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BROWNING BELIEVING: "A DEATH IN THE DESERT" AND THE STATUS OF BELIEF

By Jonathan Loesberg

SOME JOHN, WE ARE TOLD, possibly both the Evangelist and the beloved apostle, but, for reasons we will see, possibly only one, the other, or neither, reanimated so his dying words can be recorded by other early Christians, tries to tell those who will now live with no contact with anyone who had contact with Jesus Christ, how they may live with that absence. Although his reanimaters preserve and venerate his words, it's not clear that they actually follow them or even understand them. In the wake of the questions first German Higher Criticism and then more recent work in the 1860s had raised with regard to the historical accuracy of the New Testament, Robert Browning, tries to propose how his contemporaries might believe. At the same time, as a consequence of a definition of how to believe, Browning also suggests how to look at the beliefs of others as expressions of one's condition and situation rather than as assertions whose accuracy it is in our interests to measure: he tells us what a dramatic monologue may show us. With regard to either aim, either with his contemporaries or with his critics, he did no better than John did with the poem's auditors. At least with regard to the issue of how to believe, one watches an odd critical history as readers have become increasingly aware of how completely Browning seems to have accepted the conclusions of the Higher Criticism about the historicity of the gospels, but have refused to accept how completely this meant that his justification for belief wound up reproducing the Higher Critical position about the historical reality of Christianity, with the addition of an epistemologically daring and dangerous justification of willed belief in an object accepted as possibly fictional that gives his ostensible Christianity only the appearance of an orthodoxy it had in fact abandoned.[1]

The epistemology of belief and the justification of religious belief are separable issues (at least to the extent that there are other objects of belief than those classed as religious). And certainly one can find analyses of the epistemology that do not discuss reasons for assenting or not to Christianity or the existence of God, just as one can find justifications of Christianity that take the epistemology of belief more or less for granted. But the topics frequently came in pairs as thinkers such as Newman, Huxley, Mansell, and Mill mixed theological with epistemological argument, sometimes justifying religious belief with the working of belief in general, sometimes attacking religious positions by finding them epistemologically unwarranted. More importantly epistemological theories questioned whether the attempt to articulate a position for choosing to believe on grounds recognized to be insufficient for reasoned assent, an increasingly common position in theological discussion, was even

psychologically possible and various other thinkers questioned whether such willed belief was ethically justifiable. At the same time, the attempt of Higher Critics such as David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach to outline a Christianity to which one could assent in the absence of a belief that the Incarnation and Resurrection were historical events raised questions about the authenticity or the content of the beliefs proposed that made an interest in the Higher Criticism become an interest in the epistemology of belief. Browning shows an understanding of how these issues are linked in both "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" but he articulates his fullest position in "A Death in the Desert." Browning's John certainly does propose reasons for assenting to something at least similar to the Incarnation and Resurrection. The grounds for belief he offers, however, and – pointedly despite his own eyewitness to the history he ostensibly defends – the reasons he gives for believing are relentlessly tied to a choice to believe in what may be a fiction. John, thus confronts directly both the issues of epistemology and the analyses of the Higher Criticism, accepts them in all their difficulty rather than evades them, and finally offers more a position about the way beliefs allow us to live lives than a position about why one should accept Christianity.

I

When Victorians debated the definition of belief in works of psychology, that debate frequently had, just behind it, the possibility of theological extension. We may start with a relatively neutral account of an ambiguity in normal definitions, Herbert Spencer's explanation in a footnote for replacing a phrase with the word "belief" in it, with a phrase with the word "cognition":

> My reason for making this change of expression, is that the word *belief*, having two radically-opposed meanings, admits of being misinterpreted. It is habitually applied to dicta of consciousness for which no proof can be assigned: both those which are unprovable because they underlie all proof and those which are unprovable because of the absence of evidence – both those which are most certain and those which are most uncertain. (Spencer, *Principles of Psychology* II, 405)

What Spencer means by those dicta of consciousness that "are most certain," includes our basic perceptions of reality and also, possibly, certain formal apprehensions such as that two and two equal four. We do not believe these things because of evidence we have of their truth but because they seem givens of our dealing with the world. Sir William Hamilton, following Kant, classified them as Intuitions and defined them as beliefs. Predictably, John Stuart Mill complained:

> In common language, when Belief and Knowledge are distinguished, Knowledge is understood to mean complete conviction, Belief a conviction somewhat short of complete; or else we are said to believe when the evidence is probable (as that of testimony), but to know when intuitive, or demonstrative from intuitive premises . . . but in Sir W. Hamilton's use of the term, it is the intuitive convictions that are the Beliefs, and those which are dependent and contingent upon them, compose our knowledge. Whether a particular portion of our convictions, which are not more certain, but if anything less certain, than the remainder, and according to our author rest on the same ultimate basis, shall in opposition to the common usage of mankind, receive exclusively the appellation of knowledge, is at the most question of terminology, and can only be made to appear philosophically important by confounding difference of name with difference of fact. (Mill 63)

One might expect that Mill, like Spencer, having explained the terminological distinction in Hamilton's use of the term, might merely have accepted it as, if eccentric, once explained, innocuous. The last sentence above, however, suggests the reason for his more strenuous complaint and that reason becomes clearer as he deals with the religious implications of Hamilton's ideas, particularly in their treatment by Mansel.

One of the ways of justifying religious convictions was to claim them to be as real to oneself as one's perceptions of basic reality. Thus, John Henry Newman claimed in his *Apologia* that he was as certain of God's existence as he was certain that he had hands and feet (*Apologia*, 18). And Darwin's father, Dr. Robert Darwin, recalled a patient who claimed that "I know that sugar is sweet in my mouth, and I know that my redeemer liveth." We will see Bishop Blougram express a nostalgia for this form of belief, no longer, as he thinks, available to him. But, really, belief was available in this simple form to few people, so few that Darwin dismisses the testimony with mild irony as "an unanswerable argument" (*Autobiography* 96).

The real issue that bothered Mill was H. L. Mansell's claim that we could never have knowledge of God because we can't have finite knowledge of the absolute or the infinite, coupled with his claim that we could nevertheless meaningfully assent to propositions that we couldn't empirically understand, and this claim gets us closer to the issue of willed belief. Specifically, in *The Limits of Religious Thought*, Mansell argued, in one instance, that since infinite goodness was different in kind from finite, human goodness, one couldn't make any reasonable evaluation of the morality of any action or demand attributed to God since one had no knowledge at all of the criteria by which they were moral. And yet, he claimed it our duty to believe in God's morality.[2] Mansell can, of course, make this argument with some coherence, if he can take belief to be an unquestioning intuition, thus allowing us to believe in a proposition we can nevertheless not entirely construe. Mill was famously furious at the result, saying that if God's goodness is not what human beings mean by goodness, then it isn't goodness at all and that if it were proven that a Being existed who ruled the world according to principles that human beings are incapable of conceiving, "I will bear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call this being by the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say in plain terms that I will not . . . and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go" (103). Thus what seems to be a quibble over terms becomes the occasion for a Byronic refusal.

By asking us to believe what we do not understand, Mansell raised the issue of willed belief and Mill showed how one could respond to such a request. The deeper issue in the dispute, however, was not about slipping incoherent claims into the category of unquestioned apprehensions or even about trying to evade logical difficulties of affirming God to be moral while demanding that one not question the morality of his actions. It was, rather, one of asking in what sense one could believe in God or in the revelation of the New Testament, not merely in the absence of good evidence of the one's existence and the other's accuracy, but in the presence of good reasons to doubt both. What kind of belief could one hold about positions that anyone could see had been effectively enough controverted so that one response was a demand to believe in the face of one's comprehension. Although some critics have argued that Browning may have read Spencer,[3] and he was certainly aware of Mill and Mansell, he is unlikely to have read the epistemological debate (and the *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* was first published in 1865, a year after the appearance of *Dramatis Personae* and "A Death in the Desert"). But the attempt to articulate a position of something like a willed

belief in the face of doubt well pre-dated the psychological debate and Browning was surely aware, for instance, of John Henry Newman's characteristic mode of arguing for certain theological points by asserting that the objections against them were no stronger than objections against more commonly held theological beliefs and so if one believed the latter, one could in a sense choose to believe the former, a pattern of argument that pervades the case that *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* makes for various Anglo-Catholic positions.[4] Most pointedly, he argues, as a general point, that people are happier in faith than in doubt and therefore a state of faith is to be preferred (199), an observation, that, if true, only has strength to the extent to which one can choose faith over doubt. And Browning puts the case for willed faith regularly in the mouths of various of his speakers. His interlocutor on *Easter-Day* says:

> Could he acquit us or condemn
> For holding what no hand can loose,
> Rejecting when we can't but choose?. . .
> You must mix some uncertainty
> With faith, if you would have faith be. (ll. 63–66, 71–72)[5]

Blougram claims:

> The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say,
> If faith o'ercomes doubt. How I know it does?
> By life and man's free will, God gave for that!
> To mould life as we choose it shows our choice (ll. 604–07)

And, if these seem speakers of doubtful reliability, here is John in "A Death in the Desert":

> Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,
> Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,
> And straightway in his life acknowledge it,
> As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire. (ll. 295–98)

In various ways, all these speakers claim that if one believes merely because one's reason or senses compel one to, then one's belief has no particular merit, showing neither an ethical choice nor an act of intellectual strength.

But epistemological definitions of belief suggest that we cannot choose our beliefs and, if we could, we ought not. After all, we do not choose what perceptions we intuit or apprehend. Hamilton called them beliefs precisely because we assented to them of necessity, without intervening reasoning or analysis. And even if one followed Mill's preferred definition of belief as being an assent on reasons less certain than that leading to conviction, regardless of the strength of one's reasons, one either finds them strong enough or not. If one thinks they are strong enough to call forth belief, one believes. If one does not, with all the best will in the world, one has already withheld belief. Thus George Henry Lewes insists, in *Problems of the Life and Mind*:

> We are as 'free' to perform one action rather than another as we are 'free' to think one conclusion rather than another; that is to say, each action, each thought, is possible under certain conditions, and will be produced whenever these conditions are untrammeled. Out of various ideas which may

> emerge at the moment, a conclusion is logically, inevitably reached. Opinion is 'free' in the sense that another conclusion would have been reached had the premisses been different; but opinion is not free to reach another conclusion while the premisses remain unchanged. . . no man is free to think what he pleases of the square of the hypotenuse when the geometrical demonstration has been followed. If your conclusion differs from mine on any given point, it is because the premisses have not the same significance to you as to me. (IV: 108)

Lewes, of course, is not contending that anyone or thing, a schoolmaster with a stick, perhaps, forces you to assent to the Pythagorean theorem, merely that, once one understands the basis of the theorem, one can't help but believe it. In cases where we disagree, we don't choose to disagree, we merely evaluate the evidence differently. And that evaluation is also a matter of belief, not choice. Obviously, this form of "constrained" belief is most true of mathematical propositions capable of irrefutable demonstration. For Lewes, though, the principle is true of all propositions: we do not choose to believe them, but do so if we accept the bases on which they are maintained, their "premisses." In the light of this claim, choosing to believe when, psychologically, one does not assent to the basis of the belief, becomes, effectively, acting as if one believes, based on a belief that one does not hold. And that leads to an ethical difficulty. At worst, acting as if one believed what one did not is usually called hypocrisy. But even if one acts on the belief in the secondary belief that so acting will bring about good results, T.H. Huxley's protest still would carry weight: "however bad our posterity may become, so long as they hold by the plain rule of not pretending to believe what they have no reason to believe because it may be to their advantage so to pretend, they will not have reached the lowest depths of immorality" (539). Huxley is not concerned with hypocrisy here but the ethical effects on both an individual and a society of forcing observance of a position one thinks untrue. Still, the word "pretends" occurs twice. A position one has to choose to believe, doesn't mark an ethical expression of one's freedom, but a pretence.

This debate about the ability to choose belief, coupled with an argument about the ethics of pretending to a belief one does not hold in the hope of bringing about the good consequences of holding the belief is obviously already a debate about holding religious beliefs whose factual or historical basis one doubts. But that connection becomes much more direct in the context of Strauss's analysis of the historicity of the New Testament in *The Life of Jesus*. Strauss raises the question of belief in two ways. First, he accounts for much of what the Gospels recount as arising from what he calls myth, by which he means narratives or images whose purpose is to embody a meaning and which derive from that purpose rather than from the reporting of an historical event. As a result, Strauss has to account for the state of belief of those who wrote the myths since they certainly wrote as if they were recounting events that had actually occurred. Moreover, since Strauss takes it as a given that any account of a miracle is an indication that one must explain that account mythically (Strauss, 88), miracles being prima facie impossible, and since miracles remained, in nineteenth-century English theology, one of the primary "evidences" of Christianity's truth, to accept Strauss was, of necessity, to raise the question of whether, in his light, one could still consider oneself a Christian. This leads to the second problem, which Strauss raises quite explicitly in his "Concluding Dissertation," which is the extent to which a Christianity that does not base itself on a belief in an historically occurring Incarnation and Resurrection, can be held in a way that is intellectually coherent and not hypocritical.

Anyone for whom the Biblical accounts of the life of Jesus are manifestly historical will have little trouble simply rejecting Strauss, since he offers little direct argument against accounts of miracles of the kind one finds in Hume and Baden Powell's contribution to *Essays and Reviews*. In a brief chapter, he argues against taking the Gospels as written either by those to whom they were attributed or by eyewitnesses (Strauss 69–75) and generally uses differences and contradictions among the Gospels to show that they obviously cannot all be correct, arguing against the likelihood of various harmonizing interpretations. But, since, as I said, he takes the presence of a miracle in an account as prima facie evidence for taking that account mythically, his central argument in favor of mythical interpretation is that mythical interpretations are the best account of the point of texts since they explain directly a narrative's meaning, which the myth exists to symbolize or embody.[6] Browning did not, however, seem to think that one should tie one's belief in Christianity to the accuracy of miracles and has John, as we will see, give an account of miracles that seems to follow Baden Powell's suggestion that even eyewitness testimony does not evidence miracles since it is notoriously unreliable: "Testimony, after all, is but a second-hand assurance; – it is but a blind guide; testimony can avail nothing against reason" (*Essays and Reviews* 141).

The problem with Strauss's account, and also one of its strengths, was in its handling of the question of the belief of the authors of the Gospels. On the one hand, Strauss insists that the mythic account virtually necessitates that one take the Gospels as having been written long after the events by authors who were not witnesses: "We have seen that in reference to the early histories of the Old Testament, the mythical view could be embraced by those only who doubted the composition of these Scriptures by eyewitnesses or contemporary writers. This was equally the case in reference to the New" (58). The obvious reason for this insistence is that attributing the invention of a myth to an eyewitness raises the question of deceit. To take the Gospel accounts as mythic, one must presume they were written by later authors who received accounts that they thought true. These accounts grew from a vague human unconscious that generated narrative accounts to embody an ideal concept (81). On the other hand, if one begins with the presumption that accounts of miracles must be accounted for rather than accepted, the mythic interpretation has two advantages over an attempt to offer a naturalistic account of how the event could have occurred. First, the basic problem with naturalistic explanations is that, once they give up the historicity of the Gospels they are ostensibly explaining, lacking any other accounts of the events, they have no evidence at all for the naturalistic narratives they offer as replacements (Strauss 55–56). Second, while the mythic account forces a somewhat uncomfortable explanation of how their authors could take the myths as historical reality, naturalistic accounts virtually necessitated a very ambiguous account of Jesus as stage-managing miracles.

Ultimately the difference between the mythic and the naturalistic explanation refers back to the difference between the aims of the critics in question and, with relevance to Browning, specifically the difference between the aims of Strauss and Renan. Though Strauss did have a theory of how the life and death of a human being led to a belief in a supernatural reincarnation, the aim of his book was not to recover the actual life of Jesus but to account for the various versions of it in terms of a theory of how a myth of that life developed. He did not need to explain how miracles might have seemed to have occurred to eyewitnesses because his theory of how they developed mythically did not need to suppose that any narrative he read described events that actually happened. Renan, on the other hand, despite the description most critics of Browning give of him as a radical theorist, actually did mean

to recover an actual life of Jesus, one that looked very much like the Gospel accounts (he was far more conservative than Strauss in believing the accuracy of his sources and particularly in believing that the Johannne Gospel was in fact written by John the Apostle[7]), with the single, vital exception that he believed Jesus was a human being and all the events accounted for in the Gospels therefore needed a naturalistic explanation. Believing that he was giving an historically accurate account of the events, Renan therefore explained miracles, based on no particular evidence as Strauss predicted, as misapprehensions or, in the case of Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus, as a stage-managed event (Renan 251–52). We will see Browning dealing with the absence of evidence for naturalistic explanations with surprising directness in a monologue spoken by an eyewitness. Although he never speaks positively of the mythic explanation (he mentions it only once, ironically, in "Christmas Day," lines 859–75), we will also see that his objections to Renan's *Life of Jesus* are as Straussian in his response to Renan's naturalism as they are orthodox.

But Strauss's "Concluding Dissertation: The Dogmatic Import of the Life of Jesus" raises the most general questions that stand behind Browning's poems about belief and the voice he gives, in "A Death in the Desert," to the reasons for believing when the object of belief has disappeared. It is unclear whether Browning read this concluding section since the belief he ascribes in "Christmas-Eve" to the Higher Critics that Jesus was "A Man! – a right true Man, however" (l. 878), while not a claim Strauss would oppose, is in fact far more descriptive of the Unitarian Christology with which Browning was familiar than it was of Strauss's. Whether Browning had read this far in Strauss or not, however, Strauss comes very near to describing the outline of Browning's beliefs and delineating their difficulty. Strauss claims to believe in the philosophical truth of Christianity, but merely to separate it from its historical claim and thus states that the problem is how to make that separation:

> In proportion as [the critic] is distinguished from the naturalistic theologian and the free-thinker – in proportion as his criticism is conceived in the spirit of the nineteenth century, – he is filled with veneration for every religion, and especially for the substance of the sublimest of all religions, the Christian, which he perceives to be identical with the deepest philosophical truth; and hence, after having in the course of his criticism exhibited only the differences between his conviction and the historical belief of the Christian, he will feel urged to place that identity in a just light. (757–58)

Strauss identifies that deep philosophic truth somewhat differently than Browning, extrapolating it from the Incarnation and the Resurrection to a belief that Christianity teaches the divinity of the human spirit rather than seeing Christianity as teaching primarily that the God of power is also a God of love. But Strauss recognizes the problem with any formulation that proposes a belief in a truth about humanity that Christ symbolizes, separated from a belief in a symbolizing Christ, which is that that second belief is the distinctive belief of Christianity and it is that belief that the critical attack of the historical Christ seems to undercut. He proposes to replace the historical claim with a belief that the material realization of the idea of Christianity, rather than being a single historical incarnation can be the material history of humanity: ". . . is not the idea of the unity of the divine and human natures a real one in a far higher sense, when I regard the whole race of mankind as its realization, than when I single out one man as such a realization?" (780). But Strauss recognized that holding this belief and at least claiming to others to be a Christian was hypocritical: ". . . the theologian who is at once critical and speculative, must in relation to the church be a hypocrite. The real state of the case is this. The church refers her Christology to an individual who existed

historically at a certain period: the speculative theologian to an idea which only attains existence in the totality of individuals" (782).

The hypocrisy in Strauss is in the speculative and critical theologian claiming to remain a Christian while withholding a belief in the historical individual's divinity the belief in which the church sees as constitutive of being Christian. That hypocrisy would cease to exist if one gave up the claim of being Christian and gave up one's desire to preach one's speculative belief within the church to Christians. But the basic cause of the hypocrisy derives from the difficulty of giving credence to the significance of a myth once one knows that the narrative one recounts is a myth. Carlyle's often misinterpreted connection of fiction with lying goes directly to this problem:

> Fiction, while the feigner of it knows that he is feigning, partakes more than we suspect, of the nature of *lying*; and has ever an, in some degree, unsatisfactory character. All Mythologies were once Philosophies; were *believed*: the Epic Poems of old time, so long as they continued *epic*, and hand any complete impressiveness; were Histories, and understood to be narratives of *facts.* (Carlyle, XXVIII: 49–50)

The contrast of fiction with myth here, in which myth is a fictive account that the writer believed to have been factual, makes clear that the lying Carlyle identifies in fiction occurs not merely because the fiction represents facts that did not occur (myths do that), but because, even when knowing and revealing that one is feigning, in order to express the truth the fiction symbolically embodies, one must feign belief in the fictive embodiment. The unsatisfactory character of fiction, however, Browning accepts in the fullest sense in his asserting a belief in Christ, even if he knew the belief to be inaccurate: "I know the difficulty of believing . . . I know all that may be said against it, on the ground of history, of reason, of even moral sense. I grant even that it may be a fiction. But I am none the less convinced that the life and death of Christ, as Christians apprehend them, supply something which their humanity requires, and that it is true for them."[8] Although Browning won't say, with Strauss, that he simply does not believe in the historicity of Jesus' divinity, he insists that he bases nothing on that historicity. Nor does he even try to offer a redefined Christology. He simply claims the necessity of the belief in the doubtful historicity as supplying something humanity requires. Taken alone, this sentence would run afoul of Huxley's ethical strictures and of the larger epistemological issues to the extent that Browning thinks that, construing the acceptance of Christianity as he does, he can describe himself as believing. But, after all, not everyone agreed with Huxley or attended to the arcane of epistemological theory. In the context of the direct concern of poems like "Bishop Blougram" and "Mr. Sludge" with the ethics of feigned belief and the articulation in "A Death in the Desert" of a mode of detaching belief from its object, the full epistemological debate and its occurrence in Strauss becomes directly relevant to Browning though.

II

Prior to turning to "A Death in the Desert," I start with two of Browning's poems that critics class as casuitical and also about religion, "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" because those poems obviously raise the same questions about the status and justification of belief. Generally, because the poems constitute explicit arguments

directed at persuading an auditor and each speaker has a more or less specific end in mind (Blougram wants not to be despised, Sludge wants not to be publicly unmasked), critics have attended to outlining the logic of their arguments and showing how they are or are not persuasive.[9] Dorothy Mermin's attention to the issue of "sincerity" (Mermin 59) more nearly shifts the concerns to the ones I want to discuss here, which is less the question of how we judge the speakers (I am more Victorian than Victorianist in finding them fairly unproblematically unsympathetic, and more Victorianist than Victorian in thus finding the interest of the poems elsewhere) than the way Browning investigates the possibility of choosing belief, a possibility that both poems open for us and also fairly thoroughly close down. That closure highlights the specialness, indeed the anomalousness of the position Browning works out for the speaker of "A Death in the Desert" for choosing to believe in what may be a fiction, an anomalousness he seems to recognize in the way that poem outlines that that speaker, eyewitness to Christ, is as unsuccessful, as a hypocritical bishop and less successful than a fraudulent medium at persuading his auditors. Indeed, I do not think Browning resolves a problem in that later poem that he raises in the earlier "Bishop Blougram's Apology," but rather that all three poems circle around the impossibility of the belief position he himself holds: believing in the truth of an object he grants may be fictive. To stress this commonality, I start with "Mr. Sludge," whose articulation of the problem is the least ambiguous.

To find "Mr. Sludge" a psychological study of some sort or an interest in the ambiguities of Sludge's position, one has to begin with a belief that Sludge, like Blougram, believes at least half of what he says, that there is some self-revelation in the poem. And of course, the form of dramatic monologue would seem to depend on at least the possibility that we are given such a self-revelation.[10] But this monologue so clearly undercuts that possibility that one has to say that the critical insistence on it amounts to a victory of formal expectation over content. It is true that Sludge, in the course of the poem, does confess flaws in a way that might be found engaging and certainly does, as Armstrong in "Browning's Mr. Sludge" argues, espouse arguments about art and religion that we take to be Browning's own. But we should place the central monologue fully in the context not only of its ending, but of its opening. Having been caught, Sludge tries for the poem's first fifty lines to repersuade Horsefall of his genuineness, appealing to his contact with Horsefall's mother: "You show no mercy? – Not for Her dear sake,/The sainted spirit's, whose soft breath even now/Blows on my cheek" (ll. 13–15) and then to his being tormented by some lower-class (either black or Irish) ghost. Only when all of these feints have failed does Sludge offer to "tell all about the tricks" and "the whole truth, and naught else" (ll. 55–56). Even if, after the desperate grasping at straws of the first fifty lines, we were disposed to take Sludge at his word (and indeed about certain things we can say that he at least does describe the actual situation he is in), the poem's conclusion is more than what Hoxie Fairchild has described as a dramatic monologue's giveaway. Sludge's blank fury after Horsefall has let him go, his considering accusing Horsefall of murdering his own mother, doesn't somehow show us the fallacy of his argument, but rather shows that, no matter how we may evaluate the argument on its own terms, Sludge never tells an uncalculated truth or one he doesn't have to but has been arguing merely to achieve the end of escape. Any credence he gives to what he says is an accident. If, with Chesterton (195–97), we are to take the point of the poem as its final abject confession of a belief in spiritualism, we really cannot take the point to be that Sludge actually confesses that belief, since we manifestly know that he does not.

But if we are to find Sludge to be so completely disingenuous as to find nothing to learn about him from his monologue, then what do we take the point of the monologue to be? "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" is an almost unique Browning poem, I would argue, in that the interest in the monologue is in what it reveals about its auditor. The question throughout the poem is less what Sludge believes than in why his justification works on Horsefall (unlike Blougram and John, Sludge achieves the end he wants from his auditor).[11] Sludge's argument divides into roughly two parts. The first explains how he came to be a fraudulent medium, largely claiming he was led into it by Horsefall's and his circle's interest in having their beliefs in the supernatural confirmed. The second half responds to the question, "But for God?" (792), which Sludge attributes to Horsefall, and it offers a positive justification for his activities as a medium in terms of the service to religion spiritualism performs and of his own religious beliefs, or at least the beliefs he claims to hold.[12] One should note that the first half of the argument can only work to the extent that his judgment about at least Horsefall's motives for sponsoring him are correct, since he all but explicitly blames Horsefall and his circle for degrading him, and the second half, while up to a point, Sludge could believe in what he says, again can only work to the extent that he persuades Horsefall of the value of the beliefs he describes rather than merely of the fact that he holds them more or less sincerely. Thus, oddly for a dramatic monologue, while, in the end, we know very little about what Sludge believes, we know some things about what Horsefall believes.

And in the first instance we know that Horsefall and his circle, while skeptical and aware of financial dupes, show themselves open and receptive to spiritual duping. Sludge posits a hypothetical servant (fairly clearly himself in Horsefall's house) who would have no chance in being believed if he claimed to have been given a "V-note," but would immediately have a supernatural claim credited:

> If he break in with 'Sir *I* saw a ghost!'
> Ah the ways change! He finds you perched and prim;
> It's a conceit of yours that ghosts may be:
> There's no talk now of cow-hide. (ll. 138–41)

After outlining the ways, Horsefall and his circle virtually force Sludge to produce material manifestations of his spiritual abilities, thus to cheat, but also make it easy for him, defending him against any doubters, he sums up the situation:

> Once the imposture plunged its proper depth
> I' the rotten of your natures, all of you –
> (If one's not mad nor drunk, and hardly then)
> It's impossible to cheat – that's, be found out! (ll. 545–48)

As an actual justification for what Sludge does, this section of the poem is obviously at the least ambiguous. One can't justify robbery by noting that the doors of a house one has robbed were left unlocked, virtually tempting one. Moreover, there's an obvious risk in blaming one's auditor's gullibility for one's having cheated him, if one hopes for his mercy, and then going further and blaming "the rotten of your natures" for the extent of one's imposture. The only strength this argument can have is Horsefall's recognition of the

truth Sludge speaks not about himself, but about Horsefall and his circle. If one imagines the poem to be asking a question, something like, "in our modern nineteenth century, how can such an absurd superstition as spiritualism thrive?" the answer Sludge first gives is that the upper-classes manifest an irresponsible credulity about that which is their leisure, religion, in contrast to their clarity about financial fraud.

Left here, the poem's interest might well be in the psychological process by which a gullible audience leads a mild impostor more and more deeply into fraud. But Sludge's question, "But for God?" gives a justification, of a kind, to Horsefall's circle for crediting Sludge that raises the issues of belief in fiction with which this article is concerned. To this question, Sludge offers two seemingly related but ultimately mutually exclusive answers, at least with regard to Sludge. The first is that, fraudulent though his practices are, they in fact serve religion:

> As for religion – why, I served it sir!
> I'll stick to that! With my *phenomena*
> I laid the atheist sprawling on his back,
> Propped up Saint Paul, or, at least Swedenborg! (ll. 667)

Lines like this justify Armstrong's claim that the poem ascribes to Sludge artist-like characteristics that elsewhere Browning speaks of positively ("Browning's 'Mr. Sludge'" 8). Sludge invents details, "phenomena," that embody the religious truth, thus like a writer of religious fictions, serving religion with his constructed representations. This argument does not really justify Sludge, even at face value: one can, of course, easily distinguish between a fiction, which admits its fictiveness, and a fraud, which thrives on not admitting it.

But Carlyle's distinction between fiction and myth does come back to haunt here, particularly when we turn to Sludge's second justification, which is that he not only serves religion, but believes in it deeply, a belief that makes him unable at times to be sure he is in fact cheating. In one of his more powerful moments, Sludge asserts his attentiveness to the suggestions in this world of another one:

> I tell you, men won't notice; when they do,
> They'll understand. I notice nothing else:
> I'm eyes, ears, mouth of me, one gaze and gape,
> Nothing eludes me, everything's a hint,
> Handle and help. (ll. 1011–15)

Sludge here claims the artist's attention to the meaning of the details of the world that escape the rest of us. One can't help but note that if this claim were true, he would hardly have to invent fictive or fraudulent phenomena to body forth significance. But, again, the significance of the claims really is Horsefall's implicit acceptance of them in his giving Sludge money and releasing him. Sludge's argument gives a justification for Horsefall's gullibility as showing a certain religious sensitivity to the world. Sludge's audience allows his imposture, but that fact speaks at least to a certain religious sensibility on their part. It so speaks though, because the audience errantly believes in the imposture, believes in the reality of the fictive details. The poem asks the questions about the poet that Armstrong argues it does because, while Sludge's

self-justification really cannot persuade the reader of the poem of his honesty or sincerity, his case for assent to a redeeming fiction gives pause to the poem's audience who, though in a different position than Sludge's audience, might assent to the value of that fiction. Essentially the poem creates a case, not for fraudulent mediums, but for their gulls, for their belief in an illusion by redefining the illusion for us as a redeeming fiction. But the justification works by separating those who believe from those who create and those who recognize the fictive quality of the object of their belief. "Bishop Blougram's Apology" pushes even harder at the problem of believing in a fiction.

Although "Bishop Blougram's Apology" is regularly interpreted in terms of the validity of Blougram's arguments against unbelief and for the life his faith allows him to lead, for a poem about belief, the one question it does not answer is "what does Bishop Blougram believe in?" In the course of the poem, Blougram attributes numbers of criticisms or questions to Gigadibs, but one question recurs again and again. It was we expect the thrust of the original article that caught Blougram's attention: isn't it unethical to pretend to a belief one in fact does not hold for the material advantages that result from the pretence? At any point in the poem, Blougram might resolve this problem by asserting that he in fact does believe what he appears to believe, that Gigadibs is wrong to suspect him of skepticism. At one point, he approaches such a statement, as we will see, but he never makes it and, in the absence of that answer, he cannot ever really respond satisfactorily to the question. The poem lays out the pattern of evasion and sidestepping at the outset. Imagining that he could become Pope, Blougram attributes to Gigadibs the response "An unbelieving Pope won't do" (l. 65). He then takes advantage of the formulation "won't do" to shift the question to whether a successful life is better than a failed one lived according to an impossible ideal, a shift that only makes sense if one takes the demand that one live according to one's beliefs as an impossible ideal. Blougram poses a version of the question for himself four times: in what way can one choose a belief one does not actually hold? At one point, he approaches a formulation that looks like one John will make and his turning from it thus poses the central question that the later poem will face.

Before turning to Blougram's central answers to the accusation of feigning belief, we can see the extent of the problem he faces by noting that he implicitly admits that he does not believe. He notes: "Believe – and our whole argument breaks up./Enthusiasm's the best thing, I repeat" (ll. 555–56). The shift from belief to enthusiasm might here shade what Blougram says into a claim that one cannot believe unquestioningly, with no recognition of the force of skeptical attacks. But a direct reference to Strauss makes clearer what Blougram thinks. He starts by saying that the best thing would be to believe as Luther did, but he can't do that. He then offers Strauss as another alternative:

> Strauss is the next advance. All Strauss should be
> I might be also. But to what result?
> He looks upon no future: Luther did.
> What can I gain on the denying side?
> Ice makes no conflagration. State the facts,
> Read the text right, emancipate the world –
> The emancipated world enjoys itself
> With scarce a thank-you. (ll. 577–84)

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Because Blougram so regularly changes questions of belief into questions about the consequences of holding beliefs, the status of his evaluation of Strauss is somewhat ambiguous, but really only somewhat. He claims he can't be Luther, but that he can be all that Strauss should be, which at least implies that while he can't share Luther's straightforward belief in Christianity, he does give intellectual assent to Strauss's skepticism. This implication is strengthened by his description of what Strauss does as stating facts and reading the text correctly.[13] In effect, Blougram declares his intellectual assent to Strauss's argument. Giving assent is a working definition of believing. As Lewes says, one does not have a choice in the matter, once one accepts the "premisses." The fact that Blougram thinks that there is no future in believing in Strauss, that he won't get anything from it, doesn't change matters. It may lead him to act as if he didn't believe in Strauss, but believe him, at least according to Lewes, he surely does.

In this context, Blougram's first serious response to the question of his beliefs looks less impressive than critics who see him speaking for Browning here think it is. Having accepted that his belief is not "Absolute and exclusive" (l. 163), Blougram imagines himself and the skeptical Gigadibs he hypothesizes on equal grounds:

> Our dogmas then
> With both of us, though in unlike degree,
> Missing full credence – overboard with them!
> I mean to meet you on your own premise:
> Good, there go mine in company with yours!
> And now what are we? unbelievers both,
> Calm and complete, determinately fixed
> Today, tomorrow and for ever, pray?
> In no wise! all we've gained is, that belief,
> As unbelief before, shakes us by fits,
> Confounds us like its predecessor. (ll. 168–79)

From this, he concludes "And both things even – faith and unbelief/Left to a man's choice," (ll. 218–19), he is free to choose faith. First, although we presume that Gigadibs does not believe in Christianity (on only the evidence of Blougram's description of him, since at other times he is imagined as a Protestant objecting to Catholic excessive belief in miracles), this is hardly the same as saying that he has no beliefs. We have seen that effectively Blougram believes Strauss's analysis of the New Testament to be accurate. For all we know, Gigadibs believes that as well, with greater or lesser certainty, perhaps, but with assent. But even if we grant Blougram's supposition that both of them live in an equal state of doubt of their own position, Blougram not being sure of Christianity's truth, Gigadibs unsure of its falseness, it does not follow that they therefore have a choice to make. They are in fact, still in a state of belief: they each believe that they have insufficient evidence either to assent to Christianity or to believe it false. They may choose to act either as if they thought Christianity true or as if they thought it false, but in fact, if, as Lewes says, we do not choose our beliefs, they still believe that they don't know and either act will be a pretence.

After he effectively attests to an assent to Strauss, Blougram answers the question of the status of his belief in a way that seems more persuasive since it offers a belief on which one may rest one's assent to Christianity, more than mere will:

> 'What think ye of Christ,' friend? when all's done and said,
> Like you this Christianity or not?
> It may be false, but will you wish it true?
> Has it your vote to be so if it can? . . .
> If you desire faith – then you've faith enough. (ll. 626–29)

We have seen Browning make an argument very much like this and we will see John make one near it as well: the proof of Christianity is its responsiveness to humanity's best impulses about itself in the world. We might take this argument as we take some of Sludge's for religion; it really doesn't matter if we believe that Blougram believes it as long as we see its truth. After all, we don't really need to know, as some critics have asked, which half of what Blougram says he also believes in order to evaluate the strength of his argument. For that, we only need to know which half we believe in, or at least which half Browning wants us to believe in. But Blougram has one more response to make that will again undercut this notion of choosing to believe, even on the basis of one's approval of the belief's moral content (as opposed to its pragmatic value). Having established a reason to choose belief in the face of doubt because of that belief's moral consequences, he then imagines Gigadibs, nevertheless, in the face of this, reasserting his doubt as not to be done away with by will. Blougram then argues that we all have an instinct to obey moral laws, even though we could argue that they derive merely from survival advantages. Thus obeying a moral law, without an explicit belief in a God who authorizes that law means:

> Then, friend, you seem as much a slave as I,
> A liar, conscious coward, hypocrite,
> Without the good the slave expects to get,
> In case he has a master after all! (841–44)

Again, since some critics have found persuasive the argument that only a belief in God can give support to a moral law and explain our conscience, or our moral instincts, it is worth noting that, at least empirically, there has been plenty of disagreement with that claim since at least Kant. Since numbers of people do think that, though, perhaps Browning did as well. But the argument explicitly recalls the Victorian claim that one should support Christianity, regardless of one's own beliefs, because of its social importance as supporting the morality of believers. Browning would surely have known, since Huxley was not the first to cast moral opprobrium on such arguments, about their questionable status. And in the context of Blougram's justification, one might note that acting an assent to Christianity to gain its moral consequences is not really that different from acting an assent to gain its practical consequences as far as hypocrisy is concerned, while neither type of consequence, logically, can function as an actual reason for belief. In having Blougram raise the question, just prior to his vulgar, concluding assertion of power over Gigadibs, Browning casts Blougram's earlier request to an assent based on one's own moral desires again into question as aligned with this more morally questionable version of espousing a belief because of its ethical consequences.

In a sense, this poem, atypically for Browning, who generally wants to attend to skepticism rather than evade it, offers as a response to Blougram a return to an unthinking belief expressed by unself-conscious action. Although we do not know the state of Gigadibs's

religious beliefs at the end of the poem, we know that he has exchanged writing for action, leaving for Australia, and, at least the narrator hopes, "By this time he has tested his first plough/And studied his last chapter of Saint John" (ll. 1013–14). The response is a morally appropriate one to Blougram because, by the end of the poem, his arguments for acting as if one believes have become so distant from any position that seems to arise from actual thought or belief that the only response Gigadibs can imagine is to throw all argument about belief overboard and just act. Because Gigadibs can escape the dilemma Blougram's apology presents him without making any evident belief claims (he neither believes Saint John nor disbelieves; he merely stops studying him), though, we may guess that the problem with that apology is not the rightness or wrongness of certain arguments but precisely the absence of belief in the arguments. In contrast with even other of Browning's casuists, Blougram pointedly does not give us something like the world he apprehends through the expression of his beliefs about that world. This is not a criticism of the poem, but rather its point. We can evaluate Blougram's arguments as arguments, but we have no real sense of what Blougram believes, thus no real sense of who he is.[14] One would have thought that choosing belief, as existential as such a choice might be, even if epistemologically doubtful, would at least be self-revelatory in a way Browning poems can celebrate regardless of the content of belief. "A Death in the Desert" will show us how a chosen belief can be revelatory in this way, and thus show us the kinds of justification for Christianity it can provide and the limits of that justification.

III

BOTH "MR. SLUDGE" AND "Blougram" are unnerving reading experiences because they seem to undercut belief at the moment we want it and offer alternatives with which we cannot be satisfied. We can sympathize with the gullibility of Sludge's audience as a symptom of a laudable belief to which Sludge gives hypocritical voice, but we can neither share Sludge's position nor that of his auditor. The way Blougram's easy cynicism turns Gigadibs's attack into a facile skepticism makes us want an answer to that skepticism. The poem's depiction of Gigadibs's answer to Blougram's hyperbolic arguments for choosing belief is so unsatisfactory that critics have struggled mightily against it in their attempts to interpret the plain reading of the report that he has "studied his last chapter of Saint John" – that he has put the gospel down in favor of taking up the plow – into meaning that he has stopped studying the Higher Criticism or that he has started studying the final chapter of the gospel. "A Death in the Desert" shows us that Browning's problem was to one extent Blougram's: he wasn't trying to find an argument for Christianity that answered Strauss's attacks on its historicity or Feuerbach's analysis of its origin in human need. Like Blougram, he assented to those attacks and wanted to find an argument that comprehended them. He creates such an argument for the persona of John. But John escapes the problem of hypocrisy in his arguments because of a special aspect of his case (the poem is finally a dramatic monologue and not a dramatized theological position) that so resists generalization that the poem fairly clearly depicts its lack of success on its own internally dramatized audience. John does, however, represent one generalization central to the working of dramatic monologues. His argument for the belief he holds shows how consciously willed belief, when it becomes an expression of how one construes one's world, also becomes a definition of a life worth living. John may not tell us, unless we are already persuaded, why we should assent to Christianity, but he does tell us

why we should learn to live the beliefs we choose and how choosing belief may become an expression of self rather than a psychologically incoherent claim or a hypocritical dodge.

"A Death in the Desert" has long been taken as a response to Renan's *Life of Jesus*, despite some evidence arguing against this connection.[15] If it does respond to Renan, though, I will argue, its response is not primarily to Renan's depiction of a human rather than a divine Jesus and some aspects of his interpretation of the Johaninne gospel, though he certainly did not find arguments for a human Jesus very persuasive. Rather, Browning seems to respond to Renan's striking interpretive naiveté and his lack of Straussian hermeneutic skepticism from a fully Straussian perspective that articulates an argument for Christianity that does not merely grudgingly accede to Strauss's critique and Feuerbach's psychological explanation but seems fully to accept their reality. The arresting dramatic element of the poem is that this position comes from not only an eyewitness but from an eyewitness who, having been awakened so his auditors may hear someone who has had first hand contact with the original events give them his final words, relentlessly tells us how we must learn that the eyewitness account, the historical accuracy of miracles, even the documentary truth of the narrative he tells are all superceded concepts, obstructing the reasons for belief.[16] Unsurprisingly, his audience does not quite listen. More surprisingly, as I have said in this article's opening, neither have most of Browning's critics.

The poem's dramatic situation, as well as the recursive context in which that situation is set, establish fairly clearly a skepticism about textual origins as well as about the value of eyewitness testimony, or indeed the question of whether one in fact has eyewitness testimony. Let's start with the situation, whose ironic elements have been hardly noticed in a reading of the poem. Early Christians take the nearly dead John to a cave in order to reawaken him for a moment. The narrator makes clear that this attempt is not for John's benefit but for theirs. The narrator says "'He is not so far gone but he might speak" (l. 20) and then, more ghoulishly, ". . . we would not lose/The last of what might happen on his face" (ll. 27–28). There is no suggestion that they are doing anything to cure John or to ease his death. They want some last word from him and so, more nearly than awaken him, they reanimate him for a moment. John indeed describes himself as in a not completely human state. He is not sure of the reality of his perceptions, being unsure whether he sees his reanimators or James and Peter. He describes his soul as having departed from his "perished brain," though he declares that a disembodied "I myself remain" (l. 80). And he has no illusions about why he has been reawakened, momentarily from a death he describes as having welcomed:

> 'If I live yet, it is for good, more love
> Through me to men: be naught but ashes here
> That keep awhile my semblance, who was John –
> Still, when they scatter, there is left on earth
> No one alive who knew (consider this!)
> – Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
> That which was from the first, the Word of Life.
> How will it be when none more saith "I saw"? (ll. 126–33)

Benevolently accepting the reanimation of his "ashes," John immediately raises the question that that reanimation means to stave off. What will happen to belief when the last living person who saw the events has died? To stave off that possibility, John's auditors reanimate

him and then later write down his words so that they may leave one last eyewitness mark in history. John's advice to them, as we will see, was to accept the end of eyewitness and the lack of its necessity. The way in which the text describes its own uncertainty of transmission shows they might have done better to have listened to him.

Critics have been more responsive to the way in which the poem's frame multiplies layers of transmission. But, as I have said, they usually argue to make this structure part of an affirmation of a historical Christianity.[17] It's hard to imagine how the transmission story we are given makes things more reliable, however. At the opening of the poem, we are told by a narrator, who says he cannot name himself, but does not give a reason for that, that he is reading a text only "Supposed of Pamphylax," (l. 1), indicating of course that the text may not be authored by the author it names itself as having. We seem to have a history that gets the text from Pamphylax to the narrator via Xanthus, "my wife's uncle," who we at first might take to be the Xanthus who attends John's death. We quickly find that this cannot be true since the Xanthus who accompanied Pamphylax pre-deceased him and "could not write the chronicle," (l. 57) or indeed have passed it on since his death occurred before the writing. This only matters because a transmission history we thought we had is taken away from us, thus leaving a text that has found its way into the library of a nameless early Christian we know not how. That nameless Christian in fact expresses a proper, Higher Critical, hesitation about the text's attribution of its own authorship given that Pamphylax admits to not having written it in a line that virtually bases the text's value as an eyewitness account of the death of the last eyewitness on an unevidenced call for belief:

> So lest the memory of this go quite,
> Seeing that I tomorrow fight the beasts,
> I tell the same to Phoebas, whom believe! (ll. 651–53)

The call to belief will exist only as written by Phoebas, even on an optimistic reading of the transmission history here. Phoebas, of course, was not present at the death scene and must take the narrative as genuine on faith. We receive it from him without any information allowing us to analyze the changes it may have undergone. And, of course, this doesn't even take into account that we depend for John's words on Pamphylax's recounting of them. None of this remotely proves that we don't get John's words accurately, much less that we are reading a Straussian "myth," rather than a report of an actual death. But the transmission we are given does reproduce the kind that Strauss, as we have seen, thought to underlay the creation of myth in the New Testament text.

More significantly, the poem also calls into question for the contemporary audience and any audience who has the same text of the Johaninne gospel that we do, who the John whose dying words we hear is. Certainly this John asserts his authorship of both *Revelations* and of a life of Jesus. And the life of Jesus he wrote seems to have contained the suggestion our Johaninne gospel does that the beloved disciple would survive until Jesus' second coming, a suggestion that must now be withdrawn:

> For many look again to find that face,
> Beloved John's to whom I ministered,
> Somewhere in life about the world; they err

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> Either mistaking what was darkly spoke
> At ending of his book, as he relates,
> Or misconceiving somewhat of this speech
> Scattered from mouth to mouth as I suppose. (ll. 654–59)

Although these lines create evidence of contemporary doubt of the veracity of the narrative before us, as well as of its further transmission history, they do describe the gospel we have and attribute it to the man whose dying words they record. But this John, in explicit contradiction of the Johaninne text, asserts his absence from the crucifixion (ll. 303–10), quoting, not himself, but Mark: "I forsook and fled." Shaffer has noticed this detail most prominently, describing John's confession as the "heart of the poem" (198). Although she takes John to be confessing to a falsehood in the gospel, thus affirming Renan's reading, she does not explain how Browning thinks we are to regard the falsehood.[18] A Browning annotator also notes this point, but, amazingly, concludes that "for Browning, the point is irrelevant" (Browning 1156).

But the point is, as Shaffer stresses, central. If this John wrote the gospel we have, he here admits that there he lied, or at least fictionalized.[19] And because his account loses its eyewitness and historical value at least on that point on which the Gospel insists on itself as an eyewitness account, all other points must be cast into equal doubt. Suppose we assume that this is some other John, though, one who wrote much of what we think that John wrote, but also a gospel, now lost, that has some pointed differences from our Johaninne text. But if the beloved disciple authored the gospel of John we have, this John must be someone who also followed Christ and happened to share that John's name (as the poem sports two Xanthuses and two Pamphylaxes, one can hardly balk at the possibility of two Johns). Then, of course, we can believe this John, but his testimony doesn't have the force of the testimony that that John's had since he is not St. John but just another john. Or, of course, this John could be the beloved disciple, but that disciple as Strauss thought, but Renan did not, might not have written our Johaninne gospel, which then loses its eyewitness status (though he has evidently written some gospel). Finally, this John could be the author of all the Johaninne texts and indeed the eyewitness the narrator of John's gospel insists he is but not be the beloved disciple, who that gospel insists was at the crucifixion, but some other John, who fled. This solution, however, would make this John again be stretching things in insisting he was an eyewitness to an event that he in fact did not witness. In this detail about John's having fled the crucifixion, the poem makes the identity of the John who supposedly tells us how we may believe now that the last eyewitness has gone as unsure as the transmission history of the text makes the status of the text we read.

Browning does not, in "A Death in the Desert," then resist the Straussian reading of the Gospels. Rather he embeds its situation in what would seem to be the voice of an eyewitness who knows the historical truth. From this perspective, Browning's critique of Renan looks rather different than in the way it is normally taken. Although denying Christ's divinity, Renan is, compared to Strauss, an extraordinarily naïve reader of the Biblical texts. He insists that the Johaninne gospel was in fact written by the beloved disciple, though at a late date in his life, when his beliefs had been shaped by intervening circumstances (Renan 15). Indeed, he may be the only critic of note since the eighteenth century who thought that the reference to Christ in Josephus was not a later forgery (Renan 5). It is this very naïveté that indeed forces him to consider John as authoring a falsehood in his account of the crucifixion and,

given that, like Strauss, he does not believe in the reality of miracles, forces him, as we have seen, to account for miracles, particularly in his discussion of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, by depicting Jesus as engaging in fraud. Browning's letter to Blagden complains directly of this aspect of Renan, rather than of Renan's reading of Jesus as an extraordinarily good man, but not a divine one (a reading with which, of course, Browning disagreed, but by which he would hardly at this late date be shocked):

> I have just read Renan's book, and find it weaker and less honest than I was led to expect. I am glad it is written: if he thinks he can prove what he says, he has fewer doubts on the subject than I – but mine are none of his. As to the Strauss school, I don't understand their complacency about the book – he admits many points they have thought it essential to dispute – and substitutes his explanation, which I think impossible . . . His admissions & criticisms on St. John are curious. I make no doubt he imagines *himself* stating a fact, with the inevitable license – so must John have done. . . What do you think of the figure *he* cuts who makes his hero participate in the wretched affair with Lazarus and then calls him all the pretty names that follow? (McAleer 180)

Browning complains not of Renan's ultimate reading of Jesus, except as a matter of tone (he calls him "pretty names"), but of his odd combination of admission and criticism, which he contrasts with the Strauss school, whom he criticizes for not recognizing the difference between Renan's position and theirs, but not for their position. And it is Renan's explanations and not theirs that he considers impossible. His complaint about the treatment of Lazarus's raising is virtually identical with those Strauss makes of those who offer naturalistic explanations. And, the sentence about the Gospel of John notes exactly the way in which the acceptance of the authorship, coupled with the refusal to accept some of what the text says creates a "curious" reading. In effect, Browning complains about the way an attempt to recapture an historical Jesus winds up being much less persuasive than a full acceptance of the force of Straussian skepticism. And this acceptance is precisely the starting point of the John who his followers rudely awaken from near death.

John, awakened to give witness, proceeds by stripping away the value of the witness he might have to give. Instead of insisting on the eyewitness accuracy of his gospel, he admits that it was written long after the event and in light of further knowledge. He says he has:

> . . . stated much of the Lord's life
> Forgotten or misdelivered, and let it work:
> Since much that at the first, in deed and word,
> Lay simply and sufficiently exposed,
> Had grown (or else my soul was grown to match,
> Fed through such years, familiar with such light,
> Guarded and guided still to see and speak.)
> Of new significance and fresh result (ll. 166–73)

This statement not only attests to later reinterpretation, even reinterpretation that may have been due to his own changing attitudes (his soul was grown to match), but insists that the reinterpretation produces new truth or at least new significance. He thus complains to his auditors of their insistence on reducing truth "to plain historic fact,/Diminished into clearness" (ll. 236–37). And confronted with a questioning of his own identity – "Was John at

all, and did he say he saw?" (l. 335), rather than insisting on his existence and his authorship, trying to affirm it for us as a voice from the past, as he knows he cannot, he imagines a different self, arguing for the truth that matters to him in a different way:

> For if a babe were born inside this grot,
> Grew to a boy here, heard us praise the sun,
> Yet had but yon sole glimmer in light's place, . . .
> I think I could explain to such a child
> There was more glow outside than gleams he caught,
> Ay, nor need urge "I saw it, so believe!" (ll. 340–43, 348–50)

Pamphylax, in the face of hypothesized doubt, insists, "I heard, you believe!" And one might have thought that John had all the more reason to say to the boy that he, John, had actually seen the light. Part of John's stature for his auditors and for the readers of the poem, is that he has seen, and we nostalgically attribute to him the historically untroubled belief that comes from direct perception. John, though, will have none of that argument. Unlike his auditors, he gives that claim up for an entirely different argument. As one might guess from other Browning poems and statements, John extrapolates from human love to the need for a God of love, which God Christ symbolically embodies. He then turns, as has been noticed before, to the objections of an extrapolated speaker whose arguments sound that sound like those that might be raised by a Feuerbachian.[20] And his answers to those arguments raise again the question of how one can honestly hold a willed belief.

Having said that he could explain the reality of a God of love to a child in a cave without a reference to an historical event, John daringly lets an objector simultaneously co-opt his argument and question it. He characterizes this speaker as one who "listens quietly, nor scoffs," thus characterizing the arguments as ones made in good faith and to be taken seriously. The skeptic first establishes the argument from human love to divine love and then turns back and questions its sufficiency:

> First of love then; we acknowledge Christ –
> A proof we comprehend His love, a proof
> We had such love already in ourselves,
> Knew first what else we should not recognize.
> 'Tis mere projection from man's inmost mind,
> And, what he loves, thus falls reflected back,
> Becomes accounted somewhat out of him;
> He throws it up in air, it drops down earth's
> With shape, name, story added, man's old way.
> How prove you Christ came otherwise at least? (ll. 379–88)

Drew rightly identifies Feuerbach's discussion of the Incarnation as a projection of human love as standing behind this passage (Drew 215–16). But Drew leaves unquoted the most pointed passage in Feuerbach. Having explained that the Incarnation expresses human love for another, he then notes that taking the explanation so far only explains "the dogma in its falsity," since every religion, in some aspect or another, presents us with a sympathizing god. The Incarnation is special because it captures a special aspect of the Christian God: "Love

does not exist without sympathy, sympathy does not exist without suffering in common . . . Sympathy presupposes a like nature. The Incarnation, Providence, prayer, are the expression of this identity of nature in God and man" (Feuerbach 54). This passage gives an even fuller version of Browning's usual argument than John attributes to the skeptic. And, unlike the skeptic, Feuerbach does not insist that attributing love to Christ is merely projection, at least explicitly. But every word of the psychological explanation implicitly insists on the projection. Unlike the skeptic, Feuerbach does not merely explain why humans might extrapolate from their love a sympathetic god but why the Christian God responds more fully than other sympathetic gods might to the specificity of human love. He explains exactly the importance of the Christian belief as Browning or John would explain it, leaving the implication of the adequacy of the explanation unstated but unavoidable.[21]

John's answer to the skeptic returns to the ground of encouraging a belief in religion for the good it gives us rather than because we know it to be true. John does not sound like Blougram, but his response asks for a form of chosen belief. First, he states, as he will elsewhere, that the ways God indicates truth change as human beings grow. Although this claim does not necessitate that earlier revelations were fictions attuned to the level of human intellect at the time, that is the clear implication of such arguments.[22] Then he concludes with a simple appeal to leave off arguing at the point at which one has proved sufficient for ones uses:

> I say, the acknowledgement of God in Christ
> Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
> All questions in the earth and out of it,
> And has so far advanced thee to be wise,
> Wouldst thou unprove this to re-prove the proved?
> In life's mere minute, with power to use that proof,
> Leave knowledge and revert to how it sprung?
> Thou hast it; use it and forthwith, or die! (ll. 474–81)

The final line of the passage certainly has the tone of admonitory certainty. And John uses the language of proof and knowledge. But the passage effectively gives away the argument about historical basis to the extrapolated skeptic. It starts by saying an acceptance of God in Christ solves all questions. In other words, it gives us a productive way to live. And his answer to the claim that divine love is merely projected human love is simply to declare the question of where the belief came from irrelevant, a leaving of knowledge to "revert to how it sprung." Since John does not dispute the skeptic's question about the original basis of belief, he, in effect, declares the question of whether the account of the Incarnation actually occurred to be irrelevant to the reasons for which we should believe it occurred. Note that he never asks us to change the way in which we believe, to accept a symbolic Christology as Strauss does, but he does ask for a belief in a reality coupled with an acceptance that arguments against the actual occurrence of the reality are, if not unanswerable, at least here unanswered. With considerably more sincerity, he falls back on Blougram's question, "Like you this Christianity or not?" a question Blougram is forced to ask in the light of his effective acceptance of Strauss. John's response is the more surprising since he has been awakened because he can respond to the skeptic, "but I was there, I saw." The poem continually asks us to see John, not precisely as offering us a recovered eyewitness account, but as an allegory

of eyewitness. And that allegorical eyewitness keeps telling us to ignore the fact of his eyewitness and any question of the historicity of the events he witnessed. And in their desire for eyewitness testimony, the auditors of the poem keep turning a deaf ear.

One might think that John offers the responses he does to give a ground for belief to those who will no longer be able to say "I saw." As we will, see, in that, for the poem's auditors, he fails. But, further, John really does not seem to see his having seen as a material seeing. We have seen that this reanimated John has no clear sense that his perceptive faculties are working normally. But he also says about himself, "To me, that story – ay that Life and Death/Of which I wrote 'it was'–to me it is;/ – Is here and now: I apprehend naught else" (ll. 208–10). If we take this claim as description and not religious hyperbole, we must assume that the "story" John recounted, as if it had temporal specificity, as if "it was," in fact, to him, does not have temporal location, and thus material occurrence, but is something on the order of a meaningful vision, one that coopts all his apprehension. Even if we read this line more metaphorically as a testament to the vividness of his faith (though it fails to be completely coherent read this way since he is talking about seeing and having seen, not having faith), John's account of his witness of miracles makes clear that he puts little stock in material perception – and offers a novel answer to the question of how we may account for reports of miracles:

> I cried once, "That yet may believe in Christ,
> Behold this blind man shall receive his sight!"
> I cry now, "Urgest thou, *for I am shrewd*
> *And smile at stories how John's word could cure –*
> *Repeat that miracle and take my faith?*"
> I say, that miracle was duly wrought
> When, save for it, no faith was possible.
> Whether a change were wrought I' the shows o' the world,
> Whether the change came from our minds which see
> Of shows o'the world so much as and no more
> Than God wills for His purpose – (what do I
> See, suppose you, there where you see rock
> Round us?) – I know not . . . (ll. 459–71)[23]

This passage makes clear that John has no particular belief that his perceptions are the unquestionable intuitions of some Victorian epistemologies. Whether God changes the "shows" of the world, or changes how a certain group of people perceived those shows matters little to him. Indeed, he opens the way for a naturalistic explanation of miracle as mass hallucination and does not see much distinction between that and divine prestidigitation. Although God's changing the "shows" of the world must count as a supernatural event and not quite an illusion, the phrasing is odd, amounting to seeing the point to be a way of calling forth faith without changing natural law. If God operates by changing perception, he has still worked supernaturally, strictly speaking, but the distinction between that and hallucination really doesn't exist. For John, the miracle operates as Strauss said it did, as the making of a narrative point, the only difference being that there is no need of the story having been passed down so the writer may take the myth for the reality since John sees the mythic significance and not the material reality as primary in the original event.

John removes the problem of either hypocrisy or impossibility from the holding of willed belief, but he does so from a position so anomalous as to be one that virtually only he could have, and certainly one unavailable to any one who has not had his particular experience of Christ's life and death. He does not believe either against all evidence or despite absence of evidence. One assumes that what he sees, he also saw, or at least believes he did. Indeed, although he places no stock in his eyewitness, his recommendation to follow him in this indifference to historical accuracy takes part of its appeal from its being an argument from strength rather than weakness: he can tell us to ignore historicity because, having perceived the events, he has no problem doubting their historical existence. That for us that problem may be more intractable, again, manifests itself in the inability of any non-eyewitnesses to listen to him. But, for him, his experience of "that Life and Death" has so changed his sense of himself in the world, that the belief has become a primary intuition to which material experiences correspond. Thus when they do not correspond, they can be explained away, as we would explain away a concept that seemed right but did not correspond to that which we perceived. Only from this perspective, does John's near acceptance that the events of the life he recounted may be received as fiction as long as one accepts that they communicate the important significance in the way they needed to for their audience correspond with his thinking that he has, with that explanation, also denied that the account was fictional. Since for John, perception, as apparitional, verges on the fictional, the distinction the extrapolated speaker means to draw doesn't really function for him. Indeed, John's position is so eccentric as, despite its obvious faith in the rewards of an afterlife with Christ, to come near to a Nietzschean acceptance of the Angel of the Eternal Return who offers, in *The Gay Science*, rather than eternal reward, a repetition of one's life moment by moment (273). John does not exactly accept complete repetition of his life and certainly does not accept its possible extension with complete Nietzschean joy. Nevertheless, he accepts an ongoing mission of trying to commend belief in the absence of eyewitness:

> 'Such is the burthen of the latest time.
> I have survived to hear it with my ears,
> Answer it with my lips: does this suffice?
> For if there be a further woe than such,
> Wherein my brothers struggling need a hand,
> So long as any pulse is left in mine,
> May I be absent even longer yet,
> Plucking the blind ones back from the abyss,
> Though I should tarry a new hundred years!' (ll. 634–42)

Given John's clear disturbance at having been awakened at the beginning of the poem, the offer is a generous one. But one must also say, given the way believing and testifying belief has become the content of belief for him, one is unsure that this constant life of having been left behind to testify hasn't become the meaning of his life, the way his belief, in contrast to Blougram's evasions, rather than its content, tells us who he is.

Not surprisingly, those who hear John and read the report of his dying words, while treating the report with reverence and preserving it, do not particularly follow his recommendations. The poem's opening speaker and its closing interpolated speaker both express as important parts of their faith their belief in an imminent second coming of Christ,

a belief we know to be inaccurate, but they attest to as vital. And Pamphylax, in the face of those who might doubt his report because it does not seem to accord with a belief that John will remain alive until that second coming, rather than arguing for the way John's thinking will allow us to live our belief productively, concludes with a fideist "believe!" (l. 653). There follows an ending so confused with warring voices as to be nearly impossible to sort out. Formally one of Hoxie Fairchild's giveaways, it takes away far more than it gives away. We are told that one "Cerinthus read and mused" (665) and in the poem's last line, that he is lost. Critics since DeVane (298) have identified Cerinthus as a stand-in for the Higher Critics – though based on what it is hard to say[24] – and taken the statement that he is lost as Browning's dismissal of them. But unless we assume that the one who speaks speaks for Cerinthus, we do not know what he mused. If that "one" is, as Shaffer suggests, someone of Cerinthus's school (208), one must note that neither Cerinthus nor his school sound much like Higher Critics since this speaker – confusingly enough, also named Pamphylax (l. 683), though surely not the same Pamphylax since that one would already be dead by the time the manuscript existed to be added to – rather furiously insists on Christ's divinity and indeed his second coming within a short time, proclaiming, otherwise, all is lost. If this is the musing of Cerinthus, so far from the Higher Critics being lost, we must take it that the poem declares lost those who believe too naively. We might take this interpolated speaker to be responding to Cerinthus, characterizing him as someone who affirms that Christ is merely a man (l. 666), thus someone at least like Renan, if not like Strauss. Since this speaker insists on an event we know history to have falsified, though, it's hard to take him as less lost than Cerinthus would be. In effect, Browning ends the poem with a chorus of conflicting insistences on the reality of past events, future events and the necessity of believing in them in one way and no other, all of which not only conflict with what John says but often espouse beliefs intervening history has shown to be untenable. One might say that the one aspect of Cerinthus that is lost is not his soul or his way but his historical identity, an end that is surely not limited to him at this point in the poem.

To the extent that John meant to wean his audience from a naïve dependence on an eyewitness account of Christ and, by extension, on an insistence on an imminent, material second coming, and anachronistically, meant to wean a later audience from a losing contest with the philosophical and historical inquiries of Feuerbach and Strauss, one must say that he has been no more successful with his later audience than with his contemporary ones: at any rate, as we have seen, both Victorians and later critics, with a few exceptions, see the poem as an attack on those critics rather than an attempt to accept their arguments and still find a space for belief. But really one should not be surprised at this. As a matter of persuasion, John's position has little to commend it to those who don't already share its conclusions. Even the poem's most sympathetic critics note the indirection of his responses to the interpolated skeptic.[25] Even those who, wanting to share what they take to be Browning's beliefs, take themselves to share John's, shy from John's extreme skepticism about perception and its implications for the kind of belief it endorses.[26] Thus, numbers of the poem's commentators, who take the poem's argument to be its point, evaluate it as less than a complete success, characterizing it, in Drew's words "as arid as the desert in which it is set" (219).[27]

But it is only as argument that the argument is arid. The poem has, even in contrast to other dramatic monologues, an unusually specified set of dramatic settings, even a quite ghoulish dramatization of John's reanimation. In contrast to the claims of the series of skeptics, fideists and insecure believers, who surround him in the poem, John's belief, whether it persuades

or not, represents a coherent way of living in the world, one he accepts so completely as to be willing to continue it almost indefinitely, though that continuation would bar what he seems to think would be a reuniting with his belief's object. We know who John, in contrast to Blougram, is, even if we don't know which john this John is, and we know how he lives in his world. Without being persuaded by his belief, necessarily, we accept it for the duration of the poem. But if we read the poem this way, ought we not to read other dramatic monologues, whose speakers manifestly do not share what we take to be Browning's beliefs, with equal sympathy for alterity? Although there obviously are dramatic monologues that bar our engagement with the belief of the speaker for obvious reasons – the speaker is a murderer or a fraud – and others, such as "Blougram," that for their own reasons frustrate that engagement, one would think that the obvious formal point of a poem given to us in another's voice would be to engage with that voice, at least for the duration of the poem, rather than to determine its logical shortcomings and, which half of what a speaker says we should agree with and which not. Even sympathizing, which still implies an evaluation rather than an engagement, seems an insufficient response to the form. That Caliban, Cleon, and Karshish are not Christians or don't fully accept Christianity when it is offered to them, seems about the least interesting thing we can recognize about them, about as uninteresting as determining whether we think John gets the better of Feuerbach or not. John, whichever John he is, shows us what a belief that makes sense of the world looks like. Only a consciously held belief, thus a chosen belief, can do that really since, as John implies, beliefs we hold because the facts dictate them do not show us who we are. John also shows us one way consciously held and chosen beliefs need be neither hypocritical nor epistemologically incoherent. But there might be other ways to hold one's beliefs as consciously chosen and other dramatic monologues, even those about beliefs Browning surely does not hold, might give us those examples as well.

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NOTES

1. Upon release, the poem was quickly taken as a "ghostly" voice answering the attacks of the Higher Critics and specifically Ernst Renan's *Life of Jesus* (Litzinger and Smalley 221). Although William O. Raymond recognized that Browning had no particular faith in one's ability to recover history accurately, he takes the poem as a direct riposte certainly to Strauss and probably to Renan (Raymond 33–39). Philip Drew sees the poem as more nearly directed at Feuerbach and sees Browning's near acceptance of much of what Feuerbach has to say, but insists on the poem's ultimate refutation of that Higher Critic as well (213–16). And this view is still held by Lee Erikson in 1984 (207–11). The view was first called strongly into question by Elinor Shaffer (191–225), who argues compellingly for the poem as consciously incorporating Renan's critique, but Shaffer still sees the poem as using myth to replace history as upholding Christianity, without questioning the epistemological problems such a transference of basis raises. In the last few years, most articles on the poem have recognized or explicitly argued for the poem's form of nested statements and texts as indicating a recognition of the complexity of textual transmission that more nearly aligns with than attacks the Higher Criticism, while all manage to make this recognition accord with a more or less orthodox Christian reading of John telling us why we should believe (see the two articles by Hyde, Gruber, Sullivan, Dupras, Johnstone, and Inglesfield).

2. Spencer, who is willing to assent to a recognition of the Infinite and the Absolute as concepts of which we can have no understanding, and quotes Mansell approvingly to that effect, nevertheless demurs at the claim that we should nevertheless believe in both a personal and an Infinite God (*First Principles* 93).
3. See Ingelsfield 336.
4. Published in 1872, *Discussions and Arguments* collects essays Newman wrote from the middle 1830s to the middle 1850s. There's no direct evidence that Browning read *Discussions and Arguments*, but Ryals connects "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" to Browning's feelings about *Tracts of the Times*, many of which contain similar arguments. Irvine and Honan reference "The Tamworth Reading Room" in connection with "Bishop Blougram's Apology," which was reprinted in *Discussions and Arguments* (339). And "Bishop Blougram's Apology" has one explicit reference to Newman (l. 703) and one likely reference to Newman's defenses of contemporary miracles (l. 377). Although Blougram is usually identified with Wiseman, there have been claims, at least since DeVane, that his arguments reflect aspects of Newman's (242).
5. All poems quoted from the Penguin edition of the Complete Poems, edited by Pettigrew and Collins.
6. If one takes Strauss to be arguing for a mythic interpretation as against an orthodox one, his argument quickly becomes circular. Strauss considers an account of a miracle satisfactorily explained if he can account for the role it plays in portraying Jesus as divine, fulfilling messianic prophecy, etc. Since a text frequently claims that the event it recounts matters because it shows Jesus was divine or did fulfill a given messianic prophecy, the mythic interpretation only becomes preferable if one takes for granted that the text's accompanying claim that the event did happen is inaccurate and that the invention of the event rather than its occurrence is explained by the proof of divinity or the fulfillment of messianic prophecy.
7. Renan 15–16.
8. Mrs. Sutherland Orr, 879, quoted in Raymond 39.Raymond contests Orr's conclusion that Browning therefore did not believe in an historical revelation, arguing that he had "an unswerving faith in the revelation of the Incarnation and 'Christ's cross and passion' within the spiritual experience of humanity" (40). But, by the definition of revelation as the historically specific information about Christianity that God gave humanity through the historical events of Christ's life (as opposed to the information he gave to all humanity through their psychological state and the evidence of the world he created), Orr is at least right that, whether Browning thought a revelation occurred or not, he did not think it necessary for it to have occurred for humans to apprehend the information it contained. Thus he did not believe in it as a historically necessary event since the human need of its message is all the support it needs, even if the events of the revealing were fictive, an interpretation that Raymond's formulation supports rather than refutes.
9. Although since Isobel Armstrong's "Browning's Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" critics have noticed coincidences between Sludge's self-justification and some aspects of belief about aesthetics and religion that we attribute to Browning, there is little disagreement that we are to find flaws in Sludge's argument and be appalled by him. The case with Bishop Blougram has been somewhat more vexed. On the poem's appearance, George Eliot's judgment that the poem was a satire of Blougram's views (Litzinger and Smalley, 176) was the more or less universal one. F. E. L. Priestley's "Blougram's Apologetics" changed the direction of the debate by arguing that Blougram's arguments were all strong ones that look vulgar because they are directed at persuading a vulgar auditor. Since then, critics have tried to evaluate Blougram's positions based more or less on Philip Drew's criterion that Browning allows us to evaluate the intrinsic strength or weakness of Blougram's arguments (126). The problem with this method – and no one including me can entirely escape from it – is that one's own beliefs frequently will shape one's evaluations of Blougram's. Even more recent accounts of the poem, such as Thomas Fish's, which try to see it as an attempt to describe a psychology rather than judge an argument do wind up describing the psychology based on their evaluations of the argument.
10. This is, of course, Robert Langbaum's position (207).

11. According to Mermin, Sludge does not get all he wants, because Horsefall does not continue to listen to him (62–63) and, if this is his end, he surely fails. But he does get Horsefall to let him go and give him money and I would account this a far nearer reaching of his end than Blougram's.
12. Although I take it that Sludge does respond to questions Horsefall actually asks since he has more to fear from the outcome if he does not than do other speakers, one must be cautious. Blougram, for instance, frequently attributes questions to Gigadibs that it is doubtful Gigadibs has asked,
13. Herbert Tucker has described the Higher Criticism as the deconstruction of its day (8), and, as his own book makes clear, he is quite right that Derridean reading has been a fruitful approach to those religious debates because they raise very similar questions. Further, to the extent that Strauss called into question how to read the meaning and significance of texts and thus de-stabilized the Victorians' ability to take them in ways they had thought to be straightforward, his practice may, with some metaphorical license, be described as Derridean. But Blougram's response shows us that there is an important difference. Strauss wasn't a skeptic about history; he claimed to be replacing an inaccurate understanding of it with an accurate one, to be stating the facts. In this vein, Suzy Anger's implication that frequently the skeptical historicism of defenders of faith such as Newman bore far more comparison to post-structural reading than the positive history of skeptics about religion is worth noting (23).
14. Blougram does of course reveal a clear pleasure in the comforts of the world. If one takes the poem as a satire of the justifications he offers for that pleasure, as George Eliot did (Litzenger and Smalley 176), then one knows all one needs to about him. If one takes seriously the question of the state of his belief, however, the critical debate over how to take his arguments indicates how little he reveals about that.
15. Renan's book came out in English in November of 1863 and Browning's frequently quoted letter to Isa Blagden about reading it has a date of November 19. "A Death in the Desert" was first published in *Dramatis Personae* in May 1864, which gives rather a short time for its composition. Moreover, all the issues raised in the poem about the authorship of the Gospel of John and about the historicity of its account can be easily found in Strauss. Because these are hardly determinative arguments, though, the internal suggestion of a response to Renan, asserted from the poem's first publication remains persuasive.
16. Ryals captures this aspect of John when he says of him that he "has outlived his first vision of Christ" (150).
17. The most obvious example of this is Hyde's "The Fallible Parchment," which takes the various layers of transmission to represent a various but integral Christian community. But William Gruber, who does more justice to the ways in which the poem deals with the difficulties of historical transmission, also pulls his irons out of the fire with a final assertion of paradox: "Thus Browning, in seeming to subvert the historical reliability of the parchment, and in making John less 'realistic,' by some strange paradox, authenticates both" (340). Ryals, an exception here, sees the transmission history as creating all the problems of historical distance. In an odd way, though, he also tries to save the situation by equating the later Christian community with the dying John as a result of his having outlived his experience of Christ, thus endowing them with his odd, ahistoric certainty (150–51). But John's belief is not one that is easily generalizable, as we will see.
18. Because he accepts that the apostle John was the author of the Johaninne gospel, Renan is forced to accuse John of falsehood, or at least nearly so, since while he refuses to assert John's absence from the crucifixion, he clearly doubts his presence: "His disciples fled. John nevertheless declares himself to have been present" (Renan 288). Rather hilariously, Renan also ascribes the claim that Jesus on the cross commended Mary to John to John's self-aggrandizement, even as he bases the claim that Mary did in fact live with John after the crucifixion on the very same text he is doubting (289). Strauss also doubts John's presence and attributes these details to the text's desire to enhance John's prestige. But since he doesn't think John was the author of the gospel, he isn't forced into Renan's contortions.
19. Ryals asserts that John considers his claim as a falsehood necessary to get to a higher truth (150), thus making John a participant in the kind of stage managing to which both Strauss and Browning

object. In fact, John says no such thing, nor does he offer any explanation of the contradiction or any recognition that any contradiction exists.

20. Drew (214–16) first noticed the relevance of Feuerbach to the objections of the interpolated speaker. Ingelsfield offers the fullest analysis of the sources behind the interpolated objections.
21. Browning also puts in the mouth of the interpolated speaker a more telling critique of the explanation of power than Ingelsfield supposes even as he rightly notes that the image of the sun's chariot comes from Spencer (Ingelsfield 339). But Spencer means in his discussion to explain the truth that that image in religion captures, not how humans project their own power on external images. In spirit, Browning's skeptic offers Darwin's reading in *The Descent of Man* of the origin of a belief in spiritual power (93–94). *Descent* was, of course, published after *Dramatis Personae*, but the passage in question quotes sources showing the idea was years old. Blougram, for instance, gives an evolutionary explanation for modesty (ll. 826–34), attributing it, of course, to "a French book." John doesn't much address this aspect of the argument except as it reproduces the argument about love as a projection since that is the real crux of his position.
22. See for instance Temple's "The Education of the World" (*Essays and Reviews* 1–50) which argues that revelation is calibrated to the mode of human learning at the time. Temple was not one of the contributors to that collection prosecuted for heresy since he argues that God created the reality so that it would appeal to the mode of human development ready to receive it. But the implication of an argument that Biblical texts should be read as pitched at a more primitive or superstitious audience was always to explain them as other than referential history.
23. Shaffer takes John here to be self-aggrandizingly claiming that he has worked a miracle (198) and his words certainly can be taken this way. But this also makes him a liar or a fictionalizer. I think the words can easily be taken to mean that he cried that a blind man received sight when in the gospel he wrote he offered an account of Jesus curing a blind man. In neither reading do we have to presume John to construe himself even as fictionalizing since his skepticism about perception (which Shaffer also discusses, 212–14) changes the nature of his claim about what happened when such a cure occurred.
24. As DeVane (298) explains, the beliefs of the historical Cerinthus bear no particular comparison to those of the Higher Critics. He, like the Ebionites – from whom Browning seems to extrapolate someone named Ebion (l. 329) – did deny both that Jesus was born of a virgin birth and was, from his birth through his death divinity incarnate. But both the Ebionites and Cerinthus thought that Christ's divinity descended upon him with his baptism and left him prior to his death, hardly the claim that Jesus was merely human. Browning could have learned these details from Strauss (134, 248) as well as the belief of some that Cerinthus authored the John's Gospel (73)! All we know of the poem's Cerinthus, though, is that he doesn't share John's interpretation of Jesus – but since few people in the poem do, this seems hardly sufficient to identify him with any particular school of Biblical criticism. The earlier interpolated speaker does moreover bear a comparison to the Higher Critics and he is hardly described as lost.
25. Although Drew evaluates some of John's responses to the Feuerbachian skeptic as more logically successful than I do, he also recognizes how close John's responses come to repeating rather than refuting Feuerbach (220). Ingelsfield, given the purpose of his article, describes the interpolated arguments in much more detail than he does John's response, but he may also offer more detail to interpreting the skeptic than to John because, as he admits, John's "attempts to answer the arguments of the imaginary skeptic and the representative 'man' are at best indirect: certainly these skeptical voices are not answered on their own terms" (344).
26. Shaffer is an exception here in giving full weight to John's skepticism about perception (212–14), and, despite her treatment of Renan as a more skeptical critic of New Testament texts than he is, her argument has enabled much of mine. But she too, finally, identifies myth with real Revelation (217–18) in a way that I think also refuses to accept the limits of the belief John offers.
27. Drew does not, however, agree with this characterization entirely.

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