Ruskin wrote in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856) that ‘the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion – all in one’ (Ruskin V, p. 33). Seeing doesn’t happen this ‘plain way’ in Browning’s poetry: not for the characters in poems and not for the reader. When a Browning poem appears to contemplate the visual in the form of scenery, a face or a painting, that same poem will embrace the possibilities of hallucination, phantom presences and delusion. This interest in half-presences does not correspond with Ruskin’s ideal of observed reality, nor with the transcendent category of vision by divine revelation. Where there is clarity in Browning’s poetry it does not necessarily establish confidence in the evidence of one’s eyes. For example, the dramatic lyric ‘My Last Duchess’ (1842) begins with a line that turns the poem into a painting: ‘That’s my last Duchess, painted on the wall’. Or in ‘Memorabilia’ (1855) the speaker puts seeing in a context of a figure from the past appearing, like a ghost: ‘Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,/And did he stop and speak to you?/And did you speak to him again?/How strange it seems, and new!’

The collection in which ‘Memorabilia’ appears, *Men and Women* (1855), was intended to make readers experience more than they might expect from reading. Browning told Joseph Milsand ‘I am writing – a first step towards popularity for me – lyrics with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see’. In the context of Browning’s emphatically verbal art, simple sensory responses become strange and new. Such poems produce uncertainty...
about the kind of experience it might be to read poetry, although there is nothing vague or tentative about the work itself.

**Shades**

The melancholy Ruskin is consciously haunted by the sublime shadiness of modern aesthetic experience, and constantly compares it with the bright untroubled luminosity of medieval imagination. By contrast, Browning’s death-seeking heroes and dodgy characters positively flourish under the storm cloud of the nineteenth century. Perhaps all literature is somewhat shady: the term suits both Browning’s and Ruskin’s writing, despite temperamental differences in their relation to shadowiness. *Shade* indicates the effects of influence as the overshadowing of a belated poet by a mountainous precursor figure. Shade also describes Ruskin’s idea of the dark cast of modern imagination in ‘the ages of umber’ (Ruskin V, p. 321). Browning exploits the vivid and apparently more innocent possibilities of shade as coloration: especially in a poem famously interrogated by Ruskin, ‘Popularity’, where influence is troped as a beautiful shade of blue. Breaking light into different shades and colours may also protect someone from the undifferentiated dazzle of too much brightness. A letter to Elizabeth Barrett discusses these two related kinds of shading. She has asked Browning to tell her any faults he sees in her work, and he replies by discussing poetry as painting. He describes the ‘peculiar artist’s pleasure’ of deciphering the writer’s intentions by seeing where she has laid the paint on too thick:

An instructed eye loves to see where the brush has dipped twice in a lustrous colour, has lain insistingly along a favourite outline, dwelt lovingly in a grand shadow – for these ‘too muches’ for the everybody’s-picture are so many helps to the making out the real painter’s-picture as he had it in his brain.²

In the next paragraph Browning delivers his famous comparison: ‘You speak out, you, – I only make men and women speak – give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me, but I am going to try …’ The ‘pure white light’ associates Elizabeth Barrett with Shelley, the subjective poet whose work, like hers, is ‘the very radiance and aroma of his personality’.

Browning’s self-diagnosed photophobia is fear and love of the power of a pure poetry; witness the apparition of a terrifying ‘pure