‘Decomposing Texts’: Browning’s Poetics and Higher Critical Parody

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In Browning’s Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure, Herbert Tucker makes the intriguing suggestion that the higher criticism was “the Continental deconstruction of its day” (8). Certainly, the reception of the higher criticism in the Victorian periodical press and other sources foreshadows the kind of protests against linguistic and hermeneutical indeterminacy familiar to critics in more recent times. In parodies of the higher criticism, which take the hermeneutical principles of the higher critics to their logical extreme, a kind of interpretive anarchy prevails. For instance, one humorist uses the higher criticism as a pretext for re-writing Shakespeare, and produces a textual monster, in which Ophelia marries Romeo and Juliet runs off with Hamlet.¹ The author of The Abraham Lincoln Myth, an Essay in Higher Criticism² attempts to prove that Lincoln was a historical fiction, the product of unreliable textual evidence and imperfect eye-witness testimony. In “The Higher Criticism,” a satirical poem by nineteenth-century Canadian humorist J. W. Bengough, texts and subjects-in-texts shift and dissolve in a manner we are more accustomed to associating with postmodernist texts and deconstructive readings.

If the higher criticism is a neglected field in Victorian studies, it may safely be assumed that parodies and other humorous treatments of this subject have received minimal, if any critical attention. Yet not only does this material serve as a useful marker of the reception of biblical criticism, but parody itself amplifies the critical positions presented in these works, clarifying for present-day readers just what was at stake in the higher critic’s approach to textual analysis. It is clear in Bengough’s work alone that the higher criticism confronted Victorians with the spectre of unstable texts and inaccessible historical subjects, quite apart from the questions of religious belief it posed. Parodies of the higher criticism map the contested terrain of a nineteenth-century battle over the nature of fact, evidence, and historical knowledge, pitting the advocates of literal readings of texts against a nineteenth-century version of postmodernist textuality. By examining works from Bengough’s poem to texts which are “decomposed”³ and

recomposed, I want to recover the Victorians’ sense of the higher criticism both as textual practice (as something done to texts) and as a discourse about historical evidence and oral tradition. Moreover, I will argue that the preoccupation with texts and testimony which emerges so clearly in these works accounts for similar elements in the poetry of Robert Browning, together with aspects of his poetics which, as Mary Ellis Gibson notes, seem to anticipate “his postmodern successors” (2).

Bengough’s poem captures particularly well the indignation of many Victorians confronted with the higher criticism. As in Browning’s “Christmas-Eve” (1850), the higher critic in this poem represents a kind of intellectual snobbery as he wields the “scalpel of the scholar” (l.58) and condescends to the uninitiated. Though the narrator claims he has “no quarrel with learning” (l.57), his suspicion of the intellectual may be traced in his portrait of the higher critic, who stands “scholarly and cool” at the “portals of the new Negation school” (ll.1-2). The speaker counters with his mother, pitting her simple faith against the sophistry of the higher critic:

My dear old mother, dead and gone, was a Higher Critic, too;
This Book was hers – she loved it, and she knew it through and through.
She told me ‘twas from God direct, and she’d no doubt at all,
The Patriarchs had really lived, as well as John and Paul.
(ll.45-48)

Of particular interest here is the speaker’s sense that the higher criticism undermines the evidence for the existence of historical subjects. In the words of Bengough’s higher critic:

The story of Creation, of the Flood, and of the Fall,
Are obviously poems, as is also Abram’s call.
Indeed, as to the latter, he’s not literally real – Abram’s but a noun of multitude – a Hebrew race-ideal.
(ll.17-20, emphasis added)

In this stanza, the speaker humorously confronts the possibility that a historical figure may be reduced to a kind of linguistic anomaly or, at the very least, must be understood as the product of historical myth, a projection of cultural Sehnsucht, as D. F. Strauss argued in Das Leben Jesu. Indeed,