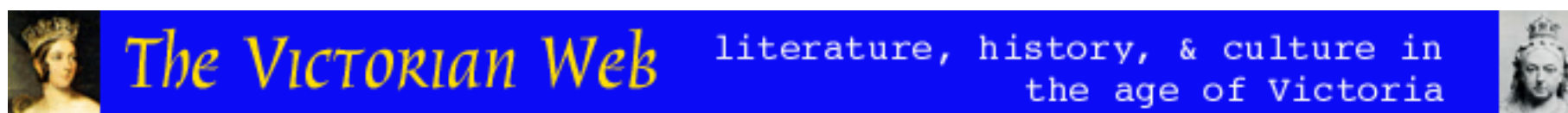


Three Defining Characteristics of Browning's Dramatic Monologues

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[Adapted from Glenn Everett, "[Victorian Web Home](#) —> [Authors](#) —> [Robert Browning](#) —> [Works](#) —> [Themes](#) —> [Genre and Style](#)"]

The first distinguishing characteristic of Browning's dramatic monologues is the point of entry, which, I argue, is not through an empathetic relationship with the speaker. The experience Browning offers us is not the same as that offered by the [Wordsworthian](#) lyric, although the poets begin the same way. In both cases, the poet's subject is the psychology of the speaker, and in both cases the author explores the speaker's point of view by means of imaginative sympathy — *Einfühlung*. With the Wordsworthian lyric, the reader's job is to achieve that sympathy; with the Browningsque monologue the reader may instead take the part of the listener, and this point of view is always available within the form. Indeed, the auditor may appear to be absent (as in "Johannes Agricola"), dead ("[Porphyria's Lover](#)"), out of earshot ("Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"), or simply inattentive ("Andrea del Sarto").

Second, whether this auditor is present does not matter so long as we find the speaker using the same kind of case-making, argumentative tone that marks "[My Last Duchess](#)" and which is the second definitive characteristic of the type. In all these instances the real listener (that is, the target of the argument) is the speaker's "second self"; and it becomes clear that in many monologues the putative auditor within the poem is less important than this Other. The arguments in "[Karshish](#)" are not really intended for Abib's eye, but for Karshish's own, as the rationalizing in "[Cleon](#)" is not intended to dissuade Protus's interest in Paulus and in Christ, but Cleon's own. The tone of the argument tells us that there is a second point of view present, and it is that point of view which we take. It is this strongly rhetorical language which distinguishes the dramatic monologue from the soliloquy, for it shows the speaker arguing with a second self. We are coaxed out of our natural sympathy with the first-person speaker by the vehemence of the arguments made; and if Abib or Lucrezia are not impressed by the arguments, we take their places within the monologues and listen as they should.

As its third important distinction, the form requires that we complete the dramatic scene from within, by means of inference and imagination, and thus these texts are rules by which the reader plays an imagined drama. The clues which Browning's speakers provide to their obsessions are observable only if we imagine ourselves within the dramatic situation, with the speaker there before us. (Because Wordsworth intends to put us within the mind of the *speaker*, his poems remain essentially lyric.) In order to read the poems in this way, we must often sacrifice our certainty about which way to take them: do the Bishop's sons really give him cause for worry that they will substitute travertine for his antique-black and make off with his lapis lazuli, or is he paranoiac? What word did [Porphyria](#)'s lover expect to hear from God? Was there any truth to the "lie" that Count Gauthier told and Gismond made him swallow? We and the listeners in these dramatic monologues can only speculate, for within the text neither they nor we can find conclusive proofs. This indeterminacy, which his first readers found so distressing, accords with Browning's own "uncertainty" about what happens in his poems: most famously his comment to Hiram Corson that the Duke might have had his Duchess put to death — "or he might have had her shut up in a convent" (Corson viii). Since the envoy cannot know conclusively, neither can we.

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