

**Jean-Charles PERQUIN**  
Université Lyon 2, Passages XX-XXI

## **Revisionism, biography and dirty little secret**

If one studies the poetry of the Brownings, it appears impossible not to realize that the questions of privacy and biography were at the centre of their preoccupations, both personal and aesthetic. For Robert Browning, everything began with his first published lyrical poem entitled *Pauline*, in 1833. The poem was published anonymously and one copy of it ended up in John Stuart Mill's hands, so that he could write a favourable article for the young unknown author. Unfortunately, things did not go the way they were expected to and the Victorian critic accused the anonymous poet of being narcissistic and morbid<sup>1</sup>. Obviously, the poet read the marginal commentaries and took them as personal offenses. It would lead him to distinguish himself from his poetic speakers in all his later works until the end of his career. As far as Elizabeth was concerned, matters became ticklish when she wrote *Sonnets from the Portuguese*<sup>2</sup>, during her courtship with Robert Browning. All the intimate details of their budding love affair were available in letters which could become material for biographers<sup>3</sup>. Robert found the sonnets both magnificent and intolerable: their transparency was most disturbing to him, and soon to her as well. Both poets had learnt to distrust the possible intrusions of nosey parkers and biographers in their intimacy. It is the very reason why the collection of sonnets was entitled *Portuguese*, after a period of hesitation with Croatian. They wanted at all cost to avoid intruders and indecent probers in their private lives. In other words, their poetry was to be radically estranged from their lives, as if this exigency were central in their poetics.

This question is all the more fundamental as both Elizabeth and Robert Browning venerated the lives of their Romantic forefathers before they themselves rejected those models for biographical divergences and disagreements. This is the central paradox I would like to insist on in this paper—the two Victorian poets who intended to protect their private lives from strangers' eyes were very curious about the private lives and opinions of their Romantic and Victorian idols, both in England and abroad, from George Gordon to Georges Sand, although they wanted their own privacies to be scrupulously respected by both their readers and their critics. Ironically enough, Robert became the executor and protector of many details in the biography of his late wife<sup>4</sup>, for instance her interest in table-turning and her consumption of opium, to name but a few. Robert was then supposed to protect the memory of a poetess whose nasty little habits could tarnish her genius as a poet. In other words, after decades of distrust towards the confusion between poetry and autobiography, *i.e.* writing and the self, Robert Browning was

---

<sup>1</sup> William S. Peterson and Fred L. Standley, "The J. S. Mill *Marginalia* in Robert Browning's *Pauline*: A History and Transcription," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, No. 66 (1972), p. 135-170.

<sup>2</sup> The courtship correspondence started in January 1845 and ended in September 1846. The sonnets themselves were published in 1850.

<sup>3</sup> Elvan Kintner, ed., *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: 1845-1846*, 2 Vol., Cambridge [Massachusetts], Harvard University Press, 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning. A Life after Death*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004.

growing suspicious about the possible impact of biography on the reception of a poet's works and the reputation and story of her genius. What is left of the genius is what the poet wrote, whereas the details and events in the life of the poet only have the power to downgrade the reputation of the author and smear genius. It is most certainly the reason why the poet invited the famous critic and biographer Edmund Gosse to his place in London, long after the death of Elizabeth and his return to England with their son Pen and many cases full of books, papers, and painful memories connected with the fifteen years of their connubial life in Italy<sup>5</sup>.

Robert's flat, in London, was to become a museum dedicated to the memory of his beloved Elizabeth, while he kept her wedding ring tied to the chain of his pocket watch. His poetry would help him overcome the terrible loss, not to mention the biographical mission he decided to make his when he resolved to leave Italy forever. The memory and biography of Elizabeth had to be protected at all cost and the best way to begin was no doubt to make sure no dirty legend would survive the poetess, even though those legends were grounded in the soil which the most reliable biographies could grow from. In other words, after decades during which the poet had been disappointed by the lives of his Romantic idols, Robert had decided to begin his new life as a revisionist, after himself keeping the lives of the two Brownings in the silent safety of their Florence flat. But even though the two Victorian poets had always kept away from the limelight of literary life, they had lived under the influence of the biographical existences of the Romantic idols of their youths<sup>6</sup>. Both interestingly and logically enough, Elizabeth and Robert experienced different phases in their perception of those Romantic poets: first, fascination (Elizabeth had firmly decided that she would become the page boy of Lord Byron and Robert had become a vegetarian after discovering the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, whom he called "sun-treader"<sup>7</sup> in the final lines of his first published poem *Pauline*). In both cases, of course, the two Victorian poets had scrupulously turned blind eyes on their scandalous lives.

In other words, the extraordinary natures of their Romantic idols were made extraordinary by their fascination for those Romantic luminaries, as if their lives were only made of poetry and ideas, without the reality of flesh and blood of those two characters. The very meaning of the word idol is fraught with sense in such a context: the image of a pagan divinity used as an object of worship. At that point, for the two Brownings, the lives of their Romantic idols were reduced to the blind adoration of their Victorian admirers. Up to that point, the anecdote would not be extraordinary in itself, as it would easily correspond to Oscar Wilde's famous quote about parents in chapter five of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them."<sup>8</sup> The relation between Elizabeth and Robert Browning on the one hand, and George Gordon and Percy Bysshe Shelley on the other hand, roughly obeyed Oscar Wilde's famous sentence. The Brownings had lived by the legends, etymologically speaking again, of course, they had accepted to believe it in their young years. Logically enough, they had accepted only the details they considered as glorious, whereas they had ironed out the dirty little secrets<sup>9</sup> which did not fit in the

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5 sq.

<sup>6</sup> Robert had always been fascinated by P. B. Shelley and Elizabeth by Byron.

<sup>7</sup> This phrase appeared for the first time in *Pauline*, lines 151, 201 and 1020.

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London, Penguin Classics, 2000, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Even though Elizabeth tried to tone down her lifelong addiction to opium in her letters, the question regularly surfaced in their courtship correspondence. As far as her keen interest in the famous medium

glorious picture of the great Romantic tradition, i.e. everything that would deserve to be part of a legend to be passed on to later generations. It was not only a question of Victorian decency and respectability, some kind of Doctor Jekyll's reputation to be preserved and protected at all cost. It was much more the necessity of understanding life only in the light of poetry and literature, as if life were only made of words and books, speeches and poems.

At the end of the day, the works of both poets, as well as their lives by the way, prove how close life and poetry were in their eyes and minds. As I have humbly tried to show in my biographies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, for the two authors, life could not be conceived without poetry, no more than poetry without life. As can be read in the fifth book of Elizabeth's *magnum opus*, *Aurora Leigh*, published for the first time in December 1856:

Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked!  
That bosom seems to beat still, or at least  
It sets ours beating. This is living art,  
Which thus presents, and thus records true life.<sup>10</sup>

This definition of real true poetry in the eyes of Aurora Leigh even became the title of a book about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's fascination for William Shakespeare's works<sup>11</sup>. Even though she resented the possible biographer's intrusion into the privacy of the poet's mind, she also glorified the possible real-life effect of biography that could easily turn into poetry. If we remember Robert Browning's successful practice of the dramatic monologue, also known as the Victorian monologue, we should wonder whether it is a good example of a versified fictional autobiography whose irony obliquely reveals what should remain concealed between the lines. The personal speech of the monologue whets the curiosity of the reader just the way the dedication of the biographer invites the reader of the biography to go behind the scenes in order to uncover the verity in the written life of the biographee.

In other words, and far beyond the Brownings' worship of the Romantic generation that preceded their own works and largely influenced them, Elizabeth and Robert articulated their apprehension of Shelley and Byron with what they naïvely expected to find in their lives and imaginary biographies<sup>12</sup>. Such a behaviour was all the more ironical as those biographies were far from the real lives of those poets, and as Robert and Elizabeth expected their own readers to stay away from their private lives. When they settled down in Florence, in a legendary place known as the *casa Guidi*, Robert himself would resent the numerous visitors who plagued them, all the more as those visitors, some of them transatlantic, only came to speak with Elizabeth. At the same time, Robert kept exploring the places that had been haunted by the Romantic generation in Italy, as if to feel the way that generation had been influenced by the great Italian tradition

---

Daniel Dunglas Home was concerned, it was an apple of discord between the Brownings and Robert never hesitated to deride what he considered an inexplicable and unforgivable form of gullibility.

<sup>10</sup> *Aurora Leigh*, V, lines 218-221, in Josie Billington and Philip Davis, eds., *Elizabeth Barrett Browning. 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Oxford Authors*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 312.

<sup>11</sup> Josie Billington, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Shakespeare. "This is Living Art,"* London, Bloomsbury, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Browning was certainly the only one to include his disappointment about Shelley in a published poem, *Pauline*. In two famous passages, lines 448-450 and 458-463, he acknowledged that his early infatuation with the great poet was bound to be dismissed one day or another.

of the Renaissance. Logically enough, the Brownings lived lives of poetry, music and painting by following in the steps of the great artists they openly worshipped, and curiously enough, those lives made of Romantic art and beauty included Romantic lives they imagined more than they knew them. This is not surprising, since admiration and influence blinded them to the realities of lives they comfortably ignored. Objectivity was and is an illusion, since reality must be apprehended by a subject who cannot refrain from perceiving with his own senses a reality that is far more reconstructed than it is plainly taken in as autonomous.

This might be, unconsciously at least, the reason why they rejected the possibility to become themselves biographees, *i.e.* objects of exploration and narration. They knew far too well that they would stop being subjects and become objects, in all the senses of this word, and their lives would then irremediably belong to a voracious audience made of critics and readers. Robert Browning's initial experience of notoriety was the unfortunate publication of *Pauline*, far too Romantic and personal as it was to be accepted as a pure lyrical fiction detached from the great Percy Bysshe Shelley. The great Romantic poet was turned into a "sun-treader" at the end of the poem, which made it impossible for the Victorian poet to accept the smallest possibility of being himself an objective part of his own poem. Detachment and estrangement thus became aesthetic necessities in Robert's poetry, to the point that the denomination "dramatic" only meant to him the fact that the speaker was not the poet and that the poet was not the speaker<sup>13</sup>. In his eyes, the poet was not to become biographical material the way his Romantic idols had, especially when he had misunderstood these idols by worshipping them. In the end, Robert and Elizabeth had actually been influenced by their own imaginary biographies of the great Romantics instead of being influenced by the realities of their lives<sup>14</sup>. When he was young and infatuated with Shelley's poetry, Robert had even become a vegetarian, imagining that it was the natural consequence of reading such literature. To put it differently, poetic creation was a logical way of influencing real life, *i.e.* biography. The vegetarian episode in Robert Browning's life was obviously not long-standing but the belated discovery of Shelley's dirty little secrets more durably disappointed the Victorian poet, who had forgotten not to focus on the reality behind the life of his idol<sup>15</sup>. Robert Browning, who all his life demanded that his readers and critics forget the man behind the poetry, was suddenly perturbed by the knowledge he had of his idol's private life. How contradictory to ask readers to ignore the poet from a biographical perspective and at the same time to deplore biographical details...

In the same vein, when the two Brownings called at Georges Sand's flat, full of illusions and dreams about the great female French writer, they were terribly disappointed by the scene they were confronted with: Georges Sand was lamentably surrounded by handsome young men visibly attracted by her fame and charms, whereas they had expected to visit a recluse and a solitary genius. Their appreciation of literary genius was not compatible with the vulgarity of real life and mundane pleasures, as if the one could

---

<sup>13</sup> In the introductory note of the 1868 edition of his works, he even repeated his typical formula "poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine." In John C. Berkey, ed., *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, Athens [Ohio], Ohio University Press, Vol. VI, 1996, p. 367.

<sup>14</sup> Robert had been influenced by the life he supposed had been Shelley's. See John Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, Cambridge [Massachusetts], Harvard University Press, 1977. In the same vein, Elizabeth had dreamt of becoming the page of Lord Byron. See Jeannette Marks, *The Family of the Barrett. A Colonial Romance*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1938.

<sup>15</sup> Richard C. Keenan, "Browning and Shelley," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, No. 1 (1973), p. 119-145.

not go with the other. Since literary life went along with the powers of imagination, domestic vulgarity was logically alien to the glorious heights of Romantic dreams and achievements. Romantic lives were lives of disappointment when they discovered the lacklustre realities behind the legendary lives of their idols. When they discovered the sordid stories about Charles Dickens and the way he used his fame to get rid of his wife after an unfair divorce, they again felt horribly disappointed by the man beyond the novelist. But Charles Dickens was one thing, and the Romantic poets were another. Indeed, the latter had fuelled the Brownings' imaginations and dreams for decades and they now belonged to and peopled their inner museums of words. The example of Robert Browning's *Pauline* is particularly relevant to that situation—Percy Bysshe Shelley cannot even be called by his name and his identity belonged to a world of ideas and beauty far beyond the flesh and blood reality of the Romantic poet<sup>16</sup>.

In a way, and this is certainly one of the reasons why Elizabeth and Robert resented biographical curiosity so much, biography was less a way to understand poetry and access it more fully than it necessarily implied the death of the poet as poet. In other words, it seemed impossible for the Brownings to remain poets if they continued to be mere human beings, and for them, Romantic poets were beyond poets, hence the problem with biography. As I alluded to a little earlier, when Robert came back to London after fifteen years of connubial life in Italy, in their *casa Guidi* of Florence, he understood that he would have to be the devoted husband of Elizabeth beyond the grave, as their poems had made it clear long before she died. As such, he would have to keep her memory and reputation intact, making sure she would be protected from the curious eyes of biographers and critics alike, especially concerning the unpoetic details of her private life, *i.e.* her guilty addiction to opium and her inexplicable fascination for spiritism and the quacks who pretended they were in touch with the dead and could communicate with them<sup>17</sup>. When her favourite brother had died, she had been heartbroken to the point that she had thought she would not survive the terrible accident, roughly five years before she started her voluminous correspondence with the Victorian poet. Fragilized by such a terrible loss, Elizabeth experienced what she had no doubt imagined as the Romantic tragedy of irreparable loss, and her sudden weakness made her the ideal victim of all the impostors who promised she could get in touch with her late brother.

As a matter of fact, life was not compatible with poetry, as if, put differently, life paradoxically threatened and destroyed the poetry in the author. The Romantics, for the two Victorian poets, were now protected by death and the legends they had generated, whereas Elizabeth had been made suddenly vulnerable by the unexpected accident which killed her brother. Such a Romantic loss had doomed the Victorian poetess to a most unromantic destiny of vulnerability and gullibility which Robert deemed should be kept unknown at all cost in order to preserve her reputation and memory. A little more than half a century before the birth of Elizabeth, in the sixtieth issue of *The Rambler*, published on the 13<sup>th</sup> October 1750, Samuel Johnson had eloquently summarized what he called “the business of the biographer” with the following principles:

It is indeed, not improper to take honest advantages of prejudice, and to gain attention by a celebrated name; but the business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into

---

<sup>16</sup> Shelley is called “sun-treader” three times in the poem, lines 151, 201 and 1020.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth was no exception for that matter, but Robert kept nagging at her about no longer trusting quacks such as Daniel Dunglas Home.

domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue.<sup>18</sup>

At the very end of the long article, Samuel Johnson nevertheless concluded with his own conception of the biographer's ethics and sense of responsibility, "If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth."<sup>19</sup>

It was clear, in Robert Browning's *Pauline*, that the poet's relation to Shelley largely prevented him from respecting the values of knowledge, virtue and truth<sup>20</sup>, just as he would find it intolerable to let the memory of his late wife be smeared by everything unpoetic in her private life and secret habits, such as her inexplicable addiction to opium and quacks. Long before Robert had pledged to preserve the memory of Elizabeth against the inquiring eyes of the public, he had known, in the wake of Samuel Johnson, that domestic reality and simplicity were precisely what the author and the reader had in common and shared necessarily. As a consequence, in order to keep the poetess alive in the minds of her readers, he should have preferred to keep the poetess available, accessible, and true to life. But at the end of the day, he decided to keep Elizabeth the way he wanted to keep his Romantic idols, in some inner museum of poetic genius, far from unpoetic eyes and the public hunger for scandals and dirty little secrets<sup>21</sup>. For Robert, biography was dangerous precisely because Samuel Johnson's conclusion to his article implied the ethics of the biographer, far beyond their interest and respect for the biographee. For Samuel Johnson, indeed, "[...] no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition."<sup>22</sup>

Since biography has moral and social functions, since truth is more important than respect, admiration and worship have very little to do with what he calls "the narratives of the lives of particular persons,"<sup>23</sup> even though biographer and biographee may be husband and wife. Robert Browning had worshipped the memories of the Romantic idols of his youth and he would later try and keep a Romantic image of his poet of a late wife. Everything Romantic was to be extraordinary<sup>24</sup> and to remain so, as if poetry must be the legendary consequence and the fruit of genius, out of reach and immortal. "Legendary" is the word, at least etymologically, since it comes from the Latin *legenda*, *i.e.* what must be read. Contrary to what Samuel Johnson implied in his article in the sixtieth issue of

<sup>18</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20110222182239/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=Joh4All.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=6&division=div2>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> "Sun-Treader—life and light be thine for ever," line 151.

<sup>21</sup> Robert, after he came back to London, kept everything that had belonged to Elizabeth untouched and he personally and diligently worked on every further edition of her poetry. He did everything he could to preserve her reputation. He went so far as to share memories and ideas about his life and art with Edmund Gosse, something he would have thought unthinkable twenty years earlier. Edmund Gosse turned the interview into a short book: *Robert Browning Personalia*, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1890.

<sup>22</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20110222182239/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=Joh4All.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=6&division=div2>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Every time Robert referred to his Romantic idols, especially in his own poetry, in *Pauline* and in *Sordello* for instance, references are grandiose and unreal, as in the qualification "sun-treader" for instance.

*The Rambler*, truth is far less important than the legendary impact of the semi-divine nature of the poet, in its most Romantic definition. How ironical and logical to see how Robert Browning expected, towards the end of the century, Elizabeth to be remembered the way he himself had remembered and worshiped Percy Bysshe Shelley, the “sun-treader,” at the end of his *Pauline*, published in 1833. As if the best biographer for a poet must be himself a poet and a lover...