‘A god in an umbrella’: The World of Robert Browning seen from a Lusophone Perspective

Paula Alexandra Guimarães
paulag@ilch.uminho.pt

My poet holds the future fast,
Accepts the coming age’s duty,
Their present for the past.
(R. Browning)

What we could call the ‘average Portuguese reader’ of Robert Browning, though being a rarity in itself, is usually very much puzzled by the way in which this prominent English poet of the Victorian era, the alleged inventor of the dramatic monologue, seems to ‘hide’ himself behind disparate characters or disembodied voices, often originated in countries other than England (Italy, France or Spain), who tell the fragmented and uncommon ‘stories’ of their lives. We have only to consult one of his earliest and most well-known poems, “The Laboratory” (1844), to understand this reaction of strangeness on the part of the average reader, whose expectations are subverted:

ANCIENT REGIME
Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
May gaze thro’ these faint smokes curling whitely,
As thou pliest thy trade in this devil’s-smithy--
Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?
(1-4)

Several pressing questions immediately arise, namely who the speaker in the poem and his supposed addressee/auditor are, what their particular story or set of circumstances is,

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1 The question and the nature of the Portuguese readership of Browning’s oeuvre will be discussed in some detail further on in this article.
2 Although much earlier occurrences of the form have been discovered in other poets, including women poets such as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, there is a general consensus among the critics that Robert Browning was the one who best and more frequently developed it.
3 “The Laboratory” is set in seventeenth century France, before the French Revolution (therefore, the subtitle ‘Ancien Regime’), and it was probably inspired by the life of Marie Madeleine Marguerite D’Aubray, marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-1676), who poisoned her father and two brothers and planned to poison her husband.
4 All the excerpts of Browning’s poems that are quoted in this article are taken from James Loucks and Andrew Stauffer’s Norton Critical Edition in the list of Works Cited.
and why the discourse or enunciation is relevant to the poet and the reader. None of these are answered, at least in a first reading of this dramatic monologue.  

Compared with other poets of the period that the Portuguese might find more palatable or ‘readable’, such as Alfred Tennyson or Matthew Arnold, who not only remained faithful in many ways to the prevailing Romantic lyric tradition but who also resonate with a quintessential ‘Englishness’, Browning emerges as a prolific ‘oddity’ or singularity that is difficult to account for. Indeed, as far as the Portuguese are concerned, his ‘alterity’ or difference, not only in relation to his predecessors but also his contemporaries, could be said to bear the ominous mark of eccentricity: to their mind and ear, his themes sound far-fetched and dislocated, his language capricious and prosaic, and his multiple speakers obsessed mental or criminal cases.

What, then, is there in Browning’s poetry that could be called ‘poetic’, one might ask. How does he correspond to the Portuguese reader or critic’s notion of Poet? More importantly, perhaps, could a Portuguese reading of Browning’s poems illuminate some of his proclaimed ‘obscurities’, improve our knowledge of the poet and the man and, by extension, increase our understanding of his country and his time? To what extent could his work, in turn, have influenced Portuguese writers and poets or interested Portuguese literary critics and commentators? How has his relatively small Portuguese reading public responded throughout the years to the challenge of his poetic complexities? These are just some of the many questions that this unique artistic phenomenon we call ‘Robert Browning’ poses, and that we will try to address in the context of both the Portuguese and Lusophone reception of his writings.

Of the nineteenth-century Portuguese poets who were immediate contemporaries of Robert Browning (1812-1889), and who might have acquired some information or knowledge of the English poet during the course of their lives, we suspect that only

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5 A dramatic monologue may perhaps be defined as a monologue half-way to becoming a dialogue. We have a character that exposes his thought before a virtual somebody, who does not reply because he/she cannot or is not supposed to, but in function of whom the character’s language and worldview is argued and (re)actualised.

6 Although not much read by the Portuguese public, Tennyson and Arnold appeared to be more accessible and intelligible in their language and, in their themes, more readily identifiable with the notion that the Portuguese had of the ‘English poet’. If Arnold represented for them both the poetic embodiment of the Victorian malaise and the conflicted existentialism of modern man, Tennyson, in his post of poet laureate, was seen as the new English bard and reviver of Anglo-Saxon legend and myth.

7 The charge of obscurity or unintelligibility of his writings was frequently levelled against Robert Browning in his own country and time, and pointed out as a major impediment for both his literary and financial success.

8 By ‘Lusophone’ we mean not only strictly Portuguese speaking communities but also Luso-descendants who have played an important role in the analysis of this reception.
those living in the last decades of the century could have fully read and eventually have been influenced by him. We have to bear in mind the relevant fact that Browning’s greater influence and impact in his own country would be more felt towards the end of the Victorian period and beginning of the twentieth century, and that the readership of his often unusual poems was quite restricted, even in England. Nonetheless, it may be useful to trace briefly the career development of some of these Portuguese contemporaries of Browning in order to detect eventual similarities with him in terms of overall poetic concerns, circumstances, styles and methods.

An important difference regarding the nature and incidence of the European literary movements of the age should be mentioned in advance. Unlike Britain, and like France, Portugal had a slow or belated response to Romanticism and to Post-Romantic movements alike; in contrast to this, an almost immediate reaction to and adoption of the Realist and Naturalist schools occurred. On the other hand, Portuguese artists and intellectuals, either working in their own country or living abroad as political exiles or officials, were much more receptive to French influences of every kind and were, for the most part, notorious Francophiles. There were some notable exceptions to this rule, though, as we hope to demonstrate.

One of these exceptions was the poet, playwright, novelist and politician commonly known as Almeida Garrett, who with his epic poem Camões (1825) is considered to have introduced Romanticism (in its wider acceptance) in Portugal. He was also one of the major renovators of the Portuguese language, having much like Browning himself used a modern colloquial style in his poetry, as well as an

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9 The Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and A. C. Swinburne, amongst others of the Aesthetic and Decadent movements from the 1870s to the 1890s, have variously claimed him as a master precursor. Some members of the Modernist movement of the 1910s and 20s, including T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, have also suffered a recognisable, although not always acknowledged, influence from the eminent Victorian.

10 The impact of the first and second generations of Romantic poets, mostly Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley, and of novelists as Walter Scott was only fully felt by the middle of the nineteenth century, when most Portuguese artists (including Almeida Garrett and Alexandre Herculano) strove Romantic poses. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Portuguese poets and novelists (including Eça de Queirós and Antero de Quental) were mostly under the influence of the great French Realists and Naturalists.

11 This phenomenon was not surprising in itself given the ancestral linguistic and cultural affinities between Portugal and France. Nevertheless, due to the French invasions and the alliance with the English in the first decade of the nineteenth century, many Portuguese intellectuals were exiled or working in England and absorbed a new culture. For many Francophiles, like Eça de Queirós, it was a difficult adaptation.

12 João Baptista da Silva Leitão, Viscount of Almeida Garrett (1799-1854), was a writer whose mother was the daughter of an Irish father born in exile in France. In 1809, his family had fled the French invasion carried out by Soult’s troops, seeking refuge in the Azores. In 1818, he published O Retrato de Vênus, a work considered "materialist, atheist, and immoral"; and it was during this period that he adopted and added his pen name ‘de Almeida Garrett’, who was seen as being more aristocratic.
unprecedented form of eroticism in his love lyrics. Thirteen years older than Browning, Garrett was acclaimed as one of the major orators of Liberalism, a true revolutionary and humanist, having consequently spent some years of his life in exile (some of which in England). He not only took initiative in the creation of a new Portuguese theatre, but he was also considered one of the greatest Portuguese dramatists, having written several dramas and historical plays.

His innovative literary manner was mostly felt in his major poetry collections, published for the most part (like Browning’s) in the 1840s and 50s, to which he added both a monumental book of Portuguese folklore and prose works, including a famous novel about a symbolic journey in his land. It is likely that, in his later years, Garrett heard about Robert Browning and even read some of the poet’s earlier poems, due not only to his excellent knowledge of English literature but also to his previous exile(s) in that poet’s country. On the other hand, the two men seem to have shared very identical historical contexts (of disturbances and reforms) and similar political views (mostly liberal), not to mention an active interest in the dramatic arts and the theatre, and an innovative approach to poetry writing. For instance, and as a famed love poet, Garrett would certainly have appreciated Browning’s modernly daring lyric “Meeting at Night” (1845), a powerful but subdued celebration of sexual passion and a challenge to Victorian Puritanism:

I
The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i’ the slushy sand.

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13 Although he did not take active part in the Liberal Revolution that broke out in 1820, he contributed with patriotic verses that his friends copied and distributed in the streets of Porto. But after the reactionary coup d'état led by the Infante Dom Miguel in 1823, he was forced to seek exile in England. While in England, in Edgbaston, Warwickshire, he began his association with Romanticism, being subject to the first-hand influences of William Shakespeare and Walter Scott, as well as to that of Gothic aesthetics. In 1828, under the rule of King Miguel of Portugal, he was again forced to settle in England, publishing Adozinda and performing his tragedy Catão at the Theatre Royal in Plymouth.

14 His major historical plays are Gil Vicente, D. Filipa de Vilhena, O Alfaigeme de Santarém and Frei Luís de Sousa, which in spite of their removed context reflect indirectly on important contemporary issues.

15 The important poetry collections are Flores sem fruto [Flowers without fruit] of 1844 and Fôlhas caídas [Fallen leaves] of 1853; the book of Portuguese folklore, Romanceiro, was published in 1843, and the prose work Viagens na minha terra [Journeys in my native land] in 1846. The latter is considered as a major example of Portuguese Romantic prose and has been successively adopted by school curricula.
Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
And a voice less loud, *thru’ its joys and fears,*  
*Than the two hearts beating each to each!*  
(my emphasis)

An almost exact contemporary of Browning was the poet, novelist and historian Alexandre Herculano, who is responsible for introducing the historical novel in Portugal in 1844. Besides being ultra-romantic in tone, his stories are rather laboured productions from an artistic standpoint, deserving high praise for their style, though they were written mainly with an educational object. Apparently with greater book-learning than Walter Scott, his model, Herculano lacked descriptive talent and skill in dialogue, and his novels show little dramatic power, which may account as well for his failure as a playwright (recalling Browning’s own lack of success in this particular field). Nevertheless, their influence was great and gathered many followers. The stirring incidents in the political emancipation of Portugal inspired his muse, and he describes the bitterness of exile, the adventurous Liberal expedition to Terceira, the heroic defence of Oporto, and the final combats of liberty, in many poems. His lyricism is vigorous, feeling but austere, and almost entirely subjective and personal, while his pamphlets are distinguished by energy of conviction, strength of affirmation, and contempt for weaker and more ignorant opponents.

While in politics he remained a constitutional Liberal of the old type, fanatical attacks and the progress of events drove Herculano, a former champion of the Church, into conflict with ecclesiastical authorities. Grave as most of his writings are, they

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16 Alexandre Herculano de Carvalho e Araújo (1810 – 1877) had humble origins and suffered privation. He received his early education at a Monastery, and had the intention of entering on a commercial career. *Eurico, o Presbítero* (1844) treats of the fall of the Visigothic monarchy and the beginnings of resistance in the Asturias which gave birth to the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. A second book, *Monge de Cister,* published in 1848, describes the time of King João I, when the middle class and the municipalities first asserted their power and elected a king who stood in opposition to the nobility. Among his poetic works we can find the following: *A Voz do Profeta* [The Voice of the Prophet] of 1836, *A Harpa do Crente* [The Believer’s Harp] of 1838, and *Poesias* (Poems) of 1850. In these little books he proves himself a poet of deep feeling and considerable power of expression.

17 Under the absolute rule of D. Miguel, Herculano, becoming involved in the unsuccessful military *pronunciamento* of August 1831, had to leave Portugal clandestinely and take refuge in England (Plymouth) and France. In 1832 he accompanied the Liberal expedition, and was one of D. Pedro’s famous army of 7500 men who landed at the Mindelo and occupied Oporto. He took part in all the actions of the great siege, and at the same time served as a librarian in the city archives.

18 His protest against the *Concordat* of 1857 between Portugal and the Holy See, his successful opposition to the entry of foreign religious orders, and his advocacy of civil marriage, were the chief
include a short description of a crossing from Jersey to Granville, in which he satirizes English character and customs, and he reveals an unexpected sense of humour. In spite of the obvious differences in literary style and purpose in relation to Browning, there are also curious similarities that might be explored further, namely the emphasis on liberalism and historicism, the criticism of the Church, a talent for poetic expressiveness and a taste for the recondite (involving tireless research in historical archives). Thus, Browning’s “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” (1842), with its rich discursive satire and anti-clericalism, might appeal as well to Herculano, bringing back simultaneously painful recollections of his own youthful experience in a monastery:

Gr-r-r-there go, my heart’s abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God's blood, would not mine kill you!
What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
Oh, that rose has prior claims--
Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
Hell dry you up with its flames! (I, 1-8)

As the enthusiasm in the Liberal Revolution gradually waned, and the social and economic instability increased, the sense of national pride collapsed, romantic nostalgia set in and was specifically applied to the declined condition of the Portuguese, as compared with the rest of Europe or the real focus of civilization. This complex of inferiority (that did not truly abolish the complex of superiority) became extremely incisive with the Realistic generation, the "Geração de 70".22

In poetry, Antero de Quental (1842–1891) was one of the most remarkable representatives of this generation, having introduced a type of ‘philosophical poetry’, mostly expressing sadness and horror in the face of a lack of meaning in life (and eventually leading to the poet’s own suicide).23 Quental’s poetic concept of ‘thinking landmarks in his battle. Finally, in 1871, he attacked the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility.

21 De Jersey a Granville [From the Isle of Jersey to Granville], 1831.
22 The Azorean poet and ideologue of his generation, Antero de Quental, wrote the most influential treatment of this problem in 1871. The work is entitled: "Causes of the peninsular people’s decadence in the last three centuries.” It was a speech delivered in May 27, 1871, in Lisbon and intended to be the first of a series of conferences by other authors, namely the novelist Eça de Queiroz, the historian Oliveira Martins and others that later became known as "the 70's generation.” A. de Quental tries to find an explanation for the cultural decadence of Portugal and Spain after the glorious epoch of the discoveries and before.
23 One of the founders of Portugal’s socialist movement, Antero de Quental’s most ardent ambition was to be a philosopher, and his essays frequently deal with philosophical themes. He had fervently embraced Hegel, but later on he read the German philosopher’s forerunners, especially Leibniz and Kant, as well as mystical writers and Buddhist literature.
feeling’ would be very influential, bearing some resemblance to Browning’s intellectualism. Very much like Matthew Arnold, Quental’s psychological and philosophical life is detectable in his poetry, which seems to have thrived on his rather dark vision of the world. His sonnets, the most achieved part of his poetic oeuvre, are often marked by skepticism, and some are militantly antireligious (“Words of a Certain Dead Man”, “Divine Comedy”). The late diptych of sonnets titled Redemption seems to reflect his ultimate understanding of the relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds, and between himself and other things. His Odes Modernas, published in 1865, were well received, but it was his sonnets, which he began publishing already in 1861, that attracted the most attention.  

Translated into German and Italian in his own lifetime, Antero’s sonnets were hugely popular at the turn of the century, partly for their technical skill but probably more so for the ideas that inspired them, and the gloomy light that illuminated them and made them somehow enchanting. It seems highly probable, therefore, that Browning heard or read something about de Quental’s, in spite of his famed reticence in relation to the sonnet form, wonderfully expressed in his 1876 poem “House” (a defense of objectivism and of the author’s right to privacy, as well as an eventual reply to D. G. Rossetti’s sonnet sequence The House of Life).

Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself?  
Do I live in a house you would like to see?  
Is it scant of gear, has it store of pelf?  
"Unlock my heart with a sonnet-key"?
(1–4)

More related to impressionism and, like Quental, a contemporary of later Victorian poets such as A. C. Swinburne, the young writer Cesário Verde (1855–1886) was unfortunately ignored by literary circles during his short life.  

O Sentimento de um Ocidental (The Feeling of a Westerner) is his masterpiece, a long poem published in 1880 where the poet describes a night in the streets of Lisbon with his "absurda necessidade de sofrer" (absurd desire to suffer). The poet’s is an acutely focused gaze, not because he romanticises what he sees but because his dazzling, unexpected

24 Guerra Junqueiro (1850–1923) and the poet João de Deus (1830–1896) should also be considered in this period. With the symbolist movement, the poet Camilo Pessanha (1867–1926) and his ultraromanticism must be pointed as well.

25 Having published the first great modern poems in Portuguese when he was scarcely more than twenty years old, Cesário Verde died from tuberculosis, and without a book to his name, at age thirty-one. Ironically, his best known poem was published as part of a newspaper commemorating the tercentenary of the death of Luís de Camões.
associations of images confer a precarious transcendence on what would otherwise be merely a crude picture of human misery in a city entering into the industrial age and with a population growing at an unprecedented rate. This was a reality that Browning and his contemporaries must have been more than familiar with, namely in the city of London, and whose human and literary effects were explored by writers such as Charles Dickens.

When evening falls across our streets
And sullen melancholy fills the air,
The Tagus, the tang, the shadows and bustle
Bring me an absurd desire to suffer.

The sky hangs low and seems all hazy;
The gas from the streetlamps makes me queasy;
The tumult of buildings, chimneys and people
Is cloaked in a dullish, Londonish hue.

[...] In quarters which the earthquake flattened
Equal, straight buildings wall me in;
Everywhere else I face steep streets
And the tolling of pious, monastic bells.
[...] And looming out of that jagged mass
Of tomblike buildings tall as hills,
Human Pain, like a baleful sea,
Seeks vast horizons for its bitter tides!
(I, II, IV, my emphasis)27

In its 176 verses there is not the slightest hint of condescension, as it records the feeling of a visually and emotionally alert westerner who happens – without a program, without a mission – to hope for a better future. Widely regarded as the greatest Portuguese poem of the nineteenth century, it contains a plethora of concrete references and images, organised into tightly metered and rhymed stanzas – quatrains consisting of a decasyllable followed by three alexandrines. The narrator in the poem is a flanêur, in the manner of Baudelaire (a poet much read and admired), wandering through Lisbon’s older neighbourhoods as the evening falls and gradually gives way – by the poem’s fourth section – to the deep, “dead hours” of night. Cesário apparently wanted to depict

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26 Cesário Verde’s images in the poem are juxtaposed according to a method suggestive of techniques employed decades later by expressionist cinema.

27 Translation from the Portuguese by Richard Zenith (Poetry International Web, 2009), from O Livro de Cesário Verde, Publisher: Silva Pinto, Lisboa, 1887.
“the present state of our great Lisbon which, in relation to its glorious past, seems but the corpse of a city”.  

The Brazilian writer Gilberto Freyre, a renowned sociologist and also a victorianist, was able to detect an interesting reaction to Browning’s Victorian fame on the part of the no-less famous Portuguese novelist and short-story writer Eça de Queirós, who lived in England for an approximate period of fifteen years in the 1870s and 80s: “[…] it is Browning that our Eça de Queirós mentions in one of his pages written in England, as a still living artist who is adored or divinized by English intellectuals: ‘a god in an umbrella’”. This comment seems to emphasise the fact that not only was Browning greatly admired by his late contemporaries, but that he was also seen by the foreign intellectual as a peculiarly modern poetic genius, living in an uncongenial climate. The seeming irony of the definition, part of Eça’s satiric language style, seems to lie in the basic contradiction between the terms ‘god’ and ‘umbrella’.

As a cosmopolite diplomat and as a writer of caustic satire, who was also widely read in English literature, Eça was clearly not enamoured of English society in general, but he was fascinated by its seeming oddity.

What a strange people! […] The English falls on foreign ideas and customs as a block of granite falls on water. There he stays, with his Bible, his clubs, his sports, his prejudices, his etiquette, his self-centredness. Even in countries where he has lived for hundreds of years, he is still the foreigner.

We can only conjecture whether this appreciation was meant to apply as well to Browning himself, who had resided in Italy for more than a decade. In this sense, both Eça and Browning were artistic exiles, simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by the foreign culture. Although Eça’s criticism could as easily fall on himself, it may be said that England acted both as a constant stimulus and a ‘corrective’ to his traditionally Portuguese francophilia.

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28 Translated into English from the Introduction to O Livro de Cesário Verde, Publisher: Silva Pinto, Lisboa, 1887.

29 José Maria de Eça de Queirós or Eça de Queiroz (1845-1900), one of the leading intellectuals of the 'Generation of 1870', is generally considered to be the greatest Portuguese writer in the realist and naturalist styles. His work is characterised by a marked ironic tone and social criticism. Zola considered him to be far greater than Flaubert, and the London Observer critics rank him with Dickens, Balzac and Tolstoy. A contemporary of A.C. Swinburne, Eça worked in the Portuguese consular service of Newcastle upon Tyne (1874-1879) and in Bristol (1879-88), but the Newcastle years were among the most productive of his literary career.

30 My translation is from the original in Portuguese: “[…] é a Browning que o nosso Eça de Queirós se refere numa das suas páginas escritas em Inglaterra como a um escrator ainda em vida adorado ou divinizado por intelectuais ingleses: ‘um deus de guarda-chuva’” (Pallares-Burke, 2005: 109).

31 This bitter sketch of the British in their Empire comes from the six-article series Os Ingleses no Egipto, "The English in Egypt", in Eça de Queirós’s Letters from England (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970).
The average Portuguese reader of English poetry, either in its original or translated form, usually comes across Robert Browning through the interposed medium of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who due both to her popular *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and modern feminist critical assessments of her work has attracted Portuguese students and scholars considerably.\(^{32}\) Furthermore, like other nations, we are profoundly moved by the celebrated love affair between the two Victorian poets, which is for us somehow reminiscent of other intense love stories in our past history, namely that of Luís de Camões and Catarina de Ataíde.\(^{33}\) It is also a known fact that this ill-fated story associated to our revered national poet has served as a major inspiration for many of Elizabeth Barrett’s poems, precisely those that Browning and other contemporaries of his most admired in her repertoire.\(^{34}\) But her own vast poetic output also included works that for the Portuguese reader seemed to engage more directly and forcibly than those of her husband’s with the social and political issues of her day and, as such, with what the reader conceived as Victorian British reality.\(^{35}\)

Thus, in a first reception stage of the Brownings in Portugal, it is Elizabeth Barrett who indisputably dominates and Robert Browning the one who remains behind the literary scene. The poet himself was acutely conscious of this difference in the reception of their respective works, reflecting in turn a radically different approach to poetry writing, as he confesses to Elizabeth Barrett early in their relationship (January, 1845):

> You do, what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem likely now to do for the first time. You speak out, you, – *I only make men and women speak – give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light*, even if it is in me, but I am going to try. (Browning, 2005: 6, my emphasis)

Here, Browning reminds us that the central problem of nineteenth-century epistemology is manifested precisely in the rejection of the subjective identity, as a means of perception, knowledge and representation of the real. Elizabeth Barrett had no way of

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32 It could be said that the initial interest in Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets* was later transferred to works such as *Aurora Leigh* (1857) and she became lionised as a radical social visionary and feminist.

33 As a young man Camões apparently traveled in elite circles in Lisbon. Tradition has it that he began a romance with Caterina de Ataíde, a lady of the Queen's suite, to whom he addressed some of his early poems. Influential members of the royal court, however, opposed the affair and forced Camões from the court, who thus initiated a life of exile.

34 Besides the well-know *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, emulating the style of Portuguese Renaissance love poetry, Elizabeth Barrett wrote “Catarina to Camoens”, a poem in which the Portuguese lady addresses the poet from her death-bed and imagines his return to her.

35 Examples of these are “The Cry of the Children”, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”, “A Curse for a Nation”, poems addressing the contemporary problems of child labour and slavery.
knowing that Browning and Tennyson would be precursor landmarks of the dramatic monologue, as Victorian expression of the conscience of fragmentarity to be equally felt at the heart of the identity crisis of Modernism.

Therefore, well before the Portuguese readership of Browning moved towards the end of the twentieth century, other aesthetic and literary priorities emerged in the modern artistic and academic national circles. Some of their most prominent representatives (as is the case of the poet Fernando Pessoa) became not only more interested, than their nineteenth-century predecessors, in Anglophone literature as such, but also in the new technique of a depersonalised poetic voice, as that found variously in Shakespeare, Browning, Pound or Eliot. Indeed, were it not for a very restricted group of Portuguese and Brazilian intellectuals, amongst poets, critics and translators, the panorama surrounding Browning’s scholarship and readership in the Lusophone world would have seemed as barren or desert as the devastated expanses ‘Childe Roland’ traverses in his quest for the ‘Dark Tower’.

IV.
For, what with my whole world-wide wandering,
What with my search drawn out thro’ years, my hope
Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope
With that obstreperous joy success would bring,
I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring
My heart made, finding failure in its scope.

VII.
Thus, I had so long suffered in this quest,
Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ
So many times among ``The Band''--to wit,
The knights who to the Dark Tower's search addressed
Their steps--that just to fail as they, seemed best,
And all the doubt was now--should I be fit?
(my emphasis)

The passage itself seems to reflect obsessively upon issues of success and failure and may signify the poet’s hard struggle (quest) for literary recognition at an early stage of his career. This is also an apt figure for both the world-renowned ‘obscurity’ of some of Browning’s writings, and the general ignorance of the Lusophone world regarding his

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36 Previously, and for a long period that extended to centuries, the Portuguese literati and artistic coteries were mainly influenced by the distinctive French and Continental schools, which coincidentally were also closely studied by the Brownings themselves, as the references to George Sand and Joseph Milsand of Dijon in their respective writings may attest.

37 William Shakespeare’s use of the dramatic soliloquy, Browning’s dramatic lyrics and monologues, T. S. Eliot’s polyphonic verse and Ezra Pound’s syntactical erasure of the self, have all differently contributed to this depersonalisation of the poetic voice.
art. We might add that our path through the analysis of the poet’s reception has been as solitary and doubtful as Roland’s.

To begin with, the average Portuguese is not an assiduous reader of Portuguese poetry as a rule, let alone of English poetry, as the differing linguistic and cultural norms duplicate the difficulty of an already demanding art form. If we add to this the intrinsic difficulties and idiosyncrasies of Browning’s language, we can easily understand, and even sympathise with, the great rarity of academic studies or translations of his works. Such notorious absence in Portugal of an original and prolific English author, though, can only be lamented and seen as a great gap in our assessment of Victorian and Modern poetry. Notwithstanding, there have been brave attempts made to change this situation in the last thirty years or so.

One of these precious contributions has been offered by the Portuguese scholar and translator João Almeida Flor in his research work entitled O Poeta, a Verdade e as Máscaras: Leitura de Robert Browning. It is in the profound knowledge of the ideological and cultural implications that link Victorianism to Modernism that Almeida Flor identifies the dramatic monologue in the writing of Browning, as the form of expression of a “forest of deceptions” established in the midst of an “aesthetics of reiteration”, in the face of which the readings “are but subjective, sophismated, fallacious and fragmentary interpretations”, each point of view contributing “with its own amount of truth (and illusion) for our interpretation of the real” (1976: 279-80). About the specific features of discourse in monologue, Almeida Flor refers that besides its placement in space, it is located both in an individual biographical time (that he designates as “climax-instant”) as, very frequently, in a collective historical time, necessarily one of ‘crisis’ (1976: 148).

His interest in this Victorian artist was persistent as, only four years later, Almeida Flor would publish the first bilingual anthology containing a translated selection of Browning’s poems – Monólogos Dramáticos por Robert Browning (1980). In the critical review of this work, the Portuguese critic Luís de Sousa Rebelo mentions the fact that the selection is dominated by a tacit dialogue between Fernando Pessoa and Robert Browning; this is openly corroborated by the question that Almeida

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38 Doctoral thesis presented to the University of Lisbon in 1976. The corresponding English translation could be The Poet, the Truth and the Masks: A Reading of Robert Browning.


40 In “Tradução”, Colóquio de Letras, No 7 (Nov. 1982), 76-78.
Flor himself formulates to his reader in the Preface, “Could Pessoa be the Browning of twentieth-century Portugal?”, having undoubtedly also in mind the conditions that had made Browning the Victorian Shakespeare of sorts.41

As Rebelo further argues, it is still the shadow of Pessoa that is projected in the selection criteria of Browning’s pieces, as one “feels the presence of a duel of peers in the discourse dialectics” (1982: 77). This is proved by the deliberate inclusion of poems such as “How it Strikes a Contemporary” and “Two in the Campagna” (inserted in Men and Women, of 1855): the first poem is born of an attitude in face of experience – the poet assuming himself above all the masks; the second one resumes a veiled paganism woven with renunciations, later expressed also in the Odes of Ricardo Reis.42 Thus, as Rebelo reinforces, the confessed purpose of the translator was to “reveal to the Portuguese reader one of the aspects of Browning’s poetry to which he could be more sensitive at that moment” (77). This corresponds to a search for a literary space in the target language where a new text can be born that is meaningful for that particular culture. For Rebelo, “The rhythm and euphony of Almeida Flor’s verse are manifested in the veiled assonances, the occasional rhyme, in caesura, and in the combined art of meter and discursivity learned precisely with Modernism” (78). His attempts are, therefore, seen as creative translations that allow the reader to elaborate an unwritten text from the suggestions he culled in his reading of Browning.

The association of the early twentieth-century Portuguese poet, prose writer, translator and critic Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935)43 with the English Victorian poet and dramatist Robert Browning is not merely coincidental. This connection would be again closely investigated by the Brazilian scholar George Monteiro in 1991 and, more

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41 Many scholars have previously documented Shakespeare's powerful presence in the nineteenth century and, namely, in Robert Browning. Oscar Wilde’s assertion that Browning “is the most Shakespearian creature since Shakespeare”, in 1890, may have initiated this critical process of identification. Adrian Poole begins his expansive study of Shakespeare and the Victorians by quoting Robert Browning’s proclamation that Shakespeare is "our very bones and blood, our very selves". Robert Sawyer’s Victorian Appropriations of Shakespeare (of 2003) also dedicates a chapter to Robert Browning.

42 Ricardo Reis is one of the most important heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa, portrayed precisely as a rational epicurean pastoral poet.

43 According to Richard Zenith, one of his most recent biographers and translators, “Pessoa […] was an active leader of Portugal’s Modernist movement in the 1910s, and he invented several of his own movements, including a Cubist-inspired ‘Intersectionism’ and a strident, quasi-Futurist ‘Sensationism. […] the Pessoa Archives at the National Library of Lisbon – include over 25,000 manuscript sheets of poetry, prose, plays, philosophy, criticism, translations, linguistic theory, political writings, horoscopes and assorted other texts, variously typed, handwritten or illegibly scrawled in Portuguese, English and French.” (Poetry International Web, 2009).
recently, in 2000. Firstly, he briefly presents Pessoa as a ‘disciple’ of Browning in an International Conference of Pessoan Studies and, secondly, he analyses the overall influence of nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature, including Browning’s poetry, in the Portuguese poet’s work. In chapter four of his book, Monteiro explores Browning’s notion of ‘Drama in Character’ and how it may have influenced both the theory and the practice of Pessoa’s poetry, pointing not only to striking similarities but also emphasising major differences between the two artists’ methods and purposes.

Following Fernando Pessoa’s self-questioning regarding his ‘explosion’ into his poetic personae or great heteronyms, ‘Have I turned myself into a nation?’, Monteiro suggests that the Portuguese poet had indeed turned himself into a ‘nation’, but that “it was an odd nation”, “a nation of poets” (2000: 58). And Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos were that rare combination: imaginary poets who wrote real poetry, “each in his own distinctive voice and on his own terms” (58). If, as he stresses, this creative method had no literary precedent whatsoever, the theoretical explanation offered by the poet himself closely resembled the ones Robert Browning had put forward in some of his works, namely in “One Word More” (from his collection Men and Women):

[..] you saw me gather men and women,
Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
Enter each and all, and use their service,
Speak from every mouth, -- the speech, a poem.
(XIV, 129-32)

Fernando Pessoa, in his turn, would write around 1915:

44 George Monteiro is Adjunct Professor, Professor Emeritus of English, Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at Brown University, as well as being a recognised translator and poet.
46 Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. It is important to mention, in this context, the Portuguese scholar Maria da Encarnação Monteiro, who had already published a study on the English influences in the poetry of Pessoa in her much earlier work entitled Incidências Inglesas na Poesia de Fernando Pessoa (Coimbra Editora, 1956).
48 “[..] he wrote under dozens of names, a practice – or compulsion – that began in his childhood. He called his most important personas ‘heteronyms’, endowing them with their own biographies, physiques, personalities, political views, religious attitudes, and literary pursuits. Some of Pessoa’s most memorable work in Portuguese was attributed to the three main poetic heteronyms – Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos – and to the ‘semiheteronym’ called Bernardo Soares, while his vast output of English poetry and prose was in large part credited to heteronyms Alexander Search and Charles Robert Anon, and his writings in French to the lonely Jean Seul. The many other alter egos included translators, short story writers, an English literary critic, an astrologer, a philosopher, a friar, and an unhappy nobleman who committed suicide. There was even a female persona […]” (Richard Zenith, Poetry International Web- Portugal, 2009).
Let us suppose that a supremely depersonalized writer such as Shakespeare instead of creating the character of Hamlet as part of a play, had actually created him as simply a character without a play. He would have written, so to speak, a one-character play – a prolonged analytic monologue" (Correspondência, 63, my emphasis).

Based on this extremely revealing statement, and in spite of the fact that Pessoa himself failed to mention Browning’s similar technique, Monteiro suggests that “Browning’s creations could [and should] be seen as the immediate predecessors for Pessoa’s heteronymic creations” (59).49

Interestingly, at the early age of twenty, Browning had apparently come up with a very similar idea of heteronymic creation but, as Monteiro concludes, he never materialised it fully; Browning thought of publishing works in several genres and under different identities, in such a way that “the world was never to guess that … the respective authors … were no other than one and the same individual” (quoted in Monteiro, 2002: 60, my emphasis). This convergence is extraordinary, but after he had failed to a certain extent as a dramatist and as a conventional lyric poet, Browning devised another form in which to conceal his ‘identity’ – the dramatic lyric or the dramatic monologue. The English poet had had harsh receptions both to his long confessional lyric Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession (1833) and to some of his plays that were performed in London.50

But the reason for his lack of success in the theatre may, in turn, explain his innovative approach to poetry writing. In the preface to his tragic play Strafford (1837), Browning mentions that it was “one of Action in Character rather than Character in Action” (Symons, 1923: 255, my emphasis); thus, it can be inferred that the important element for him was ‘character’ or personality, and not ‘action’ or event development. This principle is materialised, namely, in poems such as “My Last Duchess”, “Fra Lippo Lippi” and “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church”, in which we are introduced to the speakers’ thoughts, and how they express them, and not so much what they do.

As late as 1930, the poet Robert Browning would again, and more explicitly, come to the forefront of Fernando Pessoa’s theorising about poetry, which is indicative

50 William Charles Macready encouraged Browning to write the play Strafford, performed in 1837 by Macready himself. It was no great success but Browning was encouraged enough to try again, going on to write eight plays in all, including Pippa Passes (1841), A Blot on the ’Scutcheon (1843) and A Soul’s Tragedy (1846). Most had troubled productions and no great public effect.
of the pervasiveness of this influence. In writing about the “four grades (or levels) of lyric poetry”, Pessoa first mentions Browning as an example of the third degree, in which the ‘intellectual poet’ begins to depersonalise himself in “monologues revealing diverse souls” and feel “states of the soul that he really does not possess” (1966: 151); then Pessoa mentions Browning again in describing the fourth level, in which the poet “becomes completely depersonalised”, not only feeling but actually living “the states of the soul that are not directly his” (152). It is at this level that Monteiro believes we can place Pessoa’s own poetic practice or heteronymic creation, including the one of Bernardo Soares, asking whether they are not dramatic creations as those that populated Browning’s poetic world (2000: 62). But if “each one of Browning’s characters” has “a discrete existence of his own” and Pessoa’s heteronyms are similarly “biographical entities in themselves” (62), a fundamental difference stands out, Monteiro suggests. Pessoa created characters and speakers who are poets on their own, who have their distinctive body of poetry and poetics; Pessoa even planned to publish the individual volumes of poetry – one for each heteronym – and corresponding biographies.

Monteiro sees this process also as an “overall, unifying drama” that “emerges from the play of voices” (2000: 63) and, as such, one that could be described in Browning’s terms as ‘action in character’, and in Pessoa’s own as ‘a drama in people’. Pessoa writes, in fact, that “each one makes up a kind of drama; and together they make up still another drama” (1966: 153) – an ‘overall drama of discipleship’, in Monteiro’s words (66). Thus, to complicate matters even further, Pessoa apparently conceived a fifth level of lyric poetry to account for his own relationship to his heteronyms, “in the guise of theorist practising theory as … an act of depersonalization” (63). In 1927, Pessoa writes in the periodical Presença that “All true emotion is a lie in the intellect, […] To express one’s self is to say what one does not feel” (1966: 154).

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51 This is, in fact, a short history of modern poetry, organised by the criterion of depersonalisation, a fundamental document to discern Pessoa’s understanding of ‘tradition’. Pessoa catalogues and distributes dead poets according to the stage of depersonalisation of their respective works. Report to Páginas de Estética (eds. Prado Coelho and Georg Lind, 1966). This ‘history’ seems to anticipate T. S. Eliot’s 1953 essay entitled “The Three Voices of Poetry”.

52 As other examples of the four levels of lyric poetry, Fernando Pessoa mentions A. C. Swinburne’s work as second level, Alfred Tennyson’s as third level and William Shakespeare’s as fourth level. The coincidence that all of them, including Robert Browning, are English poets is a fact of some consequence. The circumstance that Pessoa lived his earliest years in South Africa, spoke and wrote English fluently, and that he read the major Anglophone writers, may perhaps help explain those mentions.

53 The heteronyms also have their own respective professions or occupations, as part of their defining features: for example, Alberto Caeiro is a teacher and Álvaro de Campos is an engineer.
According to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, Fernando Pessoa was not an authentic dramatic poet because he “was incapable of giving physical incarnation to his ideas”, “to create characters” (1985: 232); he could only indirectly lend them his own voice and “make each one of them into another poet” (233). Like Browning, then, Pessoa was not successful in the theatre: this is proved by his fragmentary and unfinished Fausto and, even more, by his one-scene play The Sailor, an example of ‘static drama’ (published in Orpheu, 1915). According to Pessoa, this type of drama occurs “when action does not constitute the dramatic plot […] there is no conflict and, strictly speaking, no plot. […] it reveals the soul through exchanges of words and creation of situations” (1966: 154, my emphasis). This description seems to fit exactly some of Browning’s precepts in regard to his own writing and, as such, constitutes another proof of Pessoa’s indebtedness to the Victorian poet.54

Unfortunately, in the last decade of this century, the works dedicated specifically to Robert Browning or his oeuvre, in Portugal and the Lusophone community, have been very ‘few and far between’. The Academy, and their respective research centres, appear to be much more committed to the study and analysis of modern poets and artists, probably forgetting in the process that Browning was the very first Modern, and that his multifaceted works still have a great deal to offer to the attentive and diligent twenty-first century reader. As a conclusion, I will only mention that in the present year two or three small academic works on Browning have been completed at my university, thus proving that the ‘flame’ is not extinguished.

One of them is a Masters dissertation entitled “‘The less Shakespeare he’: Revelações da Mente Masculina sobre Poder e Género na Poesia Dramática de Robert Browning”. It analyses both the manners and forms in which Browning portrays the masculine mind and its often destructive passions, through profoundly revealing speeches of the moral, social and historical motives underlying power and gender relations between man and woman. The work also discusses the respective, and often contradictory, influences of Elizabeth Barrett and William Shakespeare in the poetry of Browning, with particular emphasis on issues of masculinity, the representation of woman and poetic form (dramatic monologue).55

54 George Monteiro prefers to see Fernando Pessoa as having no precedent in the dramatic poetry of Browning; Pessoa is, in his words, “a director” who “having cast his play then refrains entirely from directing the players, who go on to spin webs and plots by themselves” (2000: 66).
55 “‘The less Shakespeare he’: Revelations of the Masculine Mind about Power and Gender in the Dramatic Poetry of Robert Browning”, Masters dissertation by Jane Maria Bastos Ewerton, supervised by
The two other works are articles recently published in International Conference Proceedings, reflecting upon specific aspects of Browning’s poetry, poetics and philosophy. The first one, entitled “Analysing Darker Motives, or Delving Robert Browning’s ‘Poetry of Revenge’”, sees the poet’s work as deriving from both a Classic and an English tradition of a ‘literature of revenge’, and as a distinctive and innovative analysis of the motives underlying many of our human actions (as disturbing and extreme as they may seem), in which notions of good and evil are made relative and ‘revenge’ and ‘forgiveness’ seen as two opposite sides of the same coin.\textsuperscript{56} The second article, whose title is “‘Speak from every mouth – the speech, a poem’: Conflicting Voices, Discourses and Identities in the Poetry of Robert Browning”, analyses the way in which Browning creates for each of his speakers a highly individual ‘linguistic personality’ through the drama of conflicting internal voices, which in turn involves a discursive conflict between the individual and some form of authority, whether institutionalised power, conventional morality or artistic formalism.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Works Cited}


\textsuperscript{56} This article is a more developed version of a paper I presented in the Panel on ‘Poe-etic Revenge’ of the First Global Conference on Revenge, Mansfield College, Oxford, in July 2010.

\textsuperscript{57} This article is a more detailed version of a paper I presented at the XII Colóquio de Outono (‘Voices, Discourses and Identities in Conflict’), organised by the research Centre for Humanistic Studies of University of Minho, in December 2010.
Flor, João de Almeida, *O Poeta, a Verdade e as Máscaras – Leitura de Robert Browning*, Doctoral Thesis in English Literature submitted to the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon, 1976.


