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**Reading Experience: William James and Robert Browning  
(Abstract)**

- Full-length article in: JLT 11/2 (2017), 162–182.

The topic of this essay is the concept of experience which, in the field of literary studies, is often used as if it were divided into an objective and a subjective aspect. Advocates of so-called ›empirical‹ approaches to the study of texts and minds tend to proceed from experience only to abstract impersonal (or objective) ›data‹ from it. By contrast, phenomenological and hermeneutic methods are frequently said to work through more immediately personal (or subjective) responses to, and engagements with, literary works. Thus experience, it seems, must either be read in terms of statistical diagrams and brain images, or else remain caught up in an activity *of* reading that, being characterised as singular and eventful, is believed to resist most attempts to convert it into such allegedly objective forms.

Drawing on the radical empiricism of William James, this essay seeks to reintegrate the experience of reading and the reading of experience, both of which are ambiguously condensed in my title. The main argument of the piece therefore hinges on James's and John Dewey's claim that experience is ›double-barrelled‹ (James 1977, 172), which is to say that it refers to ›the entire process of phenomena‹, to quote James's own definition, ›before reflective thought has analysed them into subjective and objective aspects or ingredients‹ (James 1978, 95). Made up of both perceptions and conceptions, experience, as James views it, is the medium through which everything must have passed before it can be named, and without (or outside of) which nothing, therefore, can be said to exist. With this radical account of empiricism in mind, I revisit some of the assumptions underpinning cognitive literary criticism, before turning to an interpretation of the dramatic poetry of Robert Browning, which has been described as a version of ›empiricism in literature‹ because it is concerned with ›the pursuit of experience in all its remotest extensions‹ (Langbaum 1963, 96).

More specifically, my article engages with ›Fra Lippo Lippi‹ and ›An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician‹ in order to show that Browning's dramatic monologues make experience legible as an activity by means of which perceptions come to be turned into conceptions while conceptions, conversely, are continuously reaffirmed, altered, or enriched by whatever perceptions are added to them as life goes on. As I argue, Browning's *personae* speak from the inside of an experience in the making, rather than about a series of events that has already been brought to an end. Readers of these poems are therefore invited to read along with, as well as to reflect upon, the creative activity through which characters and circumstances come into existence and through which they are sustained and transformed. It follows that Browning's writings offer their readers nothing to be processed from a mental vantage point above, or outside of, them. Instead, they involve the act of reading in the generative action through which experience comes to be made into meaningful text. Ultimately, the purpose of this essay is not only to indicate commonalities between James's radical empiricism and Browning's dramatic poetry. More importantly, I wish, by way of this endeavour, also to propose a process- or performance-based corrective, inspired by James and Dewey as much as by contemporary scholars (Ingold, Massumi), to what I regard as a rationalist or intellectualist bias in some representative work in the field of cognitive literary studies (Turner, Zunshine).

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2017-09-22

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

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**How to cite this item:**

Abstract of: Philipp Erchinger, Reading Experience: William James and Robert Browning.

In: JLTONline (22.09.2017)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003668

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003668>