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**Browning's Caliban:  
Humanity, Liminality and the Search for Transcendence**

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## ABSTRACT

Browning's Caliban:  
Humanity, Liminality and the Search for Transcendence

Maureen MacCuish

This is a study of Browning's Caliban in terms of liminality and transcendence, taking into account earlier views of Caliban's character as derived from Shakespeare. The first chapter presents a context for considering the poem, provides a brief history of the evolution of the character, and locates the poem historically and thematically within Browning's work. The second chapter focuses on the concept of liminality and its application to Caliban in his situation, treating his monologue as a type of ritual performance. Chapter three concentrates more closely on the language, syntax and peculiar grammatical choices of the poem and what this reveals about the psychology of Caliban and his concept of himself. The fourth chapter centers on the transcendent element in Caliban as we follow his theological argument and imaginative flights, and as we recognize the fundamental angst underlying his search for understanding.

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This work is dedicated to the memory of my father, Frank McCoy, 1914-1996.

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## CHAPTER ONE: CALIBAN IN CONTEXT

“Caliban Upon Setebos” exists within a nest of contexts, as do all works of literature or art. In this case, however, we have a particularly complex and controversial series of nests to deal with: there is the history of the character Caliban, from his genesis in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* through Browning’s treatment and on through Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror* and other modern portrayals<sup>1</sup>; there is also Browning’s other work, both on theological subjects and in the form of dramatic monologues; and finally, critical positions dealing with issues that the poem explores, ranging from linguistic, theological, anthropological, political, postcolonial, and mythological studies, to those focussing on consciousness and the self.

I will attempt very briefly to trace the background that has informed my reading of the work; some of these approaches will of course be given much fuller treatment in the body of this thesis.

### **The history of the character; Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.**

It is generally agreed that Shakespeare’s Caliban is original with Shakespeare, with no specific literary precedents other than the general ones of the wildman/”wodewose” figure, widespread in European literature, folklore, and myth; the anti-masque figure

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<sup>1</sup> Barring any other qualification, the default Caliban in this thesis will always be Browning’s, from “Caliban Upon Setebos”. All other portrayals of Caliban will be indicated by the author of that character (e.g. Shakespeare’s, Auden’s, etc.).



(traditionally appearing in the first section of the Jacobean masque, and representing a world of vice or disorder [Vaughan 80]); and quite possibly the model of the American Indian as imaged by the literature of exploration of Shakespeare's day.

Suggested sources for Caliban's name include the anagram for "Carib" and also for "cannibal"<sup>2</sup>, both linking him to the New World (although there is no support in the play for linking Caliban specifically with the practice of man-eating, the more general connotation of a savage native is emphasized in this suggestion); or "kalebon", Arabic for "vile dog"; or "cauliban/kaliban", meaning "black" in the gypsy language, "which had flourished in England for a century before 1611" (Vaughan 33).

The name of Setebos is attributed to an account by Antonio Pigafetta reporting on Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe in 1519-22. The voyagers seized and shackled two "Patagonians" (Magellan's term) whom they encountered near Antarctica. "[W]hen they sawe how they were deceaved they rored lyke bulles and cryed uppon theyr greate deuile Setebos to helpe them [. . .]" (d'Anghiera, *The Decades of the Newe Worlde or West India*, to which Pigafetta's narrative is appended (1555), 219v, qtd. in Vaughan 38).

Impossible as it is to determine Shakespeare's specific intention in creating the character

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<sup>2</sup> Gonzalo's utopian speech in *The Tempest* is in part a paraphrase from John Florio's translation (1603) of Montaigne's essay on the American Indians, "Of the Caniballes" (Caliban's name may derive from "cannibal")(Langbaum 126).

of Caliban, I find it an altogether credible suggestion that Caliban was meant to symbolize

a general unruliness in society and in nature. He seems to blend the (largely pejorative) Jacobean attitudes toward gypsies, conspirators, and other rambunctious elements in English society with similarly suspicious attitudes toward the Irish, the American Indians, and the Africans, all of whom inhabited the outer fringes of England's expanding world and whom the English hoped eventually to redeem from "savagery" to "civility". At the same time, the ubiquitous wild-man motif suggested civility gone astray -- bestial, treacherous, rapacious, yet capable, in the end, of suing for grace. (Vaughan 278)

Browning, of course, was inspired by Shakespeare as the literary master, both in his delight in and facility with language, and perhaps most pervasively, in his "mastery of dramatic character through distinctive language, his ability to give metaphor, allusion, and argument to speech without losing a sense of individual character" (Maynard 323).

In his study of Browning's youthful influences, Maynard observes that

Shakespeare quickly assumed a fundamental place in Browning's poetic development [. . .] and [. . .] was gleaned endlessly for literary ideas and expressions. His early letters show Browning again and again drawing from the wealth of Shakespeare in his memory just the quotation or allusion he needed to make a point. He refers familiarly to at least fifteen of the plays [. . .] and [. . .] alludes repeatedly to *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *The Tempest*. (Maynard 322)

Much of the tribute to Shakespeare in "Caliban upon Setebos" lies in the implicit acknowledgement of *The Tempest* as "a central possession of literary culture, an imaginary world that has become a reality like the historical past" (Maynard 323).

While there is no question here of Browning's literary debt to Shakespeare, certainly the

two Calibans are not identical. Shakespeare's Caliban, while capable of fine poetic language, is spoken for or against -- by Prospero, Miranda, Ariel, Stephano and Trinculo - much more frequently than he is allowed to speak for himself. He is largely defined by the others in the play, and his identity as such is created for him. In a sense, he is damned before he ever walks onstage, limited to the role of "salvage and deformed slave" by the circumstances of his introduction and the weight of "popular opinion". Browning's Caliban, on the other hand, creates himself in language. He is the only character we hear from; his thoughts and imagination are given free rein. There is a sense in which even this opportunity of our undivided attention lends the character more dignity, but, more than that, we can claim that he is a more fully developed character because he does indeed seem to have evolved to the extent that he is taking a giant step into the world of ideas; taking time from his drudging tasks to consider matters abstract, philosophical and theological.

What elements in the original get foregrounded in Browning's poem? Aside from the basic premise itself, a close reading by John Howard reveals that details and allusions abound:

From *The Tempest* Browning got the basic characters: Prospero, Miranda, Caliban's dam [Sycorax], Ariel, and of course Setebos. [. . .] Caliban's knowledge of the natural world, his use of animal comparison (the 'snaky sea', 'lithic as a leech', 'as a cuttlefish'), his possible source of the urchin-squirrel comparison, his basic need to jibe, and his tendency to fall down flat when confronted with danger, can also be traced to hints taken from a few lines of *The Tempest*. In Act II, scene ii, Caliban, burdened with a load of wood, enters, invoking sickness on Prospero. Although he knows he will be detected, he 'needs must curse' (1.4). He knows he will be

frightened with 'urchin-shows' (5). Prospero's spirits will set upon him 'like apes' (9) or 'like hedgehogs' (10). When Trinculo enters, Caliban mistakes him for a spirit, and his immediate reaction is to prostrate himself. He says 'I'll fall flat' (16). Sources can also be found for Caliban's mention of liquor (II.ii,121), the raven of Setebos (I. ii, 321-2), his mess of whelks (II, ii, 176), his toothsome apples (II, ii, 171), and his song (II, ii, 184-9). Even the time setting of the poem is suggested by *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's Caliban is drudging when he meets Stephano and soon afterwards tells him that it is Prospero's custom to sleep in the afternoon (III. ii, 95-7). One notices that Browning's Caliban is sprawling in the heat of the day, the early afternoon when he should be drudging. Moreover, [Browning's] device of using Caliban as a theologian might have been suggested by Shakespeare's Caliban, who is certainly preoccupied with finding a God (see II, ii, 121; V, i, 296; II, ii, 140-52). (Howard [in Drew] 225-6)

I would add the following allusions to (or echoes of) the original that I have noted in my reading: The image of Browning's Caliban in ll.68-74 brings to mind his drunken bout with Trinculo in *The Tempest*. The Caliban of "Caliban upon Setebos" typically devotes more attention to the details and the process and the associations that arise ("which bite like finches when they bill and kiss,") (l.70) in preparing the drink, but, when the "maggots scamper through [his] brain" we are back in the world of *The Tempest*, where Caliban spends most of his time onstage drinking with his new "masters", Trinculo and Stephano.

Caliban's respect approaching awe for the mysterious power of the book, the word, is revealed in "Caliban upon Setebos" lines 150-3 ("Himself peeped late, eyed Prosper at his books/ Careless and lofty, lord now of the isle:/ Vexed, 'stitched a book of broad leaves, arrow-shaped,/ Wrote thereon, he knows what, prodigious words;") and recalls for

us the mixture of fear and resentment that fuels his warning to his brothers-in-arms in *The Tempest* in their plot to kill Prospero: “[. . .] Remember/ First to possess his books; for without them/ He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not/ One spirit to command” (III,ii,88-91).

Finally, there is a parallel to be noted in the songs that Caliban sings in his two incarnations. The simple existence of any song at all in the midst of his monologue seems to be a conscious reference to the behaviour of the original character and signals the reader to pay attention. Then the content and taunting nature of (Browning’s) Caliban’s song directed to Setebos: “[. . .] What I hate, be consecrate/ To celebrate Thee and Thy state, no mate/ For Thee: what see for envy in poor me?” (ll. 276-8) echoes the audacity and bravura of his two songs in *The Tempest*: “Freedom, high-day [. . .]” (II,ii,175-81) and “[. . .] Thought is free”(III,ii,118-20).

### **Other treatments throughout history**

The Caliban character continues to fascinate. Whether it is the uncertainty of his fate at the end of *The Tempest*, which led many subsequent authors, playwrights and poets to devise sequels with Caliban in the leading role,<sup>3</sup> his subversive element with its appeal to rebellious instincts, or his “amphibious” nature, the indeterminacy of which offers such a wide variety of interpretations, Caliban has become, as Alden and Virginia Vaughan voluminously illustrate in their *Shakespeare’s Caliban: A Cultural History*, “a cultural

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<sup>3</sup> “Caliban is a loose end; for centuries readers and playgoers have wanted to tie him up. He captures their fancy, and they, unlike Prospero, are reluctant to abandon him” (Vaughan 19).

icon as well as a literary figure” (Vaughan xx).

To briefly summarize (and greatly generalize) the critical reception of the character from his inception ca. 1611: 17th- and 18th-century views for the most part emphasized the monstrous and grotesque aspects of Caliban, “his vices, deformities, crudities, and beastly qualities. in keeping with the era’s concern with basic distinctions between savagery and civilization” (Vaughan xxii); with the romantic movement of the early 19th century, his “natural” qualities were foregrounded, and an appreciation of his poetic language, imagination, and even a kind of rough dignity were noted; “later in the 19th century he was often portrayed as the missing link -- part human, part beast, and wholly Darwinian” (Vaughan xxii). The late-Victorian optimism that they describe endowed Caliban “with an evolving moral sensibility [. . .]. To many commentators and adapters, he seemed to embody not only humanity’s fallen condition but also its efforts to rise from a mire of ignorance and corruption” (Vaughan 113). In the midst of World War II, the disillusionment of the era is reflected in W. H. Auden’s *The Mirror and the Sea*, which takes up where *The Tempest* left off. Caliban’s closing speech (addressed to Prospero) in its existential angst is indeed a perfect mirror for the age. Caliban warns Prospero that one day he will look in the mirror and find, instead of the Ariel he had expected,

a gibbering fist-clenched creature with which you are all too unfamiliar, for this is the first time indeed that you have met the only subject that you have, who is not a dream amenable to magic but the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own [. . .]. Can you wonder then, when, as was bound to happen sooner or later, your charms, because they no longer amuse you, have cracked and your spirits, because you are tired of giving orders, have ceased to obey, and you are left alone with me, the dark thing

you could never abide to be with. . . . I must own that, after all, I am not just the person I would have chosen for a life companion myself; so the only chance, which in any case is slim enough, of my getting a tolerably new master and you a tolerably new man, lies in our both learning [. . .] to forgive and forget the past, and to keep our respective hopes for the future within moderate, very moderate, limits. [. . .] There is nothing to say. There never has been -- and our wills chuck in our hands -- There is no way out. There never was. (Auden qtd. in Vaughan 115-6)<sup>4</sup>

### **Caliban as monster**

Although it is true in a most general sense that attitudes towards Caliban softened as time went on and more complex characterizations were considered, I have found a surprising number of critical reviews that promoted this perception of Caliban as monster well into the 20th century. A sample of these comments will give an idea of the remarkable tenacity of this viewpoint as a tradition that has maintained itself despite opposing developments of thought and sympathy:

In 1956,

The 'theology' is so obviously that of a *sub-human being* [. . .] the mind of a *savage* thinking the thoughts of a Browning. (Duffin 204-5)(emphasis mine)

and 1963,

But the most important characteristic of Shakespeare's Caliban, at least for our purpose, is that Caliban is *basically a sub-human, incapable of improvement*. He is *naturally depraved*. Prospero says of him: "But thy vile race,/Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures/Could not abide to be with." (*Tempest* I, ii, 358-60) Caliban's nature in Shakespeare is the kind that is murderous, cruel, selfish; even in his desire to be rubbed and petted and made much of, *he is nothing more than a*

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<sup>4</sup> From W.H.Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 307-41.

*beast*. Browning certainly continues this characterization in Caliban. But the redeeming qualities Shakespeare gave to his monster have disappeared in Browning's Caliban, who is as cruel as nature itself. (Howard [in Drew] 226) (emphasis mine)

and 1973,

'Who but Browning, wishing to comment on the theological speculation of his day, would have recalled Shakespeare's strangest creation from the past, and made him deliver a lecture in an idiom especially created for the purpose?'

Theological argument in verse has a long and curious history, and the tradition of endowing a *non-human being* with a reasoning voice goes back beyond Dryden and Spenser to the Middle Ages.[. . .] Caliban *neither thinks nor speaks like an intelligent human being* [. . .], *a creature much inferior to man*, yet supposedly man's ancestor. (Jack 264, 268) (emphasis mine)

### **Post-colonialism. Questions of identity.**

In the 20th century, and especially in its latter half, a more sociopolitical understanding of Caliban as colonialist victim and slave has been the dominant reading. Caliban has been largely claimed by the post-colonialists these days, and with some reason, but the appropriation isn't altogether exact for reasons that I will point out presently, and there is more that can be said especially about Browning's version than such an interpretation will contain.

Caliban fits some criteria for post-colonial interpretation and is an anomaly in other ways. He does emerge out of the experience of colonization, and asserts himself by



“foregrounding the tension with the imperial power” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2),<sup>5</sup> (in this case exercised by Prospero) yet, existing as he does as a society of one, there is no possibility of a national or regional consciousness developing from this assertion. The only other native of the island is Ariel, who has been depicted by Philip Mason in a particularly engaging analogy as

the good native, the moderate nationalist, the gradualist, usually content to wait until it pleases Prospero to give him his freedom; . . . one quite expects Prospero to offer him a knighthood. [Caliban, on the other hand] is the bad native, the nationalist, the extremist -- the man who will be Prime Minister after independence. He has to be shut up, . . . not for making seditious speeches but for wanting to violate Miranda. (Mason 88-89, qtd. in Vaughan 161)

(Of course, for Browning’s Caliban it is certainly the seditious speeches which – to his own way of thinking – lead to his downfall). It is difficult to imagine Caliban as the author of a national consciousness when one considers that his own nation consists of himself alone, but as the authors of *Shakespeare’s Caliban* have pointed out, “the Third World interpretation of Caliban is symbolic, not historic; it adopts Caliban for what he represents to the observer, not for what Shakespeare [or Browning] may have had in mind” (Vaughan 146). With this adoption in mind, Caliban as symbol and rallying point may indeed serve to inspire others as he challenges a dominant culture. Although the social and political aspect of solidarity with an oppressed community is obviously missing for Caliban, many of the other observations of post-colonial experience ring true

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<sup>5</sup> The quotation of the phrase that characterizes the emergence of post-colonial literature is from Ashcroft et al. The application of this model to the situation of Caliban and Prospero is entirely my own enactment, and not meant in any way to assume an endorsement by those authors of this extension to their idea.

for him and provide a useful perspective from which to evaluate our impressions.

The editors of *The Empire Writes Back* point out that

the study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate [. . .] and [. . .][led] to the naturalizing of constructed values (e.g. civilization, humanity, etc.) which, conversely, established 'savagery', 'native', 'primitive', as their antitheses and as the object of a reforming zeal.

A 'privileging norm' was enthroned [. . .] as a template for the denial of the value of the 'peripheral', the 'marginal', the 'uncanonized'.

(3)

This is the dynamic that is set up between Prospero and Caliban: theirs is the classic colonizer/colonized relationship. But on another level it must be remembered that it is the Englishman Browning, one of the privileged colonizers, who revives the scenario and enlists our sympathy for the indigenous marginal Caliban. We sometimes overlook the fact that the perspective of the colonized and the value that we attribute to it are both invoked by an Englishman at the height of the Empire, an irony which does introduce an ambiguous/problematic element to a straight post-colonial reading of the poem. We are obliged to acknowledge in our reading that, while Caliban is busy appropriating the language that he has learned from Prospero in true post-colonial fashion, Browning is the mastermind behind it all, who is of course appropriating the voice of the native in his enterprise, even if with the best of intentions, in an attempt to understand and represent the other's voice and thought.

Caliban as character does seem to provoke rather vehement responses from critics, and

this has led me to wonder whether their dismissal of Caliban as a brutal savage is in part triggered by some reaction beneath the surface of which they are hardly aware. Perhaps they are actually disquieted by the implicit questioning of a post-colonial voice expressing its 'Otherness' (or, conversely, by Browning -- one of their own -- attempting to give a voice to an oppressed Caliban) and threatening to undermine and subvert the accepted order. Indeed, "a characteristic of dominated literatures is an inevitable tendency towards subversion" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 33), and this attribute is clear in Caliban's "fooling" Prospero and Miranda, in his charade of imitation, in his subversion of Setebos as well.

A central feature of post-colonial discourse is the concern with place and displacement, and the crisis of identity that accompanies this experience. Certainly the argument applies to Caliban in his experience of enslavement to Prospero and Miranda, in the cultural denigration to which he is exposed, and, most painful to him, in the loss of sovereignty of the island which he claims was previously his and his alone, along with the loss of his own autonomy. The crisis of self-image can be read into Browning's Caliban's semantic confusion as he slips from third person in reference to himself, over to first person, and back to third again; this slippage and ambiguity being in fact one of the defining characteristics of the monologue, noted in almost every review and the topic of much speculation concerning its significance, although none to my knowledge has attributed it to displacement caused by colonialization. At the very least it can be argued that Caliban is unsure to what extent he can risk exposing/asserting himself by using the first person to

the dominant authority (in this case the oppressive deity Setebos). Caliban hardly knows how to speak or in what way to refer to himself and his own desires. Even in hiding it may be necessary to disown or distance himself from the powerful identity of an “I”, lest he provoke the unpredictable anger of the meddling god, who in any case has a spy (the raven) who “[tells] all” (1.286).

That Caliban has been alienated from his previous culture is evident from his use of a new language (and denial of his mother tongue), and also from his re-appraisal of the myth of Setebos that he has learned from his dam. From his line in *The Tempest*, “You taught me language” (1,ii,363), we might infer that he did not even consider his previous form of communication as language, and yet we must conclude from the context of his speculations on the nature of Setebos that he and his mother had discussed such abstract matters before the arrival of Prospero. In the absence of knowledge about what if any religious education Caliban may have received from Prospero, it would seem that he has opted for a paternal language and maternal theology.

George Lamming has suggested that

[language was Caliban’s] prison. [Through language, Prospero controls the monster’s present and limits his future –] the first important achievement of the colonising process. This gift of Language meant not English, in particular, but speech and concept as a way, a method, a necessary avenue towards areas of the self which could not be reached in any other way. (qtd. in Vaughan 166)

The Vaughans go on to explain that “language is necessary to expression, and expression

is essential to change, but it is Prospero's language and therefore largely Prospero's vision of the future that Caliban must accept. And yet language is always problematic, giving voice unexpectedly to hidden hopes" (166).

Another more positive view is postulated by Janheinz Jahn, who interprets Prospero's gift of language as emancipating rather than constraining. Prospero's language affords Caliban with a means of expression for Caliban's culture. Prospero in his arrogance assumes the monster has no culture, but Caliban possesses

a culture Prospero did not create and cannot control, which he, Caliban, has recognized as his own. But in the process [of recognition] the language is transformed, acquiring different meanings which Prospero never expected. Caliban becomes "bilingual". That language he shares with Prospero and the language he has minted from it are no longer identical. Caliban breaks out of the prison of Prospero's language. (qtd. in Vaughan 166-7)

Surely this is the case as we see Caliban learning himself even as he speaks, probing the roots of his own actions, measuring himself against both Prospero and his created Setebos. And this acquired language that he uses so vigorously as "the rank tongue blossoms into speech" is the vehicle of this liberation, this self-apprehension out of which the new man begins to sense, if only dimly, intimations of further potential.

Unfortunately, and in typical post-colonial fashion, Caliban defines himself over against Prospero, using Prospero as a measuring-stick of Caliban's own thwarted potential. In "Caliban upon Setebos", his observations of the different treatments that he and Prospero

receive from Setebos (Prospero is favoured, Caliban is despised) provide a constant refrain. Caliban's envy is very real and most pervasive. In Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, we find striking parallels between Caliban's attitude towards Prospero and that of the native to the settler that Fanon describes:

The settler's world is a hostile world, which spurns the native, but at the same time it is a world of which he is envious. We have seen that the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler -- not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler. This hostile world, ponderous and aggressive because it fends off the colonised masses with all the harshness it is capable of, represents not merely a hell from which the swiftest flight possible is desirable, but also a paradise close at hand which is guarded by terrible watchdogs. (42)

We think of Ariel and all the sprites that torment Caliban in Shakespeare, in Browning the raven that tells all; in the former, Prospero's "terrible watchdogs" that guard his paradise and keep Caliban physically under control; in the latter, Setebos's "spy", another kind of watchdog that exercises an equally powerful restraint over Caliban's psyche.

Further on, Fanon observes behaviour patterns of avoidance, deep-seated psychological mechanisms that inhibit hostility towards the oppressor:

A belief in fatality removes all blame from the oppressor; the cause of misfortunes and of poverty is attributed to God; He is Fate. In this way the individual accepts the disintegration ordained by God, bows down before the settler and his lot, and by a kind of interior restabilization acquires a stony calm.

Meanwhile, however, life goes on, and the native will strengthen the inhibitions which contain his aggressiveness by drawing on the terrifying myths which are so frequently found in underdeveloped communities. There are maleficent spirits which intervene every time a step is taken in the wrong direction [. . .] which create around the native a world of prohibitions, of barriers and of inhibitions far more terrifying than the world of the settler. [. . .] The supernatural, magical powers reveal

themselves as essentially personal; the settler's powers are infinitely shrunken, stamped with their alien origin. (Fanon 43-44)

We note in "Caliban upon Setebos" that Caliban's main concern is now with Setebos, and that much of his psychic energy is indeed devoted to determining how to placate the god, how to avoid punishment if possible. At the same time, what is more surprising is the way in which Caliban measures himself against the god Setebos, and even deems himself superior in some aspects<sup>6</sup>.

The arguments for such a political reading of the Caliban character are, as illustrated, considerable. If we treat Caliban and Prospero as representatives of their respective power groups, then the situation is in many ways analogous to the post-colonial model. However, and this is a big however, it is essentially a false fit, or at least a limited one, in that the creator (Shakespeare) of the characters and the poet (Browning) who speaks through the mouth of the victimized native are both in fact Europeans, whose appropriation of Caliban's voice might arguably be considered unjustified and self-serving.

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. his own ease with his natural surroundings, the island, as opposed to Setebos' state of being ill at ease ("Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:

He hated that He cannot change His cold,  
Nor cure its ache. [. . .]") (31-33);

his ability to procreate, and Setebos' impotence in this regard:

("He could not, Himself, make a second self  
To be His mate; as well have made Himself:") (57-58)

("[. . .] no mate/ For Thee; what see for envy in poor me?") (277-8);

his assumption that Setebos is "rougher than his handiwork [. . .] [and] hath made things worthier than himself" (111-12).

My principal dissatisfaction with post-colonial claims on Caliban stems from the fact that Caliban is valued by post-colonialists not for his particularity but for his situation (in essence he is a representative of a type -- and a type which does not exist -- and not an individual). And finally the biggest stumbling block in applying this theory to the Browning poem is that Caliban's main preoccupation in the poem, his concern with Setebos, is not addressed at all in a post-colonial reading, except perhaps as another form of oppression.

Browning's Caliban from my point of view is not only, nor most compellingly, a victim. In various ways that I shall illustrate in the following chapters I maintain that he possesses and exercises a certain freedom and autonomy, through his situation of liminality, in his marvelous use, and (to a certain extent) subversion, of language to express the most profound individuality, and finally in his theological excursions, that set him apart from Shakespeare's Caliban.

### **Browning's Caliban**

Although Browning provides no date for the poem, based on biographers' research of Browning's activities, people he was meeting, and issues that preoccupied him at the time, it would seem that "Caliban upon Setebos" was

probably written in the latter part of the winter of 1859-60 [. . .] [T]he starting point of Caliban was Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which set Browning thinking of primitive man, perhaps of the "missing link," a popular phrase of the 1860's. [. . .] [I]n December 1859 the Brownings met Theodore Parker in Florence and were deeply impressed by him. Parker,



the American Unitarian, [. . .] strongly believed that at every stage of human development man has produced a theology to express the highest reaches of his spiritual life: and he saw the need for humanizing the deity to suit the mind of men. that is, he saw the necessity for anthropomorphism in religion. (DeVane 299)

In their biography of Robert Browning, William Irvine and Park Honan note that Browning and Parker held similar religious views and a mutual scorn for Calvinism:

Both believed that man had an intuition of perfect, impersonal deity, though whereas Browning held that man needed deity also to be human and incarnate, Parker maintained that he anthropomorphized deity through a want of intelligence or culture -- and the more so the lower in the evolutionary scale he stood. (Irvine/Honan 369-70)

Although the authors recognize that "Caliban upon Setebos" "is certainly a satire of the narrow, vindictive anthropomorphism of the Calvinists" (370), they maintain that it could scarcely be an indictment of anthropomorphism per se,

for Browning held that, on its highest level, anthropomorphism is natural and proper for man. Man must not only revere God as an abstract principle; he must love Him as a person. Christianity is unique in permitting man, at least ultimately, this double faith. Basically, "Caliban" is another optimistic study of evil. Thoughts that grovel in the slime may yet reach to the stars. (Irvine/Honan 371)

The poem appeared in *Dramatis Personae*, published in 1864. Others in the same volume included "James Lee"; "Abt Vogler"; "Rabbi Ben Ezra"; "A Death in the Desert"; "Prospice"; "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'"; "Apparent Failure"; "Epilogue".

As Lee Erickson has observed,

Other poems in *Dramatis Personae* come face to face with the psychological fact that in the absence of either divine or human love, in the absence of an audience, we tend to substitute a private symbolism that will supply our need and ultimately construct an audience from ourselves [. . .]. But only in "Caliban upon Setebos" does Browning find the

necessary consciousness with which to portray the horrors of losing that other person or that God whose recognition of oneself guaranteed one's having fully understood oneself. (219-20)

Browning had experimented with the dramatic monologue form as far back as 1842. By 1855, with the publication of the two-volume *Men and Women*, most of the formal experimentation was over; dramatic monologues from this collection include "Fra Lippo Lippi", "An Epistle . . . of Karshish, the Arab Physician", "Bishop Blougram's Apology", "Andrea del Sarto", and "Cleon". These are, in fact, considered his formal masterpieces. Having realized the dramatic monologue as a versatile and effective vehicle well-suited to his needs, Browning was now ready for thematic experiments. "Caliban upon Setebos", as a theological exploration set alongside other of his more Christ-centred works, breaks new ground in its portrayal of anthropomorphism carried to what some might consider its logical extreme.

Formally it stands with other monologues in the creation of a convincing character, in the dramatic impersonation and revelation of the essential self of the subject. Embedded in these enterprises is often an argument, sometimes an apologia, a justification of character; at other times (as in "Caliban upon Setebos"), a certain curiosity is exercised as to the workings of the mind in question, i.e. "what concept of God would [a man like Caliban] be likely to form, and on what grounds and in what manner would he construct it?" (Burrows 202). In comparing "Caliban upon Setebos" to several other of Browning's dramatic monologues, Burrows observes that

the subject-matter of “Caliban” is not so highly specialized nor its dialectic so intricate as those of the other argumentatory unrollings of crumpled minds [. . .]. Nor is “Caliban” an apologia like the others. [. . .] And “Caliban”, finally, though argumentative in its procedure, is not merely ‘cold philosophy’ or prosy theology. The natural life on which the theology is based is potently realized in the sensuous texture of the verse; the philosophy is at every point proved upon the pulses; the Island fully exists. (203-5)

The poem is habitually noted as an exceptional work even within the already distinctive *oeuvre* of a singular poet, and in an interview in 1885, Browning himself chose “Caliban upon Setebos” as “perhaps one of his most successful attempts at dramatic poetry” (DeVane 302).

### **Natural theology, evolution, discoveries in natural history, effect on religion**

The “Natural Theology” of the subtitle is understood to be a satirical allusion to William Paley’s book *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802).

An elaboration of the eighteenth-century “argument from design,” Paley’s book professes that God’s nature and purposes can be inferred empirically from natural phenomena. After drawing his famous “watchmaker-God” analogy, Paley adduces evidence of God’s intelligence from the complexities of human anatomy, and His goodness from the “superaddition” of pleasure to other animal sensations. (Note that it is the prevalence of pain in his existence that forces Caliban to infer Setebos’ essential cruelty.)(Loucks 252)

Natural, or rational, theology was acceptable to orthodox Christianity when and if the primacy of intuition and revelation were recognized. However, throughout the late seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century the Deist movement tended more and

more to use natural theology as a criterion for judging Revelation:

The shift of emphasis is to be seen in two famous works. Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), which takes, at least ostensibly, Revelation as the criterion in demonstrating its harmony with reason, and Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), where reason becomes the criterion for rejecting the "mysteries" of Christian orthodoxy. If the essential truths of Christianity are seen as arrived at by unaided reason, it becomes a short step to suggest that religion has a merely human origin -- that all theology is natural theology in the sense of man-made, and that there is nothing supernatural in it. This is the force of Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757). In the nineteenth century the assumptions of the "demythologising" Higher Critics were essentially naturalistic; the criteria by which they separated "fact" from "myth" were roughly the same as Hume's, and they saw Christianity as a man-made system, developed by the accretion of myths around a few historical figures and events [. . .] The [epigraph to "Caliban upon Setebos"], "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself", in effect sums up certain of the Higher Critics' theories: God is a projection of man's own nature, wishes, aspirations, qualities. (Priestley 130)

From evidence of his letters, but most of all from his poetry, it is clear that this perception of God could never be sufficient for Browning. His argument in favour of Christianity, elaborated in "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day", "A Death in the Desert", and "The Ring and the Book", to name but a few, points to the uniqueness of religious insight that brings an all-loving God, embodied in Christ, to the already-existing concept of an all-knowing and all-powerful God<sup>7</sup>. In his view the Revelation of divine love *is* the unique and essential truth that is missing from the proofs of natural theology, and is the limitation of Caliban's theology as well.

Caliban and the natural theologians he represents will continue to speculate and rationalize; they will see, but they will never *know* [. . .]

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician":  
"The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too --" (304-5)

Caliban will always continue to see evidence of Divine power; he will never see evidence of Divine Love. (Timko 149)

In understanding the background of the poem, consideration must also be given to the evolutionary angle, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and the Victorian crisis of faith. The first tremors had been felt even earlier, when geological evidence revealed that the earth was much older than had been fathomed through conventional belief in the Old Testament as cosmic history. Following upon this practically irreconcilable discovery, Darwin's theory of evolution, carried to its natural conclusion, threw into question the very existence of God as the concept of human beings as self-created<sup>8</sup> or evolved was introduced. To give some idea of its impact, three very different authors review the consequences not only for the intellectuals of his day, but for anyone (that is, the majority of Victorians) raised with the traditional religious upbringing that simply accepted the literal fact of Biblical history.

To think about evolution was to think about creation and immutability [. . .] Darwin's great investigation was not only central to scientific thought in many fields. It placed him directly athwart almost every great issue in philosophy, ethics, and religion. The old questions of necessity and free will, mechanism and spontaneity, matter and spirit, realism and nominalism, relativism and the absolute were faced all over again and argued in a new light because of *The Origin of Species*. (Irvine 51, 83)

In Britain since the seventeenth century, the study of what was called 'natural history' was commonly the consoling joy of finding the perfections of a benevolent Creator in nature. What more devastation could be heaped upon these tender motivations and consolations than the twin announcement by two of their own midst, Darwin and Wallace, both amateur naturalists in the grand manner, that it was evolution, not a divine intelligence, that has created all nature. [. . .] Cold *Uncalculating Chance*,

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<sup>8</sup> In effect, Victorians were being asked "to believe that complex organic beings made themselves (for that is what creation comes to in scientific language) out of non-organic matter" (Huxley qtd. in Irvine 103).

by making some able to survive better in this wrestle for life, and so to reproduce more. generation after generation, has blindly, even cruelly, carved this human species out of matter, mere matter. When combined with German materialism [. . .] the theory of evolution by natural selection was the hollowing knell of all that ennobling tradition of man as the purposed creation of Majestic Greatnesses. [. . .] It said in a word that there is no authorization from outside. Behold! there is nothing there. What we must do must come from ourselves. (Jaynes 438)

*The Origin of Species* delivered the *coup de grâce* to whatever lingering hopes there were that the historicity of the Bible and the Judaeo-Christian view of man springing from it would somehow be substantiated by science. The long-cherished providential theory, that God had created man, in all his pristine perfection, as a special favor, and tailored the universe to his special needs, was finished. Man was merely the most highly developed (for the moment) form of animal life and subject to the same laws of development that governed the rest; he was even given a museum label, *Homo sapiens*. (Altick 228)

The seeds of religious doubt had been sown; real spiritual anguish, such as we cannot conceive in our own secular age, followed, with -- inevitably, for many -- erosion of faith.

We are shocked by the powerful sense of betrayal evident in such works as Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.

Is there no God, then; but at best an absentee God, sitting idle, ever since the first Sabbath, at the outside of his Universe, and seeing it go? [. . .] It is all a grim Desert, this once-fair world of his; wherein is heard only the howling of wild-beasts, or the shrieks of despairing, hate-filled men; and no Pillar of Cloud by day, and no Pillar of Fire by night, any longer guides the Pilgrim. [. . .] The whole world is [. . .] sold out to Unbelief; their old Temples of the Godhead, which for long have not been rainproof, crumble down; and men ask now: where is the God-head; our eyes never saw him? (Carlyle 121-2)

Echoes of Caliban's experience are very strong here, both in certain images (the Pillar of Fire, the crumbling temple) and in the overall spirit or vision of life that is conveyed; indeed, an argument can and will be made for Caliban as nineteenth-century Everyman –

in due time.

Eventually some Churches were able to reconcile themselves to the concept of evolution as God's chosen method of creation; many theologians of Darwin's day simply denied his premise and evidence. It has been noted that with the rise of the middle class, coming into power after the enfranchisement bill of 1832, came a conservative and pietistic backlash in which "nearly every important sect identified the validity of the spiritual life with the literal truth of a creation story directly contradicted by scientific facts" (Irvine 87).

Darwin's discovery challenged accepted beliefs, and Browning certainly considered this in his exploration of how the idea of a god evolves in the mind of man. There was the question of progress (and providence), and whether belief in these held any meaning in the light of natural selection. The new science seemed to offer no assurance in this direction since there was no indication of intelligent purpose, benevolence, or justice in the "survival of the fittest". The power that lay behind the cosmos was more mysterious than ever, and not necessarily well disposed to mankind at all:

**"Whatever power": there, finally, was the transcendent mystery. If, as seemed reasonable to believe, there had been some sort of First Cause, analogous to the deists' divine watchmaker, there was no reason to believe in any Presence. Or if there was a grand design behind the veil, its outlines could not be discerned.[ . . ] If there were, indeed, laws governing all that happened, man was at their mercy; unable to detect them, let alone accommodate himself to them, he could only confess himself, like Caliban, the victim of a capricious, invisible captor. And if, instead, the only law was that of chance, before which both justice and reason were impotent, again man was helpless.**

The consequence of such a world view, of course, was that the whole array of Victorian religious and moral assumptions was called into doubt. (Altick 230-1)

And this was the world view that Browning chose to grapple with in his “Caliban upon Setebos”.

But of course, nothing with Browning is so simple, and there are undoubtedly other factors that entered into his choice of this particular character in this particular situation. It is not a great leap from the consideration of physical evolution to that of spiritual evolution, and this is the aspect of the poem that certain critics find most striking and ambitious – the effort to construct a psychologically/anthropologically credible portrait of primeval man creating religion.

In a closely reasoned essay, Barbara Melchiori finds a basis for this exploration of spiritual evolution in the “fairly primitive concept of God as exemplified in the Jehovah of the early books of the Old Testament”, and explains how Browning

struggles to find a convincing psychological explanation of why a primitive man should conceive of a creator and how he would motivate the creator’s interest in him. The solution he finds [. . .] is a subtle attempt to penetrate primitive thought-processes. [. . .] His exposition is not scientific, but poetic; nevertheless it is a poem in which he was attempting to work in full conscious control of his material and to allow his character to express himself through psychologically convincing images. [. . .] “Caliban Upon Setebos” is neither an application nor a refutation of Darwin’s theory of evolution: it is an experiment in the application and development of new ideas. [. . .] What remains most striking in this poem is [. . .] the modernity of Browning’s approach: that almost immediately after the publication of *The Origin of Species* he grasped that it opened the way to great discoveries in the field of psychoanalysis and that such study



should go hand in hand with anthropological research. (105-6).

The psychological truth of Browning's portrayal of Caliban is appreciated by the modern reader perhaps especially in its expression of alienation and uncertainty. And so we recognize the potential in Caliban, perhaps moreso because of the great distance to be covered between experience and aspiration, and an affinity with all those readers, in Browning's generation and ours, who are in fact quite sympathetic and familiar with his world of darkness and doubts.

The way in which Caliban chooses to approach the divinity – the space, the structure and the form of his experience – tell us something about his marginal position and contribute much to the realization of his character. In chapter two I will analyze his monologue in the context of Victor Turner's theory of performance, liminality and cultural consciousness. Caliban's discourse will be considered as a type of ritual performance that he enacts in full consciousness, and through which he comes to a deeper understanding of his world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CALIBAN'S CAVE: LIMINALITY AND PERFORMANCE

Anthropologist Victor Turner and some of his followers have discussed at length the concept of liminality, which Turner developed through his observations and analysis of the rituals and performances of primitive tribes. I will refer to their writings in the following pages as I explore Caliban's existential position, using Turner's theory to perceive our subject's unique situation in a new way.

"Liminality" comes from the root word "*limen*", that is, threshold, and carries within it the sense of transition, of crossing over a boundary, and of marginality as well. It refers to a process and also to a state of being. My contention is that Caliban is a liminal character, that his monologue is an expression of this condition, and that watching and hearing his monologue from this perspective can enrich our understanding of the performance that he enacts.

#### **Sacred space**

As the poem opens we encounter Caliban in his private retreat, having stolen a few moments from his drudgery to collect his thoughts and arrange them as he sees fit. The significance of such privileged space and time to the enactment of performance is explained by Victor Turner:

The dominant genres of performance in societies at all levels of scale and complexity tend to be *liminal phenomena*. They are performed in privileged spaces and times, set off from the periods and areas reserved for

work, food and sleep. You can call these "sacred" if you like, provided that you recognize that they are the scenes of play and experimentation, as much as of solemnity and rules.[ . . ] [B]oth the performances and their settings may be likened to loops in a linear progression, when the social flow bends back on itself, in a way does violence to its own development, meanders, inverts, perhaps lies to itself, and puts everything so to speak into the subjunctive mood as well as the reflexive voice. Just as the subjunctive mood of a verb is used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, or possibility, rather than stating actual facts, so do liminality and the phenomena of liminality dissolve all factual and commonsense systems into their components and "play" with them in ways never found in nature or in custom, at least at the level of direct perception. (*The Anthropology of Performance* 25)

In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Turner describes the liminal character as "structurally if not physically invisible in terms of his culture's standard definitions and classifications" (232). Caliban is in hiding, virtually invisible to Prosper and Miranda (and, he believes, to Setebos as well). The cave is the place to which Caliban escapes, not associated with his workaday world, but rather a place that gives him sensuous enjoyment, where he relaxes, watches, and where, in this secret fluid environment (a watery womb, the unconscious, the "eye" of line 8)<sup>1</sup>, he dares to dream subversive subjunctive thoughts, to play with possibilities, to suppose, to desire, to experiment. The efforts at transcendence, the stretching the mind to wrap around ideas of the Quiet and that further world, the fumbling with language, all point to this temporary subjunctive mode of being. And what is the capacity for transcendence if not an openness to other dimensions of experience, played out in whatever opportunities arise in the life and mind of a subject?

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the liminal attributes that Turner mentions are "passivity, humility, near-nakedness – in a symbolic milieu that represent[s] both a grave and a womb" (*Ritual Process* 96).

Caliban creates a ritual, a kind of stage, (the cave, the isolation, the scene he sets and describes very carefully in the first 11 lines) to contain this experience of imagining Setebos: a potentially potent force (witness the closing storm), representing power and apparently bestowing this power through identification (Caliban compares his own capricious subjection of the creatures beneath him). Caliban recognizes at times that he is playing with fire (note how often he acknowledges that he is vexing Setebos)<sup>2</sup>, but yet cannot resist probing further and further into the nature of the god.

The interludes of time that are chosen in traditional societies in which to perform rituals are described by Turner as "periods of 'timeless' time" devoted to "meditation upon, or veneration of, the transcendental" (*Drums of Affliction* 5). Caliban's choice of timing (the heat of the day, when Prosper and Miranda sleep -- a dream time which the natural world evokes, activity slowed, all but poised in suspension -- shades of Tennyson's *Lotos Eaters*), and even more, the details in his surroundings that he chooses to foreground evoke in the reader just such a sense of timelessness.

Victor Turner spent a good part of his life studying and exploring aspects of liminality in various societies in what was obviously a rich and compelling journey of discovery for him, and has proved to be a prolific source for the many who have continued to research and apply the original insights in a wide variety of fields. Within the field of

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<sup>2</sup> Note also one of the first metaphors he uses in setting the scene: "meshes of fire"-- with which (in language and thought) he encircles, in effect attempts to "trap"/ "pen" Setebos.

anthropology, Turner described himself as anti-functionalist ("Sociological and anthropological functionalism, whose aim is to state the conditions of social equilibrium at a given time, cannot deal with *meaning*, which always involves retrospection and reflexivity, a past, a history" (*The Anthropology of Performance* 97)), and anti-structuralist (with his view of society "seen as a process with some systematic features, rather than as modelled on an abstract organic or mechanical system" (*The Anthropology of Performance* 105)). During his field work he became disenchanted with the emphasis on fit and congruence, shared by both functionalism and different types of structuralism. He considered the factor of indeterminacy to be of great importance, understood that social reality cannot be fixed, and applauded the breakdown of boundaries between disciplines and the recognition of multiperspectival consciousness (i.e. the acceptance of "the notion of society as an endless crisscrossing of various kinds and intensities")(The *Anthropology of Performance* 79-80). He was interested in the study of processes as performances, with their structure being not that of an abstract system, but generated out of dialectical oppositions, in which "the units are total human beings in full psychological concreteness, not abstract, generalized sociocultural entities" (*The Anthropology of Performance* 80). His lifelong interest was in ritual, which he found in social process, especially in the ways people resolved crises.

Turner sought to integrate the notion of liminality – the threshold, the betwixt and between – so decisive to his grasp and experience of ritual as anti-structural, creative, often carnivalesque and playful – with his emerging understanding of the relationship between social drama and aesthetic drama. Performance is central to Turner's thinking because the performative genres are living examples of ritual in/as action. [It] is the art that is open, unfinished, decentered, liminal [and as such][. . .]is a

paradigm of process. [having always] at its core a ritual action, a restoration of behaviour. (Richard Schechner. preface, *The Anthropology of Performance* 7, 8)

The liminal subject, according to Turner, is first and foremost a character in transition, "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner. *Ritual Process* 95). This is most generally a phase of passage, but can also describe a state of being. The attributes of liminality are ambiguous and expressed in a rich variety of symbols. including invisibility, darkness, death, wilderness, and being in the womb. Liminal subjects are frequently represented without possessions, disguised as monsters, having no status, property, insignia, rank, role, or position in a kinship system. Liminal phenomena offer a blend of lowliness and sacredness: this is also connected with the concept of structural inferiors having "the power of the weak" (secular weakness as sacred power); in primitive societies it is often the subdued autochthonous people who are ritually potent. Liminal situations and roles are often regarded as dangerous or polluting.<sup>3</sup> Finally, they "all have this common characteristic: they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs" (Turner, *Ritual Process* 125).

It has seemed to me, after recalling these aspects of Turner's groundbreaking work in this field, so much of the concept of liminality being startlingly applicable to Caliban in his

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<sup>3</sup> This is from the point of view of "those concerned with the maintenance of 'structure'. [. . .] As Mary Douglas (1966) has argued, that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as 'polluting' and 'dangerous'" (Turner, *Ritual Process* 109).

circumstances, that this would be a fruitful line of inquiry to pursue. Initially touching on even the most evident parallels of situation and symbol. I will eventually try to tease out some of the more far-reaching implications of this theory.

Caliban himself as a liminal character exists in a bizarre position midway between the natural world consisting of the island (his legacy) and its familiar creatures over which he has some control, and the alien visitors who have washed up on his shore, taught him language (the simple fact that he is using language to express himself means that he is carrying more of Prospero's world with him than he/we might realize) and seized control of his life (he is a subjugated autochthone, for sure!). Caliban both scorns and envies Prospero and Miranda (this is clear in the section where he describes the "bauble-world" he has created to ape theirs, ll.150-168). He "plays [. . .] at being Prosper [. . .] careless and lofty, lord now of the isle" (168, 151) with a cruelty towards his subjects that reflects his own indignity at the treatment he has suffered. Miranda is represented as "a four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,/ Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye" (158-9) -- while also serving as his wife in this charade. The ambivalence that is revealed in these lines is heightened by this sense of alienation -- from Prospero, whom he imitates in some small relief from (and at the same time constant reminder of) his own burden -- and from his real persona, the sea-beast that he so perceptively describes as "a bitter heart that bides its time and bites" (167).

He is entirely alone, and this is I think the major distinction that sets him apart from the

colonialized victims that many critics would like him to represent. He has no fellow-creatures like himself who can share his suffering and with whom he forms a culture. At the same time there is a sense in which he is an unwilling member of the society of four (Prospero, Miranda, Ariel, and himself) in which he works and lives; certainly occupying the lowest rung, he clearly represents the subjected autochthonous element of the group, and interprets much of his experience, i.e. creates his culture, with reference to his place in this society.

The myth that he has inherited from his mother is lacking in clarity and not entirely satisfying to his present situation. In fact he is creating his own myth and culture anew, derived from his anomalous existence as solitary nature child, witch's son, partially educated, befriended then cast off and at the same time enslaved by the sorcerer Prospero and his enchanting daughter Miranda. In his spiritual state as in so many other spheres, he is poised on the brink, between atavistic man simultaneously trusting and fearing in the existence of his god, and modern rational man with his distance and skepticism towards religion.<sup>4</sup>

While mulling over the many liminal tendencies of Caliban, and also his efforts at

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<sup>4</sup> Again, this may be seen as a reflection of the Victorian crisis of faith mentioned in the previous chapter. On a further note, it is worth remembering that the missionary enterprise was a central justification for Victorian colonisation. Thus for Browning to have Caliban theologizing makes him something of a parodic missionary to the Europeans, reflecting back what they've supposedly given the primitive, benighted people of the world.



understanding and coping with the world around him. I discovered the work of another anthropologist, Walter Fairservis, who poses certain questions about civilization and culture, and adapts a scheme that "emphasizes an aspect of psychology as the basis for an interpretation of man's prehistoric prelude to civilization" (12). Searching for nothing less than the origin of civilization, his premise is that prehistoric man passed through several stages of cultural development, a development that was evolutionary in character, and that man also "passed through stages of intellectual awareness until he reached that stage of self-consciousness called civilization" (9). He discusses the evolution in the individual and his society of "a world view, a cosmological description of what things are, how they are ordered, why they function, and man's place among them.[. . .] Awareness of the world is [found to be] a cumulative matter, beginning in simple physical reactions and ending with perceptions of symbolic meaning often of great complexity" (21).

Caliban seems to be a prehistoric figure confronted with a culture not his own, and certainly his awareness of the world has suffered great disruption from this encounter. Fairservis' analysis provides an opportunity for measuring, in a sense, Caliban's cognitive development, and determining what cultural level he has attained in his singular society, keeping in mind that the model, like the post-colonial application, may be valid only up to a point. My attempts are not so much to fit the character to the model, since the divergences provide at least as much food for thought as, and more affirmation of Caliban's individuality, than any degree of congruence would. Still it provides a useful

entry into the discussion of Caliban's world view, and curiously enough, supports the threshold theme as well, as we find Caliban straddling stages of cognition and not easily fitting into any simple scheme. Fairservis reminds us that one comprehends one's world according to one's cultural bounds, and points out that "the power to symbolize gives civilized men the greatest cognitive capability of all mankind, past or present" (35).<sup>5</sup>

Fairservis notes that

when left on their own, primitive cultures change slowly, if at all, for they tend to reject or move away from that which would change them.[. . .] Accordingly, primitive man's cultural cognition is a relatively stable matter in which original mythological explanations of the world have long endurance[. . .][and conversely] civilized men have a dynamic, often speculative consciousness of their world. (36-7)

Caliban, of course, cannot reject or move away from that which would change him, and the consequence is that the mythological explanations that he has inherited from his mother must suffer violence, as he attempts to refashion them in accordance with his new speculative consciousness of the world.

Fairservis' proposed three-stage development of cognition -- enactive, ikonic, and symbolic -- is briefly introduced. The earliest stage is the enactive culture, and he describes the language of the individual in such a culture in the following way:

Analogy, comparisons, and naming are some of his reference categories, and the bulk of his reference is in terms of the recognized environment -- the environment to which he has an immediate relationship.[. . .]

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<sup>5</sup> I read this to mean that our Caliban has great potential, given his copious use of symbols throughout his monologue.

Rationality is based on the individual's immediate cause-and-effect relationship to his environment, both social and physical; what is *now* perceptible, tactile [ . . . ] [W]ithin the group there is a high degree of tactile advance and response: petting, holding, slapping, hugging, touching [ . . . ], and present is far more important than the past or the future. Men live in the midst of an always existent universe which is a graspable totality. (43, 44)

If we examine Caliban's language throughout most of the poem but especially in the early part (lines 7-14, 26-30, 34-55), we see that this his speech and thinking correspond to certain aspects of this model. Physical details abound, and his immediate surroundings are treated with great attention to their concrete tangibility. Analogy and comparisons are indeed his typical way of relating to the objects in his world. ("And while above his head a pompion-plant/ Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye" 7-8; "He looks out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross/ And recross till they weave a spider-web/ Meshes of fire[ . . .]" 12-14; "Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;/ Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam" 46-47), and of course, analogy is his mode of reckoning the ways and nature of Setebos, drawn from observation of his own behaviour.

Fairservis goes on to explain that "enactive ideologies are animistic in that the individual relates to things personally. Phenomena are assumed to be living entities or in possession of a living essence. The world-view is spirit-centered[ . . .]" ( 44). This is not so clear in Caliban's attitude towards those beings around him. He seems to make a clear distinction between creator and creature:

[ . . .]He made all these and more,  
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?[ . . .]  
He would not make what he mislikes or slights[ . . .]

But did in envy, listlessness or sport,  
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner, be-  
Weaker in most points, stronger in a few,  
Worthy, and yet mere playthings all the while,  
Things he admires and mocks too, – that is it. (55-6. 59, 61-5)

In fact his attitude in theological matters tends more towards the next stage of development outlined by Fairservis, that is ikonic culture, in which rites are carried out for various life crises. "and the ritual basis for these rites is the basic relation of man to the universe. Here a sense that phenomena were created as a means of regulating man's actions is implicit, and this is expressed in the reiteration of divinely inspired causes and effects in which normative concepts are underlined" (Fairservis 47). In other words, efforts are made to determine patterns of behaviour that will ensure favourable divine actions. It is supposed at this stage that there is a clue to successful living, and

the individual has a responsibility to relate past experiences to present existence for future survival. The priest, a permanent religious practitioner, carries out the ceremonies, recounts the mythologies, and reiterates the behavioral ethics. He anticipates consequence in man-god relationships. Empiricism creates a workable pharmacopoeia, which may be applied by the priest in the context of ideology. (Fairservis 47-8)

Concerning this notion that phenomena were created as a means of regulating man's actions, we have only to think of Caliban's reaction at the end of the poem, in which he is convinced that the storm is sent as a punishment for his indiscretion, but also in such revealing lines as the following:

[. . .] Setebos/ The many-handed as a cuttle-fish,  
Who, making Himself feared through what He does (141-3),

and again:

'Saith He is terrible: watch His feats in proof!  
One hurricane will spoil six good months' hope.  
He hath a spite against me, that I know,  
Just as He favours Prosper, who knows why? (200-203).

and further yet:

Dug up a newt He may have envied once  
And turned to stone, shut up inside a stone.  
Please Him and hinder this? What Prosper does?  
Aha, if He would tell me how! Not He!  
There is the sport: discover how or die! (214-8)

Caliban spends the better part of the poem trying to understand the "normative concepts" (i.e. rules for behaviour) that might give him an edge in pleasing if possible, or outwitting if necessary, this tormenting Creator who inspires the capricious causes and effects that Caliban witnesses. And so it would appear that Caliban is a liminal personality by this definition as well, and as such, is struggling to make sense of his god iconically while equipped with an enactive method of relating to the world around him. And, to complicate matters further, Caliban's existential view reaches toward the symbolic culture recognized by Fairservis as the third (and final) stage of development, in that "the world view in a symbolic culture is of a material and generally impersonal universe into which man was born and which cares nothing for him" (50). The implications of this are of course devastating – or numbing. In the presence of such an uncaring universe, humans must despair or else attempt to create some meaning, and of course we find Caliban casting about with each of his analogical models for some explanation that will demystify this unfathomed god and provide a context of meaning with which Caliban can work and live.

In discussing divination and its symbolism, Turner has perceived that

the main theme of 'revealing the hidden' is exemplified in all cults to cure persons afflicted by the shades with disease, reproductive disorders, or bad luck at hunting. The cure is essentially a process of 'making known and visible', albeit in symbolic disguise, the unknown and invisible agents of affliction.[. . .] Ritual symbols give a visible form to unknown things; they express in concrete and familiar terms what is hidden and unpredictable. They enable men to domesticate and manipulate wild and wayward forces.<sup>6</sup> (*The Drums of Affliction* 29-30)

Clearly this is what Caliban is attempting to do as he compares his own familiar relationship with the creatures that he can control, in drawing analogies ("So He") from his own responses to the imagined behaviour of Setebos, in an attempt to divine the causes of his own misfortune. Among the symbols that Caliban manipulates in his imagination is the clay bird that he names Caliban, a symbol of transcendence, one with wings to fly, the beauty of a great comb "like the hoopoe's" (79), and the power of a sting "to do his foes offence"(80); and yet this transcendent figure is soon brought beneath the heel of its creator, who would heal or maim as it took his fancy, "making and marring clay at will" (97). He then imagines the pipe "of pithless elder-joint"(117) as another

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<sup>6</sup> Turner illustrates this with his description of a Ndembu ritual for divining causes of misfortune or death. Various symbols are used, such as grass head-pads ("in hunting cults the grass is used as a symbol for the desired invisibility of the hunter when he stalks game" *Drums* 27-8), and which in this case represents "the witch's attempts to conceal vital matters from the diviner.[. . .] The head-pad is a reminder to the diviner to keep wide awake, for he must not be ignorant of anything. The grass in [the head-pad] is twisted, like the witch's attempts to deceive.[. . .] The theme of much Ndembu ritual is that of 'bringing into the open what is hidden or unknown'. This variation has the special sense of 'exposing deception and secret malice'.[...] The Ndembu term for 'symbol' itself contains the implication of a revelatory process[. . .]derived from 'to blaze a trail' in the bush.[. . .] The blaze or landmark[. . .]leads from unknown, and therefore in Ndembu experience as well as belief, from dangerous territory to known and familiar surroundings, from the lonely bush to the populated village." (*Drums of Affliction*, 28-30)

attempt at autonomy: a creation that boasts it makes the cry its maker cannot make. Of course it is at the mercy of its creator, both for the breath that inspires its music, and with the swift punishment ("Would not I smash it with my foot?")(126) for its presumption. Both these symbols – the clay of creation and the pipe/breath representing the life-giving force and inspiration of the creator are archetypes that appear again and again in religious teaching and creation myths<sup>7</sup>. Further on Caliban makes use of several potent symbols in his ritual re-enactment of Prospero's power (Prospero is apparently a kind of priest-figure, i.e. he is favoured by the god in Caliban's view, and this scenario is Caliban's attempt to assume some such power or influence). It includes a book with "prodigious words"(153); a wand which he names (154); an enchanter's robe made from "the eyed skin of a supple oncelot"(156). There is great significance in the fact of this "eyed skin", as Caliban sees himself as a watcher, a witness; even when he cannot dare identify himself as "I", he still lives within the eye that reappears in many permutations in the poem. This is what makes his representation of himself, the sea-beast that he has blinded and calls Caliban, such a terrible renunciation of the "bitter heart that bides its time and bites"(167). Miranda is represented as "an ounce sleeker than youngling mole;/ A four-legged serpent he makes cower and crouch"(157-8); this snake reference would seem to ally Miranda with Setebos, who is connected with snakes in several of the poem's images, and makes the conjecture an even more daring one than the simple role reversal

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<sup>7</sup> "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

of master and slave that it appears to be on the surface.

On the one hand, Caliban seems to move further and further in confidence that he has understood Setebos until around line 202, with the stark recognition that underlying all his analysis is the bleak truth: "He hath a spite against me, that I know,/ Just as he favours Prosper, who knows why?" (202-3); and, after a catalogue of Setebos' most recent "terrible feats", Caliban voices his frustration with the god's "wild and wayward forces": "Please Him and hinder this? – What Prosper does?/ Aha, if He would tell me how! Not He!" (216-7). Caliban only recognizes that the god cannot be manipulated in any reliable way by his creatures (with the exception of Prospero with his magic<sup>8</sup>):

Those at his mercy, – why, they please Him most  
When . . . when . . . well, never try the same way twice!  
Repeat what act has pleased, He may grow wroth.  
You must not know His ways, and play Him off,  
Sure of the issue. (221-5)

What thwarts Caliban (to the extent that he uses the word "vexed" in line 152, a term which in all other cases is reserved for Setebos) is that, although he can imitate Prospero's actions and surround himself with reasonable facsimiles of his paraphernalia (book, wand, robe, attendant creatures), he does not understand and cannot evoke the magic that lies in the books. He knows there is a mystery to pleasing or appeasing the god to which Prospero is privy and he is not. Caliban is left to attempt, because he must, to reinvent the role in his own way -- alone. It is indeed a brave and ambitious undertaking.

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Tempest*, Caliban says of Prospero: "I must obey. His art is of such pow'r/ It would control my dam's god, Setebos,/ And make a vassal of him" (I, ii, 372-4).



Notwithstanding Caliban's many attempts at anthropomorphism through the analogies that he proposes, Setebos remains a compelling mystery. The ritual performance that Caliban enacts informally and yet with some degree of care, in the setting chosen, and also in his attempts at linguistic/conceptual precision, takes place as he circles around various aspects of Setebos and considers from one angle and another the behaviour of the god as it is manifested in the fortunes of those Caliban observes, especially his own. In *By Means of Performance*, Turner discusses redressive rituals which "include divination into the hidden causes of misfortune ([. . .]in tribal societies[. . .] thought to be caused by the invisible action of spirits, deities, witches and sorcerers.)"<sup>9</sup> (11). We can see Caliban's various attempts at imaging models for Setebos's behaviour as a ritualized divination process seeking to delve into the invisible actions of the god Setebos (manifested in such natural phenomena as hurricanes, destructive waves from the sea, lightning storms,

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<sup>9</sup> The major difficulty in adapting Turner's work to Caliban's situation is that almost without exception the examples given are of social groups, whereas Browning's Caliban remains steadfastly alone. Thus in every instance where the group dynamic is emphasized, we must use our imagination and reduce the group to a single individual, and see if the idea still works. I find there is still a valid argument for applying the model to our single character, in most cases. With this in mind, the following context for redressive rituals needs the leap from many to one to make sense for Caliban's situation.

"Redressive action is often ritualized, and may be undertaken in the name of law or religion. Judicial processes stress reason and evidence, religious processes emphasize ethical problems, hidden malice operating through witchcraft, or ancestral *wrath against breaches or tabu* [Caliban seems to suspect this] or the impiety of the living towards the dead.

[. . .]As Durkheim said long ago, law needs crime, religion needs sin, to be fully dynamic systems, since without "doing," without the social friction that fires consciousness and self-consciousness, social life would be passive, even inert. These considerations, I think, led Barbara Myerhoff (1978:22) to distinguish "definitional ceremonies" as a kind of collective "autobiography", a means by which a group creates its identity by telling a story about itself, in the course of which it brings to life "its Definite and Determinate Identity" (to cite William Blake)" (Turner, *By Means of Performance* 8, 9)(emphasis mine).

fossilized newts), and to some extent of the sorcerer Prospero, in order to uncover the hidden causes of his own misfortune. He is acutely aware of the hidden malice ("spite" is the word most often connected with Setebos), and senses that he provokes it ("vexes" is another favourite term). Urgency, fear, confusion – all these propel his search for an answer, and are revealed in the dismay that he feels upon discovering yet another sign of the god's hostility:

‘Dug up a newt He may have envied once  
And turned to stone, shut up inside a stone.  
Please Him and hinder this? – What Prosper does?  
Aha, if He would tell me how! Not He!  
There is the sport: discover how or die! (214-8)

Much of the significance of Caliban's monologue lies in his desire to withdraw from his drudging life, to steal a few hours from Prospero and Miranda, in order to reflect on the motivation and effect of his own actions on the world, to understand their meaning and so to shed some light on the perceived behaviour of the god. Turner discusses the relationship between the everyday mundane world and the cultural performances that grow out of this existence as "reciprocal and reflexive"; that is, the performance not only reflects or expresses the social system, but

is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of, an evaluation (with lively possibilities of rejection) of the way society handles history.[. . .] [T]hey do this with "magic mirrors" which make ugly or beautiful events or relationships which cannot be recognized as such in the continuous flow of quotidian life in which we are embedded. [. . .][There is a] "discontinuum" of action[. . .]culturally made possible by setting aside times and places for cultural performance [that is] equally part of the ongoing social process -- the part where those people become conscious, through witnessing and often participating in such performances, of the nature, texture, style, and given meanings of their

own lives[. . .]. Since the relationship between quotidian or workaday social process [. . .] and cultural performance is dialectical and reflexive, the quality of the latter rests on the principle that mainstream society generates its opposite; that we are, in fact, concerned in cultural performances with a topsy-turvy, inverted, to some extent sacred (in the sense of "set apart," hedged around with taboo and mystery) domain of human action. (*Anthropology of Performance* 22, 24-5)

We see that Caliban escapes his daily life and its mainstream society of Prospero and Miranda to enact a performance in which he becomes more conscious of the nature, texture, style, and given meaning of his own life. The discontinuum of action leaves "Prosper and Miranda sleep[ing]/ In confidence he drudges at their task, / And it is good to cheat the pair, and gibe[. . .]"(20-22). The inverted "carnival" atmosphere is invoked most thoroughly and consistently in lines 150-169, where Caliban recalls his own attempts to mimic Prosper at his books, ("careless and lofty, lord now of the isle"), but on another level occurs whenever Caliban imagines himself in Setebos' shoes, so to speak.

Indeed, the very premise of the poem plays with the assumptions of the reader in a carnivalesque sense, as we are introduced to a seemingly earthbound creature who immediately launches into theological speculation and confounds our expectations of the appropriate subject matter or behaviour for such a one who should be drudging and cursing if we recall the Shakespeare character. If indeed he should be thinking at all, we could not imagine a less likely preoccupation than his wondering at the nature of God and the origin of things. As like imagine our dog, or a fish in the sea to be pursuing such matters. And perhaps this is what captures our interest at first; the novelty, the audacity of such a proposition. There are very basic inconsistencies that arise when Caliban the sub-

human monster with the bluntness and crudeness of an animal. "a grotesque anthropoid [. . .] capable of speech" (Honan 137), becomes Caliban the theologian, indulging in flights of conjecture on matters that concern us still and that yet remain unanswered.

Caliban considers and encounters the idea of Setebos in his own sacred space (that is, a space sacred to Caliban rather than to Setebos): "And never speaks his mind save housed as now" (268). Certainly this ritual of enacting the god is hedged around with taboo ("Because to talk about him vexes -- ha,/ Could he but know!" 17-18) and mystery ("You must not know His ways, and play Him off,/ Sure of the issue." 224-5). There are ancient taboos against discussing the gods which Caliban is undoubtedly aware of transgressing, but which he feels compelled to explore nevertheless. Turner discusses the effect of this kind of contemplation on the consciousness of the subject. He returns to the subject of performative reflexivity,

a condition in which a [. . .] group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their "public" selves. (*The Anthropology of Performance* 24)

Referring to the to some extent sacred domain that contains, embodies, expresses this reflexivity:

For such a domain to be truly reflexive, where the same person(s) are both subject and object, violence has to be done to commonsense ways of classifying the world and society. The "self" is split up the middle -- it is something that one both is and that one sees and, furthermore, acts upon as though it were another. It is, again, not a matter of dotting upon or pining over the projected self [. . .] but of acting upon the self-made other in such

a way as to transform it. (Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* 25)

This may provide a key to understanding Browning's peculiar choice of the third person pronouns, and the occasional shift from third to first person, in Caliban's treatment of himself. Browning has neatly exposed this reflexivity in his imagining a way of depicting the self split up the middle, something that one both is and that one sees and acts upon to transform it. The ambiguity that results in references to himself and/or Setebos does indicate a domain where violence is done to commonsense ways of classifying the world. With these unclear referents the reader is thrown into confusion, and we can only suppose that this is intentional disorientation on the part of Browning, to help us understand and in some way participate in the frame of mind of his Caliban.

The ambiguity extends to the depiction of Setebos, who is also imagined as a split/divided self, "hating and loving warmth alike" (43), making "what Himself would fain, in a manner, be" (62), suggesting a vicarious identification with his creation, and yet creating "things he admires and mocks too" (65), indicating an ironic and potentially dangerous, unreliable detachment. His relationship with the Quiet and the boundaries between them are unclear, as Caliban conceives of the possibility, "if He surprise not even the Quiet's self/ Some strange day, - or, suppose, grow into it/ As grubs grow butterflies" (246-8). But most of all we see the Self of Setebos conflated with that of Caliban, constructed, deconstructed, compared, refashioned, arranged and rearranged in the musings of Caliban's fertile imagination.

In analyzing the process that the liminal subject undergoes, Turner makes the following careful distinctions and useful analogies:

Th[e] opposition between social life and dominant genre is also related to[. . .] "liminality." A *limen*[. . .] is a "threshold," [. . .]use[d] to denote the central of three phases in[. . .]"rites of passage." [. . .]Rituals *separated* specific members of a group from everyday life, *placed them in a limbo* that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then *returned* them, changed in some way, to mundane life. The second phase, *marginality* or *liminality*, is what interests us here, though, in a very cogent sense, the whole *ritual process* constitutes a threshold between secular living and sacred living. (*The Anthropology of Performance* 25)

Despite what seems to me the overwhelming evidence that we have here a liminal situation and character, with a congruence in most particulars to the model that Turner puts forth, still the transformative element for Caliban seems weak. In the end is he transformed through his ritual/performance? How is his being or consciousness affected by the assumption of roles he has rehearsed? There is no question but that there is something lacking here, some resistance to resolution, and that Caliban's experience falls short of complete catharsis or renewal. There is not a clearcut positive transformation. We are forced to admit the ambiguity of Caliban's final words and gestures in the poem, and are reminded that in fact the movement of liminality is open-ended, unfinished, decentered (Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* 7-8, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 274). Ultimately, Caliban's isolation, his lack of fellow feeling, may be the key factor in this apparent irresolution.

Turner has noted that "an incomplete or irresolvable drama would [. . .] manifest the absence of *communitas*" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 50); and that "the lack of *communitas* [. . .] creates both an unviable liminality and the feeling of despair" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 54), where *communitas* in liminality can be defined as the feeling that

tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition. The bonds of *communitas* [. . .] are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-Thou (in Feuerbach's and Buber's sense) relationships. *Communitas* is spontaneous, immediate, concrete -- it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract. (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 274)

The image that comes to mind as a kind of ritual gesture gone astray is Caliban's thwarted attempt to communicate something beyond himself in the "Stonehenge" construction which he carefully, hopefully, builds, and then (figuratively) destroys in the next breath with his callous withdrawal of any meaning from the act:

'Falls to make something: 'piled yon pile of turfs,  
And squared and stuck there squares of soft white chalk,  
And, with a fish-tooth, scratched a moon on each,  
And set up endwise certain spikes of tree,  
And crowned the whole with a sloth's skull a-top,  
Found dead i' the woods, too hard for one to kill.  
*No use at all i' the work, for work's sole sake;*  
*'Shall some day knock it down again: so He. (192-99)(emphasis mine)*

And yet there is no denying that the impulse is there; the creative process has been set in motion, even despite himself. We are reminded of the value of reflexivity that has been the main thrust of Caliban's imaginative efforts:

Cultural performances are reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to

ourselves. They are also capable of being *reflexive*, arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves. As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware, conscious of our consciousness. At once actor and audience, we may then come into the fullness of our human capability -- and perhaps human desire -- to watch ourselves and enjoy knowing what we know. (Myerhoff qtd. in Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* 42)

Man is a self-performing animal -- his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself. This can be in two ways: the actor [Caliban] may come to know himself better through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings [we the readers] may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by another set of human beings. In the first instance, reflexivity is singular though enactment may be in a social context; in the second case, reflexivity is plural and is based on the assumption that though, for most purposes, we humans may divide ourselves between Us and Them, or Ego and Alter, We and They share substance, and Ego and Alter mirror each other pretty well. (Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* 81).

Surely Caliban is learning himself (if not Setebos) with every role he assumes, every leap of imagination into the mind of Setebos, and we the readers learn something about ourselves in witnessing this work (and play) in Caliban. This is the essence of creativity<sup>10</sup>; and if we can accept Caliban's efforts in this direction as religious, as I will argue in chapter four,

It has been more than once suggested that religious ritual is mainly 'expressive', that it portrays in symbolic form certain key values and cultural orientations. This is true as far as it goes, but it points to only one of many properties it possesses. More important is its creative function -- it actually creates, or re-creates, the categories through which men perceive reality. (Turner, *Drums of Affliction* 6-7)

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<sup>10</sup> Leonard Burrows, in a lively critique of "Caliban upon Setebos", provides the following summary of his "varied glances at the psychology of [Caliban's] creativity [. . .] art as free-wheeling play, as substitutive gratification, as godlike dominion over a created world; art preceding from envy, frustration, a desire to be comforted, the surplus energy of well-being and the lust for absolute rule" (214).



The creative potential of the extended metaphor that Caliban unpacks in his musings is rich and profound. As Turner contends:

There is nothing wrong with metaphors [. . .] provided that one is aware of the perils lurking behind their misuse. If one regards them, however, as a species of liminal monster [. . .] whose combination of familiar features provokes us into thought, provides us with new perspectives, one can be excited by them: the implications, suggestion, and supporting values entwined with their literal use enable us to see a new subject matter in a new way. (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 30-31)

Turner discusses the concept of root metaphors, which he relates to the term “conceptual archetype”, defined by Max Black as a “systematic repertoire of ideas by means of which a given thinker describes, by *analogical extension*, some domain to which those ideas do not immediately and literally apply” (Black qtd. in Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 26). Caliban’s efforts at analogical extension from his own thoughts and actions, reactions and behaviour to those of Setebos would then be understood as a root metaphor, his own evolving method for understanding the world:

The method in principle seems to be this: A man desiring to understand the world looks about for a clue to its comprehension. He pitches upon some area of common-sense fact and tries if he cannot understand other areas in terms of this one. The original area then becomes his *basic analogy* or *root metaphor*. He describes as best he can the characteristics of this area, or if you will, “discriminates its structure”. A list of its structural characteristics becomes his basic concepts of explanation and description. [E.g., the kin words, the nature words.] We call them a set of categories.[. . .] In terms of these categories he begins to study all other areas of fact whether uncriticized or previously criticized. He undertakes to interpret all facts in terms of these categories. As a result of the impact of those other facts upon his categories, he may qualify and readjust the categories so that a set of categories commonly changes and develops. Since the basic analogy or root metaphor normally [. . .] arises out of common sense [. . .], a great deal of development and refinement of a set

of categories is required if they are to prove adequate for a hypothesis of unlimited scope. Some root metaphors prove more fertile than others, have greater power of expansion and adjustment. These survive in comparison with the others and generate the relatively adequate world theories. (Pepper qtd. in Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 16)

Technical details or strict factual precision and congruence do not seem to matter at this point. What is essential is that the root metaphor or conceptual archetype is rich enough in implicative (or connotative) power to become a useful theoretical instrument for speculating on a grand scale.

Root metaphors have a 'thusness' or 'thereness' from which many subsequent structures may be 'unpacked'. [. . .] For metaphors share [. . .] a certain kind of polarization of meaning in which the subsidiary subject is really a depth world of prophetic, half-glimpsed images, and the principal subject, the visible, fully known (or thought to be fully known component), at the opposite pole to it, acquires new and surprising contours and valences from its dark companion. On the other hand, because the poles are 'active together' the unknown is brought just a little more into the light by the known. (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 50-51)

Caliban as self-styled magician or priest, with his "mock-Prosper" reveals certain entirely justified aspirations: his naming of the blinded sea-beast as himself is the heartbreaking obverse and perhaps psychologically truer shadow self. And so Caliban learns, or reveals more, about himself, with every 'supposeth', 'thinketh', 'conceiveth', with which he imagines the nature of Setebos.

Creative imagination is far richer than imagery; it does not consist in the ability to evoke sense impressions and it is not restricted to filling gaps in the map supplied by perception. It is called 'creative' because it is the ability to create concepts and conceptual systems that may correspond to nothing in the senses (even though they may correspond to something in reality), and also because it gives rise to unconventional ideas.[. . .] This is the very creative darkness of liminality that lays hold of the basic forms of life. (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 51)

It seems clear that Caliban's liminality, manifested in social position, existential situation, and internalized in his own self-image lends a peculiar power to his imagination. In such a character we are given the rare opportunity to see the world afresh and to witness the development of a consciousness which is at once strange and familiar. An exploration of this self-consciousness and Browning's particular and unique choices (in language, syntax, and psychology) in this construction and understanding of self in Caliban will be the focus of chapter three.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CALIBAN'S SPEECH/TONGUE: LANGUAGE AND FREEDOM

(*"Letting the rank tongue blossom into speech"* – "Caliban", line 23)

It cannot be denied by either his detractors or admirers that Robert Browning is a linguistic virtuoso<sup>1</sup>, and that is especially apparent in "Caliban upon Setebos" with its rich and irresistible play of language, the totally idiosyncratic expression of voice, and the force and originality of its execution. All of these contribute most tellingly to the development and understanding of Caliban as character. More than with most other literary characters, language defines Caliban, since what we are given to apprehend is an individual constructing himself in language – his own language. Caliban talks and thinks, in fact *is* his monologue. He is entirely self-referential, and we learn him through his speech – both in the information he consciously provides, and in the stronger sense of himself that is revealed quite unconsciously, as we listen and read "between the lines", so to speak. Everything about Caliban's language is distinctive and peculiar to himself. The devices and sounds he chooses give him a face, a body, a personality. In this sense, it seems to me, language provides Browning's Caliban with a creative outlet and an autonomy that allows him in a very real sense to break out of his prison. As Leonard Burrows testifies:

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<sup>1</sup> "Browning is not only among the most prolific of English poets, but the employer of one of the most voluminous of poetic vocabularies: roughly 40,000 words, or about double that of Tennyson or of Shakespeare. [. . .] Browning's vast poetic vocabulary, his delight in language of all kinds, familiar and remote, literary and technical and colloquial, his struggle to subdue language to his will – these things create both barriers to understanding, and huge rewards for those who read him in the right spirit" (Pettigrew xx).

Indeed. Caliban's tongue blossoms into speech [. . .] activated by dramatic pointing and gesture [. . .], by vigorous mimetic rhythms. and by diction everywhere forceful, pithy, racy and exhilaratingly pungent [. . .] a truly poetic speech. however alien to the Tennysonian orthodoxy: lithe and sinewy; charged with sensuous vitality; strenuously concerned both to mean *and* be – to be its meaning to the full. (212)

Language at this intensity, I would argue, *is* a kind of liberation, and Caliban partakes with essence entire. The concentrated focus on construction and development of character is of course the distinctive domain of the dramatic monologue, and I would like to turn now to a discussion of this form with the case in point being "Caliban upon Setebos".

### **The dramatic monologue**

Park Honan in his *Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique* provides perhaps the simplest definition of the dramatic monologue as "a single discourse by one whose presence is indicated by the poet but who is not the poet himself" (122). Although at first glance this seems too broad a definition to be very useful, he actually goes to great lengths to defend this particular description, and argues that its generality and inclusiveness are preferable to previous attempts at a too-rigid and perhaps arbitrarily exclusive classification system. It recognizes the overlap between lyric poetry and dramatic monologue and allows for the reader's discretion in distinguishing among more ambiguous candidates. Indeed, in "Caliban upon Setebos", one of the traditional qualities of the dramatic monologue, that is, the existence of a dramatized auditor/audience is far from clear. Still there seems to be no question in the mind of any critic that I have read

about the inclusion of “Caliban upon Setebos” in the ranks of the dramatic monologue.

In his study of the dramatic monologue as genre in *The Poetry of Experience*, Langbaum asserts: “It can be said of the dramatic monologue generally that there is at work in it a consciousness, whether intellectual or historical, beyond what the speaker can lay claim to. This consciousness is the mark of the poet’s projection into the poem; and it is also the pole which attracts our projection, since we find in it the counterpart of our own consciousness”(94). At a Browning Society meeting on April 25, 1884, George Bernard Shaw commented that Caliban’s speech revealed its creator perhaps too openly: “a savage, with the introspective powers of a Hamlet, and the theology of an evangelical Churchman” (qtd. in Peterson 132). And yet one can argue that Browning has introjected to a remarkable degree this totally-other character of Caliban, that he has entered into the mind of this pre-literate, nearly prehistoric, natural man; in a real psychological sense speaks through his mouth with the tones and patterns and rhythms that are not Browning but Caliban:

Browning made the [dramatic monologue] form his speciality, taking an individual line in avoiding traditional monologic situations (death-beds, betrayed women, exiles, etc.), and shifting the focus ‘from melodrama and exploitation of emotion’ to ‘psychological subtlety’. He developed a brilliant technique for conveying, through natural speech, a whole range of oblique information about the speaker’s situation, environment, and audience, and above all, about his character. Much of this character revelation is made to appear involuntary. The speaker may be trying to defend or justify himself, to project an image of himself that will win his audience’s approval; but through his very words and allusions he unconsciously betrays what he is really like. This ingenious technique of apparently unconscious self-revelation, by contradictions between a

speaker's intentions and the impression that he actually makes upon the reader, may be regarded as a highly sophisticated extension of dramatic irony. (Paul Turner xx-xxi)

Discussing the imaginative opportunities that the dramatic monologue affords to both reader and poet, Langbaum explains that

we understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue by sympathizing with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding. The combination of sympathy and judgment makes the dramatic monologue suitable for expressing all kinds of extraordinary points of view, whether moral, emotional or historical – since sympathy frees us for the widest possible range of experience, while the critical reservation keeps us aware of how far we are departing. The extraordinary point of view is characteristic of all the best dramatic monologues, the pursuit of experience in all its remotest extensions being the genius of the form. (96)

Nothing could be further from most reader's experience than the situation of Caliban, his extreme isolation, his disenfranchisement and subsequent total alienation from the only other inhabitants of the island. The extraordinary point of view that is rendered from this experience cannot but strike us with its singularly energetic direct examination of life and ideas, as well as with its unique moral/religious stance, and does seem to polarize the emotional reaction of the readers, some towards sympathy, others to repulsion.

Langbaum contends that the dramatic monologue relies upon "the intensest concreteness [of perception to account for its] evocative quality" (206). Certainly a quite striking concreteness of image and detail shines through the language of Caliban as he evokes the natural world around him. One has only to recall his catalogue in lines 45-55 of the creatures observed in their typical activities, or even the opening scene in the cave as

## Caliban wallows

Flat on his belly in the pit's much mire,  
With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin.  
And, while he kicks both feet in the cool slush.  
And feels about his spine small eft-things course. ( 2-5)

Langbaum continues in his analysis to emphasize that

The meaning of the dramatic monologue is what the speaker comes to perceive. But the thing he comes to perceive is something more than the sum of what he sees and thinks. It is also a new surge of life, an advance on the dramatic characterization with which we start because an infusion into it of the lyrical characterization – of that part of the speaker's life outside the poem which he has managed, through what he sees and thinks in the course of the poem, to articulate. [. . .] [T]he meaning of *Caliban* is the life-persistence, the biological vitality and cunning which Caliban finds in the swamp world and in what he deduces from the swamp world about the god, Setebos. The meaning is Caliban as he stands revealed in what he sees and thinks.[. . .]

The meaning is the Song of Caliban, the expression of Caliban's whole soul as it breaks through and exceeds the conditions of the poem. [. . .] The dramatic monologue is essentially a poem of learning, since more is known at the end than at the beginning, and the thing known has validity and importance not in itself but as an acquisition of the speaker. (207-8)

Martin in *Browning's Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject* calls the dramatic monologue a form, or consciousness, of subjectivity. He discusses intertextuality, the development of the dramatic monologue as an alternative to the choice between symbolic and realist modes (48); the dramatic monologue as “an open-ended process, a process of speech refastening broken lines of interconnection between the alienated individual, his inner responding ‘self,’ other human centers, and even his natural environment”(25).



With this apt remark on the open-ended process we can turn to the poem itself, with its abrupt beginning immediately imparting the sense of interrupted thought, or, more exactly, the sense that we have wandered into a monologue that has already begun.

### **The primal ooze**

The opening lines of the poem emphasize Caliban's physicality: we are treated to very tangible, sensuous details, including the heat of the day, the cool slush, the tickling of small eft-things, a creeping vine, flower and fruit. The sense of touch especially is evoked in these first few lines -- up to line 11:

'Will sprawl, now that the heat of the day is best,  
Flat on his belly in the pit's much mire,  
With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin.  
And while he kicks both feet in the cool slush,  
And feels about his spine small eft-things course,  
Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh:  
And while above his head a pompion-plant,  
Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye,  
Creeps down to touch and tickle hair and beard,  
And now a flower drops with a bee inside,  
And now a fruit to snap at, catch and crunch, – (1-11)

Caliban then presents in quite sophisticated and beautiful visual imagery the sunbeams crossing and recrossing the sea, with the double metaphor of spider-web, and meshes of fire. Caliban's use of metaphor is rare enough (as opposed to analogy, which he uses frequently) to especially call our attention to the occasion. In discussing the figurative sense of the metaphor, "Ezra Pound described the poetic image as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.[. . .] It is the presentation of

such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation.[. . .]" (qtd. in Nowotny 57). Caliban here is using the spiderweb/meshes of fire metaphor to describe a phenomenon for which there is no name or description in common language – that is, the illusion that is created by the play of light on moving water; it also carries with it a particular insight, with the emotional power/nuances/associations that are reflected in his thoughts elsewhere in the poem. The context of his own experience, with its suggestions of ways in which we can read the web and meshes of fire, enriches our understanding as we look both backward (to earlier poems) and forward (further on in Caliban's musings) from this point.

Roaming further afield, we discover particular associations of the image for Browning himself, e.g. the spiderweb which impedes the lovers in "Two in the Campagna", and then floats beyond:

For me, I touched a thought, I know,  
Has tantalized me many times,  
(Like turns of thread the spiders throw  
Mocking across our path) for rhymes  
To catch at and let go. (6-10)

The thread is something that tempts ("mocks"), teases with its apparent stability and tangibility, which he also makes an effort to follow as a train of thought ("Help me to hold it! [. . .] Hold it fast!" 11, 20) and must finally allow to be lost:

Just when I seemed about to learn!  
Where is the thread now? Off again!  
The old trick! Only I discern—  
Infinite passion, and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn. (56-60)

A web, while described here by Browning as a meandering thread that spins out freely from the body of the spider as it moves through space, and that is compared to the constant spinning out of thought in the activity of the mind, (reflecting the musings of Caliban in his attempt to in a sense “capture” the essence of Setebos: the effort of his own finite heart yearning for transcendence as it were, and of language reaching towards the ineffable). is also more likely interpreted by the reader in its more conventional sense as an intentional construction designed by the spider with a more sinister motive: web as mesh, as trap.

The introduction of this image of mesh as trap alerts us to the ubiquity and inexorability of the trap as a central metaphor for Caliban’s existential situation; the sense of no escape from the oppressive deity is made clear to us in one analogy after another<sup>2</sup>, indeed, is the

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<sup>2</sup> E.g.:

It nothing skills if He begin to plague (67);

[. . .]He does His worst in this our life,  
Giving just respite lest we die through pain,  
Saving last pain for worst[. . .](253-5);

That they, unless through Him, do nought at all,  
And must submit: what other use in things?(115-6) ;

Who made them weak, meant weakness He might vex (172) ;

‘Saith He is terrible: watch His feats in proof!  
One hurricane will spoil six good months’ hope (200-1);

‘Dug up a newt He may have envied once  
And turned to stone, shut up inside a stone (214-5);

‘Conceiveth all things will continue thus,  
And we shall have to live in fear of Him

essence of Caliban's existence in his life as a slave, this sense of himself perhaps nowhere more clearly indicated than in his blinding of the sea-beast "which he snared, [. . .] and now pens the drudge/ In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban" (163,165-66). Caliban is trapped; so is his sea-beast; so are all of Setebos' creatures: "For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them" (Ecclesiastes 9:12).

Further on in the poem we will also find several references to fire, each certainly connected with Setebos' power, both in exercises/demonstrations of it: ("Saw a ball flame down late[. . .]"(211); "fast invading fires begin! White blaze – "(289)) and in efforts to appease Setebos: "myself lit a fire" (275). But what about the effect of the sun's light, which is surely the aspect of fire which is being called on to complete the visual effect here? Caliban himself seems to prefer the darkness, and seeks it out to cover himself;<sup>3</sup> it provides safety from the eye of Setebos. And yet in his own role as "I/eye", the watcher, Caliban of course relies on the light to reveal the world around him.<sup>4</sup>

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So long as He lives, keeps His strength: no change (241-3);

[. . .]else, here are we  
And there is He, and nowhere help at all (248-9).

<sup>3</sup> The cave is his refuge: "Wherefore he mainly dances on dark nights,/ Moans in the sun, gets under holes to laugh,/And never speaks his mind save housed as now"(266-8).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Richard II's speech: "[. . .]knowst thou not/ That when the searching eye of heaven is hid/ Behind the globe, that lights the lower world,/ Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen/ In murders and in outrage boldly here;/ But when from under this terrestrial ball/ He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines/ And darts his light through every guilty hole,/ Then murders,

And we cannot ignore “some great fish breaks at times”, which leads us out of the metaphor back to literal reality, at the same time carrying a double implication: both destroying/dispelling a thing of beauty and revealing its impermanence, and breaking free of constraints, an image of transcendence as the fish, if only for a moment, leaps out of its element into the beyond<sup>5</sup> (in contrast to the icy fish which cannot escape her rock-stream). In fact, this great fish is an apt paradigm for Caliban in his struggle to break free of his limitations, and his occasional momentary triumphs in this regard.

In this complex metaphor there still remains a surplus of meaning, something apprehended but not quite able to be fully explained, that leads to “[. . .] the perspective of double vision peculiar to metaphor” (Ullmann qtd. in Nowotny 53). “This curious situation, where there has to be a similarity between two things sufficient to hold them together and a disparity between them sufficient to make their encounter exciting [. . .]” (Nowotny 53) is the tension that is maintained as Caliban continues to tease out the implications of this initial insight.

Note that he uses the word “touching” as he turns to thoughts of God, a term combining the sense of physical sensation that lingers from the first lines with the suggestion of a

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treasons, and detested sins,/ The cloak of night being plucked from off their backs,/ Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves?” (*The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, III, ii, 36-47).

<sup>5</sup> The sudden liberation of this image, preceded by the demonstration of Caliban’s capacity for metaphor, provides us with rhetorical proof of Caliban’s ability to conceptualise beyond his immediate surroundings – his forays in theology being further evidence.

tentative exploration in thought. We are reminded of Michelangelo's creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the fingertips of God touching man with all that this suggests of the once closeness of that relationship. (Here we note the creation is reversed as creature draws his god into existence.)

From there he becomes crafty, from the knowledge that he is somehow fooling ("vexing") Setebos (emphasized by the spondee "Could he but know!"), to his boast of cheating Prosper<sup>6</sup> and Miranda. In line 23 Caliban refers to his "rank tongue": is this part of his self-image? Is he passing judgment on the duplicity of language? Or is it a physical fact? (Caliban is not an adept speaker, and some of his most characteristic sounds -- the "ch" and soft "g" of clenched/chin/touch/catch/crunch/drudge/cheat/gibe/speech; the "k" as in coating/cave/creeps/tickle/catch/crunch/cross/recross/breaks/talks/called -- can be seen to reflect his physical attributes; his physiognomy may be such that certain sounds are easier for him to make than others. Certainly his rhythms of speech and alliterative patterns carry their own particular energy.) Prosper has taught him speech, but to what end?

Jaynes suggests that the nature of understanding language, and therefore the end of learning it, is in a sense to learn to obey:

Consider what it is to listen and understand someone speaking to us. In a certain sense we have to become the other person; or rather, we let him become part of us for a brief second. We suspend our own identities, after which we come back to ourselves and accept or reject what he has said.

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<sup>6</sup> Caliban's abbreviation of the name Prospero to Prosper serves to highlight his perception of the magician's good fortune, and is by extension, a constant reminder of his own misfortune.

But that brief second of dawdling identity is the nature of understanding language; and if that language is a command, the identification of understanding becomes the obedience. To hear is actually a kind of obedience. (97)

As Caliban complains in *The Tempest*: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/ Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!”(I,ii,363-5). Caliban clearly has an ambivalent attitude toward words and speech, especially evident in this last line. And yet, “the rank tongue *blossoms* into speech”(23) -- a conspicuous metaphor in that it is one of a very few references to flowers in the poem. Perhaps he means that the tongue is rank *until* it effects speech.

Kenneth Maclean points to Caliban’s image of the cave as eye: the “pompion plant/ coating the cave-top as a brow its eye”(7-8), and introduces the figure of “Caliban’s vision extending out of a hollow darkness” (Maclean 214). Plato’s cave comes to mind here, and especially the shadowy nature of the reality that is perceived, as Caliban gropes from within this metaphysical darkness to discover something of the truth. Although Maclean goes on to a rather bizarre interpretation of the eye imagery in the poem,<sup>7</sup> I find

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<sup>7</sup> “Behind the opening mood of childlike, sensuous enjoyment appears a more sinister burden of meaning. The whole passage suggests the “head” of Caliban: chin, brow, eye, the beard – Caliban’s vision extending out of a hollow darkness. The lines themselves might be unremarkable enough if the eye and the various contexts of Caliban’s way of seeing did not constantly recur throughout the poem, and if the imagery of the “head” were not picked up so centrally in the burial mound passage previously mentioned, as well as most dramatically in the final terrified lines: “Ha! The wind/ Shoulders the pillared dust, death’s house o’ the move” (ll. 287-88).

The entire complex structuring – childlike enjoyment played off against more sinister thematology developing throughout the poem – suggests the Jungian concept of the gathering aspects of the Shadow” (Maclean 213-14).

his initial observation a useful one in recognizing Caliban as watcher throughout the poem.

Caliban's choice of the word "dam" in l.16 is an interesting one, as opposed to the word "mother" that we might expect. "Dam" seems to imply a relationship closer to that of animals, and is in fact the only term that he uses in referring to Sycorax. And yet Caliban does not give her flesh, so to speak, but instead relegates her to the realm of ideas, and mentions her now and later only in reference to what she has taught him of the ways of Setebos. Similarly, as we shall see, many of her opinions he goes on to oppose. Caliban's fatherlessness is certainly significant, and looms large both in his actual relationship with Prospero and in his attempt at reaching an understanding of Setebos' ways.

Every rhetorical aspect of Caliban's speech, including cadence, contributes to an appreciation of the mood and situation of the character. Turning to meter, and bearing in mind that "the inflection of a phrase cannot be absolutely governed because stress goes where emphasis lies, and emphasis lies on what people think important" (Griffiths 333), the two phrases that draw our attention in these early lines are the spondees "pit's much mire" in line 2, and "could he but know!" in line 18. The arrangement of consonants in the first phrase forces the speaker to slow down, and to stress each syllable. The effect is a kind of phonetic intensive of the actual muck itself as our mouths squelch through the separate sounds which simply will not elide. "Could he but know!" is a different case (although the long vowels do contribute to the effect), having more to do with the



emphasis of the speaker, somewhat scandalized by his own behaviour, lingering over and admiring his own audacity.

In lines 24-25 we are introduced to a *trinity* of Setebos's; this dwelling by Caliban on the name of the god may be felt by the reader as "a repetition which comes somewhere between a stutter and a caress on the word, between finding the word an obstacle and finding it a place of rest" (Griffiths 275). Surely, even this early in the monologue, we are beginning to perceive the conflicted attitude of Caliban to his god -- Setebos fascinates Caliban and yet is liable to be vexed by Caliban's talk. Caliban is unsure what is acceptable and yet seems determined to proceed in his musings, fairly convinced that he is safe from retribution, in this particular liminal time and place. We can imagine either an eagerness to begin which spills over in the exuberance of thrice naming his subject, or, just as likely, a more relaxed stretching back and lingering over (invoking, almost) the name of the god as Caliban arrays his thoughts and observations.

We note the archaic usage of the verbs "thinketh", and "dwelleth", and the information that Setebos lives in "the cold o' the moon". The connection with the moon here may be another intertextual reference, an echo of his mother's religion and her reputed influence on that planet. Shakespeare's Prospero says of Caliban: "His mother was a witch, and one so strong/ That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,/ And deal in her command without her power" (*Tempest* V, i, 269-71). Why cold? Caliban himself dwells in the heat ("Green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o' the sun"). Setebos' affinity is with the icy

fish here; so Caliban is consciously delineating some differences from himself in the anthropomorphic creation of his god. And yet Caliban does have amphibious qualities (witness the opening scene), if not being outright fishy in his original essence: “What have we here? a man or a fish? [. . .] A fish: he smells like a fish: a very ancient and fishlike smell [. . .]” (*Tempest*, II, ii, 24-26).

Setebos’s creations -- sun, stars, and snaky sea -- introduce the sibillancy which will intensify in the analogy of Setebos with the icy fish: spied/icy/’scape/stream/herself/stream/thrusts/crystal/spike/sickened/repulse/dense/delicious/sun/flounced/bliss/despair. “Snaky sea” introduces the animal images which continue through the elaboration of the icy fish (whose plight Caliban captures poignantly), and proliferate in lines 44-55. The snake and the fish appear as emblems of Setebos. It may be helpful at this point to consider the psychological dimension of these symbols as primordial images which resonate through the ages in our own experience as well. The symbol is described as “the best way to speak of that which is in large part unknown, since it evokes the feelings and associations which make it possible for us to be in a relationship with a mystery which cannot be touched” (Singer 212). Carl Jung’s study of symbols in the unconscious (from which poetry and dreams emerge) offers us the following associations: the fish as integration of the unconscious in “a veritable bath of renewal in the life-source where one is once again a fish, unconscious as in sleep, intoxication and death” (131). The fact that

the fish is as mute as the god is silent is also significant (for that matter, so is the snake).<sup>8</sup> So, too, is the contrast between this profound silence and Caliban's volubility and apparent hyper-awareness. It is perhaps not surprising that this mysterious god who so intrigues Caliban should be represented by a symbol whose attributes support the very inscrutability that Caliban finds most vexing.

The serpent, on the other hand, is seen to embody the chthonic, or earthly principle (Jung 292); it can be a phallic image, representing sexuality, but also carrying with it "the horror that both the actual serpent and sexuality uncontrolled have inspired in generations of men" (Bodkin 236); then again, the serpent as the creature that casts its skin is associated with the renewal of life and immortality (Bodkin 276).<sup>9</sup>

Although Caliban's world is that of the "green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o' the sun" (40), he understands the nature of the fish's distress, presumably speaking as he does

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that "in alchemy the fish is the mysterious *prima materia*, or initial material, of the work, the *piscis rotundus*, the round fish in the sea, which must be cooked until it begins to shine... According to certain texts it carries in its body 'the dragon's stone,' which many seek without knowing it. The fish exerts a magnetic attraction on human beings; it is a living stone out of which the elixir of immortality can be produced" (von Franz 182-3).

<sup>9</sup> the snake is also described as "the *numen* [spiritual force] who guards the tomb [in its role as chthonic principle] and protects the transformations of the god. Psychologically it symbolizes the deepest levels of the collective unconscious, where the transformation of the god-image occurs.[. . .] When the accepted god-image ages and dies in collective unconsciousness [as to some extent in the Victorian Age?], then the psychic substance, or elements, which had in him become visible sink back there, to the region whence all revealed god-images which command belief once originated, into the psychic background and into the hidden life of the unconscious psyche [presumably to be reconstituted or remanifested in time to come]"(von Franz 270-1).

from his own knowledge of despair and thwarted attempts at transcendence (“Flounced back from bliss she was not born to breathe” (41): this observation can only come from a voice of experience).

In line 43 we find the first appearance of the refrain “: so He.” Caliban’s analogical thinking leads him to postulate a proposal, try it out in application to his own experience, and then draw the comparison to Setebos. Consequently, “: so He” most often signals the summing up of a long train of thought or argument concerning Caliban, and by extension, Setebos.

Other idiosyncrasies that are by now apparent in Caliban’s speech include an “abruptness of [syntax], with a very high frequency of omissions.” Park Honan continues:

no other speaker in Browning clips so many parts of speech, particularly so many auxiliary verbs, and the curtailment serves to reflect the bluntness and crudity of Caliban’s mind. His typical sentences are composed of short phrases and clauses that follow one another abruptly, often with a colon or simply a comma linking two independent clauses. (276)

I would argue that since Caliban is speaking to himself, the same rules do not apply as in communication with another person. In fact, I would imagine that if we were able to analyze our own internal monologues, we might find ourselves using the same kind of verbal shorthand. It must also be noted that ellipses are characteristic of many of Browning’s speakers, and perhaps has more to do with the poet’s impression of natural

speech, words and ideas tumbling out in profusion<sup>10</sup>. In short, I do not accept these characteristic omissions as evidence of the bluntness and crudity of Caliban's mind.

The traditional hypothesis concerning Caliban's use of the third person and the omission of the personal pronoun standing for his own name (as in "Thinketh", etc.) is that "even in summer he deems it desirable to avoid a too openly offered challenge to Setebos; hence the employment [. . .] of the third person singular in a curious attempt to mislead his hearer" (Naish 16). In a useful and detailed discussion of the frequent shifting of voice from third to first person and back, E.K. Brown explains:

The passages in the first person can be accounted for as expressions of those elements in Caliban's character that are struggling against his fear of Setebos, and the shifts from one person to another then serve to show the heightening of tension within the speaker.[. . .] The shifts to the first person and back to the third enrich the characterization and heighten the drama. To take them as deliberate [. . .] means that one attends [. . .] to the intention or at least the effectiveness of the poem as a rendering of a character in which there is a sharp conflict (between fear and guile on one hand and impudence and self-love on the other) and as a rendering of a drama in which there is a slow rise towards thinking oneself as great as one's god and a sudden fall to grovelling as a slave before that god. (393,

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<sup>10</sup> J. Hillis Miller offers the following theory concerning the speech patterns in Browning's dramatic monologues:

"The linguistic mirror of these sudden shiftings of point of view is the breathless haste of Browning's language. His words come in burst of half-coagulated syntax. He starts in the direction of one grammatical expression of thought, stops suddenly in the middle (*for that way will not say it all*), and then rushes off toward another syntactical form which, half complete, is broken again, and another tried, and so on. The dash, the exclamation point, and the colon are Browning's favorite marks of punctuation: full stops, but not complete breaks – the juxtaposition of related linguistic units which are syntactically impossible.[. . .]

In such passages an immense linguistic energy is prevented from going wholeheartedly in any one direction. It bursts out irrepressibly in a violent splutter, only to be checked as soon as begun by an equally powerful force preventing it from spending all its energy in one direction. Browning is a semantic stutterer. He has a great many things to say at once, and they all rush out simultaneously – producing a sentence all dashes and parentheses – a sentence which strives to exist all in a moment: all its parts in the same flash of time, not sequentially" (87-88).

Burrows marks the evolution of criticism on this much-puzzled-over issue of Caliban's referring to himself in the third person:

Nineteenth-century critics assumed that as a primitive he was a kind of child and hence used this nursery form of self-reference: 'he has not risen to the consciousness of the Ego' and this third-person device 'contributes to the presentation of the bestial [. . .] character of the creature'. But as he does in fact quite often 'rise to the consciousness of the Ego', what then? Are we to infer that Caliban is struggling towards consciousness of the Ego? That we are observing 'baby' Man beginning to grow up, in process of passing from the autistic stage to the egocentric – to use Piaget's terms? The twentieth-century critics have preferred to explain the third person in terms of Caliban's fearful need to be safe and secret in his thinking aloud: 'he' will perhaps help to fool Big Brother Setebos.[. . .] However explained, the shuttling between 'he' and 'I' produces for the reader curious oscillations in 'distancing', swinging him from outside to inside, inside to outside – now looking at Caliban as an odd character, now projected into Caliban's mind and feelings. (Burrows 208-9)

I have noted a pattern (not without exceptions) in Caliban's oscillation from third to first person: it seems that the third person is most generally used when Caliban is referring to observations of himself in his customary or actual behaviour (observing, describing, in some sense outside of himself; perhaps not as emotionally involved): in the opening scene, which we understand is a habitual refuge; in his imitation of Prosper, (with the notable exception of referring to Miranda as "my" wife - indicating more emotional investment in this aspect of the charade?), which effort he may be trying to distance himself from as a failed attempt at raising himself, and now disavows/diminishes as

“baubles[. . .] and sport”; in the same sense, his Stonehenge episode in lines 188-97<sup>11</sup> is described in the third person, as if he is now embarrassed at his zeal which came to nothing, or defensive in his failure (“No use at all i’ the work [. . .] / ‘Shall some day knock it down again:”) – these are painful episodes from which he must shield his fragile ego. Again we see him observing his typical behaviour in the third person in lines 257-62:

[. . .]. ‘Sees, himself,  
Yonder two flies, with purple films and pink.  
Bask on the pompion-bell above: kills both.  
‘Sees two black painful beetles roll their ball  
On head and tail as if to save their lives:  
Moves them the stick away they strive to clear.

lurking and hiding from the god in lines 263-69:

Even so, ‘would have Him misconceive, suppose  
This Caliban strives hard and ails no less,  
And always, above all else, envies Him;  
Wherefore he mainly dances on dark nights,  
Moans in the sun, gets under holes to laugh,  
And never speaks his mind saved housed as now:  
Outside, ‘groans, ‘curses. [. . .]

and grovelling in abject subjugation at the end of the poem.

The “I” is used in passages where Caliban seems to be imagining another stronger, freer,

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Tasteth, himself, no finer good i’ the world  
When all goes right, in this safe summer-time,  
And he wants little, hungers, aches not much,  
Than trying what to do with wit and strength.  
‘Falls to make something: ‘piled yon pile of turfs,  
And squared and stuck there squares of soft white chalk,  
And, with a fish-tooth, scratched a moon on each,  
And set up endwise certain spikes of tree,  
And crowned the whole with a sloth’s skull a-top,  
Found dead i’ the woods, too hard for one to kill. (188-97)

more autonomous and powerful self – and it is interesting to note how often the “I” corresponds with the subjunctive mood of liminality discussed in chapter 2. In line 74ff. we find Caliban fantasizing himself as Creator:

[. . .] *wishing* I were born a bird.  
Put case, unable to be what I wish,  
I yet *could make* a live bird out of clay:  
*Would* not I *take* clay, pinch my Caliban [. . .]  
There, and I *will* that he begin to live, [. . .]  
-- why, I *should* laugh; [. . .]  
Well, as the chance were, this *might take* or else  
Not take my fancy: I *might hear* his cry [. . .]; (emphasis mine)

and in line 126, destroying his “prattling pipe”:

*Would* not I *smash* it with my foot? [. . .] (emphasis mine).

Other fanciful circumstances can elicit an “I” -- or first person possessive:

[. . .] *would not joy!* *Could* I *bring* quails here when I have a mind  
(ll.135-6)(emphasis mine),

or suggest ways that Setebos could have improved Caliban’s design:

*Why not* [. . .] plate my scalp with bone against the snow,  
Or overscale my flesh ‘neath joint and joint [. . .] (174-6)(emphasis mine).

Finally, there is the speculative “I” of ll. 269-78 who imagines an at the same time more extreme (in his imagined sacrifices), and daring (in his taunting song to Setebos) Caliban than the one who falls flat in third-person ignominy at the close:

*If* He caught me here  
‘*Would*, to appease Him, cut a finger off,  
Or of my three kid yearlings burn the best, [. . .]  
Or push my tame beast for the orc to taste:  
While myself lit a fire, and made a song  
And sung it, “*What I hate, be consecrate  
To celebrate Thee and Thy state, no mate  
For Thee: what see for envy in poor me?*” (emphasis mine, except the song).



Use of the first person and the concept of “I” as metaphor is discussed in Julian Jaynes’ *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, where he explains his understanding of the fundamental basis of consciousness in language and the imaginative extension of behaviour:

A most important ‘feature’ of this metaphor ‘world’ is the metaphor we have of ourselves, the analog ‘I’, which can ‘move about’ vicarially in our ‘imagination’, ‘doing’ things that we are not actually doing. There are of course many uses for such an analog ‘I’. We imagine ‘ourselves’ ‘doing’ this or that, and thus ‘make’ decisions on the basis of imagined ‘outcomes’ that would be impossible if we did not have an imagined ‘self’ behaving in an imagined ‘world’. (62-3)

We see Caliban doing this all the time, imagining himself in situations, extending the experience of his world, in order to thus reason his way into understanding the behaviour of Setebos. The premise may be faulty, but the effort at analogy is a very understandable, very human undertaking, and serves to underline the exercise of Caliban’s consciousness.

Jaynes goes on to pose the question: “How can one know oneself? By initiating by oneself memories of one’s actions and feelings and looking at them together with an analog ‘I’, conceptualizing them, sorting them out into characteristics, and narrating so as to know what one is likely to do” (287).

It seems that in this view, whatever the significance of Caliban’s shifting from first-person pronoun to third in referring to himself, still there is a fairly clear and in most cases well-defined sense of himself, knowing his own most likely actions and even able

to explain rather sensibly the reasons behind those actions. Certainly as has been suggested by Robert Langbaum, Caliban grows in self-knowledge through what he comes to perceive in the course of his monologues. There is

a new surge of life, an advance on the dramatic characterization with which we start because an infusion into it of the lyrical characterization – of that part of the speaker’s life outside the poem which he has managed, through what he sees and thinks in the course of the poem, to articulate [. . .] Caliban as he stands revealed in what he sees and thinks [. . .], the expression of Caliban’s whole soul as it breaks through and exceeds the condition of the poem. (Langbaum 207-8)

We see Caliban’s consciousness of himself changing subtly, always in flux, sensitive to the impressions he receives from his environment, vibrating to the changes he feels from within in the form of memory and desire, in fact experiencing himself in all the richness of immediacy, not locked into a static mentality but *living* that “unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of [his] own” (Hopkins 339).

Using the first person and the third alternately according to what is appropriate to his internal state gives Caliban a more fluid identity while at the same time providing us with a more precise barometer of his feeling state at any given time. Browning uses it as an instrument to reveal the uniqueness of his character, and succeeds to an unusual degree in expressing for Caliban the “whatness” that Gerard Manley Hopkins asserts with great force in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves – goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.* (5-8)

Moving from the “I” and “he” of Caliban back to the external world of the poem, we find that lines 46-55 are rich with animal imagery,<sup>12</sup> and very particular observations and characterizations; these are also combined with water and fire images: (“sleek-wet” otter; “yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam”). The enjambments that occur in lines 48, 50, and 53 create a sense of overlap of the separate images, and draw them together in a rich tapestry, giving us the feeling of an overflowing abundance of creation. In considering the circular effect created by the interweaving of images (animal imaged by animal: otter/leech; sea imaged by animal: snaky sea; animal imaged by the sea: auk/foam), Park Honan makes an interesting point about their effect on our perception of Caliban:

Thus the imagery characterizes Caliban by linking him to an animal world (even a kind of animalized sea) and an animal God. [. . .] But what gives Caliban’s portrait its subtlety and brilliance on the level of imagery is not so much the sheer enumeration of animals as the way in which these animals are individually rendered; his central characteristic is hammered out, as it were, in a bright, hard, glittering mosaic of animal species, including their minutely observed traits and typifying actions.[. . .] It is through these bits of vividness that Caliban’s being becomes vivid; a seeming myriad of imagistic details in effect unite in the speaker’s character. (173)

The use of sibilants increases noticeably as Caliban moves from the images of Setebos’s creation to his theory of why Setebos felt the need to create: for “spite: how else?”(56).

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. this passage in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (II,ii,1-14) in which Caliban catalogues the plagues that Prospero calls down on him, using similes of animals to describe their effects: “fright me with urchin-shows [. . .] like apes that mow and chatter at me,/And after bite me; then like hedgehogs which/ Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount/ Their pricks at my footfall; sometimes am I/ All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues/ Do hiss me into madness.” (This last figure is especially significant for us considering the snake imagery with which Setebos is so closely connected.)

This spite, which includes both Setebos' for his creation, and even more revealingly in this passage. Caliban's for Setebos, is conveyed in part by the preponderance of sibilants (see/us/spite/else) introduced in the same line with "spite". which sets the tone for the following list: Himself/second/self/Himself (referring to and in a sense deriding Setebos's inability to create a mate for Himself); dislikes/slights/eyesore, in reference to that which Setebos disdains; and listlessness/sport/Himself/stronger/mocks/so/so/skills. in analyzing the relationship of Setebos to his creation(s). The phrase "that is it" with its emphatic tone, and placed, as it is, at the end of l.65, impresses us with the sense that Caliban has grasped a truth here, and caught the essence of the argument which he goes on to summarize in the final two lines of this section. Here Caliban points to the futility of purpose and complete subjection to Setebos's omnipotence in a passage brimming with plosives and suggesting much buried resentment:

*Because, so brave, so better though they be,  
It nothing skills if he begin to plague.*

The sudden modulation to the unvoiced bilabial in "plague" is sensed as a drop in intensity, in fact a careful attenuation, of what may feel at this point too bold a challenge – but the word's meaning compensates for the loss of sound.

The repetition of "there" (78, 80, 81) in Caliban's verbal creation of the clay bird <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> There is in fact a Christian precedent for this scene in one of the apocryphal Gospel narratives. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* begins with: "This child Jesus, when five years old, was playing in the ford of a mountain stream; and He collected the flowing waters into pools, and made them clear immediately, and by a word alone He made them obey Him. Having made some soft clay, He fashioned out of it twelve sparrows.[. . .] Jesus clapped His hands, and cried out to the sparrows, and said to them: Off you go! The sparrows flew, and went off crying" (Thomas

imparts vigor to the sequence of imagined actions. (It also prefigures Caliban's graphic reaction to the lightning) (290). The alliteration of "Caliban" and "clay" is a particularly insistent one, since "clay" is repeated no less than five times. The "mankin" (92)<sup>14</sup> has obvious associations with Caliban, I think in the same relation as "clay". Pairing "clay" with words such as "brittle" (85) and "merely" (94), emphasizes the clay bird's fragility and impermanence, as well as its absolute subordination to its maker.

Another treatment in Browning's work of the "creation from clay" theme can be found in "Rabbi Ben Ezra", in which the Rabbi contemplates:

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,  
That metaphor! and feel  
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay.–  
What entered into thee,  
*That* was, is, and shall be:  
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure[. . .]. (151-3, 160-2).

The fact that the creative force is in some sense shared between the potter and the clay figure is seen as problematic by DeVane:

The figure of the potter's wheel and the clay, however dramatically appropriate for the Rabbi, gets Browning into some difficulties, for the metaphor seems to make man a creature without creative power himself, and that is contrary to Browning's usual creed. He therefore gives the clay an incongruous knowledge and a capacity to participate in its own making,

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2:1-2, 7-8).

<sup>14</sup> This choice of word yields interesting associations. It seems that "manikin" is used interchangeably in alchemical vocabulary with the term "homunculus" (Jung 238), and refers to that small figure (often depicted as a naked child) that is "produced by an alchemist in a vessel or flask [and] is transformed into *pneuma* [wind, spirit] and exalted" (Singer 400n). The homunculus has also been called the *filius philosophorum* ("son of the philosophers") and is apt to burst into flames and disappear at the crucial moment[. . .] (Jung 178, 301).

and has to make the figure of clay give way to the figure of flesh (294).

But surely this is not a flaw in Browning's design, as this same ambiguity is allowed to appear in another form in our poem. Here as elsewhere the boundaries of Caliban's identity are fluid.<sup>15</sup> Caliban identifies himself as both the bird and its maker (this is significant, especially when we remember that Setebos is connected twice with fish -- a less evolved being, or at least theoretically more limited) but is reminded of his earthliness with this repetition of clay: although aspiring to flight he is not quite able to believe in the transcendent symbol.

"The bird, being a creature of earth yet not entirely of earth, since he can fly, is a symbol for that incomprehensible part of man that is sometimes called 'spirit'" (Singer 148). The bird is sent on a cruel mission to punish creatures who "mind me not"(84), then falls from flight, its "leg snapped [. . .] [lying] stupid-like" (85-6). Caliban's imagination is divided between his role as creature bird and the god who decides his fate. Caliban is here for the first time explicitly relating himself and his experience (if only imagined) to Setebos: the identities of Creator and created, Caliban and his clay bird, and by extension Caliban and his own Creator, have become blurred.

Lines 95-97 synthesize Caliban's conception of creation -- the pleasure of absolute power, with "brain become alive": the intoxication of it. The effect of drink and the

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<sup>15</sup> Another sign of Caliban's flexible identity is his blinded sea-beast that he has also named after himself.

creative surge together combine most potently, lifting Caliban beyond himself.

Line 98 articulates a kind of defense, or at least a refusal to judge Setebos. This premise.

“He is strong and Lord”, is not unfamiliar to us. There are certain echoes of the Old Testament here -- how can we judge God, or measure Him by our standards, who is entirely above and beyond?<sup>16</sup> As William James points out,

In Job [. . .] God reminds us that man is not the measure of his creation. The world is immense, constructed on no plan or theory which the intellect of man can grasp. It is *transcendent* everywhere.[. . .] Sufficient or insufficient, there is nothing more.[. . .] God is great, we know not his ways. He takes from us all we have, but yet if we possess our souls in patience, we *may* pass the valley of the shadow, and come out in sunlight again. We may or we may not![. . .] What more have we to say now than God said from the whirlwind over two thousand five hundred years ago?  
(73-4)

As Setebos is to Caliban, so Caliban is to the crabs: an arbitrary power (“Loving not, hating not, just choosing so”)(103). Caliban sees some animals as individuals (otter, auk, badger, pie, fish, bird), others as groups (eft-things, ants, maggots, grigs, crabs), and with the crabs, singles out individuals, revealing in a few lines his keen observation, knowledge of their ways, appearance, preferred foods, his total immersion and attention to the world of his surroundings. It is clear that he shares none of our aesthetic distaste for certain life forms: indeed many of the objects of his scrutiny are creatures that are ordinarily either beneath our notice (ants, beetles, flies) or inspire in us nothing but revulsion. He co-exists with all sorts of creepy, slimy insects, amphibians and reptiles,

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<sup>16</sup> See Exodus 33:19: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”

and dispassionately considers their attributes. The eft-things tickle him and make him laugh, maggots are simply lively and burgeoning, leeches are noted for their litheness and beetles evoke in him sympathy for their painful toil. Nothing escapes his attention, and there is a kind of humility in this approach, I mean in the sense of unpretentiousness and earthiness, that defamiliarizes our habitual ways of seeing, and can result in either a further distancing of the reader from Caliban (that is, affirming his beastliness), or an acknowledgment, reluctant or not, of our own curiosity about and connection with these teeming life forms and forces.

A pattern has been set up in these sections where Caliban initially pronounces his theory about Setebos's motives or situation, and then moves on to illustrate, trying out by analogy to his own life whether this theory is plausible or not. The example he uses this time is of an inanimate object, a pipe which he uses to lure small birds. In a sense he gives life to the object with his breath<sup>17</sup>, which is a time-honoured metaphor for inspiration and creation: only this pipe, when it speaks, is treacherous and boastful (does Caliban sense that he is stepping over the line in his analysis of Setebos?), and this is emphasized with a plethora of initial plosives (pipe/pithless/blown/blue/birds/Put/pipe/prattle/boast/birds/blow). I am especially intrigued by this term "pithless", which seems a fitting reference for Caliban in his shaken confidence, and also an apt reminder of the

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<sup>17</sup> Again we have reference to another of Browning's poems, "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician", ll.2-6: "[. . .]God's handiwork/ (This man's flesh he hath admirably made,/ Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,/ To coop up and keep down on earth a space/ That puffed vapour from his mouth, man's soul)".



hollowness out of which things are created.

Barbara Melchiori translates this broken pipe reference into sexual terms: "Once again the god is seen as jealous of his creature's powers of reproduction, and the punishment implied by the imagery is castration" (103). I see the conflict as language-based. Caliban is recognizing his presumption in speaking for the silent Setebos. We have been given an illustration of creation not reliably subordinate to its Creator, and the swift punishment that follows on this insolence. Caliban is all too conscious of the danger that he courts, the jealousy of his god, the problem of this spite of Setebos to which he constantly returns. Yet he is in some perverse way determined to push at this position, to "vex", to tempt the god into retribution ("Because to talk about him vexes – ha[. . .] and time to vex is now")(17-18). Perhaps because the god is silent, so silent in fact that in the next few lines Caliban imagines that he might indeed be dead ("[done] to nothing, perchance" (131) -- although the antecedents in this phrase are so unclear as to make the sense exceedingly ambiguous), Caliban feels a need to test his reactions and becomes increasingly bold in his assertions of autonomy.

There is a sense in which language limits and confines. This is surely what is behind the Jewish taboo on uttering or writing the name of God, of Yahweh in the Old Testament. To name is to exercise control over, and in naming and describing and comparing Setebos to himself, Caliban has surely blasphemed in some fundamental way. He is in stasis, caught so to speak between transgression and transcendence. In blaming Setebos, in

complaining, in pointing out the god's shortcomings:

'Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:  
He hated that He cannot change His cold.  
Nor cure its ache [. . .] (31-3);  
[. . .] He made all these and more,  
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?  
He could not, Himself, make a second self/  
To be His mate;[. . .] (55-8);

and especially in supposing that

He hath made things worthier than Himself,  
And envieth that, so helped, such things do more  
Than He who made them!.. (112-4),

Caliban has spoken the unspeakable, has said what cannot now be unsaid, and awaits some response to his challenge.

In direct allusion to *The Tempest*, and by way of analogy to Setebos in his situation (Setebos:Quiet::Caliban:Prospero), Caliban reveals in lines 150-169 his own warped attempt to imitate his "betters". In line 150 we are given more evidence of Caliban's preoccupation with watching, with the use of the two verbs "peeped" and "eyed", where the use of one or the other would have been perfectly adequate to the image being conveyed. This seems to be a signal to the reader to pay attention, and in fact we find three more references to eyes in this section ("the eyed skin" (156), "mind his eye" (159), "blinded the eyes" (164)); surely these are intentional echoes and repetitions to emphasize a central concern of Caliban's which finds its most disturbing expression in the image of the blinded sea-beast. There is also the matter of the pun on I/eye, which paradoxically keeps Caliban in the forefront even as he maintains the role of observer. That peculiar

and characteristic word “vexed” is used again in this section, this time referring to Caliban and his reaction to Prospero’s presumption. The most telling of these lines concerns the sea-beast that Caliban, in imitation of Prospero, has maimed and imprisoned and that represents his own self: “A bitter heart that bides its time and bites”(167).

Other expressions that call attention to themselves include “he knows what” (153), where we might expect instead “he knows *not* what” or perhaps “who knows what”. This expression is immediately followed by the word “prodigious”, also an unlikely term for Caliban to use, one which gives us pause to consider what he is saying. As an enchanter he is now covered with eyes (l.156), and has taken for a wife Miranda in the form of an ounce (snow leopard) that he goes on to describe as a four-legged serpent, thus bestowing on her an attribute shared with Setebos. It is interesting that the leopard Miranda’s behaviour (“A four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,/ Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye”)(159-60) closely resembles that of the Caliban in *The Tempest* towards his master Prospero. Ariel, not surprisingly, is translated into a bird, but a water-bird who must catch fish for Caliban. And finally, most pathetically, Caliban identifies with himself the lumpish sea-beast that he has captured, blinded, and effectively destroyed (a sea-beast who can neither see nor swim)<sup>18</sup>. In the light of all that has been

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<sup>18</sup> Priestley comments: “The self-hatred and self-contempt in his choice and treatment of the sea-beast to represent himself is a shrewd and moving piece of psychology. So also is the comment, ‘Plays thus at being Prospero in a way,/ Taketh his mirth with make-believes.’ ‘In a way’, indeed, and what an irony in the term ‘mirth’. The whole little world Caliban creates, like the temple he describes building a few lines later, has all the ironic force of a bitter parody” (134).

noted of Caliban's concern with seeing. it is particularly ominous that he has blinded the sea-beast. Is seeing dangerous, as speaking soon proves to be? It is clear that Caliban's own perceptions have not been blinded. but it is also painfully evident that he does feel himself to be damaged and wounded in some very fundamental way. His fears – of being blinded, and of being shut up inside a stone (trapped *absolutely*, immobilized, like the newt), both of these he imposes on his sea-beast “[. . .] which he snared, /Blinded the eyes of, [. . .] and now pens the drudge/ In a hole o’ the rock[. . .]” (163-66). The use of the verb “pens” in line 165 is an interesting choice, with its multiple denotations, here encompassing both the sense of imprisonment and also that of writing or composing (Caliban as Prospero, cruel master, has created this role for the beast and, as master of prodigious words in this soliloquy, has expressed a very basic truth about his own condition).

Now Caliban proceeds to an internal argument with his mother about who made all things. The word “vex(ed)” appears twice in two lines. This peculiar word has become a characteristic one for Caliban, having cropped up no less than five times thus far.<sup>19</sup>

At the risk of belaboring the point, it must be noted that, in line 174, Caliban's first

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<sup>19</sup> (from Latin *vexare*, to agitate, trouble) l a: to bring trouble, distress, or agitation to b: to bring physical distress to c: to irritate or annoy by petty provocations: HARASS d: PUZZLE, BAFFLE 2: to debate or discuss at length 3: to shake or toss about syn: see ANNOY. (Webster's New Collegiate 1981) It appears that any of these meanings might fit in the various contexts. It does seem significant, however, that the sound of the word itself contains a combination of the /k/ we have come to associate with Caliban and the /s/ that is linked with Setebos.

concern is for his eyes. In line 184, Caliban sees fit to point out that Setebos "hath eyes": therefore he sees and watches too, and, having eyes, is not helpless, but free to love and hate as he will. As Caliban lists the ways in which his constitution might have been improved had Setebos not meant to vex his creatures with weakness, it is clear that his highest values are practical and not aesthetic ones. He wishes for horny eyes, a plated scalp, and flesh overscaled like an orc's armour (identifying himself once again with the sea-beast).

In line 178 Caliban seems to assert Setebos quite definitely as the sole creator over against the possibility of the Quiet. The reference to the most favourable conditions under which Caliban labours to create ("When all goes right, in this safe summer-time,/ And he wants little, hungers, aches not much")(189-90) reveals a stoic nature, not expecting much, and grateful for the most minimal advantage, in this case for the relative absence of pain. His construction is reminiscent of Stonehenge; it sounds like an ancient worshipping or burial ground, and with the predominance of sibilants in its description (something/turfs/squared/stuck/squares/soft/scratched/set/certain/spikes/sloth's/skull), and details like the moon scratched with a fish-tooth on each square<sup>20</sup>, our first impression is of a temple dedicated to Setebos -- and yet line 198 ("No use at all i' the work, for work's sole sake;") belies any such purpose. If it were indeed a religious impulse that motivated the work, Caliban is not admitting it, perhaps because it found no

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<sup>20</sup> Caliban believes that Setebos dwells "i' the cold o' the moon"(25), and the fish, as has been noted, is one of Setebos' emblems.

favour with Setebos. Where this might have been intended as a sacred space of communion with the god, Caliban himself seems to have opted in favour of his cave where he can instead hide from Setebos. Why the work then? Why the memory, and why the disavowal? There is a mystery here about which we can only speculate; perhaps parallel to still-only-vaguely-understood motives underlying those structures the archaeologists were uncovering at such a pace in the Victorian age.

Beginning with “feats” and “proof” in line 200 and “spoil” in the next, “spite” towards Caliban in line 202, and “favours” toward Prosper in the next, we find an alliterative shifting between s’s and f’s throughout the whole passage reflecting the capricious nature of Caliban’s experiences of Setebos’s spite/favour.<sup>21</sup> One cannot but feel sympathy for the creature Caliban as he seeks to understand why Prosper is favoured and not he, and to admire his fortitude and attempt at humour in line 218 (“There is the sport: discover how or die!”), the ironic understatement involved in recognizing his struggle for existence as mere sport for his god, and in having to accept those terms (“there is force!”), when it is of course his life that hangs in the balance.

We can see that Caliban is indeed suffering a great deal of anxiety: first, as he recalls half

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<sup>21</sup> The imagery also bears threatening associations. Most significant is the striking image of the wave as snake (doing Setebos’s bidding). This water image is followed by a fire image which evokes Shakespeare’s Ariel; which image is reinforced by the next of the newt shut up inside the stone, as Ariel was trapped inside the pine. We also hear echoes of Caliban’s sea-beast shut inside the rock, which of course harks back to Caliban himself in *The Tempest* (“[. . .]and here you sty me/ In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me/ The rest o’ the island.” I,ii, 342-44).

a winter's work wasted at the whim of a spiteful god (210); next, in recounting his close call, delivered from death he knows not why (212): agitated and at a loss to explain what brings on the god's wrath or clemency (223); and indignant at the imagined presumption and complacency of the small creatures at his own mercy (239). Even the assonance of the long diphthong /ai/ sounds in the first half of this section lends itself to such a reading, as we note the words that are linked: spite/I/why/find/spite/lies/I/inside/die. Caliban is not feeling at all secure; it is clear that the depth of disturbance is increasing as we approach the end of the poem.

Caliban has observed life's arbitrary nature and the element of chance that seems to rule all things, and he can only infer that the ways of the supreme power are not to be predicted or assumed. He introduces the concept of *hubris* in lines 224-25 ("You must not know His ways, and play Him off,/ Sure of the issue. [. . .]"), and explains his own strategy regarding this later in the poem ("Meanwhile, the best way to escape His ire/ Is, not to seem too happy.[. . .]")(256-7). For now it suffices to know that we must not tempt the god by assuming that we have any influence over his ways. Caliban's anger rises as he projects such presumption onto the creatures over which he is lord, and insists on the right to be inconsistent both for himself and for his god. Considering the sense of powerlessness that he has displayed towards Setebos throughout the speech but especially in this section, it seems that displaced resentment plays a large part in this indefensible defense.

Caliban has moved in his musings about Setebos from the first tentative “touching” (l.16) to “thinketh” (25, 26, 31, 44, 98), then to “supposeth” (109), “esteemeth” (138), “holds” (171), “saith” (179, 200), now to “conceiveth” (241) and “believeth” (250). There seems to be an increasing level of confidence in his own conceptual powers as he progresses. The early tenor of this section, however, modulates in a minor key as he entertains the remote possibility of a change in Setebos, either through the distraction of his attention to a new more pleasing world, or by his somehow being subsumed into the Quiet’s self. The possibilities are ranged in a series of negative constructions that seem to undermine any serious consideration, as if to negate hope even while offering it, and the passage carries with it a tone of resignation that closes with the grim prospect of “and nowhere help at all.” Next he weighs the likelihood of an afterlife, and (considering his perceived disfavour with Setebos) wisely chooses to assert that all the torment ends with death. Meanwhile, to avoid Setebos’s unwelcome attention, his strategy is to lie low and not to seem too happy; he justifies this policy of avoidance by pointing to his own whimsical show of sympathy for “two black painful beetles” and his wanton destruction of the carefree colorful flies. The sibilance in lines 263-269 can be attributed to this sly and sneaking side of Caliban intent on misleading Setebos.

At line 269 Caliban switches over to the first person for the sixth and last time in the poem, describes his provisional offerings (if his deception is discovered by Setebos, he



has sacrificial contingency plans in place to appease the god<sup>22</sup>), sings a rather insolent song which seems to mock Setebos, and boldly hopes that Setebos will either be conquered by the Quiet “or else become stupidly indifferent to what men do or say” (Brown 395). The alliteration of z sounds in line 283 (*doze/doze/as/as*) is particularly apt, almost onomatopoeic in effect, and is well-placed to set off the dramatic awakening of the next scene.

The coming of the god’s retribution is an apocalyptic scene indeed. The hush of silenced nature -- the proverbial calm before the storm -- the silhouette of a single raven in a darkened sky, Caliban’s rising panic and the unforgettable image with its Biblical overtones<sup>23</sup> of the wind driving the dust before it, “death’s house o’ the move”, all told in

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<sup>22</sup> As E.K. Brown points out, he is not quite honest about these promises either. When push comes to shove and the god’s anger is provoked, Caliban makes the following compromises: “Instead of letting his apples rot on the tree, he will abstain from eating wheelks, instead of burning as an offering the best of his yearling kids, and giving his favorite beast to the orc, he will let the quails escape him, instead of cutting off a finger he bites through his lip” (395). On a more serious note, here is what William James has to say about the sacrificial attitude: “That personal attitude which the individual finds himself impelled to take up towards what he apprehends to be the divine[. . .] will prove to be both a helpless and a sacrificial attitude. That is, we shall have to confess to at least some amount of dependence on sheer mercy, and to practice some amount of renunciation, great or small, to save our souls alive”(56).

<sup>23</sup> In Psalm 18:7-14 we find the follow description: “Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken, because he was wroth. There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down: and darkness was under his feet. And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. At the brightness that was before him his thick clouds passed, hail stones and coals of fire. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice; hail stones and coals of fire. Yea, he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; and he shot out lightnings, and discomfited them.”

And in Psalm 50, from which the epigraph of our poem originates: “Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him” (Psalm 50:3).

a rush of exclamations, leave us breathless. The rhythm of the passage contributes greatly to the intensity of the moment, as does the punctuation: exclamation points which “lend the verse an abrupt and explosive quality” (Honan 289). Caliban’s terror at the fire, thunder and lightning expresses itself in “ten strong stresses almost in series” (Honan 253): “*White blaze --/A tree 's head snaps -- and there, there, there, there, there!* His thunder follows! [. . .]”. Caliban’s suspicion that the raven has told Setebos all recalls his words in *The Tempest*: “[. . .] His spirits hear me/ And yet I needs must curse” (II,ii,3-4). Another allusion to the source is heard in the remorseful closing lines of the poem, providing us with frantic echoes of Caliban’s more sober resolve in Shakespeare to “be wise hereafter,/ And seek for grace” (*The Tempest*, V.i, 295-6). The response in Browning is, however, an altogether more dramatically satisfying conclusion, true to the character that he has carefully crafted and developed, well-grounded and consistent in details, diction and tone.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CALIBAN'S THEOLOGICAL FLIGHTS

*("A spark disturbs our clod"-- Rabbi Ben Ezra)*

The earlier chapters have witnessed Caliban in his environment, and the various ways he has used to escape its bonds – or at least, to loosen them. He treats his cave retreat as a refuge and a stage, experiments there with subversive thoughts and plays with possibilities, uses language and metaphor to express his unique selfhood, and defines himself as something much more than “the salvage, deformed slave” of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. Now in this final chapter we will consider his theology, and listen to Caliban in his fullest attempt to open out to experience and what might be, to reach beyond himself and seek freedom and meaning in that encounter. What appeals to me most about Caliban, what makes him most human and at the same time most individual, is this yearning for transcendence that lurks just beneath the surface of this earthiest of men, a yearning which takes many forms and is expressed in his words, his actions, his imaginings, indeed in his very being and attitude.

In the first lines we are presented with the humble Caliban lying at ease in his element, the ancient mud from which all life originated. Surely it is significant that he is situated in such an evocative space for the entire length of the poem, a place where the fundamental elements of earth and water merge, from which all life forms and potentialities emerge, and to which they all ultimately return. “Just as his soul is in an embryonic state, so the world is at the time of the primal swamp or pregnant mud, when the long evolutionary process leading to the creation of distinct forms has not yet taken place” (Miller 84).

The energy in this earliest section is diffused, the life mostly latent. The closeness of the atmosphere is almost palpable as the heat of the day wraps itself around Caliban and the reader in a world set apart, slowed down, intensified in its overall impression of dreaminess and oblivion even as each element is duly noted blurring into the next.

The primordial nature of Caliban and his environment is emphasized in his affinity with the small eft-things that run about his arms and make him laugh, in the luxurious vegetation of the pompion-plant that “creeps down”, touches and tickles Caliban, which elicits memories of early life when the tactile sense predominates; a way of relating that is forgotten or de-emphasized in the later more “evolved” and rational world associated with sight and hearing. A flower dropping with a bee inside; this first auditory image is almost a tactile one as well, the angry buzzing felt as an agitated vibration; the snapping at, catching and crunching of fruit also having a distinct tactile component. Even the mud itself is important in terms of touch – its moisture and coolness.

Caliban’s attention is soon drawn to the life outside his cave, first in observations of the sea (“massive, limitless, profound, but at the same time, shapeless, fluid, and capricious [. . .] ‘green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o’ the sun’”)(Miller 81). We are here still in a world of potential and potency, energy and driving force, upon which Caliban is making his first attempts to crystallize or fix into form his inchoate impressions. And so we have the image of the sunbeams’ play on the water as “meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times” (14) – a kind of fragile screen laid over the moving, swelling sea, a metaphor

which perfectly captures the evanescence of the scene, one which is broken and refashioned even as it is being described. Caliban's consciousness allows for the impermanence of forms,<sup>1</sup> an intuitive understanding of reality which deepens and is the source of urgency in his questing after Setebos and the something beyond.

*"Touching* that other, whom his dam called God" (line 16, emphasis mine): here Caliban's first reference to Setebos is the most curiously intimate as well, in his choice of the word "touching". Caliban will never venture this close again in his imaginary exploration, and what he is aiming at will never again be revealed so nakedly. He states his desire in simple and transparent language here – so simple that it is easily overlooked. He is vulnerable and brash ("and talks to his own self, howe'er he please") at the same time, and the fineness of touch can easily be lost in the surrounding bravura. But it is there. The Webster dictionary defines "touch" in its first sense (there are 33 subsequent variations) as "handle or feel gently, usually with the intent to understand or appreciate". For all his roughness, there is a delicacy of yearning, a longing to understand, an approach to transcendence (however idiosyncratic) that cannot be denied Caliban in this and further passages. Every time he projects his own awareness onto Setebos, or devises an analogy with his own life, he is attempting -- however crudely or awkwardly -- to cross over into that sacred space and connect in some way with the divine presence.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this insight in its many permutations (the recognition/shock of our own mortality being perhaps the most forceful) is often the catalyst that turns people to the spiritual life. Cf. "Maya" of Hinduism, Christianity's "Remember, man, that thou art dust", to name a few.

When Caliban speculates: “thinketh, it came of being ill at ease” (31), we are initially puzzled by the question: *what* came of being ill at ease? The fact that he (Setebos) chooses to dwell in the cold of the moon? The pattern of creation that Caliban has outlined in the previous section? Clearly, in Caliban’s mind, the thought of some consequence *precedes* the condition of being ill at ease that he projects onto Setebos. In the following lines describing the plight of the icy fish, we are treated to a compassionate perception of how this unease feels. As Thomas Blackburn observes: “The poem’s most startling passage [. . .] far ranging in its thought and suggestiveness [. . .] is the image of the fish.[. . .] Browning uses this creature and its environment as an image for the creation of the world by Setebos. This God has made the world as a compensation for his inability to live in the environment he desires” (159). The crystal spike that is presented as Setebos’s natural element suggests clarity, hard-edged, with a sharpness and incisiveness that is antithetical to Caliban’s habitat, “the lukewarm brine [. . .] warm walls of wave [. . .] Green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o’ the sun”(35, 37, 40). The connotations here are murkiness, ambiguity, an element dense with matter and life (the colour green emphasizes this aspect).

Yet Blackburn goes on to interpret the impasse of the icy fish in a more inclusive way as a profound reflection on the human condition: “But the image is more significant in its reference to man’s divided consciousness. We long to escape from the cold spike of water, that is to say the limitations of our fallen selves and environment, but have not undergone the death in life, the psychic development which would enable us to be at

home in another mode of existence" (159-160). This brings to mind the womb/tomb of Caliban's cave. It is a shelter for Caliban in his liminal, performative role, but also, ultimately, a limitation from which he will need to emerge and face the real world. Reality, for Plato, exists outside the cave. Perhaps it does for Caliban, too, but he is apparently not yet ready for that second birth that is required.

The phrase "[. . .] bliss she was not born to breathe"(41) reveals something of Caliban's fatalistic mindset; ultimately, it seems, we are disappointed, thwarted in our aspirations ("bounds", "buried" and "despair" in the next line reinforce this sense); yet the ambivalence, the attraction/repulsion ("hating and loving warmth alike") persists. The fatalism which permeates Caliban's monologue is similar in many respects to William James' description of the religious sensibility of the ancient Greeks: "The jealousy of the gods, the nemesis that follows too much happiness, the all-encompassing death, fate's dark opacity, the ultimate and unintelligible cruelty, were the fixed background of their imagination"(123). A grim legacy, one that we are all familiar with, as it permeates the roots of our culture and imagination as well. Or does it? Is this sense of ourselves an unalterable condition of humanity? Is Caliban Everyman or have we evolved from his superstitious fear and dread? Recalling the Victorian crisis of faith discussed in chapter one, and particularly the quotation from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* ([. . .] "and men ask now: where is the God-head; our eyes never saw him?"), we can argue that Caliban speaks to and for the age uncommonly well. The anxiety and sense of desolation that

characterize a particular nineteenth-century sensibility.<sup>2</sup> shaken to the core by the discoveries of science and its implications, are reflected in Caliban's confusion, his groping after answers. his isolation. Of course, we feel it, even today – that is, the problems have not been resolved. But in a more secular age, and inured as we are to some extent by the passage of time and the simple truth that life does go on, with or without faith, the wound is perhaps not as raw as it was for those anguished souls. Imagine they must have felt themselves at the beginning of some immense free-fall; we a century later have grown used to vertigo, some of us even like it (what other age could invent a sport like bungee-jumping?), others are able to deny it.

Meanwhile Caliban has a jealous Setebos to deal with. The jealousy of the god is foregrounded in line 56 ff.:

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hopkins, from "My prayers must meet a brazen heaven":

My heaven is brass and iron my earth:  
 Yea, iron is mingled with my clay, So harden'd is it in this dearth  
 Which praying fails to do away [. . .] (9-11).

Tennyson, from "In Memoriam":

Are God and nature then at strife,  
 That Nature lends such evil dreams? [. . .]  
 I falter where I firmly trod,  
 And falling with my weight of cares [. . .]  
 I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,  
 And gather dust and chaff, and call  
 To what I feel is Lord of all,  
 And faintly trust the larger hope.[. . .]  
 O life as futile, then, as frail! (LV, 5-6, 13-14, 17-20, LVI, 25)

and Browning's Bishop Blougram:

There the old misgivings, crooked questions are –  
 This good God – what He could do, if He would,  
 Would, if He could – then must have done long since? If so, when, where, and  
 how?

("Bishop Blougram's Apology", 191-4)



Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?  
He could not. Himself, make a second self  
To be His mate: as well have made Himself:  
He would not make what He dislikes or slights.  
An eyesore to Him, or not worth His pains:  
But did, in envy, listlessness, or sport,  
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner be – (56-62).

Caliban's sense of himself as one of Setebos's creations ("Weaker [than Setebos] in most points, stronger in a few./ Worthy, and yet mere playthings all the while, / Things He admires and mocks too, – that is it")(63-65) puts him squarely at the mercy of this unfathomable creator: "Because so brave, so better though they be./ It nothing skills if He begin to plague" (66-67). We are beginning to get a sense of Caliban's remarkable stoicism in this passage. If we can accept a definition of religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine" (James 42), and of that divinity:

What then is that essentially godlike quality [. . .] ? [. . .] For one thing, gods are conceived to be first things in the way of being and power. They overarch and envelop, *and from them there is no escape*. What relates to them is the first and last word in the way of truth. Whatever then were most primal and enveloping and deeply true might at this rate be treated as godlike, and a man's religion might thus be identified with his attitude, whatever it might be, towards what he felt to be the primal truth (James 44, emphasis mine),

we are able to more deeply appreciate the life-and-death significance of Caliban's situation. This is no mere speculation, or theoretical dilemma that he is musing upon; the ground of his being is what is at issue here – his instinctive, intuitive feeling for the reality in which he is caught.

Returning to the discussion of form and energy that initiated this chapter, we note J. Hillis Miller's description of all of Browning's poetry as a "sea of matter [. . .][that] bubbles and heaves with latent life, and holds in its pregnant depths the seeds of all possible forms.[. . .] [T]his seething ocean [. . .] squirms with vitality, like a corpse full of maggots" (Miller 83), and this brings us curiously close to the "maggots scamper[ing] through my brain" (72) with its intimations of abundant life and possibility, as we can almost see the thoughts and ideas swarming in Caliban's mind. The reaching towards transcendence intensifies here as Caliban loses himself in drink, reflecting the time-honoured human efforts in every age to expand and/or escape ordinary consciousness. Caliban, however, rather quickly censors his own vicarious pleasure in the freedom, beauty, and strength of the bird he imagines, as he brings it crashing back down to earth. The bird is not invulnerable, and its snapped leg gives Caliban the opportunity to explore the options of benevolence or malevolence towards his creation: the potential for creation/destruction on a small scale that he attributes to Setebos on a universal one ("Were this no pleasure, lying in the thyme,/ Drinking the mash, with brain become alive,/ Making and marring clay at will?/ So He")(95-7). Having witnessed the apparent randomness of events in his world, Caliban seems bent on justifying them with this fantasy of a drunken god amusing himself at his creatures' expense.

At this point, Caliban cannot allow himself to reproach the morality of the god's behaviour. These must be accepted as absolute, unquestioned because, after (and before)

all, "He is strong and Lord" (99).<sup>3</sup> When Caliban turns this around and considers his own treatment of the crabs, he is quite willing to acknowledge that justice has no part in a world where strength determines all. He sees that his own strength is indisputable in that realm, and the fact that he is accountable to no one in its exercise ("As it likes me, each time, I do: so He")(108).

But Caliban needs some way out of this bind, some hope, however dim, of discovering a way to alleviate his condition, to improve his lot. For this desire, too, is part of the human condition: "Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (James 58).

In line 109ff. Caliban changes his thesis somewhat and postulates that Setebos is "good i' the main,/ Placable[. . .]But rough". It is a refinement and more or less a recapitulation of his argument in lines 62-67, and 94-96. Why does he assume that Setebos is rougher than his handiwork? Is this the argument that if God were all-perfect and complete unto

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<sup>3</sup> Priestley identifies Caliban as "a Voluntarist, not a Rationalist: his god is a god of arbitrary will, exercising power through pure arbitrary choice. As an orthodox Voluntarist, he holds that Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, are not founded in the divine reason, but in the divine will: his god does not will the good because it is good, what he wills is good because he wills it. Setebos lies 'Making and marring clay at will,' such shows nor right nor wrong in Him,/ Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord.' [. . .] As a corollary to Voluntarism, Caliban includes the doctrine of Election, or arbitrary choice: 'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,/ Loving not, hating not, just choosing so'"(Priestley 132).

Himself, what need would he have for creation? So Caliban imagines a Setebos basically good, more powerful but less worthy and in some ways less capable than his creatures. and so, envious of them (shades of "I am a jealous God"?). And now he speaks of the consolation (as opposed to the pleasure l.94) of power. This is a more sympathetic, and almost, pitying view of his god.

As M.P. Sabatier says, one branch of religion keeps the divinity, another keeps man most in view. Worship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization, are the essentials of religion in the institutional branch. Were we to limit our view to it, we should have to define religion as an external art, the art of winning the favor of the gods. In the more personal branch of religion it is on the contrary the inner dispositions of man himself which form the centre of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness. And although the favor of the God, as forfeited or gained, is still an essential feature of the story, and theology plays a vital part therein, yet the acts to which this sort of religion prompts are personal not ritual acts. (James 41)

Although there are moments in which Caliban comes face to face with his own helplessness and incompleteness (especially towards the end of the poem; or in lines like "Ay, himself loves what does him good: but why?/ 'Gets good no otherwise [. . .]" [180-1]; or most notably in his identification with the maimed and blinded sea-beast), much of his thought is aimed at guessing the minds and ways of Setebos, trying to divine the art of winning his favour. There is a sense in which the "external art" takes precedence in that Caliban's concern is with divining the ritual acts that will save him from destruction; on the other hand, Caliban's own "inner dispositions", particularly his perception of his

deserts and his relative helplessness, form the backdrop for all his conjecture.<sup>4</sup>

The trap closes, over and over again. Because the thought of no escape is unbearable, Caliban must try and discern some hint of redemption, some way of interpreting Setebos. At some level, the idea of "creating" a divinity that *isn't* mysterious is unsatisfying. And yet, as he worries away at the problem, tries from another angle, considers with increasing despair that his own behaviour writ large is no less cruel and arbitrary than the world he perceives, it becomes increasingly apparent that he cannot conceive of a god different in nature from himself. Certainly the Creator must be greater than His creation? In his recklessness Caliban posits that some of the creatures are finer and worthier than their god, but this only incites envy in a jealous god whose sole consolation is his ultimate power over his creation. And so Caliban keeps running into that same wall, battering himself against the deeply felt conviction that one can only submit to a greater power with no hope of understanding.

Caliban lacks the authority that Browning's other theologizers enjoy. Johannes Agricola theologizes without shame, absolutely confident that as one of the Elect he is saved; sneer as we might at his arrogance, *he* sleeps well at night ("I have God's warrant, could I

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<sup>4</sup> In his study of Browning's religious attitudes and themes, James Fotheringham notes: "religion interests [Browning] little as a body of opinion; more as a faith, though rather in a way of suggestion than of definition; but most of all as a revelation of man, and as a clue to man's thought and passion.[. . .] He must present [religious facts and ideas] "alive and at work"[. . .] as they play their parts in the souls of men, or as they reveal the passion and play of the natures of men" ( qtd. in Anderson 107).

blend/ All hideous sins, as in a cup,/ To drink the mingled venoms up,/ Secure my nature will convert/ The draught to blossoming gladness fast")(33-37). Agricola and the particular Calvinist mentality that he represents are portrayed as inhuman and monstrous in the presumption of foreknowledge and control over God that is implied here. Caliban for all his perceived "monstrousness" is far wiser in his humility. Blougram speaks wittily and ironically about his God, all the while conscious of his limited perception; and yet he is secure in his place in the Church, comfortable in his life, justified in his choice. Although the irony directed towards Blougram is far more subtle than the scathing satire of "Johannes Agricola", we are still given to understand that his complacency is a flaw, that his worldliness has compromised his faith in some way, and that it obscures the more direct contact promised only to the believer who would willingly renounce all attachments. St John in the Desert speaks from his own special authority as the last contact with the mortal Christ. He understands the problems that will beset future generations, faith that will be tested, mystery challenged -- but his is the long view and the deep peace of one secure in God's love. Caliban alone of these speaks from out of his profound darkness, his very uncertainty making him a man for our age (and, even more, of the nineteenth century). As many readers have noted, he is one with his natural world, and this is true, as far as it goes -- but of all the native creatures with whom he shares the island, he alone is blessed and cursed with that self-consciousness that looks to the past and the future and wonders how? And why? And what if? He is frightened: he sees theology as transgression, and yet is still driven to move in that direction.

In his efforts to move beyond the limits his imagination has imposed thus far, Caliban moves one step deeper into the mystery of Setebos: why is His nature as Caliban has described? Lines 129-131 (“[. . .] the something over Setebos/ That made Him, or He, may be, found and fought,/ Worsted, drove off and did to nothing, perchance”) constitute a difficult, confusing passage: is Caliban conceding that Setebos may have been defeated and eradicated? that he may no longer exist? Complicated and somewhat incoherent thoughts about the Quiet follow. In lines 135-37 (“I joy because the quails come; would not joy/ Could I bring quails here when I have a mind:/ This Quiet, all it hath a mind to, doth”), Caliban recognizes that he has the advantage of being surprised by pleasure, something which an all-knowing and all-powerful god cannot experience. And although joy as well as grief are described as deriving from weakness, and so are not felt by the unreachable and omnipotent Quiet, we are not convinced that this remoteness is an enviable state. In fact this Quiet seems all too complacent, almost bored... (“never spends much thought nor care that way”)(139). And certainly Its attention is not welcome (“It may look up, work up -- the worse for those/ It works on!”)(140-1); Caliban would rather take his chances with the more familiar concept of Setebos.

But perhaps there is more to it than this. The Quiet is entirely other, so other that Caliban’s imagination fails him in elaborating Its existence. This is, ironically, perhaps the strongest argument for Its being; because Caliban needs an ideal that is absolutely unlike his earthly experience, Setebos’ weakness becomes the Quiet’s strength. Caliban’s failure with Setebos lies in the fact that he is creating a god in his own image, imposing

his own nature, personality, attributes, on a deity who for this very reason cannot satisfy Caliban's need for an Other to respect and worship (let alone love). The Quiet is the closest Caliban comes to a conception of pure spirit, cold and aloof though It is. And it may be the direction that holds the most potential for transcendence, forcing Caliban to break free of his own imaginative and spiritual limitations.<sup>5</sup> But Caliban is not ready for this leap; either that level of abstraction is beyond him, or he prefers to hold out for a more human deity (unaware as Caliban is of a Christian God, still Browning might have intended us to anticipate what he saw as the basic primal human need for a God of love). And so the Quiet, remote, neutral, unattainable, remains an idea that Caliban sets aside for the moment.

The enjambment in line 141 signals a turn, and indeed this is where Caliban turns his attention back to Setebos whom he fears. Caliban's idea of Setebos is again linked to a fish ("The many-handed as a cuttlefish")(142). In contemplating Setebos Caliban

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<sup>5</sup> "Josiah Royce points to two facets in Browning's conception of God: a God of Power and a God of Love. He goes on to use the term "'God beyond God' to describe a unique element in Browning's theism. Royce applies the term to the God, who, for Browning, is not satisfactorily accounted for by the conventional notions of God. Such notions focus, sometimes almost exclusively, on God's greatness and power; it is this conventional God, then, that Browning tries to see 'beyond'. [. . .] [Caliban's 'there may be something quiet o'er His head'] is the God who, for man, is more satisfying and more fulfilling than is the God of Power who has been molded by the long and strong traditions of organized Christianity. Thus the true God becomes accessible only after the search for him along the customary paths has ended, leaving the seeker exhausted and still incomplete.[. . .] Royce[s'] [. . .]direction [. . .] [is] the articulation of a new and liberated concept of God. Royce discovers in Browning [. . .] new horizons that must define modern man's approach to God. God has not so much disappeared for modern man; instead, the all-satisfying 'God beyond (or above) God' is offered as, in a sense, a new reality whom old paths - laid down by the church and by traditional theism - fail to achieve access to" (Anderson 28-9).



inexorably returns to the fish (and snake) images. This leads us to water, symbol of the unconscious, and the element that draws Caliban to itself time and again (he retreats to the cave pool to think about Setebos) in imagining Setebos. Caliban himself identifies with his sea-beast, and also with bird-figures, but thwarted ones (his leg-snapped creation, the jay whose feather is tweaked, the small birds that are lured by the pipe, the quails that give him pleasure, but only as prey). In ll. 145-6 (“Looks up, first, and perceives He cannot soar/ To what is quiet and hath happy life”), both Caliban and Setebos are joined in their predicament, the predicament of a consciousness that sees beyond to what it cannot attain. With the addition of the Quiet and its world there are three levels operating here, and as Setebos imitates the real/ideal world of the Quiet with the “good” world that Caliban knows, one that is cheapened by this comparison, so Caliban illustrates in the next section the comfort that he has sought in his contrived imitation of Prospero’s kingdom, even as he recognizes its degraded nature, and downplays it as “baubles” and “sport”. The alternation of the two verbs “looks” and “makes” (l. 140 look/work, 144 making, 145 looks/perceives, 146 looks, 147 makes, 149 making) in describing first, the Quiet, and then Setebos, and by extension, Caliban himself, emphasizes the necessary bond between perception and creation. What I mean is that perception is essential to creation: Caliban creates Setebos from his observations of the world around him, as he does the roles he plays in his fantasy world, and as he also does in creating with language this monologue in which he attempts to puzzle out the nature of his universe.<sup>6</sup> Once again

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<sup>6</sup> The role of imagination is problematic for Caliban; while enriching his existence in many ways, it is also ultimately the trap of “imaging” a god that is a real danger for the spiritual seeker. (Surely this is what is behind the prohibition against images in many churches and

we are reminded of Caliban as I/eye, the watcher.

[. . .] Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life [. . .] Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree every one possesses. (James 44-45)

What is Caliban's sense of this cosmos as an everlasting presence? From this passage we would have to say that he experiences an indifferent if not oppressive universe.<sup>7</sup> There is a sense of absurdity and a fear of it, in the effort to create a god, a higher presence, who will give it meaning (i.e. for whom there is some rational motivation) even if this meaning holds, as he suspects, no protection for such as Caliban, but rather a good deal of spite for him – at least then he knows where he stands.

One critic writes,

the most interesting theme of the poem is the evolution of religious consciousness. [. . .] Setebos is both Caliban's obsession and torment. [. . .] Browning has no illusions about the 'freedom' of primitive man and Caliban's life is hag-ridden by guilts and anxiety. [. . .] Setebos is Caliban's tormentor since the half-man has projected on to this god-demon all his own dissatisfaction and ferocity. The god-demon is restless and incomplete. (Blackburn 156)

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temples – Catholic churches being a major exception – , and the warning against "false idols" in the First Commandment of the Judeo-Christian faiths.)

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Caliban is cold and ill at ease because of the "something quiet o'er his head/ Out of his reach [. . .]" (132-33); he is suspicious of the Quiet: ("It may look up, work up, – the worse for those/ It works on!" 140-41); his understanding of Setebos is based on fear: ("Setebos [. . .] Who, making Himself feared through what He does" 141, 143); and his recognition of the god's malice: (" [. . .] out of very spite/ Makes this a bauble-world [. . .]" 146-7).

This description of Setebos as a "god-demon" is an accurate one. Caliban is driven by his needs and his fears, and these seem to swirl and converge and settle, only to disperse again, all around the name of Setebos. How is it that Caliban has projected only his crueller nature onto the god? Why is Setebos conceived as so crushingly malignant? We can only infer enormous self-contempt on Caliban's part. And yet, apparently there are precedents in human history for this type of belief in demons. In discussing the religions of ancient Mesopotamia, Jaynes speculates on the origin in men's minds of demons as the gods grow more distant:

As the gods recede into special people called prophets or oracles, are reduced to darkly communicating with men in angels and omen, there whooshes into this power vacuum a belief in demons. The very air of Mesopotamia became darkened with them. Natural phenomena took on their characteristics of hostility toward men, a raging demon in the sandstorm sweeping the desert, a demon of fire, scorpion-men guarding the rising sun beyond the mountains, Pazuzu the monstrous wind demon [. . .] Even the gods could be attacked by demons, and this sometimes explained their absence from the control of human affairs. (Jaynes 232)

This last suggestion fits well with Caliban's conjecture in lines 130-31 ("[. . .] or He, may be, found and fought, / Worsted, drove off and did to nothing, perchance"), and again in 246-7 ("If He surprise not even the Quiet's self/ Some strange day [. . .]"), of a power struggle between Setebos and the Quiet; the possibility that the Quiet has been driven off or done to nothing, or surprised, or conversely, (in lines 281-2) that the Quiet might catch and conquer Setebos. Caliban accompanies these speculations with the phrase "some strange day" – a qualification either acknowledging the unlikelihood of these things happening, or else simply confirming that any affairs of these beings are beyond the realm of ordinary time and space.

I refer to these writers on the origins of religion to underline what I see as Browning's remarkably accurate intuitions of how this process of creating religion might unfold in one primitive individual with admittedly uncanny facilities of language at his disposal. We might get a sense of his motivations from watching his actions alone; then again we might not. But with access to the workings of his mind, with the unique force of his language accrued from exposure to his cruel master Prospero (who yet once cared for him, as Caliban recalls in *The Tempest*: "[. . .] when thou cam'st first./ Thou strok'st me and made much of me: wouldst give me/ Water with berries in't; and teach me how/ To name the bigger light, and how the less,/ That burn by day and night; and then I loved thee" [I, ii, 333-36]), a language then adapted to his own physiological proclivities and honed by his close observations and deep familiarity with his environment, (the quality of which observations mark him as an intensely solitary figure), we are really exposed in a profound way to the genius of creativity let loose in a world that most of us might never consider.

Caliban knows envy, naturally, is being eaten up by it ("a bitter heart that bides its time and bites")(167). In *The Tempest*, Prospero prompts Ariel: "Hast thou forgot/ The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy/ Was grown into a hoop? [. . .]"(I, ii, 257-9).

With this introduction, and most especially through this bizarre monstrous image, we are given to understand the deforming, almost pathological power that envy inflicts on its sufferer; however, there is in the context of Shakespeare's play also the more insidious suggestion that this envy may be (for Caliban) more an inherited trait of a degraded race

than an actual well-founded response to untenable treatment. And yet we know that Caliban has good reason for his resentment; it is no surprise that the betrayal that Caliban has suffered at the hands of Prospero is never far from the surface of his thoughts. His place has been usurped by Prospero, with what he sees as his rightful possession of the island,<sup>8</sup> and even more fundamentally his freedom and autonomy, all lost, to his great grief. In Browning, we see Caliban's envy extending to the god he has made ("And always, *above all else*, envies Him" (265, emphasis mine). Caliban sees Prospero winning the favor of Setebos, and to the point that he sometimes even conflates the two figures. He certainly sees theirs as a felicitous relationship, in contrast to the spitefulness (both of Prospero and Setebos) he feels in the treatment reserved for himself. And yet, as we have seen, since Caliban himself both resents and identifies with his god, envy (along with spite) is also the quality he most often attributes to Setebos.<sup>9</sup> This envy is truly a consuming emotion as it dominates Caliban's only human relationships (with Prospero and Miranda), and infiltrates every aspect of Caliban's sympathy and his imaginative life as well. To add a new twist and another possible motive in Caliban's mind for the envy that Setebos feels, Blackburn argues that

Caliban has partially outgrown the monomania and bigotry of Setebos, otherwise he would not have such a clear idea of the god's limitations.

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<sup>8</sup> See *The Tempest*, I, ii, 332-3: "This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,/ Which thou tak'st from me [. . .]".

<sup>9</sup> See line 41 – spoken of the icy fish, reflecting on Setebos ("Flounced back from bliss she was not born to breathe"), 61 – directly of Setebos ("But did, in envy, listlessness or sport"), 113 ("And envieth that, so helped, such things do more"), 144-5 ("Looks up, first, and perceives He cannot soar/ To what is quiet and hath happy life"), and 214 ("Dug up a newt He may have envied once").

Partially outgrown; he still projects his own bestiality and cruelty on to his god. Caliban has wished off his own darkness to Setebos. Consequently, the half-man is superior to his god and Setebos is jealous of the superiority of his own creation.[. . .] Certainly his fear of Setebos whom he feels bears him a personal grudge is as real as his understanding of the god's limitations; this understanding being a major reason for the grudge (157-8).<sup>10</sup>

In line 179 ff., Caliban supposes that Setebos may like what profits him, as Caliban does, but in this case makes a clear distinction between the causes. Caliban, using the terribly damaged persona of the blinded sea-beast as his alter ego, recognizes his own weakness and the fact that he needs help, and ultimately that he loves what does him good out of a kind of gratitude. Setebos, however, is not constrained by such dependence: "want[s] no help, but hate[s]/ Or love[s], just as it like[s] him [because] *He hath eyes.*" (183-4, emphasis mine) This is an important distinction, considering Caliban's major preoccupation with eyes and seeing, and it leads us to wonder why the metaphor of blindness is such a powerful one for Caliban, and where are its roots. Is he aware of his own spiritual blindness (that is, his inability to make contact with or to apprehend the god, to anticipate his expectations, to avert his spite), and is this the source of most of his psychic pain?

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Melchiori argues that Setebos envies his creatures their reproductive powers: "It should be remembered that Darwin's theory was based on the physical life cycle: creation through procreation. The poem is chock-full of sexual symbolism [. . .] The fullest possible use is made of plants and animals - images which would come naturally to Caliban, but at the same time which are relevant also to Darwin. And reading the symbolism we find that the reason given for Setebos' creation of both men and animals is simply so that they can supply the faculty of reproduction which the god does not possess [. . .] The power given by Setebos to his creatures, the power he envies them for, is just the power of procreation on which the theory of evolution depends. For Setebos lacks this "warmth" [. . .] "it came of being ill at ease:/ He hated that he cannot change his cold,/ Nor cure its ache." (ll. 31-33)" (Melchiori 148-150).

In lines 248-9: "else here are we/ And there is He, and nowhere help at all", we are most powerfully seized with the sense of immeasurable distance between here and there. The "we" of creation are abandoned, living in fear, with no hope of change. It is here that Caliban strikes perhaps his darkest note in his long monologue questing for salvation. "Nowhere help at all" in its sweeping denial is a grim assessment indeed of the prospects for redemption, and again, an indication of Caliban's remarkable stoicism, that he would make a statement like this, quite simply, and then move on. It appears to be with some relief that he asserts, in the next line, his belief that death will bring an end to the pain.

Caliban's song to Setebos in lines 276-8 is a puzzling and problematic declaration. It seems to convey the message that he worships Setebos but hates him because He has left Caliban alone. "No mate for thee" recognizes that they are in the same situation. But what an insolent taunt -- and immediately followed as it is by analogies to Setebos including (ll.279-80) "[. . .] since evils sometimes mend,/ Warts rub away and sores are cured with slime", the challenge seems to be designed to provoke. Perhaps Caliban has almost convinced himself that Setebos really is conquered by the Quiet, or has grown too decrepit to react. Perhaps Caliban feels that he has exhausted all possibilities in approaching the god. Certainly this is the first instance of direct address in the monologue (even framed as it is, in an imaginary situation -- the subjunctive mood of bold experiment). Couched as a question, Caliban's song does indeed seem to demand some kind, any kind, of response -- one which in fact is not long in coming. Does Caliban get what he wants? Does this perceived acknowledgment constitute a kind of exchange? Will

it lead Caliban to further assumptions, expectations, developments in thought? It appears that the dialogue will continue.

When we consider the construction of the "something" very like a crude temple that Caliban describes in lines 192-7, although the attempt seems to have been a failure in terms of connecting with Setebos ("No use at all i' the work [. . .] 'Shall some day knock it down again" 198-9), one feels heartened at least by the emphasis on the pleasing aspect of work for work's sole sake ("tasteth, himself, no finer good i' the world/ [. . .] than trying what to do with wit and strength" 188, 191). In fact, despite the overall bleakness of Caliban's prospects and the random cruelty towards his fellow creatures that he seems to celebrate, he also occasionally acts on compassionate instincts<sup>11</sup> that are downplayed by Caliban because of their apparent whimsicality, but which belie some other-than-selfish interests. There is hope displayed in these small gestures, and in the appetite for life that Caliban conveys in his attention to the world around him. One would wish for the Caliban of this poem something like the consoling visions that Caliban of *The Tempest* describes to Stephano and Trinculo:

Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments

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<sup>11</sup> "Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,/ And two worms he whose nippers end in red" (106-7); "'Spareth a squirrel that it nothing fears/ But steals the nut from underneath my thumb,/ And when I threat, bites stoutly in defence:/ 'Spareth an urchin that contrariwise,/ Curles up into a ball, pretending death/ for fright at my approach [. . .] " (II.226-31); "'Sees two black painful beetles roll their ball/ On head and tail as if to save their lives:/ Moves them the stick away they strive to clear" (II. 260-2).



Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again. (III, ii, 132-140)

Yet there is still an air of wonder that touches Browning's Caliban as well, in the more mundane but no less sumptuous or evocative surroundings that he moves in and experiences. We see it in the opening of the poem, in his obvious enjoyment of the mire, in his intensely physical participation in the world around him, in his startling choices of images, in his richly textured language. If, as William James asserts, "not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse" (382), then Caliban, despite his trials, envy and spite, is on the religious track, not only in his theological seeking, but in his finely-tuned attention to his surroundings and to the fullness of life.

### **Theological poetry**

Having examined the poem in the context of Shakespeare's creation, the critical reception of the character ranging from preoccupation with the grotesque to the more inclusive post-colonial reading, having considered the issues of the time in which Browning wrote, and the place of the poem in his own particular body of work, I now turn to the final "nest" to be unpacked, that is, its relation to other theological poems in Browning's *oeuvre*.

“Caliban upon Setebos” in the context of Browning’s religious poetry, chronologically, appears after “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” (from *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842); “Saul” (from *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, 1845); “Christmas-Eve” and “Easter-Day” (1850); “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician”, “Bishop Blougram’s Apology”, “Saul”, “Holy-Cross Day”, “Clean” (*Men and Women*, 1855); in the same volume as “Rabbi Ben Ezra” and “A Death in the Desert”; and before “The Ring and the Book” (1868-69). It is a notable exception to this list in that it is one of the few theological poems that did not touch on Christianity as such. The primacy of God’s love is missing from the argument; surely it is the very absence of that love that makes Setebos such a fearsome and distant god for Caliban.

The existence of God and the fact of His love is considered from many angles in Browning’s work. To name but a few and briefly remark on their impact will give some idea of the uniqueness of Caliban’s position in Browning’s theological poetry.

From *Men and Women*, we take as an example “An Epistle [...] of Karshish, the Arab Physician”: having met Lazarus, reputedly resurrected from death, the Arab physician Karshish, reluctantly, against his better judgment, with barely-concealed wonder and hope entertains the notion of the Incarnation:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?  
 So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too --  
 So, through the thunder comes a human voice  
 Saying ‘O heart I made, a heart beats here! [. . .]’  
(An Epistle [. . .], ll. 304-07)

In a companion piece to “An Epistle [. . .]” the Greek artist Cleon. (in an eponymous poem), faced with the same news, dismisses it summarily, and, tempted to imagine an afterlife “unlimited in capability/ For joy, as this is in desire for joy” (326-7), most bitterly rejects it: “But no!/ Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas,/ He must have done so, were it possible!” (333-5). The old religion leaves Cleon “stung by straitness of our life” (329), in stoic despair -- yet he dares not hope in the new. Ironically, we have watched both men in the course of their monologues illustrate the need and desirability of a Christian God, only to balk at the leap of faith that is required. Cleon actually points to the lack of revelation (in the aforementioned ll. 333-5) quite clearly as his deterrent; Karshish, although more openly marvelling at the idea, can’t quite bring himself to accept it.

In “Saul”, David the boy shepherd, summoned to bring the suffering king back to his senses, has a moment of grace/intuition, in which

I but open my eyes, -- and perfection, no more and no less,  
In the kind I imagined, full-fronts me, and God is seen God  
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the clod.  
[ . . . ] Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst Thou -- so wilt Thou!  
(248-50, 300)

In his prophetic vision (and the image of a “crucified” Saul lends itself to the reading):

He stood as erect as that tent-prop, both arms stretched out wide  
On the great cross-support in the centre, that goes to each side;  
He relaxed not a muscle, but hung there as, caught in his pangs  
And waiting his change, the king-serpent all heavily hangs (28-31),

mirrored by the love that he feels for his king, David apprehends the redeeming love of

Christ:

'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! My flesh, that I seek  
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be  
A Face like my face that receives thee; A Man like to me,  
Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: A Hand like this hand  
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand! (308-12)

In "Death in the Desert" St. John the beloved disciple, the last link with the living Christ, anticipates, as he lies dying, the questions and doubts of coming generations:

"Here is a tale of things done ages since;  
What truth was ever told the second day? [. . .]  
[. . .] must Christ then be?  
Has he been? Did not we ourselves make Him?" (370-1; 375-6)

We are reminded of Caliban's efforts in the making of a god, and the dangers that arise from this impulse. And yet, John in his compassion ("If I live yet, it is for good, more love/ Through me to men"(126-7)) holds fast to his faith in God's love, and in the wisdom that sustains the universe and man's striving after truth. He finds comfort in the belief that man will move through and beyond error, or partial truth ("the new skepticism, he asserts, is necessary to man's spiritual development" [King125]), his soul growing in strength and discernment as he continues to search after God:

[. . .] progress, man's distinctive mark alone  
Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,  
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be [. . .]  
God's gift was that man should conceive of truth  
And yearn to gain it, catching at mistake,  
As midway help till he reach fact indeed (586-8; 605-7).

Contrasted with these apprehensions of the divine (or not, in Cleon's case), Caliban's struggles to conceive of a god based on his experience of the natural world, and without

the aid of any kind of revelation, seem a grotesque parody of what religious experience can be. In "Browning Upon Butler; or, Natural Theology in the English Isle" we are told that "'Caliban' is a key work in the canon of Browning's 'religious' poetry, for it brings into focus this whole matter of the sharp distinction that he made between reason and faith and his skeptical view of human knowledge" (Timko 143). In other words, for Browning, it would appear to be an effort in futility to seek God from a purely rational standpoint. However there is also the recognition that faith is a gift not accorded to all. And still we must find a way to approach the ineffable, in courage or humility, each to his own, faith or no faith.

## **Conclusion**

In analyzing the religious experience, James points out:

The ancient saying that the first maker of the Gods was fear receives voluminous corroboration from every age of religious history; but none the less does religious history show the part which joy has evermore tended to play. [. . .] Stated in the completest possible terms, a man's religion involves both moods of contraction and moods of expansion of his being [. . .] [yet] the constitutionally sombre religious person makes even of his religious peace a very sober thing. Danger still hovers in the air about it. Flexion and contraction are not wholly checked. It were sparrowlike and childish after our deliverance to explode into twittering laughter and capercutting, and utterly to forget the imminent hawk on bough. Lie low, rather, lie low; for you are in the hands of the living God [. . .]. " (73)

Certainly here we are in the realm of "lieth flat and loveth Setebos", Caliban's intensely human reaction as he lies cowering beneath the storm at the end of the poem.

In surveying Browning's poetry, J. Hillis Miller points out that "the only thing certain is that the inner dialogue will go on indefinitely, only arbitrarily brought to a conclusion, and chopped off into a poem" (87). "Caliban upon Setebos" is certainly more than usually true to form in this regard, closing as it does in a bracketed and breathless promise as open-ended as possible, spoken out of rising panic. There is no quiet resolution here, no sense of closure: our man is as squarely *in media res* as he was found at the beginning of the poem, and the restless pace of his thinking has never for a moment let up.

From a practical point of view, we might say that Caliban has made precious little progress in his spiritual journey, that he started out mystified and ends up terrified, that there has been no enlightenment, no revelation, no conversion, that he has projected his own anxiety and fears out into the world and that they have only returned to him magnified. But this would not take into account the spirit that animates his desire for God, the life that flows through his veins, the hope that apparently will not be denied but keeps emerging in yet another attempt, one more hypothesis, the need that is in itself his reason for living. The Quiet is silent; we have seen how Caliban interprets the actions of Setebos (though he can never be sure). There seems to be no response from God, no interaction. But that is almost beside the point. Caliban's knowledge of his own limitation and his striving to reach beyond it, his unrest and his doubt, are all expressions of a strong religious impulse, a need to worship and believe -- even if the object of that belief does not respond to his faith in any way that Caliban can appreciate. That is the mystery that he is led into. That is the silence of God that each person interprets in her own way.

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