Robert Browning's Decoding of Natural Theology in "Caliban upon Setebos"

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In his letter of June 27, 1864, to Julia Wedgwood, Robert Browning reports on the following encounter:

Last night I was talking with a friend who read aloud a passage from Dr. Newman's Apology in which he says that "he is as convinced of the existence of God"—an individual, not an external force merely—"as of his own existence." I believe he deceives himself and that no sane man has ever had, with mathematical exactness, equal conviction on those two points—though the approximation to equality may be in any degree short of that: and looking at the practical effects of belief, I should expect that it would be so: I can see nothing that comes from absolute contact, so to speak, between man and God, but everything in all variety from the greater or less distance between the two. When anyone tells me that he has such a conviction, I look at a beggar who holds the philosopher's stone according to his profession. Do you see the bearing of all this as I seem to see it? How, remaining beggars—or poor, at least—we may at once look for the love of those to whom we give our mite, though we throw it into the darkness where they only may be: fortunately the experiment on our faith is never a very long one. (1)

The letter is interesting as an intervention in the nineteenth-century debate over the relation between ontology, objective knowledge, and religious belief. Browning is keenly aware of the not very subtle anthropomorphism that underwrites the postulation of a personate deity whose attributes as an individual are both knowable and known, not to mention the solipsism of such a postulation. Browning here seems aware of how arguments such as Newman's can be appropriated, taken out of context, and used on incursions into the scientific sphere to justify the enterprise of natural theology, even if Newman's argument for the existence of God is not being used for that purpose in the passage under discussion. (2) No later than The Usefulness of Natural Philosophy, the first volume of which appeared in 1663, Robert Boyle argues that "the knowledge of the works of God proportions our admiration of them, they participating and disclosing so much of the inexhausted perfections of their author, that the further we contemplate them, the more footsteps and impressions we discover of the perfections of their Creator, and our utmost science can but give us a juster veneration of his omniscience." (3)

The sentiments of Browning's contemporary Robert Chambers are, if anything closer to Newman's than Boyle's are. In his Explanations: A Sequel to "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation" (1846), Chambers, like Newman, expresses his conviction of the existence of God and states further the belief that his understanding of the very nature of his own existence offers an insight into the nature of God. "But yet the faith may not be shaken, that that which has been endowed with the power of godlike thought, and allowed to come into communion with its Eternal Author, cannot be truly lost. The vital flame which proceeded from him at first returns to him in our perfected form at last, bearing with it all good and lovely things, and making of all the far-extending Past but one intense Present, glorious and everlasting." (4)

Browning's Caliban argues along lines not very different from those ascribed to Newman and those mobilized by Boyle and Chambers, if only to show the limits and ultimate irony of any attempt to express such convictions. According to Clyde de L. Ryals, "in 'Caliban upon Setebos' Browning deals with the Higher Critics' thesis that God is created in the image of man and with the natural theologians' claim that the character of God can be derived from the evidences of nature." (5) But if Browning will implicitly have none of the argument from design from the monstrous and self-satirizing speaker of "Caliban upon Setebos," of which the subtitle is "Natural Theology in the Island," he will explicitly have none of it from Newman. In his letter, the poet appears to accuse the priest of begging (and beggaring) the question and the issue. Browning counsels instead that humanity
remain "poor, at least"—poor in spirit, that is—and staunchly skeptical to hold open the possibility that the small coinage of the self, or "mite," though it exists in "darkness," may yet inherit the kingdom of heaven, if such a dominion in fact exists.

No less interesting than the letter's intervention are the identity of its addressee and its historical moment. Julia Wedgewood—actually, Frances Julia Wedgwood (1833-1913)—was a niece of Charles Darwin, whose mother and wife (his cousin Emma) were also Wedgewoods. Julia Wedgwood's involvement in discussions of scientific knowledge versus religious belief continued long after she broke off her correspondence with Browning in March 1869. (6) For example, in a letter of October 3, 1884, to another cousin, Francis Darwin, she reports Charles's "growing hostility" toward organized religion. (7) The letter to Browning was written in 1864, the year which also marked the publication of Dramatis Personae, in which "Caliban upon Setebos," probably written almost five years earlier, first appeared.

**Whose Natural Theology?**

As has long been recognized, Darwin's is perhaps the most important intertextual presence in Browning's poem. (8) Almost four decades ago, John Howard and Michael Timko discussed Browning's representation of Caliban as the Darwinian missing link between humanity and the lower primates, as well as the theologizing of which Caliban, as such a creature, is capable. (9) Whether he is, as Edward Berdoe suggests, a student of such elemental theologians as Calvin and Augustine, (10) or whether he is "Jacobin revolutionary and half-human slave, a degenerate consciousness imposed upon by the irrational ideology of nonconformity." (11) Caliban is clearly a relic of the lower orders, whether those orders are construed as biological or social manifestations. As such a missing link, Caliban is a vestige of the natural history of creation. And given his condition and his proclivity for seeing the world as the projection of his own will and representation, after Schopenhauer—as a vestige of the natural history of creation seeing the world as vestiges of the natural history of creation, in other words—Caliban offers an important insight into the provenance of his natural theology.

Daniel Karlin, like Browning's most recent editor, Adam Roberts, is only partially correct about the provenance of the natural theology that Browning both satirizes and criticizes. (12) would argue it is not William Paley, but Chambers, the then—anonymous author of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (1844), who is the principal object of Browning's satire. Jeff Karr, on the other hand, is correct in the view that "Browning contrasts the world views" of natural theology "and Darwin in order to focus on the fundamentally flawed process of natural theology" in contrast to Darwinian induction. (13)

Those who propose Paley on the basis of Browning's subtitle or Caliban's thought process are mistaken. The fact that the term natural theology is not italicized or otherwise punctuated in Browning's title suggests that his reference is to the concept of natural theology, not the title of a specific work. Moreover, the use of the term to denote a textual process whereby one attempts to harmonize observations of natural phenomena with received religious doctrine is hardly original or even exclusively associated with Paley's Natural Theology (1802).

Raymond of Sabunda published his Theologia Naturalis (ca. 1431) well over three centuries before Paley wrote. Michel de Montaigne published his translation of Raymond, Theologie Naturelle (1569), the year after publishing his Apology for Raymond Sebond (1568), an exposition of Raymond's thoughts on the subject of natural theology.

Central to the thinking of Raymond and Montaigne after him, according to the latter, is the belief that "all things, Heaven, Earth, the elements, our bodies and our souls are in one accord: we simply have to find how to use them. If we have the capacity to understand, they will teach us.... 'The invisible things of God,' says St Paul, 'are clearly seen from the creation of the world, his Eternal Wisdom and his Godhead being perceived from the things
he has made." (14) As Montaigne's translator, M. A. Screech, tellingly comments, "that quotation, adapted from the Vulgate Latin text of Romans 1:20, is the foundation of all natural theology in the Renaissance" (p. xvii).

Francis Bacon appropriates the term in The Advancement of Learning (1605) and makes it the basis of the English scientific enterprise, albeit not without some caveats. (15) Natural theology as term and concept, and its line of descent from Bacon, to Boyle, and beyond, to Paley, were current and operative a long time before (and after) Paley. (16)

Why propose Chambers and not Paley—if not exactly as the source of Browning's subtitle, then at least as the object of his satire? The answer is that both the Brownings—and indeed Darwin himself—were deeply unhappy with Vestiges. (17) The proof of Browning's unhappiness must await the discussion of "Caliban," although his reference to the soul as a "mite" in the letter to Wedgwood is richly suggestive of an ongoing critical engagement with Chambers. (18) Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (hereafter, EBB) unhappiness can be documented more directly than her husband's. And it is difficult to imagine that she did not mention its cause to Robert Browning.

During January 1845, shortly after the publication of the first edition of Vestiges, EBB wrote twice each to John Kenyon, from whom she initially borrowed the book, and to Mary Russell Mitford about the then anonymous text. In the first of these letters, dated January 3, EBB returns the work to Kenyon, commenting that "the writer has a certain power in tying a knot—(in mating a system)—but it is not a love knot,— & it appears to me that I have read in my life few more melancholy books." She also speculates as to whether Andrew Crosse, a scientist and a friend of Kenyon's, mentioned in Vestiges as one of those reporting that he had generated specimens of the genus acarus by passing an electrical current through "a saturated solution of silicate of potash" (pp. 185-186), may be the author, and reports that Richard Vyvyan, as corroborated by his brother Edward, denies having a role in its composition. (19) The second letter, written to Mitford on January 6-8, simply repeats that Vyvyan is not the author. Another letter to Mitford, written on January 25-30, reports on the visit of Anna Jameson, whose credibility EBB dismissively impugns. "Mrs. Jameson came again yesterday, & was very agreeable—but tried vainly to convince me that the 'Vestiges of Creation' which I take to be one of the most melancholy books in the world, is the most comforting, . . & that Lady Byron was an angel of a wife" (10:41). The final letter to Kenyon, written on January 29, also reports on the last-noted visit, giving some insight into the reasons for finding the book disagreeable. Jameson "tried to persuade me that the 'Vestiges of the Creation' was the most comfortable of books, that we shd. think ourselves happy in our condition of fully developed monkeyhood—but I was too proud and discontented to be found persuadable in these things" (10:49).

Chambers makes a number of statements describing what EBB characterizes as "our condition of fully developed monkeyhood." He notes that none of the other "simiadae [can] pretend to such a place, narrowly and imperfectly endowed as these creatures are"; (20) that "the intelligence and teachableness of the simiadae rise to a climax in [humanity's] pre-eminently mental nature" (p. 272); and that as a result, "man, then, considered zoologically, and without regard to the distinct character assigned to him by theology, simply takes his place as the type of all types of the animal kingdom, the true and unmistakable head of animated nature upon this earth" (pp. 272-273).

But while Chambers' comments may seem to suggest a process of evolutionary descent and may seem to anticipate Darwin's implicit position in Origin of Species (1859) and his explicit position in The Descent of Man (1871), those comments also look back to a tradition adopted if not originated by Raymond and Chambers after him to make certain arguments in his natural theology.

In Theologie Naturelle, Raymond concludes his discussion of humanity and the four ranks or orders of creatures by observing, "We must remember that by the comparison of the general fit which exists between man and lower things, and of the fit of the lower things among themselves, we have risen to the understanding of a nature that is
Raymond's God may be responsible for the order, or orders, of this world, but he does not partake of those orders, with the result that human beings for Raymond have a good deal more in common with the creatures than with their Creator. Montaigne, commenting on Raymond, observes,

The natural, original distemper of Man is presumption. Man is the most blighted and frail of all creatures and, moreover, the most given to pride. This creature knows and sees that he is lodged down here, among the mire and shit of the world, bound and nailed to the deadest, most stagnant part of the universe, in the lowest storey of the building, the farthest from the vault of heaven; ... yet, in thought, he sets himself above the circle of the Moon, bringing the very heavens under his feet. (Montaigne, ed. Screech, p. 16)

The proof of his own assertions, for Montaigne, lies in an accumulation of supposed analogical resemblances and similarities that, when taken all in all, demonstrate to his satisfaction that there is a kinship and a continuity to be observed between humanity and the other creatures. He puts the case in the form of a question that he goes on to answer at some length: "After all, what aspects of our human competence cannot be found in the activities of animals?" (p. 19). Enter the bestiary. As Screech notes, "Montaigne, by long-established convention, cited the weeping war-horses of the poets or the tale of Androcles and the Lion as though they were zoological and historical fact. His loyal dogs commit suicide or haunt their masters' tombs. In his own day, however, his animal science was powerfully persuasive" (p. xxii).

Although his contention that Montaigne's natural history had "in its own way ... something of the appeal of Darwin" (p. xxii) is a reach, Screech is completely accurate in his characterization of the analogical examples that Montaigne adduces to his argument. To take the first, "the weeping war-horses of the poets": Montaigne argues that "we often shed tears at the loss of animals which we love: they do the same when they lose us." Then he cites by way of confirmation lines from book 11 of the Aeneid, "Post, bellator equus, positis insignibus, Aethon/It lachrymans, guttisque humectat grandibus ora." Screech translates the lines as "Then comes Aethon, the war-horse, stripped of its insignia, weeping and bathing his master's wounds in mighty tears" (p. 43).

There are no horses quite like Aethon in Vestiges. However, in the chapter entitled "The Mental Constitution of Animals," which begins with admiring reference to Natural Theology and the Bridgewater Treatises (1833-37) for calling attention to the design of the cosmos (Vestiges, p. 324), the tradition of the bestiary lives on in the plethora of analogical mental activities that Chambers ascribes to humans and animals alike. "The horse is startled by marvellous objects, as a man is. The dog and many others shew tenacious memory. The dog also proves himself possessed of imagination by the act of dreaming. Horses, finding themselves in want of a shoe, have of their own accord gone to a farrier's shop where they were shod before. Cats closed up in rooms, will endeavour to obtain their liberation by pulling a latch or ringing a bell" (p. 336).

It is this extreme version of the argument from design—the one that Neal C. Gillespie calls "the identity argument" (p. 222), which ascribes not only design but willed intentionality to every aspect of the natural world—that Browning satirizes in "Caliban upon Setebos," ultimately showing Caliban done in despite his intention, in the words of the antinomian speaker of "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" (1836), "to get to God" (1.6). Isobel Armstrong has come as close as anyone else to taking the full measure of Browning's rich sense of play in the poem:

In a joke against the natural theologians, who believed, as against revealed religion, that evidence of divinity was to be rationally deduced from the operation of the natural, material world, and yielded up in
the process of analogy, Caliban's reasoning process takes him into analogies which are by no means reassuring. But, with RB's characteristic way of releasing ironies signifying instantaneously multiple and sometimes contradictory possibilities, Caliban's thought represents a momentous effort of intellect. (p. 77)

Despite his effort, however, the parsimony of the analogical method constrains rather than enables Caliban's thinking. As Lee Erickson rightly notes, "Caliban's failure is a failure of the imagination. This is indicated by the poem's epigraph, taken from Psalms 50:21: 'These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I shall reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes.'" (23) As Erickson indirectly suggests, one of the most obvious problems with Caliban's analogical mode of argument is that it leaves him playing God in the effort to understand God. Armstrong characterizes the resulting confusion aptly:

To be caught in the meshes of analogy is not to be sure of which side of the analogy is dependent on the other: Caliban positing the deity Setebos in his own image (or deducing him from experience), positing Caliban, positing Setebos, constantly reverses a hierarchy of power depending on who is the originary figure in the comparison. (p. 77)

In proposing himself as the analog of Setebos in his dealings with the lower orders, Caliban invites comparisons between himself and those lower orders, thereby importing the bestiary tradition into his argument.

Setebos/So Betes: Darwin's Presence and Caliban's Chiastic Conundrum

"Caliban upon Setebos" is shot through with allusions to Darwinian discourse—both Darwin's natural history and his theoretical work on evolution. Many of the poem's fauna and their environments are discussed at some length in The Voyage of the Beagle (1845). For example, the "she-tortoises/Crawling to lay their eggs here" (ll. 206-207) (24) recall Darwin's chapter on the Galapagos Archipelago. (25) There, in October, "the female, where the soil is sandy, deposits [the eggs] together and covers them up with sand; but where the ground is rocky she drops them indiscriminately in any hole" (p. 384). The "otter, sleek-wet, lithe as a leech," and the "many handed ... cuttle-fish," and perhaps also the crab "whose nippers end in red," the "mess of whelks" (11. 46, 142, 107) depend at least in part for their originals on Darwin's chapter on Chiloe and Chonos Islands (pp. 274-292). There, Darwin reports on his observations of "a small sea-otter" that, "like the seals, draws a large supply from a small red crab, which swims in shoals near the surface of the water. Mr. Bynoe saw one in Tierra del Fuego eating a cuttle-fish; and in Low's Harbour, another was killed in the act of carrying to its hole a large volute shell" (p. 289). Whelks are volutes. That both of the locales that Darwin describes are island settings is not lost on Browning, whose subtitle, "Natural Theology in the Island," refers in turn to those settings and to the island-nation in which the debate over natural theology versus natural selection was raging in 1864. (26)

As with the fauna, so with the flora and the geology of Browning's setting of the poem: reporting on Low's Harbour in the Chonos Archipelago, Darwin observes that "the islands were here, as in Chiloe, composed of a stratified, soft, littoral deposit; and the vegetation in consequence was beautifully luxuriant" (p. 286). Caliban, "while he kicks both feet in the cool slush," reflects on a similar setting,

while above his head a pompion-plant Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye, Creeps down to touch and tickle hair and beard, And now a flower drops with a bee inside And now a fruit to snap at, catch and crunch. (ll. 7-11)

Caliban's blatantly pumpkin-headed act of anthropomorphizing of the "pompion-plant" and "cave-top" as a putatively human eyebrow and eye offers an early insight into the self-projection that underwrites his argument.
for the existence of and his analysis of the character of Setebos. In John Woolford's words, that act among
others reveals "that Caliban is in the process of constructing an image of deity on the basis of his own nature,
and that from the point of view of any advanced religion the results are unsatisfactory" (p. 86). (27)

The cave itself comes straight from Book 7 of Plato's Republic, where the play of shadows on its walls marks the
limits of what is knowable about higher things and beings. But those limits do not pose a problem for someone
like Caliban, who illustrates the truth of Giambattista Vico's contention "that in all languages the greater part of
the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from
the human senses and passions.... All of which is a consequence of our axiom that man in his ignorance makes
himself the rule of the universe, for ... he had made of himself an entire world." (28)

The setting of the poem is rich with implications. Browning places Caliban at the shoreline—the littoral, to use
Darwin's own geological terminology-making of Caliban, in both senses, a littoralist and a literalist, a natural
theologian of the identity school who ponders the activity at the shoreline and takes literally the analogical
resemblances and connections that he posits. Caliban's situation at the littoral is an opportune position for
another reason. In the ninth chapter of Origin of Species, Darwin, whose theory of evolution depends to a great
extent on the fossil record, freely owns its imperfection, nowhere more pronounced than at the shoreline. "I
suspect," he observes,

that but few of the very many animals which live on the beach between high and low watermark are
preserved. For instance, the several species of the Chthamalinae (a sub family of sessile cirripedes)
coat the rocks all over the world in infinite numbers: they are all strictly littoral, with the exception of a
single Mediterranean species, which inhabits deep water and has been found fossil in Sicily, whereas
not one other species has hitherto been found in any tertiary formation: yet it is now known that the
genus Chthamalus existed during the chalk period. (p. 288)

It is the absence of the fossil record at the littoral that allows Caliban to play the littoralist and the literalist, and to
refuse Darwinian insights in favor of the argument from design in the process.

And the argument from design in the poem does have a very specific design of its own. The design is suggested
by two main elements: a found anagram and a rhetorical formula that opens the way into the poem's elliptically
chiastic structure.

The found anagram is the name Setebos. Browning takes the name from The Tempest, which serves as a
source for all the names of all the other beings that Caliban names as well, except for the Quiet. (29) Read
backward, the name becomes so betes—so with the animals—a multilingual formula summative of the bestiary
variant of the argument from design that points up analogies between human beings and animals, an argument
worthy of Chambers had he written in French, or of Montaigne, who did.

Caliban pronounces the name Setebos, with its rich anagrammatical potential to be read as so betes, eight times
throughout the poem, almost the exact same number of times that Caliban puts forward his "seven theses or
propositions, each ending in analogy with 'So He.'" (30) If one adds the single instance of the variant "Not He!"
(1. 217), so betes and "So He" pretty much balance (or cancel) each other out. But the phrase that Armstrong
takes to mark analogy also marks the presence of an elliptical chiasmus, a tropic parallelism of a slightly
different sort, the identity of which clarifies the poem's satirical thrust and target. Briefly defined, chiasmus is "a
figure of speech by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second." (31)
Not surprisingly, chiasmus is a trope frequently found in Judeo-Christian religious discourse. For example, after
he has brought and withdrawn the flood, God tells Noah and his sons, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9.6). The Psalms are a particularly rich site for chiasmus, with at least thirty occurrences. (32)

To take the briefest and perhaps the most pointed of the seven instances in the poem: Caliban proposes the following analogy between himself and Setebos:

‘Thinketh, such shows nor right nor wrong in Him,
Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord.

‘Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs
That march now from the mountain to the sea,

‘Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.

‘Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots
Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;

‘Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,
And two worms he whose nippers end in red;

As it likes me each time, I do: so He. (11. 98-108)

What does the elliptical "so He" imply but leave unstated? The following lines attempt to fill that gap by reconstructing the omission:

As it likes me each time, I do: so He

Says, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm

And two worms he whose nippers end in red.

Says the first straggler that boasts purple spots

Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off.

Let twenty pass and stones the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.

He's strong himself compared to yonder crabs

That march now from the mountain to the sea.

I think such shows nor right nor wrong in him

Nor kind, nor cruel. He is strong and Lord.

Reconstructing this or any of the other six elliptical chiasmi in the poem demonstrates the extent to which “Caliban upon Setebos,” in the words of E. Warwick Slinn, “epitomises ... the solipsising process and the use of language for a mirroring self-reflexiveness” (p. 84).

The solipsistic thinking occurs in an intertextual situation that points up just how out of touch Caliban's attempt to reconcile religion and science is with either religion or science as Browning understands both. Psalm 50, which furnishes Browning with the poem's epigraph, presents a God that does not ordinarily intervene in the material lives of the creatures, and he neither feeds nor is fed by them:

I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills, I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine.

If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof.

Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: And call upon me in the day of trouble: I shall deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me. (Psalm 50.9-15)

If this is indeed the God that Browning presents, how ironic is Caliban's (mis)understanding of how to placate him?

"Would, to appease Him, cut a finger off,

Or of my three kid yearlings burn the best,

Or let the toothsome apples rot on tree,

Or push my tame beast for the orc to taste. (11. 271-274)

The animals are perfectly capable of feeding themselves—above all, "the crabs/That march ... from the mountain to the sea." These are drawn at least in part from Darwin's discussion of the cocoanut crab, Birgos latro, in the chapter on Keeling Island and coral formations in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (pp. 450-480). "The Birgos is diurnal in its habits; but every night it is said to pay a visit to the sea, no doubt for the purpose of moistening its branchiae" (p. 461). Far from being a creature dependent upon divine grace or intervention for obtaining food or any of the other necessities of life, the cocoanut crab is a marvel of adaptation that demonstrates the operation of natural selection along the lines of Darwin's theory:
It is very common on all parts of the dry land, and grows to a monstrous size.... The front pair of legs terminate in very strong and heavy pincers, and the last pair are fitted with others weaker and much narrower. It would at first be thought quite impossible for a crab to open a strong cocoa-nut covered with the husk; but Mr. Liesk assures me that he has repeatedly seen this effected. The crab begins by tearing the husk, fibre by fibre, and always from that end under which the three eye-holes are situated; when this is completed, the crab commences hammering with its heavy claws on one of the eye-holes till an opening is made. Then turning round its body, by the aid of its posterior and narrow pair of pincers, it extracts the white albuminous substance. I think this is as curious a case of instinct as ever I heard of, and likewise of adaptation in structure between two objects apparently so remote from each other in the scheme of nature, as a crab and a cocoa-nut tree.... The young are ... hatched, and live for some time, on the coast. These crabs inhabit deep burrows, which they hollow out beneath the roots of trees; and where they accumulate surprising quantities of the picked fibres of the cocoa-nut husk, on which they rest as on a bed. (p. 461)

As a creature said to move forward and backward indifferently—merely by reversing the motion of its limbs—the crab also tropes the trope of chiasmus. Browning, who displays his knowledge of eighteenth-century music in "A Toccata of Galuppi's" in Men and Women (1855), and who displays his knowledge of musical symbolism in "Abt Vogler," which appears in the Dramatis Personae volume, doubtless knew of the eighteenth-century form of the cancrizans, or crab canon, which takes the general canonic principle of repetition by contrapuntal inversion and modifies it to the principle of repetition by retrogression. (33)

The God of Psalm 50, who as "the Quiet" of Browning's poem "kept silence" so that Israel thought "that I was altogether such an one as thyself," does issue a valedictory warning. "Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver" (50.21-22). In "Caliban upon Setebos," the storm on which the poem concludes (11. 284-295) is a remembrance of this warning. Caliban figures "the pillared dust" as "death's house on the move" (1. 288) and reports on a symbolic decapitation in which "A tree's head snaps" (1. 290). This symbolic decapitation is yet another self-projection by Caliban, suggesting that he has lost his head, that is, forgotten the being who properly deserves to be worshipped as his God. Caliban confirms this forgetfulness and forfeits any claim to salvation by declaring his belief in the god of analogies rather than the God of might, the God of Exodus 13.21 (Robert Browning, p. 774n.). "Fool to gibe at Him!/Lo! Lieth flat and loveth Setebos" (11. 291-292). Not only does Caliban turn his back on the being that deserves to be worshipped as God and feign ("lieth flat" about) his love for Setebos, he turns his back on the Darwinian principles of survival as well. Caliban's survival is at least in part attributable to the fact that he is a superbly omnivorous feeder, yet he betrays this survival skill even as he betrays God in submitting to Setebos by voluntarily relinquishing his ability to feed. "'maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,/Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month/One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape" (II. 293-295).

Much of the horror or pathos that results from reading Browning's dramatic monologues arises from an awareness of how badly, even fatally, flawed the personae are, even though they present themselves as otherwise. Caliban is no exception to the rule, coming to all the wrong conclusions for all the right reasons, and ultimately not even knowing himself in his quest to know God and nature aright.


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