

## Character and Voice in the Poetry of Browning

SIMON PETCH

In a lecture delivered in 1953, "The Three Voices of Poetry", T. S. Eliot said that "dramatic monologue cannot create a character".<sup>1</sup> As his title implies, Eliot distinguishes between three voices of poetry. The first voice is that "of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody". The second voice is that "of the poet addressing an audience", and the third "is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse".<sup>2</sup> Eliot thus denies proper dramatic status to the dramatic monologue, on the grounds that the poet is likely to identify too strongly with his chosen character, whereas in stage drama the poet must invest his sympathies more prudently among a multiplicity of characters. Eliot's lecture is a highly polemical performance, which must be read in the context of his own attempt to write for the stage (an attempt which was beginning to falter in 1953), and it has some of the ironic archness we associate with the dramatic monologue: "It may be, as I have read, that there is a dramatic element in much of my early work."<sup>3</sup> The lecture should also be seen as part of Eliot's systematic attempt to exorcize from his poetry the ghosts of the great Victorians, Tennyson and Browning, to silence their echoes in his own poetic voices. Nevertheless, his distinction between character and voice is worth examining for its bearing on Browning's poetry.

This lecture is obsessed with Robert Browning, whose poetry, Eliot says, is of the second voice rather than the voice of poetic drama: "The poet, speaking, as Browning does, in his own voice, cannot bring a character to life: he can only mimic a character otherwise known to us." And again, more generally: "What we normally hear, in fact, in the dramatic monologue, is the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up of some historical character, or of one out of fiction."<sup>4</sup> Many of Browning's commentators would envy Eliot's certainty, but that the lengths to which he goes may be justified is suggested by a brief comparison with the poetry of Eliot which most approximates that

1 T. S. Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry", *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday, 1961), pp. 96-112; 104.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.

of Browning. No one would think of calling J. Alfred Prufrock, Sweeney, Gerontion, or the young man of "Portrait of a Lady", a character: the term does not fit, is not appropriate to the diversity of voice even within a single poem. The associative method of Eliot's poetry does not encourage us either to look for motivation or psychological consistency, or to analyse the situation from realistic perspectives. Prufrock, for example, is so concerned with himself and his own word games, which are partly role-playing games, that his mask slips only to reveal further masks. The poem's rhymes, rhythms, and images, emanate from a voice rather than a character (in a sense of a consistent or developing psychological entity), and any attempt to read the poem in terms of character rather than voice is going to have to supply much of the basis for its interpretation.

Eliot's distinction between character and voice is suggestive because the remarks just made about Eliot's own poetry could well be applied to the poetry of Browning. "Character" has been a problematic and misleading term in Browning criticism, which has spent too much time creating character and not enough analysing voice. The title of Park Honan's influential study, *Browning's Characters*,<sup>5</sup> has set the tone, for Honan sees the dramatic monologue as a "character-revealing" form, reliant upon "character-portraying techniques";<sup>6</sup> and more recently Warwick Slinn has identified a similar conception of motivated personality as the bottom line in Browning's poetry: "Whatever the degree of provocation in the social situation, characters usually respond to some underlying personal motive, perhaps a need for explanation or for the security of definition, and it is in the sense of this response to internal desire that the monologues are self-generating."<sup>7</sup> It is very hard for a critic to identify such personal motives, needs, or internal desires, without creating fictions of his or her own to make Browning's poems conform to his or her versions of them. To some extent this is inevitable. The dramatic monologue is a notoriously open and question-begging form, and all readers are tempted to fill the gaps by supplying (or imagining) situations, motives, pressures and needs, for the utterance which

5 Park Honan, *Browning's Characters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.

7 E. Warwick Slinn, *Browning and the Fictions of Identity* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 152. The references in this paper do not do justice to Slinn's book, which is well reviewed by Bruce Gardiner in *AUMLA*, No. 60 (Nov. 1983), 315-17.

constitutes the poem.<sup>8</sup> Such an act of interpretation involves positing a set of circumstances within which a character can be seen to function, these circumstances explaining the poem. The critic who does this is adding significantly to the poem, and such an act of interpretation reveals as much about the critic as it does about the poem. Such interpretations usually either involve the desire to create characters, or represent a need to fix or place poems about whose location Browning was deliberately vague. As we shall see, Browning gains many of his most compelling effects when he refuses to supply any sort of context for the utterances of his speakers. Even when he does give us a context, problems remain. Does "Andrea del Sarto" belong to the sixteenth century, when the man after whom the poem takes its title, lived? To the nineteenth century, when it was written, and where its uneasy awareness of materialistic compromise may place it? Or to the twentieth century in which we read it, where the poem answers to our own concerns with sexual and marital politics? Many of Browning's poems raise similar questions, which can seldom be settled by reference to Browning, whose own comments on specific poems are often vague and evasive. In any case, as recent criticism has been at pains to point out, authorial intention cannot fix the meaning of any text, which "is constantly read and re-read in different ways—by different people, by the same people at different times in their lives, by different people at different periods in history."<sup>9</sup> Thus, a text "will always mean for its readers something other than it means for its author."<sup>10</sup> Any act of interpretation is inevitably conditioned by the reader's own assumptions and presuppositions, and any character he or she creates as a speaker of Browning's poetry will have at least one foot in the socio-psychological world of the critic. The process of interpretive reading creates meaning, as well as evoking it. Thus there is much disagreement about the behaviour of Browning's characters, and scholarly journals have been the battleground for arguments about whether the Duke of Ferrara is

8 Isobel Armstrong has also pointed out that, stylistically, Browning "alerts the reader to an unusually intense participation in the poem and . . . makes the reader aware of process and of the possibility of discovering that the process is meaningful." "Browning and the 'Grotesque' Style", Isobel Armstrong (ed.), *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 93-123; 99.

9 Antony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 7.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

clever or stupid.<sup>11</sup>

Such attempts to find characters behind the poems may turn the poems into novels or plays by stressing the dramatic over the poetic aspects, and by identifying the dramatic elements as psychological rather than verbal or poetic. The term "speaker" is more happily applied to Browning's poems by his best critics,<sup>12</sup> for it directs attention to the act of utterance rather than to the circumstances which may have given rise to it. The very notion of character rests on Romantic presuppositions which may be of limited relevance to Browning's poetry. Thus, once more, Park Honan: "unless we are led to sympathize in reading a poem we feel nothing, and if we feel nothing then the poem has failed to create any effect at all."<sup>13</sup> Honan sees sympathy as a necessary condition of all poetry, and for him the test of a poem is whether or not it creates emotion or feeling in the reader. Browning's poems usually do not permit this kind of response, however. "Andrea del Sarto" is full of evocative pathos, but such pathos teeters on the edge of self-pity, and is in any case appropriated by the speaker. The reader is excluded from the luxury of a self-indulgent response, and sympathy, as Langbaum has so ably demonstrated, is tempered always by judgement.<sup>14</sup>

To stop creating characters and start listening to voices is to run up against another set of problems. Whose voices? Eliot says that we always hear the voice of the poet in the dramatic monologue, but Browning's voice is rarely consistent. Browning criticism has been bedevilled by a major problem of classification: the need, felt by most commentators, to distinguish between those poems in which Browning uses a speaker or persona, and those in which he does not. There have been various ways around this: "Browning could not begin to speak at all unless he convinced himself that he was not speaking in his own voice",<sup>15</sup>

11 See the articles by B. R. Jerman and Laurence Perrine, which originally appeared in *PMLA* in 1957 and 1959 respectively, and which are reprinted in B. Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker (eds.), *The Browning Critics* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), pp. 329-42.

12 See, for example, R. A. King, *The Bow and the Lyre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957); and Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).

13 *Browning's Characters*, p. 120.

14 *The Poetry of Experience*, ch. 2.

15 J. Hillis Miller, "Robert Browning", *The Disappearance of God* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 81-156; 106. See also K. W. Gransden, "The Uses of Personae", Clarence Tracy

the circularity of which at least recognizes the impossibility of ever making adequate distinctions. Such recognition is most stimulatingly expressed by the editors of the Victorian volume in the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*,<sup>16</sup> whose claim for Browning as "the most considerable poet in English since the major Romantics" is bold indeed. Browning's poems, it is maintained, are "antiphons in which many voices speak, including several that belong to Browning himself. . . . his art constantly explores the multiplicity of selves that inhabit apparently single, unitary personalities, some of them not at all unlike some of his own. Each of his men and women is at least several men and women, and his lovers learn that we can never embrace any one person at a time, but only the whole of an incoherence, the cluster of voices and beings that jostles in any separate self." Self, voices, and being, are terms that replace or at least circumvent the notion of character, and their pluralization here suggests how crowded Browning's poems can become. The terms also suggest the elusiveness of Browning's beings and their voices, an elusiveness already recognized in criticism by the desire (mentioned above) to categorize the personae and classify the poems according to the suspected degree of Browning's lyrical involvement. Browning's much-vaunted modernity is primarily a matter of his own recognition and poetic demonstration of the elusiveness of the self. He does not, to be sure, go as far as some modern thinkers and try to abolish the notion of the self as a conscious subject, nor does he see the self purely as a product of socio-linguistic codes; but he reveals it as something harder to pin down than the term "character" suggests.

Browning's famous comment (in the preface to *Strafford*) that he was interested in action in character rather than character in action gives us one clue to the teeming world of his poetry, but its simplistic antithetical formulation is misleading; for it masks the fact that the action in Browning's poems is verbal and vocal. His speakers are heard but not seen, and his poems are written accordingly. This again is part of his modernity, as Ezra Pound well knew, who called him with jocular respect "Master Bob Browning", and with affectionate familiarity "Old Hippety-hop

16 Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom (eds.), *Victorian Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 492-4.

(ed.), *Browning's Mind and Art* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), pp. 51-74.

o' the accents".<sup>17</sup> Browning's notoriously "grotesque" diction and irregular metre serve a major purpose, in that they add further dimensions to his voices. In reading Browning we do indeed listen to voices, but we have an advantage that his speakers' listeners do not: we can *see* rhyme and verse-form as well as hear intonation and rhythm, and such formal devices often function as comments on what is being said. They are not, as Slinn suggests, a further dimension to "the characters' manipulation of what they say".<sup>18</sup> Form is not subordinate to character. It is rather a conditioning context for voice, a means for Browning to shade, comment, or stress, to break up the rhythms and intonations of the speaking voice, to disjoint attempts at articulation. All Browning's speakers are able to do is talk, and their mode of talking is invariably a significant aspect of poetic design. Language is not expressive, transparent, or even necessarily referential. Because Browning's "characters" are not fully in control of their mental processes, their "voices" are to some extent imprisoned by their own language systems.

"Meeting at Night" (together with "Parting at Morning") and "The Lost Leader" are never read as dramatic monologues. But they are not without drama, although that drama is linguistic, and they indirectly draw attention to their own voices, which function in subtle and unobtrusive though central ways. "Meeting at Night" supplies no context apart from its title: where, who, when, how, and why, cannot provoke answers, and the laws of cause and effect seem suspended. This sense of suspension is supported by a lack of apparent motivation, and a lot of things happen very quickly over a fairly long period of time. Isobel Armstrong has said: "It is a poem about living in sexual time, timelessly long *and* momentary",<sup>19</sup> and her comment encapsulates the paradox of timelessness and intensity. The timelessness is easier to identify linguistically than the intensity. Each stanza is a sentence, and neither sentence has a main verb, which ensures that, as there is no tense, the poem cannot be located in time. The energy, as F. R. Leavis has pointed out, is strongly realized in rhyme and adjective,<sup>20</sup> but the energy is tantalizing as well as

17 "Mesmerism", in *Personae* (1926).

18 *Browning and the Fictions of Identity*, p. 3.

19 "Browning and Victorian Poetry of Sexual Love", Isobel Armstrong (ed.), *Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning* (London: Bell, 1974), pp. 267-98; 268.

20 *The Living Principle: "English" as a Discipline of Thought* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), pp. 120-22.

tangible. Indeed, so vivid and energetic are the naturalistic details of the poem that we may be tempted to read it as a symbolic orgasm: it is as if Browning is teasing the reader to find symbolic counterparts to his details. Nevertheless the inevitable crudity of any such attempt, emphasizing as it would the pushing prow, the slushy sand, and the spurt of flame, renders the poem itself much more compelling than any attempt to conceptualize the experience it describes.

The poem is thus untranslatable from its own language, and its language is that of the pathetic fallacy. "All violent feelings have the same effect", said John Ruskin. "They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the 'pathetic fallacy'."<sup>21</sup> The poem's voice is therefore muted, and more concerned with sensual communication than with articulation: "And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,/Than the two hearts beating each to each!" The lack of a main verb is complemented by a scarcity of personal pronouns, the effect of which is further to deflect attention from the voice itself. In "Parting at Morning", although the whole universe is animated, the human subject does not emerge until the very last word of the poem; and the ending of this poem suggests, through its necessary return to reality, that the experience has taken place in some special domain where the laws of reality (as well as of language) are suspended. "Meeting at Night" presents a strongly realized experience, but its voice is not individualized. In fact it is barely personalized, and the major paradox of the poem is that an experience of such power comes from such a muted voice. For there is only a voice, not a personality or character; and that voice is dissolved in the landscape or subsumed in the setting of the poem, just as the sexual energy is diffused and contained in the naturalistic detail. The language is that of landscape and sexuality, and these qualities engulf the voice which articulates them.

The voice of "The Lost Leader" is more individualized than that of "Meeting at Night", but it is a collective voice: the significant pronoun is "us" rather than "I" (which does not occur in the poem), and even the heart is "our heart". It matters little whether or not the title refers to Wordsworth, because the poem is primarily self-referential. The experience is concentrated on

21 Ruskin's account of the pathetic fallacy, in *Modern Painters*, is reprinted in J. D. Rosenberg (ed.), *The Genius of John Ruskin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 61-72.

the poetic voice and its expression of loss or betrayal, and therefore the loss counts for more than the leader. Once more, too, action and situation are verbal and vocal, and the precise nature of any external reference is unclear. There is a clearly discernible action, however, and this is suggested by the structure of the poem; for the first stanza looks to the past, with "us" as object, and the second stanza looks to the future, with "we" as subject. In its movement from past to future the poem also moves from impotence to action, and the betrayed voice talks itself into authority. A new language must be learned to communicate a "new knowledge", and, as the end of the poem makes clear, the voice of the poem has grown redemptive. The poem is short on details of external reference, but that is because they are irrelevant: the poem's meaning is internally defined, and as soon as everything is referred back to its voice, this meaning clarifies, and the title redefines itself. For we now have a new leader, feeling his way through an experience of loss and aware of the need to make new directions, but feeling also a backward pull throughout the poem—hence the elegiac tone. Power has changed hands, however, and from betrayal and bereavement the poem moves to redemption and forgiveness. In the strictest sense, the poem is *about* its own articulation, and the utterance can only be referred back to the voice.

In "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" Browning gives us a much more overtly dramatic use of language in relation to an individual speaker, but once again the individuality of the speaker is not stressed. (Very few of Browning's speakers, at least in his early poems, have names.) The title—"of" rather than "in"—directs attention from speaker to location, and yet again language and form are more revealing and suggestive than character. Philip Drew uses this poem to demonstrate Browning's dramatic method, whereby the poet establishes a point of view which is not that of the speaker: "As we read the narrative we gradually learn the character of the speaker and of his principal subject, a fellow-monk called Brother Lawrence, who is gardening while the speaker watches him narrowly. . . . It is evident that his hatred of Lawrence springs from his own sense of inferiority and has warped his judgement. . . . It requires no very austere moral standards to decide that the speaker is a hypocrite who conceals his malice and worldliness behind a façade of piety."<sup>22</sup> This

22 *The Poetry of Browning: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 18.



account of the poem, while not unhelpful, ignores the central fact that what captures our attention is the sheer energy of the performance, and Drew's evident uneasiness with his rather solemn account suggests that he may either be taking it all too seriously, or approaching it from the wrong angle. Religious formalism, rather than the speaker, is the subject, and thus the title reads "of" the Spanish Cloister, for all we have is a disembodied voice echoing from the cloistered setting of a monastery. Qualities such as spite, misdirected zeal, and energy, cannot be contained or directed in the cloistered form of the poem. In the fifth stanza, when the speaker reveals his eating and drinking habits as evidence of orthodoxy and devotion, he trips over his own metrical feet: in "I the Trinity illustrate", the rhythm demands that the stress fall on the second syllable of "illustrate" rather than the first, as would normally happen. The required mispronunciation draws attention both to his word and its rhyming partner, "frustrate", and the relationship here between what is said and how it is said functions as a neat illustration of a frustrated voice, a vocal counterpart to the patent absurdity of the monk's behaviour. Finally, the frustrated voice returns to the inarticulate growl with which the poem opened and, as meaning breaks down, the poem ends with a cackle of inconsequential rhymes.

"Porphyria's Lover" is also a soliloquy, which suggests that in the case of both this poem and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", the voice is speaking for itself alone. In neither case is anyone addressed within the context of the poem, and if the former poem supplies a context, "Porphyria's Lover" does not. This lack of context appears to have worried Browning, and the history of the poem's publication shows him slipping in stage-directions only to remove them later. The poem was first published in a periodical in 1836 with a companion-piece, "Johannes Agricola" (later, "Johannes Agricola in Meditation"). Between 1842 (when the poems appeared in Browning's collection *Dramatic Lyrics*) and 1863 they were paired under the title "Madhouse Cells". In 1863 Browning removed this title.<sup>23</sup> "Madhouse Cells" almost offers an interpretive key to the subtleties of the poem, and Browning's removal of that title (which was an after-

23 Michael Mason relates the poem and some aspects of its publishing history to contemporary psychoanalytic theory in "Browning and the Dramatic Monologue", *Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning*, pp. 231-66.

thought anyway) refers the poem back to its original claustrophobic voice, and to no location but only a situation in which "all externality has ceased to exist, and we can relate only within the structure of the situation itself."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it would be truer to say that we can relate only to the voice as it reveals itself within the structure of the verse, because the verse is tightly organized into twelve five-line stanzas, and organization of form and language are surer starting-points than the psychological complexity of the speaker. There is neither social context nor social identity, only a *Romeo and Juliet*-like world of intrigue and barriers—although even this world may be a figment of the speaker's isolated imagination.

This isolated, nameless voice speaks to and for itself. The insistent lyricism of the verse form places the poem somewhere between a riddle and a parody of a love song. As Betty S. Flowers has observed, Browning punctuates with extreme care within this lyrical pattern, so that oddities of punctuation draw attention to themselves, and disturb.<sup>25</sup> The colons at the end of the fourth and twenty-ninth lines, to say nothing of that within the thirty-seventh line, suggest an oddly disturbing relationship between the voice and its tone: in each case the pause is dislocating, the hesitation ominous. Similarly, the ending of a sentence in mid-line disrupts the lyrical pattern in a startling manner. This happens twice: at the climactic moment of the murder (l. 41), and earlier, in the fifteenth line: "And, last, she sat down by my side/And called me. When no voice replied . . ." So detached is the speaker, so removed from any conception of personality, that he thinks of himself only as a voice; and the poem exists most potently as an interplay of voices. Its drama is not, as the speaker conceives it, the melodrama of *Romeo and Juliet*, but the drama of conflicting, internal voices. Once more, the punctuation (l. 21) suggests that the speaker's response to Porphyria "Murmuring how she loved me" is an internalized gloss, a self-directed and self-serving interpretation of what she might have said. His voice reads its meanings into hers, thereby warning the reader of the dangers of imposing his own voice on Browning's poem. The most extraordinary development in the poem is that the speaking voice in the poem gradually transfers itself from the speaker to the corpse. As the speaker sees his

24 K. W. Gransden, "The Uses of Personae", p. 61.

25 *Browning and the Modern Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 129.

actions as the fulfilment of Porphyria's wish, he adopts her point of view, or rather that of

The smiling rosy little head  
So glad it has its utmost will,  
That all it scorned at once is fled,  
And I, its love, am gained instead!

The voice is at once distinctive, inhuman, and impersonal. There is, I have suggested, a deliberate absence of definitive answers to pressing questions about identity, motive, and social context, and as we have seen Browning himself was unclear as to how many clues he should supply. The absence of authority is crucial. The poem ends poised in uncertainty and suspension. The three lines of the final sentence each rest on the conjunctive "And", but the utterance leads nowhere except to bewail the lack of an authoritative voice: "And yet God has not said a word!" When he removed "Madhouse Cells", Browning recognized that the voice of the poem was stronger than that of the poet, and necessarily declined to play God.

The conclusion demonstrates only that the utterance, like any utterance, is ultimately inconclusive and unconcluded, and thus to some extent incomplete. Any aesthetic yearning we may cherish, or into which we may have been conditioned, for wholeness, unity, and completeness, is frequently confounded by Browning, whose poems often have the effect of posing problems or questions for the reader, rather than allowing him or her the luxury of a secure emotional response. The utterance is always *there*, self-contained yet inconclusive, tempting us to speculate about the larger, non-existent drama to which it refers, and tempting us also to calculate its likely effect within that drama. These remarks are particularly applicable to "My Last Duchess" and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church". Although these famous poems reveal a marked sophistication in technique over "Porphyria's Lover" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", they are most usefully approached through the considerations of relationships between form and voice which have been applied to all the poems discussed in this paper.

In "My Last Duchess" the situation is clearer than in any of the poems discussed hitherto. The presence of a listener provides a context as well as an ostensible purpose for the utterance, and places the reader in the position of a fascinated eavesdropper. But the reader is also an observer, with one overwhelming advantage denied to the fictional listener: we can perceive that the poem is written in couplets. This is not clear of the poem as speech,

because Browning, by running on his lines, has taken care to disguise his rhyme. Once perceived, however, the effect of the couplets is to modify the voice of the poem. Rather than "function as an aspect of the Duke's psychological need to impose order and control on his life", or as an expression of his compulsive desire "to control his language as well as his wives",<sup>26</sup> the couplets expose the fallacies of the poem's dominant voice. They represent the part of the voice that belongs to Browning, and it is as if, by writing the poem in rhyme which he then takes care to disguise, the poet is both affirming his presence and denying it: "I'm here but you can't see me." The Duke's confusion of the relationship between art and life and his desire to substitute the former for the latter are exposed partly by Browning's refusal to use the more naturalistic medium of blank verse. The artifice of the couplet is therefore a measure of "the poet's creative and controlling role in the dramatic monologue."<sup>27</sup> The artifice cannot be ignored any more than it can be incorporated into an empirically-minded study of the Duke as the poem's character, which is the form taken by most studies of the poem. Furthermore, the essence of the couplet is repetition, and repetition works against the poetic utterance as development, so that against the development of the poem as represented by the impetus of the Duke's statements there exists a contrary pull towards stasis. The couplet is here suggested as a major indication of the pattern and design of the poem, for reasons already given, and also because it should alert us to other repetitions within the poem. Poetic language and design thus work against naturalistic utterance, although unobtrusively. The dislocations consequent upon such disruption are perceptible only to the reader, but once perceived they provide the poetic voice with subtle echoes which would not be intended by any character controlling that voice. The function of such dislocations is to stress the poem's simultaneity rather than its development.<sup>28</sup> As far as possible, the poem should be read like a picture, perceived all at once in its entirety.

The opening of the poem is only the opening of an aside in an implied larger conversation. Ten lines from the end we find

26 Slinn, *Browning and the Fictions of Identity*, p. 3.

27 R. W. Rader, "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Literary Forms", *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976), 131-51; 136.

28 Robert Langbaum makes perceptive comments on this matter, though not in relation to this poem, in "Browning and the Question of Myth", *The Modern Spirit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), pp. 76-100; esp. pp. 85-6.

repeated words and phrases from the first four lines of the poem: "There she stands/As if alive." The repetition loops back to the opening of the poem, and as the poem launches from here into its final movement, the Duke "repeats" something we have not heard him say before:

I repeat,  
 The Count your master's known munificence  
 Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
 At starting, is my object.

This is repetition only for the listener. The reader gets the shock of hearing it for the first time, and thus Browning has firmly established two contexts in which the poem can function: the fictional dramatic situation, and the actual reading process. The best criticism of Browning maintains an awareness of these two contexts and of the ways in which they may reflect upon each other. Loy D. Martin has written of the Duke: "His fixed vision of his Duchesses, past and future, belies the reality of his own existence, so that the final irony of the poem consists in the fact that his misconception of those around him implies a misconception of the very self he worships. And the triumph of Browning's poem lies in the way it prevents its reader from repeating the Duke's error. Both we and the Duke find a vision of life in a work of art; we as easily as he might say 'there *he* stands as if alive'. But the meaning would be different."<sup>29</sup> This is well observed, although to it should be added that the Duke's misconceptions are betrayed by his revealing attempts to control voice and manipulate language.

The lines quoted above, in marked contrast to the broken syntax of earlier parts of the poem, come as one long sentence, with a pause for qualification signalled by the semi-colon after "disallowed". The language, like the alliteration, betrays its own design. For the speaker, the self which he seeks to possess is no more than an object, as quantifiable and material as a dowry or a work of art. In the Duke's context, object means "objective", but in the other context the word has implications unintended by the Duke. (The same is true of "piece" in the third line of the poem, which may refer to the woman as well as the painting.) The

29 "The Inside of Time: An Essay on the Dramatic Monologue", H. Bloom and A. Munich (eds.), *Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), pp. 59-78; 77-8.

action of the poem is a speech action, and the twin subjects of the poem are the self, and power: power over one's own self or the self of another, and power over language. Action and subject thus coalesce, but language is shown to have a power independent of the expressive or manipulative use to which the speaker puts it. The repeated phrase "spot of joy" (ll. 14-15, 21) is illuminated on both occasions it is used, first by being stretched over the line-ending, an emphasis reinforced by rhyme, and then by its commanding position at the end of a sentence. His wife's spontaneous individuality, over which the Duke had no power, represents itself in his language as a disease or blemish. The repetition ensures that we do not overlook the phrase, the significance of which refers to its user rather than the woman to whom he applies it. Likewise, the Duke's threatening statement "I choose never to stoop" emphasizes its verb by placing it at the end of a line, and thus as a rhyme word: "I choose/Never to stoop." The combined effects of stress (from rhyme) and hesitation (from line-ending) expose the power of choice as illusory; and thus the Duke is not just a prisoner of his own self-conception, but also a prisoner of the poem's language. There is much talk in the poem of the speech-act: the Duke's own "design", his lack of "skill in speech", Fra Pandolf's words, the "approving speech" of his wife, the words he might have used had he chosen to "stoop". His own utterance is a systematic attempt to appropriate and misrepresent the voices of others. Paradoxically, however, the multiple voices of the poem undermine the primacy of the speaker's point of view, as his language resolutely sends out messages other than those he wishes to transmit.

In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" Browning discovered the form that was to be his *forte* in the great poems of *Men and Women*: the blank-verse monologue. Confident enough now to dispense with rhyme and stanza, Browning has to build his voices into language, syntax, and imagery, rather than versification and form. The title, which by Browning's standards is packed with information, underwent significant change. On initial publication in 1845 the poem was entitled "The Tomb at St. Praxed's", this title (as so often) deflecting attention from the speaker. When reprinted in Browning's two-volume collection of 1849, the poem was given its new and final title. The change shifts the focus from the tomb to the ordering process undertaken by the Bishop. The most unusual feature of the title is that it contains a verb, the effect of which is threefold.

As many critics have pointed out, the title is ironic: the orders are ignored. Also, the verb draws attention to the action of the poem, which is a process of ordering. And it also draws attention, by its tense, to the relationship between past and present, which is one of the ordering principles of the poem. The title thus takes us beyond the Bishop's utterance to Browning's larger concern with the capacity of language to order reality. Indeed, in this poem more than in any of those discussed previously, language *is* reality.

For the Bishop is impotent in all ways but verbal. His only remaining power is his power over words, and, at death's door though he is, he wields this power with relish and enjoyment. The poem is alive with its own sense (as well as the Bishop's) of the power of language, such as the Biblical text which provides the poem with its opening line, and the later references to the scriptures; and such as the classical texts which will speak to posterity from the tomb. Language is living and tactile, in the "talking eyes" of the mother of his sons, which haunt the dying Bishop; in "marble's language" of carven epitaphs; and in the "mutter" of the mass. The stress on language as substance is strengthened by the materiality of the Bishop's own voice, evidenced by his insistent alliteration and repetition which, as King has pointed out, appeal more to the ear than to the mind.<sup>30</sup> The similes, too, seem disproportionate to their referents: "As fresh-poured red-wine of a mighty pulse"; "Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,/Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast . . ." Language is as solid, and as precious, as jasper or lapis lazuli. And, like "My Last Duchess", this poem refers to itself, not just by its sensuously insistent language, but also by repetition (e.g. ll. 3, 39; 13, 113; 59, 95; 5, 125).

The key repetitions are to do with Gandolf (to whom we shall return), and the word "lie". The word is used four times, in ll. 10, 80, 85, and 112. There is, as Christopher Ricks has demonstrated, a particular obviousness associated with the word, which is "that *lie* in English means both to say something false while knowing it to be so, and to rest or (expressive of bodily posture) to be in a prostrate or recumbent position."<sup>31</sup> What the Bishop means is clear enough, but the other meaning is hard to exclude, particularly as Browning plays on it in another poem about a

30 *The Bow and the Lyre*, p. 58. King has an entire chapter on this poem, pp. 52-75.

31 "Lies", *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (1975), 121-42; 121.

deluded cleric, "Johannes Agricola in Meditation".<sup>32</sup> To ask in what senses the Bishop may be lying is to raise the question about the "truth" of the poem, which of course cannot be answered in any absolute sense. The strategy of the poem is to present truth as a purely linguistic construct: language is truth, truth language. The poem's questions as put by the Bishop are fundamental: "Life, how and what is it?" Again, the answer implied by the poem is that life is language, and the Bishop's utterance should be approached as an attempt to create or establish truth rather than confront it. Taken as a whole, therefore, the poem's language holds truth and lying in complex and ambivalent poise, which helps to maintain the other balances in the poem—between reality and dream, life and death, past and present. The power of language alone can bridge the gap between life and death, can carry the Bishop comfortably from this life to the next (ll. 80-90). The religious context, which would have been more appreciated in the nineteenth century, is important here, because religious questions remain significantly unresolved. Truth is not absolute and eternal, but relative and temporary, and language tailors or constructs its versions of reality to suit circumstances. *In extremis*, at the frontiers of life and death, the Bishop is trying to order the unknowable future; but in doing so he keeps returning to the past, and the certainty of Gandolf's envy. This is both the triumph and the obsession of the Bishop's life.

Ruskin's praise of this poem (in *Modern Painters*, and reprinted in most annotated editions of Browning) is almost as well known as the poem itself: "I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the *Stones of Venice* put into as many lines, Browning's being also the antecedent work." This comment raises once more the difficult question of the location of Browning's poetry. For Ruskin, this poem was a poem of the Renaissance. For many other Victorian readers, it was a poem of the Catholic revival. For the modern reader, it is to some extent a poem of how the Victorians saw the Renaissance, and a poem of how the Victorians saw Catholicism. But it is also a poem about the material power of language.

32 See ll. 10-11, 41.



The strength with which this power is illustrated is all the greater because the ordering process undertaken by the speaker breaks down. The Bishop gets muddled, his mind wanders, and his sentences either trail away or are waylaid by new thoughts that drift into his mind and disrupt his syntax. On account of Browning's associative technique in this poem, and on account of the evident delight in verbal device with which its speaker is endowed, this poem has more in common with the poems of T. S. Eliot (with whom we started) than do any of the other poems we have looked at. A better and more relevant comparison, however, and one which may further illuminate the distinction between character and voice, is with Dickens, Browning's exact contemporary (both were born in 1812). Fictional narrative in the first person might be described as the novelist's answer to the dramatic monologue. Two of the most famous "classic" nineteenth-century novels, *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*, are first-person narratives of a fairly straightforward kind; but when Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens returned to the first-person novel later in their careers, they wrote books whose critical status is far less assured, and whose method is much more complex—*Villette* and *Great Expectations*. The distinction between character and voice is especially relevant to *Great Expectations*; for if the young and maturing Pip who is at the centre of the narrative can be described as a character, the narrating Pip, the mature adult who tells the story, is assuredly no more than a voice. The voice is hard to locate, for we do not know where it is coming from, and in this novel character and voice do not coalesce and are never equated. In *David Copperfield* (as in *Jane Eyre*) the fictional resolution is recounted with assurance and harmony. As the novel ends by referring to the writing of its own final paragraphs, the past is drawn into harmonic closure with the present. But in *Great Expectations* (as in *Villette*, and as in Browning's monologues) there is no such closure: each of Dickens' endings is written in the past tense, and the gap between character and voice cannot be bridged or closed. This may be suggested as a reason for Dickens' difficulty in ending the novel, which provides no refuge for the narrative voice (although the second and final ending, of which Dickens said "I have put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could", goes further than the first ending towards doing this). *Great Expectations* is a tormented novel, characterized throughout by misunderstanding and lack of resolution, and haunted by the ever-present gap between the narrator and his

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younger self, between voice and character. Dickens, like Browning in his poetry, has to work with a double awareness constantly in mind, in order to provide a context which allows for both the elucidation of the child's unconscious knowledge, and the knowledge of the experienced adult. This is the context in which Pip as character operates, but of course the character is only a construct of the all-pervasive narrative voice. Both Browning and Dickens are bringing language and form into relationship to explore the elusive truths that lie hidden within individual utterances. Pip's long and demanding monologue works in ways similar to those of Browning's voices, and in each case the space inhabited by both poet and novelist approximates Eliot's idea of the world of the great poetic dramatist, "a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden."<sup>33</sup>

33 "The Three Voices of Poetry", p. 112.