WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

ROBERT BROWNING

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NO English poet of comparable stature owes so little to modern criticism as Robert Browning. He has not been forgotten by the common reader, but the critics—and particularly the more influential critics—have failed to do him justice. While no one (so far as I know) has offered to show us better poems of their kind than 'My Last Duchess' and 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb', hardly a single critic of authority has seriously inquired what position the creation of such masterpieces earns Browning in the hierarchy of the English poets. What makes this neglect particularly surprising is the manifest debt of modern poetry to Browning's work. While the influence of Hopkins on modern poetry has been exaggerated, that of Browning has almost always been underestimated. It is true that Ezra Pound has more than once paid tribute to Browning, 'the soundest of all the Victorians';[1] but Pound's pupil, T. S. Eliot, seems to have felt a strong temperamental antipathy to Browning, and this antipathy failed to provoke any of the penetrating half-truths which often render his hostile criticism so suggestive. Nothing but the hypnotic influence of Eliot's criticism can explain the fact that Browning's work has so frequently been ignored or depreciated by academic critics who pride themselves on being engaged in the same struggle as the modern creative writer. Yet unless we study the manner in which Browning dealt with the principal problems confronting the Victorian poet our understanding of the poetry of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is certain to be the poorer.

The first of these problems was the problem of subject-matter: what was the modern poet to write about? The old distinction between high and low subject-matter had gone, as Browning acknowledged when he took a commonplace murder story as the subject of his most ambitious poem, *The Ring and the Book.* External action (now) must derive its dignity from its importance to the mind of man. But what exactly are the implications of this fact? Is the poet to 'dig where he stands' (as Browning once put it[1]), and write from within his own mind, like Wordsworth? If he is to go elsewhere for his subjects, where is he to go? What is he to do about the territory of the imagination which once belonged to the poet and the dramatist, but which the novelist now seems to have taken over as of right? Is the poet to avoid all subjects which are suitable for prose fiction, so resigning his claim to a great deal of his traditional subject-matter? Or is he to try to evolve a method of dealing with some of this subject-matter (at least) in his verse? The problem of the Long Poem, which so worried the Victorians and which still worries many poets today, is part of the whole problem of the poetic kinds. From the time of Spenser to the early nineteenth century English poets had taken it for granted that poetry could be classified according to certain recognized categories—love lyric, elegy, epic, and the rest: a belief which did not stultify true originality, as new kinds may be evolved and every successful poem extends the definition of its genre. By the 1830s, however, when Browning stood on the threshold of his career as a poet, the old kinds appeared archaic and artificial. 'I am inclined to think that we want new *forms*, as well as thoughts', Elizabeth Barrett was to write in one of her first letters to him. 'The old gods are dethroned. Why should we go back to the antique moulds?'[2] To what 'new forms', then, was the modern poet to turn? If we leave aside Browning's plays, we find that remarkably few of his poems can immediately be classified, except in the most general way as lyrics or dramatic monologues. As the editor of his poetry soon discovers, Browning himself had great difficulty in classifying his poems; and so we find a poem like 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation', early printed among the 'Dramatic Lyrics', moved first to the category of 'Dramatic Romances', and finally to that of 'Men and Women'.[3] The problem of discovering and exploiting the appropriate 'new forms' was in a sense the central problem of Browning's poetic career, and it is necessarily the central theme of this lecture.

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[1] *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot, 1954, p. 278.

Browning's answer to these questions derives from a momentous discovery: the discovery that all poetry is essentially dramatic. That was of course no new discovery, but a rediscovery of the truth summed up by Sir Philip Sidney when he pointed out that 'the Poet . . . nothing affirmes'.[1] After Mill's severe critique of *Pauline* Browning seems to have determined to escape at all costs from the romantic prison of subjectivity.[2] The poet must turn his back on the mirror, look out of the window, and walk into the street: that is the theme of 'How It Strikes A Contemporary'. He concluded, as we may deduce from his poetic practice, that any subject-matter is acceptable to the poet, provided that it can be dealt with dramatically—in terms, that is, of its effect on some particular human being. It follows that his poetry has important affinities not only with dramatic poetry (in the usual sense) as well as with non-dramatic poetry, but also with prose as well as with verse. As we read *The Ring and the Book* we are inevitably reminded of the novel—and above all of the work of the writer who followed his inner prompting to 'dramatize', the master of the point of view, Henry James: it is no surprise to find that James wrote an article with the precise title, 'The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*'. As we read the shorter poems, and particularly those which Browning termed his 'Dramatic Romances',[3] we are inevitably reminded of the art of the short story. Perhaps it is because there are so few great short stories in English that these short-story-poems have recently attracted so little notice: we do not really know how to come to terms with them. Yet it is obvious that poems of the calibre of 'A Light Woman' and 'The Statue and the Bust' deserve our most respectful attention. Browning's lyrics are 'dramatic', too, and while their inspiration is often in a sense personal—we notice the fine burst of love poetry after his marriage (love poetry in the form both of lyrics and of short-story-poems)—he is careful to dramatize a great deal, so that a poem can seldom be pinned to any particular known experience of his own.[1]

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[1] Browning's *Essay on Shelley* (edited by H. F. B. Brett-Smith, with Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry* and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*), 1921, p. 65.

[2] *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, 1899, vol. i, pp. 45–6 (subsequently referred to as *Letters*). [3] Cf. p. 221n[3] and p. 223 below.

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[1] *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, edited by G. Gregory Smith, 1904, vol. i, p. 184.

[2] It is only fair to add that the Poet in *Pauline* was not intended as a direct representation of Browning himself. In the copy with Mill's annotations Browning wrote that the poem had been written 'in pursuance of a foolish plan . . . which had for its object the enabling me to assume and realize I know not how many different characters;—meanwhile the world was never to guess that "Brown, Smith, Jones & Robinson" . . . the respective authors of this poem, the other novel, such an opera, such a speech &c &c were no other than one and the same individual. The present abortion was the first work of the *Poet* of the batch, who would have been more legitimately *myself* than most of the others; but I surrounded him with all manner of (to my then notion) poetical accessories, and had planned quite a delightful life for him' (*A Browning Handbook*, by William Clyde De Vane, 2nd ed. 1955, p. 41, checked against the manuscript in the Victoria and Albert Museum Library). Dr. Masao Miyoshi has argued that the direct influence of Mill's remarks on Browning has been exaggerated: *Victorian Studies, IX* (1965–6), pp. 154–63.

[3] *Bells and Pomegranates, No. VII* (1845) is a collection of short poems entitled *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (*No. III* having been entitled *Dramatic Lyrics*). In vol. ii of the *Poems* (1849) the contents of these two collections were assembled together as 'Dramatic Romances and Lyrics'. In the *Poetical Works* of 1863, however, twenty-six of these poems (several of them from the original *Dramatic Lyrics*) were printed in a separate section under the title 'Romances'. In the collected editions of 1868 and 1889–94 these same poems are entitled 'Dramatic Romances', but 'Johannes Agricola' is omitted. It is clear that Browning's general aim was to classify as 'Romances' rather than 'Lyrics' such of the shorter poems as are more definitely narrative in nature. All the poems I describe as 'short-story-poems' are to be found among the (Dramatic) Romances.

The result of this process of dramatizing is that an imaginary person comes between the poet and the reader: the nature of the poem—beyond the fact that it is essentially 'dramatic'—will depend on the importance of this imaginary person, the degree to which he is developed by the poet. In many of the lyrics and short-story-poems it is sufficient to notice that the speaker is a man (or occasionally a woman) in a particular situation: in these, as in a comparable poem by Donne (a poet whom Browning greatly admired) our attention is concentrated on the emotion expressed or the story told. In other short-story-poems the character of the speaker becomes more important, sometimes—as in 'My Last Duchess'—almost as important as the story itself. From these to the poems that we usually term the 'dramatic monologues' is only a short step. In certain of the monologues, as in 'Andrea del Sarto', a story is told: in others, as in 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb', there is little true story and all our interest focuses on the character of the speaker, which is more and more fully revealed as the monologue progresses.

Two remarkable early poems illustrate the affinity and the distinction between what I have termed the short-story-poems and the dramatic monologues proper. 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' were both written in 1834 or 1835, when Browning was in his early twenties. They were first published in a periodical called *The Monthly Repository* as two independent poems: later, in the *Dramatic Lyrics*,[1] they were grouped together under the title 'Madhouse Cells':[2] but in his final rearrangement of his poems he classified 'Porphyria's Lover' as a 'Dramatic Romance' and 'Johannes Agricola' as one of his 'Men and Women'—a category (in collected editions of his poems) quite distinct from the miscellaneous contents of the great two-volume collection published under that title in 1855.[3] While each of these two poems is a dramatic monologue in form, they are not really poems of the same kind. 'Porphyria's Lover' is a brilliantly disquieting short story, in which the speaker describes how the girl whom he loved came to him one evening from a 'gay feast' to which he had not been invited,

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[1] Cf. Helen Gardner on the love poetry of Donne: 'Donne, I believe, was stimulated by situations, some literary, some imagined, some reflecting the circumstances of his own life, by things seen on the stage or read in the study, or said by friends in casual conversation, to make poems. Whatever experiences literary or actual lie behind his poems have been transmuted in his imagination, which has worked on them to produce poems that are single and complete, as a play is single and complete. While other poets were producing sequences which, whether truly or not, at least purported to be based on their own fortunes in love, Donne produced a corpus of discrete poems. No links are suggested between them.' *John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, edited by Helen Gardner, 1965, p. xviii. In *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (it is interesting to notice) Elizabeth Barrett Browning produced a sonnet sequence describing her love for her husband.

> And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
> And all her yellow hair displaced,
> And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
> And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair.

He wonders how to prolong his happiness. The poem turns on the words 'I found / A thing to do', and ends by describing how he strangled the girl with her own long hair. The last lines reveal the insanity of the speaker. Johannes Agricola, the founder of the Antinomians, is also portrayed as a madman, but the monologue in which he reveals his insanity contains no plot. The final classification of these two poems makes it clear that Browning came to see the distinction of genre between them.

As we study Browning's development as a poet, these two short poems stand out as being of central importance. When we compare them with the early long poems, and with the dramas, we are bound to be struck by their remarkable economy and the absence of all affectation and obscurity. A reader who knew only the longer works might well have concluded that there were two things of which Browning was absolutely incapable—brevity, and clarity. These two poems would prove him wrong. Whereas in *Paracelsus* Browning allows himself over 4,000 lines, and yet fails to delineate a character, in 'Johannes Agricola' he succeeds brilliantly in only sixty lines: whereas in *Sordello* Browning allows himself nearly 6,000 lines, and yet fails to tell a story, in 'Porphyria's Lover' he once again succeeds in the brief compass of sixty lines. Of course there is a difference in the nature of the stories told, in the manner and extent to which the characters are delineated; but that is just the point. Is it self-evident that the elaborate development of the longer poems is in any way superior to the startling economy of the shorter? As we study Browning's work we find time and again that brevity was his friend, amplitude his most dangerous enemy.

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[1] *Bells and Pomegranates, No. III* (1842).

[2] As they were in the two-volume *Poems* of 1849.

[3] In the collected editions of 1863, 1868, and 1889–94 the fifty-one poems contained in *Men and Women* (1855) were distributed among the sections entitled '(Dramatic) Lyrics', '(Dramatic) Romances', and 'Men and Women'. The twelve poems in this last category in 1863 included 'Karshish', 'Pictor Ignotus', 'Fra Lippo Lippi', 'Andrea del Sarto', 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb', 'Bishop Blougram's Apology', and 'Cleon'. 'Johannes Agricola' was added in 1868, no further change being made in 1889–94. It should be noted that Browning made no attempt to redistribute the contents of *Dramatis Personæ* (1864), which was reprinted as a collection in 1868 and 1889–94.

If it seems surprising that Browning did not immediately proceed to exploit this exciting new vein of the short dramatic poem, we must remember that his ambition was still prompting him to the composition of some large-scale work. More than once he insisted to Elizabeth Barrett that what he had published up to 1845 gave '*no* knowledge' of his true potential. His shorter poems were 'mere and very escapes of my inner power'. Ahead of him lay 'what I hope I was born to begin and end—"R. B. a poem" ', a 'great building' in the construction of which he would depend on her counsel and encouragement.[1] On at least one occasion we find him referring to his own career in a Miltonic period which emphasizes the seriousness with which he took his poetry: 'It is not since yesterday, nor ten nor twenty years before, that I began to look into my own life, and study its end, and requirements, what would turn to its good or its loss.'[2] Although he could not see his way forward with anything like the clarity of the young Milton, it is evident that he had planned his whole life as that of a man devoted to poetry. For that reason the writing of a number of short poems would no more have seemed adequate to him at this point than it did to Keats when he set out to explore his own mind and imagination and wrote *Endymion*. The young Browning wanted to investigate human life and human destiny more profoundly than could be done in a brief dramatic poem. In *Sordello*, accordingly, as in

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[1] *Letters*, vol. i, pp. 17, 127.

[2] *Letters*, vol. i, p. 199.

Paracelsus, he was concerned with 'the incidents in the development of a soul',[1] while in *Strafford* and the other dramas which succeeded it he made his bid to portray character in action.

During the seven or eight years between the composition of the first brief dramatic poems and that of 'My Last Duchess' Browning seems to have written only one other short poem of this sort, the 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister'; but he also visited Italy for the first time—the country which was henceforth to exercise such a profound influence on his greatest poetry; and he wrote thousands of couplets and thousands of lines of dramatic blank verse. It is not easy to estimate the value to Browning himself of writing *Sordello*, but it is clear that the experience of writing plays combined with that of travelling and meeting a steadily increasing number of men and women to confirm his tendency to study the varieties of human character and human utterance.[2] Of his dramatic attempts, so unsuccessful on the whole, the one which is of the greatest interest in relation to his later work is undoubtedly *Pippa Passes*, a novel adaptation of the fashionable 'Dramatic Scene' in which the poet is released from the necessity of devising a full action and is therefore free to concentrate on isolated moments in which tension is high and character is revealed.

In the year 1842 Browning wrote 'My Last Duchess', a poem in which enough tension and action for any 'Dramatic Scene' are concentrated in fifty-six lines spoken by one man. It is not surprising that he should have returned to the short dramatic poem at this time. *Sordello* had failed ignominiously, while his attempts to prove himself a dramatist were causing Macready increasing dismay. In this situation Browning read Tennyson's *Poems* and found himself confronted by the spectacle of a poet of his own generation publishing a collection of short poems which was to prove the foundation-stone of a great reputation. An important letter to Alfred Domett proves that Browning studied Tennyson's poems with close attention, and it is particularly interesting to notice that he had access to a copy belonging to someone who had 'luckily transcribed from the proof-sheet'. '*One* line . . . I *have* restored', Browning wrote when he sent a copy to Domett: '—see and wonder!'[1] While no one today is likely to share Browning's strange view that Tennyson had spoilt his poems by his revisions, the fact that he read Tennyson's work with such attention means that he was in effect studying the manner in which a poet very different from himself was trying to answer the problems facing the Victorian poet, the problem of subject-matter, the problem of genre, the problem of audience, the problem of style. One remark in the letter is of outstanding interest:

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[1] Dedicatory Preface to *Sordello* in 1863 and subsequent collected editions.

[2] Cf. a very interesting passage in a letter from Joseph Arnould to Alfred Domett, written in 1843: 'Browning's conversation is as remarkably good as his books, though so different: in conversation anecdotal, vigorous, showing great thought and reading, but in his language most simple, energetic, and accurate. From the habit of good and extensive society he has improved in this respect wonderfully. We remember him as hardly doing justice to himself in society; now it is quite the reverse.' *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett*, edited by Frederic G. Kenyon, 1906, p. 86. A sentence or two earlier Arnould remarks that 'Browning says [Tennyson] is living in seclusion in a remote watering-place, seeing no man, and having his letters directed (of all conceivable beings) to a muffin-man.... If 'tis true, 'tis pity, for the very thing Tennyson most wants is more intercourse with his fellow-creatures.'

> How good when good he is—that noble 'Locksley Hall', for instance—and the 'St. Simeon Stylites'—which I think perfect.

'St. Simeon Stylites' is a study of a religious fanatic, in the form of a monologue spoken a few hours before his death, which has something in common with 'Johannes Agricola', not least the tone of its conclusion:

> . . . But thou, O Lord,
> Aid all this foolish people; let them take
> Example, pattern: lead them to thy light.

It is not surprising that Browning does not comment on any novelty in the form of the poem: the dramatic monologue was well established as a genre by this time, having been a particular favourite with the minor and minimus poets of the previous two decades. But it is surely significant that all Browning's greatest monologues were written after Tennyson had demonstrated the potentialities of the genre in the hands of a major poet.

Another poem in the same collection may also have influenced Browning. We know that 'The Gardener's Daughter; or The Pictures' greatly impressed Browning's friend Joseph Arnould, and we know that it was mentioned when Browning and Tennyson met at some later time, Tennyson observing that 'he felt his life to be in flower' when he wrote the poem—a remark which later led Browning to comment that 'nobody has more fully found out at the beginning what he was born to do—nor done it more perfectly'.[1] The poem is a monologue in which an old man describes how he first met his wife, when they were both young. The conclusion is as follows:

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[1] *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett*, p. 40. The following quotation occurs on p. 41.

> But this whole hour your eyes have been intent
> On that veil'd picture—veil'd, for what it holds
> May not be dwelt on by the common day.
> This prelude has prepared thee. Raise thy soul;
> Make thine heart ready with thine eyes: the time
> Is come to raise the veil.
>   Behold her there,
> As I beheld her ere she knew my heart,
> My first, last love; the idol of my youth,
> The darling of my manhood, and, alas!
> Now the most blessed memory of mine age.

I do not think it is fanciful to remember another portrait of a dead wife, with a curtain in front of it, too, which no one but her widower is permitted to draw, in another country and another age. It is clearly possible that Tennyson's blameless old man helped to inspire the cold Renaissance aristocrat who is the speaker in 'My Last Duchess', a man so much less admirable and so much more interesting.[2] Such a juxtaposition at least serves to bring out the great imaginative distance between the two poets. One of the principal impulses to creation, in the case of Browning, was, I think, an impulse with which we are more familiar when we study the lives of novelists: the impulse to reject romance in favour of reality. As he read Tennyson and other poets of the time Browning must often have been moved to protest, as Fielding was when he read *Pamela*, as Jane Austen was when she read Mrs. Radcliffe, as Tolstoy was when he read romantic descriptions of modern warfare.

It is interesting to find Browning explicitly emphasizing the element of the dramatic in these poems of Tennyson's:

> Hunt's criticism is neither kind nor just, I take it—he don't understand that most of Tennyson's poems are *dramatic*—utterances coloured by an imaginary speaker's moods.[3]

Yet one has only to compare Tennyson's poems with Browning's to see the much fuller meaning of the word 'dramatic' when it is applied to the work of the latter. The genuinely dramatic 'St. Simeon Stylites' is much less characteristic of Tennyson than 'The Gardener's Daughter'. Tennyson tells us that the old man who narrates the story is an artist, but we have to be told—whereas in Browning we would know from the smell of the paint. With Tennyson the story or the mood comes first, and remains predominant, the element of characterization usually being subordinate. With Browning it is quite different. It is impossible to think of 'My Last Duchess' without remembering the character of the speaker whose insane pride and latent jealousy are so brilliantly evoked. Like the born story-teller that he is, Browning keeps a surprise for the end: a surprise that is not a mere structural device, since it throws a retrospective light on the monologue as a whole. The silent visitor whom the Duke has been addressing—to whom he has been discoursing on the charm of his first young wife, a charm that was too undiscriminating for the Duke's exclusive taste, so that he has been obliged to permit or encourage her to die—turns out to be an emissary from a Count whose beautiful daughter the Duke is thinking of making his second wife, provided that she will bring with her a sufficient dowry.

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[1] *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, edited by Richard Curle, 1937, p. 75 (letter of 1864).

[2] The dates fit. Browning was reading Tennyson in July 1842: DeVane thinks that 'My Last Duchess' was written 'in the summer or early fall of 1842' (*Handbook*, p. 108). My suggestion in no way excludes the probability that Browning was thinking of Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara, as he wrote his poem.

[3] *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett*, p. 97.

Although we are apt to think of 'My Last Duchess' as a dramatic monologue, Browning himself placed it among his 'Dramatic Romances', not among the poems called 'Men and Women'. I have no doubt that this was because he regarded it as what I have termed a short-story-poem rather than as a pure monologue. The poem reveals so much of the character of the speaker that it emphasizes the narrowness of the line dividing the one genre from the other; yet the distinction is evident enough, once it has been pointed out.

This distinction becomes clearer when we turn from 'My Last Duchess' to 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb', a poem which Browning can have had no hesitation in shifting from the 'Dramatic Romances and Lyrics' to the 'Men and Women', as soon as he had devised the latter category. In this poem, as in 'Johannes Agricola' and the 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister', Browning does not set out to tell a story, but simply to reveal the character of his speaker; and now for the first time he uses blank verse,[1] the metre he was to use for almost all his subsequent monologues. Like Tennyson in 'St. Simeon Stylites', Browning takes a man confronted by death as his speaker: a device which had become something of a convention in the minor poetry of the preceding decades.[1] But there is nothing conventional about the resultant poem, or the reflections which pass through the mind of Browning's Bishop as he lies dying.[2]

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[1] Browning had already used blank verse in 'Artemis Prologuizes', but although he was later to print this poem among his 'Men and Women' it is not a dramatic monologue in the usual sense, but simply a speech intended as a prologue for an unfinished tragedy written about the end of 1840.

We know from his earlier poems that Browning was particularly interested in the vision of life that may present itself to a dying man. *Pauline* is 'A Fragment of a Confession' supposed to be spoken by a young man at the point of death. Paracelsus reflects that the 'truth And power' of human life are revealed in various situations, and 'oftenest [at] death's approach': as he lies dying his 'varied life Drifts by' and he is able to 'turn new knowledge upon old events'—though with results that he feels he must not communicate to men who have not yet reached their own final hour.[3] The headline at the beginning of the last book of *Sordello* comments that 'At the close of a day or a life, past procedure is fitliest reviewed,' and the question is raised: 'May failure here be success also when induced by love?' 'Sordello knows'—we are told: 'but too late'.[4] A few months after the probable date of the composition of 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb' we find Browning translating a passage from Dante for the benefit of Elizabeth Barrett:

> And sinners were we to the extreme hour;
> *Then*, light from heaven fell, making us aware,
> So that, repenting us and pardoned, out
> Of life we passed to God, at peace with Him
> Who fills the heart with yearning Him to see.[5]

'Which is just my Sordello's story', he commented. It is not his Bishop's story, by any means. No one should have known better than the Bishop the sort of thoughts appropriate at 'the extreme hour'. Fray Luis de Granada had summed up the teaching of a thousand homilists in the following words:

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[1] Such monologues are listed in Benjamin Willis Fuson's *Browning and his English Predecessors in the Dramatic Monolog* (State University of Iowa Humanistic Studies, vol. viii, 1948), pp. 37–43.

[2] For an able recent study of the background of the poem see Barbara Melchiori, 'Where the Bishop Ordered his Tomb', *A Review of English Literature*, vol. v, no. 3 (July 1964).

[3] *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. ii, 1889, p. 36 and pp. 160–1.

[4] The headlines are to be found only in the collected editions of 1863 and 1868.

[5] *Letters*, vol. i, p. 348.

> The house of earth (which is our grave) is the schoole of true wisdome, where almighty God is wont to teach those that be his. There he teacheth them how great is the vanity of this world: There he sheweth unto them the misery of our flesh, and the shortnes of this life. And above all, there he teacheth them to know themselves, which is one of the most highest points of Philosophy that may be learned.[1]

When John Donne had himself painted as he lay in his shroud, as when he wrote so compellingly of death in the *Devotions* and in the passage in *The Second Anniversary* which constitutes a 'Contemplation of our state in our death-bed', he was obeying spiritual preceptors whose counsel must be supposed to have been equally available to Browning's imagined Bishop. The opening line of the poem—'Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!'—naturally leads us to expect a sermon on the significance of human mortality: leads us to expect that the Bishop, like George Herbert in 'Church-monuments', will compare 'dust with dust, and earth with earth',

> [Which] laugh[s] at Jeat and Marble put for signes,
> To sever the good fellowship of dust,
> And spoil the meeting.

But, as Paracelsus had pointed out to Festus:

> Festus, strange secrets are let out by death
> Who blabs so oft the follies of this world.[2]

Our expectation of a religious homily is mocked by every line of the Bishop's monologue, as his mind drifts from the 'nephews' round his bed—whose rapacious faces we can almost see, as they cluster round him—to the mistress who had been their mother—'Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes'—and to 'old Gandolf', whose envy had added piquancy to the Bishop's delight in possessing so beautiful a woman. The most telling moral reflection in the poem has nothing specifically Christian about it: it might rather be a brilliant translation from a chorus of Sophocles:

> Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:
> Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?

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[1] I owe this quotation to *The Poetry of Meditation*, by Louis L. Martz, 1954, pp. 135–6.

[2] *The Poetical Works*, vol. ii, p. 72.

Instead of caring for the destination of his soul, the Bishop is only concerned with the destination of his body. His greatest fear has nothing to do with the Judgement to come: it is simply the nightmare thought that the 'ingratitude' of his sons may lead them to economize in the construction of his tomb. As he conjures them to obey his wishes, we notice that he does not rely on their sense of filial duty but solely on their expectation of possible material rewards:

> And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray
> Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,
> And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?

'I know no other piece of modern English', Ruskin wrote, 'prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin.'[1] It is instructive to compare the Bishop's attitude to religion with Browning's own, as uncompromisingly expressed a few years later in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*. As for his thoughts on the disposal of his own body after death, we find him quoting Donne and saying that he has 'no kind of concern as to where the old clothes of myself shall be thrown'.[2]

Our understanding of Browning's genius in the dramatic monologue may be further deepened by comparing this poem with another monologue spoken by an old man which he must have read as he made his way through Tennyson's *Poems* of 1842. It is remarkable that his comments on these two volumes make no mention at all of 'Ulysses', which most critics would now regard as the finest poem they contain. In 1845, indeed, we find Elizabeth Barrett telling Browning that she 'seem[s] to hear more' in Tennyson's blank verse than he does, though she is careful to add that 'it is not model versification—and for dramatic purposes, it must be admitted to be bad'.[3] Surely the truth is that while it may be hard to find any other term than 'dramatic monologue' for 'Ulysses', Tennyson's purpose in that poem is hardly 'dramatic' at all. 'Ulysses' is a soliloquy rather than a monologue: no one is supposed to be listening. Nor is any specific setting indicated. One has only to attend for a moment to the music of Tennyson's verse, by contrast with the human utterance of Browning's Bishop, to realize that Tennyson is not concerned with a character, but with a mood:

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[1] *Modern Painters*, vol. iv, ch. xx.

[2] *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, by Mrs. Sutherland Orr, revised by Frederic G. Kenyon, 1908, p. 244 (letter of 1866). Cf. *The Second Anniversary*, line 62.

[3] *Letters*, vol. i, p. 97.

> The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
> Moans round with many voices.

We can almost see the bow crossing and recrossing the strings, as Tennyson plays his brilliant 'cello solo. Ulysses tells us that he has 'become a name', but in the poem he remains *vox et praeterea nihil.* We know that Tennyson wrote the poem soon after Henry Hallam's death and that he considered that it gave his 'feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in "In Memoriam"';[1] and this provides a clue to the nature of the poem. Although it is written in blank verse, in the form of a monologue or soliloquy, 'Ulysses' is essentially lyrical or elegiac in its inspiration. As Ulysses urges his men forwards to new adventure, the subversive vowels seem to be tempting them back towards the Sirens from whom they have escaped. In saying this I am not passing judgement on the poem, which is one of the masterpieces of nineteenth-century English poetry: I am insisting, rather, that it is hardly a dramatic poem at all, in the sense in which Browning's great monologues are dramatic poems. The fact that the undramatic 'Ulysses' is so much more memorable than the dramatic 'St. Simeon Stylites' merely emphasizes that the dramatic poem was not Tennyson's *forte.*

When I began planning this lecture I hoped to do two things: to trace the evolution of the dramatic monologue from Browning's earlier work, and to study the development and perfecting of the form in the work of his maturity. Both ambitions turned out to be misconceived. Although his work as a dramatist and his early long poems clearly contributed something to his mastery of the monologue, the genre was already firmly established in its own right before Browning first experimented with it, so that it would be wrong to suggest that it somehow emerged from the genres in which he had written earlier; while the fact that the first of all his monologues in blank verse, 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb', is also the masterpiece, means that there is in a sense no further perfecting of the form to be traced. In the time that remains to me I wish rather to consider some of the different ways in which Browning used the monologue, particularly in the middle years during which he wrote much of his greatest poetry. This will involve two related themes which are central to any consideration of his work, the influence of Italy and the influence of painting.

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[1] *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir By his Son,* 1897, vol. i, p. 196.

In the earlier 'Pictor Ignotus' and in the two monologues by painters published in 1855, 'Fra Lippo Lippi' and 'Andrea del Sarto', Browning is writing what one might term 'pure' dramatic monologues: his concern, that is to say, is with the character of the speaker, not with a story that he wishes to tell or an argument that he wishes to advance. And, further, he is moving in his favourite country of the mind, Renaissance Italy; the importance of which may be summed up by saying that it offered him his best escape route from Victorian England. In an early letter he annoyed Elizabeth Barrett by saying that 'Italy is stuff for the use of the North, and no more', but as soon as she taxed him with underestimating that country and its literature he replied by praising 'Italy where my heart lives', and acknowledging that 'all Northern writers' come to Italy and 'discover [its] sights and sounds'—to the great enrichment of their own work.[1] 'My Last Duchess' is clearly the fruit of his first visit to Italy, as is 'Pippa Passes': his second visit, in 1844, was the prelude to his great period: while much of his finest poetry was written in Italy after his marriage in 1846. In Italy he found a country where the sectarianism of his early surroundings melted away in the sunshine and the history, where men and women and buildings and masterpieces of painting and sculpture wooed the eye as they had seldom done in the smoke and grime of Early Victorian London, where Shelleyan dreams of man as he should be yielded to a fascinated observation of man as he is—a country where contemplation of the present led naturally to speculation on the past, and in particular on that period of the past which Michelet had described as 'the discovery of man', the Italian Renaissance. The work of Browning's middle years is the greatest result in poetic literature of the informed passion for Italy which simultaneously inspired the historical researches of Jacob Burckhardt and the art-criticism of John Ruskin.

Browning chose painters as the speakers of three of his monologues not only, we may conjecture, because he was living in Florence, surrounded by their work, but also because painting had always been of major importance in his own life. His father, as the poet himself tells us, originally 'had the intention of devoting himself to art, for which he had many qualifications and abundant love', and Rossetti commented that Robert

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[1] *Letters*, vol. i, pp. 53 and 57.

Browning, senior, had 'a real genius for drawing—[though] caring for nothing in the least except Dutch boors'.[1] Frustrated in his ambition of becoming an artist, he collected prints (as he collected books) throughout his life, his collection manifesting his admiration for Hogarth and the Dutch School: 'Brouwer, Ostade, Teniers—he would turn from the Sistine altar-piece to these', according to his son. It was hoped at one time that the future poet, who was described as 'a young wonder' at drawing and who enjoyed a high reputation at school as a caricaturist, would himself become an artist; and although this did not occur the fact that the poet's father was such a mine of information about 'the lives of the poets and painters, concerning whom he ever had to communicate some interesting anecdote not generally known' was to exercise a profound influence on the poetry of his son. Like Henry James, Browning seems to have been brought up to regard painters, poets, and composers as among the heroes and torch-bearers of humanity: an attitude to the creative mind which runs through his own career and provides one of the principal subjects of his poetry. From childhood onwards he had access to such books as Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* and *The Art of Painting in all its Branches*, by Gérard de Lairesse, on the fly-leaf of which he was later to write:

> I read this book more often and with greater delight when I was a child than any other: and still remember the main of it most gratefully for the good I seem to have got from the prints and wonderful text.

Nor was he limited to books and prints. In a letter he refers to the Dulwich Gallery, which was only half an hour's walk from his boyhood home, as 'that Gallery I so love and so am grateful to—having been used to go there when a child'.[2] This collection, which must have influenced his imagination at an impressionable time, contained not only landscapes and examples of 'heroic painting', but also portraits by Holbein, Rembrandt, Veronese, Vandyke, Velasquez, Gainsborough, and Sir Joshua Reynolds. Browning is also certain to have visited the National Gallery, which opened when he was a boy of twelve. It would be surprising if he did not visit the great Hermitage Museum in St.

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[1] The quotations are from *The Life of Robert Browning*, by W. Hall Griffin, completed and edited by Harry Christopher Minchin, revised ed. 1938, pp. 4, 12, 11, 8, 9–10.

[2] *Letters*, vol. i, p. 528. A list of the paintings at Dulwich in 1832 may be found in a monthly periodical, the *Library of the Fine Arts; or Repertory of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Engraving*, vol. iii, pp. 427–32.

Petersburg during his brief visit in 1834, although there may have been some waning of his interest in painting about this time, if we may judge from a letter to Fanny Haworth, written about the year 1841, in which he tells her that he is now again 'getting to love painting as I did once'.[1] Four years later he told Elizabeth Barrett that he found the actual process of writing a disagreeable one:

> But I think you like the operation of writing as I should like that of painting or making music, do you not?[2]

He always envied the life of a painter, and felt particularly at home in a studio. In 1861 the American sculptor and poet William Wetmore Story mentions that 'all the last winters he worked with me daily for three hours in my studio', complaining that now Browning has left Italy there is 'no one with whom I can walk any of the higher ranges of art and philosophy'. 'Dear Story', Browning wrote in one of his first letters from England, 'tell me what you can about the studio; let me smell the wet clay once more'; while in a later letter he light-heartedly describes himself as 'SCULPTOR and poet'.[3] Browning's wife tells us that he used to say that '*nothing ever made him so happy before*' as modelling with clay at Casa Guidi.[4] Back in London, he frequented the studio of the painter Felix Moscheles: 'As for the visits to your studio,' we find him writing in a letter to Moscheles, 'be assured they are truly a delight to me, for the old aspirations come thickly back to memory when I see you at work as—who knows but I myself might have worked once? Only it was not to be'.[5] It is not surprising that he was delighted when his son Pen gave signs of inheriting his love of painting and sculpture, and he arranged for him to study 'the plastic art' under no less a master than Rodin.

While Browning had long been familiar with Vasari's *Lives of the Painters* and the other literary sources of his artists' monologues, the experience of living in Italy seems to have been required to fertilize the seed sown during his childhood. When he himself was living in the country which had been the home of Fra Lippo Lippi and the rest, and enjoying daily opportunities of studying their work in the surroundings for which it had been designed, his early reading came alive again in his mind. There was also the stimulus of teaching his wife: 'I mean to know something about pictures some day', we find her writing to Miss Mitford from Florence in 1846. 'Robert does, and I shall get him to open my eyes for me with a little instruction. In this place are to be seen the first steps of Art.'[1] When he adopted the *persona* of an Italian painter, therefore, Browning had a considerable fund of knowledge to draw on, and he wrote with the sympathy of an enthusiastic amateur artist as well as the insight of a fellow creator. It is sometimes suggested that painting becomes a sort of allegory for poetry, in a poem like 'Fra Lippo Lippi': perhaps it would be nearer the mark to say that Browning regards painting as a testing-ground for the soul of man, as he regards music and poetry and every other human activity. 'All the Arts are mediators between the soul and the Infinite', as Elizabeth Barrett once wrote to him.[2]

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[1] *Life and Letters*, p. 124.

[2] *Letters*, p. 41.

[3] *William Wetmore Story and his Friends*, by Henry James, 1903, vol. ii, pp. 68, 113, 117.

[4] *Life and Letters*, p. 233.

[5] *Fragments of an Autobiography*, by Felix Moscheles, 1899, p. 334.

Browning was keenly interested in Italian painting, and sympathized with Fra Lippo Lippi as against 'the Prior and the learned' who considered his work too naturalistic to lead men towards God; yet the main concern of the poem is clearly with the character of the speaker, which may well have interested him from the moment he first dipped into his father's copy of Vasari as a boy.[3] The same is true of the most important monologue on a non-Italian subject in the collection of 1855, 'Bishop Blougram's Apology'. In this poem, which is in a sense closer to Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* than the other monologues—since the Bishop anticipates and gives expression to the objections of his companion, Mr. Gigadibs—Browning obviously enjoys the opportunity of displaying his dialectic skill; yet one has only to compare the result with Dryden's *Religio Laici*, or *The Hind and the Panther*, to see the difference between argument for the sake of persuasion and argument for the sake of creating a character. When we turn to the two verse epistles in the 1855 collection, however—'An Epistle containing the strange medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician' and 'Cleon'—we find ourselves reading poems written with a different intention.

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[1] *Life and Letters*, pp. 143–4.

[2] *Letters*, vol. i, p. 547.

[3] An incident which would appeal to any boy occurs near the beginning of Vasari's *Life of Fra Filippo Lippi*: the capture of the painter by pirates. Whereas this plays a very prominent part in Landor's 'Fra Filippo Lippi and Pope Eugenius the Fourth', however, Browning makes no mention of the episode.

Each is a dramatic monologue in form, and in each Browning characterizes the writer with great skill. The style of each epistle, as well as the matter, helps to create the character of its writer—Karshish, 'the picker-up of learning's crumbs', emerging as a garrulous yet intelligent medical man, observant and professionally inquisitive, and the gifted Cleon as a man whose cold arrogance leads him to declare unhesitatingly that the Christian doctrines 'could be held by no sane man'. Yet in neither of these poems does the characterization of the writer appear to be Browning's principal concern. At first, indeed, it is tempting to classify 'Karshish'—in which the writer describes the unaccountable behaviour of Lazarus, after he has been raised from the dead—as a short-story-poem; yet one has only to compare it with 'My Last Duchess' to realize that that would be a mistaken classification. In this poem Browning is not so much concerned with a narrative of certain events as with a consideration of the way in which one particular incident in the Christian story would have struck a particular type of man living at the time. 'Cleon' is essentially similar, although the body of this poem is discourse and argument rather than description and narrative. In both poems, as it seems to me, Browning is primarily concerned with the search for the truth about certain disputed events, as he was to be again, on a much larger scale, in *The Ring and the Book*.

In *Dramatis Personæ* the tendency to use the dramatic monologue primarily for other purposes than that of characterization becomes more pronounced. While the speaker of each of the monologues is still characterized—and on occasion brilliantly characterized—it remains true that the main subject of 'Abt Vogler' is the effect of music on the soul, the main subject of 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' the poet's own view of old age, the main subject of 'A Death in the Desert' the authenticity of part of the Christian story, the main subject of 'Caliban upon Setebos' the limitations of 'natural theology'. They are fine poems, yet none of them has quite the unforgettable quality of 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb'. One detects a distinct waning of Browning's powers at this period—a waning which simultaneously lessened his desire to create characters, or his ability to do so, and increased his determination to convey a message to his readers.

Browning's later use of the dramatic principle in poetry, and of the dramatic monologue in particular, is not my subject today. All that can be said here is that in *The Ring and the Book* he is concerned (as in 'Karshish', 'Cleon', and 'A Death in the

Desert') with investigating the truth about something that once happened by examining the reaction of a number of people who were alive at the time. In many of the *Dramatic Idyls*, as DeVane pointed out, the dramatic monologue is 'more than half abandoned'[1] and the result at times comes close to direct narrative. In *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day* the poet himself becomes the speaker, the 'People of Importance' being reduced to the silence that is the inevitable fate of the second person in a dramatic monologue. As we read this late poem it is interesting to recall a passage in a letter from Elizabeth Barrett written forty years before:

> You have the superabundant mental life and individuality which admits of shifting a personality and speaking the truth still. *That* is the highest faculty, the strongest and rarest, which exercises itself in Art,—we are all agreed there is none so great faculty as the dramatic. . . Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides—and after having made your own creatures speak in clear human voices, to speak yourself out of that personality which God made . . . I do not think that . . . only your own personality should be dumb, nor that having thought so much and deeply on life and its ends, you should not teach what you have learnt, in the directest and most impressive way, the mask thrown off. . . It is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium, that poets teach most impressively. . . *Now* let us have your own voice speaking of yourself.[2]

What we value Browning for most highly today is not his direct teaching, however, but his extraordinary dramatic faculty. Like Chaucer, he teaches best when he is content to make his creatures 'speak in clear human voices'. Although the distinction which Browning tries to draw in his essay on Shelley, between 'the subjective poet' and 'the objective poet', is critically unsatisfactory, it remains of great interest because he is so clearly writing with his own poetry in mind and because it emphasizes the distance that he had travelled from the work of his early idol. In one of the notes to her edition of her husband's work, which must have been well known to Browning, Mary Shelley had written that Shelley 'shrunk instinctively from portraying human passion, with its mixture of good and evil, of disappointment and disquiet'.[3] 'Human passion, with its mixture of good and evil' is the great subject of Browning's own poetry, and particularly of his dramatic monologues. None of his speakers (except conceivably Pompilia) is wholly admirable, and most of them are men of whom any moralist would be bound to disapprove.

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[1] *Handbook*, p. 429.

[2] *Letters*, vol. ii, pp. 181–2.

[3] Note on *The Witch of Atlas*: *The Complete Poetical Works*, edited by Thomas Hutchinson, reprint of 1947, p. 389.

I do not mean to suggest that Browning himself disapproves of them—or at least that he tells us that he does. If we consider the principal dramatic monologues as a group we will find that the least successful (which is also one of the latest) is 'Mr. Sludge, "The Medium" ', the monologue whose speaker is most clearly condemned. The most successful (which is also one of the first) is 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb', in which the speaker is not judged at all. It is not that Sludge is reprehensible and the Bishop innocent: if anything, the Bishop is surely the more reprehensible of the two. It is simply that in the greater poem Browning contents himself with the miracle of creation, as he does in all his most successful monologues. 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' is an interesting marginal case. While Browning had every right to reject the suggestion that the poem is merely a satire, the lines of commentary at the end do constitute something of an artistic blemish. In writing them he was departing from the method he had appropriated to himself at the beginning of *Sordello*, the method of gaining his effect

By making speak, myself kept out of view,
The very man as he was wont to do,
And leaving you to say the rest for him.[1]

'What easy work these novelists have of it!', he once exclaimed in a letter—'a Dramatic poet has to *make* you love or admire his men and women,—they must *do* and *say* all that you are to see and hear—really do it in your face, say it in your ears, and it is wholly for *you*, in *your* power, to *name*, characterize and so praise or blame, *what* is so said and done . . if you don't perceive of yourself, there is no standing by, for the Author, and telling you'.[2]

This reference back to the novel is appropriate, and it is bound to recur in any attempt at an intelligent discussion of Browning's work. It is not a question of his being 'prosaic'—though of course some of his bad poetry is extremely prosaic—but of his goal being the goal of the novelist and the dramatist: the truth about people. In aiming at this goal, in his mature poetry, he was making his personal attempt to rectify the great weakness in recent English poetry which Francis Jeffrey had diagnosed in 1828, 'the want of subject and of matter—the absence of real persons, . . . and conceivable incidents, to which all [the] splendid apparatus of rhetoric and fancy may attach itself, and thus get a purpose and a meaning, which it never can possess without them'.[1]

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[1] Lines 15–17.

[2] *Letters*, vol. i, p. 155.

I think that Browning tells us more than most poets about human life, about love, about success and failure, about human passion and human motive. He does this, in his finest work, not by tracing 'the development of a soul' (a theme which is apt to become tedious, when developed at length in the manner of the *Bildungsroman*), but by presenting an individual man at one instant in time, as in a great portrait-painting. The Bishop on his death-bed and Andrea at the window, Bishop Blougram with his glass of wine and the Duke drawing the curtain to reveal the picture of his first wife—they are caught for ever at one instant of time as if they had been painted by Titian or Rembrandt. As we read such poems it is illuminating to remember the young Browning sitting 'a good hour' (as he says that he often sat) 'before one, some *one* of those pictures I had predetermined to see'.[2] The habit he contracted as a boy in the Dulwich Gallery clearly lasted throughout his life and played its part in determining the direction of his genius. His aim, in his great monologues, is to paint the whole man, 'in his habit as he lived', with his past and his future destiny implicit in a few moments of time. It is sometimes tempting to use the word 'classical' of these extraordinary and in some senses most unclassical of poems. The monologue has its own unities of time, place, and action. They are to be observed, not as an end in themselves, but as a help to the poet in furthering our understanding of human nature through a deeper understanding of one particular man:

> Take the least man of all mankind, as I;
> Look at his head and heart, find how and why
> He differs from his fellows utterly[3]

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[1] *Edinburgh Review*, vol. xlviii (Sept. 1828), p. 51 (a review of the first part of *The Fall of Nineveh*, by Edwin Atherstone). 'To satisfy a rational being, even in his most sensitive mood'—Jeffrey goes on—'we require not only a just representation of passion in the abstract, but also that it shall be embodied in some individual person whom we can understand and sympathize with.'

[2] *Letters*, vol. i, p. 529.

[3] *Dramatis Personæ*, 'Epilogue', lines 68–70.

—do *that*, and do it with the wise curiosity that seeks to contemplate rather than to judge, and the result may be Titian's *Pope Paul III*, or Rembrandt's *Jacob Trip*, or Browning's incomparable poem, 'The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church'.