

LYRIC POETRY  
BEYOND NEW CRITICISM

EDITED BY CHAVIVA HOŠEK  
AND PATRICIA PARKER

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

ITHACA AND LONDON

1985

HERBERT F. TUCKER

## Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric

His muse made increment of anything,  
From the high lyric down to the low rational.

(*Don Juan* III.lxxxv.5-6)

I would say, quoting Mill, "Oratory is heard, poetry is overheard."  
And he would answer, his voice full of contempt, that there was  
always an audience; and yet, in his moments of lofty speech, he  
himself was alone no matter what the crowd.

(*The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*)

## I

"Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude." "Lyric poetry, as it was the earliest kind, is also, if the view we are now taking of poetry be correct, more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other."<sup>1</sup> Thus wrote John Stuart Mill in 1833, with the wild surmise of a man who had lately nursed himself through a severe depression, thanks to published poetry and its capacity to excite intimate feeling in forms uncontaminated by rhetorical or dramatic posturing. One listener Mill's characteristically analytic eloquence is likely to have found at once was Robert Browning, who moved in London among liberal circles that

1. John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Poetry*, ed. F. Parvin Sharpless (Columbia, S.C., 1976), pp. 12, 36. The quotations come from two essays of 1833, "What is Poetry?" and "The Two Kinds of Poetry."

touched Mill's and who in the same year published his first work, the problematically dramatic *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession*, to which Mill drafted a response Browning saw in manuscript. Browning's entire career—most notably the generic innovation for which he is widely remembered today, the dramatic monologue—would affirm his resistance to the ideas about poetry contained in Mill's essays. Indeed, as early as *Pauline* Browning was confessing to the open secret of spontaneous lyricism, but in ways that disowned it. What follows is emphatically the depiction of a bygone state:

And first I sang as I in dream have seen  
Music wait on a lyrist for some thought,  
Yet singing to herself until it came.

(ll. 377-79)

In this complex but typical retrospect the poet of *Pauline* figures as an eavesdropper on his own Shelleyan juvenilia, themselves relics of a dream of disengaged and thoughtless youth from which the sadder but wiser poet has on balance done well to awaken. Browning's enfolded of a lyrical interval into a narrative history sets the pattern for the establishment of character throughout his subsequent work, a pattern knowingly at odds with the subjectivist convention that governed the reading of English poetry circa 1830 and to which Mill's essay gave memorable but by no means unique voice.<sup>2</sup>

To the most ambitious and original young poets of the day, Browning and Alfred Tennyson, the sort of lyricism Mill admired must have seemed "overheard" in a sense quite other than Mill intended: heard overmuch, overdone, and thus in need of being done over in fresh forms. Among their other generic experiments in the lyrical drama (*Paracelsus*, *Pippa Passes*), the idyll ("Dora," "Morte d'Arthur"), and the sui generis historical epic form of *Sordello*, during the 1830s Ten-

2. Ideas like Mill's abound, for example, in Macaulay's 1825 essay "Milton," in *Critical and Historical Essays* (London, 1883): "Analysis is not the business of the poet" (p. 3); "It is the part of the lyric poet to abandon himself, without reserve, to his own emotions" (p. 6); "It is just when Milton escapes from the shackles of the dialogue, when he is discharged from the labour of uniting two incongruous styles, when he is at liberty to indulge his choral raptures without reserve, that he rises even above himself" (p. 8). Comparing Mill's writings with T. S. Eliot's "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953), Elder Olson, *American Lyric Poems* (New York, 1964), p. 2, concludes that "the study of the question has not advanced much in over a hundred years." Olson's conclusion retains its force after two decades. See Barbara Hardy, *The Advantage of Lyric* (Bloomington and London, 1977), p. 2: "Lyric poetry thrives, then, on exclusions. It is more than usually opaque because it leaves out so much of the accustomed context and consequences of feeling that it can speak in a pure, lucid, and intense voice."

nyson and Browning arrived independently at the first recognizably modern dramatic monologues: "St. Simeon Stylites" (1842; written in 1833) and the paired poems of 1837 that we now know as "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover." These early monologues were not only highly accomplished pieces; within the lyrical climate of the day they were implicitly polemical as well. The ascetic St. Simeon atop his pillar, exposed to the merciless assault of the elements, stands for an exalted subjectivity ironically demystified by the historical contextualization that is the generic privilege of the dramatic monologue and, I shall argue, one of its indispensable props in the construction of character. Browning's imagination was less symbolically brooding than Tennyson's and more historically alert, and he launched his dramatic monologues with speakers whose insanities were perversions, but recognizably versions, of the twin wellheads of the lyrical current that had come down to the nineteenth century from the Reformation and the Renaissance. The historical figure Johannes Agricola is an antinomian protestant lying against time as if his soul depended on it; and Porphyria's lover, though fictive, may be regarded as a gruesomely literal-minded Petrarch bent on possessing the object of his desire. Each of Browning's speakers, like St. Simeon Stylites, utters a monomaniacal manifesto that shows subjectivity up by betraying its situation in a history. The utterance of each stands revealed not as poetry, in Mill's terms, but as eloquence, a desperately concentric rhetoric whereby, to adapt Yeats's formulation from "Ego Dominus Tuus," the sentimentalist deceives himself.

What gets "overheard" in these inaugural Victorian monologues is history dramatically replayed. The charmed circle of lyric finds itself included by the kind of historical particularity that lyric genres exclude by design, and in the process readers find themselves unsettlingly historicized and contextualized as well. The extremity of each monologist's authoritative assertion awakens in us with great force the counter-authority of communal norms, through a *reductio ad absurdum* of the very lyric premises staked out in Mill's essays, most remarkably in a sentence that Mill deleted when republishing "What is Poetry?": "That song has always seemed to us like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next."<sup>3</sup> ("Ourselves"? How many of us in that next cell? Does one eavesdrop in company? Or is that not called going to the theater, and is Mill's overheard poetry not dramatic eloquence after all?) Tennyson's and Browning's first monologues imply that Mill's position was already its

3. *Essays on Poetry*, p. 14.

own absurd reduction—a reduction not just of the options for poetry but of the prerogatives of the unimprisoned self, which ideas like Mill's have been underwriting, as teachers of undergraduate poetry classes can attest, for the better part of two centuries. Tennyson and Browning wanted to safeguard the self's prerogatives, and to that extent they shared the aims of contemporary lyrical devotees. But both poets' earliest dramatic monologues compassed those aims through a more subtle and eloquent design than the prevailing creed would admit: a design that might preserve the self on the far side of, and as a result of, a contextual dismissal of attenuated Romantic lyricism and its merely soulful claims; a design that might, as Browning was to put it in the peroration to *The Ring and the Book* (1869), "Suffice the eye and save the soul beside" (XII.863). St. Simeon, Johannes, and Porphyria's lover emerge through their monologues as characters: poorer souls than they like to fancy themselves but selves for all that, de- and re-constructed selves strung on the tensions of their texts.

## II

Both Tennyson and Browning proceeded at once to refine their generic discoveries, though they proceeded in quite different directions. While Tennyson kept the dramatic monologue in his repertoire, he turned to it relatively seldom; and with such memorable ventures as "Ulysses" and "Tithonus" he in effect relyricized the genre, running its contextualizing devices in reverse and stripping his speakers of personality in order to facilitate a lyric drive. Browning, on the other hand, moved his dramatic monologues in the direction of mimetic particularity, and the poems he went on to write continued to incorporate or "overhear" lyric in the interests of character-formation. "Johannes Agricola" and "Porphyria's Lover" had been blockbusters, comparatively single-minded exercises in the construction of a lurid character through the fissuring of an apparently monolithic ego. The gain in verisimilitude of Browning's later monologues is a function of the nerve with which he learned to reticulate the sort of pattern these strong but simple monologues had first knit. The degree of intricacy varies widely, but the generic design remains the same. Character in the Browningsque dramatic monologue emerges as an interference effect between opposed yet mutually informative discourses: between an historical, narrative, metonymic text and a symbolic, lyrical, metaphoric text that adjoins it and jockeys with it for

authority. While each text urges its own priority, the ensemble works according to the paradoxical logic of the originary supplement: the alien voices of history and of feeling come to constitute and direct one another. Typically Browning's monologists tell the story of a yearning after the condition of lyric, a condition that is itself in turn unimaginable except as the object of, or pretext for, the yearning that impels the story plotted against it.<sup>4</sup>

What we acknowledge as the "life" of a dramatic monologue thus emerges through the interdependence of its fictive autobiography and its *élan vital*, each of which stands as the other's reason for being, and neither of which can stand alone without succumbing to one of two deconstructive ordeals that beset character in this genre (and that arguably first beset the self during the century in which this genre arose). The first ordeal lies through history and threatens to resolve the speaking self into its constituent influences, to unravel character by exposing it as merely a tissue of affiliations. At the same time, character in the dramatic monologue runs an equal but opposite risk from what certain Romantic poetics and hermeneutics would assert to be the self's very place of strength and what we have been calling, after Mill, the privacy of lyric. A kind of sublime idiocy, lyric isolation from context distempers character and robs it of contour, as Socrates said long ago in the *Ion* (lyric poets are out of their minds), and as Sharon Cameron, with an eye on Greek and earlier origins of lyric, has said again more recently: "the lyric is a departure not only from temporality but also from the finite constrictions of identity."<sup>5</sup> We

4. Genre theorists have often observed this distinction, though usually in honoring the exclusivity of lyric. For Babette Deutsch, *Potable Gold* (New York, 1929), p. 21, the essential distinction lies between prose and poetry: "The one resembles a man walking toward a definite goal; the other is like a man surrendering himself to contemplation, or to the experience of walking for its own sake. Prose has intention; poetry has intensity." According to Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p. 475, "The state of arrest in which we would situate the essence of lyric is not analogous to dramatic action at all, but is the dialectical counterpart of action." Olson, "The Lyric," *PMMLA*, 1 (1969), 65, says of lyrics that "while they may contain within themselves a considerable narrative or dramatic portion, that portion is subordinate to the lyrical whole. . . . Once expression and address and colloquy become subservient to a further end as affecting their form as complete and whole in themselves, we have gone beyond the bounds of the lyric." For a recent view of Browning opposed to that of the present essay see David Bergman, "Browning's Monologues and the Development of the Soul," *ELH*, 47 (1980), 774: "For Browning, historicity only prettifies a work. . . . History, the creation of a concrete setting, has never been a major focus for Browning." I would reply that history is indeed a major focus for Browning—one of the two foci, to speak geometrically, that define his notoriously elliptical procedures.

5. *Ion* 534; Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time* (Baltimore and London, 1979), p. 208. See also the quirky Victorian theorist E. S. Dallas, *Poetics* (London, 1852), p. 83: "The outpourings of the lyric should spring from the law of unconsciousness. Personality or selfhood triumphs in the drama; the divine and all that is not Me triumphs in the lyric."

find this lyric departure superbly dramatized in the valediction of Tennyson's *Ulysses*, that most marginal of characters, whose discourse poises itself at "the utmost bound of human thought" (l. 32). Insofar as we find *Ulysses* transgressing that bound—as for me he does in the final paragraph, with its address to a bewilderingly mythical crew of Ithacan mariners and with the concomitant evanescence of its "I"—we find Tennyson transgressing the generic boundary of dramatic monologue as well.

One good reason why the dramatic monologue is associated with Browning's name rather than with Tennyson's, who technically got to it first, is that in Browning the lyrical flight from narrative, temporality, and identity appears through a characteristic, and characterizing, resistance to its allure. Browning's *Ulysses*, had he invented one, would speak while bound to the mast of a ship bound elsewhere; his life would take its bearing from what he heard the Sirens sing, and their music would remain an unheard melody suffusing his monologue without rising to the surface of utterance.<sup>6</sup> Such a plot of lyricism resisted would mark his poem as a dramatic monologue, which we should be justified in reading as yet another allegory of the distinctive turn on Romantic lyricism that perennially recreated Browning's poetical character. "R. B. a poem" was the title he gave in advance to this allegorical testament, in the fine letter, virtually an epistolary monologue, that he addressed on the subject to Elizabeth Barrett; and by the time of "One Word More" (1855) he could proudly affirm his wife's lyricism as the privately silencing otherness his public character was to be known by.<sup>7</sup>

Dramatic monologue in the Browning tradition is, in a word, anything but monological. It represents modern character as a quotient, a ratio of history and desire, a function of the division of the modern mind against itself. Our apprehension of character as thus constituted is a Romantic affair; in Jerome Christensen's apt phrase for the processing of the "lyrical drama" in Romanticism, it is a matter of learning to "read the differentials." As a sampling of the dozens of poetry textbooks published in recent decades will confirm, the dramatic monologue is our genre of genres for training in how to read between the lines—a hackneyed but valuable phrase that deserves a fresh

6. Although Browning never wrote such a monologue, he glanced at its possibility in "The Englishman in Italy" (1845), with its vision of "Those isles of the siren" (l. 199) and its audition of a song "that tells us / What life is, so clear"; "The secret they sang to Ulysses / When, ages ago, / He heard and he knew this life's secret / I hear and I know" (ll. 223–27). Life's secret, needless to add, goes untold in Browning's text.

7. Letter of 11 February 1845, in *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845–1846*, ed. Elvan Kintner, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 1:17.

hearing.<sup>8</sup> In the reading of a dramatic monologue we do not so much scrutinize the ellipses and blank spaces of the text as we people those openings by attending to the overtones of the different discourses that flank them. Between the lines, we read in a no-man's-land the notes whose intervals engender character. Perhaps the poet of the dramatic monologue gave a thought to the generic framing of his own art when he had the musician Abt Vogler (1864) marvel "That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star" (l. 52). The quantum leap from text to fictive persona (the dramatic "star" of a monologue) is no less miraculous for being, like Abt Vogler's structured improvisation, "framed," defined and sustained as a put-up job. That such a process of character-construction tends to elude our received means of exegesis is a contributing cause for the depression of Browning's stock among the New Critics. But one way to begin explicating a dramatic monologue in the Browning tradition is to identify a discursive shift, a moment at which either of the genre's constitutive modes—historical line or punctual lyric spot—breaks into the other.

## III

Since the premier writer of dramatic monologues was, as usual in such matters, the most ingenious, it is difficult to find uncomplicated instances in Browning that are also representative. We might sample first a passage from "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855), a sizeable blank-verse monologue that happens to contain lyric literally in the form of *stornelli*, lyrical catches Englished in italics that Browning's artist monk emits at odd intervals during the autobiography he is improvising for the night watch. In the following lines Lippo is taking off those critics whom his new painterly realism has disturbed:

8. Jerome Christensen, "Thoughts That Do Often Lie Too Deep for Tears": Toward a Romantic Concept of Lyrical Drama," *Wordsworth Circle*, 12:1 (1981), 61. For an appropriately genealogical testimonial to the pedagogical virtues of the dramatic monologue see Ina Beth Sessions's postscript to "The Dramatic Monologue," *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 516n.: "One of the most interesting comments concerning the dramatic monologue was made by Dr. J. B. Wharey of the University of Texas in a letter to the writer on January 17, 1935: 'The dramatic monologue is, I think, one of the best forms of disciplinary reading—that is, to use the words of the late Professor Genung, "reading pursued with the express purpose of feeding and stimulating inventive power."' Among the earliest systematic students of the genre in our century were elocution teachers; their professional pedigree broadly conceived goes back at least to Quintilian, who recommended exercises in impersonation (*prosopopoeia*) as a means of imaginative discipline. See A. Dwight Culler, "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue," *PMLA*, 90 (1975), 368.

"It's art's decline, my son!  
You're not of the true painters, great and old;  
Brother Angelico's the man, you'll find;  
Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:  
Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!"  
*Flower o' the pine,*  
*You keep your mistr . . . manners, and I'll stick to mine!*  
I'm not the third, then: bless us, they must know!  
Don't you think they're the likeliest to know,  
They with their Latin?

(ll. 233-42)

The gap for interpretation to enter is, of course, the middle of the second italicized line, marked typographically by ellipsis and prosodically by the wreckage of the embedded snatch of song. Amid Lippo's tale of the modern artist's oppression by his superiors, by religious and representational traditions, and by the Latin learning that backs up both (poetry as overseen?), the apparently spontaneous individual talent bursts forth in a rebellious chant—which is then itself interrupted by a reminder, also apparently spontaneous, of Lippo's answerability to the authorities right in front of him. Lippo's lyric flower breeds a canker: the poetry we and the police thought we were overhearing turns out to be, through versatile revision or instant overdubbing, a rhetorically canny performance. Or, if we take a larger view, it turns out to have been rhetoric all along, Lippo's premeditated means of affirming solidarity with the unlettered night watch by ruefully policing his own speech in advance and incorporating this police action into the larger speech act that is his monologue.

The passage is intensely artificial yet intensely realistic, and we should note that its success does not rely on our deciding whether the monologist has forecast his occasion or stumbled upon it. The twist of the lyrical line against itself nets a speaking subject who is tethered to circumstances and, for that very reason, is anything but tongue-tied. Here as throughout the Browningsque monologue, character is not unfolded to comprehension but enfolded in a text that draws us in. Even after nearly four hundred lines we do not grasp Lippo's character as an essence and know what he is; but if we have negotiated the text we know how he does. In the terms of the passage in question, we know his *manners*, not least his manner of covering up his *mistr*. . . . Lippo's character arises, in the differentials between vitality and circumstances, as a way of life, a mazing text, a finely realized, idiosyncratic instance of a generic method.

A similarly punctuated digression from story, or transgression into lyric, occurs at the center of Browning's most famous monologue, "My Last Duchess" (1842):

She had  
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 't was all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift.

(ll. 21–34)

The framing hesitations of "How shall I say?" and "I know not how" may or may not come under the Duke's rhetorical control; but a comparable tic or stammer invades his discourse more subtly with the appositional style of the middle lines, which do here with syntax the work done otherwise in Fra Lippo's *stornelli*. Halfway through the monologue, these lines constitute a lyrical interlude around which the Duke's despotic narrative may be seen to circle, with a predatory envy that escapes his posture of condescension. Anaphora and grammatical suspension, time-honored refuges of lyric, harbor recurrent images of the daily and seasonal cycle, of natural affection, and of sexual generation that not only contradict the Duke's potent affiliation with art, culture, and domination but show these contradictions within the text to be contradictions within the Duke. Or rather, to discard the figuration of inside and outside that dramatic monologue at its best asks us to do without, it is these textual contradictions that constitute the Duke's character. The polymorphous perversity he here attributes to his last Duchess is as much an attribute of his own character as is the different, monomaniacal perversity with which he has put a stop to her egalitarian smiles. Each perversity so turns on the other as to knot the text up into that essential illusion we call character. Hence the Duke's characteristic inconsistency in objecting to the "officious fool" who, in breaking cherries for the Duchess, was not breaking ranks at all but merely executing his proper "office" in

the Duke's hierarchical world. Hence, too, the undecidable ambiguity of "My favour at her breast": the phrase oscillates between suggestions of a caress naturally given and of an heirloom possessively bestowed, and its oscillation is what makes the star of dramatic character shine. Such a semantic forking of the ways, like the plotting of spontaneity against calculation in Fra Lippo's "*mistr . . . manners*" revision, blocks reference in one direction, in order to refer us to the textual production of character instead.

Because in grammatical terms it is a paratactic pocket, an insulated deviation from the syntax of narrative line, the Duke's recounting of his Duchess's easy pleasures wanders from the aims of the raconteur and foregrounds the speech impediments that make her story his monologue.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Duke's listing is also a listening, a harkening after the kind of spontaneous lyric voice that he, like the writer of dramatic monologues, comes into his own by imperfectly renouncing. Lyric, in the dramatic monologue, is what you cannot have and what you cannot forget—think of the arresting trope Browning invented for his aging poet Cleon (1855), "One lyric woman, in her crocus vest" (l. 15)—and as an organizing principle for the genre, lyric becomes present through a recurrent and partial overruling. This resisted generic nostalgia receives further figuration intertextually, in "My Last Duchess" and many another monologue, with the clustering of allusions at moments of lyric release. Here "The dropping of the daylight in the West" falls into Browning's text from major elegies, or refusals to mourn, by Milton ("Lycidas"), Wordsworth ("Tintern Abbey," "Intimations" ode), and Keats ("To Autumn"); and the Duchess on her white mule so recalls Spenser's lyrically selfless Una from the opening of *The Faerie Queene* as to cast the Duke as an archimage dubiously empowered.

Amid the Duke's eloquence the overhearing of poetry, in this literary-historical sense of allusion to prior poems, underscores the choral dissolution that lurks in lyric voice. Furthermore, it reinstates the checking of such dissolution as the mark of the individual self—of the

9. David I. Masson, "Vowel and Consonant Patterns in Poetry," in *Essays on the Language of Literature*, ed. Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin (Boston, 1967), p. 3, observes that "where lyrical feeling or sensuous description occurs in European poetry, there will usually be found patterns of vowels and consonants." For more general consideration of the linguistics of lyric, see Edward Stankiewicz, "Poetic and Non-poetic Language in Their Interrelation," in *Poetics*, ed. D. Davie et al. (Gravenhage, 1961), p. 17: "Lyrical poetry presents the most interiorized form of poetic language, in which the linguistic elements are most closely related and internally motivated." Note that Stankiewicz, following the Russian Formalists, here refers not to psychological inwardness but to the nonreferential, auto-mimetic interiority of language itself.

dramatic speaker and also of the poet who, in writing him up, defines himself in opposition to lyrical orthodoxy and emerges as a distinct "I," a name to conjure with against the ominous: "This grew; I gave commands" (l. 45). Toward the end of his career, in "House" (1876) Browning would in his own voice make more explicit this engagement with the literary past and would defend literary personality, against Wordsworth on the sonnet, as just the antithesis of unmediated sincerity: "'With this same key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart,' once more! / Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!" (ll. 38-40). Poetry of the unlocked heart, far from displaying character in Browning's terms, undoes it: Browning reads his chief precursor in the English dramatic line as a type of the objective poet, the poetical character known through a career-long objection to the sealed intimacies of the poem à clef.

## IV

In 1831 Arthur Hallam gave a promising description of the best of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) as "a graft of the lyric on the dramatic." The Victorian dramatic monologue that soon ensued from these beginnings was likewise a hybrid genre, a hardy offshoot of the earlier hybrid genre in which the first Romantics had addressed the problem of how to write the long modern poem by making modern civilization and its discontents, or longing and its impediments, into the conditions for the prolonging and further hearing of poetry: the "greater Romantic lyric." The genre M. H. Abrams thus christened some years ago has by now achieved canonical status, but a reconsideration of its given name from the standpoint of the dramatic monologue may help us save it from assimilation to orthodox lyricism by reminding us that the genre Abrams called "greater" was not more-lyrical-than-lyric but rather more-than-lyrical. Despite a still high tide of assertions to the contrary, the works of the first generations of Romantic poets were on the whole much less lyrical than otherwise.<sup>10</sup> Once we conceive the Romantic tradition accordingly as

10. Arthur Hallam, "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson," in *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. T. Vail Motter (New York, 1943), p. 197; M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York, 1965), pp. 527-60. On the Romantic mixture of lyric with other genres see Cameron, *Lyric Time*, p. 217; Christensen, "Thoughts," pp. 60-62; Robert Langbaum, "Wordsworth's Lyrical Characterizations," *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (1982),

a perennial intermarriage, which is to say infighting, of poetic kinds, we can situate the Victorian dramatic monologue as an eminently Romantic form. In correcting the literary-historical picture we can begin, too, to see how fin-de-siècle and modernist reactions to the Browningsque monologue have conditioned the writing, reading, and teaching of poetry, literary theory, and literary history in our own time.

At the beginning of Browning's century Coleridge remarked, "A poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry." By the end of the century Oscar Wilde, looking askance at Browning's achievement, took up Coleridge's distinction, but with a difference: "If he can only get his music by breaking the strings of his lute, he breaks them, and they snap in discord. . . . Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose."<sup>11</sup> The difference between Coleridge's and Wilde's ideas of what a poem should be is in large part a difference that the dramatic monologue had made in nineteenth-century poetry, a difference Browning inscribed into literary history by inscribing it into the characteristic ratios of his texts. Wilde and others at the threshold of modernism wanted Mill's pure lyricism but wanted it even purer. And through an irony of literary history that has had far-reaching consequences for our century, the Browningsque dramatic monologue gave them what they wanted. Symbolist and imagist writers could extract from such texts as *Pauline* and "Fra Lippo Lippi"—and also, to sketch in the fuller picture, from the Tennysonian idyll and most sophisticated Victorian novels—lyrical gems as finely cut as anything from the allegedly naive eras, Romantic or Elizabethan, upon which they bestowed such sentimental if creative regard. The hybrid dramatic monologue, as a result of its aim to make the world and subjectivity safe for each other in the interests of character, had proved a sturdy grafting stock for flowers of lyricism; and the governing pressures of the genre, just because they governed so firmly, had bred hothouse lyric varieties of unsurpassed intensity. These lyrical implants it was left to a new generation of rhymers, scholars, and

319-39. Langbaum's earlier book *The Poetry of Experience* (1957; rpt. New York, 1963), which places the dramatic monologue within Romantic tradition, should be consulted, as should two responses that appeared, almost concurrently, two decades later: Culler, "Monodrama," and Ralph W. Rader, "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms," *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (1976), 131-51.

11. Coleridge is quoted in Frederick A. Pottle, *The Idiom of Poetry* (Ithaca, 1941), p. 82. Wilde's comments occur in "The Critic as Artist" (1890), in *Literary Criticism of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Stanley Weintraub (Lincoln, Neb., 1968), p. 202.

anthologists to imitate, defend, and excerpt in a newly chastened lyric poetry, a severely purist poetics, and a surprisingly revisionist history of poetry.<sup>12</sup>

The fin-de-siècle purism of Wilde, Yeats, Arthur Symons, and others was polemically canted against the example of Browning; yet it remained curiously, even poignantly, in his debt. Consider, for example, Symons's resumption of a rhetoric very like Mill's, as he praises Verlaine in *The Symbolist Movement* (1899) for "getting back to nature itself": "From the moment when his inner life may be said to have begun, he was occupied with the task of an unceasing confession, in which one seems to overhear him talking to himself."<sup>13</sup> The pivotally wishful "unceasing," which distinguishes Symons's formulation from Mill's, also betrays a kind of elegiac overcompensation. Mill had dissolved audience in order to overhear poetry as if from an adjacent cell; Symons, writing at an appreciable historical remove from the achievements of Verlaine, is by contrast trapped in time. Symons's overhearing of poetry resembles less Mill's eavesdropping than the belated Browningsque audition of a poignant echo, and the symbolist movement he hopes to propel is fed by an overwhelming nostalgia that creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates. The nostalgia for lyric that throbs through the influential versions of the poetic past Symons and his contemporaries assembled sprang from a range of cultural causes we are only beginning to understand adequately.<sup>14</sup> But we can observe here that the rhetorical pattern into

12. Victorian writers were divided as to the chronological priority of lyric over other genres. For Dallas, as for Mill, "Lyrics are the first-fruits of art" (p. 245), while Walter Bagehot contends that "poetry begins in Impersonality" and that lyric represents a later refinement ("Hartley Coleridge" [1852], in *Collected Works*, ed. Norman St. John-Steuas, I [Cambridge, Mass., 1965], pp. 159-60). As to the normative status of lyric, however, the later nineteenth century had little doubt. Summaries and bibliographical aids may be found in Francis B. Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry* (New York, 1901), p. 147; Charles Mill Gayley and Benjamin Putnam Kurtz, *Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism* (Boston, 1920), p. 122; W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1966), pp. 433, 751-52. For representative belletristic histories of poetry from a nostalgic, fin-de-siècle perspective see John Aldington Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* (London, 1893), pp. 393 ff.; Edmund Gosse, "Introduction" to *Victorian Songs: Lyrics of the Affections and Nature*, ed. E. H. Garrett (Boston, 1895); and Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899; rpt. New York, 1958) and *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (New York, 1909). On the influence of F. T. Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861; rev. 1981), an anthology that "established, retroactively and for the future, the tradition of the English lyric," see Christopher Clausen, *The Place of Poetry* (Lexington, 1981), p. 67.

13. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, p. 49.

14. Marxian approaches now offer the most promising and comprehensive explanations of the fortunes of lyric as a product of industrial culture, yet recently published Marxian analyses evaluate the social functions of lyric very differently. For Theodor W. Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957; trans. Bruce Mayo, *Telos*, 20 [Summer

which their lyrically normed historiography fell was precisely that of the poetic genre that had preeminently confronted lyricism with history in their century: the dramatic monologue. It is as if what Symons championed as the "revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric,"<sup>15</sup> having repudiated the "impure" Browning tradition in principle, was condemned to reiterate its designs in writing. The symbolist and imagist schools wanted to read in their French and English antecedents an expurgated lyric that never was on page or lip. It was, rather, a generic back-formation, a textual constituent they isolated from the dramatic monologue and related nineteenth-century forms; and the featureless poems the fin-de-siècle purists produced by factoring out the historical impurities that had ballasted these forms are now fittingly, with rare exceptions, works of little more than historical interest.

Virtually each important modernist poet in English wrote such poems for a time; each became an important poet by learning to write otherwise and to exploit the internal otherness of the dramatic monologue. When the lyrical bubble burst within its bell jar, poetry became modern once again in its return to the historically responsive and dialogical mode that Browning, Tennyson, and others had brought forward from the Romantics.<sup>16</sup> And upon the establishment of Yeats's mask, Pound's personae, Frost's monologues and idylls, and Eliot's impersonal poetry, it became a point of dogma among sophisticated readers that every poem dramatized a speaker who was not the poet. "Once we have dissociated the speaker of the lyric from the personality of the poet, even the tiniest lyric reveals itself as drama."<sup>17</sup>

1974], 56-71). "The subjective being that makes itself heard in lyric poetry is one which defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective and the realm of objectivity" (p. 59); in contrast, Hugh N. Grady, "Marxism and the Lyric," *Contemporary Literature*, 22 (1981), 555, argues that "the lyric has become a specialized, though not exclusive, genre of Utopian vision in the modern era."

15. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, p. 65.

16. Olson, "The Lyric," p. 65, in distinguishing the "verbal acts" of lyric from those of more elaborated forms, himself acts fatally on the strength of a simile: "The difference, if I may use a somewhat homely comparison, is that between a balloon inflated to its proper shape, nothing affecting it but the internal forces of the gas, and a balloon subjected to the pressure of external forces which counteract the internal." But a balloon affected only by internal forces (i.e., a balloon in a vacuum) would not inflate but explode. That the "proper shape" of a poem, as of a balloon, arises not from sheer afflatus but as a compromise between "internal" and "external" forces is precisely my point about the framing of the dramatic monologue—as it is, I think, the dramatic monologue's (deflationary) point about the lyric.

17. Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism*, p. 675; see also Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (1938; rev. ed. New York, 1950), p. liv. Don Geiger, *The Dramatic Impulse in Modern Poetics* (Baton Rouge, 1967), pp. 85-95, provides a capable overview of the persona poetics of the New Criticism.



We recognize this declaration as dogma by the simple fact that we—at least most of us—had to learn it, and had to trade for it older presuppositions about lyric sincerity that we had picked up in corners to which New Critical light had not yet pierced. The new dogma took (and in my teaching experience it takes still) with such ease that it is worth asking why it did (and does), and whether as professors of poetry we should not have second thoughts about promulgating an approach that requires so painless an adjustment of the subjectivist norms we profess to think outmoded.

The conversion educated readers now routinely undergo from lyrical to dramatic expectations about the poems they study recapitulates the history of Anglo-American literary pedagogy during our century, the middle two decades of which witnessed a great awakening from which we in our turn are trying to awaken again. Until about 1940 teachers promoted poetry appreciation in handbooks and anthologies that exalted lyric as “the supreme expression of strong emotion . . . the very real but inexplicable essence of poetry,” and that throned this essential emotion in the equally essential person of the poet: “Lyrical poetry arouses emotion because it expresses the author’s feeling.”<sup>18</sup> By 1960 the end of instruction had shifted from appreciating to understanding poetry, and to this end a host of experts marched readers past the author of a poem to its dramatic speaker. John Crowe Ransom’s dictum that the dramatic situation is “almost the first head under which it is advisable to approach a poem for understanding” had by the 1960s advanced from advice to prescription. In Laurence Perrine’s widely adopted *Sound and Sense* the first order of business is “to assume always that the speaker is someone other than the poet himself.” For Robert Scholes in *Elements of Poetry* the speaker is the most elementary of assumptions: “In beginning our approach to a poem we must make some sort of tentative decision about who the speaker is, what his situation is, and who he seems to be addressing.”<sup>19</sup>

That such forthright declarations conceal inconsistencies appears in the instructions of Robert W. Boynton and Maynard Mack, whose *Introduction to the Poem* promotes the familiar dramatic principle but pursues its issues to the verge of a puzzling conclusion. The authors begin dogmatically enough: “When we start looking closely at the

18. Oswald Doughty, *English Lyric in the Age of Reason* (London, 1922), p. xv; Walter Blair and W. K. Chandler, eds., *Approaches to Poetry* (New York, 1935), p. 250.

19. Ransom is quoted in William Elton, *A Glossary of the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1949), p. 38. *Sound and Sense*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1963), p. 21; *Elements of Poetry* (New York, 1969), pp. 11–12.

dramatic character of poetry, we find that we have to allow for a more immediate speaker than the poet himself, one whom the poet has imagined speaking the poem, as an actor speaks a part written for him by a playwright.” But then Boynton and Mack, with a candor unusual in the handbook genre, proceed to a damaging concession that dissolves the insubstantial pageant of the dramatic enterprise into thin air: “In some instances this imagined speaker is in no way definite or distinctive; he is simply a voice.” (When is a speaker not a speaker? When he is a “voice,” nay, an Arnoldian “lyric cry.”) With this last sentence Boynton and Mack offer an all but lyrical intimation of the mystification inherent in the critical fiction of the speaker and suggest its collusion with the mysteries of the subjectivist norm it was designed to supplant.<sup>20</sup> It may well be easier to indicate these mysteries than to solve them; what matters is that with our New Critical guides we seem to have experienced as little difficulty in negotiating the confusions entailed by the fiction of the speaker as we have experienced in converting ourselves and our students from lyrically expressive to dramatically objective norms for reading.

Why should we have made this conversion, and why do we continue to encourage it? Why should our attempts at understanding poetry through a New Criticism rely on a fiction that baffles the understanding? These are related questions, and their answers probably lie in considerations of pedagogical expediency. One such consideration must be the sheer hard work of bringing culturally stranded students into contact with the historical particularities from which a given poem arises. Life (and courses) being short, art being long, and history being longer still, the fiction of the speaker at least brackets the larger problem of context so as to define a manageable classroom task for literary studies. To such institutional considerations as these, which have been attracting needed attention of late, I would add a consideration more metaphysical in kind. The fiction of the speaker, if it removes from the study of poetry the burden, and the dignity, of

20. Robert W. Boynton and Maynard Mack, *Introduction to the Poem* (New York, 1965), p. 24. On p. 45, to complete the circuit, the authors equate the “voice” with “the poet.” They thus return us through a backstage exit to Clement Wood’s definition of lyric in *The Craft of Poetry* (New York, 1929), p. 189, as “the form in which the poet utters his own dramatic monolog.” Compare the dramatic metaphor in Benedetto Croce’s 1937 *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on “Aesthetic”: “The lyric . . . is an objectification in which the ego sees itself on the stage, narrates itself, and dramatizes itself” (quoted in Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism*, p. 510). For Geoffrey Crump, *Speaking Poetry* (London, 1953), p. 59, the reverse seems true: “an element of the dramatic is present in all lyrical poetry, because the speaker is to some extent impersonating the poet.”

establishing contact with history, puts us in compensatory contact with the myth of unconditioned subjectivity we have inherited from Mill and Symons in spite of ourselves. Through that late ceremony of critical innocence, the readerly imagination of a self, we modern readers have abolished the poet and set up the fictive speaker; and we have done so in order to boost the higher gains of an intersubjective recognition for which, in an increasingly mechanical age that can make Mill's look positively idyllic, we seem to suffer insatiable cultural thirst. The mastery of New Critical tools may offer in this light a sort of homeopathic salve, the application of a humanistic technology to technologically induced ills.

The thirst for intersubjective confirmation of the self, which has made the overhearing of a persona our principal means of understanding a poem, would I suspect be less strong if it did not involve a kind of bad faith about which Browning's Bishop Blougram (1855) had much to say: "With me, faith means perpetual unbelief / Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot / Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe" (ll. 666—68). The New Criticism of lyric poetry introduced into literary study an anxiety of textuality that was its legacy from the Higher Criticism of scripture a century before: anxiety over the tendency of texts to come loose from their origins into an anarchy that the New Critics half acknowledged and half sought to curb under the regime of a now avowedly fictive self, from whom a language on parole from its author might nonetheless issue as speech. What is poetry? Textuality a speaker owns. The old king of self-expressive lyricism is dead: Long live the Speaker King! At a king's ransom we thus secure our reading against the subversive textuality of what we read; or as another handbook from the 1960s puts it with clarity: "So strong is the oral convention in poetry that, in the absence of contrary indications, we infer a voice and, though we know we are reading words on a page, create for and of ourselves an imaginary listener."<sup>21</sup> Imaginative recreation "for and of ourselves" here depends upon our suppressing the play of the signifier beneath the hand of a convention "so strong" as to decree the "contrary indications" of textuality absent most of the time.

Deconstructive theory and practice in the last decade have so directed our attention to the persistence of "contrary indications" that the doctrine espoused in my last citation no longer appears tenable. It seems incumbent upon us now to choose between intersubjective and

intertextual modes of reading, between vindicating the self and saving the text. Worse, I fear, those of us who are both teachers and critics may have to make different choices according to the different positions in which we find ourselves—becoming by turns intertextual readers in the study and intersubjective readers in the classroom—in ways that not very fruitfully perpetuate a professional divide some latter-day Browning might well monologize upon. I wonder whether it must be so; and I am fortified in my doubts by the stubborn survival of the dramatic monologue, which began as a response to lyric isolationism, and which remains to mediate the rivalry between intersubjective appeal and intertextual rigor by situating the claims of each within the limiting context the other provides.

In its chartered life the dramatic monologue can help us put in their places critical reductions of opposite but complementary and perhaps even cognate kinds: on one hand, the transcendently face-saving misprisions that poetry has received from Victorian romanticizers, Decadent purists, and New Critical impersonalists alike; on the other hand, the abysmal disfigurements of a deconstruction that would convert poetry's most beautiful illusion—the speaking presence—into a uniform textuality that is quite as "purist," in its own way, as anything the nineteenth century could imagine. An exemplary teaching genre, the dramatic monologue can teach us, among other things, that while texts do not absolutely lack speakers, they do not simply have them either; they invent them instead as they go. Texts do not come from speakers, speakers come from texts. *Persona fit non nascitur*. To assume in advance that a poetic text proceeds from a dramatically situated speaker is to risk missing the play of verbal implication whereby character is engendered in the first place through colliding modes of signification; it is to read so belatedly as to arrive only when the party is over. At the same time, however, the guest the party convenes to honor, the ghost conjured by the textual machine, remains the articulate phenomenon we call character: a literary effect we neglect at our peril. For to insist that textuality is all and that the play of the signifier usurps the recreative illusion of character is to turn back at the threshold of interpretation, stopping our ears to both lyric cries and historical imperatives, and from our studious cells overhearing nothing. Renewed stress upon textuality as the basis for the Western written character is a beginning as important to the study of poetry now as it has been for over a century to the writing of dramatic monologues and to the modern tradition they can illuminate in both backward and forward directions. But textuality is only the beginning.

21. Jerome Beaty and William H. Matchett, *Poetry: From Statement to Meaning* (New York, 1965), p. 103.