HEARING ADVENTURE: GIUSEPPE CAPONSACCI, BROWNING’S “HOLLOW ROCK”

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The deep country of hearing, described in terms of geology more than in those of any other natural science, not only by virtue of the cartilaginous cavern that constitutes its organ, but also by virtue of the relationship that unites it to grottoes, to chasms, to all the pockets hollowed out of the terrestrial crust whose emptiness makes them into resonating drums for the slightest sounds.

– Jacques Derrida, “Tympan”

In Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book, Giuseppe Caponsacchi wants his silent auditors to share his perception of Pompilia’s moral goodness and grief from her murder. An impeccable legal and religious system underestimated the seriousness of her troubles and left her vulnerable to Guido Franceschini’s villainy. Although the judges have much to learn about duty and charity from Caponsacchi’s brief transforming association with “the sad strange wife” (6.493),¹ the canon nevertheless feels guilty for not preventing the crime, which has further impaired his self-confidence and thus ruptured his ambitions as a man and as a priest. He has to retell his story because criminal circumstances and an aching conscience demand that he “help the august law” (108) while admitting his dishonor.

So far my remarks merely echo what many others have written about leitmotifs in Browning’s monologues, including those in The Ring and the Book: spiritual agonizing within and between speakers and auditors whom this dramatic genre enlists to mark what Bishop Blougram calls “the dangerous edge of things” (395); and a barbarousness which disorients personae and imperils their intellectual and moral balance. A few scholars with good sense have begun to delve into Browning’s poetry “Deeper than ever the Andante dived” (12.861) by plumbing the subject of “overhearing.” Herbert Tucker, for example, recommends that readers not “turn back at the threshold of interpretation, stopping our ears to both lyric cries and historical imperatives, and from our studious cells overhearing nothing” (243). And John Maynard, though not spending enough time measuring the acuity of either Browning’s listeners or readers-overhearers, is correct that

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in “[t]he form of dramatized poem… [b]ecause of his initial uncertain relation to the speaker, the reader is driven to create a position for himself as listener” (107-08). Whereas plenty of excellent studies chart Browning’s finer optics, interpretive adventures await readers who plot his canon in terms of listening and deaf spots. The way Caponsacchi valorizes, or repeals, his life’s most telling experiences can test whether readers are keen enough to learn from Browning’s refinement of a psychological branch of otoscopy practiced in numerous poems throughout his career. We have to enter eerie textual gaps, meet obliqueness head-on, and reach otoliths on “the other side of language” without sealing them: “The ability to listen, which allows us to hold firm and remain vigilant at the borders of obscurity, might be the condition that makes it possible for us to remain open to further linguistic and theoretical fields of concern” (Fiumara 91). The resulting benediction from some grand yet still small voice (in our heads?) will always warn us – like Caponsacchi – that it takes more than meets the eye to tell anything about human motivation:

Let this old woe step on the stage again!
Act itself o’er anew for men to judge,
Not by the very sense and sight indeed –
(Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
What mortal ever in entirety saw?)

…
To-wit, by voices we call evidence… (1.824-29, 833)

Aurality is a featured motif in Caponsacchi’s central monologue because of how he “turned Christian” (474), and how as an amicus curiae he wants his audience to reform their moral faculties by hearing him quote Pompilia and by listening to his “poor excuse/For what [he] left undone” (1480-81). The way Caponsacchi defines himself as auriculate and tries to affect others acoustically brings us within earshot of Browning, who throughout his career aspired to be not only one of the “Makers-see” (Sordello 3.928) but also a “Maker-hear.” Just as Pompilia reacts to her friendly canon’s features, so readers must try to hear Robert Browning in “The broad brow that reverberates the truth,/And flashed the word God gave him, back to man!” (7.1796-97; emphasis added). Both Caponsacchi and Browning suspect that their respective audiences will “mouth and mumble and misinterpret” (1868). Yet the canon’s close listeners are bound to realize that his “great adventure” (1003) has excavated his spirit, leaving