Browning *UPON* Arabia

A Moveable East

HÉDI A. JAOUAD

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The Arab's wisdom everywhere
—Sordello

—it was of the mystic Orient or of the glowing South that he [Browning] oftenest thought and dreamed. With Heine he might have cried: 'O Firdusi! O Ischami! O Saadi! How do I long after the roses of Schiraz!'[1]
—William Sharp

In loving memory of my parents, Mahmoud and Chérifa,
and my brother, Abdellatif

Preface and Acknowledgements

'Browning Upon Arabia' aims to chart Robert Browning's early and abiding, though often overlooked, engagement with the East, particularly the 'Arab East,' a vast and richly diverse cultural and geographic area that extends from North Africa to the Persian Gulf, and also includes Medieval Muslim Spain, or Al-Andalus. Except for two poems 'Waring' and 'Clive,' India is absent from his work. Browning's East is essentially monotheistic.

Given Browning's wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and extensive, eclectic reading, any thorough research on his relationship to the controversial question of the East would have to examine not only the texts themselves but also practically all ancillary disciplines that encompass the Orient, including onomastics, religion, geography, and history. Such an ambitious undertaking would require massive preliminary groundwork. Happily, some of this foundational work had already been laid down by generations of Browning critics and students, albeit without a unifying thread. Over a century ago, Edna Whitcomb (1922) called attention to Browning's interest in 'the ethics, the wisdom, the mysticism, the religion, and the hot-headed emotions of the Oriental peoples' (p. 17). More recently, E. A. Khattab (1983) has closely examined a number of references to 'things Oriental' in Browning's work: instances in which the themes, the imagery, and the atmosphere struck him as purely Oriental (p. 116). To his surprise, and ours, these references are numerous and span the poet's whole career. Browning's representations of the peoples and histories of the East range from early poems and

dramas, such as 'Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr' (1842) and *The Return of the Druses* (1843), to the late serial poem *Ferishtah's* Fancies (1884). These works reveal Browning's resistance to triumphalist and imperialist forms of Orientalism generated by many nineteenth-century British and European literary and scholarly portrayals of 'The East.'

This book builds on Khattab's seminal research in the essays 'Browning in Arabia' and especially 'Assimilation and Transformation: Browning's "Muléykeh",' an illuminating study of 'things arabian [*sic*]' in Browning's work, and also a remarkable piece of scholarship that pointed me to valuable research and bibliographical sources. As Khattab's (1984) research reveals, 'Browning's attraction to and use of such material is really the tip of the iceberg of a constantly deep trend in his work' (p. 46). In sum, this undertaking aims to broaden the discussion by examining, through close textual analysis, the deep trend that is Browning's East.

Orientalism, like many 'isms,' has many connotations. Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* (1978) is, of course, unmissable in the ongoing debate on Orientalism. It is a major work of cultural criticism that generated a number of counter-discourses and cross-disciplinary responses. *Orientalism* transformed the intellectual landscape of the humanities and the social sciences, garnering a heightened interest in marginal subjectivities. Said's critics, however, focused on the author's propensity to generalize and essentialize. Others took him to task for glossing over cultural, regional, or religious specificity within the scholarship, essentially presenting the Orient as a monolithic Other.

John MacKenzie, a historian of imperialism, asserts that there is more to Orientalismthan Said's presentation of 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient' (Said, 1978, p. 3). MacKenzie argues that Orientalism was an appreciative cultural response by the West toward the East. O. P. Kejariwal, the renowned Indian author and translator, faults Said for failing to acknowledge the Orientalists who 'sought kinship, between the worlds of the East and the West, rather than to create an artificial "difference" of cultural inferiority and superiority,' referring specifically to British philologist–lexicographer and translator Sir William Jones (1988, p. 221–233). Daniel Karlin (2009) also argues in his Introduction to *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* that the encounter between East and West was far from hegemonic or antagonistic; rather it 'began as a linguistic exercise, not, as expressed as a literary choice' (p. vii).

Some of the criticism levelled at Said are not serious or objective, but border on the *ad hominem*, particularly Daniel Martin Varisco (2011) and Aijaz Ahmad (1992) who accused Said of omitting texts that did not fit his theoretical framework, and what Ahmad called, a 'cavalier way with authors and quotations' (1992, p. 222). Benita Parry (1993), in her review of Ahmad's book, notes of his criticism that he 'appears less concerned with producing a critique of the book's substance than with putting a sinister gloss on its reception.' (p. 124)

Varisco accuses Said of misquoting Browning's translation of Goethe's *Westöstlicher Diwan*:

> Had he consulted the well-known translation by Robert Browning, that 'God is of the east possess'd,' Said would have recognized that the poet was not turning Islam into a romanticized pantheism. (p. 219)

Said, however, could not have misquoted Browning, for Browning never translated Goethe.

Said addressed the misunderstandings and shortcomings of his study, particularly that his argument, in *Orientalism*, was more political than scholarly, too closely connected 'to the tumultuous dynamics of contemporary history' (p. vii). In his 'Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition of *Orientalism*,' Said clarified that the West was far from being monolithic in its approach to the Orient: 'There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control' (2003, p. xix). Above all, he re-asserted his aim in writing about this controversial topic: the primacy of humanistic inquiry and critique over political considerations.

For Said, this brand of humanistic inquiry is exemplified in Goethe's comprehensive study of world literature that 'preserved the individuality of each work without losing sight of the whole' (p. xxiv). Also, he heralded Erich Auerbach, whose 1946 book *Mimesis* was 'meant to be a testament to the diversity and concreteness of the reality represented in Western literature' (p. xxv) which promoted the same appreciation for Islamic literature that Goethe encouraged.

Had Said focused on Robert Browning, rather than, say, Benjamin Disraeli, he would have found yet another example of the sort of Humanism which embodied 'co-existence and enlargement of horizons' that he cherished in Goethe and Auerbach (2003, p. xix).

For Browning, the East, specifically the 'Arab,' who Browning considers a person hailing from Arabia (Muslims, Jews, Christians of all sects and denominations) becomes a prototype of the humanist and a projection of nostalgia for a lost 'Renaissance,' such as the one that emerged in Italy in the fifteenth century, which Browning saw as a period of cultural symbiosis of East and North. Browning paired 'East and North' rather than the familiar binaries of 'East and West' or 'North and South' in order to resist the confrontational, and derogatory attitudes deeply encoded in those familiar pairings and point to a view of 'East and North' as overlapping and interdependent zones whose histories were profoundly and productively intertwined. Browning considers the category of 'Arab' a dynamic, protean, and hybrid identity often observed paternalistically and derisively from a Western perspective. Browning attempts to blur boundaries between identities such as 'Arab and Jew' to create characters who form complex compositions of various Eastern sensibilities, nationalities, faiths, and origins and who reveal surprising affinities and contributions to Northern identities and forms of knowledge.[2]

Ultimately, 'Browning Upon Arabia' aims to prove that Browning researched extensively the literature, history, philosophy, and culture of the East, especially the 'Arab East,' to produce poetry that is sensitive to its Eastern resources and devoted to confirming the interrelation of Northern and Eastern knowledge in pursuit of a new form of transcendental humanism, one that places 'mere man's nature' at the center. Browning's approach of the East is therefore sapiential, more passionate and serious than that of his contemporaries. For him, unformed knowledge, or worse 'little knowledge,' especially by contemporary Northerners, is one of the greatest hindrances to harmonious relations between cultures. The North and East relation, then, is about sharing ideas and knowledge, representing the core of epistemology. Browning aims to transcend traditional binaries: East and North are merely extensions of each other.

Browning's work reveals that knowledge is not the purview of one's people or culture, but is cumulative and migratory, a sort of moveable [f]east, as it were. I use 'Moveable East' as a metaphor for the imprint of the East, especially the Arab East, that Browning sees everywhere in the North.

Without a doubt, I could not have prepared this book for publication by myself. The following professors read, at different stages, parts of the manuscript, and offered many insightful critical comments and editorial

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Saratoga Springs, USA Hédi A. Jaouad

Notes

1. William Sharp, *Life of Robert Browning* (London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1897), 57.
2. In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Said points to the connection between anti-Semitism and 'its Islamic branch Orientalism' made apparent to Said because he was an Arab Palestinian.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Browning upon Arabia

Geographical references to the Orient in Browning's work are rare, and, except for an overland trip to Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 1834, the author never set foot in the Eastern world.[1] Nevertheless, the Orient permeates Browning's work.[2]

Browning mainly derived his knowledge of the East through research and wide-ranging readings. His knowledge of the East is thus essentially *livresque*, steeped in mythology and classical knowledge, yet filtered by the lens of his own modernity. Browning's Orientalism reveals a sensibility of his times and, in many respects, is still pertinent to the current time as well. His Orientalism is an aesthetic formulation, one that is inimitably his own, distinct from that of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Browning was often veiled in an allegorical mist; he was interested in a symbolic more than geographical Semitic East, namely Egypt, Arabia, and Persia. This East was the cradle of monotheistic religions and belonged to a history of intense cultural, religious, and commercial intercourse with Europe. In his sympathetic treatment of the East, Browning preceded many of his contemporaries such as Benjamin Disraeli, George Meredith, and George Eliot. The latter's view on the East, expounded in an article on Meredith, shines an interesting light on the spiritual preeminence of that culturally distant region from the perspective of the Victorian reader.

> No act of religious symbolism has a deeper root in nature than that of turning with reverence towards the East. For almost all our good

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> things—our most precious vegetables, our noblest animals, our loveliest flowers, our arts, our religious and philosophical ideas, our very nursery tales and romances have travelled to us from the East. (Eliot 1896, p. 175)

Browning set out from the beginning to distance himself from the exoticized artificial Orient, and vigorously rejected the reductive fascination with the Other, the type of fascination derided by Byron in *Beppo*: 'How quickly would I print (the world delighting), / A Grecian, Syrian, or Assyrian tale: / And sell you, mix'd with western sentimentalism, / Some samples of the finest Orientalism' (1912, p. 143).

Instead, by endowing the often derided, caricatured, and voiceless Easterners with a genuine personality and autonomous point of view, Browning took an audacious contrarian stance. This stance is evident in his first play, *Mansoor the Hierophant* (later titled *The Return of the Druses*), where history is written not from the viewpoint of the colonizing Hospitallers, but from the perspective of the underdog: the oppressed Druses. Browning emphasizes empowerment through self-emancipation and condemns the paternalism of Northerners. Remarkably, the Druses resent and reject the Hospitallers' interference, as it only serves to underscore their perceived helplessness: 'we Druses wait forsooth / The kind interposition of a boy / —Can only save ourselves if thou concede' (4.244–246).[3] In *Luria*, unmistakably a frontal attack on Shakespeare's *Othello*, Browning vindicates the character of the Moor. He confronts Shakespeare in his dramatic monologue *Caliban upon Setebos*, when he reverses Prospero and Caliban's roles, upsetting a well-established cultural hierarchy. Although Browning situates his Caliban in the context of 'natural theology' and treats him satirically, the latter is no longer portrayed as a helpless savage but more like a son of nature in the mold of the Rousseauian 'natural man.' Caliban's mimicry of Prospero's pseudo-civilized speech (a contrapuntal discursive strategy that Browning had deployed in *The Return of the Druses*) becomes, as Simon Hay (1996) writes, a 'conceptual site,' where the dominant ideological position is challenged by subversive alternatives, and against which this dominant colonial ideology is redefined and re-defended. As such a contested concept, the figure of Caliban is a representation of the conflict in Victorian colonial discourse and hence contains the ambivalences which underpin that discourse.[4]

At the time, the 'North' was represented in stark contrast to the 'South,' and often to the South's disadvantage. People from the South

had come to embody uncouth manners and unbridled emotions. In his long poem *Microcosmos*, John Davies (1603) of Hereford offers descriptions of perceived essential character traits of men from the south versus men from the north:

> For South-ward, Men are cruell, moody, madd,
> Hot, blacke, leane, leapers, lustfull, vsd to vant,
> […].
> The Northern *Nations* are more moist,
> and cold,
> Lesse wicked and deceiptfull, faithfull, just.[5] (84, p. 31)

It was believed, as described by William Harrison (1577) in his 'Description of Britain,' that the coldness of the North rendered its inhabitants 'of great strength and little policie,' while those living in hot zones are weaker of body but display greater 'Pregnancie of witte, nimblenesse of lymmes, and pollitike inuentions.'[6]

While Browning shared his contemporaries' fascination with the East, he avoided the usual associational axes of 'West and South' and 'North and South' in favor of 'North and East.' At the core of the East-North divide is an epistemological deficit, often dismissed as a clash of civilizations. In Browning's work, the North-East dynamic is a dialogue between equal interlocutors, an intercultural, multilingual conversation, but each configured as a hybrid specimen.

For Browning, the East and North shared a cultural basis in wisdom and tradition, but these values had become extinct in a utilitarian North. At its best, the North was a syncretic extension of the East, particularly during the Italian Renaissance. Rudyard Kipling later, at the height of British imperialism, recast the relationship in starkly chauvinistic terms. In his *The Ballad of East and West*, Kipling posits the relationship between East and West as an unbridgeable divide: 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' Browning views the East, instead, as a chance for renewal and spiritual inspiration, as his character Paracelsus rationalizes, 'Think, think! the wide East, where all Wisdom sprung…' (Paracelsus, I. 785–787, Vol. 1, p. 105).

Like many aspiring poets of his generation struggling to find a distinctive voice, Browning battled a towering legacy (a literary syndrome Harold Bloom terms the 'anxiety of influence') (1976, p. 192).[7] On the one hand, he contended with the Romantic-Orientalist tradition

established by his elders—Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley. On the other, he had to position himself in relation to a prevalent culture of imperialism in which he lived. This culture turned the Orient and Orientals into objects of Western scrutiny, of both fascination and repulsion. Rarely innocent and often exotic, this gaze characterized a complete Western dominance over the East, accepted as a matter of natural course. This is the Orientalism described by Edward Said in his groundbreaking study, *Orientalism*. Said argues that the Orient is an invention of Europe, a single, uniform entity in the eyes of the West.[8]

This is not to say, however, that all Orientalist writers and artists cast their Arabs, Persians, Jews, Indians, etc. in the same mold. A select few writers and artists worked outside this conception of the Orient.[9] Browning was one such writer. He portrayed Eastern people and their cultures with understanding and appreciation, acknowledging their many contributions to the shared heritage of all. He found confirmation of such convictions in work and life of such literary giants/mavericks as Shelley and Carlyle. Browning seems more interested in finding cultural commonalities rather than differences, but how did Browning arrive at a view of the East shared by so few of his contemporaries?

William Sharp (1912) points to a possible clue: the Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition. Sharp, who was also the English translator of the French critic Sainte-Beuve (1901), recalls a remark made by him in one of his famous *Causeries* upon French bishop and theologian Bossuet which applies to Browning:

> Bossuet's view of Hebrew genius extended, fecundated by Christianity, and open to all the acquisitions of the understanding, but retaining some degree of sovereign interdiction, and closing its vast horizon precisely where its light ceases.[10] (1912, p. 20)

Sainte-Beuve attributes to Bossuet an ability to fully comprehend the 'simple idea of order, of authority, of unity, of the continual government of Providence,' in the same way that the ancient Hebrews, alone among their contemporaries, 'kept clear and distinct the idea of a creative and ever-present God, directly governing the world.' Sharp attributes this view of 'Hebrew genius,' nourished by Christian theology to Browning, enabling him to grasp fundamental truths about the East that elude his contemporaries.

This Hebraic/Judeo-Christian cross-pollination underlies some of nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship, a thesis that E. S. Shaffer expounds in her book '*Kubla Khan*' *and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770–1880*. Shaffer argues, in terms similar to Sainte-Beuve's commentary on Bossuet, that Browning's Orientalism springs from altogether different traditions and motivations than the ones discussed by Said. Shaffer's (1975) approach to Orientalism was born in the 'environment of early Christianity both before and after Christ, with the meeting and synthesis of cultures and ideas out of which emerged a distinctive Christian world view' (p. 14). This historical and anthropological conception of a syncretic Orientalism, absent in Said's study, is tantamount to 'a revision of our notions of the sources and meaning of poetic 'Orientalism,'' a stance which complements rather than contradicts Said's own Orientalist paradigm[11] (p. 14). Poetic Orientalism reaches beyond the 'fanciful and ignorant borrowing from the translations of the *Arabian Nights* that began to appear early in the eighteenth century,' but it is also connected to 'textual and historical scholarship exercised on the Bible since the Reformation, and drew [*sic*] on a very considerable body of new and challenging knowledge, geological, chronological, and anthropological, though its interpretation was still moulded by Christian apologetics' (p. 14).

Shaffer distinguishes between two different, if sometimes overlapping, conceptions of Orientalism, the exotic but also the poetic, the latter of which:

> can be seen in conjunction with first-rate literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Coleridge, Hölderlin, Browning, George Eliot—and Blake, Novalis, Hugo, Tennyson, Arnold, among others—with literature often not considered under this rubric at all.

Although 'Orientalism' as a discipline is politically tainted, Shaffer maintains that:

> A European criticism can still approach the literature of the other societies from the vantage point attained by these first-rate writers, aware that their own civilization rested upon myth as fully as non-Christian societies (often the same myths), and by this very awareness maintaining the centrality and efficaciousness of their own myths.

Browning's involvement in new approaches to the Bible engendered by the higher criticism is also the crux of Charles LaPorte's *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*. LaPorte demonstrates the relevance of religion, via German higher criticism, in the Victorian period, usually associated with its decline. This Victorian experience with German higher criticism led such poets as the Brownings to redefine their roles and goals as poets, 'poetry was invested with so many moral and mystical qualities that it became, in the rhetoric of many Victorians, inseparable from Religion' (LaPorte 2011, p. 5). In other words, poetry can perform a cultural role like that of the Bible. 'Browning Upon Arabia' aims, therefore, to highlight the integrative and tolerant view of religion in Browning's poetry and study of Eastern spirituality.

In this regard, Browning's East provides a precursor to what is called intercultural and interfaith dialogue. In his own praxis of cultural relativism, Browning questions 'universal' absolute truths and shows them to be reductively Eurocentric. His work prompted a reading between lines, languages, eras, and traditions.

Beginning with *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* and continuing in many other subsequent texts, he suggests that human knowledge is pluri-genealogical and therefore irrevocably connected. For Browning, the East is a polylinguistic and multicultural space. His East is the cradle of monotheism and includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all on equal footing, and reveals a plural, heterogeneous, and vibrant East made up of Moors, Druses, Jews and Persians that cannot be reduced to a single narrative.

Browning intimates that, when civilizations clash, this collision must be viewed as an opportunity to converse and converge. Browning repudiates the Western Church's Manichean vision of history, which endeavored to 'blot out' the imprint of the East on its own cultural evolution. In fact, Browning goes so far as to suggest that the North is not the opposite, but rather the invention, of the East. The conception of a North begotten by the East, particularly expounded in *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*, and *Luria*, while radical, is not entirely novel. Thomas Aquinas and Adelard of Bath had already travelled that road, as discussed in Jonathan Lyons' *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization*. Thomas Aquinas 'carved out a truce' for modern Western science and traditional religion using the guiding principles of Arab Aristotelians. Lyons (2009) states:

> That compromise defines the rules of engagement to this day between the realms of faith and reason. And it stakes the Arabs' claim as inventors of the West, a debt that Adelard of Bath identified many centuries ago on his return from Antioch. 'Of course God rules the universe. But we may and should enquire into the natural world. The Arabs teach that.' (p. 201)

Browning's approach to the relationship between North and East goes beyond Hegelian dialectics, a philosophy in which the contradiction between a proposition (thesis) and its antithesis is resolved at a higher level of truth (synthesis). What he rejects in his work is the notion, widely held at the time, that the North and East were mutually exclusive. His humanism did not allow for the denial of these apparent differences but, instead, attempted to transcend them through transformations of soul, by soul. In fact, in Browning's work there is a superb demonstration of what Michel Foucault calls a 'freeing of difference' which:

> requires thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; thought that accepts divergence; affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction; thought of the multiple—of the nomadic and dispersed multiplicity that is not limited or confined by the constraints of similarity.[12] (1977, p. 185)

Browning's approach to the question of the ethnic and cultural Other is purposeful, functional, and ethical. This is similar to what Foucault intended by the notion of a 'curative science,' that is, a science of contra-indications meant to neutralize the effects of a poisonous contamination. In Browning's view, British and European colonial adventurism produced these 'poisonous effects,' especially in the North's social, cultural, and political transactions with the East (1977).[13]

Browning's conception of the East is akin to the one Abdelkébir Khatibi articulates in his 1973 essay *Maghreb Pluriel*:

> The Orient is not a simple movement (dialectical, speculative, culturalist …) towards the West. They are, each for the other, the beginning and the end. We are thus trying to turn toward global and pluralistic thinking, toward the thought of Otherness that is built step by step and without a guaranteed end. That is why the Hegelian metaphor of the two suns (the outer sun of the Orient and the West's inner sun of universal thought) is a metaphor still caught in metaphysics. (p. 37)

Ultimately, Browning's search for wisdom (and his own dramatic creations) is spiritual, concerned with the elevation of the human soul. His characters are usually seekers, not finders. They quest after spiritual fulfillment and wholeness, which the Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi calls *al-Insan al-Kamil*, or the perfect human, which is akin to Browning's own notion of the 'whole poet.'[14] In the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance, itself heir to earlier civilizations (the most recent of which flourished in al-Andalus), Browning unearthed the blueprint of his poetic worldview and his conception of the new humanist. Because Browning's East was livresque, the fecund creation of a widely read poet who never left Europe, Italy emerged as the cultural reference point through which Browning worked out many of his East-North connections. In Browning's work, Italy, and the Mediterranean in general, is neither East nor West, but both simultaneously, in equipoise between 'opposite eddies.' It is a permeable zone where both have long commingled (During the Roman Empire, the East-West divide was as elusive as it was artificial: any area south of Rome was considered the Orient, and any area North of the Roman latitude line was called the Occident).

Although this study focuses primarily on Arabic linguistic and cultural traditions in relation to Browning's work, it could also encompass a consideration of his East. To this end I will attempt, whenever relevant, to illuminate the manifold representations of his vision of the East, real or imagined. Even a cursory reading of Browning's work shows that his East has depth, and that his Easterners, even if they bear the mark of Otherness, are endowed with archetypal personalities and are poetically transformed into more complex characters. Browning draws on a diverse cast of characters taken from different epochs and regions: the sage, the alienated, the impostor, the brave, the foolhardy, and the rebel.

In addition to Browning's 'pluralistic thinking,' his creative work, simultaneously eclectic and syncretic, was perceived as avant-garde, placing him at the vanguard of a modernizing poetic movement. Browning exhibits a 'filiative' bond with his own literary and cultural heritage and an 'affiliative' engagement with other traditions, namely Eastern.

Filiation is genealogical, ethnocentric in scope, whereas affiliation opens the text to new frontiers, inviting multiple interpretations. As Said wrote, 'To study affiliation is to study and to recreate the bonds between texts and the world' (p. 175). Said's approach bears particular relevance to the reading of hybrid texts such as Browning's. In this respect, the 'modernism' of Browning's work is also a testament to the writer

himself. Though national and cosmopolitan, rooted in his native English soil, he is also attuned to the exterior world.

A number of critics have pointed out Browning's 'incipient modernism.' His own interpretation of Scripture through the lens of 'higher criticism' and his Rabbinic and 'casuistical' poems that I discuss in some detail later are of the order of what Shaffer calls Browning's 'modern myth-making.' For Shaffer, the poem *A Death in the Desert* exemplifies this original attempt and is:

> an archetype of nineteenth-century apologetical casuistry. […]
>
> [I]t is out of the dramatic realization of the central myth of Christianity—the direct witness to salvation—that Browning extracted a truly modern subject matter: for it had not yet been experienced as 'ancient fable,' which had to be 'rendered back / Pallid by fancy as the western rack / Of fading cloud bequeaths the lake some gleam / Of its gone glory!' It was vivid, new, even sensational in a realm where myth had not been suspected. (192–193)

Browning's modernism lies in the fusion of archaic but vibrant materials (derived mainly from Medieval and Renaissance lore and literature) with modern aesthetic impulses and forms of expression. This modernism manifests in Browning's advocacy for an original, contemporary aesthetic sensitivity which ushered in a new mode of writing, later known as the 'modernist school of English poetry.'

Browning's aesthetics were quickly met with hostility. Because of his verbal inventions and syntactical innovations, Browning was stigmatized as the poet of the incomprehensible.[15] One anonymous critic (1891) from the *London Speaker* asserted that only the prose of George Meredith surpassed that of Browning in obscurity.[16] Both were assailed for their wilfull 'torturing' of the English language, stripping English of the 'purity and precision that the eighteenth century won for it at great cost and pain.' Worse, perhaps, was the fact that Browning 'maimed' language due to 'egotism,' merely at his whim to 'make it reproduce the processes of his thought.'[17]

The critic, however, correctly predicts that Meredith and Browning were far ahead of their times and would be better appreciated by posterity:

> it is almost impossible to suppose that the men and women that Browning and Meredith have imagined can be forgotten. They are the most splendid and glittering inventions since Shakespeare died, and it is possible that, rather than lose them, posterity will take over the language with which their creators have clothed them. (1891)

True to this critic's prediction, Browning's legacy has been vivid. Moreover, as Edward Lucie-Smith (1967) writes, 'Browning moves within contemporary English and American poetry like yeast in dough.'[18] Modernism's debt to Browning is explicitly expressed in *Three Cantos 1*, where Pound begins with an *address* to the ghost of Robert *Browning* regarding the style of *his* Sordello, which Pound describes it as a ragbag and a harlequin-type text of disparate historical characters and styles.

Browning's writings invoke the notion of 'heteroglossia' in the Bakhtinian sense. They are often polyphonic, arabesque-like, peppered with scripts, words, and phrases from ancient and modern languages. Browning attempts to incorporate different topographies, languages, and prosodies, yet another celebratory gesture at hybridity.[19] For instance, in the following stanza from *Old Pictures in Florence*, Browning weaves his own text with Byron's *The Giaour*, engaging no fewer than four different tongues:

> I, that have haunted the dim San Spirito,
> (Or was it rather the Ognissanti?)
> Patient on altar-step planting a weary toe!
> Nay, I shall have it yet! *Detur amanti*!
> My Koh-i-noor—or (if that's a platitude)
> Jewel of Giamschid, the Persian Sofi's eye;
> So, in anticipative gratitude,
> What if I take up my hope and prophesy?[20]

In *The Melon Seller*, from his last Eastern book of poems, *Ferishtah's Fancies*, Browning stages a dialogue between the Dervish Ferishtah and his yet 'un-dervished' student around a sensitive and contentious religious point:

> Some say a certain Jew adduced the word
>
> Out of their book, it sounds so much the same,