

Robert Browning, 'SCULPTOR & poet'

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In a letter of 1862 to his friend the American expatriate sculptor William Wetmore Story, Robert Browning announces the preparation for publication of a new selected edition of his poetic works. The edition had been occasioned by his return to England after the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and was designed, along with the six-volume *Poetical Works* of the same year, from which the selection was taken, to reignite popular awareness of and interest in his body of work to date. Browning introduces his new edition to his friend by way of an imagined title page, which includes a rather surprising byline after the author's name: 'There's printing a book of "*Selections from R B*" — (*SCULPTOR & poet*) which is to popularise my old things.'¹ The eventual title page of the 1863 *Selections* does not, in the event, introduce Browning as 'SCULPTOR & poet' to that envisaged new readership of the 1860s, but it would not have been entirely illegitimate had it done so.

Browning's delight in playfully enacting a dual artistic identity to Story was rooted in truth. During the winters of 1859 to 1861, Browning worked in Story's sculpture studio in Rome, learning the art from his friend. When he relocated to London in 1861 after the death of Elizabeth he built a sculpture studio in his house in Warwick Crescent, and his letters during these first years in London attest to his continued sculptural activity. This moment of experimentation with another art form comes at a moment of crisis in his own. Indeed, some commentators have labelled the years between *Men and Women* in 1855 and *Dramatis Personae* in 1864 as a period of writer's block, triggered by the failure of *Men and Women* to achieve the popular or critical acclaim Browning had predicted for it.² Terms such as hiatus or writer's block are perhaps too strong to describe this quiet period in Browning's writing career; Browning often took a few years to percolate

¹ Robert Browning to William Wetmore Story, in *Browning to his American Friends: Letters between the Brownings, the Storys and James Russell Lowell 1841–1890*, ed. by Gertrude Reece Hudson (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1965), p. 101 (19 March 1862), emphasis added. The new edition is *Selections from the Poetical Works of Robert Browning* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1863).

² Pamela Neville-Sington characterizes the period as such in her biography, *Robert Browning: A Life After Death* (London: Phoenix, 2004), pp. 102–09; Reece Hudson describes this as 'a period of poetic inactivity', p. 6.

ideas between volumes of poetry, and his letters show that he was writing material eventually collected in *Dramatis Personae* from the late 1850s. Elizabeth's death would of course occasion delays. With hindsight, however, the period between these two volumes proved crucial in Browning's career. *Dramatis Personae* achieved what *Men and Women* did not, answering his critics' charges of obscurity and claiming a popular readership. As the first of Browning's publications to require a second printing, *Dramatis Personae* marked a change in his literary fortunes which continued into the 1860s with the massive success of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69) and his subsequent instantiation as the foremost Victorian poet alongside his old friend and rival Tennyson. While I hesitate, then, to propose that Browning replaced poetry with sculpture during these wilderness years of the late 1850s and early 1860s, I do think the relationship between the poet's sculptural excursion and his production, during the same period, of poems that were to prove his greatest success to date warrants some inquiry. This article will therefore address Browning's parallel pursuits of the arts of sculpture and poetry in the period 1859 to 1863. It will propose that aspects of his sculptural practice at this time influenced and informed his poetic practice, and will venture the associated conclusion, that Browning's experiments with sculpture in the 1859–63 period had some contributory role in the subsequent positive development of his poetic career.

Browning possessed a multidisciplinary creative identity. As a child he was trained in the rudiments of art and music and achieved praise for his pictorial and musical compositions. His father's skill as an artist has been well documented by Browning biographers; the elder Browning's library, famously the site of much of the autodidact's learning, was heavy with art manuals and catalogues. Like father, like son: Browning himself declared that he had been 'a youthful wonder' at drawing and that his father's *Art of Painting in All its Branches* was his favourite book as a child.³ He maintained a lifelong interest in the practice of drawing, taking up drawing instruction once again in the 1850s in Florence under George Mignaty. Indeed, since this is the decade in which he subsequently also went on to study sculpture under Story, there seems to be some catalyst at this point in his career which triggers his move from consumer to producer of the visual arts. Of the difference he perceived between the visual and the literary arts, he wrote in 1837, 'I cannot remember the time when I did not make verses [. . .] [but when] subsequently real and strong feeling called for utterance, either Drawing or Music seemed a much fitter vehicle than "verses"'.⁴

³ Maisie Ward, *Robert Browning and his World*, 2 vols (London: Cassell, 1968–69), 1: *The Private Face (1812–1861)*, p. 21.

⁴ Robert Browning to François Ripert-Monclar, in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, ed. by Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1985–), III: 1832–1837, 264 (9 August 1837).

The French artist Felix Moscheles told Browning, when the poet sat for him, that he esteemed him an ‘artist manqué’, and Browning’s response in his letters to Moscheles was that, indeed, he had had ‘old aspirations’ in this line.⁵

Were the 1850s, then, a period of particularly strong feeling that required of Browning a shift in artistic medium? G. K. Chesterton may have argued that Browning’s literary work was not, in fact, wholly separate from this visual aspect of his imagination and talent. His chapter on ‘Browning as Literary Artist’ argues that Browning’s approach to language is symbolist, and as such approaches the task of poetic writing with a visual agenda through considering the words at his disposal as so many items of arrangement and display on the page, operating under a spatial rather than a linear aesthetic in which meaning arises from the juxtaposition of these individual units of words and their competing or complementary meanings. Of Browning’s purpose in an ekphrastic poem on a German beer jug, Chesterton explains, the poet ‘was simply fashioning a ridiculous knick-knack, exactly as if he were actually moulding one of these preposterous German jugs’.⁶ A further proof of Chesterton’s case is made by the critic’s diagnosis of the concomitant faults of which Browning, like many a symbolist, occasionally falls victim: a tendency to indulge in wordplay and rhyming games for their own sake, and to produce ‘mathematical’ rhymes (pp. 89–91). Both are inevitable consequences of a poetics that prioritizes the structural and physical apparatus of poetry over its hermeneutic intent. Browning’s own lexicon in referring to his poetic practice indicates a physicalized conception of poetic language: time and again he describes how he ‘makes’ or ‘fashions’ verses. Anecdotal instances which give insight into his composition method, such as the instance during the planning of *The Ring and the Book*, when he laid out twelve pebbles to represent the twelve books of the poem, indicate that the poet conceived of both poetic language and form in a spatial and physicalized manner (Ward, 1, 298). Though the visual-spatial properties of Browning’s verse and of his approach to poetry have been raised by past critics, then, critical discussion of Browning’s visual-verbal correlations has thus far failed to consider the particular role of sculpture in his artistic imagination and practice. Browning clearly moved on from his resurgent interest in drawing in the 1850s to develop a preference for and interest in sculpture that became a sustained and serious engagement for a number of years.

What, though, was Browning’s understanding and experience of sculpture? Work in sculptural studies since 2000 has challenged the assumption that Victorian sculpture was a simple continuation of the

⁵ Ward, *Robert Browning and his World*, 11 (1969), *Two Robert Brownings? (1861–1889)*, pp. 178–79.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 141.

white-marble idealism of the eighteenth century's signature neoclassical style. In an influential study, *The Sculptural Imagination*, Alex Potts shows how contemporary reception of Antonio Canova's work, one of the heretofore vaunted leaders of the continued dominance of neoclassical style in nineteenth-century sculpture, was in fact rooted in an appreciation of the physical and phenomenological dimensions of the ideal sculptural object.⁷ Potts's work on Canova here and elsewhere demonstrates how responses to Canova's work praised his textured surfaces, enjoying the illusory experience of the real which his pieces thus achieved in a way that foregrounded their artifice and representative nature.⁸ Potts further shows that the Grand Tour custom of visiting Canova's studio, promoted by the sculptor himself, opened the door literally and metaphorically to an understanding and appreciation of the sculpted object's procession from and through the physical material of its generation. A tour of Canova's studio in Possagno exposed the viewer to the successive stages in the production of the ideal object. Canova's studio practice became famous, and he gained recognition and renown for his process as well as for his products. His innovations in technique in the use of a maquette or bozzetto (scale clay model) were well reported in accounts of his work and were copied by his peers: the sculptor would mould the maquette or bozzetto — the first and most creative stage of the process — himself, then use studio assistants to make a cast in plaster of the clay model, which was then mathematically scaled with pointing tools to produce a larger plaster model — upon which the sculptor would further refine his design, then again leaving the cast to his assistants to work up a rough marble copy, the sculptor revisiting his work at the end of the process for a final stage of adding detail and finesse to the marble. Studio assistants were also heavily involved in the production of the many plaster casts and copies of the marble originals. As further studies of Victorian sculpture have shown us, then — and not least the most recent exhibition on Victorian sculpture, 'Sculpture Victorious' at Tate Britain (2015) — Victorian sculpture was created and received in a context of production, technological innovation, and reproduction, which not only confounds ideas of a singular and idealized art object, but of a singular and idealized artist also.⁹

Browning's experience of sculpture should not therefore be thought of in the context of viewings of reified ideal figures in museum settings. Browning knew sculptors, and he and his wife were the subject of several

⁷ Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 38–44.

⁸ See also Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁹ 'Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901', Tate Britain, 25 February to 25 May 2015. Devised by Martina Droth, Jason Hall, and Michael Hatt.

busts and sculptured portraits (Harriet Hosmer's 1853 *Clasped Hands*, for example), and so the poet had first-hand experience of sculpture's practical methods. A letter home during his 1878 visit to Asolo records his visit to the *Gipsoteca* there. The *Gipsoteca* was, as the name suggests, a museum of Canova's plaster casts, which were displayed with their markings, holes, and measurements from the pointing process intact. Attendance at the *Gipsoteca*, therefore, could not but leave the viewer with a grasp of the sculptor's studio process: Browning attended there in 1878 as mentioned, but it is probable that he would have seen or at least heard of it also on his earlier visit of 1838.¹⁰ Certainly the character of the ideal sculptor Jules in *Pippa Passes* (1841) is based on Canova. As the format of the poem demands, Jules undergoes a transition in character or mindset prompted by Pippa's passing: Browning's sculptor is dramatized at the moment when he transfers, aesthetically, from an idealist aesthetic to a materialist one, embodied in the personal commitment he makes to his model, and in his renewed interest and participation in the natural world.

Browning's reported conversations with William Wetmore Story on the direction of Story's art in the 1850s are also illuminating. Only Story's portion of this conversation is extant: from what remains, however, it is clear that Browning exhorted to Story his long- and closely held theory of the need for objectivity in art (as outlined in his *Essay on Shelley* (1852)), and critics of the Browning–Story relationship agree that Story's sculptural output responded to his friend's proposed redirection.¹¹ Previous to his association with Browning, Story had been content to work within a traditional idealist mode; he only achieved critical plaudits — for *Cleopatra* and *The Libyan Sibyl*, both shown to great acclaim at the 1862 World Exposition in London — when he began to integrate dramatic psychological and historical elements into his compositions, thereby particularizing his figures rather than idealizing them. Critical commentators on Story's work agree in attributing this change directly to his association

¹⁰ The *Gipsoteca* was set up by Canova's brother in the years immediately after Canova's death in 1822. The *Gipsoteca* also exhibited Canova's painted works, of which the sculptor was inordinately proud, but popular judgement — contemporary and subsequent — has failed to agree with the artist's high estimation of them. Browning's response is typical: 'I daresay she [Sarianna] will have told you how we trudged together, this morning, to Possagno — through a lovely country: how we saw all the wonders, — and a wonder of detestability indeed is the paint performance of the great man [Canova]!'. Browning to Mrs Thomas Fitzgerald, in *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas Fitzgerald, 1876–1889*, ed. by Edward C. McAleer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 68–69 (28 September 1878). See also Katharine C. Bronson, 'Browning in Asolo', *Century Magazine*, April 1900, pp. 920–31 (p. 923).

¹¹ Frank R. DiFederico and Julia Markus, 'The Influence of Robert Browning on the Art of William Wetmore Story', *Browning Institute Studies*, 1 (1973), 63–85 (p. 66).

with Browning.¹² Browning's approach to sculpture, then, was in keeping with his demands made broadly elsewhere for an objective art that engages with reality directly.

Underpinning this was his appreciation of sculpture's inseparable relationship to the physical materials of its creation. When we come to evidence of Browning's own sculptural practice during the period of 1859 to 1863, it is clear that what draws him to the art is its directness of engagement between artist and material. Barrett Browning notes in a letter to Sarianna Browning of 1861 that in contrast to the cerebral vexations produced by his poetic work

which I call beating his dear head against the wall till it is bruised [. . .] the modelling combines body-work and soul-work, and the more tired he has been, and the more his back ached, poor fellow, the more he has exulted and been happy — no, nothing ever made him so happy before.¹³

A letter from Ruskin to Browning records the critic's pleasure at hearing of Browning's sculptural exploits, and his belief that the art will suit him: 'I think it possible you may find quite a new form of expression of yourself in that direction.'¹⁴

Throughout all of Browning's references to his sculptural activity in his letters of the 1860s, the medium to which he refers is clay. In asking Story for news of the studio, he pleads, 'let me smell the wet clay once more', and discusses with him how 'our clay is white, not the rich Roman brown'. Moreover, Browning frequently writes of clay as a site of escape from pressing engagements or worries, as in his confession to Story in 1862 that 'my true *treat* would be an evening over the [pile] of unread books, — or a morning with the old coat & wet clay'; and again, to Isa Blagden in 1867: 'now all I want for *myself* is to be forgotten in some out of the way place in Italy or Greece, with books, a model and a lump of clay & sticks.'¹⁵ It may be that, as a relatively young student in the art, he occupied himself only with this first stage of sculptural production, or that, as an amateur, he did not care to progress to the more costly experiment of working with bronze or marble. Or it may be that, in line with the conclusions raised above, his motivation to engage in the art of sculpture as a means of moving

¹² Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and his Friends*, 2 vols (London: Blackwood, 1903), I, 231–35, 239; Margaret Farrand Thorp, *The Literary Sculptors* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965), p. 47.

¹³ Quoted in Neville-Sington, p. 109.

¹⁴ John Ruskin to Browning, quoted in Ward, I, 298 (December 1859).

¹⁵ *Browning to his American Friends*, ed. by Reece Hudson, p. 96 (21 January 1862); p. 136 (26 November 1863); p. 100 (19 March 1862); p. 104, n. 9 (19 June 1867), emphases in original.

to a more direct and physicalized engagement between an artist and his materials was answered by this first and most tactile stage of the sculptural art. Browning smashed all his creations as he made them, so no practical objects exist by which we can measure his participation or productions in the art. Ruskin makes the only mention I have found of a specific piece by Browning, a Cytherea, with corroborating evidence of its quality from Barrett Browning: 'It is wonderfully done, say the learned. He says all his happiness lies in clay now.'¹⁶ The Cytherean Venus is a thought-provoking subject, given Browning's declared interest in objectivity and art; depicting the goddess's birth in the sea, the Cytherean Venus celebrates an incarnation of the divine, a commingling of the physical element of her birth with her own divine nature.

The sum of all this scattered data is that Browning's interest in sculpture was motivated by his preference for process over product in art. In attempting to explain his 'sensitiveness to criticism' to Elizabeth during the course of their courtship correspondence, Browning reveals he has no thought of a readership — public or critical — for his work during the composition process, thus 'the not being listened to by one human creature would, I hope, in no-wise affect me'.¹⁷ Browning's focus as a poet is on the undertaking of the creative act. What interests him is the task between his poetic conception and its delivery into the materials under his command as poet. As he explains to Ruskin in the 1855 letter which is the best statement Browning gives of his poetics, he seeks to 'make shift [in his poetic language] with touches and bits of outlines' to convey a work's generating idea, rather than 'laying it all out, as you would have me'. His concern as a poet is with the best way to express his meaning in and through the formal materials at his disposal: thus his focus as a poet is with his art, not with critics or an imagined reader: 'A poet's affair is with God [. . .]; look elsewhere, and you find misery enough.'¹⁸ Browning's abiding preoccupation with form and process is evidenced by, and indeed was the cause of, the poet's interest in artistic representation across a number of media and disciplines, as previously outlined. While sitting to Felix Moscheles Browning declared he was enjoying the opportunity it afforded of watching the painter work, 'always enjoying as I do the sight of creation by another process than that of the head with only pen and paper to help. How expeditiously the brush works' (Ward, II, 178–79). *Pippa Passes* provides an early definition of art as based in its process of engagement with its materials

¹⁶ Ruskin, writing in 1860, and Elizabeth's letter to Sarianna Browning, both quoted in Ward, I, 299.

¹⁷ Browning to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in *Robert Browning: The Major Works*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 602–06 (p. 604) (11 February 1845).

¹⁸ Browning to Ruskin, in *Robert Browning*, ed. by Roberts, pp. 691–93 (pp. 692–93) (10 December 1855).

through the character Jules the sculptor, who declares, ‘to produce form out of unshaped stuff | Be Art — and further, to evoke a soul | From form’.¹⁹ Daniel Karlin has written with characteristic insight on the importance of ‘work’ to Browning: which word he variously analyses as vocation, industry figured as duty, workmanship, and productivity; and poetic ‘work’ as spiritual calling.²⁰ Karlin’s discussion of ‘work’ in Browning’s lexicon shows that it is the ‘doing’ of art which concerns this artist when thinking about his art, not the destination, debates, or discussions into which that art may subsequently be placed.

Browning’s poetics of process, however, did not endear him to his critics. A creative method that focuses exclusively on the playful interrelation of meaning and word results, as Chesterton has shown, in a dense and self-referential type of poetic language. From *Sordello* in 1840 to *Men and Women* in 1855, Browning’s work was met with the repeated complaint of ‘obscurity’ from critics and supporters alike, and a repeated exhortation from both camps to produce a clear and easily navigable text. The seed of Browning’s disagreement with his critics lies in his fundamental belief in the artist’s duty to the creative work (to the art-‘work’, or work of art) versus his peers’ more traditional view that the artist’s primary obligation is to the reader. The criticism of *Men and Women* in 1855 was particularly stinging to Browning, as here he had at last attempted to accommodate his critics and produce a clearer, less obscure poetic text. However, he found himself on the defensive over the issue of his ‘obscurity’ once again.²¹ The revelation that his great efforts were not enough was the precipitating blow behind his ensuing period of poetic silence.

The crisis that Browning suffered in the years immediately following *Men and Women* was not writer’s block, specifically, but a crisis of faith in his poetic theory. Faced with repeated failure in spite of his great accommodations and concessions to his critics, Browning must have considered whether, if time and again his poetics of process found no audience, his approach was a mistake. Thus, I would argue, Browning stopped writing poetry not because of a dearth of inspiration, but because he lost faith in the inspiration that was uniquely his. But that lapse in faith in his objective poetics of process was only temporary. It was restored by his experiment with sculpture, undertaken in the years subsequent to *Men and Women*. Here, he found an art form that supported and reinforced an objective aesthetic: here, an art form based in process. Browning’s

¹⁹ *Pippa Passes*, Part II, in *Robert Browning*, ed. by Roberts, p. 79, ll. 298–300. All quotations from Browning’s poems will be from this edition.

²⁰ Daniel Karlin, ‘Introduction: Robert Browning’s Pleasure-House’, in *Robert Browning*, ed. by Roberts, pp. xi–xxvii (pp. xiv–xv).

²¹ See ‘Unsigned Review’, *Athenaeum*, 17 November 1855, in *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 155–57, for a representative response.

sculptural excursion provided him with an artistic community, and an artistic site for the development of his ideas on objective aesthetics, which could not be fostered by any other practitioner within his own medium. That experience of successful objective art-making gave the poet the confidence to re-enter the literary fray once again, on his own terms. *Dramatis Personae* (1864) is not discernibly different to *Men and Women*, but therein lies the victory. After his sculptural experience, Browning found the confidence to continue with his poetics of process, and to restate his objective aesthetic. Between the years of 1855 and 1864, then, sculpture provided Browning with a solid answer to his poet's dilemma of how to respond to continued criticism of his work. The influence of his sculptural period is evident in the way that *Dramatis Personae* produces and articulates that renewed poetic message. The remainder of this article will trace the direct influence of Browning's sculptural experience on his subsequent poetic volume in terms of its production and contents.

Dramatis Personae marks a change in Browning's composition method which can be comprehensively attributed to his recent work in sculpture. The volume's poetry was written simultaneously with and immediately after his period of sculptural activity. Barrett Browning links Browning's sculptural practice with a positive effect on his poetic productions in that period: in the same letter in which she outlines his physical delight in the creative efforts of sculpture, she reveals that he is generating poetic material too, and directly as a result of the switch to another medium: 'He has the material for a volume and will work at it this summer, he says [. . .]. Oh the brain stratifies and matures creatively, even in the pauses of the pen.'²² Prior to the early 1860s, Browning's composition methods were erratic. He tended, he often said, to work a composition out in his head entirely before committing it to paper.²³ It seems that early in his career this method produced a rather disordered and at times agonized working model. He writes in 1840 of having various projects scattered across his desk, none of which were nearing completion; his biographer Pamela Neville-Sington notes that, contrary to his wife, whose ease of composition was a wonder to many, 'Browning had always found composition to be a slow and painful process. His heart would sink, so he once said, when he opened his desk to write, only to rise when he shut it.'²⁴ The Story sculpture studio provided Browning with an alternative working model.

Story worked to a strict daily routine of 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and it seems that Browning adopted the sculptor's methodical approach to the artistic task. Story's letters attest that, during the winters of 1859 and 1860, Browning worked daily in his studio for three hours each morning, and

²² Barrett Browning to Sarianna Browning, quoted in Ward, 1, 299 ([early] 1861).

²³ For example, Browning to Isa Blagden, quoted in Ward, 1, 45 (1864).

²⁴ Browning to Alfred Domett, in Ward, 1, 98 (May 1843); Neville-Sington, p. 104.

Browning's own letters upon his return to England demonstrate that he had transferred that work principle to his poetic routine. He writes to William Michael Rossetti in 1861 that he no longer waits for inspiration, as was his wont in Italy, but sits down to a regular daily routine of writing.²⁵ Contrary to his typical habit of conceiving a work in its entirety before sitting down to its composition, letters from this period show Browning writing without a plan or idea in place, instead writing to time. Poetic content is generated by process in this approach. Browning, as I have argued, had long subscribed to a poetics of process; but now, under sculpture's aegis, he was producing it. On holiday in Breton with Sarianna and his father, he speaks of writing 120 lines of a new poem which he is intent upon continuing with regular morning sessions 'whether I like it or no'.²⁶ In 1862, Browning explicitly attributes his new writing routine to the inspiration of his friend in a subsequent letter to Story: 'my time is almost wholly taken up — first by work of a morning then by going out of evenings — did you not bid me do that too?'.²⁷ He proudly writes to Story in late 1863, as an example of his industry, of his simultaneous construction of his private sculpture studio alongside a busy and industrious programme of poetic labours.²⁸ John Woolford and Daniel Karlin's textual history of Browning's poems supplies two pieces of evidence to corroborate the thesis of a development or change in Browning's composition methods at this time. Firstly, Woolford and Karlin state that few manuscripts of Browning's poetry survive prior to *Dramatis Personae* in 1864, but that after that volume and date manuscripts for every work survive. Secondly, they show that Browning's works written prior to 1864 were heavily and repeatedly revised when republished (e.g. for the 1868 and 1888–89 collected editions of his works), but works written after 1864 are not so frequently and substantially revised.²⁹ What these two facts indicate is that after his experience in Story's sculpture studio Browning took more care over the composition process of his works, curating his draft materials more carefully, and producing more satisfactory expressions of his ideas with the new extended and methodical approach to his labours. Browning's new routines of work, then, in the composition and completion of poems for the 1864 *Dramatis Personae* collection, can be traced back to the habits and methods of work in which he was instructed in Story's studio.

²⁵ Browning to William Michael Rossetti, quoted in Neville-Sington, p. 81 (undated).

²⁶ Browning to Blagden, quoted in Neville-Sington, p. 50 (August 1862).

²⁷ Browning to Story, in *Browning to his American Friends*, ed. by Reece Hudson, p. 100 (19 March 1862).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–36 (26 November 1863).

²⁹ *The Poems of Browning*, ed. by John Woolford and Daniel Karlin (London: Longman, 1991–), 1: 1826–1840, pp. ix–xii.

I would also argue that his sculptural experience affected the contents of the poetry subsequently produced. Browning's sculptural experience afforded him with a focused and targeted analogy through which to communicate his aesthetics of objective art. Browning's poetry had always been populated with creative artists: Filippo Lippi, Baldassare Galuppi, for example. But the creative population of *Dramatis Personae* are unified through a shared identity as creative artists who are 'makers', and who are each shown performing their artistic identity through depictions of them engaged in the act of its material (formal) creation.

'Abt Vogler', for example, is presented simultaneously as artist as Genius and artist as maker; an extemporizing composer, the insubstantial melody contained in his inspiration is only successfully engaged by the composer because of his necessary connection with and talent for the construction of a physical instrument through which to relay his audible inspiration. The artist is introduced through his technological innovation, the orchestrion. The poem contains a powerful description in stanzas iv–v, akin to many found in Romantic literature, of the moment when music occludes form, and the instrument and music become one. But, unlike its Romantic precedents, there is in this poem a repeated insistence on the necessity, value, and nature of that physical part of the musical process, the instrument. Thus, the soul-transporting notes are first 'keys' that produce sounds; and Vogler uses an architectural metaphor to describe his composition as a 'building', a structure of music which, despite his intentions, in fact reinforces the artificiality of the musical product achieved — a beautiful construct, but a construct still: 'Ay, another [note] and yet another, one crowd but with many a crest, | Raising my rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass' (p. 301, ll. 18–19). The walls of gold are not of glass: the poem here uses simile, not metonymy, to describe the illusory nature of music's erasure of physical structures. Vogler's identity as artist lies in his inability to sustain or command such a unity. Vogler creates within the physical context, and any impression of synthesis is purely temporary. The poem is not about a projected moment of fusion, but rather orients the primary identifier of creative identity and process with the consciousness of the gap between intention and execution. 'Abt Vogler' insists that the artist works within a framework of a physicalized representative medium, unequal to that which it seeks to represent. Artistic identity arises from the process of engaging with the gap between the two, not with its dissolution. As a result, the ultimate affirmation of this type of artistic identity is to show it in process, and the only conclusion available within such a creative paradigm is a repetition of process; thus 'Abt Vogler' ends with the composer beginning again on another composition.

At the top of *Dramatis Personae*'s canon of creative makers is God. The ur-type of creative identity, God's ur-type of creative process is depicted

through a sculptural trope. Thus God creates, in repeated examples in the text, through his tactile manipulations of clay. In 'Rabbi Ben Ezra', for example, he is the 'Potter' 'whose wheel the pitcher shaped' (p. 309, l. 150); and in 'Caliban Upon Setebos', Setebos is a deity who embraces the shaping process of creation, being a Creator who 'it pleaseth [. . .] to work, | Use all his Hands, and exercise much craft' and in imitation of whom Caliban imagines himself making 'a live bird out of clay' (p. 333, ll. 185–86; p. 330, l. 76). The creative artists who work in God's shadow are lesser in degree but not in kind. God's clay; Vogler's orchestrion. But the sculptural motif of clay, being aligned as God's creative material, stands as the ur-type of the creative material, and the artist as sculptor (or potter, if we follow the example's transfer of emphasis from the fine art of sculpture to the manual craft of pottery) as the ur-type of artistic identity. In *Dramatis Personae's* aesthetic universe of materialist art-production, sculpture is the primary referent and model.

This coherence of identity and approach across the community of artists in *Dramatis Personae* means that the volume communicates, more effectively than Browning had managed previously, his objective aesthetic. Indeed, such is the systematization of the aesthetic programme in the volume that a sustained defence is provided in one of the collection's dramatic monologues. 'A Death in the Desert' sees St John defending the 'lie' that he was witness to Christ's Resurrection. St John's lie, the poem shows, was a necessary creative act, and St John therefore joins the cast of the volume's creative makers. St John argues that, in the absence of revealed religious meaning (in the period immediately succeeding Christ's death), it was necessary to prop up faith in Him by creating meaning through constructing a representation (his lie, or false witness testimony) of that original and essential Truth (that Christ has risen). It is better to create within the diminished forms of meaning available to us within the material sphere, and to point towards the Truth, than, in the context of a perceived breach between material and spiritual, to begin to lose faith in the spiritual idea altogether. And, in an analogy that should hold little of surprise to my reader, St John makes his point by likening his own process of fabrication to the endeavour and process of the sculptor. Like the sculptor who 'ere he mould a shape | Boasts [. . .] the shape's idea, and next | The aspiration to produce the same', St John knows the truth of his inspiring Idea, and cannot help that the form it takes must be a lesser version of that message; John insists that we should not berate the object for its failure to be the inspiring thing itself, but rather that we should praise the artist for his attempt, and applaud the object for the nearness with which it approximates to the 'truth' or Idea it seeks to reveal:

So, taking clay, he [the sculptor] calls his shape thereout,
Cries ever, 'now I have the thing I see!':
Yet all the while goes changing what was wrought,

From falsehood like the truth, to truth itself.
 How were it had he cried 'I see no face,
 No breast, no feet i' the ineffectual clay'?
 Rather commend him that he clapped his hands,
 And laughed 'It is my shape and lives again!'
 Enjoyed the falsehood, touched it on to truth,
 Until yourselves applaud the flesh indeed
 In what is still flesh-imitating clay.
 Right in you, right in him, such way be man's!³⁰

St John gives also the supporting case of the Ten Commandments, pointing out that the original patterns on the mount were transcribed by Moses into 'copies' which 'serve still and are replaced as time requires: | By these, make newest vessels, reach the type!' (p. 326, ll. 628–29). When the original Truth dissipates, it is no crime to reproduce that Truth creatively, in material forms that keep its essence present in the material context: in that context, representation is the only and best option.

Sculpture repeatedly affords the type, then, for a form of creation that must acknowledge its representative nature, and embrace the separate physical structures of its art form positively as a result. The volume's 'Epilogue' similarly argues for an admission or acceptance in modernity that mimesis is impossible. Organized around three successive speeches, the poem moves from an original position of revealed religious vision, to the dejected voice of the later subject from whom religious truth has been veiled ('We, lone and left | Silent through centuries') (p. 346, ll. 43–44), to a confident third voice who asserts the possible meaning and value of inhabiting a plane defined by the loss of spiritual certainty and its resultant epistemological breach. This speaker advances his ideology as a new and progressive view, of joy and vitality in the acceptance of lack, rather than dejection in the lament for lost unity: 'Friends! I have seen through your eyes: now use mine!' (p. 347, l. 68). The spiritual and epistemological message of the 'Epilogue' agrees with the volume's aesthetic message: that creation (meaning) can be achieved within an aesthetic that not only accepts breach, but which generates its creative material out of the conditions of that breach. Browning's 1855 letter to Ruskin demonstrates that the poet sought deliberately to fracture the reader's easy relation between word and meaning. In semiotic parlance, Browning was more than aware that his creative energy arose out of the hermeneutic disruptions he created between signifier and signified:

³⁰ 'A Death in the Desert', p. 326, ll. 608–22. 'Caliban Upon Setebos' warns, of course, of the dangers of degenerating in such a mode into materialist creation only — Caliban fails to recognize and follow the sculptor Jules's second definition of art, that not only is it the imparting of meaning to shapeless stuff, but it is also the imparting of soul to that stuff.

You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping
 from ledge to ledge of my 'glaciers' as you call them; not stand
 poking your alpenstock into the holes, and demonstrating
 that no foot could have stood there; — suppose it sprang over
 there?³¹

Browning's work previous to *Dramatis Personae* had enacted this poetic theory in its fractured poetic language, but had alienated its readers as a result. What Browning achieves in *Dramatis Personae* is a more programmatic delivery of his same aesthetic position, which teaches its readership how to understand its agenda through outlining and explaining the new markers of aesthetic identity and aesthetic value it creates. Paradoxically, one such marker of success that *Dramatis Personae* provides is creative failure or the failure of meaning more generally. In an aesthetic that favours process over product, the actant needs only to show himself engaged in the process to be positively valued. As failure is a marker of engagement in the attempt to make meaning, it is here depicted as a marker of a successful creative identity. Thus, Abt Vogler 'fails' to produce his sublime musical elevation, but succeeds as an artist on the volume's terms. The volume, then, contains poems about the fact of failure, without a redeeming narrative that resolves the individual aspirations of the actants: 'Youth and Art' is about a failed love affair that never, in fact, began, and 'Apparent Failure' meditates on the suicides displayed in the Paris Morgue. Neither poem places the failed subjects in a broader narrative of eventual or future success or hope. Both poems afford rather a blank, bleak impression, then, as the reader is not given the expected context through which to read these failures. But their presence feeds into and reinforces the text's aesthetic and epistemological agenda to acknowledge identity, and creation, as arising out of the condition of necessary rupture. In the context of the volume's aesthetic and epistemological agenda of process, failure must be confronted and depicted as an inevitable aspect of the necessary and defining condition of being and of creating, which is only that of being engaged in that process of both being and creating.

Sculpture provided Browning with an abiding metaphor, then, in service of his continued articulation of his objective poetics. But further, during a period of his career when critics and readers continued to be hostile or resistant to his poetic ideas, sculpture provided a practical support and stimulation to his continued development of those ideas. Those who understood Browning's work at this point were few, and most of his early appreciators, like the Pre-Raphaelites, were young and without influence. Browning found himself alone and unappreciated, therefore, but still with

³¹ Browning to Ruskin, in *Robert Browning*, ed. by Roberts, p. 691 (10 December 1855).

the courage of his convictions. What I suggest here is that Browning found more in common, aesthetically speaking, with his sculptural colleagues, than with the literary mores of his peers. In its acknowledged studio processes, the art of sculpture in the nineteenth century laid bare its manner and modes of production. The plaster copies manufactured by studio assistants were sold to museums and collectors, and respected as indicators of the great original, just as, 'A Death in the Desert' points out, the tablets of Moses's Ten Commandments are respected without a sense of diminution of the original's beauty or value through its possession via a reproduction. Ideas of a singular artwork were therefore challenged and problematized by the art of sculpture in the nineteenth century, as were conceptions of a singular artist-Genius by the practices of its studio system. In his letters to Story, invoking the good old times in the sculpture studio at Rome, Browning invokes a sense of collegiality and communal endeavour which must have been sorely lacking in his experience of literary relationships. He writes to Story:

Dear Story, tell me what you can about the studio — let me smell the wet clay once more, and hear the birds & the goat thro that dear little door to the left: I would send my kind remembrances to M. Boncinelli [studio assistant] if he cared to have them, & he may, in his good nature.³²

Browning began his career in a context of creative sociability as a member of a local Camberwell group of young friends with an interest in music, poetry, and theatre, self-named The Set or The Convivialists, and his subsequent attempts to collaborate with Macready on writing for the stage bespeaks a continued taste for collaboration and exchange. During their marriage, he gave Elizabeth drafts of all his work in progress, to obtain her comments and criticism; she, however, did not show anyone her work until it was ready for the press; and though his correspondence shows that Browning sent manuscripts of his work to a number of friends and critics, including Carlyle and Ruskin, and received some comments in return, that sense of community present in his early career is never quite resurrected. 'Old Masters in Florence' in *Men and Women* pleads for artists and poets as a whole to behave generously towards one another, to accumulate upon one another's successes. That model of artistic relationships, however, was teleological, and I would maintain that the collegiality of the sculpture studio as a place where art was produced collectively would have been a great attraction to the poet and his peculiar brand of creativity.

³² Browning to Story, in *Browning to his American Friends*, ed. by Reece Hudson, p. 96 (21 January 1862).

When, in 1880, Browning was asked his opinion of a Wordsworth edition that proposed to place early and late versions of the same poem side by side in order to display the poet's revisions to them over time, he answered that this method was in his opinion 'incontestably preferable to any other' (Ward, 11, 216). To Browning, the process of an author's engagement with a text was more important than the achievement of a singular or 'complete' work of art. His own tendency of making amendments and additions to presentation copies of his texts without feeling the need to subsequently collate or collect them when revising them for republication in later years means he conceived of the author's relation to the text as ongoing and fluid. As Woolford and Karlin state of such variant texts, their value is to be thought of as 'possessing a differing rather than a cumulative value' (*Poems of Browning*, 1, p. xiii). Just as with the plaster copies of sculpted marble originals, Browning's oeuvre displays the poet's conception that art's meaning lies with its process. In the transparency of its engagement with the physical materials of its medium, in its dissipation of conceptions of singularity in art and the artist, Browning adopted sculpture as an inspiring example to maintain his belief and expression of his alternate aesthetic at a crucial period in his career, when examples from within his own discipline were unavailable. That inspiring example was accompanied, not less usefully, by the poet's appropriation of working methods and techniques from his practical sculptural experience — his pen's pause — which freed him from the cerebral tropes of poetic composition and allowed him to develop a process-based system of verse-making. I hope this article has shown how, in a context of repeated criticism of his poetic theory, sculpture afforded Browning a renewed place of creative confidence to place his poetry before the public once again. In conclusion, then, we may cite Browning's recounting, in the headnote to *Pauline*, of his juvenile ambition to produce works in a number of media, and to release them under a series of pseudonyms, only to reveal himself subsequently to the public as the one multidisciplinary artist behind the productions of 'Brown, Smith, Jones and Robinson' (Ward, 1, 46). A 'foolish plan' he calls it, and Browning did move away from the extravagance of that early project, but not so far as we may think. In 1864, it was entirely legitimate that the author should imagine himself presented to a new reading public as 'Robert Browning — (SCULPTOR & poet)'.