THE extensive correspondence between John Ruskin and the Brownings forms a fascinating exchange among three distinguished Victorian literary figures. The relationship was initiated by Ruskin, who praised Mrs. Browning profusely in his works of the 1850s. The feeling between Ruskin and Mrs. Browning was obviously intense, and drew from Ruskin an intimacy concerning himself disproportionate to their limited encounters. Robert, though he obviously kept in the background and seems rarely to have sought out Ruskin, was provoked by Ruskin at least three times to a spirited defense of his art, and after Mrs. Browning’s death in 1861 dealings between the two men continued to be rather frequent. The high points of the existing correspondence have been summarily presented twice before. Of the twenty-five letters presented here, sixteen are from Ruskin to Robert Browning and five to Mrs. Browning; there are two from Robert Browning, and two from Mrs. Browning, addressed to Ruskin. These letters fill in details of the literary activities and opinions of Ruskin and the Brownings until Mrs. Browning’s death, suggest the extent of the two men’s social relations in the sixties, and invite, finally, some observations on the importance of the Brownings in Ruskin’s life.

The Ruskin letters are published by permission of the Ruskin Literary Trustees and their publishers, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.; the Browning letters, including an extract from the letter to Rossetti dated 22 April 1856, by permission of the late Sir John Murray of London. Letters 4, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 25, as well as the extract mentioned above, are held by the University of Texas Library; Letters 1, 2, 3, 5, 1

6, and 11, by the New York Public Library (Berg Collection); Letters 10 and 12, by the Yale University Library; Letters 13 and 24, by the Pierpont Morgan Library; and Letter 15, by the Armstrong Browning Library, Waco, Texas. I am grateful to all these institutions for permission to print these letters. I also wish to thank Professor Gertrude Reese Hudson for her helpful and encouraging reading of this manuscript.

My basic editorial principle has been to allow the Ruskin letters, especially, to remain as close as possible to their original form. Those who have worked with Ruskin’s manuscript correspondence know the vagaries of his punctuation, especially his all-purpose stroke—used variously as hyphen, dash, comma, and period. My transcriptions of this mark were decided on the basis of length, slope, collocation, and surrounding punctuation, although Ruskin’s energetic vinculum still abounds in the printed versions offered here. Similarly, I have retained Ruskin’s spectacular ampersand and have added missing end punctuation only when the lack is confusing. Ruskin’s frequently omitted apostrophes have not been supplied. I have used the bracketed “sic” sparingly, I think only three times: to indicate a misspelling (Letter 5), a solecism (6), and a puzzling word usage (18). Letter 6, evidently written in great haste and agitation, is the test of my restraint; but in its splendid inattention to detail, it defies regularizing in any case, and deserves publication as it stands.

I

Ruskin praised Mrs. Browning’s poetry as early as February 1841, in a letter to Edward Clayton (i. 443). She also took sympathetic though not uncritical note of Ruskin from an early date. Evidently alluding to Modern Painters, vol. ii (1846), she wrote the novelist Mary Russell Mitford, already Ruskin’s close friend, on 24 August 1848, that Ruskin’s book is “Very vivid, very graphic, full of sensibility, but inconsequent in

some of the reasoning". "Still," she concludes, "he is no ordinary man... we have by no means... seen the utmost of his stature." She takes up the subject again on 10 October, finding Ruskin "gifted and eccentric": "Very eloquent he is, I agree at once, and true views he takes of Art in the abstract, true and elevating. It is in the application of connective logic that he breaks away from one so violently." But the grounds for a personal acquaintance were laid in the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1851), where Ruskin spoke of "the burning mystery of Coleridge" and the "spirituality of Elizabeth Barrett" (ix. 228).

The Brownings were in London from late June through early October 1852, and Ruskin and Robert Browning met at Patmore's in September (xxxvi. 141). Shortly thereafter, Ruskin visited the Brownings in Welbeck Street, and the visit was soon returned. "Mr. Ruskin has been to see us", Mrs. Browning reported to Miss Mitford. "We went to Denmark Hill yesterday by agreement to see the Turners—which, by the way, are divine. I like Mr. Ruskin much, and so does Robert. Very gentle, yet earnest—refined and truthful. I like him very much. We count him among the valuable acquaintances made this year in England" (LEBB, ii. 87). The attraction was mutual, and the center of their discussions was Italian politics. Ruskin reported to his father that he liked Robert ("he is the only person whom I have ever heard talk rationally about the Italians, though on the liberal side"; xxxix. 141), and he later told Miss Mitford: "I was of course prepared to like her, but I did not really expect to like him as much as I did. I think he is really a very fine fellow, and she is the only sensible woman I have yet met with on the subject of Italians politics. Evidently a noble creature in all things."

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2. W. G. Collingwood, *The Life of John Ruskin* (2nd ed., Boston and New York, 1902), p. 163. The late date Collingwood gives for this letter (August 1853) is correct (Ruskin was in Glenfinlas at the time), but Ruskin's remark ("I had the pleasure this spring, of being made acquainted with your dear Elizabeth Browning, as well as with her husband") represents a serious lapse of memory, since the Brownings were in Italy throughout 1853 and Ruskin was not on the Continent. See Basil Champneys, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Coventry Patmore* (London, 1900), ii. 292.
Ruskin continued his public adulation in *The Stones of Venice*, vol. ii (1853), calling *Casa Guidi Windows* a "noble poem" (x. 243 n.). A correspondence may well have begun by this time; at any rate, we find Mrs. Browning saying in December 1853, "I shall write to Mr. Ruskin" (*LEBB*, ii. 151). But a letter dated 19 July 1854 from Owen Meredith must have given the Brownings some pause concerning their earnest and refined new friend. In retailing the latest London gossip, Meredith, then only twenty-two, discusses the strange grounds of the Ruskins' imminent divorce:

Well, now Mrs. Ruskin is seeking a divorce from her husband—on the strangest grounds. It seems that on the very day of their marriage, Mr. R. (after having expatiated at length upon the lives of the 'Holy Virgins of Old') informed his bride that he had no intention whatever of having children; and from that day to this, it is avouched, they have been living together as brother and sister... Well, the Lady (as the story goes—undisputed, I believe, by Ruskin) seems to have pardoned this *manque de devoir du mari* and unrepiningly imitated the 'Holy Virgins of Old' until she found that her husband was forever throwing her in the way of temptation and laying man-traps for her, when she indignantly revolted from so strange and shocking a state of things—and now comes the divorce! You may fancy all the jokes on this at the London dinner tables—the stones of Venice not being spared!\(^1\)

The first extant letter is of 4 March 1855, full of Ruskin's intense admiration for Mrs. Browning's poetry (xxxvi. 191-2). He asks her if he may tell her about his last visit to Miss Mitford, who had died on 10 January, "and about her last letters to me".\(^2\) He tells her that he is about to mention her in a forthcoming book—apparently either *Modern Painters*, vol. iii, or more likely, as we shall see, *The Elements of Drawing*. In her reply of 17 March, Mrs. Browning confides her gratitude for the praise in *The Stones of Venice*: "There was 'once on a time,' as is said in the fairy tales, a word dropped by you in one of your books, which I picked up and wore for a crown" (*LEBB*, ii. 191). In his answer of 6 April, he boldly lists his objections to her poetry, especially to some of her diction: for example, the word "nympholeptic". With amazing candour he tells her,

\(^1\) *Letters from Owen Meredith... to Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Aurelia Brooks Harlan and J. Lee Harlan, Jr., Baylor Browning Interests (Waco, Texas, 1936), p. 79. One wonders what Mrs. Browning made of the bawdy last sentence, and is surprised at Meredith's breezy tone in a letter sure to come to her attention.  

\(^2\) See *Mitford Correspondence*, pp. 301 ff., 313 ff.
"I used to think ... you were mystical and forced. ... I thought something was sickly in the tone." But he justifies his boldness with an ardour that can only be called that of a courtly lover: "I did not think you were really great. But you are; and I know it, now" (xxxvi. 196). She defended herself at some length on 2 June (LEBB, ii. 198-202). But he returned to the attack even more strongly on the 19th, "graphically" describing her diction as

Tesseric, pentic, hectic, heptic,
Phoenico-daemonic, and dyspeptic,
Hipped-ic, Pipped-ic, East-wind-nipped-ic,
Stiffened like styptic doubled in diptych
Possi-kephaly-chersecliptic. (xxxvi. 215)

The Brownings arrived back in England on 12 July, and settled in at 13 Dorset Street. They were deluged with visitors, and we hear that "the pressure of social engagements weighed heavily upon Mrs. Browning": "Both were glad to migrate to Paris in October."¹ Ruskin was one of their first visitors, since he saw at least Mrs. Browning on the 14th, as this first of the unpublished letters (postmarked 16 July, a Monday) indicates.

1 Saturday Evening

Dear Mrs. Browning

I don't know what we were both thinking of today, when we spoke of our manifold engagements this week. I was thinking it was Monday—instead of Saturday: and meant that I would keep every day open for you in the week after next, when you said you were engaged all through the week. But next Wednesday, or Friday, would do well for me—if Mr. Browning & you could come—to lunch, dinner, or tea—as you like best. My Father & Mother are just now at Tunbridge Wells—and may be there yet some time.

With sincere regards to Mr Browning
Most truly Yours
J Ruskin

The second note it postmarked 17 July, a Tuesday, almost certainly the date it was written.

Dear Mrs Browning

Not hearing from you, I have been obliged to give up Wednesday, but Friday afternoon I have still, this week.

Most truly Yours,

J Ruskin

This is followed by a note postmarked 21 July, a Saturday.

Denmark Hill

20th July

Dear Mrs Browning

You know I count on you and Mr Browning for Tuesday. Tea at six, on lawn if possible. If not possible we shall have enough indoors to talk about. If the day is very bad, so as to make it unsafe for you to come out at all, I do not expect you. With sincere regards to Mr Browning.

Most truly Yours

J Ruskin.

Mrs. Browning evidently came alone to Denmark Hill on Tuesday, the 24th. She reported: "We spent an evening with Mr. Ruskin, who was gracious and generous, and strengthened all my good impressions. Robert took our friend young [Frederick] Leighton to see him afterwards, and was kindly received" (LEBB, ii. 210).²

The following letter must have been written on 3 or 10 October 1855, since the Brownings left for Paris on Wednesday, the 17th.

Wednesday evening

Dear Mr Browning

I will be with you tomorrow evening—joyfully—you do not name your hour, and I cannot get into town, I fear, till about 1/2 past nine—but I may have an hours chat or listen, even so late as that perhaps. And are you really going?—I would have come more after you, but I knew you must have many friends making claims upon you. I trust you will both do me the justice to believe it has not been owing to want of regard on my part, or of longing to talk with you. But, for all of us, every hour has I believe been numbered since you came.

¹ See Ruskin's letter of 23 July to F. J. Furnivall (xxxvii. 650): Mrs. Browning was the next day "coming to tea at six".

² The letter can be dated after 4 August by an allusion to "an absurd exposition of 'Maud' as an allegory", which appeared in the Athenæum for that date (pp. 893-5). The "graceful, spirited letter" of Mrs. Jameson had appeared on 28 July.
Believe me, when you come back again to England—if I am there—you escape not so.

—Ever faithfully yours, and Hers—

J Ruskin

I did not speak to either of you of poor Miss Mitford—thinking I should give Mrs Browning too much pain. I will write to you something about her, some day.

Mrs. Browning wrote Ruskin on Tuesday, 16 October, on the eve of her departure, elaborately apologetic for the Browning's failure to visit Ruskin once again (LEBB, ii. 213-15). In response, and before the end of October, Ruskin finally kept his promise to discuss the last days of Miss Mitford.

5

[late October 1855]

Dear Mrs Browning

I think I ought rather to write in various plea for pardon of apparent neglect, both of your husband and you, than receive so kind a letter from you: for indeed when people come all the way from Florence to see their friends in England, said friends ought, it seems to me, at least to take the trouble of coming into town. But, between very little and nothing, in the way of friend-seeing, I hold that there is no difference; and unless we had had, among us, time for complete talk and daily intercourse, the one, two, or three calls and visits were really of no use whatever. I knew that you could not give me much of you, and I did not strive for the little: As I told you before you shall not always scape so easily.

Now, lest one thing or another come between, let me tell you what I had to say about Miss Mitford. You know, I doubt not already, that the persuasion she had of having been injured in the spine¹ was mistaken—that the illness resulted from the severe shock, caused by her fall, to a system which had been too much lowered by her habit of living. Her servant told me that for a year or two before the accident she had lived upon little else than tea or weak soup: and the whole nervous system was overthrown, and dropsy came on, causing the inability to move. I found her when I went to see her (on returning from the Continent, about this time last year, or a little before, lying in her armchair by the open window, with a nosegay by her, sent by Lady Russell much altered; but only by reason of thinness in the features—not in any wise in expression. Some evidence there was of physical suffering, but none of sadness, and the make and cast of the face being more brought out, gave it a look of power and thoughtfulness such as I never saw in any other woman. Imagine all the power and keenness of Mrs Sartoris's look,² concentrated into the small features under the gray

¹ Miss Mitford was thrown from her pony-chaise in December 1852 (Mitford Correspondence, p. 228).

² Mrs. Sartoris, née Adelaide Kemble, had been an opera singer and had a face of unusual quality. See LEBB, ii. 210 (August 1855): "How I like Adelaide's face! that's a face worth a drove of beauties!" And see Gardner B. Taplin, The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (New Haven, 1957), pp. 278-9.
hair—and think how fine it must have been. She talked, as if she had been a schoolgirl with a favourite companion—as cheerful and as rapid in transition—and as ready to take up any chance leaf of the autumn's blowing by—and play with it. She talked for an hour and a half—then sent me down to have my dinner in the little parlour—and sent for me again for another hour afterwards.

Whether she, as I, had altered any wise in mind since last I had seen her—I know not; but whereas before I had only been struck by her talk, as one is necessarily by her writing, for its sweetness and sympathy & brightness, now I was struck by its power [. I have often heard able-thundery sort of talk, coming to nothing after all—but Miss Mitford was so unerring, it seemed to me, in judgment; so sternly Right in everything with all her love (or perhaps because of her love—if one could see far enough)—that I never remember having left a house with such a sense of veneration as I did her cottage that afternoon.

—But the vigour of her mind was so great that it deceived me as to her general health. She was at that time better than she had been for some months, and still continued to gain for a week or two more. I thought she was deceiving herself as to her danger—and though she wrote to me at Christmas that she was getting worse, I thought still that I should be able to take her the first hawthorn blossom, and did not go down then to see her. She soon had the Mayflower without the thorn.

I have therefore nothing to tell you of any special interest about the close. Our talk, when I saw her, was all of usual matters—her favorite Beranger, and Louis Napoleon, & so on, and I never was able to tell her the issue of the only question between us which needed arbitrement [sic]. I had never read Miss Austen—having taken offense at something or other in the beginning of "Pride & Prejudice," and remaining a very satisfactory example of the last. Miss Mitford insisted that Miss Austen was right and I was wrong: and after much argumentation, it was finally settled that I should go home and read all Miss Austen's novels; which I did faithfully and in the end, delightfully out loud, to my mother—but I never was able to tell Miss Mitford how completely she had conquered—and how entirely I had been wrong.

I have written as if I only had seen her one afternoon, but I stayed two days at Reading and went each day to see her. The second day, she was just as lively as the first, and shot away upon her pet topics or broke so that I could not get one thing asked her properly, which I wanted to ask, about the country she lived in. I have often regretted so much that she had got cottaged in that stupid Berkshire, where, nearly of all England I suppose, the country is most finishedly Dull & adventureless; and I wanted to ask her what sort of person she would have been, if she had stayed in her old Northumberland, among the rocks & brooks. Can you answer this—for her—and for me—

I spoke, a page or two back of thundery conversation. I think I never heard Lightningy conversation like your husband's that night at tea with Mrs Sartoris & Leighton. You will not, I know, think I mean merely to say pleasing things

1 See letter of 24 December 1855 in Mitford Correspondence, p. 308: "The feeble, fluttering pulse which can often hardly be found is kept beating by brandy . . . and 7 to 10 times in the 24 hours I take enormous doses of that incomparable medicine. . . ."
to either of you, and if you think, as perhaps you may, that I have got into a habit of saying the pleasantest things I can to my friends, if you will ask any of them, they will tell you, I don't often take that turn. But the simple fact is that I never heard anything to approach your husbands brilliancy of illustration and swiftness of fancy. But he wants more scolding about his poetry even than you do. He loses half the power he might have over the public by the least possible faults, which with the least possible trouble he might avoid. He is just like Rosetti—brilliant in colour—boundless in imagination—intense in sensation and sentiment, and yet puts in odd or idle little cramps & blots which keep him from being read by thousands.

Of this however another day:—for I have not yet read his longer poems, which seem to be those he has taken real pains with: not having until rather lately, been myself at all aware of his real power, and having been one of that very mob, whom I want to scold him for not winning. I had glanced at the flight of the duchess and though I liked certain lines & rhymes in it, I fancied it was erratic & careless, and I have so little time for reading poetry at all that I never read any but the most perfect—if I know which that is. My pet bookcase shelf, or what I call the Supply shelf, is however now composed of Dante, Spenser, Keats, Wordsworth, the Two Brownings, and Tennyson—Hood, George Herbert, & Young. Of minor collateral singers I have Shenstone (by the bye, if Mr Browning would be a little more Shenstonian in flow, it would be all I want—but he is continually breaking the back of his verses) Longfellow, Emerson: I have this shelf not at all for pleasure—or amusement: But for supply. I never read poetry to amuse me. But it seems to me that you poets know a thing or two more than most people—that you really are the only Sensible & Practical people and I go to you always to be taught, (when I begin to be puzzled about them)—my two chief points of enquiry—Where am I?—and what's to be done next? By the bye—I hope you give up those rascally radicals, now. I am very liberal—and in most senses very Republican—but in heart and head entirely Louis Napoleon's and a great advocate for Slavery, of a wholesome kind & in the right place.

Well, by way of showing liberality I will spare you from the penance of another white sheet, which I feel not a little inclined to begin upon—but wont—and so with sincerest regards to Mr Browning

Always most truly Yours

J Ruskin

[In margin:] I don't understand something you say in your letter about "Intense apprehension"—what do you mean.

Robert, writing to Rossetti on the 29th, called Ruskin's letter "a dear, too dear, and good letter from Mr. Ruskin". 2


On the 31st, he directed his publisher, Edward Chapman, to include Ruskin's name among those to receive the two volumes of his new poems, *Men and Women*. A letter to Ruskin from Mrs. Browning, dated 5 November (*LEBB*, ii. 216-20), discusses Miss Mitford at length (judging her and Jane Austen more critically than Ruskin had), and ends by chiding him for his ability to "look serenely at slavery". She also takes up a wearisome half-misunderstanding, begun in the letter of 16 October and continued in Ruskin's marginal query, concerning her "intense apprehension". She now placatingly explains, apropos of his "burning imagination" and his tendency to overpraise: "You don't mistake by your heart, through loving, but you exaggerate by your imagination, through glorifying. There's my thought at last." By now this sort of overly-sensitive and even operatic exchange was becoming a regular strain of the correspondence of these two high-strung creatures, one pattern being immoderate praise from Ruskin leading to a provocative comment by Mrs. Browning on Ruskin's temperament, followed by his slightly wounded and often distorting reaction, the whole concluded in a soothing, almost motherly reassurance from Mrs. Browning. On the other hand, to be fair to Mrs. Browning, it should be noted that her slightly critical analysis of Ruskin's enthusiasm undoubtedly sprang from something like embarrassment (along, admittedly, with a confessed pleasure) at his double-edged effusions on her poetic and personal merits.

Ruskin waited until 2 December to reply, in the longest letter he wrote to Browning—full of good-natured but perversely imperceptive bewilderment over Browning's language, rhythm, intentions, and point of view.  


2 The letter was received on the 6th, for on that date Mrs. Browning reported to her sister that "this morning" they had received a letter from Ruskin, praising especially "An Epistle... of Karshish" (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Letters to Her Sister, 1846-1859*, ed. Leonard Huxley [London, 1929], p. 235). contd.
Dear Mr Browning

I know you have been wondering that I did not write, but I could not till now—and hardly can, now: not because I am busy—nor careless, but because I cannot at all make up my mind about these poems of yours: and so far as my mind is made up, I am not sure whether it is in the least right. Of their power there can of course be no question—nor do you need to be told of it; for everyone who has power of this kind, knows it—must know it. But as to the Presentation of the Power, I am in great doubt. Being hard worked at present, & not being able to give the cream of the day to poetry—when I take up these poems in the evening I find them absolutely and literally a set of the most amazing Conundrums that ever were proposed to me. I try at them, for—say twenty minutes—in which time I make out about twenty lines, always having to miss two, for every one that I make out. I enjoy the twenty, each separately, very much, but the puzzlement about the intermediate ones increases in comfortlessness till I get a headache, & give in.

Now that you may exactly understand the way I feel about them—I will read, with you, one poem—as I read it to myself, with all my comments and questions. I open at Random—Cleon?—no—that's not a fair example being harder than most. The twins?—no—I have made out that—(except the fifth stanza)—so it is not a fair example on the other side being easier than most. Popularity?—yes, that touches the matter in hand.

Stand still, true poet that you are

I know you;—let me try and draw you:

(Does this mean: literally—stand still? or where was the poet figuratively going—and why couldn't he be drawn as he went?) Some night you'll fail us? (Why some night?—rather than some day?—"Fail us." Now? Die?) When afar you Rise—(Where?—Now?) remember &c. (Very good—I understand. My star, God's glowworm. (Very fine. I understand and like that.) Why extend that loving hand.

(Grammatically, this applies to the Poet. the ellipsis of "Should He" at & throws one quite out—like a step in a floor which one doesn't expect. Yet locks you safe. How does God's hand lock him; do you mean—keeps him from being seen?—and how does it make him safe. Why is a poet safer or more locked up than anybody else? I go on—in hope. "His clenched hand—beauty"—very good—but I don't understand why the hand should have held close so long—which is just the point I wanted to be explained. Why the poet had to be locked up.

"My poet holds the future fast." How? Do you mean he anticipates it in his mind—trusts in it—I don't know if you mean that, because I don't know if poets do that. If you mean that—I wish you had said so plainly.

In justice to Ruskin, it may be noted that G. K. Chesterton, in his Robert Browning (London, 1903), pp. 155-6, called his manner "abrupt, sketchy, allusive, and full of gaps", and chose precisely the final stanza of "Popularity" as his example of "Browning's dark and elliptical mode of speech".
That day the earth's feastmaster's brow. Who is the earth's F.? An Angel?—a [sic] Everybody?
The chalice raising. This, grammatically, agrees with "brow," and makes me uncomfortable. Others, &c. very pretty I like that. "Meantime I'll draw you." Do you mean—his Cork?—we have not had anything about painting for ever so long—very well. Do draw him then: I should like to have him drawn very much.
I'll say—"a fisher—&c."

Now, where are you going to—this is, I believe pure malice against me, for having said that painters should always grind their own colours. Who has not heard—merchant sells. Do you mean—the silk that the merchant sells Raw—or what do you want with the merchant at all. "And each bystander." Who are these bystanders—I didn't hear of any before—Are they people who have gone to see the fishing?

"Could criticise, & quote tradition."
Criticise what? the fishing?—and why should they—what was wrong in it?—Quote tradition. Do you mean about purple? But if they made purple at the time, it wasn't tradition merely—but experience.—You might as well tell me you heard the colourmen in Long-Acre, quote tradition touching their next cargo of Indigo, or cochineal.¹

"Depths—sublimed." I don't know what you mean by "sublimed." Made sublime—if so—it is not English. To sublime means to evaporate dryly, I believe and has participle "Sublimated."

"Worth scepter, crown and ball."—Indeed. Was there ever such a fool of a King?—You ought to have put a note saying who.

"Yet there's," &c. Well. I understand that, & it's very pretty Enough to furnish Solomon, &c.

I don't think Solomon's spouse swore.—at least not about blue-bells. I understand this bit, but fear most people won't. How many have noticed a blue-bells stamen?

"Bee to her groom" I don't understand. I thought there was only one Queen-bee and she never was out o'nights—nor came home drunk or disorderly. Besides if she does, unless you had told me what o'clock in the morning she comes home at, the simile is of no use to me.

"Mere conchs—[art?]." Well, but what has this to do with the Poet. Who "Pounds" him?—I don't understand—

World stand[s] aloof—yes—from the purple manufactory, but from Pounding of Poets?—does it?—and if so—who distils—or fines, & bottles them.

"Flasked & fine" Now is that what you call painting a poet. Under the whole & sole image of a bottle of Blue, with a bladder over the cork? The Arabian fisherman with his genie was nothing to this. Hobbs, Nobbs, &c. paint the future. Why the future. Do you mean in the future.

¹ In Long Acre, a London street near Covent Garden, "were congregated the colour-makers, goldbeaters, artists' tool-makers, modellers, and journeymen of every kind." See Edward Walford, _Old and New London_ (London, 1879-85), iii. 266.
Blue into their line? I don’t understand;—do you mean Quote the Poet, or write articles upon him—or in his style? And if so—was this what God kept him safe for? to feed Nobbs with Turtle. Is this what you call Accepting the future ages duty.—I don’t understand.

"What porridge"? Porridge is a Scotch dish, I believe; typical of bad fare. Do you mean that Keats had bad fare? But if he had—how was he kept safe to the worlds end? I don’t understand at all!!!!!!!

Now, that is the way I read, as well as I can, poem after poem, picking up a little bit here & there & enjoying it, but wholly unable to put anything together. I can’t say I have really made out any one yet, except the epistle from the Arabian physician, which I like immensely, and I am only a stanza or so out with one or two others—in by the fireside for instance I am only dead beat by the 41-43, and in fra Lippo—I am only fast at the grated orris root, which I looked for in the Encyclopaedia and couldn’t find; and at the There’s for you¹—give me six months—because I don’t know What’s for you.

Well, how far all this is as it should be, I really know not. There is a stuff and fancy in your work which assuredly is in no other living writer’s, and how far this purple of it must be within this terrible shell; and only to be fished for among threshing of foam & slippery rocks, I don’t know. There are truths & depths in it, far beyond anything I have read except Shakespeare—and truly, if you had just written Hamlet, I believe I should have written to you, precisely this kind of letter—merely quoting your own Rosencrantz against you—"I understand you not, my Lord." I cannot write in enthusiastic praise, because I look at you every day as a monkey does at a cocoanut, having great faith in the milk—hearing it rattle indeed—inside—but quite beside myself for the Fibres. Still less can I write in blame. When a man has real power, God only knows how he can bring it out, or ought to bring it out. But, I would pray you, faith, heartily, to consider with yourself, how far you can amend matters, & make the real virtue of your work acceptable & profitable to more people.

For one thing, I entirely deny & refuse the right of any poet to require me to pronounce words short and long, exactly as he likes—to require me to read a plain & harsh & straightforward piece of prose. "Till I felt where the fold-skirts (fly, redundant) open.² Then, once more, I prayed; as a dactylic verse, with skirts! for a short syllable Foldskirts fly—"as tremendous a long monosyllable as any in the language" and to say, "Wunce-mur-y"—prayed, instead of "once more I."

And in the second place, I entirely deny that a poet of your real dramatic power ought to let himself come up, as you constantly do, through all manner of characters, so that every now and then poor Pippa herself shall speak a long piece of Robert Browning.

And in the third place, your Ellipses are quite Unconscionable: before one can get through ten lines, one has to patch you up in twenty places, wrong or right, and if one hasn’t much stuff of one’s own to spare to patch with! You are worse than the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed. Bright, & deep enough

¹ Lines 351 and 345 of "Fra Lippo Lippi". In his reply of 10 December, Browning identified orris-root as "a corruption of iris-root . . . of world-wide fame as a good savour." ² "Saul", Stanza III.
truly, but so full of Clefts that half the journey has to be done with ladder & hatchet.

However, I have found some great things in you already, and I think you must be a wonderful mine, when I have real time & strength to set to work properly. That bit about the Bishop & St Praxed, in the older poems, is very glorious. Rossetti showed it me. In fact, I oughtn't to write to you yet, at all, but such is my state of mind at present and it may perhaps be well that you should know it, even though it may soon change to a more acceptant one, because it most certainly represents the feelings of a good many more, besides myself, who ought to admire you & learn from you, but can't because you are so difficult.

Well—there's a specimen for you of my art of saying pleasant things to my friends.

I have no time left, now, for any unpleasant ones—so I must just say goodbye and beg you to accept, with my dear Mrs Browning, the assurance of my exceeding regard & respect

Ever most faithfully Yours,
J Ruskin

What Ruskin did not reveal was that the letter was the result of a night-long "siege" with Rossetti, who was not, however, allowed to see the final product. "Ruskin," Rossetti wrote William Allingham on 8 January 1856, "on reading Men and Women (and with it some of the other works which he didn't know before) declared them rebelliously to be a mass of conundrums, and compelled me to sit down before him and lay siege for one whole night; the result of which was that he sent me next morning a bulky letter to be forwarded to B., in which I trust he told him he was the greatest man since Shakespeare."

The letter had, in fact, compared Browning to Shakespeare, but Ruskin's "objurgations" were provoking enough to rouse Browning to an important rationale of his art, at the high point of his creativity. In his long reply, dated 10 December (xxxvi, pp. xxxiv-vi), he describes poetry in a now well-known phrase as "a putting the infinite within the finite", and reminds Ruskin that "in asking for more ultimates you must accept less mediates". He refuses to take up most of Ruskin's objections, but he brilliantly defends "foldskirts" as a trochee, insists he doesn't see

1 Rossetti Letters, i. 283. On this same date, 8 January, Mrs. Browning wrote Harriet Hosmer, a young American sculptress, concerning the Brownings' last visit to England: "Oh, Hetty, why were you not here, in London first, and you should have heard Alfred Tennyson read 'Maud' to us, and Mrs. Sartoris sing to Ruskin, and Carlyle talk, our three best remembrances." See Harriet G. Hosmer, Letters and Memories, ed. Cornelia Carr (New York, 1912).
himself in his characters, and ends by declaring himself "apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me". Ruskin wrote Browning again later in the month, to indicate that he was sending him a copy of *Modern Painters*, vol. iii. Mrs. Browning was deputed, on Christmas Eve, to thank him for the book, "and also for writing my husband's name in it. It will be the same thing as if you had written mine..."1

But by 22 January 1856 the book was not sent, and Ruskin wrote Browning at the old address, 102 Rue de Grenelle, Faubourg St. Germain, though in December Mrs. Browning had already indicated a move to 3 Rue de Colysee.

Many & happy years to you both.

Dear Mr Browning

I have been laid up with sore throat, & not been able to attend to business: otherwise you would have had my book before now—but please tell me if the address of this letter is right, now as I want to send it safely.

That was a nice cunning answer of yours—for that you are. You answered the only two questions in all my letter that were easy—and left all the difficult ones to the imagination—and as I haven't got any, I am badly off—still—but always affectionately yours & Mrs Brownings.

J. Ruskin

I didn't quite know which of you I admired the most, but I was sure Mrs Browning would like the book best as it is inscribed to you. On the whole I do hope you will both find something that you like in it. That's another thing I've to quarrel with you for—those mighty modest Dedications of yours to Landor and I don't know whom else. I can't bear modesty.2

This was the first of three letters sent to Browning between 22 January and early February. The second of the three asks

1 Collingwood, *Life of John Ruskin*, p. 167. In the absence of this new letter of 2 December 1855, and relying on Browning's reply of 10 December, William E. Colburn, "Ruskin and Browning: The Poet's Responsibility" (*Studies in the Literary Imagination*, i (1968), 37-46), concludes (p. 45) in the face of the abundant evidence of *Modern Painters*, vol. iv, that "Although Ruskin apparently liked Browning personally, he neither understood nor appreciated his poetry". Colburn also speaks (p. 37) of "the essential difference between the two men as to the artist's responsibility to his audience", but this is to draw too broad an inference from Ruskin's objections to Browning's obscurities.

2 The reference is to Browning's elaborate dedication of *Luria* (1846) (Bells and Pomegranates, no. VIII) to Walter Savage Landor.
RUSKIN AND THE BROWNINGS

questions in aid of *Modern Painters*, vol. iv, on which Ruskin was still working.

8

[late January 1856]

Dear Browning

There is one thing which will surprise you, & at first painfully because you will think it wrong, in the book I have just sent you—namely that I have not spoken of your poems in it—when you know that I admire them. I mean to speak of some in the next volume, (out in about eight weeks I hope)—in this I was literally afraid of telling any more truth—the mob do so entirely hate every form of truth & reality that it is a mere question how far you can go without being stoned—and I did not choose to make you incur the risk of what I am likely to get for my Raphael work in this volume. Not only this but I don't know even yet what to think or say about you. What I am going to say will be about your wonderful understanding of painting & mediaevalism, unique among poets, and some reference to St Praxeds under coloured stones. But for general witness to your standing among poets I am quite, as yet, incapable.

—It is perhaps especially unlucky that I—who am on the whole better able to understand your artistic handling than most men—am yet so much out of the way of real “men & women”—that just as in an assembly room I am always doing awkward things and not understanding what people say to me till five minutes after they have bid me final goodnight, so all your drama, obscure to most from their want of sympathy & passion, is obscure to me from my want of wit. I have I suppose, about as strong reasoning and about as feeble uptaking power, as ever man had; if it were not for consciousness of this deficiency I should scold you as violently as I could for not speaking plainer.

This letter will I trust convince you of the truth of the assertion in my last, of my excessive dislike of modesty. Writing so coolly as if it were a matter of so mighty importance what I said of your book.

Even this scrawl, for I have only been four hours out of bed & am still weak—but the sore throat & feverishness quite beaten. With all best regards to Mrs Browning

Affectionately Yours

J Ruskin

—By the bye—seriously—will you tell me what “Onion stone” is and what is the Latin or Italian term which I suppose you translate because I must put a note to it in quoting.

Do you mean anybody in particular by the lost leader? & how was Shakespeare of us, in that sense. Shakespeare was a monstrous Tory.¹

Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us,
Burns, Shelley, were with us,—they watch from their graves!

Browning's reply of 1 February, acknowledging the gift,

¹ “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church” and “The Lost Leader”, both poems of 1845, were included, along with Luria, in Browning's collected Poems of 1849. The latter allusion is to lines 13-14 of “The Lost Leader”:
is his longest letter to Ruskin, and is largely devoted to reflections on Modern Painters, vol. iii, which he described as "an arrangement of rockets of various sorts & sizes". What most agitated Browning was his erroneous conviction that he was classified by Ruskin among the moderns, whose chief characteristic is their "want of faith" (v. 322 ff.). And he defends himself against the putative charge by citing three passages from Sordello (vi. 621-8, 780-9, 853-70) which he admits are, "Of all my things, the single chance I have had of speaking in my own person—not dramatically".

This is the background of the opening sentences of Ruskin's third letter, which Browning received before 6 February.

[early February 1856]

Dear Browning

I was truly rejoiced & made better by your letter, & hasten to thank you for it; & chiefly for your quoting your own poetry, which I take very kindly of you thinking it shows all manner of good friendship & happy trust. And I like all you quote very much. Only please note you are off on a wrong tack in supposing that I class you among the moderns. I consider you a Pre Raphaelite & include you always in the exceptions I make of that class to all that I say of modernism. Touching Scott, and colour, & those matters—I cannot write you today—the two things I have mainly at heart being to say that my question about the onion stone was not in querulousness but in simple good faith and ignorance of Italian—that now I know what it means, I highly approve of the whole thing & would not have it otherwise—all these words should be translated, but you would spare your readers trouble—No—you would spare yourself discredit—for most readers won't take the trouble—if you just put the word at bottom of page—(cipollino)

1 "A Letter from Robert Browning to John Ruskin", Baylor Browning Interests, no. 17 (Waco, Texas, 1958). Browning's copy of Modern Painters, vol. iii, was inscribed, "with affectionate and respectful regards" (New Letters, p. 93 n.).

2 One wonders what Browning's reaction was to Ruskin's including Mrs. Browning and Wordsworth among "our earnest poets and deepest thinkers", but of the "anxious or weeping" variety (v. 323).

3 On that date Browning told Chapman he had received "the other day" three letters from Ruskin (New Letters, p. 89).

4 Browning had argued at length against Ruskin's high regard for Scott, who was discussed extensively in Chapter XVI of Modern Painters, vol. iii. Browning particularly objected to Ruskin's giving "the preference to color over form in poetic artistry" (see v. 344-52, especially p. 349).

5 Browning had answered on 1 February: "Now—I have to answer you that onion-stone is the grey cipollino—good for pillars and the like, bad for
Next, I want to know what poor Wordsworth did to be so abused.\footnote{Browning had written: "Don't tell that I thought of—who else but Wordsworth? Shakespeare was of us—not for us, like Him of the Defensio [Milton], nor abreast of our sympathies like the other two [Burns, Shelley]: I wish he had been more than of us."} Burns & Shelley indeed!! they were true men?— & he false?—what do you mean my dear fellow. I always look upon Shelley as a mere sick schoolboy who was always eating too much plumcake. I can't make out what you find in him. I think one might write Shelley by Shrewsbury clock as easily as—Here goes, for a bit more of Revolt of Islam—

Then I looked up—& lo—from forth the West
The Likeness of an Eagle came, afloat—
Hoary with fire—the clouds beneath its breast cloven
Boiled back in swarthy waves—a narrow throat
Swarthy's too good for Shelley
so I've split it
Of blue before it opened—like the throat
Of the Halcyon. All its plumes were edged with ice—
were threads of
And through the ice was silken lightning shot—
And through the lightning throbs of Love,
Twice—Thrice—
Winnowed by Liberty, in the Abysmal Paradise.

—Except the old gentleman in Nicholas Nickleby, who calls for bottled thunder, & a corkscrew\footnote{In chapter XLIX of Dickens' \textit{Nicholas Nickleby}, the demented "gentleman in small clothes" demands "'the bottled lightning, a clean tumbler, and a corkscrew.'"}—I know nothing—positively—so absurd as Shelley—& even the old gentleman has more practical tendencies—one knows, by his sending for the corkscrew, which Shelley never does.

I am always wanting whenever I read a word of him, which I rarely do, to bring him to some practical conclusion. E.g.

It was a little lawny islet,
By anemone & vilet
Like mosaic-paven.
There sat a gentleman, flushed & shy
And a girl with a corkscrew curl in her eye
On the grass, between, was a large eel-pie,
And a ham-bone, cleanly shaven.
And the gentleman asked, in accents mild
"Was it quite enough soaked, before it was biled.

\textit{finer work, thro' its being laid coat upon coat, onion-wise,—don't I explain by translating the word, and do you like it a whit more?}
And the lady replied, as she pulled a vilet
Off the little lawny islet—
" Didn't I tell you, Jane would spile it." 1

There's something worth having an island for, in that.
But please write & tell me what you mean about Wordsworth, for I don't understand: I am nearly all right again; & getting on with my work. It was nothing but that I had ate too many red herrings—Ever with best love to Mrs Browning
Most affectionately Yours,
J Ruskin

P.S. I've read the Revolt of Islam four times over, or thereabouts, & never yet made out who revolted, or what it was about, or whether Islam has anything to do with the Turks.

Browning's notorious early addiction to Shelley—evident in Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, and later in the Introductory Essay to the spurious Shelley letters of 1852—obviously had not diminished by the mid-fifties, as "Memorabilia", the last poem in volume i of Men and Women, had just testified to Ruskin and to the world. It was not until 1858 that he was to lower his estimate of the poetry after the quite personal grief of learning of Shelley's treatment of his first wife. 2 Ruskin's attitudes

1 For the first three lines, see Shelley's "The Isle". Ruskin must certainly have remembered this letter when he wrote the following passage in chapter X of Praeterita, in the late eighties. After speaking of Byron, Ruskin continues: "In that same year, 1836, I took to reading Shelley also, and wasted much time over the Sensitive Plant and Epipsychidion; and I took a good deal of harm from him, in trying to write lines like ' pricky and pulpous and blistered and blue'; or 'it was a little lawny islet by anemone and vi'let—like mosaic paven,' etc.; but, in the state of frothy fever I was in, there was little good for me to be got out of anything. The perseverance with which I tried to wade through the Revolt of Islam, and find out (I never did, and don't know to this day) who revolted against whom, or what, was creditable to me; and the Prometheus really made me understand something of Aeschylus" (xxxv. 183).

2 Griffin and Minchin, pp. 185-6; see also pp. 51-53, 66-69, 183 ff. Frederick A. Pottle, Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts (1923; rpt. Hamden, Conn., 1965), pp. 34-64, studies the Shelleyan echoes in Pauline and Paracelsus. Lionel Stevenson, "Tennyson, Browning, and a Romantic Fallacy", UTQ, xiii (January 1944), 175-95, modifies this thesis by showing that, while Browning was still devoted to Shelley, the early poems nevertheless develop a critique of Shelley's "abstract utopianism" in favour of a "creed of practical, tolerant concern with commonplace human affairs". Browning's view of Shelley and of his own practice are treated in Philip Drew, "Browning's Essay on Shelley", VP, i (January 1963), 1-6; and in Thomas J. Collins, "Browning's Essay on Shelley: In Context", VP, ii (Spring 1964), 119-24. Shelley's ambiguous role in Browning's religious thought is discussed by Thomas J. Collins, "Shelley
toward Shelley are perhaps more complex but less well known, and deserve some comment. His great enthusiasm for Shelley is evident in the early prose pieces of the 1830s (e.g. i. 157, 252, 253). The earlier volumes of *Modern Painters* had quoted from Shelley liberally, and volume iii, which Ruskin had just sent Browning, had solved a problem in Ruskin’s aesthetics by judging that, although Byron and Shelley are “passionate and unprincipled men”, they nevertheless look on “pain and injustice” with “distress and indignation” (v. 372-4). Nevertheless, as early as 1846, Ruskin had spoken of “the sickly dreaming of Shelley over clouds and waves”, and in 1857 he was, as we shall see, to call him “shallow and verbose” (iv. 297 n.; xv. 227). The doubleness of attitude no doubt reflects, as Cook and Wedderburn suggest, “an essential sympathy” between the two men, both in the morbidity and verbosity Ruskin condemns, and in their “volcanic instinct of justice” (i. 254 n.).

II

Browning has praised *Modern Painters*, vol. iii, to Rossetti, who, in a reply of 6 February, described the book as “Glorious . . . many parts”—especially chapter IV. Rossetti’s postscript—“Poor Ruskin has been very ill, but is getting better—overwork I think. He and I had a long spell at you one night lately.”—led Browning to ask on 13 March, “How is Ruskin, I am anxious to know and will write”.1 At any rate, Ruskin’s discussion of “The Bishop Orders His Tomb” in *Modern Painters*, vol. iv, issued in April 1856, obviously pleased Browning, still in Paris, though he complained to Chapman on the 21st that no one quoted Ruskin’s praise in the weekly literary magazines.2

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2 New Letters, p. 93 n. Rossetti wrote Allingham in April: “Really, the omissions in Browning’s passage are awful, and the union with Longfellow worse.” See Rossetti Letters, i. 299-300, and notes.
whose volumes continued to sell far more slowly than his wife’s, had good reason to feel satisfaction on reading that “Robert Browning is unerring in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages; always vital, right, and profound; so that in the matter of art... there is hardly a principle connected with the mediaeval temper, that he has not struck upon in those seemingly careless and too rugged rhymes of his” (vi. 446-7). And Ruskin had concluded: “I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the Stones of Venice put into as many lines, Browning’s being also the antecedent work” (vi. 449).¹

Ruskin evidently had failed to send Browning a copy of Modern Painters, vol. iv, in April, and Browning’s copy, not received until October, consequently lacks an inscription.² It was Rossetti who sent Browning, not the volume but the relevant “extract”. In a previously unpublished letter dated 22 April, Browning thanked Rossetti:

The extract from Ruskin was strange and pleasant... I value a word from him at its worth, I venture to believe,—I know at least how I should regard any Brown or Jones with a “passed muster, J. Ruskin”—stuck on the front of his cap: the praise, in itself, is quite above this mark, of course—but in this world judgments are made by overpayments here and under payments there, from the same paymaster often, and the result is the only fair thing: while Ruskin pays me a great gold piece for a poor little matter, some Grimley [sic; Gremlin?], or whatever is the name, is sure to be picking my pocket and putting a bad fourpenny “bit” into my hand.³

¹ The reference is to vol. iii of the Stones of Venice (xi. 81-115). Ruskin’s inquiries early in the year led to the following note, glossing Browning’s “antique-black”: “‘Nero Antico’ is more familiar to our ears: but Browning does right in translating it; as afterwards ‘cipollino’ into ‘onion-stone’. Our stupid habit of using foreign words without translating is continually losing us half the force of the foreign language. How many travellers hearing the term ‘cipollino’ recognize the intended sense of a stone splitting into concentric coats, like an onion?” (vi. 448 n.) For an interesting account of Ruskin’s comments and their relation to Browning’s poem, see Robert A. Greenberg, “Ruskin, Pugin, and the Contemporary Context of ‘The Bishop Orders His Tomb’”, PMLA, lxxiv (October 1969), 1588-94.
² New Letters, p. 93 n.
³ Letter in the possession of the Miriam Lutcher Stark Library of The University of Texas at Austin; listed as item RA15 (p. 48) in Warner Barnes (ed.),
The Brownings were in London—Mrs. Browning's last visit to England—from late June until late August, and from 1 October until their departure for Florence on the 23rd. Ruskin had gone to Switzerland in May with his parents, and did not return until early October. The following letter from Switzerland, virtually unknown to Ruskin and Browning scholars and printed in an obscure volume, is worth citing in full:

Fribourg: 29th August, 1856.

Dear Mr. Browning

After all, you are in my debt for a letter you know, so really I am not quite so bad as I appear to myself thinking just now how I have been treating you. I was so ashamed of the way I had mangled that poem of yours that I dared not look you even by letter in the face for some time afterwards, but how the summer has gone by I know not. I came in this evening from among the pinewoods, which were all in their gold and purple of sunset at 1/2 past six,—dolorously wondering what I had done with the long days. The fact is, I have done nothing with them; but people used to tell me, with view to moral effect—that doing nothing made the time seem longer. I found life seemed very short when I was busy, so this year, I tried idleness in hope of obtaining a little ennui—but instead of that, the summer has gone like a dream, and of this dream, I have nothing to tell anybody. I really do not suppose anybody else ever passed so long a time with occurrence of fewer adventures, or ideas. I think fresh air must make one stupid—stupid I certainly am—to more than common degree; and I shall have, it seems to me, to add this influence of Stupefaction to the other elements of mountain power I have been trying to investigate.

I was a good deal tired when I left London in May; and it was really necessary for me to vegetate—but I did not know to what a very slow vegetation I should arrive. I had quantities of plans in my head when I began the journey—they are all gone—I was much interested in public events—but no event now possesses interest for me, except breakfast.

You will not expect me, in this state of mind, to attempt writing a letter to a poet. I don't see any use in poetry. I recollect you have written something nice about figs, somewhere—but that is all I do recollect. I am beginning to think that, after all, there may be some sense in the kind of people who make railroads: and I entered with the profoundest sympathy the other day into the feelings of a Calf who would lie down with its eyes shut in the middle of the road, and had continually to be pulled up by the tail.

I believe we are coming home again some day soon—and I hope then to find myself better, and to come and see you—You will really get that precious book of mine to-morrow—the day after you get this precious letter—I was doubtful of your address at Paris, & then thought every day you were coming to London,

Catalogue of the Browning Collection (Austin: University of Texas Humanities Research Center, 1966).

1 Quoted in Arnold, Ventures in Book Collecting, pp. 199-201.
& then hadn't your address in London—and then wanted to write you something about my reasons for spoiling your poem before I sent it you—I don't remember them now—it seems to me quite natural that I should spoil anything I meddled with.

You needn't trouble to answer this—They say you are writing more poetry. I daresay I shall be very glad of this—someday—but I don't care, just now—I have just enough animation left to hope heartily that you and Mrs. Browning are well—and to be sure that I am always affectionately Yours

J Ruskin

Browning wrote in acknowledgement on his return with Mrs. Browning from the Isle of Wight:

39. Devonshire Place
Oct. 3. '56

My Dear Ruskin,

We returned here two days ago—late into the night—but I looked for and found, the first thing, the book you had promised me three weeks before. What kindness of you! for you know the worth of what you write, if that were all to thank you for—whereas there is the gift, and the goodness of the manner. We shall take & keep all of it gratefully and lovingly: the first reading will be, in a little time, at Florence or Rome. For the quotation to which you allude—that I was aware of, thru' Rossetti, months ago. I think I can afford to say that it is pleasant indeed to see my name among good names,—with a distinguishable peak in your hill-country of poets: and as every such bit of peak may possibly have some peculiar Flora of its own (since even the boiling mud-baths at Abano sprout a certain little miracle of a flow' ret not obtainable elsewhere) you will perhaps get a weed or so off me if you break your back long enough by bending to look. So enough of that. Whatever you do look at and pronounce upon, I shall continue to inform myself about earnestly, I know.

We shall stay here for perhaps a fortnight longer: how it vexed us to hear yesterday from Miss Heaton¹ that you were not only arrived but had been, in the course of the morning, at the very back of this house,—Mr. Richmond's, to wit. How should I venture to ask you to give us an evening here? Yet it would not be unlike you to do so. My wife is tired, tired out with the last throes of the printing her poem, and forced moreover to keep a remainder of strength for all the travelling to follow. We should be glad indeed to see you once before we set out.

In any case,—truest thanks again from us both; how is your health now—what has Switzerland done for you? Will you write a word and say, at least?

Every yours affectionately
Robert Browning—

The poem Mrs. Browning was finishing in October was "Aurora Leigh", her novel-in-verse, published in mid-Novem-

¹ Ellen Heaton, a spinster from Leeds, is identified by Edward C. McAleer, in Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1951), pp. 31, n. 38, and 38, n. 17.
ber. Though Ruskin continued to disapprove of some of her coinages, his well-known letter of 27 November outdid itself in extravagance, calling *Aurora Leigh* "the greatest poem in the English language, unsurpassed by anything but Shakespeare" (xxxvi. 247-9). He wrote again on 28 December, to the same effect (ibid. pp. 252-3). Browning justifiably crowed with pleasure as he quoted to Chapman from the letters on 5 January 1857.1 Ruskin’s major writing project of the winter of 1856-7 was *The Elements of Drawing*. Here, again, he praised the new poem: "genuine works of feeling, such as *Maud* or *Aurora Leigh* in poetry, or the grand Pre-Raphaelite designs in painting, are sure to offend you”, he tells his workingman-audience, especially if they “persist in looking at vicious and false art” (xv. 224). And in an appendix on "Things to be Studied", he draws both Brownings into the net-full of approved moderns: Then, in general, the more you can restrain your serious reading to reflective or lyric poetry, history, and natural history, avoiding fiction and the drama, the healthier your mind will become. Of modern poetry, keep to Scott, Wordsworth, Keats, Crabbe, Tennyson, the two Brownings, Thomas Hood, Lowell, Longfellow, and Coventry Patmore... Mrs. Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* is, as far as I know, the greatest poem which the century has produced in any language. Cast Coleridge at once aside, as sickly and useless; and Shelley, as shallow and verbose; Byron, until your taste is fully formed, and you are able to discern the magnificence in him from the wrong (xv. 226-7).

Mrs. Browning took note of the praise in a letter to her sister on 18 August (LEBB, ii. 268). But Ruskin did not write until October, though as the following letter indicates there had been a lost letter in the spring.

11

25th October 1857

Dear Mrs Browning

I write in queer desperation, having been all the summer wondering when I should be in such a good and happy state of mind as to be worthy to write to you or to Robert. I have been very bad and sulky all the summer and have never written, and I regret it the more because I fear you may have never got a letter of mine written partly in thanks for yours and Roberts—received before Mrs Stowe came over,2 partly to express some little odd ways and occurrences of

1 *New Letters*, p. 99. These must also be the two referred to by Mrs. Browning on 2 February (LEBB, ii. 253).

admiration of your poems (Aurora chiefly) such as I did not expect myself & which might therefore have interested you.
But all I can say now is—don’t go to Egypt\(^1\) without telling me where to write to you there—& how you, both, have been, and are.

I am very well, but not quite right, for want of the Alps this summer—and am in the ruts of the road for a little bit, not on the downs or racecourse.
—But always gratefully and affectionately Yours

J Ruskin

Sincere regards to Miss Heaton if with or near you. I have all her letters and hope to have much delight from the drawings she has left for me to take charge of

In *The Political Economy of Art*, published in December 1857, Ruskin twice mentioned *Casa Guidi Windows* (xvi. 39 and n., 68 and n.). He wrote to both Brownings on 24 January 1858, saying that he is sending the book to them, and recommending the passage on Italy which included a note on Mrs. Browning (xxxvi. 275-6 ; xvi. 68 ff.). On 29 March, he sent the Brownings some important remarks on his changing religious attitudes: “All churches seem to me mere forms of idolatry,” he tells them; “their beliefs and disbeliefs seem to me one worth about as much as the other, their doings and shortcomings alike blind and ridiculous—not by any means worth being d—d for” (xxxvi. 280). This is obviously a premonition of Ruskin’s “unconversion”, his decisive break with his evangelical background, at Turin in July and August, under the joint tutelage of Veronese and the “little squeaking idiot” of a Waldensian preacher.\(^2\) On his way home, in September, he saw the Brownings in Paris, where they were making a short visit.\(^3\) And on 24 October\(^4\) he wrote Mrs. Browning, in deepest gloom:

Away I went to Turin! of all places—found drums and fifes, operas and Paul Veroneses, stayed another six weeks, and got a little better, and I begin to think nobody can be a great painter who isn’t rather wicked—in a noble sort of way.

I merely write this, not by way of a letter, but just that you may know there is something the matter with me, and that it isn’t that I don’t think of you nor love you. (xxxvi. 292)

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\(^1\) On the Brownings’ plan to visit Egypt and the Holy Land in the autumn of 1857, and the reasons for its abandonment, see LEBB, pp. 272, 275.
\(^2\) See Cook, i. 517-24.
\(^3\) Ibid. p. 524.
\(^4\) Misdated 14 October 1858 in Cook and Wedderburn, as the original in the New York Public Library indicates.
RUSKIN AND THE BROWNINGS

Mrs. Browning waited until 1 January 1859 to answer, expecting a promised second letter, which never arrived (LEBB, ii. 299-301). Obviously at a loss how to respond to Ruskin’s distress, she seeks to cheer him up, exclaiming, “What would this life be, dear Mr. Ruskin, if it had not eternal relations?” And she proceeds to develop her view of “a correspondence between the natural world and the spiritual.” Robert added a rather patronizing postscript: “I am to say something, dear Ruskin . . .; go on again like the noble and dear man you are to all of us, and especially to us two out of them all.” Ruskin’s reply, on 15 January, takes up again the revolution in his interconnected religious and aesthetic tastes (xxxvi. 302-304). He says of Veronese, Tintoretto, and Titian: “I never know which is noblest and dearest. I’ve had to give up all the old monkish pictures, for their sakes.” But the letter is even more important for its memorable expression of Ruskin’s growing alienation from the British public, picturing himself as “always howling and bawling the right road to a generation of drunken cabmen, their heads up through the trap-door of a hansom, faces all over mud—no right road to be gone upon at all—nothing but a drunken effort at turning, ending in ditch.”

Mrs. Browning sent the following note, addressed in an unposted envelope to “John Ruskin Esqre. Junior, Denmark Hill.”

My Dear Mr. Ruskin,

I am meaning to write to you but not today. This time it is simply to introduce to you, Mr. Bridell, a very clever landscape painter, married here in Rome to the daughter of my husband’s old friend Mr. Fox, of Oldham, who, she also, is devoted to art—for art’s sake, therefore, & ours, will you suffer them to take your hand?

Rome, May 1.

The year is determined by the fact that Frederic Lee Bridell, a promising painter who was to die young in 1863, married Eliza Fox in February 1859. Eliza, or “Tottie”, was the daughter of Browning’s old friend, William Johnson Fox, Unitarian minister and M.P. for Oldham, who had written appreciative reviews of Pauline and Paracelsus in 1835. Mrs. Browning’s promised letter is dated 3 June (LEBB, ii. 315-17);
like most of the letters from this time on, it is full of her passionate hopes for Italy, where hostilities had broken out in April. Though Ruskin was obviously less optimistic about modern Italy, and less intractably anti-Austrian, he fully shared her pro-Italian and pro-French sentiments.¹

During the summer of 1859 Ruskin published, after great difficulty, three of his newspaper letters on the Italian Question, strongly supporting France's alliance with Sardinia in declaring war on Austria (xviii. 537-45). On 20 November Ruskin refers to a letter just received from Mrs. Browning (xxxvi. 325). He wrote the Brownings about his Italian letters on 11 December, in a deeply dispirited mood (xxxvi. 330-1). On 16 February, Browning asked Chapman to send Ruskin a copy of Mrs. Browning's Poems Before Congress.² Evidently he did not receive them until mid-March, when they put him into "a half laughing—half crying humour".³ Ruskin's next extant letter to Mrs. Browning is dated 5 November 1860 (xxxvi. 347-8); in it he admits to having been in a silent and depressed condition for two years. He has discovered, he says, "the great fact that great Art is of no real use to anybody but the next great Artist"; and so he will have to start "with moral education of the people, and physical". He wrote her again on the 25th, thanking her for her "comforting letter" (xxxvi. 349-51). Not only is he pessimistic about Italy, but he agonizes over the blow given to his "moral principles" by the realization that what he has done out of virtue and self-denial has brought "catastrophe and disappointment", whereas "Everything that has turned out

¹ See Cook, i. 463-4.
² Ruskin wrote to Miss Heaton, 9 March 1860: "Thanks for Mrs. Browning's noble letter, but she's wholly wrong (for the first time in her life, I believe) about the Rifles—the only thing to save us from our accursed commerce, and make us men again instead of gold shovels" (xviii. p. xxiv).
³ There is another unexplained reference in a letter of Mrs. Browning's to Isa Blagden, in late March 1860: "it is with dismay I have to tell you that the letter you addressed under cover to Mr. Ruskin has never reached us" (LEBB, ii. 366). Ruskin was in England in March.

³ The Winnington Letters: John Ruskin's Correspondence with Margaret Alexis Bell and the Children at Winnington Hall, ed. Van Akin Burd (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 239; letter of 18 March 1860. A letter to Margaret Bell of 25 October 1864 (p. 522) includes "autographs of Carlyle, Froude, Browning and his wife".
well I've done merely to please myself”. It was one of these letters, perhaps the latter, that Mrs. Browning referred to soon after as “written in a very desponding state about his work, and life, and the world” (LEBB, ii. 414).1

Mrs. Browning wrote early in May 1861; three extracts survive.2

So much for the book as a gift—as a book you will be thanked for it by voices out of number besides mine and my husband’s, though none are likely to recognise with a more susceptible admiration than we do, the beauty, the truth, the combination of tenderness of detail and height of soul everywhere observable in this as in other works of yours—and what exquisite drawings. You are sad here, very, perhaps where all’s tried the deepest men must be sad or bitter. That touch of divine music, to which artistic natures have access spoils the street ballad to them at last. T’is hard at best to listen to two tunes at once—and at worst, there’s a dreary, a scarcely tolerable sense of discord between that and this. Sad you may well be sometimes, but hopeless, my dear friend, you have no need to be, you ought not to be, you must not be. God over all is Hope over all. He holds the worlds in the hollow of His hand. Nothing of the handful hangs without, not one of your “leaves.” I believe in the existence of a grand comprehensive harmony—(surely the permission to evil is a condition of human liberty). What grows more and more distinct to me is that what men call “analogy” (between the natural and the spiritual) is a real connection and correspondence. “What if earth be but the shadow of heaven”—as Milton wrote?3 What if every blade of grass have a special and eternal significance? Earth then is full of profound intentions, and such expositors of visible beauty as yourself stand still higher than they know.

Italy will do well, notwithstanding some troubles at Naples and poor, noble, passionate Garibaldi’s want of large intelligence. My hopes continue strong and reasonable I think—the question of Rome is a question of time merely, not of intention on the part of the Emperor—and Cavour knows this perfectly. Let France go and another door is open to Austria—therefore it is supposed that Europe will be relieved from the actual state of suspense as to war or no war before a French evacuation of Rome takes place. Is it possible that war

1 On 11 November 1860, Ruskin wrote John Brown in a depressingly character­istic vein, concerning the fourth instalment of Unto This Last (in the November Cornhill) : “all those descriptions and sentimentalisms are of an entirely second­rate and vulgar kind, quite and forever inferior to either Tennyson, Browning, Lowell, or any other. . . .” See Letters of Dr. John Brown, edited by his son and D. W. Forrest (London, 1907), p. 293.

2 The fragments, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, are in an unidentified hand.

3 Paradise Lost, v. 575.
I drop Italian lyrics out of my vial drop by drop still for America, who has sympathies for Italy notwithstanding her own crisis which might well be absorbing. I look for good from it, I. Do you call one a "Hopeful"?—by the female branch? I saw the other day a private letter from Francis Newman, in which he said a thing which struck me. He had tried in vain, he said, to see the hand of God in the fate of nations[,] only within the last two years he had actually seen it. Coming from such a man, it struck me.

Rome. 126. Via Felice
May 1861.

Despite the late date, the letter refers, almost certainly, to *Modern Painters*, vol. v, issued in June 1860, and especially to the final chapter, "Peace". For Mrs. Browning's "Sad you may well be sometimes, but hopeless ... you have no need to be, you ought not to be," etc., reflects Ruskin's "I hear it said of me that I am hopeless"; "I am not hopeless, though my hope may be Veronese's: the dark-veiled" (vii. 457). And her remark, "He holds the worlds in the hollow of His hand," repeats his "The longer I live, the more clearly I see how all souls are in His hand" (p. 456).

Mrs. Browning's remarks on Providence in history, in effect a continuation of her reflections on "God over all" as an antidote to Ruskin's "sad" and "hopeless" mood, provoked from Ruskin one of his most revealing letters regarding his religious state (xxxvi. 363-5). He reports, on 13 May, that it is "immeasurably, infinitely absurd" to look for God's hand in dealing with nations—obviously, a direct repudiation of the doctrine of his master, Carlyle. "God's laws", he explains, "you can trace. His Providence Never." Those laws are "that courage and chastity and honesty and patience bring out good; and cowardice and luxury and folly and impatience, evil, in their exact and unfailingly measured measure". "I am stunned [he confesses]—palsied—utterly helpless—under the weight of the finding out the myriad errors that I have been

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1 For Mrs. Browning's comments on Italian politics in the spring of 1861, see *LEBB*, ii. 431-2, 437, 439, 441, 449-50.

2 Francis W. Newman, brother of the future Cardinal, Professor of Latin in London University and a well-known unsectarian religious liberal.
taught about these things.” “And you can’t conceive how lonely I am in all this”, he concludes, cast off as he feels he is by his old religious friends.

Two things are evident in the letters exchanged by Ruskin and Mrs. Browning during this period. First, to no other correspondent, save perhaps Charles Eliot Norton, does Ruskin reveal so fully the shift, after 1858, in his aesthetic, social, and religious thinking. Second, to no other friend at all does he look so openly for solace in the despondencies of these years. A ritual is set up, in which his confessions elicit a “comforting”, quasi-religious response, after which he subsides. She was the maternal figure, older and safely married (she turned fifty-four in March 1860), to whom he turned as his religious doubts finally separated him from his own mother, and as his radical social theories created a deep cleavage between him and his father. Nor should it be forgotten that his tormented infatuation with Rose LaTouche, whom he had first met in 1858, must have contributed to the upheaval of these years.

III

Ruskin had ended his letter in May by saying, “I am going to write often now”. But their spiritual and emotional relationship was to be snapped at its height by Mrs. Browning’s death in Florence on 29 June. Commenting on 20 July to Mrs. Edward Burne-Jones about the death of another friend, he adds: “And there’s Mrs. Browning gone, too, who was a friend, and such a one; but one must not think about oneself in talking of her, it is all the Earth’s loss” (xxxvi. 374). Strangely, Ruskin did not write Browning himself until 17 November 1861, from Lucerne (xxxvi. 392). He explains, almost as he would have to Mrs. Browning: “I have been ill—not a little, neither; and am so still, more mentally than otherwise, however.” He speaks of Browning as being “every way my superior in powers of thought, and of suffering”. I think it is not pressing the evidence too hard to read their relationship as being between the confessedly weak and unstable male—“in a state of sick apathy, or dull resolution”—placatingly submissive before the
presumptively more aggressive and stable male force. At the very least, Browning rarely took the initiative in their dealings, before or after this time, and Ruskin somehow conveys a self-depreciating deference in presence of the older man, springing perhaps from a fear of being rebuffed.

Browning, who returned to London in October 1861, took up lodgings at 1 Chichester Road, Upper Westbourne Terrace, until April 1862. Ruskin addressed him there; the envelope is marked 9 April, a Wednesday.

14

Dear Browning

You say you "have things for me." How am I to have them? Would you like to come down to my quiet room of work at the National gallery on Saturday morning.—Or shall I come to the Athenæum, on that or any other day?

Ever affectionately Yours

J Ruskin

One would like to know what the "things" were. If the following letter is, as seems likely, part of the same sequence, there must have been an intervening exchange.

15

19. Warwick Crescent,  
[April? 1862]

Mr dear Ruskin,

I will be at the National Gallery,—that is, under the Portico of the Entrance to the Old Masters—next Friday at 5,—since you choose to make such an entire pleasure of the arrangement: you shall give me a sandwich with my tea, if you wish—and, (unless the weather is bad,—in which case, let Monday bring me amends) I expect to be as happy as you wish.

Affectionately yours

R Browning

"Next Friday" would probably then be 18 April. In any event, the letter is almost certainly of this spring, when Ruskin was going through the Turner sketches at the National Gallery, "removing the mildew and adding a good many identifications" (Cook, ii. 43).

Ruskin was on the Continent from May to November 1862. He wrote Browning on 10 December; the letter was delivered by private messenger.
Denmark Hill, Camberwell
10th Dec

A good hours drive remember. Shall I, or may I, come & drive you out?

Dear Browning,

You cannot think, nor can I, how I’ve been hindered from getting over to you, but I’m arranging everything for changing my home—and all my ways of life, and the father & mother grudge me, during the few days I have here.

—Could you come and dine here at six, on Friday next, (the 13th isn’t it) there will be no one but my father & mother & my two dear friends, Edward Jones and his wife.

Ever your affectionate
J Ruskin.

The following Friday was in point of fact the 12th. On the 11th Ruskin wrote again to Browning, now at his permanent address, 19 Warwick Crescent, Harrow Road. This was sent through the post.

Dec. 11 62

Dear Browning

How kind and good you are. I will be with you tomorrow at four.

Ever affectionately Yours,
J Ruskin

The dinner on the 12th is evidently the one referred to by Lady Burne-Jones, at which she and her husband first met Browning.

I remember ... that some talk went on about the rate at which the pulse of different people beat, and that Browning suddenly leaned towards me saying, ‘Do me the honour to feel my pulse,’—but I could find none to feel. This is what he meant us to know, for he told us afterwards that it was never perceptible to touch, which seemed strange in so powerful an organization as his.1

Browning seems to have dined with Ruskin again. He wrote Isabella Blagden on Friday, 19 December: “dined with Ruskin on Tuesday”—which would have been the 16th. And further on in the letter he speaks of a remark made to him by Ruskin “on Friday,” no doubt referring to the visit of the 12th.2

The new “home” Ruskin spoke of in Letter 16 was Mornex, in Switzerland, which he had discovered in August. He was back there before Christmas. The following, on

2 Dearest Isa, ed. McAleer, pp. 143, 144.
lined paper measuring $13 \times 18$ inches, must have been written soon after.

[late December 1862-early January 1863]

Dear Browning

The photographs came safely. I will only say earnestly—thank you. My dislike of all photographs could by nothing be increased, and it is nothing diminished by these, but they are precious.

I was so glad to see you that evening. So glad to find you well, and at work. I shall look with deep interest for that exposition of Horace. I want to believe in Diana—if it may be, and to dedicate a pine to her, but the pines in my garden are nearly all of a size, and I don’t in the least know which she would like; because, though she lights [sic] one, (I observe) more than the rest, I attribute the preference to the arrangement of the tiles on a neighbouring house corner, on the other side of the village street.

—Also, I would fain put my spring into good humour, but I don’t seem to see that it would be at all better pleased by a little goats blood in it—and I like my goats—better, rather—to drink of it than dye it. What am I to do? Please send me some advice to

Mornex.
Haute Savoie.
France.

& remember me sometimes—and as then, and always

affectionately Yours,

J Ruskin

My father & mother send grateful regards.

I write so much more comfortably on this paper than on anything chartistically polite.

The reference to Diana reminds us of his new mood as he finally broke away from the confinement of his parents’ home. He had written Norton from Mornex about 21 December ("Shortest day"): “I’ve become a Pagan, too; and am trying hard to get some substantial hope of seeing Diana in the pure glades . . .” (xxxvi. 426). Ruskin was reading intensively in Greek and Latin authors at this time (Cook, ii. 54), and there are numerous references to Horace (including the title) in Munera Pulveris, to the writing of which he very soon set himself.

Ruskin was in London from May to September 1863. Sometime in June, he wrote to Frederick Leighton: “It is

1 On Horace’s dedicating his favorite pine to Diana, see The Queen of the Air (1869) (xix. 349 and n.). And see a letter of 13 September 1862: “If I ever get better, I mean to be religious again too, but my religion is to be old Greek” (Cook, ii. 51).
my turn to claim Browning for you, though I know what your morning time is to you” (xxxvi. 446). On 14 June, Browning and Ruskin were both at a party given by Richard Monckton Milnes, which included, in Matthew Arnold’s report, “all the advanced liberals in religion and politics”. The invited included G. H. Lewes, Herbert Spencer, “a sort of pseudo-Shelley called Swinburne,” and Froude. With Ruskin, Arnold said, “I had some talk, but I should never like him”. On 17 July, Browning wrote the Storys: “Ruskin is back from Switzerland, & well: I see him now & then”; and the two men met at Rossetti’s in August. But the visits were not sustained, since a year later, on 13 July 1864, Ruskin wrote William Allingham: “I am in a state of puzzled collapse, and not fit to see anyone. I have not seen Browning for a year!” (xxxviii. 330b).

Browning’s *Dramatis Personae* was published in May 1864; the following letter of January 1865 indicates a further prolonged lapse in their relations. (Ruskin’s father had died on 3 March 1864; Ruskin remained at Denmark Hill with his mother until the spring of 1866.)

19

Denmark Hill
28th Janv. 1865

My dear Browning

The enclosed letter is from an amiable enough person to whom I should like to say that I had sent it you, and I am glad to be forced at last to write a word to you. I have been living in the crannies of stones and wilted edges—of cairns—quite insensitive and helpless—throughout the last year—recovering some tone of mind, but not caring to talk to anybody. I am recovering also a little general strength, so, and mean to go on for a month or two longer. I was provoked by that poem of yours on table rapping—for this reason. If it be jugglery—one does not write poems against jugglers—you might as well have written against Morison’s Pills. But if it be not jugglery—there is no use in raving about it—and you only hinder the proper investigation of facts. Of course it is very disgusting. Nothing can be more disgusting than having to go


2 Perhaps it is to this party that Ruskin alludes in a letter to Leighton, apparently of this period: “I saw Browning last night . . .” (xxxvi. 447).

to a water closet—but one does not write poems on the nastiness of corporeal dejection. If tables turn—it is the part of a man of sense to know why—and if not—to say so in plain prose—and have done with it. I am violently grieved and angered by the abuse of a talent like yours on such a matter, while the passions of the nation are allowed to run riot in war and avarice, without rebuke. If you care to come over any evening for a chat, you cannot doubt how glad I shall be to see you. Any day after this week is out if you will say you’ll come & dine at 5—or come to tea at 7, with my old mother & me. Of course I should like it—but I don’t expect you to come in the least—and I love you always though I’m in a rage at you just now.

—So believe me,

Ever affly Yrs,
J Ruskin

Mrs. Browning’s extended involvement in spiritualism, and Browning’s fierce objections, culminating in “Mr. Sludge, The Medium” in 1864, are well known.¹ What is less familiar, and even startling in view of the tone of this letter, is Ruskin’s half-reluctant interest in this fashionable craze at this period and later. In fact, January 1865 falls in the centre of his personal relations with Daniel Dunglas Home, the Scottish-American “spiritualist medium” who is the subject of Browning’s devastating portrait. Through Mrs. Cowper-Temple, Ruskin attended seances in 1864, and though not without his reservations, he seems to have been impressed. He unsuccessfully sought out Home in May 1865, and wrote him two friendly letters in September 1864 and December 1865—though, as Cook points out, both are “polite apologies”. But it was only later, in the 1870s, after the death of Rose La Touche, that he took a deeper interest in spiritualist phenomena.² It seems likely that the “rage” he expressed in this letter arose precisely from his inability to decide whether “table rapping” was indeed jugglery or not—especially in a period when his earlier religious convictions were under the severest scrutiny.


Ruskin's letter drew from Browning, on 30 January, his best explanation of his intentions in "Mr. Sludge".

You are wrong, however, to be angry with my poem; nor do you state the facts of it my way. I don't expose jugglery, but anatomize the mood of the juggler,—all morbidness of the soul is worth the soul's study; and the particular sword which "loveth and maketh a lie" is of wide ramifications. What I present, thus anatomized, would have its use even were there a veritable "mediumship" of which this of mine were but a simulacrum. But I meant, besides this, to please myself (and I hope, God) by telling the truth about a miscreant, whom, by one of the directest interventions of God's finger I seem ever to have recognised, this poem has already been the means of properly punishing: I know what I say.

I don't catch the parallel in the other case of the "dejection"—what does that simulate? or in what need exposure? Then, to me there is no "nastiness" in it at all,—the external circumstance, which seems to arrest your eye, being, when viewed from a higher point, just the consummate contrivance of utmost "niceness"—if men were born "scatophagi," and the repellent properties were found all the same, then—"nastiness," if you like: as it is, that quality saves them from abomination, and is precious. (xxxvi. pp. xxxviii-ix)¹

Ruskin's reply is postmarked 31 January.

Dear Browning

I am so grateful to you for your letter, and saying you'll come.

It is very reasonable this saying of yours, but to think of the things that need poets to say them—and of you—studying morbid psychology—and Tennyson—double marriage—as if it mattered to any one what came of that?²

Ever affectionately Yours

J R

—When will you come.

But Browning did not visit Ruskin then, as a letter from Browning on 24 February 1865 makes clear.³ Pen Browning had caught the measles, and though he is now recovered, the father is not quite well and asks to put off the visit for a few more days. Browning continues: "A letter, from my sister in Paris ... told me how properly you were placed there: I can't help sending a strip of it, because it is an indirect and

¹ The complexity of Browning's intentions in the poem, revealed in this letter, is the subject of Isobel Armstrong's "Browning's Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", VP, ii (Winter 1964), 1-9—though she does not make use of this letter. See also W. O. Raymond, Infinite Moment, pp. 141-7.

² *Enoch Arden* had appeared in 1864. Ruskin was not alone in disapproving of Tennyson's "sympathetic presentation" of bigamy in the poem: see the *Athenaeum*, no. 1920, 13 August 1864, pp. 200-1. Ruskin quoted approvingly from the poem in 1869 (xxxvi. 570).

³ *New Letters*, pp. 166-7.
unintended witness to a fact I should like you to be sure of. I know and love Milsand thoroughly...." DeVane and Knickerbocker read "you were placed there" as a reference to an unrecorded visit by Ruskin to Paris. Instead, as Ruskin's reply of 25 February indicates, the reference is to a review by Joseph Milsand, Browning's old friend, whom Ruskin had yet to meet: "Than you so much for that extract. I was deeply grateful for Milsand's review" (xxxvi. 481). Milsand (1817-86), a distinguished critic of English literature, had already introduced Browning to the French public in the early fifties. Now, in L'Esthétique Anglaise (1864), he offered the first extended study of Ruskin's art theories.

There is a lapse of another year in the extant correspondence; the year of the following letter is determined by the fact that 25 March 1866 was a Sunday.

21

DENMARK HILL, S.

25th March [1866]

My dear Browning

I hardly ever venture to ask any of my friends to our barbarous early dinner—& my dull hostship—but, somewhat unexpectedly, the little lady whom you saw at the shop door the other day is coming with her mother, and they're both nice, and Froude is coming—and I think you might just be able to get through the evening, and you will make us all happy.

—Only I couldn't know before—and it's Tuesday, the day after tomorrow—1/2 past six. Can you come.

Ever affectionately Yours

J Ruskin

Ruskin was finally to meet Milsand in November 1866 when he was visiting Browning. The envelope of the following is dated 13 November.

1 New Letters, p. 166 n.
2 Much of the book was drawn from Milsand's articles in the Revue des Deux Mondes, 1 July 1860 and 15 August 1861.
3 The little lady who was to come with her mother may have been Susan Scott, to whom Ruskin addressed, from 1859 on, long and intimate letters signed "Ever your affectionate Papa". Mrs. Scott was to tend Mrs. Ruskin at Denmark Hill in 1869 while Ruskin was in Verona. See The Solitary Warrior : New Letters by Ruskin, ed. J. Howard Whitehouse (London, 1929), pp. 22, 62-66, 118 ff. Another candidate is Constance Hilliard (see following note).
Dear Mr Browning

It has I fear, appeared rude to Mr Milsand that I have not yet waited upon him. I've been kept at home by toothache & general wretchedness, but I'm coming over tomorrow afternoon—I so hope to find you both that I am thus impertinent in telling you so before—but if you were necessarily going anywhere I'll come every day till I find you, and am always affectionately, Yours

J Ruskin

Rob* Browning Esq

On the 15th, Ruskin invited the two men to dinner.

I won't do it again.

Dear Mr Browning

I truly think my dining room so dull a place that I never can take courage to ask any of my friends to come four miles out to it,—but putting it wholly as an act of benevolence to me, do you think Mr Milsand & you could dine with my old mother & me—(and there are two bright children—or girls—as they call themselves—staying with us)1—on Monday or Thursday next at six. I have not the remotest notion how people give dinners now—but there will be mutton, or beef, or something,—& welcome,—& thanks.

Ever with regards to your sister2—& kindest remembrances to M. Milsand

Most truly & affectionately

Yours

J Ruskin

They came on Monday, the 19th.3

Browning and Ruskin seem to have continued to meet occasionally until Ruskin's removal to Brantwood in the Lake Country in 1872. Ruskin's diary for 15 January 1867 reads: "Browning called".4 The following note, though undated, is

1 The two girls may have been Joan Agnew, Ruskin's cousin, who lived with him and his mother from 1864 to 1871, and Constance Hilliard. The girls were of the party Ruskin took on a tour of Switzerland from April to July 1866. See Cook, ii. 108 ff.

2 Browning’s sister, Sarianna, came to live with him in June 1866, after the death of their father.

3 The Diaries of John Ruskin, ed. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse (Oxford, 1958), ii. 603. Browning wrote on the 26th: “we went together to M. Arnold’s, Ruskin’s, and another place or two.” See Dearest Isa, ed. McAleer, p. 251, and Arnold's letter of 9 November (Letters of Matthew Arnold, i. 397-8).

4 Diaries of John Ruskin, ii. 608.
of the sixties; the black-bordered stationery may indicate
a date soon after Ruskin's father's death in March 1864.

24

My dear Browning

I'm afraid you want to get off, after all.
Could you come Wednesday to our quiet dinner at five o'clock.

Ever yours affectionately

J Ruskin

The correspondence, however, and even to some extent the
personal intercourse did not cease in 1872.

25

Brantwood,
Coniston, Lancashire.
Aug 13th 84

Dear Browning

Indeed I am thankful for any occasion that brings me a thought or word from
you. I have immediately answered Mrs Norris gratefully, though I would not
accept her offer in the present instance.
—I only wish you were just a little nearer my side of London—or my end of
Coniston Water—that I might sometimes have a glimpse as well as a word.

Ever affec77Yrs,

J Ruskin

The two aging men, despite their almost permanent separation,
and despite the waves of mental illness which increasingly
curtailed Ruskin's activities in the eighties, never ceased to speak
admiringly, even affectionately, of each other. In November
1885, for example, Browning is found casually citing *The Stones
of Venice*, twice, in giving advice to friends touring in Italy.¹
And a month later, he speaks to another correspondent of
"having a particularly affectionate feeling for [Ruskin] person­
ally".² After nearly meeting in the spring of 1883,³ the two
men met, evidently for the last time, in London, in April 1888.
Browning, Ruskin reflected, "is really now one of my oldest
friends" (xxxvii. 603; see xxxv. p. xxix). About Mrs. Browning,* there was a curious and sad moment of hesitation. Reading
her *Last Poems* (1862) in February 1868, Ruskin noted: "not

¹ *New Letters*, p. 321.
³ Though finally unable to attend the meeting of the Wordsworth Society
in Westminster Abbey that Spring, Browning reported to William Knight that
"he would come to the Abbey, since Matthew Arnold was to preside and Ruskin
would possibly attend...". See Knight's *Retrospects* (London, 1904), p. 80.
so good as I thought, depressing me with doubts of my own judgment”—and added, “False poetical enthusiasm: how wasted”. But in print he remained her unswervingly loyal partisan, and continued to refer favorably to her works, twice at the very end of his career.

IV

I have suggested, in passing, some of the reasons for the protracted and perhaps surprisingly warm relationship between Ruskin and the Brownings. A few more reflections are in order. Ruskin's characteristically confessional mood in the letters reaches its height in the late fifties and early sixties, dropping off rather suddenly with Mrs. Browning's death. We saw him saying in May 1861, “I am going to write often now”. His letters to the Brownings in this period are filled with his religious wrestlings, his search for a new métier in the arena of radical social criticism, his growing alienation from his parents, and the consequent creative paralysis he was undergoing. He wrote Charles Eliot Norton in August 1859, in near despair, deserted as he feels by all his old friends: Tories, the P.R.B., the Evangelicals, Roman Catholics:

Domestically, I am supposed worse than Blue Beard; artistically, I am considered a mere packet of quibs [sic] and crackers. I rather count upon Lowell as a friend, though I've never seen him. He and the Brownings and you. These four friends were important to Ruskin at the time for several reasons: they were distant from the London scene, they were intensely sympathetic to him and in various ways personally indebted to his work, and they were careful to abstain from passing conventional political and moral judgements on

1 _Diaries of John Ruskin_, ii. 642.

2 xxvii. 308; xxiii. 61; xxv. 526 n.; xxxv. 530. There is, however, a playful asperity concerning Browning in a letter of August 1878: “[Browning] knows much of music, does not he? but I think he must like it mostly for its discords.” See _Letters to M. G. & H. G._ (London: privately printed, 1903), p. 39. A reminiscence of Browning which appeared in the _Pall Mall Gazette_ for 3 November 1890 gives a late opinion: “At lunch we talked of Ruskin and his art-views, with which, it seemed to me, Browning had not much sympathy. . . . ‘But never mind,’ he said, ‘he writes like an angel’” (xxxviii. 159).

3 _Letters of John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton_ (Boston and New York, 1904), i. 84.
his thought, especially as it was moving into a new phase. Certainly Ruskin and the Brownings read one another’s work closely up to 1860, and a recent critic’s judgement is well grounded that the influence was “reciprocal”, and that “Browning... conforms to Ruskin’s conception of the naturalist artist.”¹

In fact, the affinities of temperament and outlook between Ruskin and Robert Browning are more numerous than one might at first suppose; some of the difficulties lie in the fact that Browning’s multiform genius defies definition. Both sets of parents, first of all, were cultivated, affluent, middle-class Evangelicals; indeed, Ruskin and Browning both spent their boyhoods in suburban Camberwell, and attended nearby chapels in Walworth. And though both as men moved away from sectarianism and opened to the Victorian public hitherto sealed areas of knowledge and experience, the two careers are everywhere marked by Nonconformist moralism and individualism. Perhaps each career is best read as a subtle and shifting interplay of the counter pulls of a narrowing but essential Puritan conscience, and the imaginative and sensuous seductions of a “dissolving” European cultural viewpoint.

To put the affinity in a different perspective, the effect of the two men on the English literary public of the 1850s was revealingly similar. When Charles Kingsley, playing the arch-philistine, sent Thomas Hughes “The Invitation” to a ten days’ holiday at Snowdon, in August 1856, he chose Browning and Ruskin as the two literary intellectuals to be left behind:

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Leave to Robert Browning
Beggars, fleas, and vines;
Leave to mournful Ruskin
Popish Apennines,
Dirty Stones of Venice,
And his Gas-lamps Seven;
We’ve the stones of Snowdon
And the lamps of heaven.²
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The lines are a tribute to the growing celebrity of the two men, and to their linkage in the public mind. Kingsley seems to suggest that they are alike in being difficult and "intellectual," highbrow and unwilling to stoop to entertain, "aesthetic" in attitude and exotic in subject matter. Kingsley, who knew both men, would have found Browning as suspect as Ruskin certainly was, for his connection with the Pre-Raphaelites. We are not surprised that the sexually obsessed Kingsley, indignant over Ruskin's supposed treatment of his wife, disliked him "on first meeting as being essentially feminine"; but it is startling to find that on their first meeting, he found even Browning "effeminate."¹

Still, it is not easy to catch the full impact of the Brownings on Ruskin's emotional and creative life, especially because we err too often in thinking of the Brownings as characteristically Victorian and therefore as intellectually conservative. A juster perspective is suggested in a fascinating letter sent by Ruskin's father in 1859 to the editor of the Edinburgh Witness, in order secretly to suppress one of his son's letters on the Italian Question.

My Son has fancies & is a thinker but from being home bred & coming little among men after College years—he is too confident & positive & has got some strange notions from strange people the best and highest of whom are Carlyle, Browning, Tennyson & Maurice—but after them some atrocious Radicals & Louis Blanc people & scampish artists & working Men who flatter & borrow money. He is right in many ways & wrong in many.²


² Quoted in "Ruskin's Correspondence with His God-daughter Constance Oldham", ed. Margaret E. Spence, Bulletin, xliii (1960-1), 522 (Ryl Eng. MS. 1245/3).
The elder Ruskin's distress at his son's new venturings in political economy is well known (see Cook, ii. 5-6). What is less evident is that the nervous City merchant viewed the Brownings as among the more respectable of the "strange" people who had led his son out into darker and deeper waters. The Brownings were uniquely placed—by reason of their greater age, their physical distance, the authority of their own creative achievements, the coincidence of certain artistic and political interests, and their high-minded but unconventional religiousness—to support Ruskin emotionally during his most severe emotional crisis. Mrs. Browning's death in May 1861 tore away the central support from one of the most significant three-way relationships in nineteenth-century literary history.