5-2014

The Deception of Perception: Browning, Childe Roland, and Supersensory Belief

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THE DECEPTION OF PERCEPTION: BROWNING, CHILDE ROLAND,
AND SUPERSENSORY BELIEF

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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May 2014

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Browning's fascination with the senses and the mind as determiners of reality floods his work. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," in particular, offers a more complicated, sincere exploration of this topic that had become central to Victorian debate. As Browning acknowledges repeatedly through his poetry, the debate between sensory data (empiricism) and supersensory belief (idealism) could not be understood in clear-cut categories. In much of his poetry, however, he grounds these questions in deceptively simple discussions of mesmerism or the Victorian philosophy of the mind. Although those two topics may seem disparate to twenty-first century readers, Victorian belief on thought and consciousness was directly connected to spiritualist and religious conversation. Despite its position as one of Browning's best-known poems, scholarly discussion of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" neglects to acknowledge the tension of these debates in the poem. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" is fundamentally concerned with Roland's inability to trust empirical data (his senses) to determine reality for himself or the reader. The conclusion of "Childe Roland" is famously inconclusive. Browning does not provide us with his own answer to this question, but Roland ultimately raises his trumpet to empirical data as his basis for reality. Although his relationship with these questions is not necessarily a comfortable one, Browning is content to sit with these specters in discomfort rather than give up the search for truth.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"Impossible! Only—I saw it!" exclaims the speaker of Robert Browning's

"Natural Magic." The speaker utters these words in the wake of an inexplicable encounter

with the uncanny and supernatural. Unable to trust what he sees, the speaker ends the

poem just as baffled by the experience as he began. Browning's fascination with the

senses and the mind as determiners of reality floods his work. "Childe Roland to the Dark

Tower Came," in particular, offers a more complicated, sincere exploration of this topic

that had become central to Victorian debate. As Browning acknowledges repeatedly

through his poetry, the debate between sensory data (empiricism) and supersensory belief

(idealism) could not be understood in clear-cut categories. In much of his poetry,

however, he grounds these questions in deceptively simple discussions of mesmerism or

the Victorian philosophy of the mind. Although those two topics may seem disparate to

twenty-first century readers, Victorian belief on thought and consciousness was directly

connected to spiritualist and religious conversation.[1] Despite its position as one of

Browning's best-known poems, scholarly discussion of "Childe Roland to the Dark

Tower Came" neglects to acknowledge the tension of these debates in the poem. "Childe

Roland to the Dark Tower Came" is fundamentally concerned with Roland's inability to

trust empirical data (his senses) to determine reality for himself or the reader. Although

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[1] As Edward S. Reed, a scholar of psychology, wrote, "The 'scientific' debates over mind, body, and soul in the 1800s are inseparable from the religious debates concerning these matters" (3). He even went as far as to claim, "it is, in fact, anachronistic to separate the two" (3).

Browning does not provide us with his own answer to this question, Roland ultimately

raises his trumpet to empirical data as his basis for reality.

CHAPTER TWO

BROWNING AND SPIRITUALISM

Spiritualism was always a point of controversy for Victorian England, even

during its moments of greatest popularity. Although this movement went by many names

(the most used were spiritualism, mesmerism, and animal magnetism), it was commonly

understood as belief in an unseen world of spirits that could be accessed through specific

practices (séances, table rapping/turning, automatic writing, etc.). John Jones, a Victorian

spiritualist practitioner, defined spiritualism as "the belief in the existence of spirit as a

person, endowed with mental perceptions and powers of force; by which he can, though

invisible, act according to his invisible physical powers, as man can with his visible

physical energies" (qtd. in introduction to *The Victorian Supernatural* 7). What Jones

identifies is the paradoxical theory that an unseen force can be simultaneously invisible

(incapable of being perceived by the senses) and physical (open to observation through

the senses). Jones believed in spirits as real presences with specific powers that could be

manifested in ways that, if not entirely physical, could at least appear in forms that could

be observed by the senses. This philosophy was not necessarily revolutionary. Orthodox

religion had accepted an unseen God or gods manifested in physical ways for countless

centuries. Unlike orthodox religions, however, spiritualism did not claim a deity in any

strict sense. Even this deviation was not the point of greatest concern for Browning or

others who remained skeptical about the increasingly popular spiritualism.[2] For most

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[2] Late nineteenth century writer Richard A. Armstrong presented Browning as one of the
few nineteenth century poets who believed in "faith triumphant." He writes, "For, deep

skeptics, the controversy concerning spiritualism was about the integrity and trustworthiness of self-proclaimed mediums and mesmerists. Countless scholars, writers, philosophers, and doctors participated in spiritualism, and even published articles and letters defending spiritualism as a legitimate science.

The mix of skepticism and belief was present not only in the Brownings' social circle, but in their marriage. The famous Browning marriage tends to attract scholars who would rather place Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning into neat, complementary categories, rather than enter into the messier nature of their real thoughts.[3] Scholars such as Nina Auerbach polarize the couple, presenting RB as obstinate skeptic and EBB as devoted fanatic; of course, their poetry and personal letters indicate that their stance on spiritualism was nothing if not complicated. Browning rarely addressed spiritualism in his letters, but made his skepticism clear even in these few references. His wife, however, wrote about spiritualism constantly to a variety of recipients, including her friends, experts on animal magnetism, and, of course, her husband. Although she loved the idea of mesmerism and frequently expressed her interest in the subject, EBB, too, wrestled with skepticism. She often wrote about testimonies she had heard and stories of healings caused by hypnotism or spirit-encounters, but was hesitant to believe them completely. Even in her expressions of greatest belief in the

and intuitive as was his faith, and ever triumphant over doubt and fear, his was not a mind that could live untouched by the searching questionings of his time. At bottom, he had no doubts of his own to face, but he was keenly alive to the doubts of others, and these he faced, and learnt to understand and to sympathise with so far as was needful, in order to give them helpful answer" (Armstrong 116-117).

[3] Scholars love to conflate the famously ambiguous Browning's beliefs into simplistic, black-and-white terms. Addison C. Bross, however, remarks that Browning believed that faith and doubt must always coexist (12).

validity of spiritualist practices, EBB always voiced her own doubt. She rarely expressed complete faith in spiritualism; rather, her faith and skepticism were mixed in equal measure. Like her husband, she experienced difficulty reconciling scientific fact with what she called "phenomena," or the testimonies of supernatural healings and spirit encounters (*The Browning Correspondence* 7.272). On November 5, 1842, EBB wrote to Mary Russell Mitford about her friend and former governess, Mrs. Orme, who frequently sought the help of mesmerists and "quacks" (a term that EBB used to refer to doctors who relied on mesmeric practices as scientific techniques) (*BC* 6.142). EBB, supposedly the couple's only advocate for spiritualism, spoke about this occurrence with incredulity. She was not passing along the information to support mesmeric forms of healing, but to gossip about how a mutual friend could resort to unreliable healing practices.

As EBB continues to write to Mitford over the following months, however, she mentions mesmerism with greater and greater frequency, and begins to imply a serious consideration of spiritualism as a legitimate mode of belief. On August 3, 1843, for instance, EBB wrote to Mitford about her conflicted feelings on the subject:

> But not to be either a stupid infidel or a credulous *hoaxee,* is really hard,--
> where one's experience & what one calls one's philosophy, lie on one
> side, --& a heap of phenomena on the other,..which are contrary to the
> experience of our sense & yet presented anew under the evidence of those
> very senses. For my part,..perhaps I am credulous naturally. I am ready to
> believe everything in the way of the spirit-world--& what I am inclined to

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think or not to think of Mesmerism, is of little worth even to myself. (*BC*

7.272)

EBB captures the heart of the spiritualist debate for Victorian England. People continue

to claim that they witnessed events "contrary to the experience of our sense," which

empiricism would reject as untrue; yet, those experiences were witnessed through

sensory, empirical observation. The results of these séances (many of which were held in

parlors as a tea-time diversion) were concrete enough to meet the Victorian thirst for

empirical proof. EBB, however, needed to reconcile the sensory with the supersensory

existing beliefs—what she calls her "philosophy." Her own reluctance to trust mesmeric

"phenomena" came from her inability to reconcile the sensory and supersensory. She

could not be satisfied by even the strongest pieces of evidence on either side until

philosophy and phenomena supported each other. Although she expressed far more

interest in the subject than did Browning, she is also concerned by the apparent

separation of belief and the senses. EBB's reflective tone at the beginning of this excerpt

becomes abruptly dismissive by the end, as she attempts to laugh off her serious

contemplation of "a heap of phenomena" as mere over-credulity in "the way of the spirit-

world"—a world which she continues to view with some trepidation.[4]

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[4] By Dec. 12, 1843, EBB's interest had strengthened into belief, but with some remaining
reservations. She admitted to Hugh Stuart Boyd, "It is precisely *because I believe in it*
that I am averse to having recourse to it. Do you not understand?—I shrink from this
mystery which seems to consist in placing the Spiritual being, & the will, into
dependence on another Spiritual Being & will, & by means unguessed at by the reason"
(*BC* v.8). By this time, EBB so believed in the power of spiritualism and the spirit realm
that she approached it only cautiously for several decades, finally giving it up all together
at the end of the 1850s (Basham 144).

EBB's husband rarely wrote about mesmerism in his letters, and even his few references avoid straightforwardly stating his opinion. On June 30, 1845, Elizabeth Barrett wrote to Browning about the mesmeric experiences of Harriet Martineau, a friend who shared EBB's interest in spiritualism (*BC* 10.283). Browning's only response was to briefly remark in his next letter that "An old French friend of mine, a dear foolish very French heart & soul, is coming presently—his poor brains are whirling with mesmerism in which he believes, as in all other unbelief" (*BC* 10.287). French stereotyping aside, Browning suggests that mesmerism's influence on the heart and soul is not the main problem—the trouble is mesmerism's affect on the mind. It is not his friend's "dear foolish very French heart & soul" that are "whirling," but "his poor brains" which are confused by belief in mesmerism. The mind controls our perceptions and shapes our reality, so a confused mind that misinterprets any form of phenomenon is liable to mistake illusion for reality. Under the influence of spiritualism as either parlor fad or serious pursuit, his friend may quickly find himself deceived by con-artists or worse. When EBB entirely gave up her belief in mesmerism in the late 1850s, Browning was overjoyed that she had given up these beliefs, and even "celebrated her recovery from the old madness of Spiritualism" (Basham 144). To recover from "madness" is to be restored to a true sense of the world. According to Browning, to believe in spiritualism is to lack the ability to determine an accurate grasp of what is real and what is not.

More intriguingly, Browning equates belief in mesmerism with "all other unbelief." Most practitioners of spiritualism/mesmerism did not acknowledge a higher power, nor was there one standard for mesmeric practice. In this way, spiritualism

deviated from Christianity and other traditional religious practices. Since spiritualism was not theistic in nature, it shared more in common with atheism than with Christianity or orthodox religion. For many Victorians, atheism meant a scientific, pragmatic view of the world, to the exclusion of faith in a higher power. Such a declaration was still unsettling to Victorian society, but was, like many taboo subjects, becoming increasingly vocalized. Spiritualism was neither purely scientific nor purely reliant on faith, but was incredibly vulnerable to manipulation and hoax. Browning implies that, like unbelief, belief in spiritualism confuses the mind, sending it "whirling."

Browning addresses the fraud prevalent in spiritualist rituals more explicitly in his poetry than in his letters. The typical subjects of his abuse are individuals, rather than any belief system itself.[5] For Browning, the false mediums (opportunistic men and women claiming the gift of communing with the dead) were particularly culpable because they manipulated their audience's perception of reality for monetary gain or power. These intruders were adept at blurring the line between real healings/spirits and illusion. He addresses this issue most directly in "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," in which a dishonest medium (based on Daniel Dunglas Home, whom Browning exposed for fraud during a séance that he and his wife attended) is thrashed by an angry, deceived audience member for faking the work of the spirits during a séance. Mr. Sludge's attacker never speaks, but his violent reaction to Sludge's trickery communicates the depth of his distress. He reacts with more than disappointment or even anger—Sludge cries, "Please, sir! your thumbs are through my windpipe, sir!" (22-23). Such an explosive reaction indicates that the man

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[5] See "Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" as two examples of the distinction between Browning's attack on religious *individuals* vs. the religion itself.

in the audience had accepted the events of the séance as real. The true deceiver in the poem is not Mr. Sludge, although Browning does not hide his contempt for him. It is more likely that the violence of the man's reaction stems from humiliation that he was deceived by his own senses. His senses indicated that the events unfolding before him were real, yet every detail of the séance was an elaborate hoax designed to manipulate him and the rest of the audience. Isobel Armstrong observes of "Mr. Sludge," "Empirical methods have exposed him, but before this they seemed to establish his authenticity, and are therefore unreliable; consequently, if we have no means of discovering whether somebody is telling the truth, we have no means of discovering whether he is lying" (3). If he could not trust his own senses to accurately identify the truth in this situation, then what could he trust?

The speaker of "Natural Magic" experienced a more positive, though nevertheless disorienting, encounter with the physicality of the supernatural. The first stanza of this poem reads:

> All I can say is—I saw it!
>
> The room was as bare as your hand.
>
> I locked in the swarth little lady, --I swear,
>
> From the head to the foot of her—well, quite as bare!
>
> 'No Nautch shall cheat me,' said I, 'taking my stand
>
> At this bolt which I draw!' And this bolt—I withdraw it,
>
> And there laughs the lady, not bare, but embowered
>
> With—who knows what verdure, o'erfruited,

o'erflowered?

Impossible! Only—I saw it! (1-10)

Mesmerism was distinct from many other belief systems because the immaterial world of spirits could also materialize before the eyes of witnesses. As long as the audience of the séances could *see* the spirits appear or *see* healings occur, they could believe in the existence of spirits and in the validity of mesmerism. If mesmerism relied solely on testimonies and claims, or if only the medium could see the spirits, then mesmerism would have garnered as much belief and skepticism as that given to twenty-first century fortune-tellers.

CHAPTER THREE

BROWNING AND THE VICTORIAN PHILOSOPHY OF THE MIND

Even outside of such explicit cases of the illusion of perception by individuals, Victorian intellectuals were deeply concerned by the mind's fallibility and potential to deceive. If we could not trust empirical data for a definitive interpretation of the truth (and many still believed in this possibility), then the natural response would be to turn to the philosophies of the mind. William Wordsworth addressed this cultural dilemma in his letter to Isabella Fenwick in 1843, in which he explained his thought process before writing "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." Wordsworth writes, "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this *abyss of idealism* to the reality" (336, emphasis mine). What Wordsworth describes is his internal tension between the concrete and immaterial worlds. Wordsworth chooses to channel his thoughts on immortality and idealism through the form of an ode. The ode allows Wordsworth to position idealism as ultimately praiseworthy, regardless of his underlying skepticism and conflicted emotion with the veracity of the immaterial. Despite his professed idealism, he still clung to tangible, visible objects to recall him from becoming lost in his internal life. He speaks of idealism as though it were dangerous, while empirical data was somehow safer, more terrestrial, than the world of his mind. In the words of Joanna E. Rapf, Wordsworth was driven in part by his "need…to root his imagination in the material world" (378). As EBB hinted at in her letter to Mary Russell

Mitford, however, pure empiricism is just as deep an abyss as pure idealism. Empiricism is based on the assumption that the senses are faultless and all external data is objective; however, all of that empirical data must be filtered through our own minds. If our minds are infallible, then we can trust our senses to determine truth. If, however, our minds cannot be trusted to accurately filter what we observe with our senses, then empiricism fails us.

For Wordsworth, the two were inseparable. Even in his poetry and letters, the external and internal constantly battle for the position of greatest value. In "The world is too much with us" (Sonnet XIV), for instance, the speaker moves back and forth between disillusionment in what he sees (what he is capable of discerning with his senses) and longing for the past that he cannot, but longs to see. In the second half of the sonnet, the speaker expresses his longing for an unattainable past almost as an aside:

> …Great God! I'd rather be
>
> A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
>
> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
>
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
>
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
>
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn. (9-14).

The speaker longs for a mythic past, rather than a historical past—one that is not only unattainable, but that never existed. The final three lines of the stanza emphasize the sensory experience required to establish the reality of a returned past. Yet if Proteus and Triton never existed, would the speaker be able to trust his senses if he *did* see those

mythical figures? Each possibility only further proves the fallibility of the senses to move us closer to immortality through the recovery of the insubstantial past.

Victorian fascination with the mind led to a growing acceptance of psychological studies and psychotherapy as legitimate science. Scientists began to apply their empirical curiosity to the workings of the mind, thought, and consciousness. Edward Reed comments that nineteenth century study of the mind had to continuously assert its support and mutual cooperation with religious thought (8). Reed writes that nineteenth century "mainstream thinkers often attacked the promoters of scientific psychology as allies of atheism, but even a superficial reading of their work reveals how false this accusation was" (9). This accusation echoes Browning's remark that belief in spiritualism was akin to unbelief. Religion, spiritualism, and psychological study all sought for truth, yet the latter two seek truth outside of a deity, which made them dangerous in the eyes of many Victorians. In any case, psychological study was still in its early stages of development. As far as Browning and much of Victorian society were concerned, these new scientists of the mind were not to be trusted.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME

By 1853, Browning had already established his distrust of the senses, mental

perception, and of people's ability to manipulate both. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower

Came" reflects this distrust, not only in content, but in the events surrounding its creation.

When Browning wrote "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" in 1853, he attributed

its source to a few lines from Edgar's speech in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. However, over

three decades later (in 1887), he admitted to an acquaintance,

> I was conscious of no allegorical intention in writing it….Childe Roland
>
> came upon me as a kind of dream. I had to write it, then and there, and I
>
> finished it in the same day, I believe. But it was simply that I had to do it. I
>
> did not know then what I meant beyond that, and I'm sure I don't know
>
> now. But I am very fond of it. (qtd. in *A Browning Handbook* 229)

This second attribution, admitted over thirty years after Browning first wrote the poem,

lacks all of the certainty that Shakespeare-as-source allows. Instead of the reliable printed

work of Shakespeare, Browning claims that even he does not understand the

circumstances or purpose of the poem. Although Browning ends his concession by

asserting his affection for the poem, his admission is largely filled with his lack of

understanding/knowledge. According to William C. De Vane, Jr., "Many times in his

later days Browning denied that *Childe Roland* had any source other than the line in *King*

Lear" (229). Once again, the reaction is of greater importance than that which inspires the

reaction. *King Lear* was something that he could explain and trust would be understood

in concrete terms. The play fit into a long literary history—a history in which he surely wanted his own work to be placed. The unusual dream, on the other hand, could not be explained definitively.

Of course, Browning was only one of many poets who claimed some kind of otherworldly inspiration as the source of their work. Samuel Coleridge claimed as much about the inspiration of "Kubla Khan," written only four decades prior to "Childe Roland":

> The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation of consciousness of effort. (78)

Coleridge's claim that he fell asleep to the "external senses" implies that he was given over to the internal thoughts of his own mind (or, to borrow from Wordsworth, to the abyss of idealism). When he returned from the abyss, his ideas became objects, moving him from idealism in dream to empiricism in waking life. Like Browning, he experienced the influence of an external source of inspiration, although Coleridge's was not as direct or complete a push as Browning's experience. In these moments, both poets became what William B. Yeats would call "vessels"—conductors for the power of an external, unseen force.

Long before Coleridge, Browning, or Yeats would make their claims of powerful vision, Plato wrote in *Ion* that all of the best poets wrote the words of God through divine inspiration:

> For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed… For in this way, the God would seem to indicate to us and not allow us to doubt that these beautiful poems are not human, or the work of man, but divine and the work of God; and that the poets are only the interpreters of the Gods by whom they are severally possessed.

In this piece, Socrates declares that poets must be either "dishonest or inspired" (Plato). Ion responds by claiming that poets are inspired, "for inspiration is by far the nobler" (Plato). Nobler it may be, but Socrates' accusation lingers, if only at a distance. In a sense, the poet is the medium between audience and artistic inspiration. As such, the artist has the ability to manipulate and deceive. In a sense, this places Browning in the position of the mesmeric mediums he hates, especially if the poem was the result of an external, unseen force as he claimed. Adam Roberts argues that "Browning's poetry is haunted by ghosts," specifically in the use of "his powers medium-like to give voice to dead men and women" (110). As the father of the dramatic monologue, Browning frequently chose historical or fictional figures to speak from long-dead eras. Daniel Karlin, a prominent Browning scholar, suggests that, "One might call [occult/magical power] the hidden agenda of all dramatic monologuists, and of the poet who created them" (66). Karlin refers to Browning's use of dramatic monologues as a means to speak

a message through the voice of someone else, a skill that reflects semblances of mediumship and the occult. As poet and skeptic, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" places Browning in an odd position. The "arch-opponent of spiritualism" (Basham 119) is compelled by a dream into a position in which he must interact conceptually, if not directly, with spiritual forces and events in the poem.

The poem's form itself becomes a significant contributor to Browning's struggle between the sensory and supersensory. Unlike the structure of Coleridge's dream-poem, which reflects the elusiveness and movement of dreams, Browning's dream-poem adheres to a specific, rigid form for two-hundred-and-four lines. The rhymes follow an *abbaab* pattern for thirty-four stanzas. Through this structure, the poem itself becomes an attempt to harness an encounter with the immaterial. Although the landscape moves with Roland's ever-shifting state of mind, the poem's structure never changes. Yet, even the reliability of the poem's structure is deceptive. Browning chooses to channel his dream through a narrative poem, in which the young knight-to-be follow his predecessors on a quest to defeat foes and return victorious. By synthesizing his own rhyme scheme with the lyrical stanzas typical of traditional narrative poetry, Browning creates a sense of what Freud referred to as *unheimlich* ("unhomely"). In other words, Browning's new rhyme scheme makes the familiar traditional stanza become something unfamiliar or Other. He creates an uncanny rhyme that underscores the sense that something indiscernible is not quite right in the poem. The poet leaves us no tree to grasp at; the poem's form only exacerbates the unhomeliness of the poem's content.

Perhaps it is the poem's unusual creation that makes the distinction between poet and speaker less clear in "Childe Roland" than is typical for Browning's poetry. I do not want to do this poem or Browning the injustice of assuming that the speaker and poet are one and the same; however, it would be an equal disservice to ignore the similarities between the questions that haunt Browning and those that haunt Roland. Literary critic Edward Strickland also speaks of poet and speaker as the same in this poem, writing that at the end of the poem, "Roland/Browning faces at last at the Dark Tower an initiation rite into the Round Table of Romantic visionaries" (300). As Roland stares at the images of his deceased friends, both he and Browning must grapple with the questions that haunt them and either accept their reality for what it is or find some way to reconcile their senses with their mental perception.

Despite Browning's belated attribution of the poem to his dream-vision, we cannot dismiss *King Lear* entirely. This play struggles to answer the same questions that Browning and Roland wish to answer. The specific passage that Browning first claimed as his inspiration comes from a speech given by Edgar while he is disguised as Poor Tom the beggar. Feigning madness, Edgar cries, "Childe Rowland to the dark tower came, / His word was still, 'Fie, foh, and fum, / I smell the blood of a British man" (III.iv.182-184). Edgar, more than any other character in the play, experiences the foolishness of trusting in his senses. Early in the play, Edgar's younger brother Edmund forges a letter in which Edgar appears to be planning their father Gloucester's death. Although saddened by this news, Gloucester believes in the reality of this plot because the letter *appears* to be written by Edgar. As a result, he sends out a manhunt for his own son's

blood. Edgar flees into the moors, where he assumes the persona of Poor Tom, a mad

beggar dwelling in a hermit's hut. In the meantime, Gloucester is brutally tortured and

blinded for his loyalty to King Lear. Gloucester and Edgar's reunion occurs without

reliable sensory markers because of Gloucester's physical blindness and Edgar's

disguise. Because Gloucester cannot rely on his senses for guidance, he must trust in the

integrity of another human to lead him to truth. Unlike Mr. Sludge, Browning's dishonest

medium, Edgar's guidance leads to enlightenment instead of deception. Browning's brief

reference to *King Lear* sets the stage for his larger concern about the danger inherent in

unqualified empiricism.

The poem begins with Roland immediately expressing hostile distrust of his

guide: "My first thought was, he lied in every word, / That hoary cripple, with malicious

eye / Askance to watch the working of his lie / On mine" (1-4). According to Roland's

description, the old man shares much in common with Mr. Sludge, the corrupt medium.

Both figures delight in deceiving others through misdirection. They each assume roles as

guides through unfamiliar territory, but instead of enlightening through their direction,

they manipulate their audience's perceptions, delighting in "one more victim gained

thereby" (Browning 6). Yet, we cannot be too quick to join Roland in his accusations,

because even Roland's descriptions are filtered through his own perceptions. Roland

approaches the old man with suspicion already in his mind: Roland's "*first thought* was,

he lied" (emphasis mine 1). Shortly afterward, Roland asks, "What else should he be set

for, with his staff? / What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare / All travelers who might

find him posted there, / And ask the road?" (7-10). Roland approaches the guide with

assumptions already in place about the man's character. The first image that we encounter in the poem—that of the hoary cripple—is based far more on Roland's perceived ideas of the cripple's character than on his actual features. Roland's observations of the man's mouth and eyes are laden with his own belief that the man's eyes are "malicious" and that his mouth rejoices in acquiring "one more victim" (I.6). John Ruskin wrote, "All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the 'Pathetic Fallacy'" (qtd. in Landow 32). Although he attempts to approach the cripple through rational observation, his mind distorts the man's basic features into something nightmarish or monstrous. If his perception of the guide is already skewed, then we must exercise caution when believing what he says about the man or anything else in his twisted, dark environment. Is the "hoary cripple" (2) intentionally deceiving Roland, or is he simply an old man trying to help the lost childe reach his goal successfully? The answer to this question is far less important than the dilemma itself. When Roland is confronted by a sensory being, his immediate response is to distrust what he sees.

Roland participates in a seemingly endless, futile quest deep into a landscape that he can never be certain exists outside of his own mind. He is unable to rely fully on his senses to determine his place or direction, which leaves him in mental and emotional agony. At times, he sees things that immediately after disappear, or that shift in front of his eyes; at other times, his senses abandon him completely ("Back therefore to my darkening path again! / No sound, no sight as far as eye could strain" 104-105). Lawrence

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J. *Starzyk* writes that in much of Browning's work, "The poet...appears to be a projectionist throwing upon a screen for all to view the images drawn not after ideals or even after phenomena of nature and life but after creations of his own mind" (*The Dialogue of the Mind with Itself* 34). The speaker appears to see these images with his eyes as he would something tangible; yet, his sight proves unreliable since these supposedly concrete, observable images (the hoary cripple, path, stream, battered horse, peers) move in an out of his consciousness. His "seeing" of these figures occurs, in part, within his own mind, and is inseparable from his conscious thoughts about seeing each.

In desperation for some kind of hope, Roland says, "I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart" (84) and "asked one draught of earlier, happier sights" (87). Sight is key in this moment. These remarks follow the apparition of the grotesque horse, which disturbs Roland to the point that he must shut his eyes—temporarily removing his sense of sight altogether. In place of the disturbing visual image of the horse, he calls for more enjoyable sights—sights of times he enjoyed in the past. This moment blends the senses with memory, which is fundamentally immaterial in nature. Roland seems incapable of hope unless he is able to discern good things concretely, through his senses, which he is rarely able to do definitively. In section twenty-one, Roland uses his spear to help him cross the stream, and exclaims, "—It may have been a water-rat I speared, / But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek" (125-126). Neither he nor the reader knows what is true in this situation. Did he spear a rat or a child? Did he spear anything at all, since we must question even the reality of the river, which he says "crossed my path / As unexpected as a serpent comes" (109-110)?

Roland continues to connect memory to sensory markers in his description of his visions of friends. After he retreats to a place of blind memory, Roland exclaims,

> …I fancied Cuthbert's reddening face
>
> Beneath its garniture of curly gold,
>
> Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold
>
> An arm in mine to fix me to the place
>
> That way he used. (91-95)

Roland sees this knight vividly, with great attention to sensory detail, noting Cuthbert's "reddening face," his "curly gold" hair, almost feeling Cuthbert wrap his arm around him. Next, Roland sees "Giles then, the soul of honour—there he stands / Frank as ten years ago when knighted first" (96-97). Giles, like Cuthbert, stands before Roland not as memory, but as a real, if not a physical, presence. Roland pays attention to the physicality of their relationship during life ("An arm in mine to fix me to the place / That way he used," 94-95), while also recognizing that the immaterial image his mind has conjured up remains separate from his sensory, tactile world ("I *almost* felt him," 93). The mind and senses are dependent upon each other, yet can never act entirely for each other. Roland seems to believe that if he *could* literally feel Cuthbert's arm around him, then he would be "fix[ed]…to the place"—grounded more firmly, more solidly than he is without being able to confirm his surroundings by touch.

In the same way, the language used in the final stanza is not the language of memory or of imagination; rather, it is the language of a real, true sighting of real, true people. Roland gazes at the Tower and reflects:

> There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
>
> To view the last of me, a living frame
>
> For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
>
> I saw them and I knew them all. (199-202)

In this last verse, Roland does not say that he imagined the knights, or "It was as if there they stood." He simply says, "There they stood," implying that the presence of the dead knights is something that he can perceive with his senses. They stand among a tangible landscape (the hillsides), and in a "sheet of flame." Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the poem, the sensory and supersensory become indistinguishable. As Roland approaches the Tower, he asks, "Not hear? when noise was everywhere! it tolled / Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears / Of all the lost adventurers my peers" (193-195). Roland hears names, not in his mind, but directly in his ears, just as he would hear the clear ring of a bell. The noise "was everywhere" (193) and tangibly filled the space around him. Yet these names are of "all the *lost* adventurers" (my emphasis, 195); in other words, they are the names of knights who did not return and, presumably, died in their attempt to fulfill their mission. The names are from beyond the grave, yet are heard in Roland's present world. The language Roland uses to describe this event bears striking similarity to some of the testimonies of participants in séances: "Strange voices—voices not of this world—stole into the room, the gas turned alternately blue and crimson, and the place was suffused with an unearthly glare" (qtd. in introduction to *The Victorian Supernatural* 7). This picture is filled with otherworldly voices and "unearthly" fire, almost exactly like the scene depicted at the end of the poem. After he hears the voices

"not of this world," he arrives at the Tower and says, "in a sheet of flame / I saw them and I knew them all" (201-202). The knights, like the spirits summoned in nineteenth century séances, are both sensory and supersensory: sensory because they can be observed through empirical evaluation, and supersensory because they are either memory or spirit of someone who no longer exists in bodily form on earth.

Roland's senses constantly fail to distinguish truth from illusion, and nowhere more than at the end of the journey. Despite his weary searching for the Dark Tower throughout the poem (and long before the poem begins), he does not immediately recognize the Tower when he finally arrives. He exclaims, "Burningly it came on me all at once, / This was the place!" (175-176). He berates himself: "Dunce, / Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce, / After a life spent training for the sight!" (178-180). After years of studying, preparing for, and hearing about the journey to the Tower, Roland was surprised to actually see the Tower. Perhaps this surprise stems from a failure to sharpen his sensory perception as he journeyed through the harsh landscape, or maybe he had begun to doubt the existence of a real Tower. In either case, Roland never doubts that the Tower exists in a metaphorical sense—as the symbolic goal of the quest. He begins to doubt every other figure that he encounters on his journey, but the physical sighting of the Tower removes all doubt from his mind. This apparent inconsistency indicates that Roland's distrust of his senses has not caused him to reject the senses as a legitimate means of determining reality. Yet, his belief in the power of empiricism to prove existence must endure one more crucial test before the journey's end.

CHAPTER FIVE

DEATH: THE FINAL CONFRONTATION

The presence of death throughout this poem further complicates his fight to achieve some kind of consensus on what is real based on what his senses indicate. Death inserts itself as early as the second stanza, when Roland describes the cripple's laugh as "skull-like" (10). He even describes the earth in terms of death and decay: "As for the grass, it grew as scant as air / In leprosy" (73-74) and "Drenched willows flung [scrubby alders] headlong in a fit / Of mute despair, a suicidal throng" (117-118). When he wades through the changeable stream he "feared / To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek" (121-122). He does not say that he fears death, but that he fears to experience the result/reality of death through his senses. Although Roland does not know if the suddenly changing landscape exists outside of his own mind, he seems to believe that a sensory encounter with death will make death real.

Perhaps the most disturbing image of death in the poem, however, is the "stiff blind horse" (76) that appears in the diseased grass. Roland muses, "Alive? he might be dead for aught I know" (79). Once again, Roland distrusts what he sees. The young knight-to-be observes the horse's emaciated body, matted mane, and tired eyes, but these seemingly concrete observations cannot even prove to him whether the beast is dead or alive. Even that which empirical data and observations suggest is dead may in fact be alive—and that which we perceive to be alive may actually be dead. Roland does not limit these grim descriptors to the landscape; he also applies them to himself. In stanzas V and VI, the living Roland refers to his hopeless condition "As when a sick man very

near to death / Seems dead indeed" (25-26). Roland does not claim to be either dead or alive; rather, he uses the analogy to emphasize the deceptive nature of so-called empirical proof. Like the dead/undead horse, the sick man is assumed dead because he shows no visible symptoms of life. His friends assume that their senses will provide them the most accurate information, so they assume that their friend will die (or is dead) because he appears to be so. Their friend may yet be saved, but they reject any imaginative solution in favor of preparing for his burial. As a result, their refusal to consider truth outside of observable, measurable proof may have been the real cause of their friend's death. Roland acknowledges his own impermanence when he refers to himself as a "living frame / For one more picture!" (200-201). A picture is tangible and observable, but does not constitute the reality of something; pictures are only representations of something that no longer exists exactly as it was when the photo was taken. In a sense, photographs and portraits are sensory deceptions. By comparing himself to a person posing for a picture, Roland asserts his willingness to participate in the illusion. This moment also points to his direct gaze at his own mortality. If he captures an image of himself, does he continue to exist or does he become less himself or less human? Neither he nor Browning seem to have an answer to this question.

In the final image, "all the lost adventurers my peers" (195) exist in this in-between space, as well. They are simultaneously "Lost, lost!" (198) and stand clearly in his vision. In each case, he expresses uncertainty about whether these figures are dead as they appear, or if they only *seem* dead. Like the spirits summoned in mesmeric rituals, the lost knights occupy a gray space as present absences. Participants of these rituals

frequently called forth the spirits of the dead, often hearing distinct voices of past loved ones or seeing these spirits appear before them wearing physical clothes. In such a situation, empirical data would have informed the eager participant of two contradictory occurrences: that the person they loved was still dead and that the deceased person was with them in the room, dressed in his/her favorite clothes. But were such sightings enough to prove that the lost person was there in the room, even as a spirit? Browning certainly did not think so, since the senses could be so easily manipulated. Roland, however, is less sure than Browning. He distrusts what he sees, but remains dependent on his senses to guide him on his journey. He distrusts the hoary cripple, yet follows his advice; he distrusts the reality of his landscape, yet is horrified by what he sees, as if it is real; and, finally, he reaches images of men whom he believes are dead, yet progresses forward as if they were alive.

What is particularly noteworthy about the final confrontation is that the images of Roland's peers are viewing *him,* just as he is viewing them. Just as he attempts to discern whether or not these images are in fact real by using his senses, so he is held to his own standard of reality. In the final moment, Roland is subjected to the sensory investigation of the failed knights, bringing him face to face with his own mortality. If he can be *seen,* then he exists—even if only the "last of [him]" (200). Roland and his peers are caught together in a paradox of existence/nonexistence. Roland seems to know that the knights standing before him are already dead, since he refers to them as "lost;" however, he also recognizes them as clear, observable images of their former selves. His ability to see the knights, even if they are only illusion, makes them real, if only for a moment. Roland's

response to their evaluative gaze is to announce his approach with sensory fanfare:

"Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set / And blew" (203-204). This action not only

challenges whatever or whoever is inside the tower to fight; it also establishes his

presence there in a way that other people will be sure to understand. Like Wordsworth

grasping at walls and trees to save himself from drowning in the abyss of idealism,

Roland clutches his horn. By blowing the "slug-horn" (203), he declares his presence in

the loudest form possible, making his existence loud in his own ears, with his own voice,

as well as in the ears of anyone who may be listening. If they can't see him, they can hear

him, so a wider group of people can confirm his existence and/or death. This last act is a

sensory performance—an active, even desperate, attempt to declare his physical

presence. James F. Louks and Andrew M. Stauffer report that before the Roland of

legend died in battle, he blew his horn "so loud the birds fell dead and the Saracens [his

enemies] drew back in terror" (188). After that great sound came death, shrouded in the

unknowability of silence. And silence resists empirical knowledge.[6]

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[6] "Childe Roland" ends just before the moment of actual confrontation (with death),
leaving the reader with an ambiguous image of the afterlife. If the knights are truly dead,
then this shape-shifting landscape becomes an otherworldly afterlife. If they exist only in
memory, can they exist in other forms (either spiritual or physical)? If we interpret reality
solely through the senses, how can we begin to grapple with the concept of an
unobservable, immaterial existence after death?

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Mortality forces this abstract Victorian debate into searing urgency: can we conclusively determine existence through empirical data or through the philosophy of our minds? The original purpose of Roland's quest may have been to find the Dark Tower, but the poem's finale implies that his real purpose was to determine by what means he would establish his present and continued existence. He hesitates for a moment, pausing to look at the familiar faces of lost friends and legends, before he presses forward. Because the poem ends before any responding action to Roland's trumpet call, his death is only implied. This odd suspension at the end gives Roland the appearance of immortality, which he amplifies through his final trumpet blast. Despite his countless encounters with the deception and illusion inherent in his observable environment, Roland not only relies upon, but uses the sensory and empirical at the poem's end. Of course, as in most of Browning's dramatic monologues, the poet himself does not make his own position explicit. After all, the conclusion of "Childe Roland" is famously inconclusive. What we *can* infer from the poem is that Browning recognizes the complexity of these questions far more than the poem's hero. Although his relationship with empiricism and idealism is not necessarily a comfortable one, Browning is content to sit with these specters in discomfort rather than give up the search for truth. By giving greater scholarly attention to the impact of mesmerism and the Victorian philosophy of the mind on his life and work, we can move toward a more accurate understanding of the influence of these debates on Victorian culture, as well as on his larger body of work.

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