Julia Wedgwood on Robert Browning's 'Italian Murder Thing'

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Julia Wedgwood is now largely forgotten, except perhaps in relation to her failed relationship with Robert Browning though even Browning scholars tend to dismiss her as 'earthenware' to Elizabeth's 'porcelain.'[1] The ceramic metaphor is an appropriate one since she was the great grand daughter of the famous potter, Josiah Wedgwood. She was also the niece of Charles Darwin, a favourite pupil of James Martineau and F.D. Maurice, a friend from childhood of Harriet Martineau, from her teenage years of Mrs Gaskell and her daughters, and, later, George Eliot, as well as many of the Victorian feminists like Barbara Bodichon, Emily Davies, Frances Power Cobbe and Elizabeth Garrett. Born in 1833 she survived till 1913 and was, in the early years of the twentieth century, one of E.M. Forster's first literary mentors. Forster had a soft spot for 'Snow' Wedgwood, as she was known to her friends and family, and was one of the few reviewers to write sympathetically about her when her correspondence with Browning was published in 1937.[2] After starting out as a romantic novelist, a successful career she quickly abandoned in the face of her father's strong disapproval, she established herself as a critic, reviewer, biographer, historian and moral philosopher—a very unusual career for a woman at the time. Jose Harris recently offered an

1. Betty Miller, *Robert Browning A Portrait*, London, John Murray, 1952, p. 228.
2. Forster reprinted his review, first published in the *Listener* on 13 October 1937 as 'Snow Wedgwood' in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London, Edward Arnold, 1951, pp. 195–196.

important reassessment of her significance in the Oxford DNB, pointing out that her contemporaries saw her as second only to George Eliot in her ability to deal with 'masculine' subjects.[3] From her late teens she suffered from increasing deafness.

In his years as a widower Browning had several close friendships with women. Apart from Alexandra Orr, his first authoritative biographer, Julia was the only one able—just about—to keep up with him intellectually. Their friendship, which began a couple of years after Browning's return to London fell into two parts: a kind of courtship, which she suddenly ended in the spring of 1865, and a long and fascinating correspondence between 1868 and 1870, mostly about his new poem *The Ring and the Book*.[4] They first met at an evening party in July 1863[5] and Browning called regularly on the Wedgwood family home at Cumberland Place through the following winter and spring, a time when Julia's younger brother, Mack, was painfully succumbing to cancer. Their relationship intensified after Mack's death, aged 30 in June 1864, until March 1865 when Julia, inexplicably as it seemed to Browning, broke it off. Whether this close friendship might have evolved into marriage is debatable. In its early stages it certainly had some of the elements of a courtship: Browning called regularly on Sunday mornings; he asked, more than once, for 'Snow's' photo; he encouraged her writing and showed her some of his son's; he begged her to correspond regularly when he was on holiday in France in the summer of 1864; and told her that the thought of seeing her was the only thing that lightened his gloom at the prospect of returning to London.[6]

There were, however, significant ambivalences on both sides. Browning was the most famous and talked-about widower in London, uneasy, as he would be for the rest of his life, about what it meant to be the widower of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, then a more widely admired

3. Jose Harris, 'Julia Wedgwood', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.
4. Most of this correspondence was published in a sketchily edited version, Richard Curle (ed.), *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood A Broken Friendship as Revealed in their Letters*, hereafter Curle, *op. cit.*, London, John Murray & Jonathan Cape, 1937. For the letters which Curle chose to omit see Sue Brown, 'Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: the Unpublished Correspondence', in *The Journal of Browning Studies*, vol. 3 (December 2012), pp. 29–52.
5. Julia to Effie Wedgwood, 6 July 1863 Wedgwood/Mosley Collection Wedgwood Archive, Barlaston (hereafter W/M), 324.
6. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood (3 October 1864), in Curle, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

poet than he was himself. And he was concerned about the age gap of 21 years between himself and Julia. She, for her part, was insecure, impetuous, fearful of male sexuality and uncertain of her ability to carry off a relationship with the man who had been married to that 'beautiful soul', Elizabeth.[7] Her reverence for the work and character of Browning's dead wife was profound. There were many similarities between Julia and Elizabeth: both were small and dark, both lost the brother closest to them in age through their premature deaths, both were deeply religious and inclined to morbidity though Elizabeth had a lighter touch than Julia, both were highly intelligent and partly self-taught in Greek and Latin and both were writers. Perhaps the most striking thing about Julia and Browning's correspondence in its first phase is the similarity in language and imagery with Browning's courtship letters to Elizabeth. For her part, Julia constructed a spiritual *ménage à trois* in which the three might conduct a sacra conversazione, 'spirit to spirit', in preparation for their afterlife together.[8] Browning did not discourage the idea. When Julia suggested that he might like to be alone with his memories of Elizabeth, he reassured her: 'You are never in my way in the sacred place you speak of, and, so far as you go, I like walking with you. Nobody else goes many inches over the threshold of it.'[9]

The break which Julia initiated in spring 1865, after a censorious step-aunt had passed on to her some disobliging and inaccurate gossip, caused Browning more pain than he admitted at the time though, as a gentleman, he conceded to her wishes and stopped calling and writing. She was, however, keen that he should continue to show her his work and aware of the importance he attached to the new poem he slaved over from late 1864 to 1868. He showed some early parts of it to his great friend and supporter, Joseph Milsand, in the spring of 1868. Julia Wedgwood was, however, the only person, apart from his publishers, to see the whole of *The Ring and the Book* and comment on it in advance of its publication in four separate parts between November 1868 and February 1869. Though they never met again they corresponded fully between November 1868 and spring 1869 as Browning explained and defended his new work in a way that he never attempted with anyone else except Elizabeth and later, perhaps, Mrs Sutherland Orr. The correspondence begun in high expectation and good humour, ended in unhappy divergence in June 1870. 'Come'

7. *Ibid.* (3 December 1868), p. 164.
8. *Ibid.* (25 June 1864), p. 28.
9. *Ibid.* (31 October 1864), p 107.

Browning wrote with grace and wisdom, as he finally closed down the friendship, 'Let us go back to that quiet place where we do not forget each other.'[10] Browning destroyed much of his correspondence when he moved house in 1887 but kept Julia's letters, painful though he would have found those on *The Ring and the Book* to read.

Julia Wedgwood's comments on it went to the heart of Browning's own perplexities over how he should stand both as man and poet in relation to his dead wife. Julia was a Wedgwood: the family was known for its plain speaking. Her own outspokenness was amplified by a recklessness and lack of tact as well perhaps as her deafness, which dulled her sensitivity to subtleties of tone. The same disconcerting directness would later cause great offence in the Darwin family as Julia broke into the reverential tone of reviews of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* written by his son, Frank, to denounce her uncle's negative influence on late-Victorian society. Similarly, in her letters to Browning, she hit on some very sore places in her characteristically fearless pursuit of what she saw as the truth. Maisie Ward has described some of what she wrote to Browning as 'sublime impertinence.'[11] Betty Miller, more intriguingly (despite the hyperbole) suggests that Browning sought Julia's reaction, anticipating that it would be highly critical, as an exercise in masochism driven by his guilt at betraying his poetic inheritance from Elizabeth.[12] Late in the correspondence, after Julia had expressed her distaste at his choice of subject and treatment of it, he confessed to her: 'By the way, my wife would have subscribed to every one of your bad opinions of the book. She never took the least interest in the story, so much as to wish to inspect the papers.' This tended to reinforce what he had written four years earlier: 'my wife never had a woman-friend so entirely fit for her as you would have been.'[13] Rather than using Julia as his proxy for Elizabeth in 1868, however, it is more probable that he sought her opinion on *The Ring and the Book* because he trusted her critical intelligence. He was immensely proud of what he had achieved and full of a new creative vigour, both feelings that he expected Julia to appreciate. As he wrote to Isa Blagden in 1866, 'So good luck to my great venture, the murder-

10. *Ibid.* (14 June 1870) *ibid.*, p. 207.
11. Maisie Ward, *Browning and his World: Two Robert Brownings?* London, Cassell, 1969, p. 69.
12. Betty Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
13. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood (21 January 1869) and (April 1865), in Curle, *op. cit.*, pp. 168, 136.

poem, which I do hope will strike you & all good lovers of mine.'[14] Browning was confident that Julia would understand not only the overall shape of his work but its moral underpinning. As would become clear, there was an element of self-deception in all this.

What Julia actually found was an immensely detailed description of evil, insufficiently relieved by the depictions of Pompilia, 'that snowdrop growing out of a dunghill', as she described her,[15] and the Pope's Monologue which she much admired but would like to have found placed at the end of the poem rather than followed by a second helping of Guido, the character with whom Julia had most difficulty. She was not the only one alienated by Browning's decision to choose as his subject a late 17th century court case revolving around fraud, illegitimacy, conspiracy and possible infidelity as well as Count Guido's brutal murder of his wife and in-laws. Carlyle described it as an 'Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines' and Browning showed him the door when he asked, 'What had happened to the Eternal Harmonies?' in his poem.[16]

The Ring and the Book is the fullest and probably the finest of all Browning's evocations of Italian society, character and intellect. But Julia had never visited Italy and took no particular interest in it. Her mother was a passionate Mazzinian and, as a young woman, Julia was obliged to spend a disproportionate amount of time serving at charitable bazaars in the Italian cause. It did not endear Italy to her. She did, however, have a very definite idea of what Browning's role as a poet should be. For her, as for Henry James, he was a 'philosophical and religious teacher', the man who gave her glimpses of the 'infinite in the finite.' They had talked about Browning's new poem as he set to work late in 1864 and she was aware of its structure—the same story told from multiple points of view. But though Browning referred to it in letters to Isa Blagden as his 'Roman murder story' or his 'Italian murder thing',[17] Julia had the idea that it centred on an

14. Robert Browning to Isa Blagden, (10 August 1865), in E.C. McAleer (ed.), *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1951, p. 220.
15. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (22 January 1869), in Curle, *op. cit.*, p. 170. Julia's family nickname of 'Snow' derived from an incident just after her birth when her father, Hensleigh, laid a freshly cut bunch of snowdrops on the pillow beside her and her mother.
16. Carlyle to D.G. Rossetti quoted in Pamela Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning. A Life after Death*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004, p. 95 and Carlyle to Browning quoted in E.C. MacAleer, *op. cit.*, p. 38, fn. 19.
17. Robert Browning to Isa Blagden (19 September and 19 October 1864), in E.C. MacAleer, *op. cit.*, pp. 173, 196.

Italian heroine. And so she was frustrated at having to read through half of *The Ring and the Book* before she came to Pompilia. Predictably, she loved her monologue, sensing, as many others did, that Browning had drawn on his memories of Elizabeth. This was not an admission that he ever made to Julia though he later conceded it to Mrs Orr.[18] After 'Pompilia', Julia was then obliged to read two books of the lawyers in monologues which she and several of the early reviewers found tedious, and wait another month before receiving her final installment of the epic containing the Pope's monologue, a chapter which gave her the resolution she sought. But then, as Browning had forewarned her, there was more of the loathsome Guido and the implication that he had not, as Julia hoped,[19] sought redemption at the end.

As Julia's distaste intensified the reviews started to come in. They were far more enthusiastic than either of them had expected. Julia was particularly impressed by the judicious, largely favourable, first notice in *The Spectator*,[20] the high-minded journal to which she herself regularly contributed. Julia well knew that Browning had suffered from the hostile notices he had received earlier in his career, and, in particular, those for his great collection *Men and Women* published in 1855, which failed to get the recognition it deserved. She knew how much he had invested in his new poem and was anxious for his sake that it should fully represent his genius. For her, however, it was a failure, even she ventured 'a mistake.'[21] Yet several of the reviews made comparisons with Shakespeare and, for the first time, Browning's work was not only well received, but also sold well.

Though Julia gloried in her ability to go against the fashion, she also felt the need to back-track on some of her criticism and took what opportunity she could to praise Pompilia, a 'pearly image' in an 'ebony frame'[22] and Pope Innocent. But Browning would not allow her to pick and choose amongst his portraits. Increasingly robustly he defended his long poem as realism, assuring Julia that there was nothing in it that was not derived from his conscientious study of all the documents he could find relating to the case.[23] This was not, as he knew, altogether true.

18. Alexandra Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1891, p. 281.
19. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (3 December 1868), in Curle, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
20. *The Spectator* (30 January 1869).
21. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (21 February 1869), in Curle, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
22. *Ibid.* (30 January 1869), *ibid.*, p. 172.
23. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood (19 November 1868), *ibid.*, pp. 158–159.

Guido's second monologue, setting out his thoughts through the night before his execution, perhaps the crowning achievement of *The Ring and the Book,* was not based on anything in the record but entirely the product of Browning's own imagination. The records he studied suggested that Guido had made a last-minute confession. The Guido of Book XI, however, is savagely defiant to the end. Julia's critical antennae were fine enough and her knowledge of the poet intimate enough, for her to sense how far Guido was Browning's own imaginative creation rather than a purely historical figure.

Many of the admirers of *The Ring and the Book* detected elements of the poet's character in Pietro Caponsacchi, the chivalrous young priest who chastely rescues Pompilia from her brutal husband and the corruption of Arezzo. Others believed that the Pope's monologue was perhaps the fullest and noblest of all Browning's expositions of his own philosophical and religious views. Julia too saw it as the fulfillment of his poetic mission but she also found much of Browning in Guido. 'It is your lending so much of yourself to your contemptible characters' she told him, 'makes me so hate them.'[24] For Julia, who had struggled hard to put together the best education then available for women, an education which fell well below what two of her less gifted brothers had known, as of right, at Cambridge, the idea that a man who could hack his wife to pieces could also quote Greek and Latin, was an affront.

Browning defended his creation energetically. Guido, he suggested, was a quintessential Italian: 'the coarseness, ay, but the man is Italian, noble and living in 1698 [...] all great (conventionally great) Italians are coarse' he told her.[25] The vigour with which Browning defended Guido and the fact that he alone was allotted two Books were a huge disappointment to Julia. In 1845 Browning had warned Elizabeth that there were 'huge layers of ice and pits of cold black water beneath his volcano.'[26] It was a side of Browning that Elizabeth refused to see: Julia could not avoid the evidence of it in *The Ring and the Book.* As she had reminded him at the outset, 'Do you remember once saying to me that your Wife was quite wanting [...] in the scientific interest in evil [...]. I feel as if that interest were in you unduly prominent.'[27] Browning admitted

24. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (30 January 1869), *ibid.*, p. 173.
25. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood (15 November 1868), *ibid.*, p. 161.
26. Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett (24 May 1845), in Adam Roberts (ed.), *Robert Browning. The Major Works,* Oxford, World Classics, 2009, p. 627.
27. Curle, *op. cit.*, pp. 152–153.

her charge: 'I believe I do unduly like the study of morbid cases of the soul—and will try and get over that taste in future works.'[28] He would also, he said, allow her to avert her eyes from the whole villainous story if she chose though she could not deny the reality of evil and its dominance in the world.

Julia was only too painfully aware of the existence of evil, that sense, as she described it in her review of *The Origin of the Species*, that 'some evil power has laid its hand on the mainspring' of life.[29] But she took in her stride her uncle's depiction of the long millennia of death and destruction as the fittest struggled to survive, and confronted the problems of theodicy in 1859, just as Darwin himself had done when he was first devising his theory. What was allowable to scientists, however, was not permissible for poets.

Julia's dissatisfaction with *The Ring and the Book* was brought into high relief by her intense admiration for another long poem published at the same time, George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*. Encouraged by a mutual friend, Barbara Bodichon, she wrote a fan letter to the author. The poem had, she wrote, been a revelation to her, comparable in its effect only to Beethoven's music. What she most admired was Eliot's ability to portray 'the white light of the purest heroism without any blackness of villainy. That is not only so much more welcome to one's mind, but it is so much deeper a truth, than the ignorance & mistakes of poor humanity [...] the very converse seems to be true (of *The Ring and the Book*).'[30] Julia's assessment of the relative merits of the two poems was not shared by her contemporaries who generally found *The Spanish Gypsy* effortful and undramatic.

Julia was almost certainly not familiar with Browning's 'Essay on Shelley' in which he attempted to make the distinction between the objective poet and the subjective: the one reproducing 'things external' which are readily apprehended by his audience; the other with his 'fuller perception of nature and man' who 'is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below, as to the One above him, the supreme intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth.' What Browning called the 'effluence' of the subjective

28. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood (19 November 1868), *ibid.*, p. 158.
29. Julia Wedgwood, 'The Boundaries of Science A Second Dialogue', *Macmillan's Magazine* (21 July 1861), p. 246.
30. Barbara Bodichon to Julia Wedgwood, 'Tuesday night' (1869), W/M 438 and Julia Wedgwood to Barbara Bodichon and Yale, GEN MSS 963 Box 14.

poet 'cannot be easily considered in abstraction from his personality—being indeed the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated.' Browning judged Shelley successful as both objective and subjective poet and even appeared to demur from deciding which kind of poet 'is the higher or [has] the rarer endowment.' His description of the objective poet at work was a good description of what he would achieve in *The Ring and the Book*: 'in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, [he] chooses to deal with the doings of men (the result of which dealing . . . is what we call dramatic poetry).' By contrast, the subjective poet 'leaves [behind] the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to abstract and suppress the working of his brain.' That sense of the poet's 'personality projected from it but not separated'[31] was what Browning and Julia both most admired in Elizabeth's poetry. 'You speak out, you', as he famously wrote in only his second letter to her,[32] was echoed in Julia's praise for 'De Profundis', her favourite amongst Elizabeth's poems. 'I care perhaps too exclusively for herself in her poems', she commented to Browning.[33]

Julia's preference for the subjective poet cannot have surprised Browning. 'I look upon the Poet as essentially the supernatural man, & I complain of him, when he only mirrors our weakness', almost reads like a direct comment on the 'Essay on Shelley' as well as on *The Ring and the Book*. She went on to offer Browning a loose quotation from Francis Bacon: the office of Poetry was 'to satisfy the mind by some shadow of a higher justice than any exhibited in actual life, the soul being so much greater than the world.' This is the element I long for more of in you.[34] So, in many ways, did Browning himself. He had promised Elizabeth that one day he would write 'RB. A Poem.'[35] His difficulty in doing so was one of the reasons that held back his creative energy when Elizabeth was alive.

In the Pope's monologue, however, Julia did find something of the Idealist poet she wanted Browning to be and, interestingly, she [mis]-quoted Shelley to show her approval. 'All harmony, [prophecy] all

31. Robert Browning, Essay on Shelley reprinted in *Robert Browning. The Major Works*, pp. 574–590.
32. Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett (13 January 1845), *ibid.*, p. 594.
33. Sue Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
34. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (15 November 1868), in Curle, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
35. Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett (11 February 1845), in *Robert Browning. The Major Works*, p. 603.

medicine is mine (I am not quoting Shelley rightly) & that, I feel, just touches the work of poetry . . .You do feel that your work is the deliverance of captives, & the opening the eyes of the blind.'[36]—Though this touched on the essential tension in Browning's work between the aspiration to be a subjective poet and his disposition to write objective poetry, he could take Julia's view of the function of poetry in his stride. 'I will try and please you better next time', he promised her and again, 'next time I will try in other directions [...]. Before I die, I hope to purely invent something.'[37]

The turning point in the correspondence, however, came at the stage at which Browning recognized their incompatibility not over their views of the role of the poet but over his specific obligations as the poet who had been married to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Many of the reviews commented favourably on his eloquent acknowledgement at the end of Book I of the inspiration of his 'Lyric Love' and his invocation of Elizabeth's blessing on his work. It was a poetic statement of something he had written to Isa Blagden in Florence at the start of his labour on *The Ring and the Book*. He told her that Elizabeth remained his creative 'root' and hoped that somehow its 'flower' might be put into her hand.[38] Only Julia Wedgwood had the temerity to tell him outright that *The Ring and the Book* was a diversion from what Elizabeth had taught him both as a woman and a poet and that her death had diminished him as a poet. 'I felt as if I were reading what you had lost in your wife. The sense of good seemed dimmed', she wrote after reading the first half of his epic.[39]

Julia's outspokenness derived not only from her sense of the kind of poet she wanted Browning to be, essentially the one she found in 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day' or in 'Abt Vogler', but, more controversially, from her earlier existence in that spiritual ménage à trois with Elizabeth and her reverence for the Brownings' marriage. This, she believed, gave her the right to act as Elizabeth's spokeswoman. 'Love and honour' she told Browning, 'almost never run in the same channel. Where this has been granted, I cannot bear that all the emphasis should lie on the equally undeniable truth human beings are devilish. It seems to

36. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (14 February 1869), in Curle, *op. cit*, p. 182.
37. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood (22 February 1869, and 19 November 1868), *ibid*., pp. 189, 158.
38. Robert Browning to Isa Blagden (19 December 1864), in E.C. MacAleer, *op. cit*., p. 211.
39. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (3 December 1868), in Curle, *op. cit*., p. 164.

me ungrateful to come back from Eden to tell us that.' 'You know you owe us an adequate translation of what your wife was to you.'[40] Browning reacted angrily. Julia had said the unsayable. He closed down the correspondence.

The fact that he kept Julia's letters, however, suggests that he recognized that she had lighted on his own personal and creative unease. As he bitterly wrote to her: if, as she had suggested, *The Ring and the Book* was a 'mistake', what about his 14 years in Italy with Elizabeth when he had written very little?[41] At least one poem in *Dramatis Personae* published in 1864, the whole of *The Ring and the Book* and many of his later poems, which are full of grotesqueries, were not poems he could have published when Elizabeth was alive. The size of his output, if not its quality, markedly expanded in the years of his widower-hood. So too did his reputation as a poet, independently from his wife's. Elizabeth's death released a fund of productive energy in Browning.

Though he hotly denied any responsibility to use his poet's ability to tell the world about his dead wife, two works that followed his final break with Julia Wedgwood in 1870 were, perhaps, a partial answer to her. The first was *Balaustion's Adventure*, published in August 1871, a re-telling of Euripides's *Alcestis*, the story of the faithful wife who is prepared to sacrifice herself to keep her husband alive. It also introduces a character, Balaustion, who like Pompilia, was thought by many to reflect his wife's personality. The second is a more caustic reaction. In 1865 Browning had described to Julia with touching immediacy the occasion on which Elizabeth had presented him with 'that strange heavy crown' the 'Sonnets from the Portuguese', the sequence of poems written during their courtship.[42] Julia adored them. In asking Browning to tell the world about his existence in Paradise with Elizabeth, did she perhaps imagine that he might write the other side of the sonnet sequence exposing what his feelings had been as the courtship developed? If so, she got her answer in 1876 in the poem 'House' included in *Pachiarotto and How he Worked in Distemper*:

> Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself?
> Do I live in a house you would like to see [...]

40. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (11 June and 12 July 1870), *ibid.*, pp. 205, 208.
41. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood (22 February 1869), *ibid.*, p. 189.
42. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood, 'Friday morning' (1864), *ibid.*, p. 114.

Invite the world, as my betters have done?
"Take notice: this building remains on view,
Its suites of reception every one,
Its private apartments and bedroom too;

For a ticket, apply to the Publisher".
No: thanking the public, I must decline.[43]

At the time that he was trying to close down the correspondence with Julia, Browning told Sir Frederick Pollock that writing *The Ring and the Book* had felt like bawling at the British public through an ear trumpet and then being asked not to speak so loudly but more clearly.[44] It is easy to see his choice of simile as a reflection of his frustrations in his futile attempt to persuade Julia Wedgwood of the true worth of his poem. But there is, perhaps, another more positive impact to note. In 1889 Browning made an important change in almost the final lines of *The Ring and the Book* where he compares the power of the visual arts, music and the written word. His original lines about music read: 'So, note by note, bring music from your mind, / Deeper than ever the Andante died', words which Browning revised to read 'Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived.' No doubt he had in mind Elizabeth's passionate attachment to the music of Beethoven, music that she discovered at a painful time in her life.[45] Might he also have been remembering what Julia had written to him about the Pope's Monologue? 'I felt for a while after reading it as if something in me were released, & could speak [...] I knew that sense of everything falling into its place which [...] I hardly feel with anything but Beethoven's music.'[46]

For all of the apparent narrowness and conventionality of many of Julia's reactions to *The Ring and the Book*, she could also offer insights and flashes of critical sympathy that explain why Browning was so anxious to have her good opinion of his work. Before we continue to dismiss Julia Wedgwood as no more than a dim and rather graceless reflection of Elizabeth, it is worth remembering what Browning wrote to her in one of his last letters: 'I lost something peculiar in you, which I shall not see replaced—is that stated soberly enough? I neither can—ever could, nor would, were I able, replace anything I have once had.'[47]

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43. 'House', in *Robert Browning. The Major Works*, p. 507.
44. Quoted in Pamela Neville-Sington, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
45. See Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 222.
46. Julia Wedgwood to Robert Browning (14 February 1869), in Curle , *op. cit.*, p. 182.
47. Robert Browning to Julia Wedgwood, (8 March 1869) *ibid.*, p. 194.