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Theoretical Paradigms – Genres – Functions

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## Missing the Mediate Word: Facts as 'Memories of Things' between Non-existence and the Referent in Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*

### 1. Constructs and fictitious entities

In recent years, Isobel Armstrong (1993: 152) and Philipp Wolf (2002: 114) have placed Robert Browning within a theoretical tradition which allegedly claims that "[c]onsciousness is constructed from memory [while] memory is a series of constructs" (Wolf *ibid.*). Yet however enlightening their association of Browning with so "stunningly postmodern-sounding" (*ibid.*) a view on cognition may be, I would ask to consider whether their observations do not actually – by bracketing out their own discursive surrounding – miss an important aspect.

Research has indeed provided ample reason to credit Browning with an awareness of the fact that the items of reality we are conscious of are by no means self-contained, noncontingent entities.<sup>1</sup> And also the notion that statements consistent with memory and history are grounded in (posterior) derivatives of experience and explanation rather than in (objective) 'realities' has been traced in the writings of enough of Browning's contemporaries as to make Wolf's and Armstrong's tradition postulate more than acceptable.<sup>2</sup>

But could a mid-Victorian such as Browning actually have a presentiment that 'memories are constructs'? – Definitely not, since the concept of 'constructs' is in itself by and large a twenty-first-century construct, whereas within the Victorian order of things, an entity was either 'real' or 'fictitious', and a statement's content either in accord with empirical phenomena of an empirical referent, or epistemologically invalid.<sup>3</sup> Consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first registered English occurrence of the term 'construct' in a sense closely related to the way it is currently used in cognitivist dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Langbaum (1965), Lindemann (1999) and Rigg (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Aleida Assmann's (1999) notes on mnemonic contingencies in Wordsworth (*ibid.*: 91-94; 102-103), Nicholas Dames' (2001) observations on epistemological objections against memory in Ch. Brontë (*ibid.*: 76-124), and Wolf's own conclusive comments on Carlyle's assessment of historiography (2002: 121-125).

<sup>3</sup> As to the 'fictitious'/'real'-dichotomy see below; with respect to the correlation of 'referent-correspondence' and 'truth' cf. W.F. Cannon (1964: 48): "There cannot, as Victorians were fond of saying, be two truths, and the norm by which proposed truths were judged was, explicitly or often implicitly, the norm of natural science." For the nature of that norm cf. D.R. Benson (1985 [1981]: 301): "[T]he evidence seems to point to the assumption of an exact correlation – if not an identification – between fact and phenomenon".

courses turns out to consist in its intradisciplinary definition in 1890,<sup>4</sup> while the idea of 'social constructs' is of even much more recent origin (cf. Hacking 2001 [1999]).

Now Armstrong (1993: 148-154; 289-299) has pointed out that a post-Benthamite concept of 'fictitious entities', i.e. a concept of essentially intralinguistic referent-less items, which despite their actual reference to the 'non-existent' are treated as if their signified were 'real',<sup>5</sup> was prevalent in Victorian times – and, as she claims, also is prevalent in the poetry of Robert Browning. Yet a major problem arises precisely from the fact that such entities were considered to be referent-less and therefore to "owe their existence to language alone" (cf. Ogden 1932: 15; Armstrong 1993: 150). Thus, although Armstrong (*ibid.*: 150-151) indeed has good reason to suggest that Bentham's "theory of fictions" supplied ample footing for a poetics (or rather a form of defence of non-referential speech and writing) grounded in the "effectiveness of fiction", it is nonetheless doubtful whether the concept of 'fictitious entities' could have been brought to bear in the particular case of items of memory and perceived reality.

Even today, statements predicated upon the latter may be felt not to fulfil the truth conditions of traditional correspondence theory – in that they do not "map directly onto the world" (Lakoff/Johnson 1999: 6), and instead refer to entities already suffused with "imagination" (*ibid.*) and mediated by processes of "understanding" (*ibid.*) that organise experience according to conventionalised patterns adapted to the demands of those who try to understand. Nonetheless, such statements are supposed to be anything but non-referential. Generally speaking, the notion of constructs (like, say, gender) implies *contingency* of what is perceived as inevitably given in a certain way,<sup>6</sup> but it does not mean that the object in question lacks extra-linguistic existence in the sense of empirical perceptibility. Quite on the contrary, it is precisely the difference between the referentiality of 'constructs' – however contingent – and the non-referentiality of 'fictions'<sup>7</sup> that motivates treatises revealing the constructed nature of items of reality (cf. Hacking 2001 [1999]), and that gives to Michel Foucault's (1980: 193) often quoted dictum "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions" a note of chal-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "construct, n.2" *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. 2nd edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 3 Sept. 2004. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ogden (1932: 12).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hacking's (2001 [1999]: 12) criterion for the use of the term 'construct': "In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable."

<sup>7</sup> I am fully aware of the fact that the concept of 'fiction' here implied is a rather rigid – if not actually a somewhat naïve – one and has been rightly criticised by Wolfgang Iser (1993 [1991]) as analytically unsatisfying (cf. especially *ibid.*: 52-57 FN 2). The problem, however, remains that while it is easy to classify entities such as 'Europe' as 'constructs', it would be nearly absurd to declare them to be 'fictive', 'fictitious' or the result of 'fiction' – an absurdity immediately connected with the belief that Europe 'really exists', i.e. that the term Europe has a referent.

lence that is absent from a sentence like 'I am aware that my assessments constitute constructs rather than *true* descriptions of *objective* states of affairs.'<sup>8</sup>

The main difference consists in the fact that items of consciousness and memory – the elements that authoritative accounts of states of affairs seek to represent – are not only treated as if they were real, but that their contingency does not prevent statements predicated upon them from being referential, whereas statements that are predicated upon 'fictitious entities', and thus refer to 'fictive' states of affairs, are treated as if they were real *although* they have no referent. Tentatively speaking, fictions are consciously invented (and known to be so), whereas constructs are automatically generated and appear to be 'real'. Fiction implies the application of cause-effect relations that are considered to have equivalents in given reality to a scenario known to have no (exact) pendant in reality, whereas construction implies a pre-conscious structuring of reality (i.e. of referents) according to contingent rules.

And it is exactly the maintenance of this opposition between the 'non-referential' and the 'contingent', between the fictive and the conceptualised, as it is *inherent to* and *presupposed by* current uses of the term construct, that could not – at least not in my view – be expressed clearly, let alone presupposed, in Victorian discourses of memory. Browning may have been aware of the fact that "[c]onsciousness is constructed from memory [while] memory is a series of constructs" (Wolf 2002: 114), but it is extremely doubtful whether he would have been able to formulate a corresponding claim on the basis of the 'theory of fictions' available to him, without running the risk of conflating contingency with non-referentiality, and thus apparently registering a view that statements consistent with perceived and remembered reality in effect were utterly non-referential.<sup>9</sup>

And as a matter of fact, there is, as I intend to demonstrate, indeed good reason to assume that this calamity was clearly perceived by Browning – so clearly that even a part of his oeuvre that is often regarded as his major achievement actually may (and perhaps ought to) be interpreted as an attempt to solve this particular problem.

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<sup>8</sup> This hypothetical sentence is based on Ernst von Glasersfeld's (1991: 13) famous disclaimer: "I would be contradicting one of the basic principles of my own theory if I were to claim that the constructivist approach proved a *true* description of an *objective* state of affairs."

<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is important to note that even Wordsworth, whose awareness of the contingent character of memories has been demonstrated by Assmann (1999), in his putatively autobiographic *Prelude* clearly differentiates between actual memories ("recollection") and non-referential, confabulatory pseudo-memories that are "called to life" not by 'recollection' but on the basis of generative "after-meditation" (see below) – although, as he declares, in retrospect it becomes impossible to distinguish the former from the latter. Cf. Wordsworth (1994b: 658): "Of these and other kindred notices / I cannot say what portion is in truth / The naked recollection of that time, / And what may rather have been called to life / By after-meditation".

## 2. What there is to know

In the concluding lines of Browning's polyphonic historical courtroom epic *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69), THE POET<sup>10</sup> informs the "British Public" (XII, 831) that by the reading of *The Ring and the Book* "a lesson" (XII, 832) was (supposed) to be learned: a lesson the import of which had to be communicated in an "artistic way" (XII, 847), since any explicit formulation would only have served to "wrong the thought, missing the mediate word" (XII, 857). Nonetheless, an attempt to render the thought in an unartistic, straightforward manner is made. Put in this way, *The Ring and the Book*, according to its homodiegetic 'author' (THE POET), teaches "[t]his lesson, that our human speech is naught, / Our human testimony false, our fame / And human estimation words and wind" (XII, 834-836). And the unpleasant implication of human testimony being false – as well as the reason why human testimony *must* be false – is that whatever a given member of the "Public" believes to *know* on grounds of perception and reflection, has actually no foundation in fact: "'Thy right is wrong, eyes hast thou yet art blind, / 'Thine ears are stuffed and stopped, despite their length, / 'And, oh, the foolishness thou countest faith!" (XII, 842-844)

In uttering these sentiments, THE POET echoes prior observations made by two other monologuists appearing in the poem, and that is to say, by two characters the speeches of which he – as *The Ring and the Book's* putative author – claims to have composed. One of these characters, "the barefoot Augustinian" (XII, 446) CELESTINO, agrees with Rom. 3:4 that "God is true / And every man a liar – that who trusts / To human testimony for a fact / Gets this sole fact – himself is proved a fool" (XII, 600-603). And the reason he gives is that the noetic abilities of human beings are limited to such an extent that any individual, "nor he a bad man, no, nor fool, – / Only [...] blind like all his mates" (XII, 498-499) might err so far as to even calumniate an anchoretic martyr, mistaking the latter for a "devotee[] to execrable creed", who, "defying law", "skulk[s]" in his shadowy abode (XII, 500-501).

The other monologist, THE POPE, argues the unreliability of human testimony on grounds of discrepancies between ontological reality and reality as it is organised and structured not in perception, but in semiosis:

Why, can [man] tell you what a rose is like, / Or how the birds fly, and not slip to false / Though truth serve better? Man must tell his mate / Of you, me and himself, knowing he lies, / Knowing his fellow knows the same, – will think / 'He lies, it is the method of a man!' / And yet will speak for answer 'It is truth' / To him who shall rejoin 'Again a lie!' (X, 364-371)

<sup>10</sup> This actually nameless character – i.e. the homodiegetic 'author' of the poem, who makes his appearances in chapters ('Books') I and XII – has often been flatly identified with Browning himself (cf., e.g., Swingle 1968; Chell 1984). Following Sullivan (1968) and Rigg (1999), however, I prefer to regard this monologist as a *poetic persona* distinguishable from the historical author.

In communication, we might resume his argument, human beings exchange no correlates of ontological reality – in fact, they do not even exchange correlates of experienced reality, but vicarious items the informational scope of which is reduced and manipulated in order to adapt them to the purpose of communication. The whole process is highly conventionalised, known and understood as “the method of a man”, who “must” inevitably refer to ‘real’ phenomena by means of statements the content of which does not map onto the actual characteristics of their referents. But although the content does not map onto these characteristics – which in terms of correspondence theory (see above) means that any such statement is of negative truth value, i.e. “again a lie!” – the statement still may and will be claimed to ‘be truth’ by reason of its perceived referentiality. Although the qualities of entities such as ‘a rose’, ‘the flight of birds’, ‘I’ and ‘you’, are automatically structured according to conventionalised rules, within the limits of the human condition they can be accepted as referring to the actually given.

And this form of examination of ‘truth and lie in an extra-moral sense’<sup>11</sup> does not only constitute the common concern of a number of *The Ring and the Book*’s protagonists; in fact, the entire poem is suffused with investigative reflections of man’s ability to acquire and pass on knowledge about (historical) reality – suffused to such an extent that the poem has actually earned renown as an instance of “epistemological literature in the narrowest sense of the term” (cf. Lindemann 1999: 80).<sup>12</sup> Contents, structure, and genre of *The Ring and the Book* have – as the following paragraphs intend to demonstrate – equal share in this epistemological endeavour. While the poem on the level of genre purports to impart knowledge, and on the plot level describes an attempt to achieve knowledge, its structure is indicative of a sceptical view on the accessibility of knowledge.

*The Ring and the Book* imparts knowledge by virtue of its character as an instance of “poeticised documentation”.<sup>13</sup> The incidents which the poem relates have their counterparts in factual history, since they are (explicitly) drawn from an authentic collection of legal documents and pamphlets<sup>14</sup> that were produced and consulted in the context of a historical “Roman murder-case” (I, 121). In this way, readers of the poem acquire knowledge of a certain historical event, in that they take notice of the crimes committed by – and the proceedings conducted against – an impoverished nobleman by the name of Count Guido Franceschini, who in 1698 killed his allegedly unfaithful wife, Pompilia Francesca (née Comparini), and her parents. Yet a legal inquisition

<sup>11</sup> The allusion seems appropriate, since the general drift of argument in Browning’s poem indeed anticipates – as critics have not failed to observe (cf. Peckham 1968; Lindemann 1999) – Nietzsche.

<sup>12</sup> Translation E.B.; original text: “Bei *The Ring and the Book* lässt sich in der Tat von einer epistemologischen Literatur im engsten Sinne sprechen”.

<sup>13</sup> Translation E.B.; cf. the title of Neuhaus’ (1971: 80) chapter 2.c): “Robert Browning ‘The Ring and the Book’ – Poetisierung der Dokumentation”.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hodel’s (1916 [1908]) edition of Browning’s source material.

such as this in itself constitutes a strife to know and to make known – to achieve and collectivise knowledge concerning the genesis of a certain state of affairs (such as, for instance, the presence of mutilated bodies in the Rue Morgue) –, to the effect that imparting knowledge of the proceedings against Guido actually amounts to imparting knowledge of the way a certain knowledge about Guido was acquired. The notorious question ‘whodunnit’, however, never had any bearing on the Franceschini case. Instead, the actual trial consisted in an attempt to clarify whether the Franceschini killings had been provoked by offences to the nobleman’s reputation and self-esteem severe enough as to justify the interpretation of his deed as an act of pardonable – if not exactly legal – manslaughter *honoris causa*.

The following facts in the case were conceded by both Prosecution and Defence: Pietro and Violante Comparini were a middle-aged childless couple living in Rome whose income could only be secured after Pietro’s death if they had a child; Violante bought the child of a prostitute. This child, Pompilia, was eventually married to Count Guido Franceschini. The marriage was unhappy, and the Comparini returned to Rome, where they sued Guido for the restoration of Pompilia’s dowry on the grounds of her illegitimacy. Pompilia herself eventually fled from Arezzo in the company of a young priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi. Guido pursued them and had them arrested on the outskirts of Rome; as a result, Caponsacchi was exiled to Civita Vecchia for three years, and Pompilia was sent to a convent while the lawsuits were decided. But then, because she was pregnant, she was released into the custody of the Comparini. A fortnight after the birth of her child, Guido and four accomplices murdered her and her putative parents.<sup>15</sup>

What remained to be ascertained was whether or not Pompilia had indeed been guilty of adultery, as well as the extent to which Guido’s self-respect and social standing had actually suffered from the elopement of his wife and/or from the sudden publicity of her somewhat disreputable descent. As a side issue, there arose the question whether Guido (who happened to be secretary to a cardinal) actually fell under worldly jurisdiction, or whether he enjoyed clerical privilege and therefore could only be sentenced by a church tribunal. Allegations to this effect, however, were quickly refuted by the Vatican. At the end of the day, Guido Franceschini’s act of violence was declared unjustified, Pompilia was officially restored to good repute, and Guido sentenced to capital punishment.

Due to the particulars of the case, this decision amounts to the following ‘official statement’ concerning the nature of the Franceschini tragedy: Guido had neither been betrayed by Pompilia, nor acted in defence of his honour in the killing of his wife and parents-in-law. Furthermore, the exoneration of

<sup>15</sup> This synopsis follows the entry “Ring and the Book, The” in: *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Eds. Margaret Drabble & Jenny Stringer. Oxford University Press, 1996. *Oxford Reference Online*, Oxford University Press. 4 September, 2004. <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>>.



Pompilia implies that the reasons for her elopement were not of the amorous kind, which in turn is indicative of a contention that she was driven from home by her husband's conduct. As a result, to any account of the Franceschini case and its consequences there is inherent an officially sanctioned account of the killings' antecedents, from which knowledge concerning the factual prehistory of Guido's deed is to be derived.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to the efforts of the epistemological instrument named inquisition, we might say, the fact of Pompilia Franceschini's innocence and marital misery has been brought to public knowledge – a knowledge which Browning's poem in turn imparts to its readers.

Based on a legal dossier assembling the documents in this historical murder case<sup>17</sup> – the dossier which in *The Ring and the Book* is termed *The Old Yellow Book* – the poem presents the Franceschini trial in the form of a sequence of dramatic monologues in blank verse. The respective monologues are attributed to the different parties to the case as well as to the nineteenth-century POET, who appears in chapters I and XII, and who is designed to tempt readers into identifying him with the actual author Robert Browning.<sup>18</sup> In the first chapter, this narrator claims to have composed *The Ring and the Book*, explains the poem's indebtedness to *The Old Yellow Book*, and affirms – on grounds of this indebtedness – the facticity of the incidents 'his' poem refers to. Despite this affirmation, however, the actual status of *The Ring and the Book* remains a matter of doubt – a doubt which THE POET addresses in his often-quoted question: "Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?" (I, 705) Applying correspondence theory, *The Ring and the Book's* narrative, if regarded as a statement, clearly misses truth, since the poem's plot explicitly does not correlate with external reality. Thus, for instance, THE POET informs his audience that in the case of the original trial there "was no judgment-bar, / No bringing of accuser and accused" (I, 155-156), whereas in his poem, GUIDO appears in court and CAPONSACCI testifies to a jury.

By means of these explicit discrepancies, *The Ring and the Book's* claim to impart historical knowledge is qualified – or rather, modified. Instead of assuming that *The Ring and the Book's* informational content is identical with historical reality, readers are to assume that this content is the result of a deliberate act of manipulative reorganisation – an act of reorganisation that is also, and specifically, illustrated by the poem's eponymous ring metaphor. According to THE POET, the "Ring" functions as "a figure", "a symbol", or a

<sup>16</sup> That the 'official version' reconstructed here was demonstrably insincere, in that actually Pompilia's innocence was by no means evident (cf. Lonoff 1982) has no bearing on its functional validity: her innocence, we might say, was made 'known' – even though in all probability it did not exist.

<sup>17</sup> It is based on a dossier that embraces evidence and summaries provided by representatives of Prosecution and Defence, as well as unofficial pamphlets which represent the antecedents of the crime – either sympathising with the defendant, or else with the purpose of exonerating Pompilia. Cf. Hodell (1916 [1908]).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Sullivan (1968: 237 FN 6).

"sign" (cf. I, 31-32) for the result of a process by force of which on the one hand "[t]he untampered gold, the fact untampered with" (I, 366) is "mixed" with "motions of mine [THE POET] / That quickened, made the inertness malleable / O' the gold" (cf. I, 701-703), but which nevertheless does not alter the *essence* of what is being manipulated in this way, since in the end, "[w]hile, self-sufficient now, the shape remains," the item likewise remains "Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore: / Prime nature with an added artistry - / No carat lost, and you have gained a ring." (I, 28-30)<sup>19</sup>

Drawing upon – while at the same time deliberately contradicting – a 'theory of fictions' much older than Bentham's, Browning here reconfigures the ancient topos of 'fashioning' or 'moulding material' (Lat. *ingere*) in an innovative way.<sup>20</sup> By reactivating the dichotomy of substance and form inherent to this long-dead metaphor, THE POET manages to dispense with the dichotomy of referentiality/nonreferentiality,<sup>21</sup> and in effect postulates that statements whose content is consistent with (pre-existent) data purposely organised do not differ *essentially* from statements whose content is supposed to have not been (deliberately) 'tampered with'. Especially since, as we must infer from his further use of the ring metaphor, there actually *are no such things* as 'facts untampered with': Significantly, the ring metaphor is extended to 'fact' (the 'untampered gold') itself. Commenting on his work's relation to reality, THE POET declares that his "fancy has informed, *transpierced*, / *Thridded and so thrown fast the facts* else free, / *As right through ring and ring runs the djereed*" (I, 465-468; emphasis added). 'Facts', the passage suggests, *are* 'rings'. While the poet's task consists in the intentional fanciful manipulation of items of reality, these items in themselves obviously do not exist in a virginal state of sheer essence – instead, even before their artistic manipulation they always already *are* structured and formed in a manner that brooks comparison with the effects of the poet's own 'artistry'.

Yet the existence of such non-artistic artistry is not only postulated in *The Ring and the Book*, but also demonstrated *qua* mimicry of its effects. That the polyphonic structure of *The Ring and the Book* demonstrates how perspective interferes with knowledge, in that it emphasises the extent to which "a fact / Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look" (I, 863-864) has been stated often

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ring metaphor cf. Cundiff (1972).

<sup>20</sup> The outlines of this theory – as prevalent in writings of Cicero and Quintilianus – have been sketched by Hose (1996). The eminent difference to Browning consists in the fact that in ancient theory 'the moulded' – although by no means 'fabulous' – is not grounded in or based on 'res verae', but belongs into an entirely different category. There is no trace of the idea of 'essential equivalence' of 'res fictae' and 'historia' as implied by Browning's use of the metaphor.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, it is the fact that neither the central protagonists nor the central theme (i.e. the Franceschini killings and Guido's trial) of *The Ring and the Book* are 'fictitious entities' that allows him to do so.

enough<sup>22</sup> as to allow me to make comparatively short work of the issue. Nevertheless it has to be noted: the main formal peculiarity of *The Ring and the Book* consists in the fact that "the Old Bailey story" of Guido and his wife – to quote an early critic of the poem<sup>23</sup> – on the plot level is told by a number of narrators, displaying different perspectives on the tragedy. "Ten times [the story] is told, and yet it is not told once [...], since [t]he truth of each speech is relative to him who speaks" (Dowden 1912: x). Apart from the appearances of THE POET, the poem consists in dramatic monologues allegedly composed by THE POET. These monologues are attributed to seventeenth-century speakers, who recount the antecedents of the Franceschini killings each from their own point of view: three independent commentators of Guido's killings – representing three different streamings within contemporary public opinion in the matter<sup>24</sup> – provide three different versions of the events that led up to the crime, sympathising either with Guido or Pompilia. GUIDO appears in court and prison; POMPILIA speaks from her deathbed; Pompilia's putative lover CAPONSACCI testifies to the jury; the lawyers argue pro and contra Guido's plea of *honoris causa*, and THE POPE adds his views on human – and papal – fallibility as well as on the case, before he (contrary to *The Old Yellow Book*) in effect passes judgement, in that he refuses to affirm Guido's claim to clerical privilege on the grounds of Pompilia's innocence and Guido's guilt. Finally, an additional comment – this time not on the crime, but on the trial – is furnished by Pompilia's confessor CELESTINO, who argues that in a world in which usually only "God is true and every man a liar" (XII, 600-603), justice for once has prevailed.

Attempts to relate this narrative technique to (varying) conceptualisations of the nature of knowledge and truth abound: Thus one line of tradition has claimed that the poem's polyphonic structure ought to be interpreted as merely illustrating the essential relativity of all human knowledge,<sup>25</sup> while another line of tradition has regarded polyphony in *The Ring and the Book* as a means precisely to overcome the drawbacks of individual perspective and thereby eventually to achieve a form of knowledge that is no longer compromised by the effects of point of view.<sup>26</sup> Yet whatever the actual stance in this particular issue, there can hardly be any doubt that – together with the poem's documentary ambition, its theme, and its protagonists' comment on

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<sup>22</sup> For an extensive survey of corresponding articles and monographs dating from the first half of the century, cf. Swingle (1968: 259-261); later representatives of this tradition include, e.g., Lonoff (1982), Slinn (1989) and Lindemann (1999).

<sup>23</sup> Dowden (1912: x) credits Thomas Carlyle with this description of *The Ring and the Book's* theme.

<sup>24</sup> On the basis of the unofficial pamphlets in "The Old Yellow Book".

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the general affinity between the technique of multiple narration and concepts of epistemological scepticism cf. Nünning/Nünning (2000); for 'relativist' readings of *The Ring and the Book* drawing upon the poem's polyphonic structure cf., e.g., Langbaum (1965) and Lindemann (1999).

<sup>26</sup> Cf., e.g., Miller (1963), Lonoff (1982).

questions of knowledge acquisition and transfer – also *The Ring and the Book's* structure points to the processes by which – and, notably, the *extent to which* – knowledge about external reality is to be acquired, in that it emphasises the degree to which knowledge changes with perspective.

### 3. The fact, the memory of the thing

But while epistemologically interested readings of *The Ring and the Book* are the rule rather than the exception among Browning scholars, corresponding discussions often tend to abstract from the fact that the knowledge investigated by Browning's poem constitutes knowledge of a special kind. As Swingle (1968: 265) has remarked: "What has been rather slighted by the epistemological approach in criticism is the temporal aspect of *The Ring and the Book*." Following his hint, I would like to increase awareness of the fact that the knowledge, the accessibility of which is explored in and by the poem, decisively is a knowledge about "something which once existed in the past but which no longer exists" (ibid.). For the nineteenth-century POET and the "British Public" he addresses, the Franceschini trial belongs to the past – and from the seventeenth-century monologuists' point of view, so does the chain of events that has culminated in Guido's crime. By the time they speak, "the *is* of the murder and all that led up to it has already become *was*" (ibid.: 269), and the states of affairs to which they refer can no longer be observed. "Fallen stonewise" (I, 841) – *The Ring and the Book* reads –, the events after the short interval of their occurrence have instantly dropped out of the visible world of contemporaneity again and have sunken "out of reach" (I, 845), into the depths of the "pool" (I, 842) of time.

Adopting Swingle's terminology, the antecedents of the Franceschini killings thus at the time of Guido's trial amount to "something [...] which no longer exists" (Swingle 1968: 265), while by the time THE POET sets to work, also the legal proceedings against Guido have ceased 'to exist'. And yet, as Swingle (ibid.) – slightly inconsequently – points out, "of course the murder events still exist, at least, *as was*". The point that Swingle wishes to make, however, is made much clearer in the diction of the poem he discusses, namely in *The Ring and the Book's* intuitively plausible differentiation of 'facts' and 'things'. Insofar as events and states of affairs are part of the perceptible universe, they are 'things' of minimal duration, given only for the short span during which the event occurs, the state of affairs continues. Thus THE POET – with respect to "[t]he tragic piece" of the long-past Franceschini affair – makes mention of the universal "death of things" (I, 523; 520), while THE POPE differentiates abstract relations from things, finding "a thing existent only while it acts" (X, 1500). The existence of a 'fact', in contrast, does not depend on perception, but on cognition, and therefore can outlast the short span during which a temporal state of affairs (a 'thing') is given. While a 'thing' may alter its characteristics or die 'the death of things', the 'fact' that it once existed and possessed certain characteristics remains – provided that there is

consciousness concerning the original characteristics of the 'thing'. In an important passage of the poem, this relation is explicated.

After pointing out the differences between the varying accounts of the murder's prehistory – i.e. the existence of different views on the degree of guilt ('wolf'-character) and innocence ('sheep'-character) displayed by the respective parties to the case – THE POET concludes:

There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,/ Turned wrong to right,  
proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves, (I, 645-646) [...] / Till all at once the memory  
of the thing, – The fact that, wolves or sheep, such creatures were, – / Which hitherto,  
however men supposed, / 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, / Basé gone, shaft lost, only entablature,  
/ Dwindled into no bigger than a book (I, 661-671; emphasis added).

While "the tragic piece" of the Franceschini affair has earlier been declared to have "died the death of things", "*the fact that [...] such creatures [like Guido and Pompilia] were*" survives in the form of "the *memory of the thing*" (I, 661) – at least for a while. After that, however, even the 'fact' of the Franceschini affair – which includes Guido's murder as well as the reasons he had for committing it – is eradicated.

In this context, the implications of the memory-figure are twofold: First of all, the passage affirms the traditional conceptualisation of memories as something which is actually triggered by 'things' and does not generate its informational content independent from exterior states of affairs. Actually, it seems reasonable to assume that their being triggered by 'things' is responsible for their ability to constitute 'indisputable' facts. But while 'things' are exterior to memory and trigger memory, 'facts' do not exist outside memory, in that they depend on their 'being known'. In contrast to things, facts owe their existence to human consciousness in the form of memory. A 'fact' therefore *is* the memory of a thing – it is no 'thing' itself – insofar as it only exists *qua* 'memory of the thing'. Here, the analogies to the ring metaphor are prominent. As facts always already exist in the manipulated state of 'rings', so they exist only in the form of memories – and memories, the poem demonstrates, are conflicting, and their relation to the original characteristics of the 'things' which they commemorate by no means easy to determine.

Their conflicting character is demonstrated by the poem's polyphonic structure, since, as I would claim, *The Ring and the Book* presents all its (quasi) contemporary accounts of the Franceschini affair (i.e. the seventeenth-century monologues), in effect, as different ways to *remember* the antecedents of Guido's crime. By means of the poem's overall temporal structure, which introduces a dichotomy between the absence of 'memories of the thing' in THE POET'S time and ample reference to the 'thing' on the part of the other monologuists, *The Ring and the Book* bridges the gap between knowledge

grounded in individual experience and collectivised in testimony,<sup>27</sup> and knowledge not derived from prior observation, but achieved either *qua* access to a common body of allegedly valid information, or by inference from statements that on their part are grounded either in experience or information.<sup>28</sup> All forms occur in *The Ring and the Book*. CAPONSACCI, for instance, *recollects* in the witness-box his elopement with Pompilia, whereas to the allegorical representative of "the general mind" (I, 844) of HALF ROME, "the whole is known" (II, 1441) on the basis of *common knowledge*, and THE POPE, finally, *infers* – or in his own words: "evolve[s] – his own version of the murder's antecedents "from the whole" (X, 230) of the material presented to him.

For analysis' sake, these different forms of knowledge could in fact be associated respectively with the phenomena of 'individual memory', 'collective memory', and acts of reconstruction that do not presuppose or imply, but *result in the generation of* knowledge about the past. In the case of *The Ring and the Book*, however, their heterogeneous character is relevant only insofar, as the concept of 'memory of the thing' – the dualism of 'memory of the thing' versus 'ignorance of the thing' – is employed precisely in order to let the conceptual boundaries between the different phenomena become blurred. After that operation, what remains is the seventeenth-century monologues' common character of 'memories of the thing', and in this character their multiplicity demonstrates how 'memory of the thing' is contingent upon individual – and often arbitrary – preferences and biases on the part of its respective carrier.

'Contingent upon', however, in this context does not mean 'impeded by' or 'made impossible by'. Thus, for instance, HALF ROME's account of the crime's prehistory obviously is influenced by his own apprehensions concerning the marital fidelity of his wife (cf. II, 1540-1547), while the (pro-Pompilia) version contributed by THE OTHER HALF ROME, by THE POET is declared to be due to a "fancy-flit" (I, 886) as arbitrary as an individual's decision to support a particular starter at a sports event (cf. I, 887-892). Yet despite their idiosyncrasies and traces of arbitrariness, they constitute 'memories of the thing' and therefore in the same degree are responsible for the existence of "the fact that such [things] were".

Perception is misleading, things exist only for fleeting moments, posterior consciousness of their qualities distorts its object, point of view determines knowledge, and statements exchanged in communication do not map on reality – it is due to these implicit and explicit claims that *The Ring and the Book* has often been called 'a relativist poem' (Langbaum 1965), if not even an example of "radical relativism" (Lindemann 1999: 77). Emphasising relativ-

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the two monologues of GUIDO, and the monologues of POMPILIA and CAPONSACCI.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the monologues of the commentators (HALF ROME, THE OTHER HALF ROME, and TERTIUM QUID), of the lawyers (DOMINUS HYACINTHUS DE ARCHANGELIS and JURIS DOCTOR JOHANNES-BAPTISTA BOTTINIUS), and THE POPE, as well as the allegations to the nature of the Franceschini case and its antecedents made by THE POET.

ity, however, misses the import of two of the most prominent elements of Browning's poem – its ostentatiously documentary character and the fact that it refers to legal proceedings resulting in a death sentence. Both these elements point to a sphere where relativity is obviously supposed to end, in that they either imply or emphasise (the necessity to maintain) the dichotomy of valid and epistemologically invalid propositions. Firstly, *The Ring and the Book's* claim to constitute a form of 'fiction that makes fact alive' actually affirms implicitly the supposition that this is a characteristic which other instances of fiction do not share. Which is to say that the boundary between statements that are (by and large) consistent with empirical reality, and statements which – once they are being considered as propositions – prove inconsistent with reality, remains intact. And, secondly, the consequences of the existence of this boundary are made only too clear by means of the poem's theme, that is to say by the necessity to (be able to) defend – even in the face of contingency – basic truth claims in matters of daily life, matters that may amount to questions of life and death.

Neither can there be any doubt about the historical factuality of the Franceschini affair as such, nor do we find in *The Ring and the Book* any indications to the effect that owing to the arbitrariness inherent to man's consciousness of reality, nothing can be actually known. Consider the case of THE POPE who, perusing the contradictory accounts of the murder's prehistory, resumes: "Pleadings and counter-pleadings, figure of fact / Beside fact's self, these summaries [i.e. the testimonies, E.B.] to wit, – / How certain three were slain by certain five: I read here why it was, and how it went" (X, 215-218). Although the contradictory character of the statements he has just read leads him to contemplate man's indirect relation to exterior reality in the soliloquy on 'truth and lie in an extra-moral sense' quoted above, the idea that the basic action he summarises may never have had any form of existence exterior to individual consciousness and language could never arise. Certainly, one need not go as far as Swingle (1968: 267), who associates with *The Ring and the Book* a belief that "truth [...] is objective", "as solid and stable in this poem as in any pre-nineteenth-century work, when a God or plan sustained objective 'givens' in an ordered universe" (ibid.: 264), yet it is clear that in *The Ring and the Book* neither givens such as the murder and the trial are negated, nor does the poem utterly deny the ability of 'memories of givens' to impart knowledge about external states of affairs utterly.

#### 4. The mediate word

And here the ring of this investigation returns to its beginning. If indeed – as CELESTINO quotes St. Paul – "every man" were "a liar", and if indeed – as THE POET, THE POPE, and CELESTINO remark – all "human testimony" were "false", how could we know about Guido and his wife, and thus preserve "the memory of the thing" (I, 661)? How could *The Ring and the Book* be something else than a lie, a tale that simply has no equivalent in reality, a false testimony

delivered by THE POET? Obviously, the lesson which the poem teaches must not be reduced in this way. But obviously too, the poem permanently points to the way in which knowledge about the past exists in an adapted, moulded state, a state which is contingent upon the inevitable structuring activity of the human mind, and thus is reminiscent of the results of an artist's voluntary and conscious interference with the given world from which he derives his material. Yet contrary to the allegations of a liar, and contrary also to the references to the non-existent that are characteristic of imaginative art, by means of these moulded forms actual knowledge about the past may be possessed and imparted. Although, in terms of correspondence theory, any statement whose content is consistent with these moulded forms must be false – in that it does not map perfectly on the external reality of the original 'thing' – its truth value is by no means equivalent to that of a lie, or to a statement whose content is consistent only with imagination. Because the moulded has been triggered by an actual referent – by a 'thing' that in its own time constituted a portion of external reality. Today, we have a fixed term that we use to designate this particular in-between status of contingent referentiality, but Browning, 'missing the mediate word', had to compose a polyphonic faction epic in order to demonstrate its existence.

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