The Politics and Sexual Politics of Browning's "Love Among the Ruins"

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Text, Contexts and Intertexts

Robert Browning's short dramatic monologue, "Love Among the Ruins" appeared in public for the first time on 10 November 1855, in the privileged position of being the opening poem of his collection, *Men and Women*. This poem was written after the Great Exhibition, the event that confirmed the triumphant successes of the modern industrial nation. At the same time, however, Britain was suffering the consequences and the impact of the Crimean war, and so the period is marked both by the peak of Victorian industrial civilisation (distinguished by economic prosperity, confidence and dynamic optimism, widespread among the middle-class) and the rise of militaristic jingoism.

"Love Among the Ruins", using the aesthetic of the Sublime to revivify the image of a ruined imperial city, inscribes an incongruous mixture of powerful and contradictory emotions pertinent to the Victorian period: exultation and revulsion, triumphalism and fear. It is set in an idyllic Italian landscape containing the ruins of an unidentified ancient city, a place that clearly resembles the Campagna of Rome. But, as William Clyde De Vane points out, "the idea of the necessary subjection of antiquity to the uses of the modern world engrossed [Browning] more and more as he grew older" (192). Here Browning involves himself with the tradition of ruin poetry and also implicates a whole lot of conventional Victorian attitudes to Italy, while deeply aware that the classical past provides a screen onto which contemporary visions of society and empire are projected. The vagueness surrounding the exact geographical background of the poem helps further to render it a symbolic topos of an ancient imperial city in ruins, that is, a location in the mind of the Victorian Englishman rather than in actual space, and always generates, on one hand, a fantasy of heroic glory and

Gramma / Γράμμα: Journal of Theory and Criticism 9 (2001)
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grandeur, and, on the other hand, speculation over moral and political issues related to the question of what might cause the fall of an empire.

Before reading the poem in detail, it is worth mentioning some aspects of the background literary tradition that are utilised and implicitly negotiated. When they figure in art and poetry, such tangible vestiges of a past civilisation as monumental ruins become, as it were, naturalised and live in spirit through the permanence of nature. The traveller or poet who contemplates the ruins may overcome, and indeed transcend, the so-called 'ruin sentiment', that is, the melancholy observation that mouldering time eventually destroys the products of history and proves the vanity of human endeavour, through a mental passage into history that paradoxically coincides with a journey into timeless space. The nineteenth-century English traveller to Italy, in particular, may envisage the continuity between his national identity and its cultural roots in ancient history, and simultaneously endow Englishness with the supra-historical authority of classical values. In this respect the self-image of the British empire is inherited from the eighteenth century and dates from the cosmopolitan aristocratic Europeanism of the Renaissance, when, in Anne Janowitz's terms, "[t]he site of national origin was taken to be external to physical terrain, and derived from the classical tradition, in which the nearest genealogical link to be found was in a mythological parent-child relation between Rome and England" (9). As Janowitz puts it, "[t]he national images of both England and of Great Britain are built on Roman ruins"(20). There exists ample evidence of the deeply rooted Victorian conviction that it was the British among the Europeans who were the true heirs of the glorious ancient Romans.[1]

A complication arises though, because even though Rome provides the precedent onto which the successes of Britain are projected, the downfall of the Roman empire was used by critics of current politics, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as a warning for the future potentially disastrous outcome of aggressive materialism, political corruption and the reduction of democratic freedoms.[2] A question often addressed in political debates, especially by Whigs and Liberals, was whether and how the British empire would avoid the fate of its Roman model. English writers are faced with the complex task of enlivening the ruins and proving the continuity of past and present, while also finding ways to differentiate and distance the fallen empires from the British (see Janowitz, 20). This may be possible when the ruins are securely placed within conventional picturesque landscapes, shaped and controlled by the omnipotent gaze of the poet-observer. But anxiety supplants aesthetic pleasure as the values of the picturesque are undermined by Browning's devastated landscape. Moreover, "Love Among the Ruins" is a ruin poem with a difference: it is being spoken by an Italian, who appears completely defeated and overwhelmed by history, and so lacks the control and the dependability of language by means of which the meaningful continuity of past and present becomes articulable.

The poem's speaker is an Italian shepherd addressing, most probably, a Vi-

ctorian tourist, whom he is guiding around the ruins while taking his flock to shelter at the end of the day.[3] While explaining the ruins to his English visitor (he manages an extraordinary re-animation of the ruined city), the shepherd keeps contrasting past and present and boasting of his own pastoral life-style, including his love affair, at the expense of the life of his ancestors in the flourishing but materialist and violent city. However, the title, "Love Among the Ruins", is deeply ironic, in that the pair of Italian lovers among the ruins do not prove the continuity of life among the dead relics of the past. In fact, contrary to other critics, I would argue that the speaker's love story is merely fantasised. The poem makes use of conventional modes and codes (i.e. the ruin poem, the pastoral, the heroic and the chivalric) in a remarkably unconventional and subversive manner, and its most striking feature is, indeed, that it seems deliberately confusing.

Due to its dramatic nature, the fact that it carefully contextualises the subjective expression of its speaker, "Love Among the Ruins" makes it impossible to separate the different levels of the psychic from the social, or the individual from the historical. By positioning an Italian man, a lover, delivering his speech among a landscape of ruins and their associations of fallen empires and loss of power, Browning dramatises and historicizes questions of national, cultural and sexual identity at once. Employing his usual tactic of "displac[ing] the political debate onto alternative sites" (Woolford and Karlin 42), such as other countries or other historical periods, he responds indirectly to British political and social issues. And by focusing on and exploiting the intrinsic (in the Western tradition) link between the concepts of man and citizen – something that has been the concern of feminist theorists and critics for some time now – this poem is, at the same time, part of Browning's wider involvement with the project of what Herbert Sussman has called the constructing of Victorian masculinities.[4] The conventional imagery of Roman ruins is metaphorised in order to provide a historicist framework within which to inscribe and debate Victorian accounts of gender identities. "Love" emphasises the exclusion of women from the social and political scene, and simultaneously registers an intense anxiety related to the seemingly inescapable dependence of masculinity and masculine creativity on violent economic growth. The themes of national and masculine identity appear inextricably related, as two sides of the same question.

The distinction between past and present, which corresponds to the antagonistic relation of culture and nature, also does duty for the distinction between the categories of the sublime and the beautiful respectively, which define aesthetic qualities and gender identities at once, and so provide a language to account for aesthetic, psychological and political issues simultaneously. Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* is certainly the most important intertext of "Love Among the Ruins". In Burke's influential formulation,

> sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparati-

> vely small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent;... beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them, a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business is to affect the passions. (113)

Quite strikingly, the passage quoted above is directive and instructive; beauty is not simply light and delicate and clear, but *should not* be obscure, *should* be smooth, the sublime *ought to* be rugged or massive, those whose business is to affect the passions, i.e. poets, should never forget the eternal distinction between the two. The shepherd in "Love Among the Ruins" is apparently advocating an alliance with the beautiful and feminine aspects of nature, as all the particles of the landscape he inhabits are small and smooth (hills rather than mountains, bushes rather than trees) while the natural elements are gradually 'smoothing out' and polishing the rough and angular shapes of the broken rocks, destroying thus their potential for sublimity. The pastoral landscape is totally deprived of all the potentially sublime components of nature, "it does not even boast a tree." On the contrary, the past is imagined as consisting of magnificent objects which would properly invoke feelings of awe and terror in the observer as, strikingly, sublimity features in this poem as an attribute of culture and a component of history. Difficulties derive, however, from the fact that beauty is not what it ought to be and nature does not readily conform to the properties of beauty, in that it is too perfect, too powerful and, also, a potential source of fear.[5] That is, beautiful nature in this poem is characterised by a profound ambivalence which not only undermines the requirements of the pastoral form, but unsettles the anticipated demarcation of the binary opposition between the (male) sublime and the (female) beautiful. The (male) sublimity of the past, however, holds the key to the interpretation of the poem, because it bears associations of masculinity, which is at once creative and admirable, but also dangerous and hence brings forth a contemporary man's dilemma and embarrassment over his masculinity (as well as his Englishness) as ambiguous mixture of creativity and destructiveness.

So the question of creativity or how energy is most effectively generated and expended should be considered with respect to the categories of the beautiful and the sublime as well. In Romantic poetic theory sublimity images poetic creativity and is rendered in the language of male potency and fertility, as epitomised, of course, in the *Prelude,* where the poet's soul is compared to "... the mighty flood of Nile / Poured from his fount of Abyssinian clouds / To fertilise the whole Egyptian plain" (614-616). But in Browning's poetry the complacent identification of sublimity with masculine creativity seems impossible, as the sublime in his poetry either turns destructive, or verges on the grotesque.

Dangerous Transformations of the Pastoral

The situation in "Love Among the Ruins' is complex, firstly because the ancient city presents a persistent provocation for the speaker, who seems unable to resist an almost compulsive preoccupation with the past culture, and, secondly, because nature in the poem possesses a potentially malevolent or, in any case, threatening energy that renders the pastoral ideology impossible, and reduces the pastoral form of the poem to deceptive varnish. In the pastoral, nature is a source of capitalised Truth:

> The shepherd, actually, is half man and half Nature; he has enough in common with man to be his universal representative and has enough in common with Nature to be at one with it. Because the shepherd is so close to Nature, man, through him, can become united with Nature and consequently feel that he is a harmonious part of the whole and that his ideas are reconciled with the fundamental truths. (Congleton, 4)

Rather than adopting a pastoral view of Nature or the benign natural world of the Wordsworthean vision, Browning deprives nature of its role as meaningful ameliorative agency and utilises a pre-romantic perspective of nature as hostile, with important implications for the shepherd who is supposedly *integral* to it. Through a pervasive sexualisation of both city and landscape in "Love", the split between rural and urban life becomes involved in a ruthless power-struggle between, on one hand, male energy associated with history and social order, and, on the other hand, female energy engendered in a nature depicted as simultaneously anarchic and totalitarian. Elliot Gilbert reminds us that:

> Both in history and myth women have for the most part been associated with the irrational and destructive forces of nature that threaten orderly male culture. As maenads, bacchantes, witches, they express in their frenzied dances and murderous violence an unbridled sexuality analogous to the frightening and sometimes even ruinous fecundity of nature. Indeed, the control of female sexuality is among the commonest metaphors in art for the control of nature (just as the control of nature is a metaphor for the control of women). And as Lévi-Strauss points out, the earliest evidences of culture are nearly always those rules of exchange devised by men to facilitate the ownership and sexual repression of women. (174-5)

In "Love" nature and woman are clearly conflated, and man has lost control of an essentially dangerous nature. This is illustrated in the first place by lines 15-19:

> To distinguish slopes of verdure, certain rills
> From the hills

Intersect and give a name to, (else they run
Into one)
where the domed and daring palace shot its spires

The description of open spaces creates a sense of unlimited freedom promising an unobstructed flow of energy, but unconfined and irrational natural forces, though seemingly gentle (certain rills, low scale vegetation) gradually wipe out and destroy all artificially, that is, culturally, imposed boundaries (here represented by the overtly masculine image of the "daring palace" shooting its phallic "spires"); the result being one of threatening, meaningless uniformity, an image of "slopes and rills in undistinguished grey". Now that the fall of darkness has blurred the outline and distinctive features of the landscape, it is as if a different kind of sublime, female and clearly evil, is emerging from the imagery.

On a surface level, Browning exploits the pastoral as a means to undermine the ratification of imperialism. The speaker, assuming the persona of the traditional swain, "half man and half Nature" takes upon himself the task of denigrating the achievements of transient history: he insists on deprecating past glory mainly on ethical grounds, especially as he compares it with the "bliss" of his anticipated (or rather hypothetical) erotic encounter with a girl who waits to meet him in the ruin of the "little turret" after the completion of his shepherding duties. He is apparently trying to develop a moral argument against the "folly, noise and sin" of aggressive materialism, in order to conclude that "Love is best". But this superficial description is deceptive. The speaker is the focus of a dramatic inner conflict: in order to position himself rationally and morally he struggles to suppress the violent fantasies and desires he projects in the representation of the imaginary past. He tries obsessively to structure and order his argument as a set of clearly demarcated oppositions between past and present, culture and nature, but fails to contain and control the forces of the past that erupt through the neatly structured stanzas. Like other Browning speakers, while reconstructing the past in order to reject it and elicit a conventional moral tag (or profound Christian truth), he is actually held captive, by his own desire, in the very past he sets out to denigrate.[6] His agitated utterance is pervaded by envy of the soldiers and the monarch.

The unreliability of the speaker is a source of confusion in the poem. It has been shown convincingly that "the early Victorians defined manliness as the possession of an innate, distinctively male energy that, in contrast to Freud, they did not represent as necessarily sexualised, but as an inchoate force that could be expressed in a variety of ways, only one of which is sexual." Browning's commitment to energy is a commonplace assumption among his readers. In "Love Among the Ruins" the moralising shepherd is trying to draw attention away from the central issue that is his own essential inability to either fight or love. His excessively emphatic language proves a vain attempt to compensate for the fundamental weakness of his argument, because military aggression, the pursuit of wealth, artistic production and love are all linked in the mind of contempora-

ry readers through the Victorian preoccupation with energy, and specifically the notion of energy as the prime and indispensable ingredient of male identity that lies at the centre of the poem:

> [T]he assumption that manliness depends upon an innate, distinctly male form of energy.... [T]his model posits a powerful unitary male desire that can find expression in artistic creation, entrepreneurial activity, phallic sexuality, or any combination of these. Within this construction of manhood, then, art-making, love-making, and money-making are valued as signs of true manliness, expressions of natural, God-given male energy. (Sussman 1992, 186)

The comparison of past and present in "Love Among the Ruins" makes sense only in relation to the central question: in what conditions, that is, within what kind of social or other context, is energy or male desire possible, creative, effective and fertile, and when does it become wasted, imprisoned, destructive or destroyed? The shepherd's argument for a return to nature fails to convince precisely because it evades and suppresses the questions of creativity and potency.

I take the doubt regarding the speaker's integrity to the extreme and suppose that his story about his idyllic relationship with his lover is fundamentally untrue. His withdrawal from social life and urban turbulence is not the result of his moral choice, it is a manifestation of weakness and emasculation. His sluggishness implicitly conveys impotence (in the Victorian period "a word with social as well as sexual connotations" [Weeks 40]) and bears associations of idleness (a mode of behaviour verging on corruption). So he performs a number of functions.

On one level, he epitomises for his English interlocutor or the reader of the poem the condition of early nineteenth-century Italy. It is elucidating to compare "Love" to other nineteenth-century depictions of the Campagna of Rome, contemporary Italians and particularly shepherds. For example, Samuel Rogers in his *Italy* displays undisguised insensitivity and cruelty when he identifies the shepherd with his animals:

> Now all is changed; and here, as in the wild
> The day is silent, dreary as the night;
> None stirring, save the herdsman and his herd,
> Savage alike;...
>
> (p. 294)

Browning assumes the contemporary commonplace that Italy has regressed into barbarism, in that he brings into play associations of both the alleged excesses of ancient empires and the contemporary moral degradation of the country. His poem unmistakably invokes the usual representation of the Campagna of Rome

(one of the most plausible settings of the poem) as a place of death and desolation and can compare, for instance, with Edmund Reade's "Waste image of a drear infinity" (XXVIII), or with the following passage from his *Italy*:

> No life dispels the desert's brow of gloom:
> Hark! ye hear not the traveller's distant tread:
> Grey tombs their mouldering fragments disenhume,
> And point the moral of their greatness fled;
> Fit prelude as ye near the city of the dead!
> (XLV)

The difference between "Love" and other accounts of Italian shepherds of the period, is that here the shepherd speaks, he is endowed with the lyric "I" of the dramatic monologue, while the English tourist is put in the secondary position of listener. As a result, the reader is, in the first place, forced to identify with the speaker's subjective, expressive utterance, and the conventional power balance between the traveller's gaze and the observed object is subverted.

So the relationship of past and present is registered as an antagonistic one, while the rift with the past corresponds to or results from the discordance between history and nature. Nature is incapable of ensuring continuity; on the contrary, the growth of verdure has a cover-up effect as the landscape is nothing other than the graveyard of the once great city violently subsuming and entombing the remnants of the past: "Such a carpet as, this summer-time, o'erspreads / And embeds / Every vestige of the city, guessed alone" (27-29). Apparently the city ruins are all buried, with the exception of the one visible broken-down "single little turret", ironically "overooted" and "overscored" by small and insignificant plants such as the caper and the gourd:

> Now, – the single little turret that remains
> On the plains,
> By the caper over-rooted, by the gourd
> Overscored,
> While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks
> Through the chinks –
> Marks the basement whence a tower in ancient time
> Sprang sublime.
> (37-44)

The little turret is reminiscent of the square, squatting tower of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", while the memory of the latter poem (written one day before "Love Among the Ruins") casts the shadow of its hideous, ruinous, sexualised landscape onto the supposedly idyllic setting of "Love". Joseph Bristow observes, too, that "[r]azed, flattened, matted, these bare Roman hillsides compare, in some ways, with the landscape that reveals Brow-

ning's most violent reaction against the Romantics' legacy – the interior of 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'" (139). The poem does not reconstruct the pastoral form in order to convey a "longing for escape from the barbarities of civilization into a simple, pastoral world, projected into one moment of time" (Maynard, 442). On the contrary, love, rather than offering relief from the "barbarities of civilization", is communicated through language invocative of death, as the "extinction" of "... sight and speech / Each on each" (71-71). As W. David Shaw writes, referring to the final line of the poem, "Love is best", "[t]he lover's statement carries little conviction, because it is really an evasion. We should not reduce it by sentimental quotation to an attitude which Browning offers solemnly for our approval, for it is inseparable from the disturbing revelation that love is itself a kind of death" (118). The strange concurrence of love and death is due to the former's compliance with nature's shrouding and burial of the past, which is registered by the syntax, the grouping together of the last short lines, 80, 82, 84, ironically creating an alliance between love and eternal earth's destroying of men's vain and ephemeral productions: "Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns! / Earth's returns / For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin! / Shut them in, / With their triumphs and their glories and the rest! / Love is best" (79-84).

The poem is constructed as a concentration of ambiguities starting from the title, "Love Among the Ruins", where the ruins, in addition to being a feature of the countryside, imply the destruction of the phallic symbolism that is ample in the speaker's representation of past glory: where the palace's "spires", the "glades' colonnades", "a brazen pillar high as the sky", "a turret", a "sublime tower", "temples" on top of the mountains once dominated the scenery, now there remains only "the single little turret" within a landscape that "does not even boast a tree".[7] The radical reduction in masculinity, indicated by the ruins (revealing a substantial degree of sarcasm in the title), closely accompanies and in fact converges with the decline of civilisation. So one point to be stressed is that energy is not merely an attribute of manliness, but the force that generates civilisation and keeps it going. Accordingly, the concrete material construction of the city, whose enumerated buildings manifest indisputable progress and civilisation, used to bind manliness with economic growth absolutely inextricably: "All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades' / Colonnades, / All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts, – and then, / All the men!" (63-66). And through the metaphor of the ruins the poem focuses precisely on the problematic conjunction of history and manhood.

Because the destroyed objects are phallic symbols as well as symbols of a dead civilisation, the concepts of death and impotence are used interchangeably, the one metaphorically rendering the other. For example, with regard to the effects of the graveyard landscape, the shepherd's "vision of the beautiful carpet of grass which 'embeds / Every vestige of the city' (28-29) ironically speaks to his concrete fear that a similar engulfment will result from continued coitus with the waiting *belle dame sans merci*" (Brenner 52). The girl in the poem corresponds to

the Victorian concept of the *femme fatale*, who is "both sacred and obscene, sacred as redeeming man from culture, obscene as content with a merely appetitive existence that declines inevitably from the high fever of Eros to the low fever of dissolution and decay" (Gilbert 873). She is the sexual aggressor, waiting "breathless" and "dumb" with anticipation of sexual intercourse, while the fact that she will not speak can be read as an indicator of an animalistic sort of desire. Readings assuming that the shepherd's lover plays a traditionally Victorian female role are misreadings. "Even her amatory manners present a formidable, unconventional lover. Rather than wait seated for the shepherd's advances, he acknowledges that she will promptly stand and frankly place 'Either hand / On my shoulder' (ll. 68-69), ... not a single gesture she makes is coy or demure." Gerry Brenner also argues that "the synecdoche of embracing his face with her eyes indicates her thoroughgoing sensuousness"; additionally, it can be argued that her gaze is a sign of her power and control over the shepherd. The girl "with yellow hair" is representative of nature (the natural yellow colour of her hair is the obverse of gold and gold's connotations of artificiality and materiality) and both her presence and her gaze have now supplanted the monarch's (she now occupies the position that used to symbolise the monarch's power, where his 'sublime' tower used to be) thus marking the defeat of manhood: "In the turret whence the charioteers caught soul / for the goal, / When the king looked, where she looks now, breathless, dumb" (57-59). And the "little turret" which she now occupies bears associations of death, too, not only because it is a ruin, but through its implicit association with the square towers of "Childe Roland" and "England in Italy" that are clearly symbolic of death.

Brenner's most important contribution to the reading of the poem is the fact that he draws attention to its "most provocative but implied question – why the shepherd is in no hurry to rendezvous with the girl", which he answers by emphasising that the shepherd is actually terrified of this maid who is "the classic, never-sated, sexually demanding female". Indeed the shepherd's delay is both evident and important. In fact, there is no evidence whatsoever that he will meet the girl in the end, or that his account is not merely fantasised. But there is a blatant discord between the professed eagerness of the lover and his actual behaviour, as instead of hurrying to finish his job and rush to the turret, he delays, drifts along with his sheep and prefers chatting with his male interlocutor. His slow pace marks a purposeless lifestyle and proves his subsumption into the pervasive imagery of quiet and peace, stillness and sleepiness in the idyllic scenery that registers a vacuum of energy and engenders implications of death: " ... the solitary pastures where our sheep / Half-asleep / Tinkle homeward through the twilight, stray or stop" (3-5). His sluggishness and reluctance to act are a consequence of his lack of sexuality and energy; drifting along with his sheep, his image fits well into the landscape of ruins.

The poem's most interesting complication derives from the shepherd's obsessive fascination with the ruins. For the Italian shepherd seeking his virility in fantasy, the monumental fragments possess, as it were, a materialised 'presence'

of his lost male mastery, potency and desire. The ruins constitute solid bodies or rather limbs of evidence of his lost energy and productive masculinity.

Eleanor Cook asks why the "active ghost" of the city grows "out of all proportion in the last stanza, and why is the speaker so agitated?" and "Is it a yearning for the path of gold that produces his irony and his disgust with the undistinguished grey and perfection of grass? If so, why does he not sell the flock and march off to the big city with his golden girl?" (90). The answer is that the shepherd is not any young man with a choice of profession; he is bound to nature by virtue of a double link: he is not only the symbolic swain of the Pastoral, he is also a nineteenth century Italian, and a symbol of the "woman country". He has no choice but to remain in the position he symbolises, that is, with passive, flat and undistinguished nature because there is no big city for him to march off to. It is his English interlocutor and the poem's reader who are faced with a dilemma and the provocation to speculate over a potential choice between culture and nature, activity and passivity, the sublime and the beautiful, war and love, or whatever past and present respectively might mean.

One of the shepherd's functions is to represent a warning about what might happen to men who are too fearful of "the folly, noise and sin" of modern society. Interestingly, a contemporary man's desire for an alternative, passive, a-sexual type of masculinity has been inscribed in Victorian texts, too, as Carol Christ has shown: "[T]he ideal of the passive a-sexual Victorian female, in addition to limiting woman's political power and psychological freedom while apotheosising her, reflects men's projections of values they themselves would like in some way to possess or incorporate and reflects and reveals how some Victorian writers see man's aggressiveness, and particularly his sexual aggressiveness, as dangerous and distasteful" (147). For each of these writers – Christ's analysis focuses primarily on Tennyson and Patmore but she also includes Dickens and Ruskin – woman "represents an ideal freedom from those very qualities he finds most difficult to accept in himself" (147). Browning's poem takes issue with the tendency described by Christ.

Line 66 locates "all the men" in the past and so marks the decline in the present of a supportive male environment; the speaker's pathology may be caused by the lack of an adequate, socially constructed and promoted definition of manhood in the desolate landscape to support and reinforce it. Of course, no idealised version of the past is invoked, either; no past model of harmonious co-existence of culture and nature is ever advocated or reproduced; the present might be the time when nature has taken over exercising violence upon the city, but once the city itself had framed and subdued the landscape with its walls and towers: "Far and wide, / All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades' / Colonnades, / All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts, – and then, / All the men!" (61-66).

Line 77 describes the patriarchal hierarchy of the ancient society, "the monarch and his minions and his dames" that had rigidly structured the landscape as well the life of its members:

> Where the domed and daring palace shot its spires
> Up like fires
> O'er the hundred-gated circuit of a wall
> Bounding all,
> Made of marble, men might march on nor be pressed,
> Twelve abreast.
>
> (19-24)

While lines 19-20 reveal strong admiration for powerfully generated male energy, lines 21-22 hint that the inhibiting and 'all-bounding' effect produced by the severity of the patriarchal order not only controls and subordinates nature and women, but threatens and possibly undermines the male energy that sustains it. A sense of wasted energy is imparted by lines 21-24, by the image of soldiers marching round and round on the marble wall (the ambiguity in the syntax compares the men themselves to marble, as if they formed a continuum with the wall), confined in rows of ten and implying an alliance of heroic action (war) with male bonding and homosocial desire.

In any case, the shepherd's languor, inertia, and anxiety derive from his adherence to nature and his feminisation, and exemplify the evils bound to affect those who indulge the pleasures of too much relaxation and inactivity. In Burke's formulation, "Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder, is the consequence of the gloomy view we take of things in this relaxed state of body." (122) Having established the pathological aspect of the shepherd's personality, he can then be grouped with a number of other mentally disturbed Browning speakers, such as the Spanish monk in the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", who spies on "Brown Dolores [...] / Steeping tresses in the tank, / Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs" (28-9); or the Duke of Ferrara in "My Last Duchess" and Porphyria's lover, who murder their lovers. While these dramatic monologues are not completely free of fear and hatred of women (identifying to a certain extent with the lyric speaker is inevitable), irony is built into their structure in that they also make a second, 'objective' reading necessary, placing the reader in a privileged position of knowledge and understanding that is beyond the knowledge and understanding of the speaker himself. When trying to assess Browning's sexual politics we have to take into account the extraordinarily subjective and extreme (even grotesque) perspective of his speakers who produce distorted images of women as symptoms of their own male pathology. Sussman has shown that for Browning "these dark women do not function as dangers to manhood". On the contrary, they represent the "other side of the Victorian problematic of manliness, not the Carlylean longing for chaste masculine bonding within an all-male community, but the urge to shatter bourgois constraints on heterosexual virility" (75). Still, the important characteristic of "Love Among the Ruins" is the conflation of individual, sexual identity with cultural and political identity, which extends the pathology of sexual relations to a national scale and turns it into a critique of Victorian society and culture.

Browning's Politics of the Sublime

A first answer to the question of what has brought about the fall of the city is the misdirection and waste of male desire, as, for example, in the passages quoted below, where male energy is expressed in overtly sexualised language, hydraulic metaphors and phallic imagery, but material wealth seems to be the ultimate object of male desire:

> Where a multitude of men breathed joy and woe
> Long ago;
> Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame
> Struck them tame;
> And that glory and that shame alike, the gold
> Bought and sold.
>
> [...]
>
> In one year they sent a million fighters forth
> South and North,
> And they built their gods a brazen pillar high
> As the sky,
> Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force –
> Gold, of course.
> (31-36, 73-78).

To so audaciously conjoin heroic action (war), heroic ethos (honour and bravery), heroic achievement (glory) with the sexual drive and the ruthless pursuit of profit is to destroy a pervasive contemporary effort to suppress the morally dubious enterprises of imperialism under the cover of a constantly resurrected ideology of Romantic heroism. The poem dwells upon the embarrassing Victorian marriage of heroism with entrepreneurial manhood; its deliberately economic language addresses precisely the anxiety associated with the fact that "the masculine persona ... was organized around a man's determination and skill in manipulating the economic environment" (Davidoff and Hall 229). In "Love" economic growth both glorifies and undermines the city.

The fact is that greed and violence conflate with the city's excessive vitality, frantic activity and impressive vertical growth which cannot be underestimated. The descriptions of the buildings (spires shot like fires, tower springing sublime, a pillar high as the sky) as well as the men's numbers (multitudes, millions) and activities (tracing a fire ring or fighting wars) deliberately evade any sense of tangible proportion and realistic measurement, so as to endow the city with those features that sum up the sublime: obscurity, power, vastness and magnitude in building, etc. The lack of definitive shape allows for the implication of a greatness that is intangible, immeasurable, incommensurable, unrepresentable

in material or linguistic form. Thus, the exaggerated description of the speculated city emits in its hyperbole and imprecision the aesthetic of sublimity and epitomises the paradoxical character of the sublime. More precisely, sublimity is actually caused by its capacity to inspire the fear of death. Burke writes: "I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power.... And indeed the ideas of pain, and above all of death, are so very affecting, that whilst we remain in the presence of whatever is supposed to have the power of inflicting either, it is impossible to be perfectly free from terror" (59). It follows that the image of soldiers marching to war, as well as the figure of the King, are sublime. Browning reverses the terms of the life and death opposition as, paradoxically, live nature is characterised by deadly, sterile inertia, whereas the half-buried, dead relics of the past are still capable of stimulating a tremendous activity in the observer's imagination. The fantastic re-animation of the city expresses the speaker's ambivalent response to the ruins, fascination and revulsion, and also relates the immanent interdependence and inextricability of violence and grandeur which produces the sublime feeling: fear and exaltation.

Most relevant for this poem is that the sublime feeling is a characteristic of humanity in opposition to the rest of nature; it derives from and proves the essential difference of man and his superiority to the natural world of animals, while it also marks his capacity of relating to the infinite. Burke links to the sublime experience man's "sense of ambition", the passion which saves him from the eternal and undifferentiated circle of imitation and secures change and growth. Without ambition, "[m]en must remain as brutes do, the same at the end that they are at this day, and that they were in the beginning of the world" (46). In "Love Among the Ruins" the past evidently offers a display of man's ambition and desire to break the bondage of nature, while nature (beauty and love included) involves a flat, passive and animalistic existence.

Other poems by Browning present similar concerns. Closest to the imagined city of "Love" is the fictional classical city of the tyrant Protus in "Cleon", where man's insatiabe desire for elevation, power and superiority compels him to the building of the symbolic tower by means of which he positions himself in opposition to the flatness of nature. The symbol of the tower or fortress includes in its range of meanings and associations the strict demarcation of a territory and its borders that are both defined and defended, both excluding and intimating some enemy to be reckoned with.

As in "Love Among the Ruins", in "Cleon", too, male desire, endowed with sublime force and motivation, is bodied forth and embodied in symbolic construction; here manhood is explicitly imaged as a tower. "Cleon" involves a kind of dialectic of the sublime which explicates the situation in "Love":

> Man's spirit might grow conscious of man's life,
> And, by new lore so added to the old,
> Take each step higher over the brute's head.
> Thus grew the only life, the pleasure-house,

Watch-tower and treasure-fortress of the soul,
Which whole surrounding flats of natural life
Seemed only fit to yield subsistence to;
A tower that crowns a country. But alas,
The soul now climbs it just to perish there!
For thence we have discovered ('Tis no dream –
We know this, which we had not else perceived)
That there's a world of capability
For joy, spread round about us, meant for us,
Inviting us; and still the soul craves all,
And still the flesh replies, 'Take no more
Than ere thou clombst the tower to look abroad!
Nay, so much less as that fatigue has brought
Deduction to it.' We struggle, fain to enlarge
Our bounded physical recipiency,
Increase our power, supply fresh oil to life,
Repair the waste of age and sickness: no,
It skills not! life's inadequate to joy,
As the soul sees joy, tempting life to take.
(228-250)

Indeed, the most impressive and original aspect of Burke's formulation is that the sublime is founded on pain: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*: that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (36). This is the reason why Burke consequently distinguishes between "delight", which accompanies or results from the removal of great pain or danger, and positive pleasure. The outcome of labour is delight (negative pleasure) rather than positive pleasure because it involves physical or mental effort similar to pain. The remarkable and rather amazing (and resonating with Biblical connotations) statement in the above quotation is that "the soul sees joy [as] tempting life to take" (l. 250). That is, the dynamics of human desire to grow over nature, which is manifest in the dialectic of the sublime (ambition / pain / delight, more ambition / more pain / more delight, and so forth) launches man into a frantic process of growth which inevitably reaches a high point, an apex of death (which equals the return to the earth, at least outside the context of Christian doctrine). It is precisely the limited capacity of mortal man and his material constructions to contain the "world of capability for joy" or to keep up with the demands of insatiable ambition that destroys the city in "Love among the Ruins", where desire, compared to fire and ultimately and essentially uncontained by the structures it creates, turns self-destructive. Relevant here is an excerpt from Adam Phillips' "Introduction" to his edition of the *Enquiry*: "And it is, after all, Satan in *Paradise Lost* [used by Burke to illustrate

his notion of the sublime] who both creeps and flies and pretends to a great deal. This choice between creeping and flying announces the dilemma of the Sublime: does it bring us down to earth, or link us with the divinity of the skies? Does it enlarge us or diminish us?" (xviii)

The most interesting explanation of the destruction of the city is related to the question of one's distance from as well as one's relation to the sublime object. Burke clearly indicates that "[w]hen danger of pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (36-37). But Browning transfers the terms of the sublime from the realm of aesthetics to the realm of history and politics. Within the speculated city and its type of government, tyranny, terror and death press too close. In this respect the city is imagined as a paradox: an impossible realisation and actualisation of sublimity in everyday social life and political practice (war making, game playing, building construction etc.). Not surprisingly, sublimity is defied by the proximity of danger and turns plainly destructive.

On a first level, sublimity belongs to the past and is recovered via the distancing of history, as the nineteenth-century observer imaginatively experiences the violence of the city from a position of ultimate safety – that of a tourist visiting and contemplating a site of ruins. On a second more important level though, given that the Roman imagery is used to project and account for the frequently shocking experience of living in that 'awful time of transition', the Victorian period, the sublime is used to express a horror of *hubris* that is produced by Britain's too rapid social tranformation and frantic economic growth and its consequences, including war. It has been argued that "Love" should be read as an anti-war poem, a well-disguised response to the Crimean war, "a rejection of those values associated with the frantic prosecution of the Crimean war" (Lucas 193). This suggests a comparison and an opposition to Tennyson's *Maud*, the latter poem advocating war as a hero-making activity, purging, elevating and redeeming one from the debasing and degenerating effects of industrialism and commerce. Though correct, this view is incomplete, as Browning's poem characteristically refuses to reduce its argument to a simplified 'politically correct' position, maybe because of the fear that such a position would require the sacrifice of potency and growth. Despite the grotesqueness of the imagery (i.e. "Lust of glory pricked their hearts up"), which is produced and hence undermined by the partiality of the speaker's perspective anyway, the city's dynamism cannot be underestimated and the problem with using the terms of the sublime is that an ambivalence inherent in that notion – no matter how dangerous and destructive, the sublime is always admirable – obstructs a clear political and moral positioning. Still, Browning is always better at producing questions rather than answers and, on the pretext of responding to Roman ruins, this Janus-faced and extraordinarily condensed poem constitutes ruthless social and political critique.

Notes

1. For numerous examples including extracts from contemporary travel journals and diaries see John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South*; also, John Butt, *English Literature in the Mid Eighteenth Century*, 245, 248.
2. See relevant discussion in Malcolm Kelsal, *Byron's Politics* (58-59).
3. In assuming that the silent interlocutor of the shepherd is an English tourist, I am following a suggestion by the Browning scholar, John Woolford, who also argues that the situation of the poem is based on a contemporary reality, because Italian shepherds would often assume the role of a guide, as it were, and show Victorian tourists around their pastures.
4. Following and quoting Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Sussman looks to the history of masculinities as "a history of ethical problematizations" and observes that "for the early Victorians the problematization of sexuality and of manliness are conjoined.... The point of problematization for manhood or what the Victorian middle-class termed 'manliness' was situated in developing what Foucault calls 'practices of the self' for properly regulating or managing this internal, natural energy, 'technologies of the self that were consistently identified with the technologies of an industrializing society obsessed with harnessing the natural energy of water and fire. This definition of manhood as self-discipline, as the ability to control male energy and to deploy this power not for sexual but for productive purposes was clearly specific to bourgeois man" (10-11).
5. In his discussions on virtue and the human mind, where Burke illustrates the relevance of the ideas of sublimity and beauty for the definitions of gender identities, he makes it clear that female beauty is far from perfect:

   > [Beauty], where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature.... [A]nd modesty in general, which is a tacit allowance of imperfection, is itself considered as an amiable quality... (100).
6. Other examples are the speakers of "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and "Clive".
7. Such extensive, obviously deliberate use of sexual imagery could be partly explained by the fact that the ancient city was pagan. Marilyn Butler's (130) argument that works like Sir William Hamilton's and Richard Payne Knight's are of considerable interest to the reader of Shelley and Peacock, might be relevant for the reading of Browning, too. Hamilton, England's wealthy ambassador to Naples, and "among the immediate sources of Darwin's acquaintance with fertility cults and rites with obvious sexual meaning ... became a key figure in an iconoclastic vein of French and English scholarship. His 'Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus' was largely given over to the demonstration that phallic items and ceremonies survived in the practices of Eighteenth century Italian Catholicism", while "Knight argues that the frequent traces of phallic worship which recur in all religions, including Christianity, indicate that the phallus is 'a very rational symbol of a very natural and philosophical system of religion'." Knight issued in 1818 "a modified version of his theory for the general public – *An Inquiry into the Symbolic Language of Art and Mythology*."

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Πολιτική και πολιτική των φύλων στο "Love Among the Ruins" του Browning
Ευγενία Σηφάκη

Με το ποιήμά του "Love Among the Ruins", ο Browning συνδιαλέγεται με την παράδοση της ποίησης των ερειπίων, ενώ δείχνει βαθιά συναίσθηση του γεγονότος ότι το κλασικό παρελθόν αποτελεί μια οθόνη πάνω στην οποία προβάλλονται σύγχρονα οράματα της κοινωνίας και της αυτοκρατορίας. Για να ξαναζωντανέψει την αρχαία πόλη, ο Browning χρησιμοποιεί την αισθητική του Υψηλού (το πιο σημαντικό διακείμενο του

ποιήματος είναι το περίφημο έργο του Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*). Οι κατηγορίες του Υψηλού και του Ωραίου του δίνουν την επιπλέον δυνατότητα να συνυφάνει την ανδρική ικανότητα (στις πολλαπλές συμπαραδηλώσεις της) με την πολιτική δύναμη και την κοινωνική πρόοδο. Το ποίημα εκφωνείται από έναν αδύναμο Ιταλό βοσκό, του οποίου η ανδρική παθολογία, αρρωστημένη προοπτική και κάποτε γελοία γλώσσα λειτουργούν ως έμμεση προβολή της παθολογίας των σεξουαλικών σχέσεων στη Βικτωριανή Αγγλία.

Το Υψηλό στην ποίηση του Browning δεν χρησιμοποιείται ποτέ ως μονοσήμαντα θετική αισθητική αξία. Μεταφέρεται, παραδόξως, από το πεδίο της αισθητικής στο χώρο της ιστορίας, του πολιτισμού και της πολιτικής, ενώ υπογραμμίζεται η καταστροφική του πλευρά. Ισχυρίζομαι ότι η κατηγορία αυτή χρησιμοποιείται εδώ για να εγγράψει στο ποίημα τις αντινομίες ενός κράματος δυνατών, αντιφατικών αισθημάτων που χαρακτηρίζουν τη Βικτωριανή περίοδο (ανάταση και αποστροφή, θριαμβολογία και φόβο) και για να εκφράσει τόσο το θάμβος όσο και τη φρίκη της ύβρεως την οποία δημιούργησε η γρήγορη κοινωνική μεταμόρφωση της Βρετανίας, η φρενήρης οικονομική ανάπτυξη, το κυνήγι για όλο και περισσότερη εξουσία και επεκτατική πολιτική.