CHAPTER VI

DRAMATIC LYRICS

THE VICTORIANS ARE FAMED FOR THEIR VOLUMINOUS writing. In the case of Browning, there is not only a huge corpus of published work but also apparently a vast amount of unpublished work as well. During the 1870s when asked why he did not write more lyrics, he replied, that he had large stacks of them at home that he had not bothered to publish because lyrics were too easy to compose.¹ This seems to have been as true of the poet during his early as well as later years. For what became the best-known volume of the *Bells* and *Pomegranates* series was actually put into print more or less incidentally, at the behest of Edward Moxon, his publisher, who suggested that for the sake of popularity he should publish a collection of his short poems (*Domett*, p. 36). Condescending to seek for wider appreciation, Browning presumably went to the desk or closet where he had his short poems stashed away, chose a number of them as being suitable, wrote a few more, and then gave them to Moxon to arrange on sixteen double-columned pages. *Dramatic Lyrics* appeared in November 1842.

Though slight in size, in literary and historical importance *Dramatic Lyrics* is among the most significant books of verse in English. There is an enormous range of subjects: from Euripidean Greece to medieval France, from Renaissance Italy to England of the Civil Wars to nineteenth-century France, Spain, Algeria, and England; from gods and nobles to monks, poets, soldiers, and lunatics—all reflecting Browning's zestful appetite for the multifarious variety of human personality and activity. In prosody there is likewise tremendous variation: rhyming couplets, octosyllabics, strophes of varying line-lengths, rhythm, and rhyme scheme—all somehow transformed into the language and meter of conversation: for the *Dramatic Lyrics* are designed to be heard rather than read. Here, as in
Sordello, Browning was determined to restore the old dialogic relationship between the poet and his audience.²

We must wonder that Browning did not rush the poems into print without the urging of his publisher. It may be that he did not regard shorter forms as important. The works published prior to Dramatic Lyrics were all long. Even when he had discrete shorter works such as the episodes of Pippa Passes — and these dramatic rather than lyric — he still managed to group them into a longer work. As for lyrics, we have noted how he seems to have identified them with the Romantics; and though he was not averse to writing songs — witness, for example, those of Paracelsus or Pippa Passes — he was concerned that they be recognized as utterances distinct and separate from the poet himself. To make sure that any short lyrics he might publish were not to be regarded as short swallow flights of song expressing the poet’s own feelings, he first provided them with an obvious dramatic context and secondly linked them to other poems. Thus a poem concerned with possessiveness in marriage was put into the mouth of a Renaissance Italian duke, linked to another having to do with marital fidelity and spoken by a French noblewoman of the late Middle Ages, and published under the title “Italy and France.” Nearly all the shorter pieces of Dramatic Lyrics are thus linked to companion poems.³ And just to make further certain that his readers fully understood that these lyrics were indeed dramatic, he prefaced the pamphlet with the famous disclaimer that the poems were “‘Dramatic Pieces;’ being, though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.”

The best known of these pieces, such as “My Last Duchess,” we today call dramatic monologues. There has been a good bit of debate as to what constitutes a dramatic monologue.⁴ I shall here apply the term to those poems in which there is a speaker who is not the poet, who talks usually to someone else but occasionally to himself, and whose utterance reveals an important aspect of his character. As listeners to his monologue, we come upon the speaker in the act of talking to another person (or himself). His words and (implied) gestures capture our attention. As we focus our attention on him, we begin to
deduce the speaker’s purpose in speaking and we continue to follow him until we gain insight into his personality and hence his real as opposed to ostensible purpose for speaking. Browning himself did not use the term dramatic monologue; in fact, he seems never to have found a designation for such poems with which he was entirely happy, as he kept rearranging them into “Dramatic Lyrics,” “Dramatic Romances,” and “Men and Women” in subsequent editions.

But whatever he called them, his primary interest, here as in his earlier work, lay in the revelation of character—or “soul,” to employ his own word—and to this extent his monologues are logical extensions of those works that “display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress” (preface to Paracelsus), that treat “Action in Character, rather than Character in Action” (preface to Strafford), in which the poet’s “stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul” (1863 preface to Sordello). The soul develops, as Browning discovered, in strange, inexplicable ways, yearning first toward this and then toward its opposite; it is torn between motives that originate in external circumstances. Hence the lyric element, the song of self that we overhear, becomes dramatic. When Browning began his career, he like his immediate predecessors and contemporaries had not learned how to represent dramatically ideas in conflict with each other or humans in conflict with ideas. The only means they had at their disposal to portray these conflicts dramatically was the confessional soliloquy—the “Intimations Ode,” Alastor, Pauline—or, as in the case of Landor, the retrospective dialogue. In the dramatic monologue Browning found a means of representing dramatic conflict within personality obliquely. What his dramatic monologues do is to internalize plot, so that instead of an open conflict of opposing forces, as on the stage or in the novel, there is an interior conflict within the character of which the speaker is often not consciously aware and, as often as not, a conflict in the reader-listener’s understanding of that character. In brief—and I shall presently attempt to demonstrate by particulars what I mean—the dramatic monologue is a fragmentary, open-ended literary form that permits ironic discourse and ironic perception of that discourse.
We have already noted how Browning's irony originates partly in his desire to have a complete overview of an object or event and his simultaneous recognition that such totality is impossible; and we have seen, especially in *Sordello* and *Pippa Passes*, how any point of view is necessarily partial (in both meanings of the word) and therefore suspect and unreliable. It is not surprising then that the poet should turn increasingly toward portrayal (or examination) of various points of view. As Vladimir Jankélévitch says in his study of the ironic mode, irony practices "l'art d'effleurer"—the art of efflorescence, which adopts, one after another, an infinity of points of view in such a way that they correct each other, thereby allowing the ironist to escape all one-sided *centrismes* and recover the impartiality of justice and reason.\(^7\) In his practice of the art of perspectivism, Browning manages not only to give points of view separate and distinct from his own—"so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine"—but also to be present in those utterances without ever once speaking in his own voice. The dramatic monologue is thus a congenial form for one who wished to be both subjective and objective, lyric and dramatic, at the same time.

Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to "My Last Duchess" (entitled simply "Italy" in 1842), a poem much bedeviled by commentators\(^8\) but one about which I should like to have something additional to say. Robert Langbaum argues that this monologue is a perfect example of the tension between sympathy and judgment, our initial attitude toward the duke's speech being one of sympathetic involvement, our judgment of him suspended until the dramatic moment is passed. To Langbaum the duke's speech is entirely gratuitous, an outrageous indiscretion on the part of a man who is making arrangements for his marriage to a prospective duchess: the duke breaks into song, as it were, just for the joy of singing and, being the Duke of Ferrara in the sixteenth century, is oblivious of, and perhaps even indifferent to, anyone who hears him. Langbaum sees the duke as bigger than life: his aristocratic confidence in himself and his position causes us to empathize with him, attracts and holds our sympathetic attention. Ralph Rader, on the other hand, is the most recent of
those who hold that the duke’s speech is not gratuitous but calculating. Rader maintains that the duke uses the portrait of his last duchess as a means of indicating to the envoy that he should warn the prospective duchess to act in a way befitting the wife of the Duke of Ferrara. The duke does this obliquely because “I choose never to stoop,” either to the envoy or to the woman who is to be his wife. In the end the duke turns to the statue of Neptune as a way of indicating to the envoy that he has really been talking about art all along but knowing that the envoy has well understood his message. In support of his case, Rader contends that the muffled rhymes of the couplets in which the duke speaks suggest an underlying design on the speaker’s part: “If we assume that the Duke speaks purposefully, we see that the couplets have a very definite function—to give a submerged pattern running, like the Duke’s hidden purpose, through the whole” (p. 139).

I myself find it very difficult to see the duke’s monologue as calculating. Even though he is the Duke of Ferrara and thus in a superior position to his auditor, he would hardly designedly confess to, of all people, the envoy from the prospective duchess that he had murdered his previous wife and will likely do the same to his next if she does not act more proudly and hence worthy of a nine-hundred-years-old name. This seems to me simply not true to life, even life in Renaissance Italy. Furthermore, no matter how much the duke masks his supposed design, there is nevertheless a certain amount of “stooping” in even hinting to the envoy how he expects his new duchess to behave. It seems to me more lifelike if it happens that this cultivated autocrat simply gets carried away—into song—when talking about artifacts, of which his last duchess, “painted on the wall,” is now one. I find the duke’s monologue an example of what is called the feedback phenomenon: language is generative, one utterance begetting another that in turn modifies the former. Like so many of Browning’s monologists, the duke speaks not in accordance with what the dramatic context requires—that is, what a future bridegroom should be saying to an agent of the father of the future bride; on the contrary, he speaks in violation of the demands of the dramatic context, speaks simply because he has spoken, because one utterance
engenders another, because one musical phrase begs to be made into a song.

And this is not all: there is yet another reason why the duke speaks as he does. We noted in our examination of *Sordello* how the narrator regards speech as the means by which men justify themselves and their actions, how ultimately speech is but rationalization. In his dramatic monologues Browning shows, over and over again, how this is true. In the case of the duke, there is surely the need to justify—if not to the envoy, at least to himself—why he should have done away with his wife. Even the sixteenth-century Duke of Ferrara is not so depraved that he commits murder on a whim, for the fun of it. As the poet-narrator in *Sordello* asked concerning those the world calls “evil men past hope”:

\[
\text{don’t each contrive} \\
\text{Despite the evil you abuse to live?} \\
\text{Keeping, each losel, thro’ a maze of lies,} \\
\text{His own conceit of truth? to which he hies} \\
\text{By obscure tortuous windings, if you will,} \\
\text{But to himself not inaccessible;} \\
\text{He sees it ;} \\
\text{some fancied right allowed} \\
\text{His vilest wrong.}
\]

(3. 787–95)

Yes, there was a reason, a good reason why he had to get rid of his wife, the duke tells himself (and the envoy). He did the deed, justifiably, and enough said. Attempting to pass off his indiscretion as a mere bagatelle, an anecdote about a picture, he turns to another art object and makes a comment on it, as, casting aside all differences in rank, he and the envoy go down the stairs together.

The duke's speech is compelling. For the moment, the instant of speaking, we the readers are swept away by his song; we are fascinated by him—as presumably is the envoy, who makes no demur. Yet in the end, as he begins to descend the stairs, the moment of dramatic and lyric intensity passes, the spell is broken, we withdraw our sympathy and begin to
see this proud and haughty man for what he is—a murderer. But even then, even in reflecting on what he has said, our later judgment of the duke does little to diminish our image of the man as bigger-than-life-size. Villain though he be, he retains, as it were, his operatic grandness. With admirable irony Browning succeeds in giving us—and causing us to hold—two conflicting views of the same individual.

Let me now turn to the prosody of the poem. I imagine that for every reader the realization that it is made up of rhyming couplets comes as a surprise, for the poet has designed the poem to be read as though it were blank verse. Why then the use of rhyme at all? Rader sees the pattern as underscoring the duke’s hidden design, something like a signal on the part of the poet of his intention as to how the monologue is to be interpreted. Rader’s suggestion is ingenious, and while partly agreeing with him I nevertheless come to quite a different conclusion about the function of the rhyming couplets and hence about the nature of the poem and ultimately about the dramatic monologue as Browning uses it.

Langbaum regards the dramatic monologue as an object apart from the poet and the monologist as having a life of his own. Rader, on the other hand, argues that we do not understand dramatic monologues as standing apart from their creators and the real world in semantic indeterminancy but that we understand them as “objects whose meaning and relation to the real world are fixed by the immanent intention of the indwelling poet” (p. 132). He maintains that if we assume, like Langbaum, that Browning’s intention is to show the duke of “My Last Duchess” speaking inadvertently, then the muffled rhyme has no point. I agree that in his dramatic monologues Browning is often present—but not for the reason Rader states. It is my contention that the poet as Romantic Ironist manages in various ways to remind us that his monologues are not mere tranches de vie but art, that above the speakers there is the figure of the poet smiling at his creation and wishing to partake of it—to be both immanent and transcendent. In the instance of “My Last Duchess,” the poet signals us that, after all, this is a piece of artifice by casting his monologue in rhymed couplets. It is part of his ironic playfulness that he
conceals them by enjambment until almost the very close, when he end-stops the last lines and thereby calls attention to them as rhyming couplets. In addition, Browning calls attention to the poem as a poem when he has the duke refer to Neptune, "taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me." In that passage, whatever the speaker may or may not intend by it, we are invited by the poet to see the statue as a summarizing symbol of the duke. The poet is present in the poem, then, not to guide us in interpretation of the speaker's words but to remind us that they are, after all, but words put into the speaker's mouth by the poet. It is no wonder that the dramatic monologue, shaped from an ironic mode that was both subjective and objective, lyric and dramatic, remained for many years Browning's favorite literary form.

I have dwelt at length on "My Last Duchess" not only because it is a splendid poem but also because I wanted to demonstrate how Browning's early dramatic monologues, of which this may be taken as a paradigmatic example, operate as poems in the ironic mode. Let us now turn to the other pieces, and to consideration of the collection as a whole.

Dramatic Lyrics consisted not only of two poems previously published—the monologues now known as "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover," in the Monthly Repository in 1836—and those that the poet had written and put aside but also of poems written in 1842 after Moxon had given him the idea of publishing a collection of small poems. This suggests that Browning evidently thought of giving Dramatic Lyrics some kind of unity. It was not to be unity of form, because the collection contains lyrical narratives and dialogues as well as monologues. The unity that the poet had in mind was, I believe, thematic.

Let us look at the poems comprising Dramatic Lyrics, many with titles different from those by which they are now known. The contents of the volume were as follows:

Cavalier Tunes
   I. Marching Along
   II. Give a Rouse
III. My Wife Gertrude [later called “Boot and Saddle”]

Italy and France
   I. Italy [later called “My Last Duchess”]
   II. France [later called “Count Gismond”]

Camp and Cloister
   I. Camp (French) [later called “Incident of the French Camp”]
   II. Cloister (Spanish) [later called “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”]

In a Gondola

Artemis Prologuizes

Waring

Queen-Worship
   I. Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli [later called “Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli”]
   II. Cristina

Madhouse Cells
   I. [later called “Johannes Agricola in Meditation”]
   II. [later called “Porphyria’s Lover”]

Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr.--1842.

The Pied Piper of Hamelin; A Child’s Story.

Where “Cavalier Tunes” are concerned with loyalty to Charles I, “Italy,” which we have already examined as a dramatic monologue, deals with a husband’s perception of a kind of disloyalty on the part of his wife. The duke is a proud man who, alas, has married a woman who does not, in his eyes, sufficiently value his position. It is one of the beauties of the poem that though we see the duchess only through the duke’s eyes, we nevertheless see her in a way different from his—as a lady of great simplicity and kindness who naturally is suited to be the duchess of Ferrara, full as she is of unaffected noblesse oblige. The duke, on the other hand, we see as a man who is self-consciously duke of Ferrara, constantly aware of the need
to play the role of prince-ruler. It is an additional irony of the poem that the duke does not perceive that it is she far more than he who possesses the essential quality of nobility and grace; for it is to his mind just her very lack of this which causes him to have her done away with. His mistaken sense of pride will never let him play his role as duke easily.

The duke also prides himself as a collector of art, a virtuoso. Whatever he has—and he will have only the finest—must be totally his in order for him to enjoy the full pride of ownership: "none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I"; "Notice Neptune / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me." Always he sees himself in the role of power, possessing utterly whatever he wants and loves and demanding constant recognition of his power from what he loves. Thus his duchess he can love only when she is dead, become a portrait that he can totally possess.

"France" is also about love, pride, and loyalty. The speaker is a woman, and what she tells is full of ambiguities. The traditional reading of the poem is that it is the story of a woman wrongly defamed and her virtue restored in the eyes of the world by a knight who comes out of nowhere to defend her name and then marry her. Yet as more recent readers have noted, there are several objections to this interpretation. Why, for instance, does she lie to her husband at the end? And what is the purpose of her telling how she felt her knight's sword, bloody from the killing of her defamer, touch her side? These details seriously call into question the view that the woman is a calumniated innocent.

Like its companion poem the monologue is concerned with words. The duke of "Italy" constantly refers to speech, what people do not ask ("seemed as they would ask me, if they durst"), what Fra Pandolf said, how the duchess talked or should have talked, what the duke said, could not say, and is now saying. For the duke speech is a means of control. The monologist of "France" also associates words with power, her monologue focusing on repeated use of the word "lie." Gauthier accuses her of belying her role as queen, chaste and fair, of the tournament, although why he should do this falsely we are given no motive. Gismond comes forth, pronounces
Gauthier a liar, defeats him in duel, drags him to the lady, and forces him to say he has lied to God and to her. In telling the story to her friend Adela, however, she is concerned that Gismond, now her husband, not hear her (49–50); and when he returns before her completion of the tale, she falsely tells him that she has been talking about her falcon. Evidently the countess like the duke of the preceding poem feels that if she has the right words she can exert control over the situation at hand. For the one time when she cannot speak—and at other times she speaks glibly—she is at the mercy of another person: to Gauthier’s accusation, “I? What I answered? As I live / I never thought there was such thing / As answer possible to give” (61–63).

In speaking of the incident, the countess constantly refers to it as though it took place not in real life but on the stage. The “time and place and company” was a tournament where she was to play the role of queen. Her cousins dress her up “in Queen’s array” (11) for “the play” (18). Before her entrance onstage she takes a moment to “adjust / The last rose in my garland, fling / A last look on the mirror” (26–28); “friends kissed my cheek, / And called me Queen” (32–33); and then she takes her “state / And foolish throne amid applause” (37–38). The tournament proceeds, and just as she is about to award the prize, Gauthier stalks forth, thunders “Stay!” and recites a speech that sounds as though it had been learned from one of Dryden’s plays:

> Bring torches! Wind the penance-sheet  
> About her! Let her shun the chaste  
> Or lay herself before their feet!  
> Shall she, whose body I embraced  
> A night long, queen it in the day?  
> For Honor’s sake no crowns, I say!

Whereupon, as the deus ex machina, appears Gismond, who strides out to slap Gauthier’s mouth and call him liar. The lady is no longer at the center of the stage, willingly retiring when God “me . . . bid / Watch Gismond for my part” (83–84). Gismond defeats Gauthier, who is dragged to the lady’s
feet and made to confess. Gismond then kneels to ask, presumably, for her hand in marriage, and thereafter leads her away to his home in the south. So much for the play, which perhaps should be entitled "Virtue Defamed But Finally Rewarded."

But what really happened? We cannot be certain although we have some clues. As to Gauthier's accusation, we are told that "he must have schemed" (8) to make his charge just when all faces were on her, but apparently her cousins put him up to it—"'twas all their deed" (14). Why? Because they were jealous of her beauty. But this does not seem entirely plausible, for in the very next stanza we are told: "They, too, so beauteous! Each a queen / By virtue of her brow and breast; / Not needing to be crowned, I mean, / As I do" (19–22). Then follows this enigmatic utterance: "Oh, I think the cause / Of much was, they forgot no crowd / Makes up for parents in their shroud!" (40–42). Apparently the only reason for this remark is to impress upon her listener that she was a poor little orphan girl utterly defenseless against the world. But "the cause"? The cause of what? "Howe'er that be," (43) just when all eyes were upon her, her cousins cast theirs down. At this point she interrupts to say to her friend: "See! Gismond's at the gate, in talk / With his two boys: I can proceed" (49–50)

Continuing with her story she tells of Gauthier's denunciation and her inability to answer: "What says the body when they spring / Some monstrous torture-engine's whole / Strength on it?" At the very least the body says "ouch" or "stop!" But as it turns out, she need not say anything anyway, because Gismond advances to speak on her behalf. And why does Gismond, a man she had never seen before, do such a bold thing? Because "God had set / Himself to Satan" (70–71). She therefore had no doubt about the outcome of Gismond's fight with Gauthier. In fact, she enjoyed it: "This glads me most, that I enjoyed / The heart of the joy" (79–80). With exceeding pleasure she watches him don his armor:

Did I not watch him while he let
His armourer just brace his greaves,
Rivet his hauberk, on the fret
The while! His foot...my memory leaves
No least stamp out, nor how anon
He pulled his ringing gauntlets on.

(85–90)

The duel over and Gauthier wounded, Gismond asks, "hast thou lied?" To which he replies, "I have lied / To God and her" (101–2). This seems to me a strange, at any rate ambiguous, thing to say. Why does he not say that he has lied to the assembled crowd to whom he has made his accusation?

After it is all over, Gismond seems to have asked her to marry him. With arms around her he then leads her away; "and scarce I felt / His sword, that dripped by me and swung" (110–11). At the end, just after asking God's blessing on Gauthier's soul, she says of her two boys: "Our elder boy has got the clear / Great brow; tho' when his brother's black / Full eye shows scorn, it...," not continuing because Gismond enters. What is the meaning of this, and why does she speak of her sons immediately after mention of Gauthier? Is there not more than a slight suggestion that one of the boys may not be Gismond's?

When Gismond returns, she changes the subject and actually prevaricates about what she has been saying: "have you brought my tercel back? / I was just telling Adela / How many birds it struck since May" (124–26). There are perhaps innocent reasons why she should not want to let Gismond know what she has been talking about: for instance, she might feel it would embarrass him to hear her speak of him heroically in the presence of a third person. But in a story whose focus is on falsehood and the supposed vindication of truth, this, even if a white lie, necessarily jars on us and casts doubt as to the reliability of the truth of her tale. In addition, when we recall that this is a companion monologue to the duke's, we note how similar the ending of this poem is to that of "Italy." The predatory falcon is very much like Neptune taming a sea-horse, both literally and in function as a concluding symbol of the lady's character. In the last analysis we cannot accept the lady's story as true. We may not finally be able to reconstruct, even with ardent exercise of our "co-operating fancy,"
the entire narrative but at least we know that, in all likelihood, things did not occur in the way the monologist says.

Does the fact that the poem is full of puzzling details even about the narrative itself mean that it is to be judged as unsuccessful? If the interest in the monologue lay in the story itself, then we would be bound to say that it is not a satisfying narrative. But the emphasis here as in Browning's other monologues is on character and its revelation in speech. Many of the endings of Browning's poems are ambiguous, in part because the poet had little interest in the narrative. As we saw, in *Pippa Passes* we do not know, for instance, whether the bishop restores to Pippa her rightful inheritance or keeps it for the Church. And it does not matter because it is not the story we are invited to be interested in; it is, rather, on character that the poet wishes to concentrate. Those commentators who most misrepresent Browning's poetry do so because they study the monologues for stories or themes or morals instead of witnessing the drama of character unfold.

In “France” as in most of the early Browning, there is a tension between form and meaning as well as between content and meaning. Cast in the form of a metrical romance—stanzaic tetrameters—the monologue appears as a version of medieval romance: trial by combat, vindication of the just, love winning through. Yet as we have just seen, the poem is about the pathology of love, if indeed love it can be called. The speaker gives more than a hint about the implication of love with respect to power, of how love can be realized only when it is somehow connected with power, the power to conquer and even to kill. Like nearly all the other poems in *Dramatic Lyrics*, “France” deals with death.

The next pair of poems, “Camp and Cloister,” which are fairly artificially connected, focus on their speakers’ belief in forms of behavior inculcated by the organization to which they belong. “Camp” is a third-person narrative of a youth who follows a military code of heroism in battle even though it means his death, his only reward being that he has served his emperor—who is preoccupied with matters other than the young soldier’s mortal wounds. In “Cloister,” a dramatic monologue, the speaker adheres to the rules of monastic life but is
devoid of belief in the informing spiritual principle behind them, unwittingly damning himself in our eyes as a type of Satan while commending the saintly Brother Lawrence, whom he hates, as a true follower of Christ. Like Napoleon in the companion poem, the speaker is concerned only with mind and power whereas Brother Lawrence, like the boy soldier, is shown to be governed by emotion and love.

"In a Gondola" is a study of the psychology of romantic love reminiscent of the Ottima and Sebald episode of Pippa Passes. A clue to interpretation may be found in the first mention Browning made of it. The poem began, says Browning, as an illustration of a picture by Daniel Maclise entitled "The Serenade"; "All the 'properties,' as we say, were given—and the problem was how to cataloguize them in rhyme and unreason." The picture contained, in other words, all the stuff of storybook love: "I send my heart up to thee—all my heart. Singing and stars and night and Venice streets in depths of shade and space are 'properties,' do you please to see" (Hood, Letters, p. 7).

The varying line-lengths, rhythms, and rhyme schemes of the dialogue between a young man and his inamorata carry the two lovers through a variety of moods. She apparently a married woman, they must meet in secret. It is the danger associated with their trysts that makes their furtive meetings so rapturous. Discovery and death are never far away. What if they are caught? Paul throws a cloak over the lover's head, Gian pinions his arms, "Himself" (presumably the husband) thrusts a stiletto through his back: "I reel; / And...is it Thee I feel?" (108-9). Or they force him to the graveyard of the Lido and to the grave in which they propose to shove him, "roll me to its brink, / And...on Thy breast I sink" (114-15). She replies that indeed death is nothing to fear: "were Death so unlike Sleep / Caught this way?" (117-18). Death is not to be avoided but sought actively: dying into love, they would be free of the world's falseness and annoy, of a Venice where marriages are arranged for money between old men and young girls and where everyone is indifferent to feelings of any kind (37-48). There in the darkness of death, removed from "the
daylight world” (27), they could find the refuge that would permit them to love forever.

In the meantime, what to do? Real life being hideous, they must live in fancy. She says,

Kiss me as you made believe
You were not sure this eve,
How my face, your flower, had pursed
Its petals up.

(50–53)

He thereupon engages in some instances of make-believe, at the end of each “shattering” the fancy so that “as of old, I am I, Thou art Thou” (70, 78). Yet remaining “as of old” is not for long because he is then led into a bigger fancy, from which he retreats:

Rescue me thou, the only real!
And scare away this mad Ideal
That came, nor motions to depart!
Thanks! Now, stay ever as thou art!

(99–102)

But having this uttered, he then proceeds with even more fantastic visions.

The lovers in the poem constantly engage in little dramas to sustain the rapture of love, occasionally even telling the other the lines of the script that he or she is to speak. Thus,

Say after me, and try to say
My words as if each word
Came from you of your own accord,
In your own voice, in your own way.

(8–11)

But why deal at all with the phenomenal world, of which language is but part? “And yet once more say...no word more! /
Since words are only words” (18–19). Death alone will sustain the fervor that each desires, so speak no word unless it be a means to that land of bliss:

no word more!
Give o’er!
Unless you call me, as the same,
Familiarly by my pet-name
Which if the Three should hear you call
And me reply to, would proclaim
At once our secret to them all:
Ask of me, too, command me, blame—
Do break down the partition-wall
’Twixt us the daylight world beholds
Curtained in dusk and splendid folds.

(20–28)

Finally, the gondola ride over, they are surprised by “the Three” and he is stabbed, almost as he had foretold. Yes, they say, it was ordained to be, although in fact the lovers took fate into their own hands and made their play of love end as they wanted. Echoing Sebald’s sentiment, the serenader asks what matters their recklessness. The world, of which the Three are but all too real a part, is not alive, its inhabitants have never lived: “but I,” says the dying lover, “have lived indeed, and so—(yet one more kiss)—can die” (230–31).16

It has been customary to regard “In a Gondola” as reflecting Browning’s belief that love conquers all.17 Such a view seems to me to stem from a serious misreading of this poem of “rhyme and unreason.” Even at its inception Browning appears to have had in mind a study of the pathology of romantic love, and when we place it in the context of a volume of poems many of which, such as “Count Gismond,” deal with the relationship between love and death, I think it behooves us to investigate the psychology that results in this death in Venice.

Like “Artemis Prologuizes,” which precedes it, “Waring” is also a narrative that deals with loyalty and pride. It is in two parts—a monologue and a dialogue. The setting is not given,
but a London club would seem just right. Disaffected by a lack of recognition in London, Waring suddenly disappeared without even so much as a good-bye to his friends. The speaker tells how he misses Waring, guesses where the lost man might be, and predicts a brilliant future for him no matter where he eventually turns up. On the surface that is all there is to the poem. But when we look into it more closely, we learn that the speaker’s attitude toward his friend is more complex and less admiring than initially it seems.

If on the eve of Waring’s departure the speaker did leave his friend’s arm for the new prose-poet, how was he to know that Waring meant to slip away that very next morning? Waring was proud, and he was disappointed that no one made enough of him. True, he had not done anything, although he had achieved “certain first steps”; but who goes gleaning along the hedges when full-sheaved cornfields are by? But oh, if one could only bring him back once more! Faced with him, “so hungry for acknowledgement / Like mine,” one would “fool him to his bent” and say that great works conceived and planned surpass little works achieved—just the sort of nonsense he would like to hear. One would lie and make havoc of the claims of the “distinguished names.” Changing tone from condescending banter, the speaker asks Waring truly to come back and rouse the country from its torpor:

Our men scarce seem in earnest now;
Distinguished names, but ’tis, somehow,
As if they played at being names
Still more distinguished.

(201–4)

In the second part of the poem, another person reports seeing Waring on the Illyrian coast. The first speaker, heartened by the news but apparently having paid little attention to what was actually said, observes, “Oh, never star / Was lost here, but it rose afar.” And as if asking whether his earlier prophecy concerning Waring might not be true, he says: “In Vishnuland what Avatar?” (259–62).

The picture of the speaker that emerges is of a loquacious
bore, a clubman who makes it a point to know the "distinguished names." He speaks of Waring as one who wishes to be recognized as a "distinguished name" without ever having accomplished that which would make his name famous. But the more he talks, the more he realizes that he really does miss his friend, feels guilty for having been so condescending and patronizing in his attitude toward Waring, and comes to suspect that the "distinguished names" are perhaps less worthy of distinction than he had made them out to be. And we as listeners become increasingly aware of the real reason why Waring left: because he was bored with the empty life such as the monologist represents. But whatever the speaker says or does not say, he still values Waring more as a topic of conversation—a distinguished name manqué whom he has known well—than as a friend. In part two of the poem when someone, presumably another member of the club, relates "when I last saw Waring," the first speaker asks incredulously, "You saw Waring?" (211). And then at the end of the tale when the other clubman concludes, "so I saw the last of Waring," the first speaker is again moved to ask, "You?" as though no one had any right to speak of Waring but him.

In the two poems under the joint title "Queen-Worship," we find the old fondness on the part of Browning's lovers for strong women who assume the position of power in the sexual relationship. Both lyrics have as their speakers men who would willingly sacrifice the world for love. In "Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli," the French troubadour figures himself as a sunflower ever bending toward the sun, which represents both love and his lady. In "Cristina" the speaker claims that when he and the lady met, she flirtingly fixed him with her eyes: all of a sudden their souls rushed together. She recognized it as well as he, but she withdrew for the sake of "the world's honours," which "trampled out the light for ever." He, on the other hand, has remained faithful to this ecstatic moment of their soul's union and consequently has grown greater than she: "She has lost me—I have gained her." All that now remains to him is the proving of their separate powers: which is greater, she without him, he with her?

Traditionally the monologue is regarded as a lyric represent-
ing Browning's most cherished beliefs. But upon investigation we discover here as in "Count Gismond" certain puzzling statements that give us pause and make us wonder how much of the speaker's story is accurate. In the very first stanza, we learn that, although the lovers had apparently never met before, she was aware of the kind of man he was, "knew it / When she fixed me." And then though she was as transfixed as he by their encounter, he is not sure that she was aware of it: "To fix me thus meant nothing? / But I can't tell...there's my weakness... / What her look said." This was one of those times when time has a stop and the world becomes nothing. "Doubt you," he twice asks (33, 46), that she was aware of this? Finally, his claim to have "grown perfect" strikes us as a bit excessive. We are left with the strong suspicion that the speaker is trying to convince his listener that once upon a time a queen fell in love with him but, refusing to act on soul's truth, departed from the relationship because of worldly inducements.

In the end we come to the conclusion that "Cristina" is a dramatic monologue uttered by one whose mental balance may be doubted, not only because of what he says but also because of the way he says it. The opening lines are spoken in a halting, nervous rhythm:

She should not have looked at me,
If she meant I should not love her:
There's plenty...men, you call such,
I suppose...she may discover
All her soul to, if she pleases,
And yet leave much as she found them.
But I'm not so, and she knew it
When she fixed me, glancing round them.

And the repetition of the word "fix" in the first line of the very next stanza goes further to impress upon us the notion of fixation, of the speaker's feeling that time stopped, was fixed at the romantic moment of souls' meeting, and of his need to refer to it constantly.

As to the madness of the speakers in the next pair of poems
there is no doubt, since Browning entitled them "Madhouse Cells." Both are identical in meter, rhyme scheme, and length. The first, "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" as it came eventually to be called, is the monologue of one who feels himself predestined by God for salvation, thus being unable to do wrong and also being exempt from the necessity of good works. Johannes shows himself to be, somewhat like the soliloquizer of the Spanish cloister, one who though versed in Christian theology is not a Christian. It is Browning's point that those who believe themselves relieved by fate or ordination of the trials and tests of life are mad. Like Pauline's lover and Paracelsus, Johannes aims "to get to God," to "God's breast, my own abode." His pride as one of the elect leads him to declare that God created him before the heavens and ordained that he should grow, "guiltless for ever." The Creator did this because he needed the creature as the vessel for his love. Thus whatever Johannes does, no matter how sinful its nature, is turned to "blossoming gladness," while the good works of the unelect can never win God's love, "all their striving turned to sin."

"Porphyria's Lover" is the monologue of one who has strangled his beloved in order to preserve the good moment and make her his forever: "That moment she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good." His justification of the act is that Porphyria herself wished it too: her head now propped on his shoulder "glad it has its utmost will, / That all it scorned at once is fled, / And I, its love, am gained instead." Furthermore, all night long his and her bodies have been together side by side, "And yet God has not said a word!" The lover may be mad, but he has still enough sanity to be dimly aware that murder is wrong, forbidden by God. Yet if God does not speak in condemnation of him and his deed, then surely the act is to be condoned. Like the duke of Ferrara, Porphyria's lover demands the total possession of another person, which cannot be achieved in life.

There is more plot in "Porphyria's Lover" than in the other monologues of Dramatic Lyrics. The story material could easily have been the basis for an early Victorian play, novel, or verse narrative. The girl forced by concern (probably on the
part of her family) for financial reward and social status to marry a man she does not love, the boy of inferior social status whom she does love, his dejection, her feelings of guilt, her slipping away from a fancy dinner held to announce her engagement to be married, her visit to the boy's cottage during a storm, her giving herself to him sexually—all this is the kind of stuff, the conventions and clichés, out of which so much early nineteenth-century literature was made. It is, for example, something like the story of Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and it may be that the name Porphyria was suggested by the name Porphyro in Keats's poem. It is also reminiscent of the stories of Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" and "Maud," both of which were published after "Porphyria's Lover" but which nevertheless contain stock Victorian narrative details. Browning, however, adds his own twist (and in doing so may be satirizing early nineteenth-century narratives): first, by having the lover kill the girl to prevent the loveless marriage, and second, by having him narrate the story so as to justify his part in it. Casting it as a monologue, Browning lets us see the story from the inside, as it were, as the lover seeks for ways to show that the deed, though done in a moment of passion, was the right thing to do. Porphyria having come through wind and rain from the "gay feast" for the sake of one so pale from love of her, he—"proud, very proud"—at last knew that she worshiped him. How could he prevent the arranged marriage and keep her true to the one she really adored? "I debated what to do." Then "I found / A thing to do":

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all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her.
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It was all so natural: no rope or cord but her own hair used for the deed; and three times around, almost as if it were illustrative of Trinitarian doctrine. "No pain felt she: / I am quite sure she felt no pain." Furthermore, she seems in death as if she approved: her blue eyes (when pried open) laugh, her cheek blushes bright, her rosy little head smiles—no sign of
disapproval at all. Yes, surely, it was the "thing to do." A thing to do: he makes murder sound so innocent. It is this insane narrative of self-justification stated with such matter-of-fact simplicity and in a verse form—highly regular tetrameter lines that, mostly end-stopped, call attention to the highly patterned male rhyme—suggestive of perfect rational control—it is this that gives the poem its ironic power. When we recall that "Porphyria's Lover" was first published in 1836—and perhaps composed two years earlier, when Browning was but twenty-two years old—we see how from the beginning of his career the poet was a master ironist.

The last two poems in the collection are linked by the themes of loyalty and pride. "Through the Metidja to Abd-El-Kadr.—1842" is the lyrical soliloquy of an Arab proudly riding on horseback through the Algerian desert plain to join his chief in the fight against the French for an independent Algeria. "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is a third-person narrative that tells of a fabulous piper who by his piping freed the town of Hamelin from rats. When he has completed his job of pest control and is not paid for the deed according to contract, he entices the children of the town away into an opening in a mountain and disappears with them forever.

As we glance back over the poems of this small volume, we see that all touch on loyalty and pride. The first line in the collection, spoken by a southern Loyalist, is "Kentish Sir Byng stood for his King." The last line, spoken by the narrator of "The Pied Piper," is "If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise." With their varying ideas as to what constitutes loyalty (or disloyalty) the actors in the monologues die in battle, kill their wives and lovers or bring them back from the dead, make pacts with the Devil or act as the elect of God. Whatever misdeed or good work is performed, it is done in accordance with the individual's notion of loyalty, of which he is extremely (and sometimes madly) proud. Each acts, in other words, the way he believes the loyal man or woman should act; which is to say, each plays a role, speaks the words proper to that role, and feels that the role has been ordained. The actors are intensely self-conscious and long to explain why, in fulfillment of their roles, they have acted in a certain fashion,
more or less according to a script written by a master drama-
tist. They are thus characterized by the irony that causes them
to view themselves both as free agents and as puppets. We as
listeners observe their sense of power that conflicts with their
striving to unbend and submerge themselves in love—to mani-
fest pride as loyalty, to submit ego to some form of “out-soul.”
The dialectic of self and other thus remains a chief topic in
Browning’s study of soul-making and the ironies it involves.