

The Exhibit: Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Nineteenth-Century Archaeology

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*Till all at once the memory of the thing, — . . .
Had somehow plain and pillar-like prevailed
I' the midst of them, indisputably fact,
Granite, time's tooth should grate against, not graze, —
Why this proved sandstone, friable, fast to fly
And give its grain away at wish o' the wind.
Ever and ever more diminutive,
Base gone, shaft lost, only entablature,
Dwindled into no bigger than a book,
Lay of the column; and that little, left
By the roadside 'mid the ordure, shards and weeds.
Until I haply, wandering that way,
Kicked it up, turned it over, and recognized,
For all the crumblement, this abacus,
This square old yellow book, — could calculate
By this the lost proportions of the style. (I.661–78)¹*

This extract is taken from *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9), one of Robert Browning's most intricately structured poems, and at 22,021 lines, one of the longest poems in the English language. It is based on a seventeenth-century murder trial (1698) in which Guido Franceschini was tried and found guilty of the brutal murder of his wife, Pompilia, and her parents, Pietro and Violante Comparini. Browning found his primary source, *The Old Yellow Book*, the book of the poem's title, in a market stall in Florence in 1860.² Together with a secondary source, he used the material contained in the old book to poetically reconstruct the 'true' story behind the murder.³ His extraordinary poetic strategy was to give ten speakers the authority to present their conflicting, often violently opposed views of the facts of the case: one hears talk of different kinds of truths, each excluding the other. As such, the poem is a critique of the authority and reliability of all human interpretation, including representations of legal and historical discourse.

What, you may well ask, has all this to do with archaeology? Browning's treatment of the documents suggests they are in arrears of the full 'human' story, and the poet-speaker of Books I and XII confronts the cultural exhaustion of his time with a desire to restore the former life of his historical personages missing from legal aridities of *The Old Yellow Book*. In doing so the poet uses metaphors drawn from archaeology and architectural restoration to figure the project of recovering truth from history. Indeed the poet's own creative work, his imaginative transformation of history, is represented through the ring of the poem's title, which refers to an antique Etruscan ring from a necropolis at Chiusi, Italy, an important aspect of the poem, but one which cannot be dealt with here. My contention is that the poet's ambivalent attitude towards archaeological fragments and antiquities is a measure of his distance from his Romantic forbears and finds, instead, a parallel in writings on nineteenth-century archaeology.

The extract quoted above finds the poet stumbling upon a piece of archaeological evidence, a wasted fragment which suggests the survival of the past in the present, but also the difficulty of recovering truth from the past. Book I is an *ars poetica* in which the poet-speaker rationalises and explains his relationship to the poem and his purposes in writing it. In the opening lines, he develops the idea that 'fact' in the Franceschini case, which the sheep-like 'world's bystanders' of line 642 suppose has 'plain and pillar-like prevailed', has eroded over time. In place of an intact edifice, he finds, instead, a fragment, a ruined column, a book-size 'entablature' lying 'mid ordure, shards and weeds'. Recovering truth from the antiquarian textual remains of *The Old Yellow Book*, is compared to restoring the found fragment to the whole of which it is a part, to its classic form, in imitation of 'the lost proportions of the style' (678).

The image of the poet casually, 'haply, wandering' among ruins, coming by chance upon the 'lay of the column', suggests the leisured life of the tourist, or gentleman antiquarian, rather than the fierce entrepreneurial energies of the new-breed Victorian archaeologist. That the poet 'kicked it [the fragment] up' suggests a contemptuous Romantic carelessness, rather than the reverent carefulness of the museum professional. *Goethe in the Campagna Romana* (1786–7), by Johann Heinrich August Wilhelm Tischbein (1751–1829), is a well known image of the leisured Romantic artist-traveller in Italy (Figure 1). Goethe describes Tischbein's intention in *Italian Journey*: 'He wants to paint me as a traveller, wrapped in a white cloak, sitting on a fallen obelisk and looking towards the ruins of the Campagna di Roma in the background.'⁴ This is, in fact, a good description of the portrait; Tischbein's proto-Romantic portrait of Goethe represents the writer swathed in an elegant cape, lounging on a hilltop in the Italian countryside, and posed against an Arcadian landscape



Fig. 1: Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, Goethe in the Campagna Romana (1786-87), Frankfurt-am-Main, Städelsches Kunstinstitut.



Fig. 2: Robert Browning, Rome 1861.

featuring fragmented classical sculptures and architectural ruins. The artist–antiquarian is defined in relation to a classical archetype; the aestheticised world to which he belongs allows him to look upon the wreckage of a ruined past with leisured and receptive composure.⁵ By contrast, an 1861 photograph of Browning shows the poet in composed Victorian uprightiness, with the ruined edifice of the Roman Colosseum in the background (Figure 2). Goethe's experience of Rome on his first journey to Italy in 1786, was felt as spiritual renewal, reformation and rebirth; an antiquity which had 'hitherto been only known in fragments and chaotically' was experienced as the beginning of a new life.⁶ Similarly, *The Old Yellow Book* is 'restorative' for Browning' and his discovery of it is linked, as is the moment in Goethe's life recorded in Tischbein's painting, to rebirth and renewal.

Goethe is seated on an overturned obelisk from which the hieroglyphs have been obliterated. Tischbein's painting is thought to have influenced an engraving by P. Martini, *The Author Contemplating the Ruins of Palmyra*, the frontispiece to the Comte de Volney's *Les ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791).⁷ This print also features the broken column, upon which the author sits, contemplating the ruins of ancient Palmyra having 'l'aspect d'une grand cité déserte'.⁸ In classical architecture, the entablature of the building is on the top, above the cornice and architrave. This section often featured, as in Tischbein's picture, assemblages of sculpted human figures.⁹ Indeed, the entablature of the Parthenon, the monumental pedimental figures, later known as the Elgin marbles, was Britain's most coveted nineteenth-century archaeological acquisition. Of this fragmented entablature, we are told that the poet 'turned it over'; he finds the book-size entablature, once the crowning glory of the building and out of reach to the observer, on the ground, amenable to human handling, inspection and sequestration. In fact, the drive to institutionalise and regulate archaeological activity was partly motivated by a desire to prevent such unauthorised looting of antiquities by amateurs.

Browning's passage, and Tischbein's picture, share the iconographic features of a ruined column, broken entablature, and the figure of the poet-wanderer in Italy. In *Goethe in the Campagna*, the broken column which lies behind the bas-relief, includes a composite Roman column of the Ionic and Corinthian orders. In Browning's passage, as in Tischbein's painting, the fragment is linked to writing – the obelisk once featured hieroglyphics and the bas-relief pictures, the work upon which Goethe was engaged when the picture was executed. 'Tablet', which shares an origin with 'entablature', refers to a surface written on or painted, and the tablet was the precursor to the book just as the stylus was precursor to the pen. Furthermore, the spatial metaphor is linked to its temporal, linguistic referent – *The Old Yellow Book* – through Browning's use of the word 'style', which puns on the Latin *stilus*. One controversial Greek etymological reading derives the word from column. The spelling 'style' was originally a meaningless variant of *stile* and owes its modern currency, both in French and Latin, to the erroneous notion that the Latin *stilus* is an adoption of Greek.¹⁰

Gerard de Lairese's manual for artists, *The Art of Painting*, which was an important book in Browning's early artistic development, states that the purpose of studying the ruins of antiquity is 'chiefly to learn the ancient fate of old structures in order to know perfectly what they were in their best condition'.¹¹ At first sight, the speaker in Browning's landscape, musing over 'the lost proportions of the style', appears to share the same ambition as de Lairese's art critic, who, in a chapter called 'Ruins', can be found wandering through a classical scene observing ancient tombs, statues, vases, and the columns of an old palace. The purpose of this exercise is to instruct lovers of art in observing and preserving simple beautiful things without defects, which necessarily means abandoning 'what is deformed, spoiled, forked, or

broken'.¹² In Browning's passage, as in the later 'Parleying with Gerard de Lairese', Browning dissents from the blind ex-painter's idealism in favour of the gritty realism we find in *The Ring and the Book*: the poet is more interested in the desolate location, fragmentation, weeds and ordure. In the Piazza San Lorenzo it is the debris of tradition, the broken, disused wares of the second-hand vendors that preoccupy the poet: of some busts he declares: '(broken, Providence be praised!)' (l. 60). A broken column, symbolic of disintegration, or spiritual ruin, takes its significance from the idea of fracture rather than from the idea of the column as such. This imagery of disintegration belongs to a culture that defines itself as fragmented, and recognises its own belatedness. The successive metaphors in this passage – a decayed column, an abacus, a book – are bizarrely juxtaposed and appear to break with, rather than evolve from each other; the passage itself is disjunctive.

The 'shards' of line 673 allude to Ezekiel's wasteland of dismembered bones. In answer to the question 'Son of man, can these bones live?' God orders the resurrection of dry bones: 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: And I will lay upon you, and will bring flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live' (Ezek. 37. 3-5). This allusion to the 'Valley of Shards' links the poet-archaeologist to the resurrectionist poet, who like the prophet Elisha, can restore life to the dead past.

Browning's archaeological site is unnamed. It could be Troy, an Etruscan ruin or could allude to any number of English ruin poems. Thomas Love Peacock's *Palmyra* (1806) is a partly declamatory, elegiac ode on the researchable topic of the ruins of Palmyra, a Syrian city identified with Tedmor of the Old Testament.¹³ The opening stanzas of Peacock's poem dwell on details that appear in Browning's ruin-scape: 'burning desert-blast', 'massy columns fall around / The fabric totters to the ground' (stanza 1) and Tedmor's 'marble wastes' in Syria's 'barren world of sand'. Shelley confronts the 'colossal wreck' of the past in 'Ozymandias' (1818), a poem which internalises the Romantic obsession with ruins and becomes a sonnet fragment, formal poetic incompleteness mirroring its subject.¹⁴ Browning is not only preoccupied with the debris of tradition, but his favoured poetic form, the dramatic monologue, is a fragmentary form, offering a partial, truncated perspective towards its subject. It is not surprising therefore that Browning defends, in the *Essay on Shelley*, Shelley's 'imperfect proportions' as human products acceptable to God, describing Shelley's poetry as 'a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the Universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal'.¹⁵ *The Ring and the Book* bears the imprint of this speculation about fragmentariness, the relation of the part to the whole, the finite to the infinite, but in a more ironical, elaborate and reckless form than is to be found in the analyses of the 1852 *Essay on Shelley*.

While de Lairese or the Romantic fragment poem are possible influences on this passage, its more immediate context is nineteenth century archaeology. Browning began *The Ring and the Book* at a time when archaeology was developing as a science – indeed, the Victorians created archaeology out of history, geology and antiquarian studies.¹⁶ In the early nineteenth century, interest in the remote past was an antiquarian hobby practised largely by a rural clergy: by 1900 archaeology was a science, a component in the sweeping Victorian reassessment of the age and nature of the past, a university subject and a profession. So rapid was the development of the discipline that E. Oldfield, in his 'Introductory Address' in the *Archaeological Journal* (1852), could write: 'Within no very distant period the study of antiquities has passed, in popular esteem, from contempt to comparative honour'.

Exhuming the remains of past ages went on with unprecedented energy throughout the nineteenth century, issuing in

such elaborate excavations as the sites of the Roman Forum and Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of Troy in 1873. At the time Browning was writing, some of the great gains of archaeology were in the recent past. In 1827 the first Etruscan tombs were opened at Tarquinia, and in 1828, at Vulci. By 1848 so much was known of these buried cities that George Dennis could write *Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*. But it was not until the Unification, however, that governmental supervision of archaeological activity was established in Italy and various institutes sprang up. The beginnings of institutionalised archaeology in Britain outstripped similar developments on the Continent. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the British Government assembled in its national Museum the most important collection of ancient sculptures to be found anywhere in the world.¹⁷ This success was due to diplomat archaeologists, acting in conjunction with the Royal Navy. European imperialism made it safe and profitable for the British to explore Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine. The 'Higher Criticism' of the Bible, Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–33) and Darwin's work on evolution were critical for the development of archaeology in Britain. Serious study of prehistory could not exist until entrenched assumptions about human history, based on the Mosaic chronology and a literal interpretation of Genesis, were persuasively challenged.

The reclamation of ancient remains usually involves field excavation or surface collecting, as well as analysis, interpretation and publication of findings. Professional archaeologists spend much of their time in the classification and interpretation of unspectacular and repetitious objects of little or no aesthetic appeal or monetary value, becoming romantic, heroic figures only when finding a hidden city or a royal tomb. This was increasingly true of Victorian archaeologists who were concerned to legitimise their profession through explanation and classification. *The Old Yellow Book*, Browning's archival find, is placed under similarly intense scrutiny and reconsideration. The speaker's word, 'calculate', in line 677, plays on 'abacus' for counter (a calculating table for arithmetical problems) and 'abacus' puns on the first three letters of the alphabet — a b c. While 'calculate' is used in its usual sense of devise, reckon, estimate (implying forethought), there is a play on the derivation of the word from the Latin *calculus*, meaning stone or pebble, thus linking writing to the poet's tactile experience of handling the found fragment. The activity of calculating is of a piece with the shrewdness demonstrated by the book-buying, bargain-hunting *flâneur* in the Florentine market-place who reckons the gain or advantage of his find. Browning represents his discovery of both the archaeological fragment, and *The Old Yellow Book*, as accidental. But just as archaeological discoveries and excavations can be classified from the point of view of their purpose, as planned or accidental, Browning's accidental discovery becomes, as the passage progresses, more purposive: the fragment figures his plan to rescue 'truth' from *The Old Yellow Book*.

In the nineteenth century archaeological acquisitions were subjected to more intense analysis and classification than ever before. They were re-interpreted in a new context, according to the principles of an ambitious developing museum practice, which was concerned to become less dilettantish and more scientific. A chain of art, with the *Elgin Marbles* at its apex, 'formed the metaphorical premise of nineteenth century archaeological theory'.¹⁸ The *Elgin Marbles*, which had arrived at the British Museum in 1816, came to represent the finest achievement of classical Greece, and although the British Museum espoused a policy of 'open aesthetic and cultural pluralism', they became the standard against which Egyptian colossi, tombs from Lycia and other works were assessed and accordingly assigned places in descending order. The arts of Achaemenid Persia and Etruria, for example, were classified as forerunners to those of Greece and Rome.¹⁹ The continuity of past history could be experienced by the successive installation of monumental fragments. The 'chain of art' was an attempt to

create a historically authentic integration which would prove a Victorian notion of progress. Otherwise there would be no associative link between the fragments apart from the simple fact of contiguity or juxtaposition.

George Dennis, writing of Etrurian cities, assumes with a note of surety that archaeology provides a historical truth as a ground of knowledge superior to 'musty records':

We are indebted for most of this knowledge, not to musty records drawn from the oblivion of centuries, but to monumental remains — purer founts of historical truth — landmarks which, even when few and far between, are the surest guides across the expanse of distant ages.²⁰

Dennis qualifies this boastful assessment when he says a 'whole' Etruria is irrecoverable: 'The object of this work is not to collect the *disjecta membra* of Etruscan history, and form them into a whole ... it is simply to set before the reader a mass of facts relative to the Etruscan remains'. A contradiction emerges: archaeological 'landmarks' are fragments and, as such, are 'relative' to the original, but nonetheless these 'monumental remains' are a source of historical truth: 'purer founts of historical knowledge'. Just as Dennis describes his writerly ambitions in *Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*, as breathing new life into the past as though it were a body, the history he rejects is figured as the remains of a dismembered body.²¹ Browning's interest in the relevance or relation of the detached fragment to the whole, restoring life to the '*disjecta membra*' of a Renaissance legal case about wife murder (the mutilated female speaker of Book VII), finds a figurative echo in the conflicting ambitions of Victorian archaeology.

But Browning's chief concern in *The Ring and the Book* is not with archaeological remains but with those 'musty records' Dennis derides. He is identifying the yellowed textual ruins, and is celebrating his more ingenious and cunning eye, which is able to recognise value in things other people have overlooked. In doing so, Browning, no less than Dennis, asserts the priority of his own discipline which is able to record such moments. Despite its 'crumblement', the poet 'recognized' in the found fragment a recoverable original. The moment of recognition with its linked thematic strands of burial, death and rebirth, is related to the theme of archaeology in so far as the restoration of knowledge involves bringing to consciousness lost or forgotten material. As in psychoanalytic re-telling, this recovery involves a return of the repressed. Ironically Browning's own life has been interpreted in the light of 'the buried life' theme. The biographical legend of the two irreconcilable Robert Brownings — the 'buried life' of the private artist-genius and the public personage (the bourgeois man-about-town) — which began with Henry James' 'The Private Life' (1892), has endured in twentieth century criticism.²²

The speaker of Book I does not unequivocally suppose like George Dennis that his documents contain 'purer fount(s) of historical truth', but he does imply that the 'lost proportions' of the story are recoverable from the 'book', despite his recognition that lies and misrepresentations have accumulated in the process of its transmission over two centuries. In this way, the fragment establishes a relation between its own incompleteness and the lost whole to which it alludes. Just as the poet must deduce the whole building from the evidence of its part, in forensic and legal discourse the reconstruction of the scene of the crime uses fragments of information as evidence from which to 'calculate' guilt and innocence. My metaphor of the exhibit plays on the double meaning of the word: it refers to the fragment offered to view, as if the poem were a museum, and to its legal sense of a paper or specimen formally exhibited in a court of law or equity; the subject of debate and cross-examination.

In 'Palmyra', Peacock's speaker is haunted by the spectral voices of the dead: by 'silent wrecks more eloquent than speech' (stanza 2). Among 'mould'ring' tombs the speaker

listens for 'The voices of th' illustrious dead' (stanzas 2 & 11). For Browning, decline is answered not by retrospective nostalgia but by heroic recuperation, and although his poetic identity is linked to this excavation and restoration of a text, Browning's speaker does not collapse into the ruin he observes. No less than the speakers in Browning's earlier ruin poems, 'Love Among the Ruins' and 'Two in the Campagna', he maintains a complex awareness of the conflicts of power his project entails. Browning's fragment is visible evidence of human and cultural transience. It is a reminder too, that the artefacts of empire (including its famous poems) are subject to decomposition, to a return to the 'lone and level sands' of Shelley's 'Ozymandias'. Even though the speaker of Book I wants to preserve against decay, there is no claim to transcendence of physical decay through compensatory poetic monumentalisation, as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 55, 'Not marble or the gilded monuments' or Horace's 'Exegi monumentum' (Book 3, Ode 30) or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, perhaps the most famous twentieth-century poem about shoring up cultural fragments against the ruins of time. Rather, the speaker of Book I assumes a conqueror's *hauteur* towards the book among the ruins, and his recognition of its value is a trophy to his own personal ingenuity.

The scene of recognition described in this passage celebrates the poet's intuitive foresight, his ability to see what others have overlooked. The moment is one of clear rather than obscured vision. His recognition, placed in the outer framing monologue, is a model for other exemplary moments in the poem, including the poet's finding *The Old Yellow Book* in the market place, and his recognition of its truth, the elective affinity between Pompilia and Caponsacchi on their first meeting at the Arezzo theatre, the aged Pope's apocalyptic judgement against Guido, and Pompilia's apotheosis in the last line of Book VII. Browning's interest in revived human presences, in rescuing an obscure woman from the more 'curious annals' of a bygone age, suggests the opening lines of Walter Savage Landor's 'Past Ruin'd Iliion':

Past ruin'd Iliion Helen lives,
Alcestis rises from the shades;
Verse calls them forth; 'tis verse that gives
Immortal youth to mortal maids.²³

The musical and highly memorable first line condenses a number of powerful concepts which preoccupied Browning in *The Ring and the Book*: the remains of a past civilisation, a desire to revive the past, a woman and immortal life. Just as Landor's Helen 'lives' beyond the ruins of Iliion, Pompilia less transcendently is found, 'Alive i' the ruins' (III. 7).

Both Brownings participated in the extravagant worship by Victorians of Homer. Elizabeth's first poem 'The Battle of Marathon' (1820) was influenced by her reading of Homer in Pope's translation (1715–20), and later she translated Homer herself. She adds that 'Old Homer' made her feel her limitations as a woman poet: 'he does not spare me, for being a woman'.²⁴ The courtship letters between Elizabeth and Robert are peppered with allusions to events and personages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. After Elizabeth's death the enormous loss symbolised by Troy is identified by Browning with the loss of his wife. He wrote to Isa Blagden, making the Greek attitude to Troy in Homer's *Odyssey*, a symbol of his life with her:

The general impression of the past is as if it had been pain. I would not live it over again, not one day of it. Yet all that seems my real life, — and before and after, nothing at all: I look back on all my life, when I look there: and life is painful. I always think of this when I read the *Odyssey* — Homer makes the surviving Greeks, whenever they refer to Troy, just say of it 'At Troy, where the Greeks suffered so.' Yet all their life was in that ten years at Troy.²⁵

For those Victorians interested in the historical authenticity of Homer's Troy, myth, text and archaeology were intricately

linked. The passage from *The Ring and the Book* quoted at the beginning of this essay questions the authenticity of the oral transmission of the facts surrounding the Franceschini trial — 'the memory of the thing'. Browning's audacious attempt to recover the 'whole truth' (I. 117) and 'Fanciless fact' (I. 144) from his old source book, gives outrageous substance to Victorian anxieties about the transmission of texts as authoritative as Homer's epics and the Bible. Although *The Ring and the Book* predates Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of Troy by four years, speculative theories about the historicity of the legendary city were contemporaneous with its composition. In his late lyric, 'Development' (*Asolando* 1888–9), Browning regrets the lost authority of the Homeric text to represent the past 'faithfully'. Browning's poem shows that the archaeological reconstruction of lost Troy did not put to rest F. A. Wolf's theory (1795) that the *Iliad* consisted of bardic lays roughly woven together. Homer's texts may be persuasive, but as representations of historical reality they are no longer authoritative:

No actual Homer, no authentic text,
No warrant for the fiction I, as fact,
Had treasured in my heart and soul so long — (71–3)

Browning moves from a nostalgic recollection of his childhood games with Pope's Homer, the translation, which was also important to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetic development, to decry the 'unpleasant' dissections of Wolfian inspired scholarship:

'What's this the Germans say is fact
That Wolf found out first? It's unpleasant work
Their chop and change, unsettling one's belief' (63–5)

The 'unsettling' discrediting of Homer by scholars is felt primarily as a challenge to 'one's belief'. Just as Strauss thought of the Bible as myth, Browning responds to contemporaneous rationalist deconstructions of Homeric legend by according the 'dream' of Troy, a mythic significance.

As with the reclamation of mutilated fragments and recovery of antiquities, the restoration of dilapidated buildings went on with unprecedented energy in the nineteenth century. Eugene Emmanuel Viollet-Le-Duc (1814–79), the French Gothic Revival architect, dominated nineteenth-century theories of architectural restoration. Viollet-Le-Duc begins his treatise *On Restoration* by stressing the modernity of the term 'restoration'. He notes the paucity of definitions and makes some distinctions between merely preserving, repairing or rebuilding, and the 'art' of restoration, which more precisely entails reinstating it in a condition of completeness.²⁶ Asia and ancient civilisations, he argues, accepted decay with the result that a decaying building was neither destroyed or restored, but left to the action of time, much like the crumbled pillar encountered by the speaker of Book I.

In defending restoration against charges of superficiality and capricious fashionability, Viollet-Le-Duc cites interdisciplinary examples to legitimate his *métier*: Cuvier and geological research, philology, ethnology and science. He attributes the rapid advancement in this 'new method of studying the monuments of the past — whether in the material or moral sphere' to the influence of progressive nineteenth century attitudes to the past.²⁷ Viollet-Le-Duc continues to adduce new interdisciplinary metaphors when he describes the practice of earlier times of replacing, for example, a broken capital in an edifice of the twelfth century with a capital from the thirteenth, fourteenth or fifteenth century by way of reference to a written text: the anomalous juxtapositions are like 'interpolations in a text'.²⁸ Rather, Viollet-Le-Duc's ambition is to reinstate a building (he is referring to a fortress of the Middle Ages) 'in its entirety and in its minutest details' and, 'in a word giving back its form, its colour, and if I may venture to say so — its former life'.²⁹ Viollet-Le-Duc uses this familiar trope of restoring life to dead things in the same way that George Dennis uses it to describe his textual reconstruction of Etruscan culture.

In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning attempts to restore the reputations of Pompilia, Caponsacchi and the Pope, just as he tried to revive the reputations of Chatterton and Shelley from their entombment in literary history.³⁰ Repristination, resuscitation, resurrection and restoration form a related matrix of figures for this project. Johnson's *Dictionary*, which Browning studied in the early stages of his education,³¹ gives Milton's definitions for the word 'restorative': 'That which has the power to recruit life' and in another sense 'to bring back from degeneration, declension or ruin, to its former state'.³² 'Restoration' not only refers to things lost or damaged but to the recovery of life or consciousness of one thought dead, in both psychological and theological senses.

The idea of restoring something to its previous status or vogue is also related to 'resurrection' in the general sense of revival; rising again from sleep, decay or disuse. The word usually refers to Christ's 'resurrection' from the dead as one of the chief evidences of Christianity. In Browning's time, the *Risorgimento* gave the idea of a resurrected Italy, a political content. Barrett Browning's image of a politically and spiritually unified Italy in the closing lines of *Casa Guidi Windows*, particularly in the image of the restored pillars (776), heroically prefigures Browning's project of calculating the 'lost proportions of the style' from the fragmented pillar he stumbles upon in Book I:

We will trust God. The blank interstices
Men take for ruins, He will build into
With pillared marbles rare, or knit across
With generous arches, till the fane's complete.³³

Although Browning does not explicitly link ruin sentiment with national aspiration in the same way as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, his attempt in *The Ring and the Book* to preserve a story of a woman's oppression, links the theme of liberation and the idea of renaissance to archaeological restoration. In fact the English word renaissance came into use in Browning's time (the OED's earliest citation is 1840). Jacob Korg makes the point that 'By bringing the forgotten episodes of *The Old Yellow Book* to light again, and asserting that the poet could read their significance, Browning was linking both the Renaissance and the powerful archaeological energies of his time as analogues of the poetic process'.³⁴

Browning alludes to, but does not indulge in the romantic fragment. Rather *The Ring and the Book* amply shows that he wants completion to the point of redundancy; the structural integrity of his epic poem will depend on this drive for completeness, leaving no stone unturned. But despite the speaker's confident announcement of recoverable truth and immanent completion, the poem will remain resolutely incomplete, in full recognition of the indeterminacy of all representation and interpretation: 'Here were the end, had anything an end' (XII. 1). *The Old Yellow Book*, figured as an archaeological fragment, is an appropriate sign for an elusive 'truth' and for the secondariness of poetry that takes truth as its *telos*.

NOTES

1. *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick 1971 (Penguin, London). All subsequent references to *The Ring and the Book* will be to this edition.
2. The volume Browning found was composed of printed pamphlets and handwritten documents collected by a Florentine lawyer named Francesco Cencini at the time of the Franceschini murder trial in Rome. It is now in Balliol College, Oxford. The eighteen pamphlets provide an account of events leading up to the trial and the proceedings of the trial itself. *The Old Yellow Book* was translated and annotated by Charles W. Hodel and published in 1908. The edition I refer to is *The Old Yellow Book: Source of Browning's The Ring and the Book* (London: Dent, 1908).
3. In addition to the volume now called *The Old Yellow Book*, Browning used another contemporary source, a pamphlet on the trial obtained for him by a woman friend in 1862. This is known to Browning scholars as 'the secondary source'.
4. 28 Dec 1786, Goethe *Italian Journey*:141.
5. Comini 1988: 57 notes that in 1988 this image was appropriated to embellish *Eurocard* travel folders. This is enough to suggest the endurance in the Western imagination of the fantasy represented by Tischbein's idealised portrait of the creative, cultivated gentleman on a version of the eighteenth-century grand tour.
6. 1 Nov 1786, Goethe *Italian Journey*:116. Goethe's travel journal *Italienische Reise* is analysed in relation to Tischbein's portrait in more detail than is possible here by Moffitt 1983.
7. I am indebted to John F. Moffitt for pointing out the relation between these two paintings, see Moffitt 1983:452.
8. Quoted in Volney's *Les ruines*; Moffitt 1983:452.
9. In *Goethe in the Campagna*, the dramatis personae on the classical Greek bas-relief fragment on the right enact the recognition scene from Act III of *Iphigenie*; called by Goethe, 'my "Child of Sorrows" (*Schmerzenkind*): *Iphigenie*' (10 Jan 1787. *Italian Journey* 145). Although Browning's scene contains no equivalent to this bas-relief, his interest in the textual remains of the Franceschini case was impelled by another woman of sorrows, Pompilia.
10. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
11. De Lairese 1788:930. The influence of de Lairese on Browning's artistic development is usually mentioned in biographies of the poet and in critical commentaries. Browning remembered reading this book 'more often and with greater delight, when I was a child, than any other', Hall and Minchin 1938:9–10. Bloom 1979:552 comments on the influence of chapter 17 of *The Art of Painting* on 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'. Woolford 1975:40 also mentions *The Art of Painting* as an important influence on Browning's artistic development.
12. De Lairese 1788:255–7.
13. The poem relies on such primary sources as Volney's *Travels in Syria* (1787) and Robert Wood's *Ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tedmore, in the Desert* (1753).
14. McFarland 1981 analyses incompleteness, fragmentation and ruin in the theory and poetry of the Romantics.
15. Browning's 'Introductory Essay' ['Essay on Shelley'] in Pettigrew and Collins 1981:1012.
16. For a study of the professionalisation of archaeology in the Victorian period see Levine.
17. Jenkins 1992:13. Contemporaneously, books about archaeological excavations were popular. For example, Henry Layard's *Nineveh and its Remains* (1849), which shed light on familiar sites named in the Old Testament, became the first archaeological best seller. It sold 8,000 copies in its first year and two years later an abridgment was published to be sold on railway station bookstalls, in John Murray's series called 'Reading for the Rail, or Cheap Books in a large readable type published occasionally', see Hudson 1981:73.
18. Jenkins 1992:211.
19. Jenkins 1992:140.
20. Dennis 1848 I:xxiii-xxiv.
21. The phrase *dissecta membra* alludes to 'the remains of a poet, however dismembered', Horace *Satires*, I. 4. 63 Rudd 1973:45.
22. See Edell 1983; Ward, 1968 and 1969; and Thomas 1982.
23. Sidgwick 1946.
24. Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, 31 Mar. 1846, in Kintner 1969 II: 577.

25. 22 May 1867, Blagden 267.
26. Viollet-Le-Duc 1875:9. This work was translated from the article 'Restauration' in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture Française* (1858–68).
27. Viollet-Le-Duc 1875:15.
28. Viollet-Le-Duc 1875:12.
29. Viollet-Le-Duc 1875:26
30. Smalley 1948:91. Browning's essay was originally published anonymously as 'Article VIII' in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* 29 (Jul 1842):465–83.
31. Mrs Sutherland Orr 1891:50; Maynard 1977:297 and 445, n. 9.
32. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755, Longman, London 1853.
33. *Casa Guidi Windows*, J. Markus (ed). New York: Browning Institute, 1977 II:774–9.
34. Korg 1983:161.

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