

Browning's poem, then, focuses attention on the ways in which individual religious persuasion can test assumptions about certain boundaries and limits, whether those of poetry or of belief. For Laing, this questioning takes place on a larger scale. In response to Europe's claiming a monopoly on universality and universal perspectives, Roko puts forward his 'species-wide ethics'—but in order to avoid the exclusivity of European models, he instead proposes to think in terms of ambivalent wholenesses. Both Blougram and Roko understand faith as a place in which a negotiation between the internal and external can take place. Both find balances between religious belief and worldly preoccupations—Blougram by weaving tension and doubt into the fabric of his discourse; Roko by opening up a 'bible space' capable of containing even atheistic personal responses. Both, ultimately, gesture towards models of belief capable of the 'double action' Cheeke described.

The Double Actions of Comedy

One kind of 'double action' evident in the wordman's list of activities made possible by the 'bible space' is that of the serious ('research', 'anatomize', 'theologize') and the comic ('fart', 'smile', 'fokolate' ['foko' is glossed by Laing as 'a corruption of "fucking"']).[134] The same duality often characterises Browning's religious figures: from the gruff satire of the 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' to the 'lute-strings, laughs, and whifts of song' (l. 52) in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'.[135] It is, consequently, the purpose of this section to explore the ways in which comedy fits together with both authors' explorations of the medial zones between

[133] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 362.
[134] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 368.
[135] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, p. 184.

spiritual and material experiences and perspectives. Ultimately, comedy provides a perspective from which the 'paradoxical, intricate and unstable […] equation[s]' between 'friendly opposites' which characterise both writers' representation of religious feeling can be understood in relation to their development of incorporative aesthetics and postnational cultural identities. Indeed, comedy permits both writers to evoke powerfully the 'great range' that Elizabeth Barrett attributed to Browning's verse.

One of the reasons for this is that both authors' comic styles are markedly 'antiphonal'; they frequently integrate, in Geoffrey Hill's phrase, 'the voice of the heckler' and its 'cross-rhythms and counterpointings' into their discourse.[136] The marginal commentary of fruits in 'Godsdoor', for example, serves this function. As does the Latin in Archangelis's monologue in *The Ring and the Book* analysed in Chapter One: both work by establishing tensions between contradictory voices and intentions. For Altick and Loucks, this is *The Ring and the Book*'s defining characteristic. In the poem, the comic 'chorus is so ubiquitous that it has almost the role of a major character', and the resulting mixture of comic and tragic themes evokes a sense of life as a whole.[137] 'Long before the term acquired its modern critical vogue,' they argue, 'one could speak with entire accuracy of the "world" of *The Ring and the Book*.'[138] Indeed they are, as they themselves suggest, not alone in making this claim:

> Early commentators on the poem, including John Addington Symonds in *Macmillan's Magazine* (January, 1869) and Swinburne (*Fortnightly Review*, May 1, 1869), suggested analogies between Browning's art and Balzac's. In *The Ring and the Book* we do indeed possess a *comédie humaine* of broad scope and vitality. It is a commonplace that Browning, in his canon as a whole, greatly expanded the subject matter of English poetry, embracing subjects hitherto reserved for the novel and

---

[136] Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 94.
[137] Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks, II, *Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of "The Ring and the Book"* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 292.
[138] Altick and Loucks, *Browning's Roman Murder Story*, pp. 5-6.

> drama. The observation applies, above all, to *The Ring and the Book*, for in it he restored all of life to the accessible province of the poet working on a grand scale.[139]

Laing, too, often employs an antiphonal style in order to evoke a comic sense of 'broad scope and vitality'. In *Search Sweet Country*, for example, Beni Baidoo, whose 'one obsession' is the ridiculous desire 'to found a village', embodies this style.[140] Early in the novel we learn that 'some of his friends were making serious and half-serious searches in their lives'; Baidoo, consequently, 'felt it his duty to balance this with his own type of search': 'the search of a fool'.[141] Balancing too much seriousness with foolishness enables Baidoo to keep his friends in touch with concrete life, despite their abstract and existential searches. This sort of counterpointing occurs in *Big Bishop Roko* too: complaining about the Gold Coasters' insular and introspective tendencies, the wordman argues that

> They thought that culture was something to be defined against other boundaries (*sic*, really sick) and what boundaries could they see beyond the horizon lorry? What was a boundary except another man's line? What was the distinction except the mathematical stroke that cancelled you out of the equation of the universe?[142]

The blending of narrative and editorial registers—'*sic*' and 'sick' at once suggesting, and reacting to, the error of the Gold Coasters' thinking—comes to reflect the wordman's wish to open discourse to interrelationships and influences beyond boundaries. It also draws attention to the ways in which puns work by juxtaposing alternative voicings of printed text: the joke's success depends on '*sic*' and 'sick' being homophones. Indeed, puns, according to Jonathan Culler, 'use related forms to connect disparate meanings', and consequently provide 'illustrations of the inherent instability of language and the power of uncodified linguistic

---

[139] Altick and Loucks, *Browning's Roman Murder Story*, p. 5.
[140] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 1.
[141] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, pp. 1-2.
[142] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 152.

relations to produce meaning.'[143] As such, they foreground—through the positing of 'uncodified' relations among words—a sort of creative interrelationship between disparate elements congruent with Laing's broader social and theological intentions.

In what remains of this chapter, I would like to argue that these effects of comedy are inseparable from the translational, postnational, and religious kinds of mediation explored over the main body of this thesis. Both Browning and Laing use intercultural translation and incorporation to connect disparate linguistic and cultural communities; they both apply pressure to any limitation of culture according to national borders; and they both draw attention to the value of ambivalent wholeness in religious contexts. The antiphonal style of their comedy unites these interests: its 'cross rhythms' and 'counterpointings' provide numerous thematic, formal, and stylistic opportunities to make connections between phenomena *across* such boundaries and distinctions.

For both writers, religion provides the most significant context for these thematic crossings, precisely because it requires a sensitivity to possible congruences between internal and external worlds, and material and spiritual perspectives. Recall, for instance, George Eliot's satirical description of evangelicalism as involving the contradictory and hypocritical combination in one person of 'stringent' and 'latitudinarian' impulses. At once global and individual, religion enables Laing and Browning to develop worldviews that remain capable of balancing equalising and differentiating tendencies.

This aspect of religious experience is particularly suited to comedy. There is a tendency in critical discussion to associate comedy with mediations between the physical and the spiritual. The philosopher Simon Critchley stresses that often what makes us laugh 'is the return of the physical into the metaphysical, where the pretended tragic sublimity of the

[143] Jonathan Culler, 'The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 1-16, pp. 2-3.

human collapses into a comic ridiculousness'.[144] Sometimes the comic friction between the physical and the metaphysical is comprehended within religious contexts. Eric Griffiths, for example, also stresses the importance to comedy of the relationship between the physical and metaphysical; yet, unlike Critchley, it is a specifically Christian relationship that Griffiths foregrounds. In a lecture on Rabelais, he notes that 'comic genius' can draw inspiration from the 'clash of the human being—soaked to the bone in life in time—and the divine judgement—ever there, immobile, on the lookout, impending.'[145] The resulting comedy 'provokes an oscillation of attention, a clash of scales of judgement'—and such an oscillation is heightened by a focus on clergymen and religious figures, precisely because they represent 'the professional interface'—like Laing's and Browning's doors and bishops—'between the timeless and time'.[146] For Griffiths the grotesque, too, 'is comprehensible only in relation to an imagination, sometimes hyperbolic, sometimes calculatedly implausible, but ever present, of the celestial, a sphere of righteousness against which the kinks show up.'[147] For Laing and Browning, comic feeling often involves such an 'oscillation of attention' between scales associated with corporeal and incorporeal life; their interest in grotesque images and styles is often relational, often juxtaposed with an idea of 'the celestial'. But for both writers it is less a 'clash' between these two scales than it is their friendly coexistence in an ambivalent wholeness that animates their comic worldviews.

At one point towards the end of *Aristophanes' Apology*, Aristophanes provides a powerful image for this 'wholeness'. Attempting to explain to Balaustion the difference between his comic worldview and Euripides' tragic one, he develops a lengthy analogy:

Take a sphere
With orifices at due interval,

[144] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 43.
[145] Griffiths, *If Not Critical*, pp. 38-39.
[146] Griffiths, *If Not Critical*, pp. 40-41.
[147] Griffiths, *If Not Critical*, p. 69.

Through topmost one of which, a throw adroit
Sends wine from cup, clean passage, from outside
To where, in hollow midst, a manikin
Suspended ever bobs with head erect
Right underneath whatever hold's a-top
When you set orb a-rolling: plumb, he gets
Ever this benediction of the splash.
An other-fashioned orb presents him fixed:
Of all the outlets, he fronts only one,
And only when that one,—and rare the chance,—
Comes uppermost, does he turn upward too:
He can't turn all sides with the turning orb.

(ll. 5102-5115)[148]

The latter 'manikin', we soon learn, is Euripides:

Inside this sphere of life,—all objects, sense
And soul perceive,—Euripides hangs fixed,
Gets knowledge through the single aperture
Of High and Right: with visage fronting these
He waits the wine thence ere he operate,
Work in the world and write a tragedy.

(ll. 5116-21)[149]

The rhyme between 'Euripides' and 'fronting these'—interrupting otherwise rhymeless blank verse—fixes the relation between the dramatist and the aperture, emphasising the immobility with which he 'hangs fixed'. In contrast to this, Aristophanes claims that

I am moveable,—
To slightest shift of orb make prompt response,
Face Low and Wrong and Weak and all the rest,
And still drink knowledge, wine-drenched every turn,—
Equally favoured by their opposites.
Little and Bad exist, are natural:
Then let me know them, and be twice as great
As he who only knows one phase of life!

(ll. 5127-35)[150]

---

[148] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 315.
[149] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 315.
[150] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 315.

In contrast to Euripides, Aristophanes is 'moveable': the single pronoun '*I*' takes four verbs in four lines—'am […] make […] Face […] drink'—emphasising the mobility he describes. His description of 'opposites' recalls Laing's treatment of the abstract and concrete as 'friendly opposites'; the comic worldview is 'twice as great' as the tragic one precisely because it is able to provide a perspective that covers all 'objects, sense / And soul' that coexist in the 'sphere of life'.

Similarly, Laing's advocacy of 'wholeness' is explicit. In Tukwan, in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, 'there was always a ground-swell of wholeness'.[151] The town represents a place where the 'gum' that 'held the abstract to the concrete would not be broken'.[152] Professor Sackey too, in *Search Sweet Country*, describes the need to 'create new words, new wholes'.[153] This creating entails, throughout Laing's novels, members of a cultural community 'allowing the worlds around to seep through, while throwing their own worlds in a corresponding spread when required.'[154] As a result of this give and take, '[t]houghts would slip in and out of their own spaces, pulling along similarities and opposites alike, and ending up in unions that would vary in breadth and permanence.'[155]

Towards the end of *Big Bishop Roko*, this wholeness is connected to a form of worship attuned to medial zones between the different scales Griffiths describes:

> Why shouldn't we have intermediary worship pointing to God through a host of relative presences? There were billions of existents between even a pantheistic God and his or her worshipper; the very atoms were between us, anyway; and was this non-intermediary God to be worshipped without language, the most intermediary of things for most people?[156]

---

[151] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 17.
[152] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 123.
[153] Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, p. 334.
[154] Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 87.
[155] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 365.
[156] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 340.

Worship, by this definition, is able to 'Face Low and Wrong and Weak and all the rest' like Aristophanes; in remaining sensitive to the intermediary 'existents' between the worshipper and their God, Roko promotes a form of belief—complemented by the openness of his 'secular bible'—capable of reflecting life in its all its ambivalent wholeness.

Aristophanes, then, links wholeness to a comic worldview; Roko links it to a religious one. Yet, placing both authors together permits a perspective from which these two emphases can be seen to interrelate. The comic playwright's phrase 'benediction of the splash', for instance, already expresses comic wholeness in terms of blessing. Yet it is incarnation that best reflects this interrelation: for both writers, incarnational themes provide both a way of achieving Cheeke's 'double action' (and a sense of 'broad scope and vitality'), and a way of developing a distinctive form of comedy.

This dual aspect of incarnational themes can be traced in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'. Fra Lippo's justification of his presence in the streets quickly turns into an elaboration of an artistic perspective grounded in the opposition—to borrow Woolford and Karlin's phrase—of 'the here-and-now against the untenable illusions and attempts at transcendence of their fellow-men'.[157] Towards the end of the poem, the painter declares—in his characteristically colloquial language—the reasons for this privileging of the 'here-and-now':

> It makes me mad to see what men shall do
> And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink.
> "Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!"
> Strikes in the Prior: "when your meaning's plain
> "It does not say to folk—remember matins,
> "Or, mind you fast next Friday!" Why, for this
> What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
> Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best,
> A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.

[157] Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, p. 61.

(ll. 312-322)[158]

As is often the case in Browning's poetry, the opposition between Fra Lippo's 'meat and drink' and the Prior's 'prayer' is reflected at the level of diction. The verb 'instigate'—drawn from precisely the excessively Latinate register the painter detests—contrasts with Fra Lippo's 'plain' language, and this contrast forms the basis of his investment in a 'world' that 'means intensely'. The way Lippo's often comic language suggests a different, embodied way of thinking, feeling, and creating religiously is part of the reason why Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. identifies a 'double-voiced, pantagruelian aesthetic' in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'.[159]

If, for his contemporary John Henry Newman, 'style is a thinking out into language', then for Browning it is at times more of a *feeling* out into language—an 'embodiment', as Browning terms the poetic act in his 1852 'Essay on Shelley'.[160] For Lippo, art serves to find the world's 'meaning', to materialise it in paint just as, in *Sordello*, the narrator describes a particular mode of storytelling as the 'body[ing] forth' of a character (Book I, l. 14).[161] Strongly influenced by Giorgio Vasari's depiction of the 'lustful' Filippo Lippi, who is at once 'driven by his amorous—or rather, his bestial desires', and a painter of 'marvellous grace', Browning's poem—like Laing's Roko—celebrates materiality as a constituent part of a 'double-voiced' religious feeling.[162] Lippo, degrading the purely abstract to the solidity and physicality of 'meat and drink', 'body[s] forth' meaning: his 'lustful' appetites do not contradict his 'grace', but instead, similarly to Roko's 'hard', tactile, incarnational theology, help to develop its fuller expression.

---

[158] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, p. 49.
[159] Mark M. Hennelly, Jr., 'Victorian Carnivalesque', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 30 iss. 1 (2002), 365-381, p. 365.
[160] Newman, *The Idea of a University*, p. 232; Browning, *The Poems*, vol. I, p. 1006.
[161] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. II, p. 195.
[162] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 193-194.

Based in part on the frequency with which Browning emphasises materiality, William Whitla goes so far as to identify incarnation as 'the central truth' of Browning's poetry—a truth that affects him 'to the depths of his being'.[163] Richard Benvenuto, similarly, stresses the importance of Browning's conception of 'a total or Incarnational art'.[164] Abstract ideas are regularly seen 'to drop down'—as Browning writes at the end of the first book of *The Ring and the Book*—to 'toil for man, to suffer or to die' (I, ll. 1391-2).[165] He is, as Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks suggest, 'profoundly aware of the weakening and distortion that meaning endures when transmitted through language and the sometimes dense, sometimes cynical medium of the human mind'.[166] This 'weakening and distortion', however, is ultimately creatively and religiously enabling: Fra Lippo's world 'means intensely' despite these processes.

Laing too displays a recurring interest in incarnational themes. *Big Bishop Roko*, for example, even features an actual incarnation: that of the 'Deputy Jesus'—who comes 'to observe and learn to occupy the background' of the many conflicts that make up the novel's plot.[167] An earlier short story features the descent into the world of a 'small quick lorry', which is immediately interpreted by the population of the town it appears to as a divine message.[168] The punchline that follows helps to demonstrate the ways comedy and incarnational imagery can overlap:

> At first no one saw the gigantic message being lowered from the wheels of the lorry. The dancing and jumping of the children had continued under the intense afternoon sun. There were scores of darkglasses shined for greater shade. The message on the

---

[163] William Whitla, *The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Robert Browning's Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. vi.
[164] Richard Benvenuto, 'Lippo and Andrea: The Pro and Contra of Browning's Realism', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 13, iss. 4 (1973), 643-652, p. 643.
[165] *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. 7, p. 57.
[166] Altick and Loucks, *Browning's Roman Murder Story*, p. 29.
[167] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 49.
[168] Kojo Laing, 'Vacancy for the post of Jesus Christ', *The Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories*, ed. by Chinua Achebe and C. L. Innes (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1992), 185-196, p. 185

> big card, having folded over after the sudden rain, opened out with the sun: VACANCY FOR THE POST OF JESUS CHRIST.[169]

The comedy of this manifestation of a divine message is in its perplexing balancing of the concrete (the wet cardboard 'folded over', the use of a lorry as a mode of transport) and the abstract (an official envoy from heaven). That the message is a job advertisement intensifies this effect. What is comic is not the juxtaposition between the sender of the message and its medium (by which the divine would appear weakened and distorted), but rather the elevation of the weak and distorted through divine office. The abstract and the concrete cooperate as 'friendly opposites'.

Earlier in this chapter, Yvor Winters's claim that language is 'a kind of abstraction, even at its most concrete' was used to draw attention to the ways in which both Laing and Browning explore the paradoxical 'friendly' coexistence of the abstract and concrete. This paradoxical coexistence is, in the philosopher Alenka Zupančič's analysis, what animates comedy. In comedy, she argues, 'some universality ("tramp," "worker," "misanthrope"…) has to let a subject in all his concreteness shine through it—not as the opposite of this universal (or as its irreducible support), but as its own inherent truth, its flexibility and life.'[170] The materiality of the 'lorry' shines through the 'universality' of divine communication in Laing's story, just as the lewd and transgressive Fra Lippo Lippi shines through an ideal balance of soul and body. For Zupančič, comedy enables these 'mutually exclusive realities to continue to exist alongside each other, and, *moreover*, to be articulated within one and the same scene.'[171]

It is for this reason that Incarnational tropes (and, more generally, concrete expressions of abstract ideas) recur in both authors' comic scenes. Comedy provides them

---

[169] Laing, 'Vacancy', p. 186.
[170] Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008), pp. 37-8.
[171] Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, p. 57.

with an opportunity to think through the co-articulation of ‘mutually exclusive realities’—a co-articulation that both Laing and Browning connect to meaningful religious belief and ethical practice. In *Big Bishop Roko*, these ‘mutually exclusive realities’ are often abstract theology and grotesque physicality. Just as chewing contributed to the idea of historical and cultural interaction developed in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Roko’s ‘chewing’ is—the wordman relates—a ‘symbol for rearranging the humility of the universe.’[172] This mouth ‘that changed everything it chewed and encompassed everything in the universe with its gums and sharklike enamel’ at once foregrounds grotesque physicality and serves to embody the power of both Roko’s language and his distinctive theological project.[173] The narrator, for example, suggests that

> In fact this mouth was big enough to accommodate the hindlegs of a young dog inside it. And neither hair nor hindskin would show, this fifty-percent of dog inside one-hundred percent of bishop’s mouth, koraa. You had to approach such a mouth very carefully on certain days. For a simple reply to a greeting could land you in the middle of a storm. […] It was existentially stylish to have a mouth that gathered the weather and threw it at you. So some days I would dive into a different direction as soon as I said “good morning bishop.” In the afternoons I would sometimes hold an umbrella on guard against his words. Imagine a wordman protecting himself from someone else’s words … How I wished I had this bishop’s mouth-mouth power![174]

The bishop’s gargantuan mouth shines through his ethical and spiritual commitment to wholeness and breadth. Even language itself is materialised: the elemental power of his breath makes a word inseparable from its bodying forth. Yet the wordman’s wish that he ‘had this bishop’s mouth-mouth power’ does his own stylistic efforts little justice. As the bishop ‘gathered the weather’, the wordman’s language gathers its own material momentum from alliteration. The quick succession of interdental consonants in ‘mou*th th*at ga*th*ered *th*e wea*th*er and *th*rew’—a succession that ends, mimetically, with ‘threw’—evokes vocalisation

[172] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 7.
[173] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 135.
[174] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 37.

just as the bishop's own vocal strength is invoked. The language of narration stresses its ability to accentuate its aurally registered—and thereby felt—aspects. The reader, silently bodying forth this sound pattern, is provoked to become aware of the physical process of phonetic reading.

This activation of the physical characterises Roko's behaviour throughout the novel. He is resolute in his belief that 'hard spiritual beliefs should always go beyond metaphysics and creation stories should require hard science'.[175] By 'bringing cosmology to the level of the everyday', the purely abstract 'truths' Roko associates with the novel's European characters might be counteracted.[176] The 'wordman' narrator—in terms that echo Babo's philosophy of history in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*—explains the bishop's reasoning:

> Roko knew that if you did not manifest or materialize (either through myth, creation or religion) the current intimations of a higher, mental, emotional and spiritual structure ahead, then you would have lost touch both with an older level of existence and with the amplitude of the universe.[177]

All that is 'higher, mental, emotional and spiritual' is in danger of losing 'touch' with 'the amplitude of the universe', just as the merely physical is in danger of ignoring 'intimations' that are part of this very amplitude. Consequently, Roko's theology departs from the idea that what is required is a reactivation of the 'physical' within metaphysical speculation: to 'manifest' or 'materialize' a religious practice that is struggling under the 'disontologization' favoured in the novel's Europe (a 'disontologization' that Roko connects with the prospect of 'biological apartheid').[178]

This manifestation of 'intimations of a higher, mental, emotional and spiritual structure', is, as J. Hillis Miller argues, an important part of Browning's poetry too. For

[175] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 44.
[176] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 34.
[177] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 44.
[178] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 57.

Miller, this manifestation is linked, in Browning's thinking, to the grotesque. In his poems, Miller suggests, '[g]rotesque visible forms and grotesque language are really the same, for both are the result of the pushing out of a novel internal energy,' which enables each person to become 'just that self God intended him to be'.[179] Viewing the grotesque as evidence of the divine shining together with individual idiosyncrasies, Miller—like Whitla and Benvenuto—identifies the Incarnation as essential to an understanding of Browning's verse:

> Ultimately the doctrine of Incarnation in Browning is the idea that each imperfect and limited man through whom the power of God swirls is a temporary incarnation of God, one of the infinitely varied ways in which God makes himself real in the world. Each individual life is a center around which the totality of the universe organizes itself and fulfills one of its infinite possibilities. Every life contains a unique element, something which is never repeated, but all lives contain the same invariant: the divine presence.[180]

As a consequence of this, '[t]he poet faces in two directions, upward toward the transcendent God, and downward toward God as incarnated in the creation.'[181] Split in this way, the poet remains at the mercy of contradictory impulses, and because of this, Miller's reading accentuates the presence of 'chaos' and 'doubt' at the heart of Browning's poetry: '[o]ne could say that the most pervasive happening in Browning is crystallization leading to the discovery of its inadequacy and return to chaos.'[182] 'The heart of Browning', indeed, 'remains a struggle of irreconcilable forces', with an 'infinitely dense, wholly inexpressible chaos at the center.'[183] As a result, for Miller's Browning, '[t]o live in the realm of imperfection and change, the intermediate area between beast and God, is to live in a place where all remains in doubt.'[184]

---

[179] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, pp. 135-6.
[180] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 155.
[181] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 112.
[182] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 85.
[183] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 86.
[184] Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, p. 140.

Yet Browning's poetry also attests to an abiding interest in the ways this 'intermediate area'—recalling Laing's intermediary worship—can prove a religiously and artistically enabling space. This is particularly explicit in Browning's poem *Fifine at the Fair* (1872). Reading *Fifine at the Fair* in light of the theology of Roko and the wordman accentuates the ways in which both writers insist upon the importance of medial spaces, comic worldviews, ambivalent wholenesses, and a broad congruence of the internal and external. The poem binds together many of the themes explored in this thesis: it combines lengthy discussion of the points of intersection and coinherence between the soul and the body, a celebration of carnivalesque comic worldviews, moments of translation and incorporation, and a foregrounding of the interstices between, and relationships that exceed, national borders.

The poem consists of Don Juan's monologue, in which he attempts to explain to his wife, Elvire, his attraction to a circus performer called Fifine, as well as the general philosophy of life that underpins his attraction. Descriptions of the circus, along with a lengthy description of the Venetian Carnival (which Don Juan sees in a dream), coexist in the poem with abstract speculation upon 'abstruser themes' (l. 1523).[185] As such, criticism has tended to draw attention to struggle between abstraction and concrete circumstances in the poem, while some ignore the concrete altogether. Clyde de L. Ryals, echoing Arnold, argues that Don Juan's 'argument is a dialogue of the mind with itself: his utterance both apology and self-analysis, an attempt to explain himself to himself.'[186] Others see the relationship between this 'dialogue of the mind with itself' and its speaker's position as essential to the poem's comedy. Charlotte Crawford Watkins argues that the 'epigraph which Browning placed before the poem, a fragment of a scene from Molière's *Don Juan*, provides an

[185] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 49.
[186] Clyde de L. Ryals, 'Browning's Amphibian: *Don Juan At Home*', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1969), 210-217, pp. 211-2.

analogue for the comedy which occasions the long discursive argument.[187] It is an analogue because, as Barbara Melchiori claims, it draws attention to an ironic tension between abstract speculation and concrete circumstance:

> Browning has deliberately placed Byron's foot-loose hero in an undignified position. With his wife leaning reproachfully on his arm he lusts after the "pert" circus girl, but if his feet are chained, his mind is free to roam. In the attempt to explain, justify and excuse his desires, he ranges far and wide over Browning's whole world of ideas.[188]

The comedy of this double condition—at once chained and free—represents for these critics one of the poem's main themes.

Other critics draw attention to the poem's use of metre. Donald S. Hair argues, for instance, that in *Fifine*, 'prosody has momentous implications.'[189] The poem's 'combination of two basic patterns'—'the iambic hexameter line, and the four-stress line'—reflects the broader theme of the 'combination of opposites', and, consequently, the struggle between two metrical patterns 'provide[s] the reader with actual experience of [this] theme'.[190] Following this reasoning, Simon Jarvis suggests that in the poem 'it looks as though Browning considered an elective affinity to obtain between exuberant metaphysical, epistemological, and aesthetic speculation, on the one hand, and audacious somersaults of verse sentence and verse manner, on the other.'[191]

Yet all these examples delineate a turn away from the physical in the speaker's 'speculation'. Browning's Don Juan does not so readily separate 'metaphysical […] speculation' from physical, material life. He stresses that 'bodies show me minds, / That,

---

[187] Charlotte Crawford Watkins, 'The "Abstruser Themes" of Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*', *PMLA*, vol. 74, no. 4 (1959), 426-437, p. 426.
[188] Barbara Melchiori, 'Browning's Don Juan', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1966), 416-440, p. 418.
[189] Donald S. Hair, 'A Note on Meter, Music, and Meaning in Robert Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2001), 25-36, p. 26.
[190] Hair, 'A Note', pp. 27, 28.
[191] Simon Jarvis, 'Superversive Poetics: Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 1 (2016), 121-141, p. 123.

through the outward sign, the inward grace allures, / And sparks from heaven transpierce earth's coarsest covertures' (ll. 335-7).[192] It is the soul's 'struggle toward evidence' (l. 729) in the physical, the 'transference of all, achieved in visible things' (l. 844), that interests Browning's speaker.[193] This struggle is, as Miller notes, part of Don Juan's own conception of the grotesque:

> A love, a hate, a hope, a fear, each soul a-strain
> Some one way through the flesh—the face, an evidence
> O' the soul at work inside; and, all the more intense,
> So much the more grotesque.
>
> (ll. 1718-1721)[194]

Alert to the ways in which 'the flesh' mediates 'each soul a-strain', Browning's Don Juan exercises a double focus reminiscent of Laing's wordman:

> The real stirring of the wordman's life involved two spoons, one immediately above the other, and both with long handles, and both stirring simultaneously: the lower one for the depths of the unconscious and the higher for the annoying surface.[195]

Both consider the interrelationships between 'flesh' and 'soul, 'depths' and 'surface' a vital part of human experience, and both consider it the function of art—which, in Don Juan's words 'Must fumble for the whole' (l. 689)[196]—to negotiate these interrelationships.

This is part of the reason why Don Juan demonstrates a fascination with intermediary spaces. He describes, for instance, 'the vocal medium 'twixt the world and me' (l. 1761), and later petitions for a shift of focus to the interstices: 'Leave watching change at work i' the greater scale, on these / The main supports, and turn to their interstices' (ll. 1969-70).[197] The

[192] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 17.
[193] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, pp. 28, 31.
[194] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 55.
[195] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 133.
[196] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 27.
[197] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, pp. 56, 62.

poem also makes repeated use of ocean imagery—the sea and voyages frequently serving (in a similar way to examples discussed in the previous chapter) to intimate universal, transnational, dislocated situations. In the poem, the sea is also that which connects locations. Don Juan reflects at one point on the way ships have 'rendered futile so, the prudent Power's decree / Of separate earth and disassociating sea' (ll. 1434-5).[198] Ships instead make this sea associating, a medium of travel and intercommunication: a shift itself manifested in the fact that the phrase here is a translation of lines from Horace's *Odes* (I, iii, 21-3).

In *Big Bishop Roko*, too, the sea figures as both a medium of transport and what the wordman calls 'oceanographic union'.[199] At one point, the 'lavender section of the sea (smelling highly of distilled fish juice) had thrown up into the city a banished Shinto religion shaman from Japan, who called himself the messenger of early rising.'[200] In Laing's novel, however, the sea is only one part of a much broader medial network, which includes also aerial travel, the circulation of money, and the internet. Some characters become so addicted to the transnational connectivity made possible by aeroplanes that flight supersedes all other modes of transport. Zala, for instance, (having travelled to Hong Kong 'to invest in the markets there') installs 'a tiny temporary tea runway immediately outside his hotel bedroom, so that he could gladly fly from the bedroom to the sitting-room next door without any walking at all'—walking being (and note how the words 'gladly fly' themselves fly into this neighbouring phrase) 'a huge gadfly for him'.[201]

Essential to this emphasis on intermediary spaces in *Fifine* is Don Juan's advocacy of a perspective characterised by ambivalent wholeness—a perspective he celebrates in a way that anticipates Browning's Aristophanes:

---

[198] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 47.
[199] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 283.
[200] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 182.
[201] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 71.

> I smoked. The webs o' the weed,
> With many a break i' the mesh, were floating to re-form
> Cupola-wise above: chased thither by soft warm
> Inflow of air without; since I—of mind to muse, to clench
> The gain of soul and body, got by their noon-day drench
> In sun and sea,—had flung both frames o' the window wide,
> To soak my body still and let soul soar beside.
>
> (ll. 1540-6)[202]

Two verbs, 'to muse, to clench'—one connoting abstract speculation, the other physical seizing—together typify Don Juan's flinging 'both frames o' the window wide'. The 'double action' of body and soul produces a wholeness evoked by the poem's repeated use of a transliterated phrase from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*: '*Theosutos e broteios eper kekramene*', or 'God, man, or both together mixed' (ll. 905, 907).[203]

What results is a philosophical perspective particularly attuned to potential 'congruence[s] of the internal and external'. In the poem, this congruence is most clearly associated with Carnival. Both *Big Bishop Roko* and *Fifine* suggest that '[t]he breadth, the suppleness of mind and heart' required to effect such a congruence is provided by comic worldviews.[204] If Don Juan's argument often depends upon the idea that 'bodies show me minds' (that the concrete gestures towards the abstract), then Carnival reverses these terms: what links both Browning's and Laing's comedy is—as Zupančič argues—an awareness that the concrete can shine through the abstract.

Don Juan's response to Schumann's 'Carnival', and the dream of the Venice Carnival it prompts, demonstrates this reversal. In his dream, he quickly realises that 'Venice was the world; its Carnival—the state / Of mankind' (ll. 1858-9).[205] Rather than a metonym, however, this positing of equivalence between local and global is expressed in terms of a concrete connection between people:

---

[202] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 50.
[203] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 33.
[204] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 91.
[205] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 59.

> Lo, link by link, expands
> The circle, lengthens out the chain, till one embrace
> Of high with low is found uniting the whole race,
> Not simply you and me and our Fifine, but all
> The world: the Fair expands into the Carnival,
> And Carnival again to … ah, but that's my dream!
>
> (ll. 1606-1611)[206]

Just as his dream enables him to travel imaginatively from France to Italy, Carnival evokes a connectivity that exceeds national borders. Rhymes—'embrace'/'race', 'all'/'Carnival'—perform the linking work the lines describe. The 'world' is connected on a global scale by local embraces: the local Carnival and the 'world' in general are 'articulated within one and the same scene.'[207] This 'double action' is what produces Don Juan's 'delight' in beholding the spectacle:

> And the delight wherewith I watch this crowd must be
> Akin to that which crowns the chemist when he winds
> Thread up and up, till clue be fairly clutched,—unbinds
> The composite, ties fast the simple to its mate,
> And tracing each effect back to its cause, elate,
> Constructs in fancy, from the fewest primitives,
> The complex and complete, all diverse life, that lives
> Not only in bird, beast, fish, reptile, insect, but
> The very plants and earths and ores.
>
> (ll. 1806-1814)[208]

A composite complexity is separated into 'the fewest primitives' in order to make possible the reconstruction of the 'complex and complete'; concrete heterogeneity survives abstract speculation as 'its own inherent truth, its flexibility and life.'[209]

---

[206] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 52.
[207] Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, p. 57.
[208] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 57.
[209] Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, pp. 37-8.

The same process characterises Roko's faxing techniques, by which he materially intervenes in various texts:

> And above all, with no one looking at or hearing any language he gently faxed his name into all the Bibles and holy books of the world. This was a stupendous heretical achievement (of love), forcing millions of altarmen and shrinemen and women all over the world to, first, trace the source of this miraculously inserted name (Roko in the holy books, in the printing appropriate to each language) and second, to try desperately but without success to expunge it from these books. Roko appeared in all colours before and after the verbs, after pronouns, before and after articles and adjectives and alone in exclamations and infinitives. Apart from God, the trinity, and other holy prophets, you had never met a heavier word, with such minute connotation and reverberation. The way Roko glided into the holy books made you think that the latter were airports that opened and shut for reasons of holy aviation, of scriptural runways.[210]

These interventions constitute a kind of slapstick, which Alex Clayton links to 'the capacity to reawaken us to the fundamental physicality of the world, and hence to its detail: to its textures and rhythms,' as well as 'the physical laws and properties that restrict and permit human activity'.[211] By comically intermingling his heavy name with the words of holy books, Roko introduces a concrete interruption into theology itself, making it impossible to ignore the existence of people from the poorer countries that the rich countries wish to leave behind. The slapstick of his intervention—tripping up and obstructing the smooth progress of European theology—stresses materiality as the 'inherent truth, […] flexibility and life' of religious practice; as Roko argues, it is only from 'a position of material strength' that action from 'a universal standpoint' is possible.[212]

Browning's Don Juan shares this understanding of the value of 'a position of material strength':

> I found

[210] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 20.
[211] Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007), pp. 11-12.
[212] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 177.

> Somehow the proper goal for wisdom was the ground
> And not the sky,—so, slid sagaciously betimes
> Down heaven's baluster-rope, to reach the mob of mimes
> And mummers; whereby came discovery there was just
> Enough and not too much of hate, love, greed and lust,
> Could one discerningly but hold the balance, shift
> The weight from scale to scale, do justice to the drift
> Of nature, and explain the glories by the shames
> Mixed up in man, one stuff miscalled by different names
> According to what stage i' the process turned his rough,
> Even as I gazed, to smooth—only get close enough!
> —What was all this except the lesson of a life?
>
> (ll. 1866-78)[213]

Holding 'the balance' like Bishop Blougram, Don Juan does 'justice to the drift / Of nature'. The 'proper goal for wisdom' is 'the ground', the position of 'material strength' from which the 'stuff' of humanity—that 'composite species'—might be properly understood.

Both writers share an interest in the way comic perspectives support this emphasis. By drawing attention to a series of congruences—of the internal and external, local heterogeneity and comic worldviews, abstract speculation and material existence—Laing and Browning are able to demonstrate affiliative networks capable of holding 'the balance' between equalising and differentiating forces on a variety of scales. As the previous chapters have shown, both writers have in common what Roland Barthes, in a different context, called 'a language in which ornaments' (stylistic choices) 'are in themselves a method of investigation applied to the whole surface of the world.'[214] An investigation into 'wholes' and 'worlds' specifically—their limits, internal tensions, the modes of affiliation that make them possible; that these 'wholes' and 'worlds' are congruent with the interrelationship between bodies and souls is an essential aspect of both their religious preoccupations, and their shared interest in the value of ambivalent wholenesses. Ultimately, through comparison, both emerge as writers committed

---

[213] Browning, *The Poems*, vol. II, p. 59.

[214] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 61.

to investigating the ways in which the ‘mediate word’ can contest, intervene in, and create broad and lasting networks and communities.

CONCLUSION

Strange Likenesses: Some Principles of Comparison

'An act of knowing is an affair that concerns both you and the object you are interpreting: the person of the other, the work you are reading. You yourself change as you interpret that thing, but the thing changes too, because a new interpretation is stuck onto it.'

Gianni Vattimo and Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Not Being God* (2009)[1]

*

Christopher Ricks has noted that '[a] hyphen may articulate strange likeness and unlikeness'.[2] In this respect, the previous three chapters have all taken as their starting points different hyphens mediating contact between Laing's and Browning's texts and contexts. In this concluding chapter, I consider what these strange likenesses and unlikenesses say about the mediating function of literary criticism and its comparisons. The three chapters that make up the main part of this thesis think through many different texts under the logic of a single conversation; they constitute an attempt, in Eric Hayot's words, 'to know them *through* the act of comparison.'[3] But this 'act' itself prompts a consideration of what it is such acts make possible, and what they inevitably overlook. Hayot continues to stress that 'any comparison expresses, inevitably, not just a comparison of two things, but also a theory of comparison, of comparability,' and also that any 'comparison shapes what it compares; and it shapes the theory of comparison that makes what it compares comparable.'[4] It is important, then, to pay attention to the questions raised by placing Laing and Browning together, a placement that is

[1] Gianni Vattimo with Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. by William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 103.
[2] Ricks, *Force of Poetry*, p. 326.
[3] Eric Hayot, 'Vanishing Horizons: Problems in the Comparison of China and the West', in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 88-107, p. 88.
[4] Hayot, 'Vanishing Horizons', p. 88.

itself particularly interesting in this context because of their own shared interest in comparison.

Both Laing's and Browning's texts—as the last chapters have attempted to show—contain a great deal of thought about the ethical and social importance of comparative thinking (between languages, across borders, and between internal and external worlds), and themselves suggest a number of principles by which this thinking might be guided. This concluding chapter attempts to identify these principles, without requiring them to harden into a 'theory of comparison'. What follows has three objectives, which follow loosely Said's interest in the relationship between the world, texts, and criticism. The first is to consider once more the ways in which both Laing and Browning represent texts and their relationship with the world; the second to approach recent critical discussions through these representations; and the third to consider the movement of comparative thought.

Texts, the World, and Criticism

Laing's interest in the ways texts can themselves represent an ambivalent wholeness is formally represented by the various textual and material doublings that occur throughout *Big Bishop Roko*, particularly those relating to Roko's fear of a 'graded' mutation—one in which 'the least developed areas of the world (leastus developus) would be the last to be allowed to jump the fraudulent mutation bar.'[5] As the wordman suggests, 'no sentence was finished in Roko's world, and I saw that as the finest achievement of his still-playing story.'[6] This unfinished quality of Roko's language mirrors his attitude to texts and book objects, which are—as has been shown—continually supplemented by his faxed additions and alterations

[5] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 305.
[6] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 227.

throughout the novel. Roko's 'biblical faxism' is seen as 'a heretical triumph which was an even bigger thing for physicality'.[7] Stressing the material of printed texts as a site of struggle over fair representation, Roko's 'faxism' typifies Laing's balancing of the abstract and concrete as 'friendly opposites'.

Roko's 'faxfarts', for example—provided by the narrator as sufficient evidence of his 'complex relations with wind'—attempt to balance an unchecked tendency toward abstraction by means of 'constant releases of personal wind into books of poetry'.[8] Part of this joke—its juxtaposition of the 'serious' with the ludicrous—comes to affect the diction of the wordman's narration. Having proceeded to make a 'wind analysis', he concludes in a peculiarly formal style that both 'the bishop and I were gifted with hard percussive sounds that were marvellously odourless.'[9] These 'faxfarts' also participate in the wordman's tendency to accentuate the materiality of language. Just as, in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Babo's Minutes Book is made up of a number of different media, the wordman's story is itself materially heterogeneous. Some stories, we learn, are told through 'the medium of ants [...] and through the medium of the dung beetle', while elsewhere the narrator asks for 'really heavy punctuation (a kilo of full-stops)' in order 'to curtail' another story.[10] The 'secular bible', which encourages its readers to participate in the creation of meaning, epitomises Laing's presentation of texts as radically 'open'.

The foregrounding of a text's materiality is also common throughout Browning's poetry. His poems are full of degraded texts. They attest to an abiding interest in the ways writing is composed and received, mediated and embodied, and ultimately distorted and destroyed. In *Sordello*, for example, Browning draws attention to the 'sprawling path[s]' left

[7] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, pp. 27, 52.
[8] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 36.
[9] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 36.
[10] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, pp. 161, 215.

by worms in old books and manuscripts (I, l. 191).[11] 'Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis', included in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), recounts the speaker's semi-destruction of a particularly pedantic book. Taking revenge upon the 'delectable treatise' (l. 40), the speaker drops it into a 'crevice' in a 'plum-tree' (l. 17).[12] Retrieving it the following day, its 'clasps […] cracking and covers suppling' (l. 60), the speaker places it back on his shelf, condemning it to 'dry-rot at ease till the Judgement-day!' (l. 72).[13] In their foregrounding of textual decay, and their lowering of abstract content to the material level, Browning's poems, like Laing's novels, often recall Michael Holquist's suggestion that grotesque texts and bodies 'militate against […] the concept of a pristine, closed-off, static identity and truth wherever it may be found'.[14]

For both authors, drawing attention to a text's materiality often means drawing attention to the ways in which texts are 'open' to the world around them. Browning's childhood copy of Francis Quarles' *Emblemes* (1634), held in Balliol College Library's Special Collections, attests to this attitude towards texts. The text evidences active reading practices, including emendations. At one point, for instance, the printed text reads:

> I've done, I've done; theſe trembling hands have thrown
> Their daring weapons down: The day's thine own:
> Forbear to ſtrike were thou haſt won the field.
> The palm is thine: I yield, I yield.[15]

Browning, in pencil, amends the final full stop to a comma, and adds a third 'I yield' to match the poem's predominant iambic pentameter. Later the printed text reads:

---

[11] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. II, p. 204.
[12] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. IV, pp. 81-2.
[13] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. IV, p. 83.
[14] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 90.
[15] Francis Quarles, *Emblemes* (London: 1634), p. 149. Held in Balliol College Library, Special Collections, box labelled 'Browning relics'.

> *Sin.* Ah me! I dare not: I'm too vile and baſe
> To tread upon the earth, much more, to lift
> Mine eyes to heav'n; I need no other ſhift
> Than mine own conſcience;[16]

Browning, once more, crosses out 'ſhift' and amends to 'Shrift'. This active intervention into printed texts—Browning's own equivalent of Roko's faxing—even characterised some of Browning's compositional processes. On the inside front cover of his copy of Daniel Bartoli's *De Simboli Transportati al Morale*, given as a gift to Mrs Sutherland Orr in March 1887, Browning notes that:

> "The Ride to Ghent" was originally written in pencil on this and part of the next page, at sea, off the African coast. RB.
> ("Home thoughts from abroad" was also written here)[17]

Texts, then, for both Browning and Laing, are not closed, static, and homogenous systems, but rather are open to interventions from the outside, corrections, pressures, and even creative processes. In Chapter One, for example, Laing's creative intercultural translations of poems by Hopkins and Browning evidenced an interest in the ways in which texts change under different cultural and epistemological circumstances. Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, too, was seen to highlight the relationship between a source text (the 'yellow book') and its poetic successor. To borrow a phrase from Annmarie Drury, they both share a vision of texts as 'themselves *enacting* intercultural negotiations'.[18]

This vision reflects at a textual level both the interest in people that exceed national limits analysed in Chapter Two, and the congruence of the internal and external explored in

---

[16] Quarles, *Emblemes*, p. 165.
[17] Daniel Bartoli, *De Simboli Transportati al Morale, Nuova edizione corretta ed emendata da Angelo Cerutti* (London: P. Ronlandi, Dulau & Co, J. B. Bailliere, and Sherwood, n. d.). Held in Balliol College Library, Special Collections, box labelled 'Browning relics'.
[18] Drury, *Translation as Transformation*, p. 8.

Chapter Three. Their texts serve as sites for the creation of affiliative networks unhindered by a preference for filial relation. Comparing Browning and Laing helps accentuate the importance of this interrelationship between text and world. They encourage, with Edward Said, 'view[ing] the text as a dynamic field, rather than as a static block, of words. This field has a certain range of reference, a system of tentacles (which I have been calling affiliative) partly potential, partly actual: to the author, to the reader, to a historical situation, to other texts, to the past and present.'[19] This is true of all texts, as Said argues—yet in Browning and Laing the ways in which this 'system of tentacles' mediates between different linguistic and cultural communities, and between internal and external worlds, becomes an aesthetic principle as well as a thematic preoccupation.

They encourage, as a result, readings attuned to the 'junctures'—to recall a term first used in this thesis's introductory chapter—between texts and other texts; they foreground, in Garrett Stewart's phrase, 'mediated encounter[s] with things other'.[20] If, as Dragana Obradović argues, '[t]o undertake comparative criticism is to incite and instigate new perspectives on the world and the text, and the text in the world', then both Laing and Browning blur the line between comparative criticism and comparison literature.[21]

In this respect, Rebecca Walkowitz's 2009 article 'Comparison Literature' is particularly suggestive. It appears to describe something similar to what I have been calling affiliative criticism, although its insistence on comparison would later be relegated—in the book developed from the article—in favour of a new focus: 'born-translated literature'. Considering the changing emphases of Walkowitz's criticism alongside the approach developed in this thesis can help to shed light upon the methodological emphasis I am arguing for. In *Born Translated*, published in 2015, 'comparison literature' is used as a term

---

[19] Said, *The World*, p. 157.
[20] Stewart, *The Deed of Reading,* p. 10.
[21] Obradović, 'Part I: Provocation, Introduction', *Provocation and Negotiation*, 1-4, p. 1.

'to describe literary works that attribute their beginnings to several national geographies.'[22] In the 2009 article, however, it draws attention to the ways in which literature itself explores the implications of 'comparison at the level of typography, language, genre, and theme'.[23] This latter definition provides a clear summary of the characteristics of Browning's and Laing's texts this thesis has amplified through comparison. It also implies a strong congruence between the worlds of these creative texts and the analytical tools applied to them in acts of criticism. But what can be gained from a sensitivity to this congruence? Should Walkowitz's earlier focus on comparison's many-levelled activity within texts be preserved against a shift towards a focus on a text's transnational 'beginnings'? Answers to these questions can help to bring the comparative principles at the heart of this thesis into focus.

Walkowitz's later emphasis on works that 'appear to be—and to be derived from—translated editions' serves to accentuate the ways texts are influenced by processes of circulation and reception often considered extra-aesthetic.[24] This has at least two consequences for the comparisons developed in this thesis. First, it privileges, among the many possible relationships between text and world, a text's own anticipation of forms of *specifically textual* circulation. This preference for textual relationships overlooks the ways in which texts mediate relationships with what is non-textual—a mediation, as the previous discussion has shown, central to both Laing's and Browning's writing. Second, it privileges texts that facilitate translation. As Walkowitz notes, if the 'engagement with idiolect' is often considered 'a distinctive trait of experimental fiction', one consequence of the shift from 'comparison' to 'born-translated' literature is a prioritisation of literature that 'withdraws from that engagement'.[25] The resulting analytical preference for stylistic equalisation

[22] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 127.
[23] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'Comparison Literature', *New Literary History*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2009), 567-582, p. 569.
[24] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 44.
[25] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 44.

inevitably involves overlooking the kinds of complex composite language use discussed in Chapter One.

The difference between the emphases of Walkowitz's more recent criticism and the methodologies that govern this thesis's comparisons helps to identify a number of principles for comparative critical practice—principles derived from the experience of reading Browning and Laing together. The first is to pay attention to the ways in which texts negotiate conflicting processes of equalisation and differentiation. From the 'oscillations between the recognition and abolition of foreignness' and the incorporative aesthetics that Reynolds and Drury describe, to the ways in which certain consensuses—national, political, cultural—are challenged by internal tensions, the give and take between these two processes characterises both literary and critical attempts to grasp the complex dynamics of affiliative networks. The second is to consider texts as active sites of meaning creation, which are open to the worlds around them. This entails an awareness of the specific contexts in which they were created, but also an awareness of how texts can gesture beyond these to far broader questions and contexts. Fixing Browning only in his immediate Victorian cultural surroundings obfuscates his interest in exceeding them, just as treating Laing as embedded only in Ghanaian postcolonial history might entail overlooking his commitment to the artistic and ethical project of 'dragging two continents along'.[26] The third is never to lose sight of the 'mediate word' that makes the literary exploration of modes of affiliation possible. The relationship between style and both writers' broader ethical, political, and cultural preoccupations has been emphasised throughout this thesis. To compare texts on a thematic level alone is to ignore how theme is made available to the reader; Laing's and Browning's sensitivity to the ways in which language can support or disrupt affiliative communities ought to be replicated as far as possible. All of these principles indicate the utility of Walkowitz's

[26] Cited in Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 188.

earlier conceptualisation of 'comparison literature', which, together with Said's affiliative criticism, suggests the value of pursuing the congruences of literary and critical practices in comparative contexts.

In *Born Translated*, however, a sensitivity to this congruence is missing. 'In born-translated novels,' Walkowitz argues (the wording echoing the earlier article), 'translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device.'[27] These are works that simultaneously, by virtue of translation, 'address themselves to multiple audiences';[28] rather 'than dodging translation, they try to keep being translated.'[29] Like Said, Walkowitz opposes a '"[p]ossessive collectivism" [which] extends the idea of possessive individualism to nations and ethnic groups'.[30] Instead, the 'born-translated novel […] no longer conform[s] to the logic of national representation.'[31] These novels, 'because they value the history and future of translation, its conduits as well as its blockages, bring circulation into view.'[32]

In *Born Translated*, translation—in place of the earlier article's 'comparison'—becomes the privileged measure of a text's affiliative networks. The preceding chapters have shown how translation represents an important part, though one among others, of a text's relationship to the world. As has been mentioned, to emphasise translation too forcefully might lead to a critical preference for texts that are easy to translate—which would exclude the complex, playful, and multilingual texts of writers like Laing and Browning. It might also involve pre-empting and limiting difference in advance—the naturalisation of market decisions which prevent some kinds of alterity from being made available across languages. Indeed, it is this stress on 'circulation'—at the expense of both style and other kinds of

---

[27] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 4.
[28] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 10.
[29] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 31.
[30] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 25.
[31] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 30.
[32] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 31.

affiliation—that leads Elleke Boehmer to prefer postcolonial criticism to 'world literature studies':

> We look in vain to world literature studies to learn more about the poetics of this writing—about, say, its rhetoric of address, tropes of identity, or paradigms of worldliness. By contrast, though postcolonial studies has conventionally privileged representation including of race, gender, sexuality, amongst other identities, […] it has also addressed, even if at times intermittently, the ways in which the formal and structural qualities of the writing communicate, highlight, and enhance these representations. World literature study instead trains its attention on overarching frameworks of analysis—heuristic concepts like world-systems, literary fields, and modular reading. It seemingly has little use for critical techniques of, say, transnational or cross-cultural reading developed in contiguous fields, including the postcolonial.[33]

Walkowitz's more recent view of 'world literature' as 'a series of emerging works, not a product but a process', inevitably shifts attention away from the 'mediate word' and its 'poetics' and towards more 'heuristic concepts'.[34]

But does this mean that 'world literature' is simply a bad critical tool? Boehmer's stress on the value of 'transnational or cross-cultural reading' has, in this context, another important critical implication. Reading Browning and Laing together demonstrates the utility of critical techniques and emphases outside their usual field of reference. Boehmer's 'postcolonial poetics', for instance, places a vital emphasis on the ways in which 'texts generate new and resistant perspectives by way of juxtaposing, crossing, and sometimes clashing together different or contrasting sets of meaning, often drawn from different cultural worlds.'[35] The preceding chapters—while allowing more room for non-clashing affinities and encounters—work only by virtue of an interest in the interstices between texts, languages, cultures, nations, and individuals that has become a hallmark of postcolonial literary

[33] Elleke Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 147.
[34] Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 31.
[35] Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics*, p. 145.

criticism. Yet Laing's and Browning's different 'sets of meaning' and 'different cultural worlds', when read alongside one another, have mutually enriching effects in ways that suggest an alternative trajectory for 'world literature studies'. Rather than accept Walkowitz's shift from 'comparison' to 'born-translated' literature, a refreshed interest in world literary study attuned to the networks of affiliation made possible by literary writing and conscientious reading can draw attention to similar networks between critical approaches.

Here it is useful to return to the tentative definition of 'world literature' advanced in the introduction to this thesis. It was argued that world literature might be profitably limited to literature that is stylistically, formally, and thematically attuned to the tensions between a restraint, uncertainty, and hesitation about the equalising tendencies of any attempt to think globally on the one hand, and the acceptance that, at times, it is still important to do so on the other. Boehmer's important objection to the 'heuristic concepts' of 'world literature studies' is built into this definition, along with the concession that thinking on a universal scale is still an important part of literary writing. It also serves to accentuate the ways in which texts themselves participate in the production and contestation of affiliative networks.

Returning to the quotation from 'Andrea del Sarto' that began this thesis's reading of Laing and Browning together, both writers succeed in accentuating the value of thinking and experiencing beyond the 'grange whose four walls make [their] world[s]'. Comparison, as a critical tool, provides opportunities to reflect this value in writing about literature too. This is, above all, because both work by means of the 'mediate word'—the latter mediating encounters between the imaginative achievements of writers, the former mediating a reader's access to the manifold affiliative networks made possible by language, narrative, and form. In this sense, criticism can take a lesson from Laing's Bishop Roko, for whom the need 'to free up all the truths locked up in different cultures, to free all the divinity locked up in different

religions, and to face and learn from the most complex ethical beings of the universe' is as essential as it is self-evident.[36]

This lesson involves the recognition that comparison might benefit from a sensitivity to what the philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls 'short circuits'. For Žižek,

> A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a 'minor' author, text, or conceptual apparatus ('minor' should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not 'of lesser quality,' but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a 'lower,' less dignified topic)?[37]

The preceding chapters take this logic a step further: rather than simply re-reading a 'major classic […] through the lens of a "minor" author', they attempt to demonstrate connections between writers conventionally kept separate by treating them equitably—both, at times, acting as a minor 'lens' for the other, and at other times occupying the 'major' position. If these connections appear to be 'short circuits', to be 'faulty', it is only from the 'standpoint' of a criticism that understands comparability filiatively. What is important is the acknowledgement that it is by 'cross[ing] wires that do not usually touch'—as both Laing and Browning continually suggest—that certain paradigms of thinking and reading can be expanded.

From this point of view, it becomes clear that one of the main advantages (particularly for comparative thinking) of 'world literature' as a critical category is that it does not depend to the same extent on the kinds of organisational logic common to other approaches. The limitation described above—texts whose desire to think globally is counterbalanced by

---

[36] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 365.
[37] Žižek, 'Series Foreword', *The Parallax View*, ix-x, p. ix.

tensions of reticence—provides a set of texts that exceeds the frame of analysis which conventionally limits comparability to writers that share a temporal or geographical situation, or those that can be linked by their shared participation in traditions, or by direct influence. Opportunities for stretching the logic of comparability, and for demonstrating affiliative networks between writers with few or no filial bonds, are situated precisely in this excess.

As such, it becomes clear that one potential avenue for comparative practice is to supplant the limitation of comparison according to a given set of rules with the idea of comparison as a movement inherent to a certain kind of interpretation. This can be illustrated by reconsidering the difference between equalising and differentiating readings outlined in the introduction to this thesis. The problem that emerges from the consideration of these differences—between postcolonialism's emphasis on the centrality of difference on the one hand, and the equal, smooth, and global circulation of texts associated with 'world literature' on the other—takes on the form of an antinomy: though apparently irreconcilable, both appear from at least one perspective to provide plausible pictures of literature and the relationship between text and world. This is why Kōjin Karatani argues for the need to pay attention to the 'shifts of stance that occur because of the bracketing operation that is inherent in the *theoretical* stance.'[38] Karatani explains this 'bracketing operation' with the following example. Arguments supporting free will begin with 'the stance of seeing human action by *bracketing* natural causality,' while those supporting determinism begin with 'the stance of seeing the causality of human action by *bracketing* people's assumption of freedom. As long as they are bracketing different domains, they can stand together.'[39] Similarly, it is clear that the emphasis on differentiation requires the bracketing of equalisation, and that the emphasis on equalisation depends upon the bracketing of difference. The solution to this kind of

---

[38] Karatani, *Transcritique*, p. 120.
[39] Karatani, *Transcritique*, p. 117.

problem, as Karatani notes, requires a criticism based upon 'transversal and transpositional movement', a 'critical oscillation' between the two perspectives and their respective bracketing processes.[40] It is only by accepting the need to oscillate between both perspectives that one is able to discern the outline—produced, Karatani argues, through the 'difference' or 'parallax' between them—of the relational system that makes both appear at times as valid interpretative tools.[41]

Similarly, criticism of both Browning and Laing tends to produce antinomic problems. As has been shown across Chapter One and Chapter Two, it has been possible for critics to treat Browning as a British poet, and as a poet somehow non-British. Laing, too, can be made to fit solely within the context of West African literary traditions, and can be described also as working principally from the position of someone who does not fit within this context. What is required, then, is a way of reading capable of oscillating between these poles. Comparison, as a critical tool rather than an institutionalised and rule-based 'approach', is primed for such an oscillation: its very analytical logic requires that criticism turn its attention away from individual texts conceived of as homogenous, closed, and self-sufficient, and towards the relation between different texts made available by a 'transversal and transpositional [interpretative] movement', one that takes into consideration the parallax or difference produced in the process.

This is, perhaps, the main critical lesson made available by oscillating between Browning's and Laing's texts. Reading back and forth between both authors' own elevation of the kind of movement Karatani describes to the level of an aesthetic principle serves to demonstrate a congruence between the affiliative work of literature and the affiliative work of comparison: both depend upon the same movement, and both shift focus to interstices or

---

[40] Karatani, *Transcritique*, p. 4.
[41] Karatani, *Transcritique*, p. 3.

junctures (both those between texts, and those between linguistic and cultural communities, for instance) and the relational networks that make them possible. For both authors, however, the development of new affiliative networks often depends upon the oscillations which take place between poles routinely considered mutually incompatible (such as the foreign and the familiar, the abstract and the concrete, even Laing and Browning themselves). This evidences the importance of Žižek's 'short circuits' to the movement of comparative criticism. Comparison, in the sense described here, requires thinking past 'format[s] of habitual connection'.[42] To recall one of the wordman's phrases, '[l]inking yourself and your ilk alone in the universe was a silly thing to do'.[43] Comparison, as a critical tool, can only provide a starting point for the analysis of affiliative relationships if it is capable of moving beyond any limitation of affiliation according to filial bonds.

[42] Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 151.
[43] Laing, *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 259.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Browning and Laing's Texts:

Browning, Robert, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1871)

——, *Aristophanes' Apology, including A Transcript from Euripides, being the Last Adventure of Balaustion* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1875)

——, *Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper: with other poems* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1876)

——, *The Agamemnon of Æschylus*, ed. by Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1898)

——, *The Complete Works of Robert Browning with variant readings and annotations*, ed. by Roma A. King, Jr., Park Honan, Jack W. Herring, and Allan C. Dooley, 17 vols (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, and Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 1969-2011)

——, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by Richard D. Altick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971)

——, *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Ian Jack *et al.*, 15 vols [incomplete] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983-)

——, *The Poems*, ed. by John Pettigrew, supplemented and completed by Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols (London: Penguin Books, 1990)

——, *L'Anneau et le Livre*, trans. by Georges Connes (Paris: Le Bruit du Temps, 2009)

Laing, B. Kojo, 'African Storm', *Lines Review*, ed. by Robert Fulton, no. 27 (November 1968), p. 22

——, 'Jazz Song', 'Bring It Here', and 'Miles: Poem on a Runway', *A New Book of African Verse*, revised edn, ed. by John Reed and Clive Wake (London, Ibadan, and Nairobi: Heinemann, 1984), pp. 40-1

——, 'History, allow us to speak our minds', *Index on Censorship*, vol. 17, no. 5 (1988), pp. 85-91

——, *Godhorse* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989)

——, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992)

——, 'Vacancy for the post of Jesus Christ', *The Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories*, ed. by Chinua Achebe and C. L. Innes (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1992), pp. 185-196

——, *Die Sonnensucher*, trans. by Thomas Brückner (Munich: Marino Verlag, 1995)

——, 'This is not a paper…', *Caliban*, vol. 7 (2000), pp. 103-106

——, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (Accra: Woeli, 2006)

——, *Search Sweet Country* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2011)

Special Collections and Manuscript Sources:

HEB 33/3, Heinemann Educational Archive, University of Reading Special Collections

Bartoli, Daniel, *De Simboli Transportati al Morale, Nuova edizione corretta ed emendata da Angelo Cerutti* (London: P. Ronlandi, Dulau & Co, J. B. Bailliere, and Sherwood, n. d.). Held in Balliol College Library, Special Collections, box labelled 'Browning relics'.

Quarles, Francis, *Emblemes* (London: 1634). Held in Balliol College Library, Special Collections, box labelled 'Browning relics'.

Secondary Texts:

A Concordance to the Poems and Plays of Robert Browning, compiled by Richard J. Shroyer and Thomas J. Collins, 7 vols (New York: AMS Press, 1996)

Le Robert & Collins Super Senior Grand Dictionnaire, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2000)

The Bible: Authorized King James Version, with an introduction and notes by Robert Caroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

The Examiner, iss. 1632 (May 12, 1839)

Achebe, Chinua, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Pan Books, 1988)

Agbadja, Adolph, 'Heaven is a Fine Place', in *Voices of Ghana: Literary Contributions to the Ghana Broadcasting System 1955-1957*, 2nd edn, ed. by Victoria Ellen Smith (Suffolk: James Currey, 2018), pp. 204-208

Altick, Richard D., and James F. Loucks, II, *Browning's Roman Murder Story: A Reading of "The Ring and the Book"* (Chicago and London: The University Press of Chicago, 1968)

Anyidoho, Kofi, *Earthchild with Brain Surgery* (Accra: Woeli, 1985)

Apter, Emily, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013)

Armah, Ayi Kwei, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Harlow: Pearson, 1988)

Armstrong, Isobel, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)

Arndt, Susan, 'Postkoloniales Palimpsest: Igbo-Relexifizierung und Lexemisierung in der Englishsprachigen Nigerianischen Literatur', in *Exophonie: Anders-Sprachigkeit (in) der Literatur*, ed. by Susan Arndt, Dirk Naguschewski, and Robert Stockhammer (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007), pp. 149-164

Arnold, Matthew, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

——, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose*, ed. by P. J. Keating (London: Penguin Books, 2015)

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)

Ashcroft, Bill, 'Bridging the Silence: Inner Translation and the Metonymic Gap', in *Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literatures: Multilingual Contexts, Translational Texts*, ed. by Simona Bertacco (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 17-31

Azevedo, Álvares de, *Noite na Taverna: Texto Completo* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Ouro, 1965)

Bagehot, Walter, 'Mr. Browning's New Poem', *Tinsley's Magazine*, 3 (Jan 1869), pp. 665-674

——, *Selected Essays of Walter Bagehot* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1927)

——, *The English Constitution*, ed. by Miles Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984)

Ball, Stephen J., 'Imperialism, Social Control and the Colonial Curriculum in Africa', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1983), pp. 237-263

Barclay, D., *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy 1840-61* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Bartel, Roland, 'Shelley and Burke's Swinish Multitude', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 18 (1969), pp. 4-9

Barthes, Roland, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Vintage Books, 2010)

Baumgarten, Stefan, and Jordi Cornellà-Detrell, 'Translation and the Economies of Power', in *Translation and Global Spaces of Power*, ed. by Stefan Baumgarten and Jordi Cornellà-Detrell (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019), pp. 11-26

Bawa, Sylvia, 'Christianity, tradition, and gender inequality in postcolonial Ghana', *African Geographical Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2019), pp. 54-66

Bayley, John, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976)

Beer, Gillian, 'Rhyming as comedy: body, ghost, and banquet', in *English Comedy*, ed. by Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 180-196.

Begam, Richard, and Michael Valdez Moses, eds., *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

Bennett, Tony, and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (London: Macmillan, 1987)

Benvenuto, Richard, 'Lippo and Andrea: The Pro and Contra of Browning's Realism', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 13, iss. 4 (1973), pp. 643-652

Berdoe, Edward, *Browning and the Christian Faith: The Evidences of Christianity from Browning's Point of View* (London: George Allen, 1896)

Berger, Stefan, 'Narrating the Nation: Historiography and Other Genres', in *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, ed. by Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, and Andrew Mycock (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 1-16

Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994)

Biagini, Eugenio F., 'Popular Liberals, Gladstonian Finance, and the Debate on Taxation, 1860-1874', in *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain 1850-1914*, ed. by Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 134-162

Birmingham, David, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Father of African Nationalism*, revised edn (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998)

Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

——, 'The World and the Postcolonial', *European Review*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2014), pp. 299-308

——, *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Bonaparte, Louis-Napoleon, *Receuil historique des pensées, opinions, discours, proclamations, lettres et beaux traits de Napoléon III* (Paris: Appert et Vavasseur, 1858)

Breen, Keith, and Shane O'Neill, 'Introduction: A Postnationalist Era?', in *After the Nation?: Critical Reflections on Nationalism and Postnationalism*, ed. by Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-18

Brown, Judith, 'Style', in *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, ed. by Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Colombia University Press, 2016), pp. 214-232

Brown, Nicholas, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

Buden, Boris, Stefan Nowotny, Sherry Simon, Ashok Bery, and Michael Cronin, 'Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem, and Responses', *Translation Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2009), pp. 196-219

Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Bury, John, 'Browning's Philosophy', in *Browning Studies, being Select Papers by Members of the Browning Society*, ed. by Edward Berdoe, 2nd edn (London: George Allen, 1899), pp. 28-46

Cardoza, Anthony L., 'The Risorgimento', in *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics*, ed. by Erik Jones and Gianfranco Pasquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 16-24

Carlyle, Thomas, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1887)

Carr, Cheri Lynne, *Deleuze's Kantian Ethos: Critique as a Way of Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018)

Carver, Terrell, 'Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (1608) and Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): The Constitutional is the Personal', *Shakespeare*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2018), pp. 174-180

Cassin, Barbara, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil/Le Robert, 2004)

Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan, '"The Making of the Working Class": E. P. Thompson and Indian History', in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. by Vinayak Chaturvedi (London and New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 50-71

Cheeke, Stephen, *Transfiguration: The Religion of Art in Nineteenth-Century Literature Before Aestheticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

Chesterton, G. K., *Robert Browning* (New York: Macmillan, 1903)

Chibber, Vivek, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2013)

Clayton, Alex, *The Body in Holywood Slapstick* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007)

Clingman, Stephen, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

Collini, Stefan, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

——, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)

Collins, R. G., 'Browning's Practical Prelate: The Lesson of "Bishop Blougram's Apology"', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1975), pp. 1-20

Cook, A. K., *A Commentary Upon Browning's* The Ring and the Book (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966)

Cooper, Brenda, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998)

Critchley, Simon, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Culler, Jonathan, 'The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters,* ed. by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 1-16

Currey, James, *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series & The Launch of African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 2008)

Dabashi, Hamid, *Being a Muslim in the World* (New York: Palgrave, 2013)

Dako, Kari, 'Code-switching and lexical borrowing: which is what in Ghanaian English?', *English Today*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2002), pp. 48-54

Damrosch, David, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003)

——, *How to Read World Literature* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2009)

Deandrea, Pietro, '"New Worlds, New Wholes": Kojo Laing's Narrative Quest for a Social Renewal', *African Literature Today*, vol. 20 (1996), pp. 158-178

——, *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphosis of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002)

Dei, George J. Sefa, *Schooling and Education in Africa: The Case of Ghana* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004)

Dimock, Wai Chee, 'Literature for the Planet', *PMLA*, vol. 116, no. 1 (2001), pp. 173-188

Doloughan, Fiona, *English as a Literature in Translation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016)

——, 'Translation as a Motor of Critique and Invention in Contemporary Literature: The Case of Xiaolu Guo', in *Multilingual Currents in Literature, Translation, and Culture*, ed. by Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 150-167

Drew, Philip, 'Browning and Philosophy', in *Writers and their Background: Robert Browning*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1974), pp. 104-141

Drury, Annmarie, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Duffin, Henry Charles, *Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956)

Eliot, George, *Felix Holt: The Radical*, ed. by Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin Books, 1995)

——, 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cummings (1855)' , in *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*, ed. by Gertrude Himmelfarb (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 119-144

——, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Thomas A. Noble, with an introduction and notes by Josie Billington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Empson, William, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949)

——, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Penguin Books, 1995)

Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1990)

Finlayson, Iain, *Browning: A Private Life* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004)

Fraser, Robert, *Lifting the Sentence: A Poetics of Postcolonial Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

Gallop, G. I., ed., *Pigs' Meat: Selected Writings of Thomas Spense, Radical and Pioneer Land Reformer* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1982)

Gifford, Paul, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004)

Gilmour, Rachael, and Tamar Steinitz, 'Introduction', in *Multilingual Currents in Literature, Translation, and Culture*, ed. by Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-15

Goodlad, Lauren M. E., *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Gramling, David, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016)

Green, Jonathon, *Slang Down the Ages: The Historical Development of Slang* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1993)

Griffiths, Eric, *If Not Critical*, ed. by Freya Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

——, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Hair, Donald S., *Robert Browning's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999)

——, ‘A Note on Meter, Music, and Meaning in Robert Browning’s *Fifine at the Fair*’, *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2001), pp. 25-36

Harrison, Nicholas, *Our Civilizing Mission: The Lessons of Colonial Education* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019)

Hawlin, Stefan, ‘Reading Browning Intertextually: “A Toccata of Gallupi’s” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn”’, *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2015), pp. 263-279

Hayot, Eric, ‘Vanishing Horizons: Problems in the Comparison of China and the West’, *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. by Ali Behded and Dominic Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 88-107

Hazareesingh, Sudhir, *The Saint-Napoleon: Celebrations of Sovereignty in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004)

Hennelly, Jr., Mark M., ‘Victorian Carnivalesque’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 30, iss. 1 (2002), pp. 365-381

Hensley, Nathan K., *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

Hernández, Ellie D., *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009)

Hetzler, Leo A., ‘The Case of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Browning and Napoleon III’, *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 15, no. 4 (1977), pp. 335-350

Hill, Geoffrey, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Hodell, Charles W. (ed.), *The Old Yellow Book: Source of Browning’s The Ring and the Book in Complete Photo-Reproduction*, 2nd edn (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908)

Holquist, Michael, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)

Hood, T. L., ed., *Letters of Robert Browning* (London: John Murray, 1932)

Hopkins, Gerard Manley, *The Poetical Works*, ed. by Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)

Ipsen, Gesche, ‘Part II: Negotiation, Introduction’, in *Provocation and Negotiation: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, ed. by Gesche Ipsen, Timothy Matthews, and Dragana Obradović (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 121-3

Jack, Ian, *Browning’s Major Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973)

Jackson, Kofi Abaka, *When Gun Rules: A Soldier’s Testimony* (Accra: Woeli, 1999)

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991)

Jaouad, Hédi A., *Browning Upon Arabia: A Moveable East* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Jarvis, Simon, ‘Superversive Poetics: Browning’s *Fifine at the Fair*’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 1 (2016), pp. 121-141

Johnson, Samuel, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols (London: J. & P. Knapton; T. & T. Longman; C. Hitch & L. Hawes; A. Millar; and R. & J. Dodsley, 1755)

Kalliney, Peter J., *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Kalu, Ogbu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Karatani, Kōjin, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003)

——, and Joel Wainwright, '"Critique is impossible without moves": An interview of Kojin Karatani by Joel Wainwright', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2012), pp. 30-52

——, *History and Repetition*, ed. by Seiji M. Lippit (New York: Colombia University Press, 2012)

Karlin, Daniel, ed., *Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett: The Courtship Correspondence, 1845-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

Kasperska, Iwona, 'Las Cartas y Diarios de Guatemala de Andrzej Bobkowsku como Ejemplos de Traducción Intercultural', *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2010), pp. 55-67

Kelley, Philip, Edward Hagan, and Linda M. Lewis, eds., *The Brownings' Correspondence*, vol. 25 (Winfield: Wedgestone Press, 2017)

Kirsch, Adam, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016)

Klein, Tobias Robert, 'Kojo Laing and the Cultural Specifics of an African Modernity', in *Texts, Tasks, and Theories: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures*, ed. by Tobias Robert Klein, Ulrike Auga, and Viola Prüschenk (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 37-57

Korg, Jacob, *Browning and Italy* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983)

Kraft, C. H., and A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Hausa* (London: The English Universities Press, 1973)

Kropp-Dakubu, M. E., '"Search Sweet Country" and the Language of Authentic Being', *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 24, no. 1 (1993), pp. 19-35

——, ‘Kojo Laing’, in *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers: Third Series*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors and Reinhard Sander (Detroit and London: Gale Research, 1996), pp. 140-149

——, *Korle Meets the Sea: A Sociolinguistic History of Accra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

——, ‘Kojo Laing’s Poetry and the Struggle for God’, in *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film*, ed. by Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (*Matatu* 21-22; Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 235-241

——, ‘The historical dynamic of multilingualism in Accra’, in *The Languages of Urban Africa*, ed. by Fiona McLaughlin (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 19-31

Lambert, José, ‘Translation and Mass Communication in the Age of Globalisation’, in *Translation and Global Spaces of Power*, ed. by Stefan Baumgarten and Jordi Cornellà-Detrell (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2018), pp. 127-143

Larsen, Timothy, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Lazarus, Neil, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990)

Li, Xiaofan Amy, *Comparative Encounters between Artaud, Michaux and the* Zhuangzi: *Rationality, Cosmology and Ethics* (London: Legenda, 2015)

Little, Daniel, *New Contributions to the Philosophy of History* (New York: Springer, 2010)

Lowry, Howard Foster, ed., *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932)

MacDonald, Ian P., '"Let Us All Mutate Together": Cracking the Code in Laing's *Big Bishop Roko*', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2016), pp. 313-328

Macken, Valérie, 'Matthew Arnold and the Use of Comparison', in *Provocation and Negotiation: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, ed. by Gesche Ipsen, Timothy Matthews, and Dragana Obradović (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 253-270

Maja-Pearce, Adewale, 'Interview with Kojo Laing', *Wasafiri*, vol. 3, nos. 6-7 (1987), pp. 27-29

Marx, Karl, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings*, vol. 2, ed. by David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2010)

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party: A Modern Edition* (London and New York: Verso, 2016)

Maynard, John, 'Robert Browning's Evangelical Heritage', *Browning Institute Studies,* vol. 3 (1975), pp. 1-16

McAleer, Edward C., ed., *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951)

McKenzie, D. F., *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

McMillan, James F., *Napoleon III* (London and New York: Longman, 1991)

Melchiori, Barbara, 'Browning's Don Juan', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1966), pp. 416-440

——, 'Browning in Italy', in *Robert Browning: Writers and their Background*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1974), pp. 168-183

Meyer, Birgit, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999)

Mill, John Stewart, *On Liberty* (New York: Cosimo, 2005)

Miller, J. Hillis, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000)

——, 'Robert Browning', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets*, ed. by Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 392-407

Morgan, Edwin, *The Midnight Letterbox: Selected Correspondence 1950-2010*, ed. by James McGonigal and John Coyle (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015)

Morton, Heather, '"A Church of Himself": Liberal Skepticism and Consistent Character in "Bishop Blougram's Apology"', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2007), pp. 29-48

Morwood, James, ed., *Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary: Latin-English*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Mufti, Aamir R., *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018)

Murray-Miller, Gavin, 'A Conflicted Sense of Nationality: Napoleon III's Arab Kingdom and the Paradoxes of French Multiculturalism', *French Colonial History*, vol. 15 (2014), pp. 1-38

Neville-Sington, Pamela, *Robert Browning: A Life After Death* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004)

Newell, Stephanie, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction: 'Thrilling Discoveries in Conjugal Life' & Other Tales* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000)

——, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Newman, John Henry, *The Idea of a University*, ed. by Frank M. Turner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996)

Ngaboh-Smart, Francis, *Beyond Empire and Nation: Postnational Arguments in the Fiction of Nuruddin Farah and B. Kojo Laing* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004)

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

Nickels, Joel, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Nkrumah, Kwame, *Axioms of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Panaf Books, 2003)

——, *The Struggle Continues* (London: Panaf Books, 2006)

——, 'Africa's Resources', in *The Ghana Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Kwasi Konadu and Clifford C. Campbell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 307-310

——, 'Independence Speech', in *The Ghana Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Kwasi Konadu and Clifford C. Campbell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 301-302

Obradović, Dragana, 'Part I: Provocation, Introduction', in *Provocation and Negotiation: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, ed. by Gesche Ipsen, Timothy Matthews, and Dragana Obradović (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 1-4

Owusu, Maxwell, 'Rebellion, Revolution, and Tradition: Reinterpreting Coups in Ghana', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1989), pp. 372-397

Partridge, Eric, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001)

Patterson, Annabel, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989)

Philip, M. NourbeSe, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, with a foreword by Evie Shockley (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014)

Porter, James I., ed., *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014)

Price, Roger, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Quayson, Ato, 'Magical Realism and the African Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. by F. Abiola Irele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 159-176

——, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014)

Reynolds, Matthew, *The Realms of Verse, 1830-1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

——, 'Browning and Translationese', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2003), pp. 97-128

——, 'Browning's Forms of Government', in *Robert Browning in Contexts*, ed. John Woolford (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1998), pp. 118-147

——, *Translation: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

——, 'Introduction', *Prismatic Translation*, ed. by Matthew Reynolds (Oxford: Legenda, 2019), pp. 1-18

Ricks, Christopher (ed.), *The Poems of Tennyson: In Three Volumes*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (Harlow: Longman, 1987)

——, *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

——, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002)

Ripley, John, Coriolanus *on Stage in England and America, 1609-1994* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998)

Rose, Richard, 'William James Millar Mackenzie 1906-1996', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 101 (1999), pp. 465-485

Ryals, Clyde de L., 'Browning's Amphibian: *Don Juan at Home*', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1969), pp. 210-217

Ryerse, Barbara, ‘Browning’s *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*: Formal Verse Satire and the Donnean Influence’, *Victorian Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2003), pp. 49-69

Said, Edward W., *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage Books, 1991)

——, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994)

——, *Reflections on Exile: and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2012)

——, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2019)

Saint-Amour, Paul, ‘The Medial Humanities: Toward a Manifesto for Meso-Analysis’, *Modernism/modernity*, 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0092> [accessed 27 November 2019] (para. 10 of 11)

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014)

Saussy, Haun, ‘Comparative Literature?’, *PMLA*, vol. 118, no. 2 (2003), pp. 336-341

Saville, Julia F., ‘“Soul Talk”: Networks of Political Poetry in a Trans-Channel Literary Triangle’, *Victorian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2013), pp. 299-308

Schad, John, *Victorians in Theory: From Derrida to Browning* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999)

Scharm, Heike, and Natalia Matta-Jara, ‘Introduction’, in *Postnational Perspectives on Contemporary Hispanic Literature*, ed. by Heike Scharm and Natalia Matta-Jara (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), pp. 1-25

Schwarz, Roberto. *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. by John Gledson (London and New York: Verso, 1992)

Shakespeare, William, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ed. by G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

——, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, ed. by R. B. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Silva, Alexandre Rocha da, and Júlio César Augusto do Valle, ‘O Mérito e o Mito da Democracia Racial: Tópicos de uma Discussão’, *Revista Internacional de Educación para la Justicia Social*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2014), pp. 235-250

Simon, Sherry, *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012)

Siskind, Mariano, ‘The Globalization of the Novel and the Novelization of the Global: A Critique of World Literature’, *Comparative Literature*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2010), pp. 336-360

Skinner, Quentin, ‘Hermeneutics and the Role of History’, *New Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1975), pp. 209-232

Sloterdijk, Peter, *Spheres, Volume I: Bubbles,* trans. by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2011)

——, *Spheres, Volume II: Globes*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2014)

Small, Helen, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Smith, Neil, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, 3rd edn (London and New York: Verso, 2010)

Soja, Edward W., *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989)

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, ‘The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview’, in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. by Vinayak Chaturvedi (London and New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 324-340

——, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008)

Stewart, Garrett, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007)

——, *The Deed of Reading: Literature, Writing, Language, Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015)

——, *The Value of Style in Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Tanikella, Leela, 'The Politics of Hybridity: Race, Gender, and Nationalism in Trinidad', *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2003), pp. 153-181

Tholoniat, Yann, *Polyphonie et Décentrement dans The Ring and the Book* (Reims: Presses Universitaires de Reims, 2004)

Thompson, R., *To the public, alias the 'swinish multitude'* (London: printed for Daniel Isaac Eaton, 1794)

Trager, George L., and Bernard Bloch, 'The Syllabic Phonemes of English', *Language: Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1941), pp. 223-246

Tucker, Herbert F. 'Unsettled Scores: Meter and Play in Two Music Poems by Browning', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2014), pp. 24-52

Turner, W. Craig, 'Art, Artist, and Audience in "A Toccata of Gallupi's"', *Browning Institute Studies*, vol. 15, Meeting the Brownings (1987), pp. 123-129

Tymoczko, Maria, 'Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation', in *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 19-40

Vasari, Giorgio, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Vattimo, Gianni, with Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. by William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009)

Vološinov, V. N., *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. by Ladislav Matejka and R. Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986)

Walckenaër, M. C. A. (ed.), *Oevres Complètes de Jean de la Fontaine* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1840)

Walkowitz, Rebecca L., *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)

——, 'Comparison Literature', *New Literary History*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2009), pp. 567-582

——, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015)

Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015)

Watkins, Charlotte Crawford, 'The "Abstruser Themes" of Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*', *PMLA*, vol. 74, no. 4 (1959), pp. 426-437

Watkins, Geoff, 'The Appeal of Bonapartism', in *Marx's* Eighteenth Brumaire: *(Post)modern Interpretations*, ed. by Mark Cowling and James Martin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 163-176

Whiting, Lilian, *The Brownings: Their Life and Art* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911)

Whitla, William, *The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Robert Browning's Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963)

Wilde, Oscar, *Intentions: The Decay of Lying, Pen Pencil and Poison, The Critic as Artist, The Truth of Masks* (New York: Brentano's, 1905)

Wilson, Ross, 'Browning's Balancing Acts', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 337-348

Wilt, Judith, 'The Laughter of Caponsacchi', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1980), pp. 337-357

Winters, Yvor, *In Defence of Reason* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960)

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edn, trans by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009)

Wolffe, John, ‘A transatlantic perspective: prostestantism and national identities in mid-nineteenth-century Britain and the United States’, in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-c. 1850*, ed. by Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 291-309

Woolford, John, and Daniel Karlin, *Robert Browning* (London and New York: Longman, 1996)

Woolford, John, *Browning the Revisionary* (London: Macmillan, 1988)

——, *Robert Browning* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007)

Wright, Derek, ed., *Contemporary African Fiction* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University African Studies Series, 1997)

Young, Robert J. C., *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995)

Zabus, Chantal, *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*, 2nd edn (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007)

Zimmern, Helen, ed., *Epic of Kings: Stories Retold from Firdusi* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1883)

Žižek, Slavoj, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009)

Zupančič, Alenka, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2008)