Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism

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Robert Browning’s periods of residence and travel on the Continent coincided with some of the great political upheavals of the time, but the closest the poet may have ever come to being in any personal danger due to such unrest was in the late summer of 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War. At the time, Browning and his sister Sarianna were enjoying a seaside holiday at St. Aubin-sur-Mer on the Normandy coast. His good friend Joseph Milsand lived in a cottage only “two steps off,” Browning wrote to Isa Blagden, while they stayed in “another of the most primitive kind on the sea-shore—which shore is a good sandy stretch for miles and miles on either side.”

During previous summers in Brittany, Browning had developed an enthusiasm for swimming which he now indulged almost daily, although he confessed that the “sadness of the war & its consequences go far to paralyse all our pleasure” (342). If convinced that France was being justly punished for its misplaced faith in Napoleon III, Browning still felt a vague attachment to the struggling nation that compelled him to remain on the scene: “I am glad to be in France rather than elsewhere just now” (344). His sympathy was also quickened, no doubt, by witnessing Milsand’s difficult efforts to secure his home and belongings in Paris.

But even as German armies began a steady advance toward the capital after capturing the emperor himself, Browning remained confident that they...
could make it back to the safety of England without difficulty: “we can reach Havre from Caen in a few hours—& thence get to Southampton when we please,” he wrote to Blagden in mid-September, “so I think we have decided to remain till the end of the month” (345). Within a week of penning these reassuring words, however, Browning began a frantic departure from France. Milsand was concerned that the poet might have already been mistaken for a German spy by restless villagers. State authorities were also on the lookout for French nationals trying to leave the country, which had been forbidden by government order. As a result, the boat to Havre, along with most trains and coaches, was no longer in service. Only through Milsand’s last-minute efforts were the Brownings able to secure passage out of the country, at midnight, on a cattle boat bound for Southampton.

How near Browning truly came to being detained or arrested is not entirely clear, but, at the very least, the shock to the psyche of this suddenly accidental tourist must have been profound. The incident is telling in other ways as well, and reveals something of what inspired Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, perhaps Browning’s most ambitious attempt to inscribe contemporary French culture and his own presence within it. Recounting a more placid vacation two summers later in St. Aubin, the poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by Browning to a fellow traveler, Anne Thackeray, in which he rhapsodizes over the peacefulness of the landscape before introducing a darker, hidden truth. Not far from where they were staying, Antoine Mellerio (1827–70), the wealthy son of a Parisian jeweler, had committed suicide by leaping from a tower on his estate. As the poem explains, Mellerio seems to have been motivated by a desperate religious faith that compounded his guilt over an extra-marital affair (in an earlier effort to atone for his sins, Mellerio had destroyed his love letters—and his hands—by holding them over a fire). With the help of Milsand, who had first told Browning of the incident, the poet examined press reports and court records associated with the case, and eventually decided that he had hit upon “a capital brand-new subject” for a poem, one that would untangle Mellerio’s complex web of personal and spiritual obsessions. With names and places changed to prevent the possibility of libel suits (Mellerio, for example, became Léonce Miranda, and St. Aubin became St. Rambert), Browning’s poem hit the press less than a year after Mellerio’s contested estate had been settled by the court at Caen.

Mixing seaside strolls and sightseeing with the tale of a gruesome suicide, the poem is another vacation interrupted by reality—a comforting, inviting surface that hides more troubling forces at work. But in many ways, these kinds of intrusions were nothing new for Browning, whether in France or Italy. They were indispensable to him, in fact: his authority as a travel poet
hinged upon the tension between the expected and the unexpected, the comforting and the threatening. Weaker travel discourse, to him, merely recycled what was reassuringly familiar. To make this point to Elizabeth, he singled out Mary Shelley’s *Rambles in Italy and Germany*, which, as we saw earlier, she had read and loaned to him in September 1845:

why don’t you tell us that at Rome they eat roasted chestnuts, and put the shells into their aprons, the women do, and calmly empty the whole on the heads of the passengers in the street below; and that at Padua when a man drives his waggon up to a house and stops, all the mouse-coloured oxen that pull it from a beam against their foreheads sit down in a heap and rest. But once she travelled the country with Shelley on arm; now she plods it, Rogers in hand. (BC 9:70)

In some sense, Browning pays tribute here to the kinds of obscure but telling markers of Italy he had unearthed in his own verse. In *Pippa Passes* (1841), for instance, a peasant girl may not eat roasted chestnuts and dump the shells on tourists, but she does recount how an old man feeds her “on his knees with fig-peckers, / Lampreys and red Breganze-wine” (3.236–37). In “The Englishman in Italy” (1845), Browning’s distinctively Italian culinary delights almost begin to overwhelm the speaker, who imagines “grape-gleaners (two dozen, / Three over one plate) / With lasagne so tempting to swallow / In slippery ropes” (95–98).

If such fine details were enough to distinguish Browning from Samuel Rogers and the other “tourists in rhyme” who had succeeded him, to rest alone on this kind of consumption of the exotic and unfamiliar was still in many ways to miss what he considered most important to the poet as traveler. What apparently drew Barrett Browning to Shelley’s book—its tentative intervention in the political sphere—even if it misses Robert’s notice here, was still a vital part of seeing and assimilating Europe. Like the unobtrusive but ever-vigilant poet of “How It Strikes a Contemporary” (1855), where Browning again imagines himself into the mind of a European, “He took such cognizance of men and things, / If any beat a horse, you felt he saw; / If any cursed a woman, he took note; / Yet stared at nobody” (30–33). The need to be relevant, earnest, and, at times, contemporary and political never left him and still authorized his presence abroad in more clandestine ways. It would keep interrupting him, as it had in *Sordello* (1840), when a “sad, dishevelled ghost / That pluck at me and point” (3.696–97) compels him to break off from his historical poem of the thirteenth century and reflect on his own crisis of poetic and political purpose: “There is such niggard stock
of happiness / To share, that, do one’s uttermost, dear wretch, / One labours ineffectually to stretch / It o’er you” (3.706–9). The girl would return again in the guise of Pippa, urging the rest of the poem’s cast into various forms of repentance with her song. She returns still later in The Ring and the Book (1868–69) as Pompilia: Browning “discovers” her in a marketplace in Florence, where he again seems to be idling his time like any casual traveler. The “Old Yellow Book,” a legal relic from the early eighteenth century describing her murder and the trial of her estranged husband Guido Franceschini, sits inconspicuously enough among other “odds and ends of ravage” (1.53) before it calls to Browning and insists upon the epic transformation it would receive at his hands.5

Now in modern France, Browning had returned in many ways to the same fundamental question: when visiting a location for reasons of personal or artistic enrichment, how does one avoid ignoring the political and social realities of the people who call it home? Cosmopolitanism, as Amanda Anderson reminds us, is an ideal that depends in large part upon “a mobility that is the luxury of social, economic, or cultural privilege.” How does one, in turn, negotiate the “complex tension between elitism and egalitarianism” that accompanies the effort to cross into another culture?6 In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, as during that summer in 1870, Browning was not entirely successful at fashioning this idealized in-between space, one that balances the idea of travel as vacation—an escape from the pressures of urban mass culture—with the demands of a more engaged kind of Anglo-European citizenship and identity. What Red Cotton Night-Cap Country attempts, in essence, is to play in earnest. It invokes the pleasure of the beach but insists on the presence of danger, becoming like Normandy itself: a pristine borderland seemingly isolated from the urban centers of Paris and London, but also, according to Browning, peculiarly at the heart of political and cultural conflict in Europe. The poem strives to cope with the contradictory impressions that his lifelong encounter with Europe created in him—impressions that blended identification with distance and sympathy with judgment. These are, of course, the same tensions that define Browning’s signature form, the dramatic monologue, as Robert Langbaum first proposed in The Poetry of Experience (1957). And as I will argue in this chapter, more so than any other Browning monologue, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country underscores the intricate ways in which the dramatic monologue form reproduces the dynamics of travel itself, revealing how the one practice continued to fuel the other even at this relatively late stage of his career. Browning’s poetry exists at borders, in numerous senses, as has long been recognized by commentators on his work: between poetry and prose, lyric and drama, England and Europe, culture and
politics, men and women. Each of these sets of borders comes into play in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, and in attempting to dwell at the border, the poem finally reveals just how difficult, and necessary, it is to occupy this liminal space. In particular, Browning’s encounter with Europe seems always to come back to women—as figures in his poetry, as we have already seen—and as authors themselves—his wife Elizabeth included. Women would occupy both roles simultaneously in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, offering added insight into why Europe, and the cosmopolitan, were such gendered spaces for Browning.

**Browning’s Ambivalence** toward France reflects the attitude of many British liberals at the time. As Clare A. Simmons reveals in *Eyes across the Channel* (2000), these mixed feelings were especially evident in the alternating enthusiasm and dread for plans to build a channel tunnel between the two countries—plans which were briefly put into effect in 1882 and which, it should be noted, Browning opposed. His wish to leave Britain’s natural borders intact, however, was not necessarily due to the kind of Francophobia one sometimes sees in Browning’s compatriots. And while his overall enthusiasm for French culture may not have rivaled Barrett Browning’s, I am still suggesting that *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* embodies a stronger connection than is conveyed, for instance, by insisting that he inhabits France with a sense of detachment akin to naturalism or that he always remains an “outsider” in the poem, as different readings of it have proposed. His life and work, rather, reveal an intense if indeterminate sense of belonging to France.

In several senses—personally, professionally, and, of course, geographically—France was closer to Browning than the other nations of Europe—closer even than Italy in some key respects. One telling contrast is that France by and large exists in the present for Browning: two earlier long poems, *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* (1871) and *Fifine at the Fair* (1872), likewise deal with contemporary French people and subjects. In a way that Italy had not yet achieved, France was a part of modern Europe for Browning, a nation with a more immediate impact on the course of art, politics, and the sciences. With a long exposure to French language and literature, like Arnold, and frequent visits to Paris and the coasts of Brittany and Normandy, Browning no doubt felt that he could inhabit the minds of contemporary French people, whether Miranda or Napoleon III, with the same authenticity that he could with other subjects of his dramatic monologues. *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, he claimed, revealed “just what I imagine the man might, if he pleased, say for himself.”
To adapt Mary Louise Pratt’s familiar term, it could be said that Browning inhabits a different kind of contact zone in France as opposed to Italy, which a brief comparison to *The Ring and the Book* demonstrates.\(^{11}\) There Browning remains distanced from the protagonists of his poem not just historically but structurally, in a sense, by speaking *in propria persona* only at the margins of the poem, as if peering over into his subject.\(^{12}\) In *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country,* rather than creating the illusion that Italy unfolds itself before the reader’s eyes, Browning mingles with his subject and its location throughout the course of the poem. This effect is characteristic of what Donald S. Hair terms Browning’s later “parleying” poems. As Browning converses with Thackeray, “the two voices begin to sound like a complex argument comprehended by a single consciousness and advanced by a single voice, especially when one speaker proposes or conjectures positions for the other.”\(^{13}\) Browning’s overall encounter with France becomes a kind of parleying or negotiation between the author and those who inhabit France with him, including his fellow travelers. The kind of authorial distancing one is used to with Browning’s more historicized dramatic monologues in part disappears here.

This sense of greater closeness to French people and culture had very real origins in the bonds that Browning developed with individual French citizens: key among these associates, of course, was Milsand, who in 1851 published one of the earliest and most appreciative critical surveys of Browning’s poetry.\(^ {14}\) It may be no exaggeration to say that, second to Elizabeth, Milsand was the closest person Browning had to a kind of soul mate, one who shared his wife’s willingness to comment carefully on his work, a duty which Milsand took over after her death in 1861. Theirs typifies the devoted and openly affectionate male friendships of the time. Milsand’s daughter Marie Blanc-Milsand later recalled that during those summers in St. Aubin, “Every day the two men could be seen on the beach, the arm of Browning always round Milsand’s shoulders.”\(^ {15}\) An illustration accompanying her article recreates a photograph of the two men in a similar pose as they soak in a painting by Browning’s son (see figure 3). The illustration conveys something of the intellectual and aesthetic symbiosis of their friendship, a prototype of the broader ideal of cross-cultural fertilization that Browning endorses in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*—one characterized, as we will see, by a specifically masculine kind of bonding. Milsand, in fact, is the only person referred to by name in the poem, that “Milsand, who makest warm my wintry world, / And wise my heaven” (2945–46). That Browning felt the need to express such public gratitude to his friend—making him, in essence, a part of the poem—is not surprising, for without him there might not have been a poem
Figure 3  Robert Browning and Joseph Milsand looking at a painting by Browning’s son, 1882 (photographer William H. Grove; courtesy Armstrong Browning Library).
at all. It was Milsand who guided Browning to landmarks associated with the Miranda story and who gained him access to court records that might otherwise have been restricted to foreigners. In the poem and in Browning’s real life, Milsand, more than any other single individual, was the mediator through whom Browning interpreted France.

This personal connection between England and France—a mutual desire to know and understand each other—broadens and takes on a geographical dimension in the poem. The first part of the poem underscores the proximity of Normandy to England as well as its equidistance between Paris and London, the metropolitan centers of Europe. Normandy, of course, was also the origin of the 1066 invasion that briefly united France and England under one monarch. Miranda’s distinctive “Parc Anglais” (704) is one of several reminders of this cross-cultural pollination: the very English-sounding French phrase, like others in the poem, subtly reinforces the linguistic overlap between the two cultures. Similarly, Browning’s need to alter the names of the people and places in the poem provided him with the opportunity to turn the village of Douvres into “Londres”:

Take the left: yonder town is—what say you
If I say ‘Londres’? Ay, the mother-mouse
(Reversing fable, as truth can and will)
Which gave our mountain of a London birth!
This is the Conqueror’s country, bear in mind,
And Londres-district blooms with London-pride. (421–26)

Londres stands now as a symbol of peaceful coexistence between France and England, although the reference to “the Conqueror” reminds the reader that Browning and Thackeray are walking a landscape crisscrossed by invading armies and defined by cultural clashes: where French, Norse, and English all sought at one time or another to reclaim land they thought was theirs or to maintain a foothold in continental Europe (an idea, we know now, that would prove prophetic in ways Browning could not have imagined). Although now mostly a retreat for holiday makers, the shoreline resonates with a grander historical legacy and significance. Rhetorically as well, it was a land worth fighting over.

Browning’s objective is indeed to lay claim to this landscape, and his contest takes the form of a verbal battle with Thackeray, whose active presence in the poem, as Hair describes, belies that of the typical auditor of the dramatic monologue. The staging of the poem as a conversation between two British travelers with contrasting views of the region is partly based on
reality: during his 1872 vacation, Browning visited Thackeray at nearby Lion with the aim of healing a rift that had opened up between them after he became convinced that she had spread rumors he planned to remarry. With their friendship restored, the poem begins cordially enough: “And so, here happily we meet, fair friend! / Again once more, as if the years rolled back / And this our meeting-place were just that Rome / Out in the champaign” (1–4). While all may be well between them on the surface (Browning even dedicates the poem to her), what the reader gradually begins to see unfold is a knock-down contest for textual authority—for ownership of the seaside they both lay claim to as travelers and authors. Browning later admits as much with an appropriately pugilistic metaphor to describe their conversation: “British maid / And British man, suppose we have it out / Here in the fields, decide the question so?” (381–83).

The spoils of their contest is St. Aubin itself, this “[m]eek, hitherto un-Murrayed bathing place, / Best loved of sea-coast-nook-ful Normandy!” (20–21)—a place where one could still experience authentic solitude, although this would not last long, as the ambivalent “hitherto” reveals. With this backhanded tribute to the same Murray who had accompanied Clough, Browning engages his poem in the battle for cultural capital that had been raging throughout the nineteenth century between a mass-culture “tourism” and a more selective anti-tourism or “travel.” Browning thus fits the pattern of other self-fashioned travelers who, in James Buzard’s words, “lay claim to an aristocracy of inner feeling, the projection of an ideology of originality and difference.” In terms of genre, such distancing served to reinforce the idea that poetry—particularly long, challenging poems in the style of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*—was a special genre reserved for more selective readers. Such poems might lack popular appeal, but they remained, like the mountain retreat where Browning would later set *La Saisiaz* (1878), “[y]et untroubled by the tourist, touched on by no travel-book” (60). Before retreating to the mountains, however, he was more preoccupied with preserving St. Aubin’s “unpretending beach” (17), a goal that had gained renewed momentum in 1871 with the passage of the Bank Holiday Act, which created leisure time for a new generation of tourists eager to experience the joys of the seaside both at home and abroad. The seaside serves as the reader’s entry point into France and into the country of the poem: to know one, it seems, is to know the other. Browning acknowledges that he and Thackeray are both attempting to relocate France and cosmopolitan identity away from metropolitan centers such as Paris. At the same time, however, Browning insists that the seaside must remain poetic turf.
The authority of Browning’s claim would rest in large part on an already well-established British tradition of littoral verse, one that appears to have crested around the time of his visits to France, a span which witnessed the publication of Swinburne’s “The Triumph of Time” (1866), Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “The Sea-Limits” (1870), and, of course, Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1867). Earlier in the century, Romantic poets, Byron especially, had helped to transform the beach, in the words of cultural historians Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, from, at best, a medical necessity into “an outpost for reflection and self-discovery, a place where nature, in her infinite dynamism and enigma, presents a subtle script through which the human spirit cryptically reveals itself.”

Browning had already paid tribute to sea-bathing as physically and spiritually rejuvenating in the “Amphibian” prologue to Fifine at the Fair, which features Browning enjoying a swim off of the Breton coast as he draws a series of connections between swimming, flight, and the will to transcend different elements and modes of existence. With the aid of the poet, the beach becomes a border between the here and the hereafter: “Unable to fly, one swims” (48) and, in a similar act of transference, “[w]e substitute, in a fashion, / For heaven—poetry” (55–56). Swimming even creates in him a foretaste of a celestial reunion with Elizabeth: “Does she look, pity, wonder / At one who mimics flight, / Swims—heaven above, sea under, / Yet always earth in sight?” (73–76). The beach affords the closest thing there is to communion with heaven while simultaneously teaching one to accept the limits of earth and time: it is a lesson, we will discover, that the impetuous Miranda would have benefitted from.

Browning swims in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country too, inspiring a burst of alliteration as a wave “flecks [his] foot with froth, nor tempts in vain” (40), but for the most part he stays out of the water, dwelling instead on the value of how all of the different natural elements of the seaside come together to form one uniquely gratifying environment. The poem becomes an ode of sorts to beachfront property, even if one possesses it only as lessee. Browning is like many who rent property near the shore in search of repose and a good view: “That, just behind you, is mine own hired house: / With right of pathway through the field in front” (22–23). This particular beach, he notes, holds another natural enticement:

Be sure I keep the path that hugs the wall,
Of mornings, as I pad from door to gate!
Yon yellow—what if not wild-mustard flower?—
Of that, my naked sole makes lawful prize,
Bruising the acrid aromatics out,
Till, what they preface, good salt savours sting
From, first, the sifted sands, then sands in slab,
Smooth save for pipy wreath-work of the worm:
(Granite and mussel-shell are ground alike
To glittering paste,—the live worm troubles yet.) (26–35)

Lying in Browning’s pathway, the mustard flower (like the Miranda narrative he later discovers), belongs to him by “lawful” right. Indeed, the image of the wild-mustard flower crushed open to reveal an acrid odor serves as a metaphor for the poem itself: the reader moves from an invitingly pleasant landscape to more hidden trouble. Placing oneself on the beach means both getting away from it all and getting to the heart of the matter.

Browning then proceeds to draw a contrast between his own view of the region and that of Thackeray, who seems more drawn to its peaceful aspects and proposes to pay tribute to St. Aubin in a work of her own—either a kind of travel guide or picturesque novel—with, as Browning puts it, a “[s]ubsiding-into-slumber sort of name, / Symbolic of the place and people too, / ‘White Cotton Night-cap Country’” (144–46). Hers is just the sort of book that might have broad appeal to other British travelers in France who were likewise in search of destinations away from the major seaside developments of Dieppe, Dunkirk, and Trouville. Initially, Browning greets the idea with good-natured humor, but his words gradually take on a more concerned tone, one that borders on sarcasm:

Oh, better, very best of all the news—
You mean to catch and cage the wingèd word,
And make it breed and multiply at home
Till Norman idlesse stock our England too?
Normandy shown minute yet magnified
In one of those small books, the truly great,
We never know enough, yet know so well?
How I foresee the cursive diamond-dints,—
Composite pen that plays the pencil too,—
As, touch the page and up the glamour goes,
And filmily o’er grain-crop, meadow-ground,
O’er orchard in the pasture, farm a-field
And hamlet on the road-edge, floats and forms
And falls, at lazy last of all, the Cap
That crowns the country! (157–71)
Browning’s attention to bibliographical features—the inclusion of sketches, the cursive typeface—suggests a finished product that is more commodity than text, something that will be bought for its packaging. The content of Thackeray’s hypothetical book is also a kind of package: a glossy surface, replete with farms, pastures, and peasants—a preconceived notion of pastoral France. In effect, Browning restates poetically what he said earlier of Mary Shelley’s *Rambles in Italy* to Elizabeth. *White Cotton Night-cap Country*, he implies, is strangely domestic for a travel book; this “small book” does not travel at all or reveal the true color of the region. Thackeray thus becomes, in essence, the anti-poem within the poem: a travel text in her own right, but one that misdirects readers.

In part to legitimate his own act of textual production, Browning of necessity must problematize the very escapism his poem otherwise validates, and it is Thackeray’s presence as auditor that makes this possible. Throughout their discussion, he has been subtly undermining the pleasantness of the countryside, arguing that the metropolis and modernity intervene there in ways only dimly apparent—ways that had, of course, taken himself by surprise two summers earlier. Amid the “sweet rusticities” (114) of a land seemingly removed from the fluctuations of history, Browning notes that a bill posted on a barn, “still placards the Emperor / His confidence in war he means to wage, / God aiding and the rural populace” (134–36). Paris, the center of France and of politics, and its leader, appear as trace memories on the countryside, scars that seem to hide deeper wounds. The region becomes a borderland isolated from the city but always subject to its political power. Browning, in turn, attempts to fashion a poetic space between city and country, a pretty flower with an acrid odor. His rhetorical strategy amounts to a kind of *otium cum dignitate*: a working vacation—a mix of the recreational and the serious, the tourist and the traveler. One encounters the whole of France, in all its pleasure and danger, not at its center, Paris, but at its periphery. Browning-sur-mer and citizen Browning thus inhabit the poem together, striving to wed the pleasure of travel with a sense of responsibility for the region’s political and cultural identity.

The poem’s main narrative continues to expound on Browning’s impression of true versus false kinds of cosmopolitanism. Like Thackeray, Miranda is portrayed as a *mistraveler*, someone unable to cultivate that liminal space between the recreational and the serious. Physically he may have moved himself to the border region inhabited by Browning, but, intellectually, he has not. He insists instead on dwelling in extremes: on the one hand, an empiricism grounded in the Enlightenment, and, on the other, a lingering spirituality that manifests itself in the popular craze for miracles, such
as the famous sighting of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, and more specific to Miranda's case, her sighting at La Délivrande, which he makes a particular object of his munificence and devotion. Rather than canceling out his religious faith, Miranda's insistence on facts demands that the existence of God be confirmed by miracles: it is this vain hope that compels him, in Browning's judgment, to leap from his tower with the expectation that an angel will intercede to save him and carry him to La Délivrande.

The poem offers what at first seems like a rather simple explanation for Miranda's failure to negotiate these extremes—an explanation, however, that would appear to undercut any endorsement of cosmopolitanism or border-crossing that the poem might otherwise espouse. Miranda, the son of a French mother and Spanish father, might be genetically predisposed to fall victim to contradictory impulses within French culture:

Monsieur Léonce Miranda, at his birth,
Mixed the Castilian passionate blind blood
With answerable gush, his mother's gift,
Of spirit, French and critical and cold.
Such mixture makes a battle in the brain,
Ending as faith or doubt gets uppermost;
Then will has way a moment, but no more:
So nicely-balanced are the adverse strengths,
That victory entails reverse next time. (1151–59)

Such a diagnosis recalls Browning's old distrust of "all hybrid & ambiguous natures & nationalities," the same impulse that made him quit Florence for London soon after Barrett Browning's death to ensure that Pen would be educated at English schools. While Browning does play rather casually here with cultural stereotypes, the passage, I would suggest, has a more precise aim than to be a blanket condemnation of cultural cross-pollination. His point is not that Miranda would have been better off growing up in one national climate or the other. Rather, the problem is that France and Spain, from Browning's point of view, are too much alike: they do not edify and enhance each other so much as reinforce what is already there (as opposed to France and England, an implication that I analyze more closely later.) Miranda's dual ethnic inheritance is thus not the cause of his downfall but magnifies the larger flaw in his character: he is uniquely positioned to reap the intellectual benefits of dwelling at the border and of traveling between nationalities, but for all of his pretensions toward cosmopolitanism, he limits his cultural contacts, and stays locked within a stagnant series of influ-
Browning’s point of view here is not far from Matthew Arnold’s in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” where he advises critics to “try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better” (3:284). Along similar lines in “Heinrich Heine,” Arnold held up his subject as an example of a beneficial mixing of cultures and races: “Heine’s poetry . . . perpetually blends the impression of French modernism and clearness, with that of German sentiment and fulness; and to give this blended impression is, as I have said, Heine’s great characteristic” (3:124). Miranda resists such mixing and seems disinclined to probe too deeply into his own or anyone else’s ideas. He instead plays the part of the dandy and adopts a dilettantish, false worldliness.

With wealth and access to education and the arts, the possibility of cultivating a more balanced intellectual disposition presented itself to Miranda, but he does not take advantage of this opportunity. The intellectual forces doing battle within Miranda, as he fluctuates back and forth between the demands of the body and the spirit, are all French, Browning stresses, and work toward the same end: “Fat Rabelais chuckled, where faith lay in wait / For lean Voltaire’s grimace—French, either foe” (1234–35). Again, being French in itself is not what renders these forces damaging; it is their failure to be counterbalanced by other intellectual traditions, which gives the former uncontested sway over Miranda’s mindset:


Miranda’s intelligence lacks the depth that comes from concentrated, extended exposure to different ideas—the sort of rigorous mental exercise that lays the building blocks of critical thinking. Instead, his thoughts never leave the surface realm of “opinion,” where each idea seems interchangeable with the next. His way of reasoning forms the epistemological equivalent of Thackeray’s proposed travel book: all surface in content as well as form, and based on a too-easy superimposition of one culture or idea onto the next.

After Miranda transfers himself to the Normandy countryside, the wits he surrounds himself with, while part of a celebrity-packed cultural elite, do not aid him in forming a well-rounded perspective on the political and
spiritual dilemmas of modern Europe. Instead, they serve mostly to keep him entertained: “half-hour playings at life’s toil, / Diversified by billiards, riding, sport— / With now and then a visitor—Dumas, / Hertford—to check no aspiration’s flight” (2134–37). The poem does not dwell on what the by then aged Alexandre Dumas or the Marquess of Hertford might have contributed to Miranda’s intellectual development—and that, in fact, is Browning’s point: they are just names to Miranda, signifiers of art and ideas. Similarly, the alterations he makes to his estate, including a priory that dates back to the middle ages, reveal his preference for mingling ideas together rather than endeavoring to evaluate them critically: he wishes both to restore the priory to its original state and to have all of the extras that current tastes in architecture demand. The end result, according to Browning, is a study in incongruity: “a sense that something is amiss, / Something is out of sorts in the display, / Affects us, past denial, everywhere” (710–12). Miranda’s mother, apparently, concurs and sees in this unholy mix of ancient and modern shadows of a falsely restored religious faith, one that attempts to deny the contradictions at its heart: “‘Clairvaux Restored’: what means this Belvedere? / This Tower, stuck like a fool’s-cap on the roof— / Do you intend to soar to heaven from thence? (2228–30). Her words, of course, prove all too prophetic. The grounds of his estate offer no retreat from the aesthetic onslaught. His park “à l’Anglaise, as they compliment! / Grass like green velvet, gravel-walks like gold” (657–58), as Browning’s exaggerated description implies, is a “[m]odish adornment” (704) that draws attention to itself as a mark of style, not substance. Rather than being a monument to Miranda’s familiarity with English culture, the park testifies to his lack of true appreciation for it—his failure to look beyond his own nation and cultural milieu. Altogether, his home and the life he makes for himself in the countryside are simply “Paris expounded thus to Normandy” (745).

That true “friendly wit” who might have better educated Miranda, we discover, is none other than Browning’s friend Joseph Milsand. Instead of looking toward La Délivrande for a miracle, Miranda might have directed his gaze toward St. Aubin, where he would have seen something else entirely:

There he stands, reads an English newspaper,
Stock-still, and now, again upon the move,
Paces the beach to taste the Spring, like you,
Since both are human beings in God’s eye.
He will have understood you, I engage. (2913–17)
From this description, it is easy to mistake Milsand for Browning, the only other person in the poem, one would imagine, who might read an English newspaper while walking the beach, and they are, in some sense, cultural doubles. Milsand traverses that same borderland of spiritual peace and rejuvenation, the beach, and thus stands as a model of Anglo-French cross-dwelling. Milsand’s genius, Browning claims, is also essentially cosmopolitan—a capacity for sorting out competing ideas and offering in return a tolerant, humane understanding:

He will have recognized, ere breath be spent
And speech at end, how much that’s good in man,
And generous, and self-devoting, makes
Monsieur Léonce Miranda worth his help;
While sounding to the bottom ignorance
Historical and philosophical
And moral and religious, all one couch
Of crassitude, a portent of its kind.
Then, just as he would pitifully teach
Your body to repair maltreatment, give
Advice that you should make those stumps to stir
With artificial hands of caoutchouc,
So would he soon supply your crippled soul
With crutches, from his own intelligence,
Able to help you onward in the path
Of rectitude whereto your face is set. (2921–36)

Milsand embodies faith with depth, a practical intelligence—one perhaps quintessentially French, as Arnold too had opined—that integrates the ideas and insights of today, such as advances in artificial limbs, with the wish to provide spiritual comfort. Milsand reminds one as well of another cosmopolitan figure in Browning, the Arab physician Karshish—someone French in spirit if not in person and born of a culture that in Biblical times signified the highest achievement in medical science, as France did in modern Europe. And if not Christian, neither is Karshish dismissive of the intellectual challenge Lazarus’s account of Jesus poses for him; he approaches the question rigorously and openly. Similarly, it was Milsand, Browning notes in the tribute quoted earlier, who “made wise his heaven.” Both men had gone through crises of faith—Milsand, in fact, had converted to Protestantism after his—and shared a desire for a spirituality that did not retreat from
modernity but allowed them the space to dwell comfortably as intellectuals and as believers. Theirs would be a “fresh distillery of faith” (3033), to borrow a phrase from the poem.

Without such guidance, Miranda ends up crossing borders he should not and falls victim to the contradictory impulses of modernity. His looking for angels and miracles—not unlike spiritualism, another modish foe of Browning’s—was a symptom of the times, a need to verify faith in the afterlife along quasi-scientific lines. Miranda flings himself from the tower, imagining that an angel will intervene to save him, thus performing a miracle that would at once restore faith throughout Europe: “The news will run / Like wild-fire. ‘Thousands saw Miranda’s flight!’ / ’Tis telegraphed to Paris in a trice” (3539–41). The irony of the telegraph carrying news of the miracle is lost on him, however: the telegraph itself is the miracle, against which Miranda’s nostalgia for reality-defying demonstrations of God’s presence appears a sort of intellectual relic. Rather than reconciling modern times with the faith of the past, Miranda jumbles the two together to create what is at essence a vainglorious, reactionary gesture:

Regenerated France makes all things new!
My house no longer stands on Quai Rousseau
But Quai rechristened Alacoque: a quai
Where Renan burns his book, and Veuillot burns
Renan beside. (3553–57)

This book-burning fantasy mirrors Miranda’s own fruitless efforts to burn away the desires of the flesh by holding his mistress’s love letters over an open flame. France will again be ruled by the Bourbons, he imagines, and the streets will be renamed after the likes of the seventeenth-century saint Alacoque or Miranda’s contemporary Louis Veuillot, editor of the conservative Catholic journal The Universe and a relentless critic of Renan. Browning’s point, however, is that modern France must not dwell in either extreme: a religious conservatism that preys upon a popular desire for miracles, or a soulless rationalism that finds its logical outcome in the Paris Commune. Browning makes his case against the latter by stressing that Miranda’s anti-clerical physician, Beaumont, although he blames “those priests” (2611) for his patient’s disturbed state of mind, would soon become the indiscriminate victim of radicals like himself: “for the Commune ruled / Next year, and ere they shot his priests, shot him” (2673–74).

Milsand, in contrast, models the new Anglo-French cosmopolitanism Browning endorses—spiritually oriented and cultivated at the border
between the two countries—the Enlightenment tempered by faith. It was an intellectual and spiritual confederation after Matthew Arnold’s own heart, and in an odd way, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* does read as a sequel of sorts to “Dover Beach”: it invites those embroiled in the Victorian crisis of faith to cross over to a different shore and cultivate a truer, more enduring spiritual fellowship. If the agnostic Voltaire’s Paris was the embodiment of cosmopolitan Europe in the eighteenth century, then in Browning’s poem, Milsand’s un-Murrayed bathing place becomes that locus. With the help of Milsand, Browning reinvents France, or more precisely, that traveler’s landscape between France and England: Browning’s Norman landscape reclaims the area for both countries and thus bears something of his own English image. Miranda’s troublesome Spanish/French constitution now takes on a new dimension: it underscores the more successful international exchange that Browning endorses through himself and Milsand. Together, France and England form the ideal partnership of European nationalities for coping with modernity. Miranda, however, never truly left Paris, never partook of what St. Aubin had to offer: friendship with Milsand, the spiritual rejuvenation of the beach, and a closer proximity to England. Thus the form that successful border-crossing assumes in the poem is not without a tinge of anti-Catholicism (although it should be made clear that the poem does not identify Milsand as Protestant or make any explicit anti-Catholic references). To contemporary readers not inclined to identify with the Catholic Church, however, Miranda’s downfall could have easily been interpreted as the outgrowth of problems that Protestantism, so the thinking went, had striven to correct. Catholicism remained a religion too concerned with surfaces—performing rituals, doing good works—rather than with ministering to the real condition of the soul underneath.

*Browning’s French* connection is thus not without restrictions, and I want to explore more fully some of the religious, political, and gendered exclusions that adhere to it. The turn toward Milsand briefly acknowledges what is a mostly hidden source of authority in the poem, one that reveals how privileged Browning’s position is vis-à-vis Miranda’s and Thackeray’s. While she, for example, remains culturally isolated in the poem, experiencing the country at the level of visual surfaces alone, Browning is able to revel in the strong masculine friendship that lends him greater access to France. Writing against Thackeray allows Browning to establish his own more intimate and knowing relationship with this complex landscape. Cosmopolitanism, in turn, becomes an identity open only to those invited into its
circle: a Cosmopolitan Club, in effect, not unlike the London society of the same name to which Browning belonged. The cosmopolitan club of the poem likewise depends ultimately on personal connections and friendships between men like the one Browning shares with Milsand, which draws attention to another point where the critique of Thackeray and Miranda intersect. Miranda, one recalls, also lacks earnest male companionship: he is alternately dictated to and undone by his mother, his mistress, and, finally, by the Virgin Mary.

Looking ahead to Swinburne, one wonders as well if a more indirect target of Browning’s in this poem is the “florid impotence” he associated with him and aestheticism in general, which was variously attacked by critics for its preoccupation with the body, Catholic iconography, and with the France of *l’art pour l’art*. Browning made the remark about Swinburne in a March 1870 letter to Blagden, adding that his verse suggested to him “the minimum of thought and idea in the maximum of words and phraseology” (333). In a later letter he linked Swinburne with Rossetti, whom he also charged with a lack of depth: his works were “scented with poetry, as it were,” and displayed the characteristic “effeminacy of his school,—the men that dress up like women” (336). Virginia Blain has also drawn attention recently to these comments, with the aim of highlighting what she sees as “some of the fascinating intersections between gay and straight even in the heartland of high Victorianism, well before the fin de siècle: Tennyson/Browning/Arnold country.” Indeed, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* is precisely this kind of country, where gay/straight forms yet another complex border area at work in this poem. Browning attempts to validate homosocial bonding as key to cosmopolitan understanding, so long as it does not cross over into a more threatening kind of physical indulgence. Miranda’s failure to control his bodily desires, his obsession with saints and miracles, his false worldliness, are all finally of a piece.

In its effort to cross national boundaries, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* thus in turn reinscribes another complex set of gender and genre boundaries. In a curious way, however, the poem finds itself at its close attempting to undo these same boundaries, an effort forced upon Browning by Thackeray’s lingering presence in the poem. The need to welcome her into the poem at its outset and then, in effect, exclude her from it later creates the problem of how to re-invite her, and the vacation poem *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* started out as, back into its overall purpose. Now returned to London, Browning recalls how they “paced the sands before [his] house” (4234), and wonders whether “what Saint-Rambert [St. Aubin] flashed [him] in a thought, / Good gloomy London [will] make a poem of” (4239–40). To put
his vacation toward this more sober poetic purpose, Browning again invokes the ideal of *otium*, a border discourse between work and leisure. His purpose in addressing Thackeray was to

*Play ruddy herald-star to your white blaze*  
*About to bring us day. How fail imbibe*  
*Some foretaste of effulgence? Sun shall wax,*  
*And star shall wane: what matter, so star tell*  
*The drowsy world to start awake, rub eyes,*  
*And stand all ready for morn’s joy a-blush? (4242–47)*

Poetry here becomes what wakes one up to reality, leaving one edified and refreshed to begin life again. The ending thus strives to put back together what the poem had separated—red and white, the Miranda narrative and the travelogue. And, in this way, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* concludes much as Browning’s abortive vacation of 1870 had, in the safety of London after a momentary brush with danger. The political danger of the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath in the Paris Commune enter *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* only to remain at its margin. The poem pays tribute to the political reality (and anxiety) of France—the red cap of revolution—and insists on its relevance to a complete picture of the country. At the same time, the poem is equally determined to escape from the threat radical politics poses to its own ideological security. If Browning insists nonetheless on remaining connected, it must be accomplished discursively. For him, writing the poem accomplishes this end, as interpreting it, he suggests, does for the reader/traveler: “through the place he sees, / A place is signified he never saw, / But, if he lack not soul, may learn to know” (62–64). Normandy here remains a working vacation, a rich cultural text dotted with signs speaking to those with the ability to interpret them. Such is the luxury of the border to which Anderson earlier alluded—a state of being that depends in part for its existence on the gender and class privilege of the traveler. The poem, in effect, wants to have its signs and decode them too—to dwell both with the signifier of the region and its comforting surface, and with the truer “soul” beneath, to which the poem provides special access.

I would thus challenge some earlier readings of the poem which champion Browning for undermining his own textual authority in the manner of post-structuralism. Walter M. Kendrick, for example, in what remains a brilliant, almost prototypical model of deconstructive analysis, suggests that “[i]n place of Miss Thackeray’s language, which limits the associations of words according to an intention which is ‘meant’ by them, the narrator has
employed a language which moves freely within itself.” Kendrick adds, “His character does not govern the meaning of what he says, nor is his language the expression of something about him. He is a location on the surface of discourse.”

By the very act of displacing Thackeray’s language, however, Browning assumes a power that indeed lies outside the play of language within the poem, originating instead in cultural assumptions about gender and genre. Brendan Kenny also inadvertently reveals how much the argument for a poem without a center ultimately depends upon the presence of Thackeray as rhetorical Other: “Browning rejects the notion of a neutral observer if this means expressing admiration for an alien and archaic cultural system which one has no intention of participating in oneself—the position of Miss Thackeray. Browning’s obtrusive narrative voice makes it evident that he is making an evaluative judgment on French culture and that he expects a critical assessment of his own role by the reader.”

I would suggest rather that the poem does not so much “expect” this critical assessment as force the reader into making one in its absence. Tellingly, while Kenny’s analysis of the poem has much that is insightful to say about Browning’s criticism of Thackeray and of French culture, at no point does it indicate on what specific grounds a “critical assessment” of Browning himself might be formulated.

To bring the poem more in line with recent work on Browning and the dramatic monologue, one could position it—with qualifications—as a kind of “double poem” after Isobel Armstrong’s definition in Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics. For Armstrong, the double poem is “literally two things at once, lyric and drama concurrently. . . . each poem within the poem, lyric and drama, has a dangerous edge of ambiguity and instability, so that the interface is never clear—it is never quite clear where lyric is displaced into drama, or where drama is dissolved in lyric feeling.” By placing himself at the center of the poem as its speaker, however, Browning takes some of the edge off of that ambiguity, revealing instead the kind of “yearning after the condition of lyric” that Herbert F. Tucker detects in Browning’s other, more clearly dramatic speakers—voices not ready to concede their own authority. As noted earlier by comparison to The Ring and the Book, Browning’s authorial self-positioning in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country mirrors that of his own location within France, one more deeply imbedded in the country that is the subject of the poem. The reader, in turn, does not appear to stand outside of the poem with the author critically judging the truth claims of its speakers, as is the case with Browning’s epic of Italy. It is for this reason, in part, that The Ring and the Book seems more conclusively to undermine the possibility of a centered, authoritative voice within poetic discourse.
Armstrong’s concept of the double poem nonetheless helps one to articulate the dilemma at the heart of Browning’s cosmopolitanism: there always remains an irresolvable tension between the self-oriented mode of lyric—travel as self-enrichment—and the dual aim of constructing that self through its dramatic engagement with the outside world. In this respect, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, like Browning’s travels in France, was one more effort to get a handle on those “unstable entities of self and world,” which Armstrong traces back to Browning’s earliest attempts at the dramatic monologue form.\(^9\) In the process of this struggle, Browning lays bare the sort of stumbling blocks that may impede any effort to inscribe cosmopolitanism, even as it has been reconstituted in our own time in the wake of postcolonial criticism and cultural studies: that is, a cosmopolitanism that commits itself, in essence, to removing the “club” mentality from efforts to forge a global vision. Vinay Dharwadker captures this impulse in his introduction to Cosmopolitan Geographies (2001) when he asks hopefully for a cosmopolitanism that will “dissociate itself from class, hierarchy, and affluence, so that it might transform itself someday into a ‘true cosmopolitanism from below’”—something, for instance, very like what Barrett Browning strove for over the course of her career, as I argued in the previous chapter.\(^30\) In this guise, cosmopolitanism is less a personal identity or achievement than an ideology: a movement not of “cosmopolites” but of individuals who value the aims of cultural diversity and wish to see a more equitable distribution of wealth and power throughout the world. What Red Cotton Night-Cap Country reveals, however, is the difficulty of squaring the progressive political aims of cosmopolitanism, whether in the nineteenth century or in ours, with its essence as a form of cultural authority and privilege. The poem questions whether the ability to know and empathize with another nation first demands that one be able to familiarize oneself closely with its history, literature, and culture—the kind of knowing that comes from education but perhaps, just as crucially, from the friendships that travel and residence abroad cultivate. In other words, it is less likely that someone would adopt the progressive internationalism Dharwadker calls for without having first had access to the class advantages that tainted earlier manifestations of cosmopolitanism. Those taking a more suspect view of the new cosmopolitanism, such as Robert Pinsky, make much the same claim, calling it an identity open only to “people like ourselves: happily situated members of large, powerful nations, prosperous and mobile individuals.”\(^31\)

Challenging Pinsky, however, I would not therefore conclude that cosmopolitanism is an illusion, but rather that its political ambitions cannot be comfortably integrated with its origins in forms of class and gender privilege.
This is one explanation for why neither citizen Browning nor Browning-sur-mer ever emerges with satisfying cohesiveness out of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*. Their conflict underscores the difficulty of attempting to dwell at the border: it is an identity always open to the charge that it is mostly a self-gratifying pose—a quest for personal enrichment—not a program of political activity. And at least one critic of Browning, Robert Viscusi, paints precisely such a picture of the poet’s engagement with Italy, seeing in his apparent endorsement of free trade at the close of “The Englishman in Italy” a template for a kind of aesthetic colonization, one that reduces Italy to a “simple object of desire.” However valid this claim may be in certain contexts, it also presupposes the existence of an alternative, ideologically safe form of cultural exchange that does not involve the exercise of cultural power. It is little wonder then that, thinking much along the same lines, the former poet-laureate Pinsky advises the more achievable goal of cultivating one’s own garden. In contrast, Browning leaves us stranded at the border, but in a way that might finally be for our own good: he insists upon the imaginative effort needed to inhabit other minds, nations, and historical moments, even if such dwelling at times makes us uncomfortable. Achieving this broader aim demands a much more serious and difficult engagement that travel only begins to put in motion: a true cosmopolitan citizenship requires deep immersion within the language, landscape, and culture of the country one seeks to know. Browning’s response to the crisis of Anglo-European identity, then, was not unlike his response to the crisis of religious faith: to land finally on something like solid ground, it would take serious, concentrated intellectual labor of the kind Miranda fled from. “How very hard it is to be / A Christian!” (1–2), Browning would remark at the outset of *Easter-Day*, foreshadowing the intellectual challenge that awaited readers of the poem and that would continue to engage him over the course of his long career.

*Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* similarly schools us in the challenge of cosmopolitanism, accomplishing this in two ways: through its problematic exposure of Thackeray and Miranda, but also through the more unintended exposure of Browning’s own historically determined limits, limits that continue to renew themselves in our own time and that may make any border-crossing gesture seem limited when viewed from the future. The poem does not provide a blueprint for cosmopolitanism, but rather a warning of its complexity, one that takes us back, in some ways, to Clough’s suspicion of the communication technologies and transportation networks that were to inaugurate a new age of global unity and understanding. *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, in fact, has its own postal moment, when Browning
surveys the Channel and remembers a mail-packet that had gone down in a storm: “thirty paces off, this natural blue / Broods o’er a bag of secrets, all unbroached, / Beneath the bosom of the placid deep, / Since the Post Director sealed them safe” (90–93). Crossing borders, this image reminds us, is an endeavor fraught with the danger of loss and misreading. Browning may have promised too much in vowing to lay open the bag of secrets that is France, but the true measure of his poem’s value may lie in that very same effort to exceed its grasp. Browning strives for a way of traveling and of inscribing travel that would overcome travel’s essential contradiction: the wish to inhabit a foreign culture and yet not to abandon one’s own. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country thereby pays tribute to the border itself as a defining metaphor of modernity, when dwelling at borders seems both increasingly inevitable and desirable, an empowering state but one fraught with anxiety.