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Town Talk and the Cause Célèbre of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*

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There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,
Turned wrong to right, proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves.

(ROBERT BROWNING, *The Ring and the Book* [1868–69])¹

These lines from Robert Browning's ambitious, blank-verse epic, *The Ring and the Book*, describe the town talkers of late seventeenth-century Rome as they witness the proceedings of a triple-murder trial. Speaking in propria persona, Browning seems disdainful of the relativistic abandon of "prattle" that "proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves." Yet the explicit premise of *The Ring and the Book* is to reanimate talkers—from the dead material of print—who fail, more often than not, to provide clear moral judgments. In the first of twelve books, Browning narrates how he discovered the "inert stuff" of court documents bound in an "old yellow Book" amid the bric-à-brac of a Florentine stall and devised a plan to "enter, spark-like" in order that "something dead may get to live again" (1.469, 33, 755, 729). In 1698, according to the documents, one middle-aged Count Guido Franceschini stood accused of murdering his seventeen-year-old wife, Pompilia, and her adoptive parents, Pietro and Violante Comparini; his motives were an alleged affair between Pompilia and a young priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, and the Comparini's schemes to secure the count's wealth. *The Ring and the Book* renews interest in this old case through the creation of ten dramatic monologues, each offering a different perspective on the case. Notably, the first third of the poem's nine speakers (Guido himself speaks twice) are members of the general public, precisely the kind of town talkers Browning derides in the epigraph to the present essay. Moreover, the subsequent monologues of those much closer to the case seem unable to escape the proliferation

1. Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Thomas J. Collins and Richard D. Altick (Peterborough: Broadview, 2001), 1.645–46. All subsequent references to this work are to this edition and appear parenthetically within the text by book and line number(s).

of “prattle” in such diverse forms as “banter,” “chatter,” “gossipry,” “rabble-brabble,” and “noise.”²

This essay examines Browning’s relentless preoccupation with generating such forms of “idle talk” in *The Ring and the Book*.³ For the most part, critics from the time of the poem’s initial publication to the present day have focused their energies on speakers directly involved in the case—Pompilia (on her deathbed), Guido, Caponsacchi—or the Pope, as he crafts his learned pronouncement.⁴ Those who have devoted attention to the first three town talkers, including scholars such as Mary Rose Sullivan and William E. Buckler, give accounts that tend to individualize these personae in ways that obscure the significance of their identities as part of a crowd.⁵ Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks bring exceptional focus to the crowd as a figure that advances the plot of *The Ring and the Book* and furthers dramatic irony through its misperceptions.⁶ My discussion expands the boundaries of the crowd’s influence further by focusing on the form of its “prattle.” In what follows, I treat the important role that town talk plays not only within the poem but also without—that is, in the world of the poem’s reception and the contexts of Browning’s late-in-life bid for greater fame. I argue that the town talkers within the poem function as a means for Browning to anticipate—even script—the positive response of the public to his poem. Through town talk, *The Ring and the Book* makes emphatic efforts to usher in its own public wel-

2. The frequencies of these words are: “banter,” two times; “chatter,” three times; “gossipry,” three times; some variant of “rabble” or “brabble,” three times; “prattle,” six times; and “noise” (specifically as talk), sixteen times.

3. See Martin Heidegger, who defines “idle talk” as “gossiping and passing the word along, a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on increases to complete groundlessness” (*Being in Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996], 158).

4. The lawyers (bks. 8 and 9) are subject to a similar critical fate; Patricia D. Rigg argues that they represent circular returns to Half-Rome’s and Other Half-Rome’s subjective formulations in “Legal ‘Repristination’ in ‘The Ring and the Book,’” *Browning Institute Studies* 18 (1990): 113–30.

5. Mary Rose Sullivan, “Half-Rome, the Other Half-Rome, Tertium Quid,” in *Browning’s Voices in “The Ring and the Book”: A Study of Method and Meaning* (University of Toronto Press, 1969), 21–73, details how the personalities of each speaker are formed from their particular life experiences. William E. Buckler identifies specific character traits with each talker—Half-Rome’s male chauvinistic cruelty; Other Half-Rome’s overly romanticized imagination; and Tertium Quid’s nouveau riche insecurity—in “Imaginative Mirrorings: Books II, III, and IV,” in *Poetry and Truth in Robert Browning’s “The Ring and the Book”* (New York University Press, 1985), 64–98.

6. Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks, “The Tragic Stage: Comedy and the Crowd, Miracles and Molinism,” in *Browning’s Roman Murder Story: A Reading of “The Ring and the Book”* (University of Chicago Press, 1968), 281–326.

come. Such efforts seem especially marked when compared with Browning's earlier works, which also explore the publicity of the poetic voice but tend to focus on miscommunication—usually blamed on the intellectual limitations of a popular audience.⁷ In *The Ring and the Book*, the “gossipry” of crowds courses through the veins of the poem with an insistent, vital power that not only produces the cause célèbre of Guido's trial but also of the poem itself.

On the eve of the poem's publication, the fifty-six-year-old Browning was very much caught up with the problems of public reception, for he was not yet a household name. The volumes that became canonical, such as *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Men and Women* (1855), and *Dramatis Personae* (1864), only received wider recognition after the critical impact of *The Ring and the Book*. The 1860s marked an important turning point for Browning. Certainly, it was a time to mourn the loss of his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who died on June 19, 1861, but it was also a decade in which he sought to emerge from the shadow of her greater fame. He cultivated ambitious new literary connections, boldly breaking with his usual publisher, Chapman & Hall, to persuade the well-known Smith, Elder & Company to bring out *The Ring and the Book*. Browning also became an omnipresent guest at London dinner tables, gaining a reputation as a boisterous and gossip talker himself.⁸ According to his contemporary Charles Harold Herford, Browning “talked openly . . . of the poem and its progress,” such that “rumour and speculation busied themselves with it as never before with work of his, and the literary world at large looked for its publication with eager and curious interest.”⁹ Such comments reveal that Browning was already seeking to make *The Ring and the Book* the proverbial “talk of the town” before its appearance in print.

My argument that Browning attempted to script his own reception through *The Ring and the Book's* town talkers builds on Herbert F. Tucker's identification, in Browning's poetry, of a “moral doctrine of incompleteness [that] finds a clear aesthetic analogue in his poetics.”¹⁰ Although Tucker concentrates on Browning's earlier work in order to elaborate

7. In *Robert Browning: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), Sarah Wood discusses Browning's early self-consciousness about fame in poems such as *Pauline* (1833) and *Sordello* (1840), his transition into greater publicity through *The Ring and the Book*, and his later struggles with institutionalized, professional authorship in works such as *Pacchiarotto*, and *How He Worked in Distemper* (1876).

8. See E. A. W. St. George, *Browning and Conversation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), on similarities between Browning's forceful style of talking and his later poems.

9. Charles Harold Herford, *Robert Browning* (London: Blackwood, 1905), 172.

10. Herbert F. Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 5.

on the poet's preoccupation with a future-oriented, anticipatory aesthetic, Tucker maintains that this particular aesthetic informs the poet's "entire oeuvre."¹¹ In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning makes an unprecedented attempt to channel anticipation beyond the formal bounds of his poetry, exploring how he might use the power of literary town talk to exert an influence within the social space of his poem's reception. In what follows, I begin by discussing the central functions of town talk within the poem, indicating the ways in which such talk operates through a vital process with an almost demiurgic agency that, in Browning's own words, "mimic[s] creation" (1.740). Yet, this process also resembles the strikingly secular and modern logic of mass media. With spark-like iterability, town talk reproduces itself through remarkably efficient processes of auto-generation within different bodies, producing the "event-ness" that is the poem's central "plot." I argue that in *The Ring and the Book*, the passing of town talk from person to person suggests a nascent form of viral mediation that is the poem's true subject.¹²

In the second part of my discussion, I examine the ways in which the types of town talk within the poem are repeated in 1860s media forms—specifically, the periodical reviews around its publication. Moreover, I trace how *The Ring and the Book* aligns the style and structure of its town talk with the formalism of mid-Victorian, liberal argumentation (the ideals of which were articulated by prominent theorists such as Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill). "Prattle" that "turned wrong to right," the poem indicates, is symptomatic of what is arguably the most intractable problem for liberal practitioners in this period: the difficulty of arriving at disinterested judgment.¹³ The poem collapses the paradox of disinterested judgment—which requires an individual to occupy simultaneously both an abstracted and an involved position—into a more general tendency of town talk to be at once apart from the crowd and part of it. This absorption of liberal aspiration into mere town talk allows Browning to manage a gingerly entrance into greater publicity: *The Ring and the Book* writes itself

11. *Ibid.*, 4.

12. Patricia D. Rigg, *Robert Browning's Romantic Irony in "The Ring and the Book"* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999), argues that *The Ring and the Book* deliberately blocks readers from discovering historical truth and foregrounds its myriad representations. Jonathan Loesberg makes an analogous argument about "A Death in the Desert" (1864), claiming that the poem offers not so much "a recovered eyewitness account" as "an allegory of eyewitness" ("Browning Believing: 'A Death in the Desert' and the Status of Belief," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 18 [2010]: 230).

13. Recent scholars who explore different manifestations of this problem—including Elaine Hadley, Amanda Anderson, Lauren Goodlad, and David Wayne Thomas—are discussed later in this essay.

into becoming the “talk of the town,” but not—given Browning’s marked poetic self-consciousness—without ironizing that very process.

TOWN TALK’S ANIMATIONS IN *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

As their names suggest, the first three speakers of *The Ring and the Book* are synecdoches for larger crowds: “Half-Rome” favors Guido; “Other Half-Rome” favors Pompilia, her parents, and Caponsacchi; and “Tertium Quid” holds a composite opinion that fails to convey any sense of a stable position. Browning’s designation of their monologues as “sample-speech[es]” further emphasizes the generic substance of their talk (1.865, 896). In an introductory description of these speakers, Browning implies that they lack any controlling consciousness behind the words that they utter. He analogizes their town talk as pulsating ripples that move along the surface of water after a stone has broken through, an image that presents town talk as a natural force that functions independently of individual speakers’ minds:

Here are the voices presently shall sound
 In due succession. First the world’s outcry
 Around the rush and ripple of any fact
 Fallen stonewise, plumb on the smooth face of things;
 The world’s guess, as it crowds the bank o’ the pool,
 At what were figure and substance, by their splash:
 Then, by vibrations in the general mind,
 At depth of deed already out of reach.

(1.838–45)

Town talk—here described as “voices,” “the world’s outcry,” “the world’s guess, as it crowds” near the “splash” of incident—initially gathers around the “rush and ripple” of “fact,” the stone. The image of the stone’s descent to unknown depths suggests its irrecoverability the moment it enters the water. What continues to visibly gain energy, however, are the “vibrations in the general mind” of the crowd, a movement that mirrors and drives the vibrations of town talk that emanate outward from a lost, central event.¹⁴

Through careful alternation between a focus on fact sinking away and on the “voices,” “outcry,” “rush and ripple,” “guess,” or “vibrations” of the crowd, these lines ascribe to town talk a force equal to that of ordinary fact. This passage ignores the more chaotic aspects of “the world’s outcry” and “crowds”; voices “sound / In due succession” and town talk is subject

14. Rigg argues that “the shape of *The Ring and the Book* [as a whole] is . . . cone-like . . . formed by a series of concentric circles [of testimony]” (*Robert Browning’s Romantic Irony*, 17).

to the strict sequence of “first” gathering around fact and “then” vibrating through “the general mind.” The sense of town talk’s orderly pulsations outward coupled with the metric regularity of iambs beginning from “vibrations” and continuing into the next line had important implications for existing debates about the place of poetry—and literary art more broadly—amid a developing mass readership during the second half of the nineteenth century. In particular, the regularity of town talk departs from the earlier nineteenth-century complaint that the disordered noise of (literal and figurative) crowds disrupted the eloquence of poets. In *The Prelude* from 1805, William Wordsworth invokes the poetic Muse to raise him “above the press and danger of the crowd,” complaining that the “anarchy and din” of the city interrupted a poet’s individual consciousness and inhibited poetic production.¹⁵ For Victorian poets like the laureate Alfred Tennyson, other concerns emerged about a different kind of “crowd”—namely, “the chorus of indolent reviewers” and an ever-growing middle-class readership who looked to such reviewers to guide their literary tastes.¹⁶

Browning himself had long been interested in exploring the incommensurability between poetry and popularity. *Sordello* (1840), for example, chronicles the decline of the eponymous troubador who could never recuperate his natural gift for song once the crowd discovered his talent. Through the “prattle” of Naddo, “busiest of the tribe / Of genius haunters,” *Sordello* as “the thrice-renowned / Goito manufacture” becomes as self-conscious about fame as the nineteenth-century poet who would sell his wares in popular periodicals.¹⁷ In “Popularity” (1855), Browning sanctifies John Keats’s poetry by pointing out its clear distinction from that of his crowd pleasing imitators.¹⁸ In these earlier poems, Browning draws a clear line between true art and that which earns what he mocks as “the world’s good word” in “Respectability” (1855).¹⁹ The suggested image of town talk as concentric ripples of water, however, treats the crowd’s relationship with the poet differently. In *The Ring and the Book*, the “voices . . .

15. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), 7.655–59, in *The Prelude: The Four Texts*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

16. Alfred Tennyson, “Hendecasyllabics,” line 1, *Cornhill Magazine* 9 (1863): 708.

17. Robert Browning, *Sordello*, lines 821–22 and 481–82, in *The Poems of Browning*, ed. John Woolford and Daniel Karlin, 4 vols. (New York: Routledge, 1991).

18. Browning mocks imitators “Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes, and Nokes,” concluding with Keats’s authentic distinction in the famous last line, “What porridge had John Keats?” (“Popularity,” lines 58 and 65, in *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, ed. John Woolford, Daniel Karlin, and Joseph Phelan [New York: Routledge, 2013]).

19. Browning, “Respectability,” line 21, in Woolford, Karlin, and Phelan, *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*.

shall sound,” and the noisy “prattle” of town talk produces the originary momentum that empowers the poem’s other voices. Here, the crowd might be said to enable—even inspire—Browning’s art.²⁰

A different description of talking crowds—this time by Half-Rome himself—brings attention to town talk’s galvanizing force upon human bodies as it motivates the actions of people pushing their way into the church to view the slain bodies of Pompilia’s parents:

So, people pushed their way, and took their turn,
Saw, threw their eyes up, crossed themselves, gave place
To pressure from behind, since all the world
Knew the old pair, could talk the tragedy
Over from first to last.

(2.106–10)

The lines describe the age-old phenomena of sensational spectacle and an ensuing crowd of gossips. Yet the logic here seems back-to-front, for in Browning’s formulation, talk is the cause of the ensuing action of seeing (as in, “Since all the world / . . . could talk he tragedy,” “So, people pushed their way”). The syntax emphasizes town talk’s originary power, as it springs the bodies of the crowd into action. In contrast, the quick movement of the crowd’s gestures—especially the brevity of their gaze as they “saw, threw their eyes up, crossed themselves, gave place / To pressure from behind”—makes the spectacle itself seem merely incidental to the talk. Bodies that see and cross themselves are mere conduits for town talk’s energies; their identical gestures further the sense that they function not so much as individuals as interchangeable gossips. The alliterative effects—“people pushed,” “took their turn,” “talk the tragedy”—undermine any sense of singularity that “took their turn” might otherwise suggest.

Other Half-Rome also stresses the automatic way in which de-individuated bodies circulate town talk as he describes the widespread impact of rumors about Guido’s mistreatment of Pompilia:

Who could help noticing the husband’s slouch,
The black of his brow—or miss the news that buzzed
Of how the little solitary wife
Wept and looked out of window all day long?
What need of minute search into such springs

20. See John Plotz’s argument that in nineteenth-century literature, the perception of crowds was not monolithic—not just “chaotic,” crowds could also seem a “directed” force (*The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 2).

As start men, set o' the move?—machinery
 Old as earth, obvious as the noonday sun.
 (3.858–64)

Here, town talk—as “the news that buzzed”—disseminates the pathos-saturated image of the unhappy Pompilia at her window, a sentimental portrait that might readily call forth “springs” of tears. But Browning ends the line with “springs” and through enjambment, launches into the idea that human emotions (the “springs” of Guido’s jealousy) are machine-like. This bait and switch from expressive sentiment to ordinary machinery disrupts town talk’s affecting portrait of Pompilia, calling attention, instead, to its automatic conventionality. If Guido’s rage is machinelike, so too is town talk’s sympathy. Trite and iterable, the emotion behind “the news that buzzed” might also “start” or “set o’ the move” any human body. The abrupt shift in tone that “what need” achieves—from sympathetic sentimentality to dismissive inquiry—further underscores this quick movement from human emotion to mechanized feeling.

In a complementary description from book 1, Browning in *propria persona* insists on town talk’s precedence before the testimonies of other speakers:

So much for Rome and rumour; smoke comes first:
 Once let smoke rise untroubled, we descry
 Clearlier what tongues of flame may spire and spit.
 (1.943–45)

These lines follow on the heels of his description of *Tertium Quid*, thus “Rome” stands for all three town talkers, their talk “rumour” and “smoke.” With strong metrical emphases on “smoke comes first,” “so much” seems more an observation on town talk’s prodigious role in the poem than its dismissal. The connected imagery of “smoke” and “flame” links town talk to the other speeches in the poem and ironizes the Pentecostal allusion to divinely inspired voices. Guido, the first to speak after *Tertium Quid*, reveals that his talk fashions itself directly out of the “smoke” of “Rome and rumour.” The villain repeatedly casts himself as town talk’s victim, a helpless actor whose drama unfolds through the hands of “common gossipry” (5.1822), but he inadvertently discloses his intentional deployment of town talk’s patterns for his own ends. Below, he “quotes” town talk’s account of Pompilia’s alleged affair with Caponsacchi:

(By this time the admiring neighborhood
 Joined chorus round me while I rubbed my eyes)
 “T is months since their intelligence began,—
 A comedy the town was privy to,—
 He wrote and she wrote, she spoke, he replied,

And going in and out your house last night
 Was easy work for one . . . to be plain with you . . .
 Accustomed to do both, at dusk and dawn
 When you were absent,—at the villa, you know,
 Where husbandry required the master-mind.
 Do you not know? Why, we all knew, you see!”
 (5.998–1008)

According to Guido, it is town talk that goads him into anger and eventually, murderous action. Yet Guido's quotation of town talk seems a charade, for the idea that he plays cuckold in a comedy is one that he is fond of repeating in other parts of his own speech.²¹ Moreover, he ventriloquizes town talk's patterns with suspect exactitude. In relaying such phrases as “to be plain with you,” Guido mouths town talk's accessibility and mass appeal, and in placing frenetic emphasis on privileged knowing (“you know,” “Did you not know? Why we all knew”), he captures town talk's paradoxical impulse to seem at once confidential and transparent—a point I explore in greater detail in the second part of my discussion. Guido seems, therefore, less town talk's victim and more its shrewd director.

In stark contrast to Guido, Pompilia—like the stone that hits the water—is at the very center of the poem, a position that has led critics ever since the poem's publication to concentrate on the ways in which her speech distinguishes itself from the voices that surround it. One critical trajectory has focused on Pompilia's sainthood, her status as a “virgin martyr” capable of divine expression, especially through her extraordinary forgiveness of Guido.²² A more secular point of view suggests that Pompilia is the individual soul who brings forth the truth of her own personal expression, regardless of audience expectations.²³ Either way, such accounts emphasize the distinction

21. See Michael G. Yetman, “‘Count Guido Franceschini’: The Villain as Artist in *The Ring and the Book*,” *PMLA* 87 (1972): 1093–1102, on how Guido situates himself within a medieval or Renaissance comedy.

22. Robert Buchanan praised Pompilia's “immortal features” in his review for the *Athenaeum: A Journal of Politics, Literature, Science, and the Arts*, March 20, 1869, 399; more recently, Kay Austen details Pompilia's role as a traditional saint and martyr in “Pompilia: ‘Saint and Martyr Both,’” *Victorian Poetry* 17 (1979): 287–301, while Charles LaPorte offers a deconstructive reading of how Pompilia knowingly deploys the generic features of virgin martyr hagiography in “Sacred and Legendary Artists: Anna Jameson and Barrett Browning in the Hagiography of Pompilia,” *Victorian Poetry* 39 (2001): 551–72.

23. See John Stuart Mill's famous distinction that eloquence is “heard,” and poetry “overheard,” in “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” (1867), reprinted in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 348. Ann P. Brady foregrounds Pompilia's lyric individualism by arguing that “like Antigone, her self-direction puts her in opposition to society's values manifested in power” (*Pompilia: A Feminist Reading of Robert Browning's “The Ring and the Book”* [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988], 15).

of Pompilia's speech from that of others, one that Browning's authorial persona certainly encourages when he introduces her in the first book as "a soul [that] sighs its lowest and its last / After the loud ones" (1.1076–77). Yet Browning's reference to "the loud ones" gestures toward the ineradicable fact that within the poem, town talk always threatens to overpower Pompilia's expression, no matter how lyrical or even divine it may be. At the same time that the description confirms her orality's distinction, it figures her speech as a nonverbal exhalation that resigns itself before other, more robust voices. To borrow from Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), if Pompilia is the poet who manages to "[hold] up [her] name / To keep it from the mud,"²⁴ then she does so with full understanding of the relative feebleness of her voice in the realm of public talk that makes up *The Ring and the Book*.

Other Half-Rome's image of Pompilia on her deathbed, surrounded by town talkers, crystallizes this sense of her singularity's inefficacy:

But many more, who found they were old friends,
Pushed in to have their stare and take their talk
And go forth boasting of it and to boast.
Old Monna Baldi chatters like a jay,
Swears—but that, prematurely trundled out
Just as she felt the benefit begin,
The miracle was snapped up by somebody,—
Her palsied limb 'gan prick and promise life
At touch o' the bedclothes merely,—how much more
Had she but brushed the body as she tried!

(3.48–57)

Here, Other Half-Rome emphasizes town talk's ability to reproduce itself in different speakers. The people who (again) "pushed in" at Pompilia's bedside "take their talk" as if talk were something to be incorporated to them (rather than something they originate themselves), and, repetitively, they "go forth boasting of it and to boast." The long stresses on phrases such as "Pushed in" and "go forth" as well as the trochaic inversions of "Old Monna," "Swears—but," and "Just as" make palpable the interruptive and preemptive force of the crowd, whose bodies obscure Pompilia's as their town talk obscures her voice. The fact that Old Monna Baldi fails to touch "the body" and only "the bedclothes merely" offers but small relief from the onslaught of her "chatter." The passage tracks the gradual merging of the Other Half-Rome's "chatter" with Old Monna Baldi's: he begins with reportorial detachment ("But many more . . . Swears"), then moves into paraphrase ("but that, prematurely . . . merely") and finally

24. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Kerry McSweeney (Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.311–12.

ends with free indirect discourse (“how much more / Had she but brushed the body as she tried!”). In defining contrast to the exuberant iterability of gossip, Pompilia’s speech expends itself, once (and for One—God, her auditor).

If Pompilia’s encounter with town talkers represents the exhaustion of lyric before comparatively robust vulgar speech, Pope Innocent XII’s encounter with the same demonstrates the relative lifelessness of written, scholarly language. The hope that Pompilia places in the written word’s capacity to overcome talk—“How happy those are who know how to write!” (7.82)—is contradicted by the Pope’s preoccupation with textual mortification. Throughout his speech, the Pope is aware that words carefully culled from amassed textual precedent fail to catch the spark of divinity. Observing that “of the making books there is no end!” (10.9) and expressing his fatigue poring “over these dismalest of documents” (10.214), the Pope indicates that he is no confident dispenser of infallible judgment and seems doubtful of his own capacity to “resurrect” divine truth by examining historical records.²⁵ By contrast, the Pope muses, with wonder, on the spark-like impact of street gossip on human bodies:

Thy chill persistent rain has purged our streets
Of gossipry; pert tongue and idle ear
By this, consort 'neath archway, portico.
But wheresoe'er Rome gathers in the grey,
Two names now snap and flash from mouth to mouth—
(Sparks, flint and steel strike) Guido and the Pope.
(10.286–91)

Inclement weather may rid the streets of “gossipry,” but “pert tongue and idle ear” will gather where it can. The way in which the “two names” electrically “snap and flash from mouth to mouth” connote thunder and lightning, as if town talk itself is a form of weather fit to rival nature’s storm. The description may ironize the spark of divinity, here suggesting a kind of perverse proximity between the creative energies of town talk and of God. The Pope’s emphasis on town talk’s sequestration, conducted “’neath archway, portico” and “in the grey,” does not seem to diminish its vitality—rather, town talk’s concentration seems to intensify its spark. In *The Ring and the Book*, this authoritative religious figure questions whether

25. See Suzanne Bailey, “Somatic Wisdom: Refiguring Bodies in *The Ring and the Book*,” *Victorian Studies* 41 (1998): 575–79, on the Pope’s interest in the corpse of Formosus (exhumed for his posthumous trial) as a figure showing Higher Criticism’s failure to resurrect divine wisdom from the scholarly perusal of historical texts. These observations were particularly relevant given *The Ring and the Book*’s publication in the same year that the First Vatican Council issued a formal definition of papal infallibility, which Browning here undermines.

or not he can voice a judgment that will rise above that of the crowd. The Pope's doubt here seems strikingly different from the representation of the true poet in "How It Strikes a Contemporary" (1855) as "a recording chief-inquisitor" in the service of God, holding his own against "neighbour's tongues," "the town's true master if the town but knew."²⁶ In *The Ring and the Book*, the Pope himself—supposedly God's "recording chief-inquisitor"—stands reduced to monosyllabic expression ("Two names... / ... steel strike") that mimics town talk's telegraphic "snap and flash."

BROWNING'S LIBERAL REVIEWERS AND SCRIPTING THE "TALK OF THE TOWN"

The Pope's description of gossips convening together in tight spaces so that they can share in the intensity of spark-like talk illustrates an important paradox at the heart of town talk's communications. Town talk gains potency from both asserting its confidentiality and letting go of that confidentiality in the act of communication. In other words, the energy of town talk's "snap and flash" obtains from its simultaneous refusal and willingness to share. *Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome* enact this same paradox in their frequent promises to offer auditors exclusive information—"Be ruled by me and have a care o' the crowd," *Half-Rome* commands (2.2)—at the same time that they render this information less exclusive through relaying it. For example, when repeating the town talk at Pompilia's bedside to his auditors, *Other Half-Rome* at once affirms and negates exclusivity's narrowing of boundaries:

Somebody, at the bedside, said much more
Took on him to explain the secret cause
O' the crime: quoth he

(3.91–93)

In the act of communication—what follows "quoth he"—town talk tries to maintain the exclusivity of the "secret cause" at the same time that it reveals that very "cause."²⁷ In practice, town talk will neither give up on its

26. Robert Browning, "How It Strikes a Contemporary," lines 36–40, in Woolford, Karlin, and Phelan, *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*.

27. A significant critical history of theorizing secrets as paradoxes aids my thinking here. According to Georg Simmel, "Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession" ("The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 11 [1906]: 466). More recently, Beryl Bellman has written that "the practice of secrecy involves a do-not-talk-it prescription that is contradicted by the fact that secrecy is constituted by the very procedures [i.e., talk] by which secrets get communicated" ("The Paradox of Secrecy," *Human Studies* 4 [1981]: 22).

exclusivity (for it is the sense of its limited accessibility that renders talk all the more attractive) nor restrain its own impetus toward animating more talkers.

Tertium Quid is the most important practitioner of town talk's paradoxical communicative procedures, for it is through him—and his identifiably mid-Victorian style of argumentation—that Browning ushers *The Ring and the Book* into the assumed space of the poem's own reception. Through Tertium Quid, Browning assimilates the rhetorical patterns of Victorian liberalism into the paradoxical structure of town talk. A Roman aristocrat and friend to church and government officials, Tertium Quid seems an unlikely candidate for town talker: no gossipmonger in the marketplace, he imagines that his elevated social status qualifies him to make superior judgments. Yet, it is this seeming unlikelihood—and his concomitant expressions of his own distinction from the “mob” of other lower and middle-class talkers—that actually furthers his implication within general town talk. More so than his colleagues Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome, Tertium Quid emphasizes town talk as bearing information not easily had:

And nothing hinders that we lift the case
Out of the shade into the shine, allow
Qualified persons to pronounce at last,
Nay, edge in an authoritative word
Between this rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools
Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome.
(4.6–11)

In this passage, he enacts the same contradiction that Other Half-Rome has performed earlier: he maintains the exclusivity of the “authoritative word” that he and his aristocratic peers “pronounce” while at the same time making the “word” widely known, “out of the shade into the shine.”

What connects Tertium Quid with mid-Victorian liberal principles is his attribution of his talk's exclusivity to his unmatched, “reasoning” intellect and the patterns of argumentation that result from his adopted paradigm. He thoroughly believes that he can develop infallible judgments through a disinterested consideration of different viewpoints, a process closely linked to the liberal thinking of Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill. According to Arnold's famous dictum, “disinterestedness” facilitates “seeing the object as in itself it really is.”²⁸ To a greater degree than the other town talkers, Tertium Quid makes exaggerated use of variations on the phrase, “on the other hand” or “on the other side,” his speech pat-

28. Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” in *Culture and Anarchy* and *Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 26.

terns seeming a near-parody of Mill's assertion that the individual must deliberately test his opinions against contrary ones (4.581, 617, 651, 699, 903, 1043, 1625). Along the same lines, the prepositions "either" and "neither" pepper Tertium Quid's speech, occurring fourteen times in total and in ways that emphasize the balance between assertions and counter-assertions.²⁹ Tertium Quid is equally fond of deploying what Elaine Hadley calls Victorian liberalism's "ventriloquial method," in which an individual specifically presents his opponent's argument as if it were his own in order to show how well he has inhabited different opinions before arriving at his own.³⁰ Tertium Quid makes aggressive use of prescriptive second-person addresses—for example, "Here you put by my guard" (4.305) or "Here you smile" (4.1125)—to "throw himself" into the "mental position" of others, as Mill would have it.³¹

Tertium Quid's deployments of mid-Victorian liberal judgment, however, result in evident fallibility. He inadvertently allows his class bias—which tilts him toward Guido—to affect his abstract thinking. From the very beginning, his tertiary positioning within the poem undermines his boast that he will "edge in an authoritative word / Between this rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools." No more authoritative than the "rabble's-brabble" of Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, or the crowds at the church and Pompilia's deathbed, Tertium Quid evinces, in the end, some awareness that he has failed in his aspirations toward infallible judgment: "only, all this talk talked, / 'T was not for nothing that we talked, I hope?" and "(You'll see, I have not so advanced myself)" (4.1635–35, 1639). His failure implicates him within another paradox, the complications of which were the subject of critique—and anxiety—among Victorian liberal thinkers themselves. Hadley and other recent scholars including Amanda Anderson, Lauren Goodlad, and David Wayne Thomas observe that it was common for major Victorian liberal thinkers to wrestle with the contradiction inherent within disinterested judgment. Hadley notes a paradoxical state of "abstract embodiment" that liberals in the 1860s struggled to maintain; Anderson identifies "ambivalence" in writers' conceptions of "a dialectic between detachment and engagement"; Goodlad explores the tensions between individual character and civic engagement;

29. For example: "There are difficulties perhaps / On any supposition, and either side" (4.1581–82), or "You see so far i' the story, who was right, / Who wrong, who neither, don't you?" (4.314–15).

30. Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 149.

31. John Stuart Mill asserts that only those who have "thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them" may reach better judgments ("On Liberty," in *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini [Cambridge University Press, 1989], 39).

Thomas opts to “recover” Victorian liberal discourse from attributions of naïveté by pointing out its aspirational “oscillations” between the “heroics of individualism” and “a practice of liberal many-sidedness.”³² Whether focusing on paradox, dialectic, or oscillation, these inquiries mutually disclose a mid-Victorian concern with the formal difficulty of remaining a fully active citizen while also adopting a disinterested stance. *Tertium Quid*, unmindful of such contradictions, sees no inconsistency in proclaiming his own detached genius while clearly embroiled in class politics.

The larger point is not so much that Browning recognized the limitations of liberalism in practice as that *Tertium Quid* provides the poet with the innovative means of subsuming the liberal paradox into town talk. As such, Browning is able to formulate an exceedingly complicated relationship with his public. He is able simultaneously to win the public’s favor through an adherence to popular liberal conventions and to subject these same conventions to proleptic irony. The success of such irony depended on his reviewers’ uncritical performances of liberal judgment—and this was precisely what followed. In the heyday of liberal reform and amid unprecedented growth in mass print culture, the increasingly middlebrow periodical reviews also embraced a turn toward disinterestedness, often as a way of avoiding alienating their increasingly diverse audiences. In addition to offering multiple political perspectives within its pages, the new reviews, magazines, and newspapers of the 1860s also diversified their content, integrating fiction and poetry with politics, science, and current affairs. These new publications strove to put into practice—with varying degrees of nuance—mid-Victorian liberalism’s most prized ideals.³³

Performing the liberal rites of disinterested critique, John Addington Symonds in *Macmillan’s Magazine* takes his turn at “weighing the balance of conflicting evidence, to hear every side of the question,” launching into his own consideration of Guido’s guilt, Violante’s chicanery, Pompilia’s feelings, and Caponsacchi’s intentions. At great length, Symonds presents a series of questions that showcase his capacity to understand the issue from all sides:

32. Hadley, *Living Liberalism*, 12; Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 132; Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); David Wayne Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 33. Similar to Anderson, William David Shaw, *The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), has attributed a “dialectical temper” to Browning’s poetry, although Shaw does not link this dialectic to liberalism.

33. Many liberal thinkers published their most famous tracts in these new middlebrow publications. Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, for example, was serialized in *Cornhill* from 1867–68.

The question now remains, who was really guilty? Was the Count a monster or a dupe? Did he marry Pompilia with a base motive, drive her parents to desperation, worry her life out in his palace at Arezzo, forge letters in her name, lay a trap for her and Caponsacchi, and after being foiled by their truth and innocence, in the final resort wreak his spite by murder? Or, on the other hand, had Violante tricked him into the marriage, slandered him at Rome, and cozened him out of his rights by pretending that Pompilia was not her child? Had Pompilia really carried on a clandestine correspondence with Caponsacchi? Was the child not Guido's own heir, but the priest's bastard? And supposing all these questions answered in the affirmative, was the Count not justified, after insults and legal delays, in taking the matter into his own hands and blotting out the three faithless lives?³⁴

In a virtuosic display of liberal convention, Symonds inhabits assertions and counter-assertions through an energetic volley of rhetorical questions (with a characteristic "Or, on the other hand" in the middle). In effect, *Tertium Quid's* similar style of argumentation serves as an ironic rejoinder to this review, which was published in November 1868 after the release of the first of the poem's four volumes (which contained only the framing first book, *Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome*). But Browning had already fully conceived his *Tertium Quid* far before the publication of the second volume; hence, his ironic energies may be described as anticipatory.³⁵ In view of *Tertium Quid's* fallible town talk, I suggest that we might even "hear" Symonds's volley of questions as gossip town talk, consistent with its at once seductively withholding and plainly disclosing structure.

The remarks of subsequent reviewers remain similarly entangled within the patterns of liberal formalism as they extend these same patterns to judge poem and poet. Summing up his view of the whole poem, E. J. Hasell in *St. Paul's Magazine* offers a statement no less noncommittal than any of *Tertium Quid's* equivocations: "If *The Ring and the Book* fails to fulfil the most hopeful anticipations raised in the minds of some readers by Browning's earlier poems, it nevertheless falsifies the auguries of ill which others have derived from them."³⁶ The *Times's* judgments of the poem meticulously balance merits and demerits in weighted statements: for in-

34. John Addington Symonds, "The Ring and the Book," *Macmillan's Magazine* 18 (1868): 268.

35. In a letter to J. T. Fields penned July 12, 1868, Browning ascribed the idea of serial publication to George Murray Smith, suggesting the poet himself was ready to bring out the poem in its entirety, in *The Browning Letters* (Baylor University, 2014), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/ab-letters/id/8501/rec/2>.

36. E. J. Hasell, "The Ring and the Book," *St. Paul's Magazine* 7 (1870): 377.

stance, “his subtle analysis of character . . . at once delights and wearies,” “his minute observation of cause and effect . . . argues want of spontaneity and inspiration, but contains within itself inherent beauties,” and “his violent and defiant Realism . . . to some looks so like truth.”³⁷ With a bravura fit to rival that of Browning’s town talkers, the *Times* reviewer concludes: “We have endeavoured to do justice to this voluminous poem.” In the intentionally uncontroversial *Cornhill*, Frederick Greenwood formulaically structures his review in two parts, beginning with assertions as to the poem’s strengths, reiterating what “everybody has heard by this time . . . how original and how daring was the attempt,” and proceeding with the poem’s limitations.³⁸ Greenwood demonstrates his allegiance to *Cornhill*’s original prospectus (written by W. M. Thackeray), which promised—apropos of the present discussion—that the magazine would inform its readers “what the world is talking about.”³⁹ In concentrating on what “everybody has heard by this time,” Greenwood circulates liberal “disinterestedness” as a form of town talk.

To be sure, I am not contending that all of these reviewers deliberately crafted their formulations with the ideological principles of liberalism in mind. I do, however, note the broad consensus among these increasingly influential literary tastemakers that authority comes from a circumspect style of argumentation that, at the very least, grows out of the same milieu that produced Victorian liberalism’s more rigorous thinkers. Like Tertium Quid, these reviewers seem allergic to making stronger judgments—particularly about a poet not yet revered but also not ignored by the public—lest they should be classed with the “reasonless unreasoning” mob. Yet it is this very circumspection that renders their statements, in Browning’s view, wholly within the province of town talk’s operations. Not infrequently, these self-proclaimed arbiters of literary taste express the paradox (unwittingly or not) of their own bids to elevate themselves above their own readers, while at the same time identifying with—or even exemplifying—these same readers. *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, a pioneer publication in terms of its affordability, wide circulation, and middle-class respectability, proclaims that Browning’s art is “not [yet] in accordance with the poetical taste and fashion of the age” yet at the same time assures its readership that they are among “the educated public” that will meet Browning with “measured and judicious approval.”⁴⁰ Symonds

37. “The Ring and the Book,” *Times* (London), June 11, 1869, 4.

38. [Frederick Greenwood], “Browning in 1869,” *Cornhill Magazine* 19 (1869): 253.

39. W. M. Thackeray, Prospectus to *Cornhill Magazine*, printed in George Smith, *A Memoir: With Some Pages of Autobiography* (London: Private Circulation, 1902), 111.

40. “The Ring and the Book,” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* 46 (1869): 473.

and his colleague at *Macmillan's*, John Rickards Mozley, assert with equally self-congratulatory aplomb, that *The Ring and the Book* requires readers with “patience and intellect . . . capable of weighing and comparing conflicting evidence,” and that it “cannot be appreciated by the easy-going and somewhat indolent reader,” in spite of the shilling monthly’s targeted bid for a broad readership.⁴¹ The *Times* presents one of the most illustrative statements of this contradictory desire to be at once separate from and amid the crowd: “To the British public ‘ye who like him not,’ who cannot stomach this poem, we can only say that we can sympathize with their palate, but we must pity them the loss of an intellectual treat.⁴² In such statements, we can hear the echoes not only of *Tertium Quid*’s snobbery but also of *Half-Rome* and *Other Half-Rome*’s alluring offers of talk apart from the crowd even as they remain fully participatory within its “prattle.”

* * *

The Ring and the Book brings attention to town talk’s extraordinary capacity to galvanize speaker after speaker to produce a cause célèbre, but the poem harbors no illusion that town talk creates lasting effects. Guido’s second monologue, delivered before his execution, is obsessed with the idea of his own talk ending. Addressing a cardinal and an abbot who come to visit him, Guido commands: “Let me talk / Or leave me, at your pleasure! talk I must: / What is your visit but my lure to talk?” (11.130–32). In characterizing their “visit” as his “lure to talk,” Guido demonstrates the extent to which his talk seeks, still, to influence others. A few lines later, he expresses his great frustration that he will not be able to control the town talk that he knows his execution will spark:

I use my tongue: how glibly yours will run
 At pleasant supper-time . . . God’s curse! . . . to-night
 When all the guests jump up, begin so brisk
 “Welcome his Eminence who shrived the wretch!
 Now we should have the Abate’s story!”

(11.138–42)

In this moment, what concerns Guido most is neither death nor the after-life but rather “how glibly” the clergy’s “tongues” will prattle about his final moments as if his demise formed the most ordinary topic of “supper-

41. Symonds, “Ring and the Book,” 262; J. R. Mozley, “The Ring and the Book,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 19 (1869): 544.

42. “The Ring and the Book,” *Times* (London), June 11, 1869, 4.

time” conversation.⁴³ Through the sociality of their dinner-table talk, these authorities will then determine the course of the town talk. Unable to bear the thought that he will not be able to “use [his] tongue” anymore to direct this talk, Guido imperiously spews out his last words in a desperate attempt to anticipate what they will say.

Guido’s anxieties mirror Browning’s own concerns about the ways in which *The Ring and the Book* would be talked about. As Sarah Wood observes, Guido is not the only one on trial: “Robert Browning also is on trial,” and “the British public . . . will it know how to read the poem?”⁴⁴ It seems appropriate, then, that in the opening lines of the final book, Browning’s authorial persona immediately takes over from Guido’s Faustian, sputtering remarks at the end of the penultimate book (“Don’t open! Hold me from them! I am yours, / I am the Granduke’s—no, I am the Pope’s! / Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . . / Pompilia, will you let them murder me?” [11.2424–27]). As he smoothes over the punctuated energies of Guido’s last words, Browning narrates:

Here were the end, had anything an end:
Thus, lit and launched, up and up roared and soared
A rocket, till the key o’ the vault was reached
And wide heaven held, a breathless minute-space,
In brilliant usurpature: thus caught spark,
Rushed to the height, and hung at full of fame
Over men’s upturned faces, ghastly thence,
Our glaring Guido: now decline must be.

(12.1–8)

“Here were the end” of Guido’s spasmodic talk, these lines imply; its fiery energies first “caught spark” and “rushed to the height” of the heavens, and then came back down again. Until the lines reach “Our glaring Guido,” however, it is not entirely clear what exactly the unfolding rocket metaphor represents. Possibly, “the end” could also refer to poem’s conclusion. And since rockets were often an image of literary success, the rocket might entail the end of *The Ring and the Book*’s public release and Browning’s rapidly rising celebrity. For example, in an 1837 article for the *Quarterly Review*, Abraham Hayward writes that Charles Dickens “has risen like a rocket, and he will come down like the stick.”⁴⁵ The *OED* gives another instance from *United States Magazine* in 1856: “We have witnessed the

43. Guido’s sentiments here echo those of the Renaissance bishop in “The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church” (1845) as the bishop realizes that he will have no recourse should his kin decide not to follow his commands for his burial.

44. Wood, *Robert Browning: A Literary Life*, 171.

45. [Abraham Hayward], review of “The Pickwick Papers,” *Quarterly Review* 59 (1837): 518.

rising of many a literary rocket, shooting like a meteor across the zenith, to fall backward with a few disconnected stars fast fading to oblivion.”⁴⁶

Both examples invoke the rocket metaphor as much to describe a literary celebrity’s rise as his fall. Both note the phenomenon of sudden but impermanent fame. What does it mean, then, for Browning to share this kind of “fame”—which so readily sounds like the “flame” of the rocket’s explosive spark—with “glaring Guido’s” fiery rise and extinction? Such identification seems counterproductive, if Browning desired more than short-lived recognition. A look at what happens in the poem after the chatter around Guido fades away might provide some answers:

Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less
In every fresh transmission; till it melts,
Trickles in silent orange or wan grey
Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark,
And presently we find the stars again.

(12.15–19)

These lines extend the rocket metaphor to refer to town talk; they indicate that the “brilliant usurpature” from the lines before stands for a momentary condition in which the collective animation of the crowd maintains a vital potency that rivals the flame/fame of the heavens. After this moment, however, the town talk—and the cause célèbre it sustains—“melts” and “trickles in silent orange” in a synesthetic articulation that confirms the already robust associations between fame and orality/aurality. These lines conclude with a highly aestheticized image of colors fading into the dark and the restoration of divine light in the form of “stars,” brightest once “again.” A pleasant calm remains in the wake of town talk’s disappearance.

Out of this calm, the poem suggests, the production of text commences. As opposed to in the first book, Browning’s authorial persona in the final book takes up only a little space; quoted letter extracts from a Venetian visitor and the lawyers form the bulk of the monologue. The final book, then, enacts print’s “usurpature” of the throne that talk has vacated. As the speaker looks over a final document, which is a note detailing the court’s decision to restore Pompilia’s name to “perfect fame,” he calls it “print that ends my Book” (12.757, 753). The phrase refers to the fact that the note was the final document in the “old yellow Book,” but it could very well apply to the way in which “print”—in the form of letter extracts—ends Browning’s poem. The account that the Venetian visitor’s

46. See *OED Online*, s.v. “rocket, *n.*”; the example is taken from “Books and Book-Making,” *United States Magazine* 3 (1856): 174.

letter gives of Guido's final words seems markedly textual in comparison with Guido's explosive last remarks; he

harangued the multitude beneath,
 He begged forgiveness on the part of God,
 And fair construction of his act from men,
 Whose suffrage he entreated for his soul,
 Suggesting that we should forthwith repeat
 A *Pater* and an *Ave*, with the hymn,
Salve Regina Coeli, for his sake.

(12.173–79)

With a metric regularity unusual for *The Ring and the Book's* jagged prosody, the Venetian visitor chronicles the end of Guido in near-perfect iambic pentameter—breaking only to linger on Guido's apostrophe to the Virgin Mary (“Queen of Heaven”)—as if to imbue the story with a rhythmic fixity that will ensure its transmission through the generations. In juxtaposition with the uneven, irregular rhythms that drive the monologues in *The Ring and the Book*, the Venetian visitor's letter emphasizes the unchanging nature of textual accounts and their tendency to convey conventional forms of morality. Though it may be easier to commit such lines to memory, it is probably not this Guido—with a “*Pater*,” “*Ave*,” or “*Salve Regina Coeli*” on his lips—that makes the most potent impression on the reader.

Browning's last direct address to his “British Public,” which so many readers past and present have taken as the poem's central message, is like the Venetian visitor's account of Guido's salvation—it proposes a simple and conventional moral:

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
 (Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
 Of many which whatever lives should teach:
 This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
 Our human testimony false, our fame
 And human estimation words and wind.

(12.835–40)

In contrast to the Venetian visitor's, these are exceedingly awkward lines. Trippingly, they prescribe a lesson that “whatever” (rather than whoever?) “lives should teach,” thereafter clarifying (three times) their application specifically to humans, and ending with a couple of heavy alliterative effects (“false, our fame” and “words and wind”). The studied clumsiness of these lines ironizes aspirations toward fixed moral lessons; also, the way in which their irregularities mark their status as “talk” rather than text undermines their content. The lines proclaim the insignificance of talk while seeming unable, from a formal point of view, to escape the trappings

of everyday orality. What these lines achieve, then, is a suspended position between a fascination with talk's insuperable vitality on the one hand, and a sense of relief that it will fade away, on the other. This address to the public holds together town talk's strength as well as its impermanence—and suggests that they are ultimately constitutive of one another. We might understand town talk as intense, its powers highly concentrated within the limited time and space of a cause célèbre.

Once talk has died out, Guido's final conversion into textual myth by the Venetian visitor prefigures Browning's own canonization as a poet by literary scholarship. From about 1870 onward, after the chatter of the initial reviews died down, new studies and handbooks on how to read Browning's poetry produced a new wave of textual scholarship that sought to make—as Tertium Quid did—authoritative pronouncements as to whether the poet was to be ranked a great artist for all time. For the most part, these later critics confirmed earlier accounts that *The Ring and the Book* was Browning's magnum opus. Yet unlike Tertium Quid or the chorus of reviewers who chimed in immediately after *The Ring and the Book's* publication, these new studies were notably more concerned with questions of posterity, the sort of innovations Browning brought to bear upon established poetic traditions, or the way in which *The Ring and the Book* represented the culmination of Browning's poetic methods.⁴⁷ As Patricia O'Neill pithily asserts, the result of this proliferation of textual scholarship was that “when Browning died in 1889, the whole machinery of his canonization was already in place.”⁴⁸

I would suggest a distinction between the spheres of influence intended by the reviews following *The Ring and the Book's* publication and those intended by the later studies that effected Browning's canonization. The former seek an immediate impact upon living oral culture while the latter seek an impact on later generations. Although the earlier reviews are textual themselves, their greater impermanence (both in subject matter and form—as periodical reviews rather than studies) enabled them to participate in and influence the literary talk of the town; they contributed to what well-read, respectable middle-class citizens might say to one another about Browning when *The Ring and the Book* first came out. Although it would be a strain to say that Browning somehow scripted not only the immediate talk around *The Ring and the Book's* publication but also his own poetic legacy, Browning predicted that the textual “machinery” would follow the intense moment of town talk.

47. See Louise Greer, *Browning and America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), on the rise of Browning Societies and the scholarship they produced.

48. Patricia O'Neill, “The Browningites,” in her *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 1.

A letter Browning wrote to his close friend Isa Blagden in August 1865 gives us, in the poet's own words, the sense of his own growing but temporary celebrity upheld by literary town talk: "I suppose what you call 'my fame within these four years' comes from a little of this gossiping and going about, and showing myself to be alive. . . . When there gets to be a general feeling of this kind, that there must be something in the works of an author, the reviews are obliged to notice him."⁴⁹ With characteristic truculence, Browning wrests control of town talk from his reviewers, claiming that his own "gossiping and going about"—not theirs—was responsible for his increasing popularity. At the same time, his skeptical disdain toward fickle "general feeling" indicates that he understood well the contours of his modern literary celebrity and his own limitations in scripting its permanence.

49. Robert Browning to Isa Blagden, August 1865, quoted in Alexandra Leighton, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (New York: Cosimo, 2005), 259.