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Abstract

The thesis examines the relationship of Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold and Arthur Clough with their audiences. The intersection between readers conceived by addresses within poetic texts and historical readers who reviewed and commented on these works is, I argue, fundamental to an understanding of the literary climate of the nineteenth century. Using techniques associated with new formalism, the thesis seeks to expand our understanding of the relationship between aesthetic impulses and historical and social pressures. It examines the poetry's self-consciousness towards its readers, and uses the responses of historical readers to situate patterns within Victorian poetry in a literary historical context.

The introduction provides a background to the literary historical context within which my thesis operates, and sets out the content of each chapter. The first two chapters explore the early poetry of Tennyson and Robert Browning alongside their reviews and contemporary essays on poetic theory, arguing that their singular poetic voices develop through their conception and depiction of a readership. The next two chapters, on Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Browning's *Men and Women*, continue to explore an often conflicted relationship between these two poets and their readership. A chapter on Arnold and Clough presents a counterpoint to Tennyson and Browning, focusing on the 1850s. I finish with two chapters on Tennyson's *Maud* and Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, exploring how Tennyson and Browning re-negotiate relationships with their readers through the dramatic medium.

In my discussion of each poet, I examine the mixture of reciprocity and resistance towards their reviewers. The tension between the poets' sense of responsibility towards their audience and their own aesthetic desires is a source of creativity: even through their resistance to the demands of their audience, their poetry is unavoidably shaped by those readers.

Voice and Reception in Tennyson, Browning, and  
Other Victorian Poets

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PhD in English Studies  
Durham University  
2012

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Note on the Primary Texts

Matthew Arnold (1965) *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (ed.) Kenneth Allott, London, Longmans.

All quotations from Arnold's poetry and prose (unless specified otherwise) will be taken from this edition.

Robert Browning (1983) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol I Pauline, Paracelsus* (eds.) Ian Jack and Margaret Smith, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Robert Browning (1984) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol II Strafford, Sordello* (eds.) Ian Jack and Margaret Smith, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Robert Browning (1991) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol IV* (eds.) Ian Jack, Rowena Fowler and Margaret Smith, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Robert Browning (1995) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol V Men and Women* (eds.) Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Robert Browning (1998) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol VII The Ring and the Book, Books I-IV* (eds.) Stefan Hawlin and Tim Burnett, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Robert Browning (2001) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol VIII The Ring and the Book, Books V-VIII* (eds.) Stefan Hawlin and Tim Burnett, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Robert Browning (2004) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning Vol IX The Ring and the Book, Books IX-XII* (eds.) Stefan Hawlin and Tim Burnett, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

All quotations from Browning's poetry (unless specified otherwise) will be taken from these editions.

Robert Browning (2009) *The Major Works* (ed.) Adam Roberts, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

All quotations from Browning's prose (unless specified otherwise) will be taken from this editions.

Arthur Hugh Clough (1974) *Amours de Voyage* (ed.) Patrick Scott, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press.

All quotations from Clough's poetry (unless specified otherwise) will be taken from this edition.

Alfred Tennyson (1987) *The Poems of Tennyson* ed., and notes Christopher Ricks, 3 vols, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Harlow, Longman.

All quotations from Tennyson's poetry (unless specified otherwise) will be taken from this edition.

### Abbreviations

CH Arnold	Dawson, Carl (ed.) (1973) <i>Matthew Arnold: The Poetry; The Critical Heritage</i> , London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
CH Browning	Litzinger, Boyd (ed.) (1970) <i>Browning: The Critical Heritage</i> , London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
CH Clough	Thorpe, Michael (ed.) (1972) <i>Clough: The Critical Heritage</i> , London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
CH Tennyson	Jump, John D. (ed.) (1969) <i>Tennyson: The Critical Heritage</i> , London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

### Referencing

I use the Harvard referencing system.

### Declaration

No material in this thesis has been submitted for a degree at this or any other university. The work is solely that of the author, under the supervision of Professor Michael O'Neill. An excerpt from chapter one, in an earlier form, has been published as "A tale of little meaning': The Mind's Ear in Tennyson's Early Poetry", *Tennyson Research Bulletin*, Autumn 2010.

### Statement of Copyright

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### Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

In 1866 Christina Rossetti published a short poem entitled “Twice”, in which she addresses both her lover and her God. I reprint the poem in full below:

I TOOK my heart in my hand  
 (O my love, O my love),  
 I said: Let me fall or stand,  
 Let me live or die,  
 But this once hear me speak— 5  
 (O my love, O my love)—  
 Yet a woman’s words are weak;  
 You should speak, not I.

You took my heart in your hand  
 With a friendly smile, 10  
 With a critical eye you scanned,  
 Then set it down,  
 And said: It is still unripe,  
 Better wait awhile;  
 Wait while the skylarks pipe, 15  
 Till the corn grows brown.

As you set it down it broke—  
 Broke, but I did not wince;  
 I smiled at the speech you spoke,  
 At your judgement that I heard: 20  
 But I have not often smiled  
 Since then, nor questioned since,  
 Nor cared for corn-flowers wild,  
 Nor sung with the singing bird.

I take my heart in my hand, 25  
 O my God, O my God,  
 My broken heart in my hand:  
 Thou hast seen, judge Thou.  
 My hope was written on sand,  
 O my God, O my God; 30  
 Now let Thy judgement stand—  
 Yea, judge me now.

This contemned of a man,  
 This marred one heedless day,

This heart take Thou to scan 35  
 Both within and without:  
 Refine with fire its gold,  
 Purge Thou its dross away—  
 Yea, hold it in Thy hold,  
 Whence none can pluck it out. 40

I take my heart in my hand—  
 I shall not die, but live—  
 Before Thy face I stand;  
 I, for Thou callest such:  
 All that I have I bring, 45  
 All that I am I give,  
 Smile Thou and I shall sing,  
 But shall not question much.

A poem “full of devotional feeling” (Bell 1898: 219), an “attack...upon the powerlessness of women in a rigid patriarchal society” (Harrison 1988: 186) and “addressed to a man Christina loved” (Packer 1963: 186), “Twice” is a poem that holds several possibilities in suspension. Rossetti turns to both “You” (9) and “Thou” (28), contending with a lover and a god, in this poem where addressees are slippery. Yet there is one potential addressee of her poem whom critics have overlooked. The “critical eye” (11), the “judgment” (20) pronounced with an authority that makes the speaker quail, the repetition of “scanned” (11) and “scan” (35) may be read to insinuate another kind of auditor of her speech: the reviewer-critic. Reviewers quite literally scanned the work of poets, commenting critically on their use of metre, vocabulary, structure and form, as well as the emotional and moral significance of their poetry.

Rossetti’s ironic protest, “You should speak, not I” (8), is framed by the gendered perspective of a woman whose “words are weak” (7), but her experience is one common to nineteenth-century poets. The callousness of her initial recipient is also figured in Shelley’s perception of reviewers (the allusion to Shelley made concrete by Rossetti’s

skylark), who “scatter their insults and their slanders without heed as to whether the poisoned shaft lights on a heart made callous by many blows or one like Keats’s composed of more penetrable stuff” (Shelley 2009: 530). Rossetti’s speaker is one whose heart is made of penetrable stuff, and in this instance, it breaks when judgment is pronounced.

Her vulnerability is emphasised by the contrast of her heart with the hand, smile and eye of her addressee. There is an inequality in what each offers the other, where he remains defiantly external, and does not expose his inner being in exchange for hers. Their relation is not dissimilar from that of the poet who submits the imaginings of his deepest heart to reviewers, who, by dint of their anonymity, kept their own hearts hidden. The wild cornflowers and the singing bird connote the freedom and spontaneity of an ideal lyric poet, qualities which the speaker has lost since she has offered up her heart to this specific auditor.

Though cowed, Rossetti’s speaker turns on her addressee and appeals to a higher authority. The fifth stanza posits an ideal reader who would “refine with fire” (37) what is valuable in her work and “purge the dross away” (38) rather than declaring it unripe. “My hope was written on sand” (29) refers to a biblical parable which proposes that to build one’s hopes upon man is like building upon the insubstantiality of sand; as a result, the building will be washed away at the first storm (Matthew 7: 26-7). Her faith in the initial addressee is exposed as an illusion which reflects badly on him; to write on sand is to write for an unworthy audience. She rejects him by directing her attentions elsewhere and discovering a more honourable auditor.

Yet this ideal reader is exacting, demanding her whole being and holding it possessively “Whence none can pluck it out” (40). The final two lines are ambiguous: her lack of

questioning could mean that her inquisitive spirit is silenced, or, more positively, that her spirit is able to sing freely to God without having to question herself. Caught between these two addressees, the speaker's experience poses a fundamental question: to whom must the poet sing, and how does her choice affect her song, potentially altering it in ways she had not imagined? Rossetti's speaker turns from an inadequate addressee in whom she had placed her hopes to a more authoritative judge, but either choice will redefine her voice.

"Twice" fulfils Isobel Armstrong's definition of the Victorian poem as "an expressive model and an epistemological model simultaneously" (Armstrong 1993: 13); in other words, it expresses a psychological state but at the same time questions the conditions of its speech and its interpretation. Armstrong's formulation that "the epistemological reading will explore things of which the expressive reading is unaware and go beyond the experience of the lyric speaker" (Armstrong 1993: 13) is pertinent for an interpretation of "Twice" which looks beyond its psychological expression. As we shift our focus, the auditors in the poem metamorphose from characters within the text (a lover, God) to a vision of the poem's real readers and an apprehension of its reception. This double vision, where auditors conceived by the text slip between imagined or idealised and real worlds, offers a new perspective on Armstrong's double poem.

Indeed, in scholarly work following Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry*, critics have pursued the study of Victorian readers. Writing in 2000, Brake, Bell and Finkelstein point out that "researchers have come increasingly to recognise the importance of reading audiences for Victorian culture" (Brake 2000: 3). The explosion of a mass public audience in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century and the transformation of a literary culture in this period into an industry are phenomena much noted. Such changes bred anxiety as well

as excitement in writers and philosophers of the age, but undoubtedly these new developments transformed the literary landscape.

Critics have been careful not to assume a homogenous mass audience in the nineteenth century, recognising the heterogeneity of readers within multiple reading publics. One such distinction is made by Richard Altick: the mass reading public, he writes, “is *not* the relatively small, intellectually and socially superior audience for which most of the great nineteenth-century authors wrote – the readers of the quarterly reviews, the people whom writers like Macaulay, the Brontës, Meredith, George Eliot, and John Stuart Mill had in mind” (Altick 1957: 6-7). His proposition that it was the readers of periodicals for whom Victorian writers published is a timely reminder that any study of Victorian reading publics cannot ignore the presence of Victorian periodicals.

The flourishing of periodical culture is a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Periodicals covered every topic imaginable, from the broad sweep of science and religion, literature and the arts, to the more specialist publications on architecture, the military, or agriculture, to name only a few. Robin Gilmour points out that periodicals formed the basis “of contemporary intellectual and cultural life” in the nineteenth century and opened up intellectual debate from “the preserve of the specialist and the expert” to the “thoughtful men and women” (Gilmour 1993: 7) who read the numerous periodicals published. Literary debates flourished in this climate, and the dialogue between writers and philosophers of the high Victorian period, a time of intense poetic theorising, took place in essays published in periodicals. Not only did poets publish their work in periodicals, but their publications were widely reviewed by the periodical press.

Within the literary sphere, there was a wide divergence in the quality of criticism published. David Latané writes that in the Victorian age there was “a prevalence of

criticism of the most crudely biased sort, in which gain for one's political party, religious sect, bank account, or ego ledger was transparently the motive" (Latané 1999: 388) but Joanne Shattock states that, "[T]he criticism of Victorian poetry was articulate, deeply serious, especially in its anxiety about the place of poetry in an unpropitious age" (Shattock 2002: 378). Victorian poets had to contend with both kinds of criticism. Tennyson in the 1830s, for example, suffered the virulently biased reviews of Christopher North and J.W. Croker but the insightful reviews of Arthur Hallam and John Stuart Mill tempered the extremity of the former. What marks all of these reviewers, however, is the authority with which they speak. Reviews were addressed to poets in a conversational tone, as if the reviewer was writing a personal letter advising on their work, with an often avuncular manner. The periodical press was highly influential and regulated critical opinion to such an extent that writers began to resent their power. If "the producers of print were at times to assume, and at times to dictate, particular audience values" (Brake 2000: 3), then poets had to contend with these producers if they wanted any control over their reputation.

Reviewers became a barrier between poets and the larger reading public, but they also served as a reading public in themselves. Altick notes that Victorian writers sometimes wrote for the readers of the reviews, but I contend that a more significant conversation took place between poets and the reviewers themselves. My thesis makes a detailed study of exchanges between poets and reviewers over the period 1830-1870 and examines the significance of these exchanges as a way of understanding current critical thought on Victorian poets.

Isobel Armstrong writes that "periodical criticism is closer to cultural pressures than... abstract treatises and makes one powerfully aware of the literary situation in which

it was written” (Armstrong 1972: 3), and a study of Victorian poetry within this literary situation has the potential to illuminate current critical debate. If Victorian poets were torn, as is commonly assumed, between the weight of social responsibility and the tug of the lyric imagination, then who was imposing these pressures upon them? If their poetry self-reflexively questions its own aims, then at whom, in fact, is it aiming at, and how is this audience conceived and addressed?

Any study of the aims of Victorian poets, their poetic mission, as it were, cannot be divorced from their reading audience. The small, elite group of readers who commented publicly on poets' work and filtered their work through to an anonymous mass audience, and the ideal readers poets imagined into being through their poetry, interweave to create a complex web of linguistic negotiations between poet and audience. The kinds of readers conceived by the poetic texts jostle with the responses of real readers and I examine how far poets created the readers they wished for, and how resistant reviewers were to such ideals, imposing their own interpretations upon the poetry.

Boundaries between those reviewing in periodicals and those producing literary texts were blurred; literary writers often reviewed other texts, as well as publishing themselves in periodicals. The relatively small, elite literary circles in London dominated the scene, and factionalism was common. Periodical reviews were for the most part anonymous, allowing friends to pen the praises of their associates. Reviewers who wished to be particularly vitriolic could hide behind the mask of this anonymity, although within the elite London literary circles most identities were known. Journals were associated with particular political or religious persuasions, and some writers created their own journals to promote their work. The Pre-Raphaelites set up their own journal, *The Germ*, to disseminate their ideas just as Dickens founded *All the Year Round* which he used to

publish his own novels.

The careers of Tennyson and Browning were shaped by their fortunes in the periodical press, and there is both external evidence in letters and internal evidence within their poetry which demonstrates the attention they paid to their reviews.<sup>1</sup> At Cambridge Tennyson fell in with a group of friends and young intellectuals called the Apostles who supported and encouraged his poetic work, but his early career was blighted by several caustic and devastating reviews. In the early 1830s he fell foul of the factionalism within literary culture and was heavily criticised by Christopher North in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and J.W. Croker in the *Quarterly Review*. These conservative journals associated Tennyson with the “Cockney” school of poets, a group with which Keats was associated and which was censured both because of their social pretensions and their connections to radical politics.

Although Tennyson was reviewed more moderately by J.S. Mill and W.J. Fox he was deeply troubled by the antagonism of Croker and North. His friends remarked on his extreme sensitivity to criticism: Sir James Knowles wrote to a friend that Tennyson “could never forget an unfriendly word, even from the most obscure and insignificant quarter” (Shannon 1952: 33). In a letter to his friend James Spedding, Tennyson wrote “I do not wish to be dragged forward again in any shape before the reading public at present” (Shannon 1952: 35) and indeed he famously did not publish his next volume of poetry until 1842. Tennyson’s 1842 volume, *Poems*, contained revisions of poems published in his 1832 volume and E.F. Shannon documents the correlation between particular criticisms and Tennyson’s revisions, where, for example, seventy percent of the passages

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive account of Tennyson’s reading of reviews, see E.F. Shannon, *Tennyson and the Reviewers: A Study of His Literary Reputation and of the Influence of the Critics upon His Poetry 1827-1851*. For Browning, see William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*.

criticised by J.W. Croker were changed or deleted (Shannon 1952: 41).

It was not only formal changes that Tennyson enacted in his poetry: petitions that he should turn his talents away from shorter, lyric poems to a longer work which would deal explicitly with issues pertaining to contemporary society led to the publication of *The Princess* and *In Memoriam*. The universal and resounding praise which followed the publication of *In Memoriam* was in large part responsible for Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate and his reputation as the national poet from the 1850s up to his death was solidified by reviewers in newspapers and periodicals.

Like Tennyson, Browning had cultivated a small but influential group of supporters, most notably W.J. Fox who championed the young poet. Browning's first publication, *Pauline*, though reviewed encouragingly by Fox, had no impact on the literary scene and was otherwise reviewed disparagingly in a few lines in *The Literary Gazette* and *Tate's Magazine*. His second publication, *Paracelsus*, was reviewed by Fox and another friend, John Forster, and had a much greater exposure than *Pauline*. *Paracelsus* gave Browning the reputation of a young poet of promise, but unfortunately this promise was cataclysmically broken off by his long poem *Sordello*. Famous in literary history, this poem was declared incomprehensible even by the most intelligent readers (Jane Carlyle, Tennyson, and G.H. Lewes among them), and made Browning the laughing stock of the literary sphere. Browning's unpopularity with critics endured for decades and the feeling of frustration was mutual. His difficult, elliptical style and obscure subject matter puzzled his reviewers, who felt they could not untangle Browning's purpose from his poetry, and Browning was often exasperated by their lack of understanding.

It took much longer for Browning to gain the popularity and esteem held by Tennyson. Of his 1855 volume, *Men and Women*, regarded in the present day as one of his best

works, De Vane writes, “the British public took the gift coolly...To an age used to the bardic formality of Wordsworth and Tennyson, Browning's manner was still too new, too familiar and racy, his utterance too broken” (DeVane 1935: 25). But in this decade, Browning began to be taken up by the young generation of men in Oxford and Cambridge, and became a favourite of the Pre-Raphaelites. His popularity grew steadily as his contemporaries became accustomed to his singular style and manner, and culminated in the publication of *The Ring and the Book* in 1868-9 (the poem was published serially over these two years). It was this poem that brought Browning near to Tennyson’s renown and solidified his position as another national poet.

For younger poets, Arnold and Clough, contending with the periodical press was unavoidable. As Carl Dawson points out, “The press carried an authority which could give inferior writers, such as Alexander Smith, impressive if temporary reputations, but which could also inhibit good writers...and to a great extent control sales” (CH Arnold: 2). Arnold and Clough were both criticised by reviewers because their work was felt to be written for a small and elite audience rather than a wider reading public. The melancholic flavour of their work was deemed inappropriate by reviewers who believed that poetry should have a sustaining and improving influence.

Although each of these writers was at various points exasperated by critics, their annoyance did not stop them poring over their reviews or publishing in periodicals. Arnold's “letters show a consistent and close attention to what his critics say” (CH Arnold: 5) despite affecting indifference and Clough showed a similar concern. Kathryn Ledbetter emphasises Tennyson’s conflicted relationship with the periodical press: “[h]e repeatedly claimed to hate periodicals, while seeking them out for financial support or surrendering to requests from friends for contributions” (Ledbetter 2007: 5). A feeling of dependence

on periodicals also brewed resentment in Browning, whose ambitions were repeatedly frustrated by the misapprehensions of his reviewers. Browning jibes at Tennyson in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, “Tennyson reads the *Quarterly* and does as they bid him, with the most solemn face in the world – out goes this, in goes that, and all is changed” (Letters 1969: 19), but his letters showed that he also paid attention to his own reviews. He writes from Florence requesting information about the reception of *Men and Women* and shows bitter disappointment and exasperation when reviewers go against him. In later life, he admitted to a friend, “this ridicule and censure [of his early poems] stung him into quite another style of writing” (DeVane 1935: 47).

The exasperation of these poets went beyond personal vanity. The reviewers who made up their most vociferous audience made demands on the formal concerns and the aims of their poetry. It is commonly accepted that the force of social and moral responsibility which acted upon Victorian writers was extremely strong. “Victorian aesthetic and social forms must be concerned to work for the good” (Campbell 1999: 31), Matthew Campbell reminds us, and reviewers voiced and continually reinforced the idea of these responsibilities. A prevailing characteristic of Victorian writing is what E.D.H. Johnson describes as a tension between a desire to communicate with the public and the desire to remain faithful to an aesthetic experience (Johnson 1952: ix). The ideas and formal innovations of Victorian poetry were worked out through negotiations with this audience; the resistance and acquiescence of poets at various points shaping indelibly the poetry of the age. The conflicting pulls of imaginative integrity and duty to one’s nation brought about a creative tension which fuelled much of Tennyson and Browning’s work. To understand fully this creative tension, it is imperative to investigate the nature of the dialogue between these poets and their reviewers.

Studies of audience in Victorian poetry have tended to focus either on the imagined audience dramatized within the text (such as Dorothy Mermin's book, *The Audience in the Poem: Five Victorian Poets*) or on the facts of reception history (as in Laurence Mazzeno, *Alfred Tennyson: The Critical Legacy*). Mazzeno's book gives a detailed description of Tennyson's reception, quoting from a large number of reviews, but he offers no analysis of Tennyson's poetry in relation to his reception. Mermin's book is characteristic of studies of the dramatic monologue in that it focuses on auditors within the text: she argues that "[t]he speaker speaks to someone, but not to us, and we overhear him" (Mermin 1983: 5). This polarisation gives the false impression that fictional and real audiences remained apart; that while poets may have been interested in their own reception, secretively poring over reviews, their readers made little impact on the language or direction of their poetry. While there has been local discussion on reviewers' commentaries, there has not been a sustained examination of the dialogue between poets and reviewers and the character of the poetic creativity that is involved.

W. David Shaw's excellent study, *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God*, argues that poets used the imagined audience of the dramatic monologue as a strategy to speak to their real audience from behind a mask, enabling them to write about subversive subjects. But like many other critics, he neglects to give a detailed analysis of that "real" audience. By investigating the dynamic and often tense relation between poets and reviewers, I hope to illuminate some of the critical arguments made about modes of poetic address within Victorian poetry.

Matthew Bevis' study *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* demonstrates that a division between a real and an imagined audience is false. Bevis' book examines writers' negotiations between different forms of speech, namely, public and

political oratory and literary writing. His method of reading literary texts alongside contemporary materials such as newspaper reports and parliamentary speeches is highly illuminating. By a close reading of rhetorical techniques across different modes of writing, he demonstrates the deep involvement of literary writing of the nineteenth century with other forms of speech, at the same time as it cultivates a critical detachment from those forms.

Bevis' work is indicative of a recent trend within Victorian poetry studies, classified by literary scholars as new formalism. This approach seeks to combine the best of historicism with the best of formalism in order to illuminate the synergy of poetic forms and historical pressures. New formalism blends principles of formalist analysis with an awareness of the cultural contexts of the texts being discussed, and examines how the stresses of historical and cultural movements bring to bear upon aesthetic forms. While Marjorie Levinson foregrounds the divisions within this movement, what they all share, she writes, is a wish to "recover for...scholarship in English is some version of [its] traditional address to aesthetic form" (Levinson 2007: 559).

Susan Wolfson describes how new formalism seeks to recover form from the historicist scholarship of the nineties which viewed literature as identical with other kinds of discourse (Wolfson 2000: 2). Instead, new formalist scholars hope to rediscover form's "various and surprising work, its complex relation to traditions, and its interaction with extraliterary culture" (Wolfson 2000: 9). Writing in a specifically Victorian context, Stephanie Kuduk believes that a new formalist approach will help Victorian poetry studies to move away from

a narrow and inward-looking conceptualisation of [Victorian poetry's]

aims and ends... Victorian poetry scholarship deserves an expanded sense of the conversations in which it participates and a more capacious understanding of the aims towards which it is directed.

(Kuduk 2003: 514)

Where my own study strives to fulfil the aims of new formalism is by expanding our understanding of the conversations in which Victorian poetry participated by exploring the dialogues between poets and their reviewers over forty years, where poets shaped and changed the tastes by which they were read, but, conversely, the pressures exerted by reviewers also shaped the work of poets. George Levine describes the historicist Marxist belief that “literature is indistinguishable from other forms of language” (Wolfson 2000: 2). What my study of the dialogues between poets and their reviewers ultimately reveals is that poetry is always denser, richer and more complex than the discourses surrounding it. What Wolfson calls form’s “various and surprising work” argues for the importance of poetry as an aesthetic form which responds on its own terms to cultural and historical movements. While sometimes burdened or constrained by the demands of their age, poets such as Browning and Tennyson used form inventively and experimentally to channel their imaginative vision and comment critically on these demands.

To take one example of Browning’s engagement with his reviewers, the image of an oyster and a pearl occurs both in his poetry and in his reviews. The image is first used in a review of Browning in the *Athenaeum* in 1840, and later becomes the conceit of his poem “Popularity” in 1855. It is used by another reviewer in 1856, and reappears in *The Ring and the Book* in 1869. The pearl comes to represent the beautiful or valuable meaning that reviewers believed was present in the poetry, and the shell the difficulty and ugliness of

Browning's style. The image becomes the battleground of a dispute over Browning's style, which reviewers felt hampered their abilities to get at the pearl of meaning hidden by the rough constructions of the verse. His reviewers felt that Browning ought to present his poetry in a more decorous and less difficult style so that they could more easily extract a moral. Browning inverts the image in "Popularity" to defend the ugly oyster shell of his poetic experimentation; by reversing the conceit and arguing that the act of fishing up the ugly shell is more important than the beautiful dye extracted, he expands the terms of critical debate about his grotesque style.

My approach to these dialogues combines what Susan Suleiman defines as three different practices within reader theory: the rhetorical, which concentrates "on describing techniques of persuasion, narrative or thematic structures, individual or collective styles" (Suleiman 1980: 22) and the phenomenological which is "concerned with the experience whereby individual readers (or listeners or spectators) appropriate the work of art" (Suleiman 1980: 22), as well as a sociological approach. She points out the limitations of the first two: the rhetorical critic imagines an ideal reader posited by the text who shares the assumptions of the writer. In phenomenological criticism the experience of the actual reader is often glossed over and "the individual subject it poses is often indistinguishable from an abstract and generalized 'reader'" (Suleiman 1980: 26). Sociological critics, on the other hand, attempt to recover the experience of actual readers and "seek to investigate reading as essentially a collective phenomenon. The individual reader is seen...as part of a *reading public*" (Suleiman 1980: 32). I seek to avoid the limitations of each practice by combining these approaches: my thesis examines rhetorical structures and modes of address within poetic texts and the kind of reading experience they offer their readers. But I pay equal attention to the actual readers of the poetry of Tennyson, Browning, Arnold

and Clough, noticing patterns and ways of reading which are common to a reading public as well as exploring the individual responses of readers.

Vincent B. Leitch reminds us that reader theory has “developed a rich panoply of types of readers – informed readers, ideal readers, implied readers, super-readers, and ‘literants’” (Leitch 1995: 34). I switch between dramatic auditors (or characters) within the text, the readers conceived by the language of the poetry and real readers. In my own terminology, I use the word “auditor” or “listener” when speaking of characters within the text, or the addressees of the poetry as conceived by the text, as against an actual, historical, or “real” reader. The term “audience” is used when the imagined and real readers become mixed in the poet’s mind, as is often the case.

In its focus on auditors within the texts, my thesis offers a detailed analysis of address and apostrophe. In his recent book on address, William Waters reminds us that poetic address looks beyond the page, out towards its real readers (Waters 2003: 5). Waters places himself against the dominant mode of thinking about address in the twentieth century, proposed by critics such as Jonathan Culler and Northrop Frye, who have inherited Mill’s idea that “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*” (Mill 1973: 80). Mill’s influential essay set out to defend poetry from the Utilitarian accusation that it encouraged irrational judgment, but his thoughts on poetry and rhetoric created a predicament for Victorian writers. His claim that true poetry turns its back upon the reader and displays “the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener” was patently untrue for Victorian poets. Bevis finds evidence within Victorian poetry which explicitly addresses its audience and within Victorian poetic theory to demonstrate that

[F]rom the conception to the reception of their work, Tennyson’s

contemporaries did not, as Mill put it, display an ‘utter unconsciousness of the listener’. The listener might be resisted or ignored as well as courted or flattered, but the listener was present.

(Bevis 2007: 149)

Mill’s essay created a false distinction between poetry and rhetoric which challenged poets who were being called by others to keep their audience in mind. To achieve a lyric indifference to one’s audience at the same time as acting with moral responsibility towards them was a feat well nigh impossible.

Mill’s legacy has remained in twentieth-century readings of poetic address. For Culler, apostrophe is a “figure which seems to establish relations between the self and the other [but] can in fact be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism” (Culler 1977: 66). For Culler and Frye, poetic address continues to turn its back upon the reader and addresses only the objects of its imagination. More recent work by Waters and Adela Pinch demonstrate that this approach presents a false depiction of address: “the implication that all poetic addresses are equally fictive distorts literary history” (Waters 2003: 4). Pinch agrees that to read address as a performance which does not reach beyond the text denotes a false equivalence: “[s]ome of the most influential treatments in twentieth-century lyric theory focused on apostrophe as performance that renders all objects of address more or less equivalent, or interchangeable” (Pinch 2010: 90).

My thesis seeks to avoid rendering objects of address more or less equivalent by a close reading of address, apostrophe and pronouns in the poetry of Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and Clough. Pronouns and address sometimes include or encompass the reader, or sometimes do indeed seem to turn their back on the reader altogether. The kinds of ideal

readers imagined into being by the poets often bring to bear upon the reception of poetic work. In other cases, such as Browning's ambitious poem *Sordello*, the demands that poets make upon the reader are at strife with dominant methods of reading; the ideal reader that Browning addresses is at odds with the historical readers of the poem.

Though many of the poems I discuss fall under the category of the dramatic monologue, I do not enter into an exploration of genre. My study is not primarily one of genre, but of reader relations across various poetic forms, although where I coincide with the dramatic monologue is in its staging of negotiations between artist and audience. Glennis Byron's recent study has been useful in that it reminds us how the dramatic monologue in "Victorian literature generally moves away from an emphasis on the autonomous individual and begins to represent the self in context, focusing upon the individual in relation to others and upon the individual's position in society" (Byron 2003: 3-4). Other recent studies of the Victorian dramatic monologue focus on both the reader and the rhetorical performances of the speaker acting upon an auditor. Linda K. Hughes's study, *The Manyfaced Glass: Tennyson's Dramatic Monologues*, argues that the dramatic monologue involves "the reader who responds" as a key element (Hughes 1987: 10) and Cornelia Pearsall believes that "Every Victorian dramatic monologue represents an oratorical performance, that is, dramatizes the effort to persuade" (Pearsall 2008: 21). In my own study of the dramatic monologue, I examine the artist in context and his position in relation to his audience.

Each of the four poets I have chosen to study has a variant relationship to their reviewers. I focus primarily on Tennyson and Browning to give a sense of the dialogue between poets and reviewers over a sustained period and to examine how these relations played out across several decades, from 1830 to 1869. This length of time is necessary to

appraise the development of particular trends and patterns in the reception of poetry, and the simultaneous evolution of a distinct poetics which at points appears to bend to contemporary taste and at others to direct that taste.

The study begins in the 1830s, in a period of transition, when, by this decade, the major poets of the first two decades of the nineteenth century had died, leaving what was felt to be a poetic vacuum. Tennyson and Browning entered onto this empty stage, at a time when there was intense concern about the absence of a major poetic figure. As Joseph Bristow asserts, “it is particularly noticeable how periodical reviewers bemoan the supposedly moribund state of English poetry, looking out all the time for new poets” (Bristow 1987: 4). From his first publications in the 1830s, Tennyson’s poetry became subject to intense scrutiny. He emerged as the most prominent poet of his age and remained so throughout his writing life. Such a position meant that he became the standard against which all other poets were measured and many of the expectations about what poetry should be and do coalesce around him. The immediate popularity of *In Memoriam* in the middle of the century is an index of public expectation and taste, and the consternation provoked by *Maud* in 1855 is testament to the tension between the weight of public expectation and the artistic integrity of the individual poet in the nineteenth century.

Browning ran the full gamut of reactions throughout his long career: his earliest publications were almost completely ignored, then a significant few heralded him as a promising young poet. A long period of hostility and misunderstanding followed before a gradual acceptance and, indeed, a lionization of Browning as a national poet almost equal to Tennyson. He had to navigate relative obscurity and the extreme hostility and mockery which accrued to him after the publication of *Sordello* in 1840. What makes Browning a

fascinating case study is the discrepancy between himself and the public he seeks to address. His attempts to gain critical acceptance while remaining committed to his own sense of poetic mission manifests the pressures under which Victorian poets were writing.

Arnold and Clough are presented as counterpoints to Tennyson and Browning, both in the length of their careers and their poetic responses to reviewers. Where Tennyson and Browning constantly seek new ways of addressing readers, Arnold and Clough dramatise a poetic voice defined by its resistance to addressing its audience. Their poetry is fascinating precisely because they struggle to reconcile their own feelings of alienation from the dominant culture and their own ambitions to ennoble and aid their fellow-men. The aim of the thesis is to expand our understanding of each of these individual poets and to throw light on their specific peculiarities, but also, precisely because of their different experiences and responses to their reading public, to gain a more precise sense of a Victorian poetics which grew organically alongside and out of its readers.

Each of the poets I discuss is, evidently, male and as such, presents a necessarily contained picture of writing conditions in the Victorian period. The experiences of female authors, because of their gender, were of a different variety. Lack of space precludes a comparative study of gender here, but other critics have also significantly discussed this issue. In the case of Elizabeth Barrett, for example, Marjorie Stone examines Barrett's reception, finding her gender to be of specific importance in relation to the role of the female author. Fuller accounts of the issue of gender and reception can be found in Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992) and Kathryn Ledbetter's *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilisation, and Poetry* (2009). Comparably, critics such as Herbert Sussman and Clinton Machann have broached from a broadly culturalist perspective the topic of a specifically masculine poetics in

Victorian literature. While male poets evidently did wrestle directly with the issue of gender, the emphasis of this thesis is the relatively unexplored formal and linguistic exchanges between these poets and their reviewers. This focus offers a new way of understanding Victorian poetics in the context of its literary situation.

Likewise, I have not broached the topic of particular schools, such as the Spasmodics and the Pre-Raphaelites. These schools had a more strictly formulated identity, and authors within them were received as part of an aesthetic affiliation, which was not the case with Tennyson, Browning, Arnold or Clough, who each developed a distinct poetics less subject to the demarcations of a specific group identity. These coteries, and the individuals within them, have their own creative dynamic of reception, and in this study, I concentrate instead on the development of an individual poetics in relation to audience.

Linda K. Hughes believes that “the newer understanding of periodicals as a shaping force of Victorian literature and culture has made them increasingly central to Victorian studies” (Hughes 2006: 318). If periodicals were a shaping force of Victorian literature, and certainly the judgments pronounced by reviewers suggest that they wished to direct the flow of poetry, it was not the case that the poets themselves were content with this state of affairs. They voiced their complaints in letters and in their poetry itself. By paying close attention to the poetry’s often tense relationship to the judgments of reviewers, this thesis takes a different focus to other recent studies of Victorian poetry and periodicals which explore the publishing history of poetry within periodicals. Kathryn Ledbetter’s study, for example, *Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals: Commodities in Context* focuses on the contextual details of the poems Tennyson published in periodicals and their particular historical moment. While I read in close detail the reviews of the poets discussed, the emphasis is on textual analysis rather than historical readings, highlighting

patterns and connections which shed light on the shaping of Victorian poetry and poetic theory. I also look primarily at reviews published in the public realm rather than anecdotes and conversations; therefore texts such as Hallam's *Memoir*, although useful resources, take second place to reviews published within the time-frame of the poetry I discuss.

Wimsatt and Beardsley caution against using the biography of an author to determine the meaning of a text as "such methods can fail to attend to the literary work as a discrete object" (Mikics 2007: 158). They distinguish between two types of evidence for interpreting the meaning of the poem: "external" evidence from letters and journals of the author, and "internal" evidence from within the literary text (Lamarque 2006: 181) and argue that only "internal" evidence should be employed when interpreting literary texts. While the primary work of the thesis is done through "internal" evidence and readings of the poetic texts, I do make occasional concessions to the aims and intentions of the poets, as demonstrated in letters and poetic treatises. As Lamarque reminds us, critics can "quite properly seek to grasp what the author intends to communicate" at the same time as reading "literary works as forms of communication distinct from ordinary conversation" (Lamarque 2006: 185, 186). For the most part, however, this thesis focuses on the poetry rather than the "external" evidence of letters and prose. As Michael O'Neill suggests, it is possible to "allow the possibility of authorial intention to arise as it is intimated by the poems themselves" (O'Neill 1997: xv).

The first two chapters of the thesis examine the work of Tennyson and Browning in the 1830s to the early 1840s. This decade was formative both for the political transformations of the nineteenth century and the aesthetic reformulations of high Victorian literary culture. The first half of the nineteenth century saw the transition from "the feudal and agrarian order of the past [to a] democratic and industrial society" (Houghton 1957: 4).

Shifts in political power from the aristocracy to the middle classes were accompanied by the industrial developments which radically changed Britain's landscape and transformed it into a "dynamic, free-wheeling society" (Houghton 1957: 6).

These political and social changes also affected philosophy and art, both in their material production and their principal informing values. Old systems of patronage made way for the commercialisation of literature and its dependence on market forces. Lucy Newlyn and Andrew Bennett write of the effects of the new developments in reading culture in the early nineteenth century and both comment on anxieties about the growth of a large, anonymous mass audience (Bennett 1999: 44). Newlyn writes that "relatively secure systems of recognition gave way to a dependency on unknown readers, whose numerical power and anonymity were felt to be threatening" (Newlyn 2000: 8). It was in part this dependency which fuelled the growth of the literary reviewing culture; an intermediary was required to tell the public what poetry to read and to maintain literary standards.

This new climate also provoked questions about the role of the artist in the political and social life of the nation. John Lucas points out that much of Tennyson and Browning's early poetry is "devoted to statements, analyses, and questionings of what it is to be a poet, and how best to use your talent". Lucas explains that this self-consciousness arose from the "general opinion [the poets] encountered, that a poet is the central man of his age and that his responsibilities are therefore enormous" (Lucas 1971: 7). It has become commonplace among some critics to assert that the novel was the dominant form of the Victorian age, and that other art forms keenly felt their inferiority in comparison. As Ivan Kreilkamp claims, "the novel achieves such dominance that no literary genre can operate without reference to it" (Kreilkamp 2005: 156). However, while it was certainly the case that publishers may have felt a concern with the sales figures (particularly in the 1830s

when turning a profit from a new poet was difficult), poetry was still considered a literary form which had access to higher moral and spiritual truths than the novel.

Although in this decade, Tennyson and Browning turned to their Romantic forebears for inspiration, they were also forging a new path. Questions which had troubled the Romantics remained important for the poets of the 1830s but a changing world required that they provide new answers to these questions. Richard Cronin states that “[f]or Browning as for the Apostles the example of Shelley brought into sharp focus the question of how poetry might and ought to act on the real world” (Cronin 2002: 170). It was felt that a fresh poetic formulation was needed if poetry was to continue acting as a force of cultural relevance.

The first two chapters examine the poetic responses of Tennyson and Browning to the literary pressures of the 1830s. They read Tennyson and Browning’s early work, 1832-42, in the light of a dialectic between sound and meaning, where the development of a poetic voice can only take place within a socially constructed world of meaning. Aim is central to this discussion of the development of the poet’s voice, which also explores the impact of essays by J.S. Mill, A.H. Hallam, W.J. Fox, and early reviews of Tennyson and Browning’s work, and examines how far their work conforms to or resists the expectations of their reviewers.

In these, as in the later chapters, I concentrate on those aspects of the poetry which pertain to a concern with addressing readers and on the poetry’s awareness of itself as a text which is being read. As well as investigating the cultural pressures under which the poems were written, I seek to explore how the poems display a sense of their own self-consciousness, defined by Michael O’Neill as “not only poetry that reflects on the subject of poetry...[but] poetry that displays awareness of itself as poetry” (O’Neill 1997: xiii).

O'Neill continues: "[t]he relationship between the poem-being-constructed and the self-that-constructs...creates a force-field in and out of which the poets...produce...poetic structures" (O'Neill 1997: xvi). I would add to this relationship the element of the reader that is constructed by the poem's addresses as a dimension fundamental to our understanding of the way Victorian poems operate. Joseph Bristow writes that

Browning's poetry devises structures which anticipate a dialogue with its readership. If these poems are frequently about the creation of poetry, they are, then, also deeply concerned with the way they are being – or should be – read (Bristow 1991: 23).

My thesis delves into these poetic structures and examines the kinds of dialogue which arose between Tennyson and Browning and their readerships.

The next four chapters deal with poetry published primarily in the 1850s. The depressed poetry market of the 1830s had recovered its buoyancy and, politically, England had settled somewhat after the social unrest of the 1830s and 1840s. In the late 1840s "a new economic confidence slowly emerged" (Purchase 2006: xv) and the leisured middle classes who became consumers in the growing literary market were flourishing. Yet simultaneously, the propagation of new scientific thought threatened religious and moral certainties. J.A. Froude wrote of the 1840s as a time when "the intellectual lightships had broken from their moorings...the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry" (Day 2005: 38). In the light of this disquieting intellectual climate, poets were under pressure to offer their readers a grasp on their historical and spiritual present.

A chapter on *In Memoriam* seeks to understand why this poem made Tennyson "*the*

poet of the day, the poet who has struck just the right chord, just hit the bull's eye. He writes, and as it seems, both thinks and feels exactly *with*, and *for*, and *in* his age” (*English Review* Apr 1852: 108). I offer a reading of the poem’s rhetorical techniques against the scores of reviews published in its aftermath. Pronouns, apostrophes, and address are examined alongside reviewers’ comments in an attempt to understand the way the poem works to situate its readers, and creates an impression of harmony between them. Similar attention is paid to pronouns and apostrophe in the chapter on *Maud*, and I investigate how the expectations aroused by *In Memoriam* of a poet in harmony with his audience are upset by the way the protagonist of *Maud* addresses his listeners. This chapter provides a fresh angle on the contrast between the popularity of *In Memoriam* and the hostility aroused by *Maud* by examining apostrophe and pronominal address in both.

Between chapters on *In Memoriam* and *Maud* are two chapters which examine the work of Browning, Arnold, and Clough in the 1850s. Reviewers of Browning’s work were often incensed by its difficulty, and believed that he demanded far too much work of his readers. Through his ideas in the “Essay on Shelley” and the development of characters such as Sordello and Fra Lippo Lippi, a poetic can be traced. The artist, for Browning, should offer a fresh vision of the world, inviting the reader to see through his own eyes better by sharing what the artist sees through his. Villains in Browning’s poetry are identified by their attempts to control others’ vision, by using, or misusing, rhetoric. In the dramatic monologues of the 1850s Browning questions how far an artist should adapt himself to his audience, detach or engage with them, and to what degree an audience can or should change the direction of the artist. The debate which raged in his reviews, where his critics argued over what concessions Browning should make, and how far his readers should attempt to follow him, is mirrored in these poems.

In Chapter Five, I argue that Arnold and Clough are similarly concerned with the relation of the artist to his audience. Arnold and Clough's poetry wrestle with a sense of the inadequacy of the modern artist, and the difficulty of finding a poetic solution to the problems of the age, with which they were deeply concerned. Pronouns and apostrophe in "Empedocles on Etna" and *Amours de Voyage* turn back upon themselves and portray the alienation of Arnold and Clough's poetic speakers. These linguistic impasses act upon the narrative of the poems themselves (ending in suicide and estrangement) and their publishing and reception history (Arnold removed "Empedocles" from publication, and *Amours de Voyage* was published ten years after it was written in America rather than Britain).

I finish with a discussion of *The Ring and the Book*, where I re-examine each of the monologuists in the light of Browning's relationship to his own readership, arguing that *The Ring and the Book* uses tropes from Browning's reviews to re-define readings of his own poetry. Images and phrases from his reviews are woven into the poem, and used to challenge those reviewers who imposed their judgments on his work. In each of these chapters, my close readings of the poetry focus on address and apostrophe, and on allegories of reading, rather than documenting the commitment of the poets to other social and political problems of their time. Where helpful, I make reference to interpretations of these poems by other critics who discuss the engagement of the poetry with contemporary issues.

Much of the interesting tension between these poets and their reviewers emerges from the limitations of those reviewers in regard to the formal experiments and moral purposes of the poets. This thesis, however, seeks not only to demonstrate some of the limitations of contemporary reviewers, but also to show how the pressures of reviewers exercised an

influence on the formal practices of the poets. The thesis aims to open up new ways of understanding the individual poets I discuss. In the case of *In Memoriam*, for example, I argue that reading the pronouns and address in the light of Tennyson's relationship to readers, gives a fresh interpretation of that poem by illuminating its aesthetic practices.

As well as expanding our understanding of each individual poet I discuss, a study of the reviewing culture of the high Victorian period and its impact on individual writers enables a central insight into the rich and complex formal and thematic experiments of Victorian poetry.

## Chapter 1

### The Mind's Ear in Tennyson's Early Poetry

“What produces the impact must have soul in it, and must be accompanied by an act of imagination, for voice is a sound with a meaning, and is not merely the result of any impact of the breath as in coughing”. (Applebaum 1990: 3)

The relation of sound to meaning is a particularly heated one in regard to Tennyson, for whom the sound of meaning was as important as the meaning of sound. Two thousand years after Aristotle, in a culture where poetry had become a written form in the first instance, Tennyson's poetic imagination was still enchanted with the notion of its own voice. The presence of voice as a theme in his poetry, and its often self-conscious portrayal suggests that, despite its written form, he was still haunted by the origin of poetic language in a realm of sound. Donald Hair attributes Tennyson's interest in non-verbal sounds to his fascination with nature: it is

clear that Tennyson apprehended nature aurally, and that he  
heard in a nature a voice. Not articulate speech, at least initially,  
but expressive sounds which seemed like the raw material, or  
the basis, of language. (Hair 1991: 67)

It is true that when Tennyson thematises voice, when the word itself appears in his poetry, it is often connected to a natural object. Yet these voices also refer to an inner, imaginary world, depicting a voice which is heard by the poet but incomprehensible to others. In “The Talking Oak”, the oak tree, “answer'd with a voice” (20) the speaker's

questions,

Though what he whisper'd, under Heaven  
None else could understand (21-22)

In “The Dying Swan”, he writes, “With an inner voice the river ran” (5), suggesting that voice exists in an interior world which the poet hears as a sound that does not bear interpretable meaning. There is a discrepancy between the poet and the reader's experience of sound. Mysterious intimations of this interior world of sound in the poet's mind are described to us in the wordless songs which appear in the poems, but they remain at one remove. What is conveyed as meaningful language to a reader is often a translation from the ineffable music of the poet's imagination.

This division between sound and meaning has shaped scholarly debate about Tennyson's poetry; it takes on a dialectic of private and public, imaginary and civic, individual and communal, melody and thought. The feeling that his private imaginings were cloaked in acceptable forms for the public leads David Riede to conclude that “the two-Tennyson theory has long distinguished between Tennyson's intimate self and his public 'character” (Riede 2005: 41). Seamus Perry explains further that this demarcation of private self and public persona is linked to Tennyson's propensity for verbalism, to the division between melody and thought which has often troubled his readers (Perry 2005: 5).

Whitman's famously double-edged compliment to Tennyson's “finest verbalism” (CH Tennyson: 350) carried with it the suggestion that not much substance lay behind the music of Tennyson's verse. Auden continued in this vein with the remark that Tennyson

“had the finest ear, perhaps, of any English poet; he was also, undoubtedly, the stupidest” (Fuller 2009: 403). Later in the twentieth century, such an attitude made Tennyson an ideologically suspect figure whose aesthetic indulgences mask not just a lack of substance, but an evasion of shady politics. Perry sums up the Marxist belief that, “all this verbalism might have something very definite concealed within it: the art might actually be up to something, something unsavoury” (Perry 2005: 4).

More recently, critics including Perry and Riede have begun to probe these dichotomies. Eric Griffiths attempts to heal the breach when he writes that “Tennyson thought *in* melody” (Griffiths 1989: 107), but the process whereby melody is transformed into thought is a complex one. To understand how Tennyson's poetic voice comes into being *through* imagining itself into thought, it is necessary to examine the way it imposes meaning onto sound. In order to become meaningful, his poetry has to mean something to someone. In this opening discussion, I wish to examine how the dialectic between sound and meaning operates within his early poetry, and how the poetry has to learn to transmute sounds heard by the poet alone into words that can be communicated to others. Indeed, many of the poems in the 1830 and 1832 volumes dramatise precisely the failure of voice to transform its own inner sounds into meaningful words.

In the practice of the early poetry, the poems work towards conceiving an audience on which voice may operate, an audience without which characters remain languishing in an echo chamber of reverberating sounds which cannot carry beyond themselves. The dire fate of characters such as Mariana and the Lady of Shalott suggest that poetic voice has no hope of surviving unless it finds an audience upon which to act. Poetic voice in these early poems comes into being only as it imagines listeners it can speak *to*. The presence of an audience is fundamental to the process of creating poetry, and as we read the early

poems, we are caught up in Tennyson's imagining of auditors. These early poems question how far the presence or absence, or indeed the nature of an audience, shape what his characters actually say.

Voices, powerful but disembodied, resonate through Tennyson's childhood and adolescence. He describes, in early childhood, his "habit of spreading [his] arms to the wind, and crying out, 'I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind'" (Martin 1980: 21). What is curious about this juvenile declamation is the ambivalence concerning the owner of the speaking voice: is it the voice of the wind, or a voice of the boy's imagination? The present tense makes the experience particularly intense, for if it is the boy's own voice, then he is both speaking and hearing himself in the same moment. Of course, in a normal speech act, we hear what we say, but this phrase, "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind", is a peculiarly self-conscious act of projection: he throws forth his voice (which becomes "*a* voice" rather than "my voice") to the wind for the strangeness of hearing it. The act is self-contained in that the voice returns to the ear of the speaker, and suggests a lonely melancholy: the present tense ("I hear" rather than "I heard my own voice") suggests the voice's fragility which exists only in the present moment of speaking. The phrase anticipates the strangeness of Tennyson's relationship with the disembodied and ephemeral voices that permeate his work. These often inarticulate cries convey sounds without meaning, sounds which remain at one remove from the reader.

The emptiness of the voice (nothing is, in fact, said) exemplifies Tennyson's difficulty in finding something to say. Cronin and Coyle write of Tennyson's struggle to formulate a clear set of political ideas:

Tennyson found in his Apostolic friends at Cambridge not only

the appreciative audience that every young poet needs, but a loosely consistent set of values that his poems could articulate. He was in need of the second quite as much as the first. (Coyle & Cronin 2000: 117)

Tennyson was writing in a period where poets were exhorted to take on a moral responsibility towards their readers. Marion Shaw reminds us that two eminent critics read poetry in this light: “both Fox and North assumed that the merit of a poem depended primarily on its philosophical content” (Shaw 1973: 56). The political and theological discussions of the Apostles gave Tennyson a framework for the debates which take place in the poem.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the presence of his Cambridge friends, however, Tennyson’s conception of an audience developed within as well as without the poetry. In order to be able to take up the mantle of a poet of his age, Tennyson’s poetry had to discover ways of speaking effectively to an audience, as well as formulating the philosophical content so desired by his reviewers, Fox and North. His 1830 and 1832 volumes of poetry are full of poems which portray voices coming into being only as they imagine themselves being heard by others. A trope which is common in the early poetry is that of a song within a poem, heard by the speaker, but remaining hidden from the reader. These mysterious songs are present in “The Lady of Shalott” and “Tithon”, poems which explore the notion of song or voice coming into being.

“Tithon”, a poem written in 1833 but unpublished until 1869, exemplifies this exploration of a lyric voice which comes into being only through the awareness of an audience. “Tithon” is a dramatic monologue inspired by the classical myth of the

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of the interaction between the Apostles’ politics and Tennyson’s poetry, see Chapter 5, “Civilising Romanticism” of Richard Cronin (2002) *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840*.

character Tithon, or Tithonus, a mortal who falls in love with the goddess of the dawn, Aurora. The gods grant his wish of immortality, but he crucially forgets to ask for eternal youth, and so is fated to grow ever more aged in body. “Tithon”, along with its companion dramatic monologues, “Ulysses” and “Tiresias”, has often been associated with the figure of the poet; Culler believes “their protagonists are all poet figures – a seer, a quester, a consort of the Dawn” (Culler 1977: 86). The setting of “Tithon” is resonant of the poetic imagination: the heaven that Tithon occupies consists of vast, silent space, resonating with its own emptiness and governed by the relentless cycle of sun and stars. In the midst of this expanse lies Tithon, broken and wearied by immortality, weaving his words into the spacious silence. Tithon inhabits a timeless dream world of the imagination, a world where the poetics of creativity rather than the laws of physics dominate him. His lonely voice the only sign of humanity in the immensity of heaven, the poem dramatises all the confusion of poetic voice forming itself, emerging from the landscape of the imagination into being. In portraying the consciousness of a character unhampered by mortality, Tennyson explores the dimensions of a mythical, imaginative world bounded by limits other than our own.

Tithon is suspended between mortal time and eternity, between natural or mortal time, where plants and animals are born and die, and the everlasting cycles of eternity where sunrise and sunset continue endlessly and space has no bounds. He makes clear the incompatibility of the two when he envisages Aurora continuing in her world, renewing her “beauty with the morn”, and himself returning to “earth in earth” (62,3). Through these circles of time, Tennyson portrays the gulf between a vision of imagination and of the mortal world, their very incompatibility illustrating the difficult quest of the young poet who must bridge this gap. Tithon is poised between infinity and mortality, rather as

the poet-speakers in Tennyson's early poetry are poised between their imaginative worlds and an audience to whom they must sing. Herbert Tucker recognises that Tithon is “seeking directions out of Aurora's dreamily ambient space and cyclical time” (Tucker 1988: 246); that to prevent being swallowed up by the vastness of infinity, he must speak a language which breaks with her immortality.

Tithon's shadowiness and his anxiety about the wasting away of his body suggest a concern with form. There is an urge in the poem to construct a narrative out of the vast emptiness, to speak in order to remain singular and not to disintegrate entirely into the cosmos. His speech is a plea to Aurora to release him from his painful immortality, and it is doubly a plea because only her presence allows him to speak at all. As Tucker points out, “the power of imagining sympathetic fellowship...provides...his initial occasion for voice” (Tucker 1988: 244). Aurora exists as someone to frame his speech around, and much of the language of the poem is directed towards arousing her sympathy and pity: as soon as he sees her “eyes...fill with tears” (18) he pleads, “Let me go” (19), and asks “How can my nature longer mix with thine?” (55). The questions in the poem are largely rhetorical, anticipating no answer yet pleading for some change or resolution. By providing an occasion for his voice, she enables the only possible means of his emancipation.

Tithon has undergone the decay of his physical body and a re-orientation into a realm of unknown infinity. His body has been left “a white-haired shadow” (8) and all that remains of his former self is his voice. Only his voice has the potential to bring about his release, if he is able to persuade Aurora to let him go. As well as his own song, Tithon describes the mythical song of Apollo which brought the towers of Ilion into being. Apollo has the godlike power to transform reality through song; his words are an unknown magic

formula heard by Tithon, but hidden from the reader. Tithon's only hope is to find a way for his voice to emulate Apollo's and to transform his reality.

The unspoken words of Apollo's song are typical of the way in which Tennyson's early poetry imagines songs of great power, but struggles to bring them into being. They remain wordless, and the speakers of the poems remain suspended between their knowledge of these wordless songs and the words that they themselves speak. Cornelia Pearsall writes that Tithon knows that only his words can save him, that their "glorious form will attain for him release or nothing can" (Pearsall 2008: 269). Tennyson chooses to leave the reader in suspense, never knowing whether Tithon's glorious words succeed in transforming his condition. Although we may know the mythical ending to the story, that Tithon's torment is ended when he is turned into a grasshopper, the formula for an Apollian song remains unspoken.

The urge to transform an inner imaginative power into a song which will act upon the world is common to several other poems written in the early 1830s, namely "The Mermaid", "Mariana" and "The Lady of Shalott". In the companion poems, "The Merman" and "The Mermaid", the lyric condition of singing alone is weighed against the power of a voice operating on others. A speaker opens the poems by asking, "[w]ho would be" (1) a merman or mermaid, and then imagines what they would do if they were either. On a first reading of the poems, it may easily escape notice that the poems are not uttered by a fictional merman or mermaid, but by an unidentified speaker imagining himself into their voices. The conditional tense – "I would be a merman" (8) – implies that the speaker imagines but cannot fully bring this voice into being. His evocation of the merman filling "the sea-halls with a voice of power" (10) is at odds with the lack of power in the speaker's own voice, unable to create anything other than a thwarted dramatic monologue

which never quite manages to move beyond the conditional.

The obsession with voice is drawn out further in “The Mermaid”, the speaker of which is more conscious of the way she sounds. She states that,

And I should look like a fountain of gold

Springing alone

With a shrill inner sound, (18-20)

What is striking about the image is the representation of physical appearance by a sound. It appears that the mermaid thinks of herself in two different ways, both as an object (the fountain) that is visible to others (swiftly confirmed by the sea-snake which looks in at her), and as a sound audible only to herself. Although some attempt is made to describe the voice with the adjective “shrill”, the nature of this inner sound remains mysterious to the reader. To make the leap from looking to sounding within one simile at first appears confusing, but it is in fact emblematic of the transformation of inner sound into an image recognisable to others.

Some kind of imaginative transformation must take place within her in order for the content-less inner sound to be conveyed and for her to become apparent to others. She looks like a fountain, and so a sea-snake “look[s] in” (26) at her, and her gradual rise to queen of the ocean follows after the sea-snake's recognition of her beauty. In order to be validated by others, imaginative inner sound must become embodied, must take on a form. Vowel sounds mimic this transformation; beginning with “i” and moving into “o”, lines 18-20 represent the shift from self-perception, “I”, into an apostrophic “O” which evokes another.

The mermaid self-consciously uses her appearance to seduce the king of mermen and win the love of all the creatures in the ocean. Isobel Armstrong is right to point out that the sea world of “The Merman” and “The Mermaid” is used as a fantasy realm from which to probe gender politics: she comments that “the mermaid's negotiations with sexuality are rather different from that of the merman” (Armstrong 1993: 47). Although for both the merman and the mermaid a voice of power is measured by its success in seducing the opposite sex, the mermaid is more artful and more self-conscious about her voice. The merman's voice of power attracts a number of mermaids whom he kisses, masculine prowess conventionally rated by a ratio of one to many.

The mermaid rises to eminence in that she refuses the “bold merry mermen” (42) in order to catch a larger prize, the “king of them all” (45). She is now elevated above all others in the watery kingdom and is free to move at will “away, away”. Her survival is bound to the transformation of her voice from its inner state of sound into an image which attracts others, and draws them to her voice. Like Isobel Armstrong, Linda K. Hughes notices the gendered difference between the powerful merman and the seemingly more passive mermaid: she argues that the mermaid is more “narcissistic” and sings “more to herself than to another” (Hughes 1987: 51). However, while the mermaid may be more narcissistic, it is the case that she is more conscious of her audience than the merman. While she had initially desired to “sing to myself the whole of the day” (10), she later realises that others must hear her song if she is to gain power. At the end of the poem, she knows that, “if I should carol aloud...[a]ll things...[w]ould lean out...[a]ll looking down for the love of me” (52-5). Her inner sound has become a song which has won her the admiration of others, and demonstrates that inner sound takes on significance only when it is recognised by an audience.

“The Mermaid” is not the only poem among the 1830 and 1832 volumes where voice is equated with sexual power, and in “Mariana”, the failure to win back her lover leaves Mariana alone and unhappy. The poem is narrated in the third person, with beautiful and melancholic descriptions of her “lonely moated grange” (8) from the poet-speaker which are amplified by a repeated chorus in her voice,

She only said, “My life is dreary,  
                   He cometh not,” she said  
 She said, “I am aweary, aweary,  
                   I would that I were dead!”           (9-12)

With slight variations, Mariana's words remain the same throughout the poem; she cannot find anything new to add. Crucially, she has nothing to say because there is no-one there to hear it. As Dorothy Mermin points out, there is “no one outside her consuming consciousness” (Mermin 1983: 33). Her speech is mired in the stasis of her abandonment; her ever-repeated refrain demonstrates the need for an auditor in order for speech to progress. There is a slight shift in her words in the final refrain of the poem: “she only said” becomes “[t]hen, said she” (81), “she said” becomes “she wept” (83) and “I would” becomes “Oh God, that I were dead” (84). The word “[t]hen” appears to presage some movement or change and the sudden force of her emotions is portrayed in her weeping and the emphatic address to God. These verbal shifts seem to presage a small hope that Mariana’s situation will reach some form of resolution, but that the poem ends before this resolution can occur makes this hope a fragile and precarious one. The reader is left poised between the endless repetitions of Mariana’s words and an ambivalent suggestion

that some action or change will come to pass.

This balance between stasis and movement has been observed by critics: Seamus Perry has noted that in Tennyson's poetry the impulse to progress is in tension with the impulse to circle endlessly and hopelessly in repetitions, "between the obligation to move forward and the desire to stay still" (Perry 2005: 58). In "Mariana", the impulse to turn back upon the self has won. Mariana's repetitions evade the forward progress of ordinary words which spin onwards through their lines. One would not repeat the same lines so many times if speaking to an interlocutor, and so speech is stymied by the absence of a listener. Like "The Merman" and "The Mermaid", "Mariana" is a thwarted dramatic monologue, imagining its speaker but unable to bring into being a listener, and therefore its protagonist is unable to conceive of anything to say.

The task of finding an audience to whom a poet might speak also directs "The Lady of Shalott". This mysterious and elusive poem has been read many times as an allegory of the poet learning to bring her art to bear upon the world. In summing up the poem's perennial fascination, Kathryn Psomiades writes that "the poem opposes the Lady's private artistic activity to the real world outside her tower and constructs that opposition as a *problem*" (Psomiades 2000: 27). In this reading I wish to scrutinise the ways in which the Lady is seen and heard (or not seen and not heard) by her audience. Similar to "The Mermaid", "The Lady of Shalott" dramatises a woman's voice as it sings to others, and interrogates the conditions under which this voice can take on a meaningful relationship with its audience.

"The Lady of Shalott" was originally published in the 1832 *Poems* and revised for the 1842 *Poems*. The 1842 version of the poem heightens the Lady of Shalott's anonymity, asking, "who hath seen her wave her hand? / Or at the casement seen her stand?" (24-5),

lines which are not present in the 1832 version. In the later version of the poem, the reapers “hear *a* song that echoes cheerly” (30) which they identify as being sung by the “fairy / Lady of Shalott” (35-6), whereas in 1832 the reaper “hears *her* ever chanting cheerly” (30) [my italics]. The 1842 version both emphasises the Lady's invisibility by pointing out that no-one has seen her, and distances her song from herself, suggesting that Tennyson's sense of the strangeness and mystery of poetic voice had grown even stronger within the ten years of the poem's revisions. A song that echoes and appears distant from its originating owner, “a song” rather than “her” song recalls Tennyson's early childhood experience of a voice that speaks in the wind.

Like this early childhood experience of voice, the Lady's voice lacks the substance of actual words. Though the reapers can hear her song, we, the readers, cannot; the poet depicts the Lady singing, but does not describe what she might sing. That her art remains hidden is an essential part of the curse that lies upon her, which will come to pass if she “stay / To look down to Camelot” (41). Images of the world come to her reflected in the mirror which hangs upon her chamber wall. Forbidden from looking directly at the world, it is equally significant that the world cannot look at the Lady of Shalott: she can watch them but must remain herself unwatched.

The mirror is the equivalent of the walls of Mariana's grange: where the walls send Mariana's voice echoing back upon itself, the mirror prevents any image of the Lady of Shalott being carried forth into the world. She weaves images from the world into a coloured web which only she can see and so she becomes the sole consumer of her art, as Mariana is the sole auditor of her words. Whereas the mermaid is liberated when the sea-snake looks in at her, the Lady of Shalott is trapped because no-one is able to see her. Yet in this instance, when the Lady attempts to overcome the curse, disastrous consequences

ensue.

She leaves her chamber and climbs into a boat which takes her down the river to Camelot. Like the mermaid who “carol[s] aloud” (52), the Lady of Shalott ends the poem with a “carol” (145), but unlike the mermaid, she has failed to transform her voice into a voice of power which brings recognition from others. In the very act of singing, “her blood was frozen slowly” (147), and before she reaches the first house of Camelot, she dies. As she arrives into Camelot, the citizens can see her body and read her name, but cannot hear her voice. Jane Wright points out that while the Lady dies, the tapestry which flies out the window survives; it becomes “the real and independent” work of art (Wright 2003: 289) which now exists separately from its creator. What is significant, then, is Tennyson’s concern with the separation of the artist and the work of art, and the contrasting ways in which each is received by the world.

Erik Gray notes the possible parallels between the audience within the poem and Tennyson's consciousness of his real audience: “the response of a possibly misunderstanding public is figured in “The Lady of Shalott” both in the reapers and in the knights of Camelot at the end” (Gray 2000: 47). Yet it is not simply the misunderstanding of the public which brings about the curse, but the Lady's deficiency in being unable to transform herself or her voice. She has failed to bridge the gap between her imaginative world of shadows and the social reality she craves. When she reaches Camelot, a corpse in her boat, she is a “gleaming shape” (156) which floats by. Glimmers and gleams run through the 1830 and 1832 poems, imaginative visions which remain tantalisingly out of reach, never fully to be realised, resonant of Shelley’s “Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost” (“The Triumph of Life”: 431). The Lady's “gleaming shape” suggests that she will remain lost in a mystical, interior world, the words of her song never straying beyond the

realm of potential, or making their way into concrete speech. Although Jane Wright argues that the tapestry she has created has survived, we, the readers, crucially never see the picture she has woven. The transformation from imaginative sounds to meaningful words has not been fulfilled.

There are other significant discrepancies in the different ways in which the internal audience and external audience perceive “The Lady of Shalott”. In the 1832 version of the poem, the knights find a parchment at her breast, in which they read a note written by the Lady herself:

The web was woven curiously  
The charm is broken utterly,  
Draw near and fear not – this is I,

The Lady of Shalott                    (168-71)

In the 1842 version, this note from the Lady has disappeared and instead the people of Camelot read her name upon the prow, and Lancelot articulates it in the final lines of the poem. This revision weakens the agency of the Lady, whose name is voiced by others rather than by herself, and this version of the poem portrays an image of the artist as one who has no power and no voice of their own. That Lancelot rather than the Lady voices her own name suggests the poet’s anxiety about the fate of poetic voice once it emerges into the world. The appropriation by Lancelot and the inhabitants of Camelot of her identity and voice in the form of her name heralds both the death and the loss of any power belonging to the artist. This ending of the poem depicts the poet’s fear about the appropriation of both the artwork and the artist by a strange and unknown public.

The dramas which play out in these poems, where women triumph or fail in love, allow Tennyson to interrogate the nature and identity of poetic voice. Each of the women in these poems has an impulse to sing or speak, and must try to transform their voice from an interior conception into words which will bring to bear on others. That the artist in these poems is cast as a female is symptomatic of a general trend in the 1830s, where “[t]he emphasis...on sensibility as the most important element of the poetical character led to an identification of poetry as feminine” (Christ 2002: 10), and by extension, to the figure of the poet as a female. The figure of the poet as an abandoned woman resonates with the anxieties felt by poets and critics in the 1830s that the mass audience made up of the middle classes were turning away from poetry. The market for poetry was certainly not at its strongest in this decade and the weak commercial prospect can be seen in the attitude of Tennyson's publisher, John Murray, who was loathe to take on too many new poets when the financial prospects were not strong. Coupled with the gloomy commercial outlook was a belief that many readers were incapable of appreciating the literary merits of poetry and would abandon it in favour of sensationalist novels. The dubious seduction routine of the mermaid plays into a concern about what the poet must do to attract an audience, and the isolation or death of those women who fail to win their lovers in part presents the bleak fate of the unloved or unheralded poet.

Certainly, Tennyson had a baptism by fire at the hands of the reviewers of his 1830 and 1832 volumes. It was exactly his exploration of the process of poetic voice coming into being, and his sense of a division between sound and meaning, that brought to the fore the vitriol of Christopher North and J.W. Croker, his most notorious reviewers. Tennyson sought to understand the transformation of imaginative vision into meaningful words, but, in North's eyes, it was “easy to extract from [the volume] much...unmeaningness” (CH

Tennyson: 59). North seeks to make certain that on occasions when he does praise Tennyson for his skill with sound, it is at points where the music does not overwhelm the reader.

There is fine music there; the versification would be felt  
delightful to all poetical ears, even if they missed the many  
meanings of the well-chosen and happily-obedient words; for  
there is the sound as of a various-voiced river rejoicing in a  
sudden summer shower...But the sound is echo to the sense.

(CH Tennyson: 59)

North notices in Tennyson's 1830 volume an excess of music and sound which obscures the possibility of meaning. His comparison of Tennyson's poetry to a "various-voiced river" is more perspicacious than he perhaps meant to be, inviting us to remember the many wordless voices which strew the poems. North allows himself to be briefly carried along by his own and Tennyson's lyricism, but brings himself up short when he remembers that he seeks sense as well as sound, and that all this music must eventually *mean* something. Even if readers missed the meaning of the poems, they would still be delighted by the music, but what defines North's compliment is that "the sound is echo to the sense": that all is right with the poetry when sound is secondary to sense, a sentiment reconfirmed when he writes that "sometimes we fear there is no meaning in his mysticism" (CH Tennyson: 59). While acknowledging the charm that Tennyson's music could hold, North keeps his own enchantment in check by reminding himself that the poetry must mean more than it merely sounds.

North's ambivalence also characterises the reviews of W.J. Fox and J.S. Mill, writers who were opposed to North in their support of the young Tennyson. Although Fox, Mill, and North may have felt their reviews of Tennyson had little in common (North called Fox "the quack in the *Westminster*", Mill retaliated by accusing North of "cutting capers and exhibiting himself in postures", CH Tennyson: 53, 85), their readings all share an impression of a division between sound and sense. All three exhibit an unacknowledged contradiction at the heart of their readings of Tennyson, and ambivalence about the power of his music to operate upon them. In the case of Mill and Fox, their praise for the beauty of the language is counteracted by their belief that poetry ought to impact meaningfully and politically on the real world.

Mill defines great poets as having both "fine senses" and a "philosophy", the latter necessary to prevent poetry from becoming "not understood by any other persons" (CH Tennyson: 91, 92). He distinguishes between the poet's unique capacity to have a strong sensory experience and the ability to turn this experience into a philosophy which will achieve the aim of great poetry, to "raise [men] towards the perfection of their nature" (CH Tennyson: 92). His distinction broadly fits with Tennyson's own troubled picture of an imagination resonating with its own sounds, attempting to translate this experience for an audience; what Mill describes as "struggling upwards to shape this sensuous imagery to a spiritual meaning" (CH Tennyson: 93). When Mill writes that the faults of the volume lie in the poems which "are altogether without meaning" (CH Tennyson: 94) he coincides with North in the belief that sound must be secondary to sense.

However, Mill is not quite so clear as to how readers should relate to this division. He writes that we must be "willing to feel [the poetry] first and examine it afterwards", and of "The Lady of Shalott", that "this is a tale of enchantment; and...they will never enter

into the spirit of it unless they surrender their imagination to the guidance of the poet” (CH Tennyson: 88). He praises Tennyson for creating a convincing imaginative world which draws the reader in and heightens their credulity. But towards the end of the review, he exhorts Tennyson to “guard himself against an error...that of embracing as truth...those [conclusions] which have the most poetical appearance...those which are most captivating to an imagination” (CH Tennyson: 96). Mill encourages his readers to surrender their imaginations to the enchanting powers of the poet, but also asks Tennyson to rein in his ability to captivate the reader with poetical appearances.

A similar contradiction can be found in Fox's 1831 review of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. Fox initially praises Tennyson for his powers of dramatic invention – he “has the secret of the transmigration of the soul” – but later warns that there is “a dangerous quality in that facility of impersonation...It must not degrade him into a poetic harlequin” (CH Tennyson: 27, 32). Tennyson's imaginative prowess must not distract him from the important task of commanding influence over the nation, for “[a] genuine poet has deep responsibilities to his country and the world...they can act with a force...upon national feelings and character” (CH Tennyson: 33).

Both Mill and Fox demand that Tennyson subordinate sound to sense, and the enchantment of his music to the morally improving meaning, while wishing to enjoy to the full the beauty of his music. They were caught between their wish to be enchanted, and their hesitation at endorsing what they felt to be an asocial music which was not fulfilling its role in improving the nation. Their ambivalence echoes Tennyson's own disquiet about the balance of music and meaning in his poetry and the reviews of his work did little to assuage this worry. Tennyson gained a reputation for bending to his reviewers when he heavily edited the 1842 version of *Poems* in favour of their comments, the

textual evidence for which is documented most comprehensively by E.F. Shannon. E.F. Shannon points out that the modifications made to the 1842 edition of *Poems* coincide with criticisms made by reviewers: “Tennyson's willingness to mold his thoughts in regular and familiar patterns corresponds significantly with the reviewers strictures” (Shannon 1952: 45).

What Shannon's book leaves out, however, is the way that Tennyson responded antagonistically as well as conforming stylistically to his critics. In the ill-advised squib “To Christopher North”, or the short poem “Poets and Critics”, Tennyson's antagonism to his reviewers rises to the surface with such epithets as “Crusty Christopher”, “Fusty Christopher” (“To Christopher North” 2, 9). With hindsight, Tennyson later regretted publishing “To Christopher North”, especially when it accrued more mockery. “Poets and Critics” is hardly more sophisticated, accusing critics of mindlessly following fashion, but it did remain unpublished until 1892. Though slight pieces, the poems demonstrate the attention Tennyson paid to critics, and the frustration they caused him. In other poems, Tennyson's response was more complicated. “The Lotos-Eaters” presents a more sophisticated response to his critics than these short diatribes. A reading of “The Lotos-Eaters” and its revisions for the 1842 volume reveals that Tennyson was as much interested in the way his work was being read as he was by its imaginative origins, and the poem dramatises modes of listening which subtly critique the readings of Fox, Mill, and North.

“The Lotos-Eaters” has been read as a poem which dramatises the tension between what Matthew Campbell calls a Victorian “ideology of resilience and activity” (Campbell 1999: 3) and an attraction to pure aestheticism. Derek Colville highlights how the poem dramatises this tension through its paradoxes: “[v]erse which counsels soporific escape is

in many places remarkably animated” (Colville 1970: 173). As well as its involvement in this debate, “The Lotos-Eaters” investigates the status of poetry and its auditors. The first speaker demonstrates that the central enchanting power of the lotos is one which operates upon the ear rather than the eye. While the mariners *see* the landscape they remain free, but when they first taste the lotos-flower, it is their faculties of hearing which are most changed. The “gushing of the wave” (31) recedes, and “if his fellow spake, / His voice was thin, as voices from the grave” (33-4). As the voices of his companions fade, each mariner experiences an intensification of internal music, where “music in his ears his beating heart did make” (36); the collective pronoun, “they”, is replaced by the singular, “he”, demonstrating that the mariners become cut off from each other, slipping into an isolated aesthetic state. “Deep-asleep he seemed, yet all awake” (35), each mariner appears no longer responsive to the outside world, but their inner state is one of heightened consciousness.

The narrator's description of the mariners' experience and his emphasis on its internal, solipsistic quality is important because it presents a different view than the song of the mariners themselves. In the second part of the poem, the Choric Song sung by the mariners contradicts the narrator's perspective. While the narrator describes how the mariners hear an internal music which is made by the beating of their own heart, the mariners themselves believe that the music they hear comes from the island: the first words of their song are, “There is sweet music here that softer falls / Than petals” (46-7). Rather than a music originating within them, the music of the isle “falls” and “lies” (46, 50) upon them. This discrepancy allows Tennyson to question the nature of enchantment and its origin: as listeners, are the mariners complicit in their own enchantment? Does the music of the island operate on them as an entirely external force, meaning that they are

powerless to stop their transport, or does the music awaken a deeper music within themselves, in which case they are answerable for their abandonment of their responsibilities?

The latter half of the choric song provides some elucidation; the passage 155-70 was added to the 1842 edition and provides a deep and subtle critique of the mariners as *listeners*. The mariners compare themselves to the gods who live “careless of mankind” (156), enjoying their heavenly existence despite the devastation which is occurring on the earth. In this passage (155-70) the idea of a song without meaning takes on sinister implications. When the mariners imagine the gods listening to humanity, they describe how the gods

find a music centred in a doleful song

Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong

Like a tale of little meaning though the words are strong; (162-4)

The gods ignore the suffering which forms the content of the humans' song, and choose instead to smile at the music. The verb “find” in line 162 places the agency firmly with the listening gods rather than the human singers, and implies that music and meaning are decided by the listeners rather than the singers. These gods are “careless of mankind” (155) because they ignore the political elements of a song which complains of “an ill-used race of men” (165). While the phrase “a tale of little meaning” implies that the song lacks meaning it is, in fact, only the auditors of the song who find little meaning in it. “Though the words are strong” strikes a note of accusation at the gods whom the mariners wish to emulate, as though they have deliberately decided to hear only the music and ignore the

strength of the words. By positing an audience who hear the music of a song but wilfully overlook the meaning, Tennyson places responsibility for finding meaning with the listeners and not with the singers.

Mill and Fox criticise Tennyson's writing when they feel it operates too much like an enchantment, seducing with sound but forgetting to be socially responsible. By imagining an audience who hear the music of a song but ignore the meaning, Tennyson interrogates the terms set up by critics like Fox and Mill, torn between their wish to be enchanted and their insistence that Tennyson provide a socially uplifting meaning. "The Lotos-Eaters" suggests that the enchantment in fact originates with the listeners of the song and not the singers and, by extension, the readers and not the poet. It is the mariners as listeners who ignore the "anguish" (169) of the humans and the dramatisation allows the poetry to suggest that if his readers find a lack of politically charged meaning then perhaps it is their listening rather than his writing that is at fault. "The Lotos-Eaters" demands of its readers that they interrogate the terms on which they read. As such, it demonstrates how the poet's task of addressing an audience included efforts to construct an ideal audience as well as seeking to address actual readers. By critiquing the listening abilities of the mariners, Tennyson invites the reader to imagine other ways of reading. These negotiations between his real readers and the auditors that the poetry creates were only the beginning of a long conversation in which his poetry is both shaped by, and tries to shape, his readers.

Not all of Tennyson's early readers were so suspicious of his musical prowess. Arthur Hallam was most sensitive to Tennyson's struggle to bring an imaginative world into being, and to recreate it for his readers. Hallam had a subtler perception of the relation between sound and sense, as when he describes how Petrarch and Dante

produce two-thirds of their effect by sound. Not that they  
 sacrifice sense to sound, but that sound conveys their meaning,  
 where words would not. (Tennyson CH: 45)

Unlike Fox and North, Hallam does not fear that Tennyson's sounds will get in the way of meaning, but recognises instead that the sound is part of the meaning. His theory of a poetry of sensation allows Tennyson's poetry to breathe more freely, under less pressure to *mean* something. When he remarks that poets such as Tennyson are more sensitive than others, that their “senses told them a richer and ampler tale than most men could understand” (CH Tennyson: 38) he provides a way of understanding the mysterious, hidden songs which permeate the early poems. To think of an integration of sound and sense within the poetry sheds light on the way in which the poems are consistently attentive to the processes of sound *coming into* sense. Hallam’s account of Tennyson’s poetry is concurrent with the argument that his poetic voice comes into being as it tries to make sense to an imagined auditor. In these early poems, Tennyson’s sense of an audience to whom his poetry addresses itself is developed through his characters: their negotiations with auditors mirror the discord between Tennyson and his own audience. The dramas within the poems play out some of the conflicts between his poetry and his reviewers, but equally show Tennyson’s resistance to conforming entirely to their strictures.

Hallam's account of poetry does not provide a comprehensive model for all poets of the 1830s. In the same decade, the young Browning was engaged with discovery of a poet's aim, and his poetry was equally, though differently, concerned with bringing an audience into being. Browning launched himself more confidently into experiments with auditors,

playing an imagined audience off against his real readers. The following chapter will, in part, be concerned to show ways in which his methods and experiments were at odds with Hallam's ideas, and how his path deviated from Tennyson's.

## Chapter 2

### Writing the Reader in *Pauline* and *Sordello*.

*Sordello* is “the most illegible production of any time or country. Every kind of obscurity is to be found in it...to be compelled to look at a drama through a pair of horn spectacles would be a cheerful pastime compared with the *ennui* of tracing the course of *Sordello* through that veil of obscurity which Mr. Browning's style of composition places between us and his conception.” (CH Browning: 240)

The publication of several important essays on poetic theory in the 1830s by J.S. Mill, Robert Carlyle, W.J. Fox and Arthur Hallam, amongst others, demonstrate that this was a decade reorienting itself poetically as well as politically, and Browning's poetry enters wholeheartedly into these debates. While the essays discuss the social and political responsibilities of the poet, Browning's early works, such as *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, experiment with the kinds of writing they were advocating, and are unafraid to delve into the contradictions thrown up. These early poems dramatise the tensions inherent in the demands for a poetry which was both socially responsible and imaginatively authentic. Most reviewers were perplexed by Browning's early poems because they failed to understand the way in which the poems questioned the processes that underpinned the modes of writing championed by Fox and Mill. His works were a little like the back of a tapestry, where all the rag-ends and knots in the poet's mind were on view, and his readers found the outlines of the picture difficult to comprehend.

If the 1830s was a decade reorienting itself poetically, Browning's contribution was to open up the mechanics of the poet's mind within poetry itself, to make, as it were, the

interior, exterior. His attempt to demystify the inner workings of the poetic imagination was at odds with some contemporary views of what poetry could and should be. The exposure of the processes of the poet's mind confronts Hallam's claim that "poetry is a sort of magic, producing a number of impressions, too multiplied, too minute, and too diversified to allow of our tracing them to their causes" (Tennyson CH: 38). In his first three major poetic works, *Pauline* (1833), *Paracelsus* (1835), and *Sordello* (1840), Browning is ceaselessly doing exactly what Hallam believes is impossible: tracing the impressions created on the reader back to their original source in the imagination. In *Sordello*, for example, where the hero of the poem is a poet, and the "stress lay on the development of a soul" (Preface to *Sordello*, Jack 1984: 194), Browning continues to scrutinise the evolution of the poet's mind as it develops through a series of encounters with various audiences.

Despite Browning's best efforts to attend to all the nuances of the poet's relationship with an audience, he initially failed to convince any significant number of readers. The publication of *Pauline* in 1832 barely caused a ripple on the literary scene, apparently selling no copies and hardly noticed by reviewers. Though *Paracelsus* (1835) placed Browning before the public eye as a promising young poet, his plays failed to hold the attention of the London audiences for long, and the publication of *Sordello* in 1840, "notorious as the least comprehensible poem written in the English language...[and] the jest of literary circles" in its own day, was largely a critical disaster (DeVane 1935: 85). *Sordello* became a byword for obscurity and incomprehensibility, and it seems as though no self-respecting Victorian man of letters was without a witty comment to make at its expense. "Walking on a new-ploughed field of damp clayey soil, would be skating compared to it" (CH Browning: 122), writes G.H. Lewes, not to be left behind in this

battle of wits. Browning was extremely disappointed with its reception, for he had hoped that it would solidify the blossoming reputation of the poet of *Paracelsus*.

Browning's obscurity came to dominate critical opinion for a significant portion of his career and any account of his poetry cannot avoid the question of his difficulty, a stumbling block to success for decades, although integral to later interest from modernist poets such as Ezra Pound. Reviewers competed to form the wittiest expressions of their bewilderment over works such as *Sordello*, and Browning became the butt of many literary jokes. He was not, however, without his champions. W.J. Fox became a friend and mentor, and defended Browning in his journal, *The Westminster Review*, arguing that his poetry was worth perseverance.

Theories of Browning's difficulty hinge on his attitude to readers. The debate between his supporters and his detractors raged most fiercely over the question of how much work readers could reasonably be expected to undertake. Did the responsibility for comprehension lie with the poet, or with the reader? Was Browning's obscurity a deliberate technique designed to challenge the reader, morally and intellectually, or did he simply write bad poetry, which did not successfully communicate his ideas? W. David Shaw writes, for example, that "Browning's failure [in the early poems] is partly rhetorical – an inability to persuade his readers – and partly an incapacity to view himself critically" (Shaw 1968: 1). In 1911 Thomas Lounsbury is more accusing when he writes that Browning has the "kind of obscurity arising from the inability or neglect of the author to render himself intelligible...he fails to fulfill the first duty of a writer, which is to take mentally the place of the reader whom he addresses" (Lounsbury 1911: 173).

Browning's expectations of his readers' intelligence and industry do seem, at times, to have been unrealistic; his belief that *Sordello* would be "a more popular and perhaps less

difficult form” (DeVane 1935: 77) was misguided, to say the least. But in recent years, critics have been more inclined to reconcile his obscurity by aligning it with a deliberate poetic enterprise. For Herbert F. Tucker, this project is “the consistent purpose of avoiding any structural or semantic enclosure that would dim the sense of the future with which he identifies his poetic mission” (Tucker 1980: 10). Donald Hair believes that Browning's masterplot “is the breaking up of things so that they can be put together again, a myth of creation and recreation as a dynamic and ongoing process” (Hair 1999: 80). Yet for both Tucker and Hair, the reader with whom they perceive Browning to be engaged remains an imaginative construct. It is true that, in *Pauline* and *Sordello*, Browning seeks to understand the nature of the poet through the speakers' developing relationship with an audience. But in order to comprehend the nature of Browning's poetic experimentation, it is necessary to grasp his relationship with his actual, living audience, with those who were reading and writing about his work.

*Pauline* is highly self-reflexive, and dramatises the process of a poet developing a voice through the introspective exploration of self and the effects of voice on different kinds of audiences; it questions the aim of poetry, dramatising various relationships between poets and their auditors. The poem has suffered in its critical fortunes when it is read as a treatise, with an expectation that it will present a set of fully developed ideas that should logically cohere. Typically, Thomas J. Collins writes,

in 1833 Browning's thoughts concerning poetry and religion were confused and even somewhat naive. And it is this intellectual confusion, even more than the structural disorder of the poem, which makes *Pauline* such an incomprehensible puzzle. (Collins 1965: 160)

Instead of writing a treatise, in *Pauline* Browning portrays the chaos of the processes which bring poetic voice into being, experimenting with the ideas in contemporary poetic theory and exploring their contradictions. The poem explores the origin of poetic voice, and its birth into the world, attempting to understand the nature of its own existence as poetry.

The word “aim” is central to *Pauline's* exploration of the nature of poetry, and recurs in various forms throughout the poem. Indeed, the purpose of the poem is arguably the search for the elusive aim of poetry, both in the sense of the audience at whom one is aiming, and the effect one could have on that audience. De Vane summarises Browning’s early mission as the wish “to explore for his own sake the problem of the individual poet and the society he lives in, his function and responsibility, and his most effective mode of communication, if his voice is to be heard” (De Vane 1935: 74). Browning’s attempt to explore the problem of how an individual poet addresses his society is worked out partly in response to the questions being raised by the philosophers and poets of the 1830s. In his 1830 essay, “What is Poetry?”, J.S. Mill writes that “the object of poetry is confessedly to act upon the emotions”, and that in poetry, “the source of the emotion excited is the exhibition of a state or states of human sensibility” (Mill 1973: 76, 77). The quest central to *Pauline* is to discover how the poet can begin to communicate his own sensibilities, and how he will be able to “act upon the emotions” of the reader; he must find what he calls in *Pauline* an “aim” (33) or a purpose for his “wild dreams of beauty and of good” (30). Browning's dramatisation of the internal processes of the poetic mind failed to be realised as such by Mill, who criticised the poem in a private letter to Browning for failing to move beyond an “intense and morbid self-consciousness” (Jack

1983: 11). He misses the purpose of the poem, which is precisely an attempt to define the conditions of possibility for such a move beyond self-consciousness. Matthew Campbell points out that both Browning and Hallam in the 1830s are “working their way out towards a position where they might be able to reconcile ‘am’ and ‘aim’” (Campbell 1999: 88). The process of exploring the nature of a poetic self and how or what that self might ‘aim’ towards an audience lies at the heart of *Pauline*.

The search for an auditor is fundamental to these processes, and the character of Pauline, to whom the poem is addressed, is the first to be employed in the experiment. The poem opens with an invocation to Pauline to enclose the speaker,

So that I might unlock the sleepless brood  
Of fancies from my soul, their lurking-place,  
Nor doubt that each would pass, ne'er to return  
To one so watched. (6-9)

The image touches on Romantic ideas of imagination beyond conscious control, and of the self as the origin and centre of creativity, establishing the speaker as a poet in the tradition of Shelley and Keats. But the speaker also insists on the need to be rid of these “fancies”, and he makes clear his dependence on the presence of another to “unlock” them. Left alone, the poet would be imprisoned in himself, his soul become a gloomy “lurking-place”, and only if Pauline watches him can he “hope to sing” (17). Her presence opens up the poet's soul, and illustrates how integral the presence of an auditor is for poetic activity to take place. Lee Erickson argues that the speaker of *Pauline* “wants his audiences to act as a kind of metaphysical enclosure protecting him from himself”

(Erickson 1984: 27). Yet, in fact, this opening passage suggests that he wants an audience in order to allow him to release his soul's images, rather than to enclose him even further.

The speaker acknowledges his need for Pauline, when he realises that if he had met her earlier,

no wandering aim [would have been]

Sent back to bind on fancy's wings, and seek

Some strange fair world where it might be a law (33-35)

Without Pauline his thoughts would be locked into an introspective cycle, not dissimilar from Hallam's "return of the mind upon itself" (CH Tennyson: 41). Rather than reaching the real world, where they could shape or change reality, the poet's aims are sent circling back on themselves, into the "strange fair world" of the imagination. To create "law" only in the imaginative world is insufficient for a poet who seeks to mould his relation to his society.

The notion of poetic law also appears in Hallam's 1831 review-essay, "On Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry", which *Pauline* appears at points to be critiquing. When writing of the imaginative life of the poet, Hallam describes the state "where all the other sacred ideas of our nature...are habitually contemplated through the medium of this predominant mood [of beauty]...they assume its colour, and are subject to its peculiar laws" (CH Tennyson: 37). The poet of *Pauline* seeks to understand this mood, but also recognises the danger of solipsism inherent in a law "peculiar" to the poet himself. If the poet indulges too heavily in his own moods of beauty, he can become mired in introspection. In a phrase that echoes Hallam's formulation of the "return of the mind

upon itself” (CH Tennyson: 41), the speaker writes that when he first “learned to turn / My mind against itself” he fell into “cunning, envy, falsehood” (347-8, 351).

The turning of the mind upon itself is portrayed in *Pauline* as involving a potentially dangerous state of solipsism, dangerous because the speaker believes it to be a state which will weaken his creativity. He describes the illusions of this kind of solipsism in the following lines, where he writes of his false belief

That tho' my soul had floated from its sphere  
Of wide dominion into the dim orb  
Of self – that it was strong and free as ever:-  
It has conformed itself to that dim orb,  
Reflecting all its shades and shapes, and now  
Must stay where it alone can be adored. (90-95)

The dimness of the orb (a thing which normally sheds light) suggests the unnatural or perverse realm of the self to which the poet has bound himself. The repetition of “dim orb” reflects the stasis of this solipsism, where, unlike the “fancies” (7) passing out of his soul earlier in the poem, his soul is trapped in itself. “Conformed” implies a limiting, unimaginative force which counteracts the potential strength and freedom of the soul, and which lacks creativity, “[r]eflecting”, rather than creating something new.

The speaker has also felt this stasis “in dreams in which / I seemed the fate from which I fled” (96-97). Browning dramatises the return of his poet-narrator's mind upon itself, but equally tries to imagine a way out of these encirclements of the mind. In the first part of the poem, this attempt at escape is bound to his relationship with Pauline. He writes of



because it was a self-enclosed state which circled back “to me”. This introspective cycle is broken by the presence of someone who gives hope by providing the poet someone to aim *towards*. His words take shape and meaning only when an auditor prevents them from dissolving into the vast formlessness of his own imagination.

*Pauline* does not experiment only with a single auditor, but extends its explorations to the relationship between a poet and a wider audience. To speak only to Pauline entails the risk of creating simply a wider circle which could also enclose the speaker, “a screen/ To shut me in with thee” (4-5). If the poet is to find his true aim he must break out into a larger sphere. He remembers his poetic career earlier in life, when he

ne'er sung

But as one entering bright halls, where all

Will rise and shout for him. (77-79)

Critics such as Isobel Armstrong have attempted to tie Browning's ideas in *Pauline* to a specific political system, in Armstrong's case arguing that “Browning was struggling both to criticise and develop *Repository* politics” (Armstrong 1993: 114). Though there is certainly a link between Browning and *Repository*, the journal edited by W.J. Fox, *Pauline* is more engaged in developing the kind of voice which could have a political influence, than it is in pursuing a particular set of political beliefs. The image of the bard or minstrel performing for an unnamed group suggests that his conception of a larger audience remains vague, and that before poetry can become tied to a particular political reality, the poet must first find a voice which can speak to any audience at all.

Finding this voice is closely connected to working out his aim, as when the speaker

wishes he could sit “with them, trusting in truth and love,/ And with an aim – not being what I am” (87-88). To realise this aim, it is necessary that he escape the conditions of solipsism, and in seeking to do so, he invokes the spirit of Shelley, referred to not by name, but as the “Sun-treader” (151). The explicit presence of Shelley in the poem, both as a character and a poetic influence, has motivated several critics to castigate the poem as the work of a naive, undeveloped young poet, as yet unable to break free of the influence of his predecessors. Kennedy and Hair write that “[d]espite the presence of many linguistically brilliant passages, the poem is a prime example of Shelley's bad influence on the young Robert Browning” (Kennedy and Hair 2007: 41). They fail to see that Shelley is used as a potential model for varying modes of relating to an audience. Such a model was necessary for a poet who had as yet no actual relation with his readers.

The first long passage on Shelley depicts a relationship between the speaker and Shelley, and another between Shelley and the world. He first believed that Shelley was “a spell to me alone,/ Scarce deeming thou wert as a star to men” (170-171). The star alludes to Shelley’s final description of the soul of Adonais, which “like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are” (Shelley 2009: “Adonais”, 494-5). Browning’s distinction between a star and a spell is an important one, for a star gives light indiscriminately to anyone who falls under it, but a spell can only be uniquely cast. The contrast occurs again when, to the poet, Shelley is like a “sacred spring” (172), but for the rest of men, like a “great river – washing towns/ And towers” (180-1). Both sets of images are positive, but they portray two distinctive kinds of relationship between poets and their auditors: one which is secret, esoteric and unto itself, and another which is open to all and enters the life of the world. The speaker is a reader of Shelley, and he believes this relationship to be private, but Shelley is also read by a multiple audience. This distinction aids the speaker

in understanding different models of reading, and the differences in being read by one single reader, or by multiple readers.

Shelley is described as

Being the pulse of some great country – so

Wert thou to me, and art thou to the world.

And I, perchance, half feel a strange regret

That I am not what I have been to thee: (189-192)

The change from the intimate relation between Shelley and the speaker, whom he also compares to “a girl one has silently loved long” (193), to one with the wider world, allows Browning to ask for whom a poet is writing, and how the answer to that question changes the nature of the poetry he writes. A single, poetically sensitive reader envisages a poet differently than a collective audience of multiple readers would, and so a poet must envisage himself differently according to which audience he believes he has. The speaker’s regret at losing this private, intimate relation with Shelley in recognition of Shelley’s wider appeal feeds into the changing literary culture, where writing for an anonymous mass audience was a matter of growing importance.

To be “the pulse of some great country” echoes the idea voiced by Fox, that the “poet has deep responsibilities to his country and the world” (CH Tennyson: 32). The depiction of the speaker’s regret enables Browning to dramatise the emotional intimacy desired by both poet and reader, and the loss of this intimacy when the poet reaches out to the wider world. Whilst the speaker imagines a voice which could be “the pulse of some great country”, he continually circles back on the self, as if seeking a return to his own enclosed

intimacy with Shelley. His oscillations between his own inner, imaginative life, and his hoped-for career as a bardic poet create a sense of uncertainty as to how this voice could actually be realised.

After the passage on Shelley, the speaker returns to a description of his inner life:

I am made up of an intensest life,  
 Of a most clear idea of consciousness  
 Of self...  
 But linked in me, to self-supremacy,  
 Existing as a centre to all things  
 Most potent to create, and rule, and call  
 Upon all things to minister to it...  
 Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all –  
 This is myself; and I should thus have been,  
 Though gifted lower than the meanest soul. (268-270, 273-6, 278-280)

This state of being, where the poet views himself as the centre of all his experience, bears out Mill's accusations of egotism. In contrast to his desire to aim outwards and beyond himself evident elsewhere in the poem, here he wishes to “call” all possible experience unto himself, with a greedy wish to “have, see, know, taste, feel, all”. By asserting that his self would “thus have been” regardless of his poetic gifts, he implies that the poet's inner life exists independently of the language to express it. This vision is similar to Tennyson's portrayal of the poet's imaginative experience as one which cannot be directly expressed in language, as I discuss in the previous chapter. Browning's speaker continues to explore

the process of communicating this inner, imaginative life to others in the lines,

For music...

is as a voice,

A low voice calling Fancy, as a friend...

And she fills all the way with dancing shapes (365, 367-368, 370)

The vision of voice as a medium which translates the inner world of the poet's soul into music that others can hear is reminiscent of Tennyson's explorations of voice in his early poems, where voice is a connecting force between his imagination and his auditors. In this passage, voice is the transformative power which creates the "dancing shapes" that will travel beyond the centre of the poet's self, visible to others in a way that his own sense of "consciousness/ Of self" (269-70) is not.

After this point in the poem, the speaker pursues his course by seeking to imagine what kind of voice he could possibly take up, how it would speak, and the effect it could have on the world. Several lines later he writes

I had

No wish to paint, no yearning – but I sang.

And first I sang, as I in dream have seen

Music wait on a lyrist for some thought

Yet singing to herself until it came. (375-379)

The distinction between music and thought, or meaning, is again reminiscent of early

Tennyson, where the poet experiences his own inner music, which is only transformed into meaning once an auditor is imagined into being. In the 1888 version, “no wish” is replaced with a definite “impulse” to sing, which heightens the sense of an emotion welling up from within, in contrast to his “yearning”, an emotion which pulls us out of ourselves, towards someone or something else; the distinction is important, illustrating that the poet must conceive of a direction for his poetry rather than simply singing without purpose. Without a sense of where his song will go, there can as yet be no “thought”, or meaning, and the poet waits within a world of pure lyricism, “singing to herself”.

*Pauline* hinges on this quest to find the thought for voice, to discover what kind of meaning a poet could bring to the world. The passages following lines 375-79 describe the speaker's attempt to find this thought or meaning by turning to “[m]en, and their cares, and hopes, and fears, and joys” (443). Yet this quest to influence the life of men proves difficult, and he falls into despair, torn between following his “wild fancy” (510), and seeking “[h]ow best life's end might be attained” (446). The distinction between these two different kinds of writing, one which seems to bestow an imaginative authenticity, and the other, which follows an aim into the world of men, exposes the difficulty of reconciling a dual purpose of writing for an audience while remaining true to the self.

When he turns toward the world, he speaks despairingly of the vanity of “all the influence poets have o'er men!” (530). In the night he can believe that,

the words

He utters in his solitude shall move

Men like a swift wind (532-534)

But though he holds an image for the effect that poetry *could* have, (the “swift wind”), he has not been able himself actually to create this effect. The unspoken “words”, empty here of content, are reminiscent of the wordless “spell” (170) Shelley can create, but which Browning's young poet is as yet unable to cast. He speaks of aims, ends, words, shapes, and fancies that his voice could proclaim, yet these things fail to find a concrete form. The poem remains stymied in the realm of potential, of the vague, dim shapes of the speaker's unformed imagination. Like Tennyson's dramatic characters, he conceives of verbal forms – songs, spells, or words – but cannot find the content to fill these forms.

The endless circling back upon himself, unable to find the magic spell to “move/ Men”, continues to the end of the poem. The long passage from 749-805 depicts this condition in its vision of a haven where he and Pauline will retreat:

To a small pool whose waters lie asleep...

And tall trees over-arch to keep us in...

This is the very heart of the woods...

One pond of water gleams – far off the river

Sweeps like a sea, barred out from land; but one –

One thin clear sheet has over-leaped and wound

Into this silent depth...

the trees bend

O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl...

so, at length, a silver thread

It winds...

It joins its parent-river with a shout.

(752, 754, 766, 768-771, 772-73, 777-78, 780)

The “small pool” where he and Pauline will hide from the world is characterised by stasis and insularity, the antithesis to the image of Shelley as a river and “the pulse of some great country”. This pool is compared to a “sleeping girl” who is unconscious of being watched, suggesting that to be unconscious of one's audience is to become insular and irrelevant. The “heart of the woods” is reminiscent of the centre of the self described earlier, and the dangers of introspection are the same. Herbert Tucker reads the return of the stream to the parent-river as a moment of triumph in the poem, where the speaker's allusion to the pond in Shelley's *Alastor* shows Browning disentangling himself from Shelley's influence: “he learns to shout for himself... Browning's voice comes into its own through a complex gesture of deference that differentiates him from the Shelley of *Alastor*” (Tucker 1980: 40). But, in fact, the moment of triumph is marred when we realise that the “shout” with which he re-joins the river has, like the aim he never finds, failed to be conceived. The message he brings from his imaginative seclusion is empty of content, like the many wordless songs which are scattered throughout Tennyson's early work.

In both early Tennyson and Browning the sense of crisis about the aim of their poetry is a driving force which many of their early critics failed to recognise. The dramatic failure of the poem's hero to escape his solipsism was confused by Mill with Browning's failure to emerge from the introspection of the imagination. In *Pauline*, Browning dramatises a young poet trying to find a purpose or direction for his imaginings, but never quite achieving or understanding this purpose. The poem explores the difficulty of developing a poetic self which will achieve the actions required of him by his age.

Matthew Campbell captures this sense of Browning as a poet caught up in the processes of writing poetry: “Browning’s speaker [in *Pauline*] is caught on the restless dilemma which confounds self and action, and the compromise of the potential of self in the pursuit of action” (Campbell 1999: 86). Such a dilemma also informs one of Browning’s most ambitious long poems. *Sordello* continues Browning’s dramatic experiments with audiences, portraying another young poet and twelfth-century troubadour who has a troubled relationship with his society. Adam Roberts suggests that “*Sordello* actually explores the same theme that both of Browning’s earlier works explore, namely the nature of the interaction between the poet (or thinker) and the world” (Roberts 1996: 25). In fact, *Sordello* takes the process one stage further: Sordello must follow a quest to discover his aim, but the poem also explores how his poetry can successfully *act* upon the world and bring his aim to pass. If *Pauline* could be described as a poem in search of a poetic aim, then *Sordello* is a poem in search of the authentic poetic act.

Browning’s search for the poetic act, a poetry which will be active in the world, involves challenging the way that poetry is read as much as the way it is written. *Sordello* oscillates between addressing the readers Browning was familiar with, from their evaluations of his work, and imagining new ways of reading. The resistance to *Sordello* is evidence that Browning was writing against the grain, challenging the very ways in which poetry was read, and reconceptualising the reader. He pushes readers to the limits of their patience and intelligence by experimenting with contemporary ideas about poetry and by presenting them in an aesthetically difficult form. Reading the text of *Sordello* against contemporary reviews, as well as the work of the major poetic theorists of the 1830s, provides a key to understanding this highly complex and formidable poem. *Sordello* experiments with the demands it is possible to make on the reader, and the narrator’s

modes of address, as well as including philosophical speculations about the nature of the poet's relationship with his audience.

In part foreshadowing the issues which would beleaguer its own reception, *Sordello* dramatises situations where a poet gains popularity by submitting to the crowd's desire and then suffers the consequences of an aesthetic malaise. Browning seeks to show the fleeting duration and spiritual superficiality of such popularity, and also dramatises the processes by which *Sordello* comes to realise that he must strive to write poetry not immediately accessible to its audience. *Sordello*'s rejection of immediate popularity in favour of wrestling with difficult aesthetic and political judgments is arguably a vindication of Browning's own stylistic decisions.

In the dedication to the 1863 edition of *Sordello* in his *Collected Poems*, he writes bitterly of the reaction: "I wrote it twenty-five years ago for only a few, counting even in these on somewhat more care about its subject than they really had. My faults of expression were many; but with care for a man or book such would be surmounted, and without it what avails the faultlessness of either?" (Jack 1984: 194). His assumptions of the "care" that readers would take were not entirely unfounded. Several reviewers of *Paracelsus* had acknowledged the difficulty of his work, but argued that it was worth the effort required to read it. One writes that *Paracelsus*

cannot therefore be read off-hand so readily and smoothly as the  
generality of the poetical productions of the day... The reader of  
such a work has his effort to make... his powers of  
apprehension... to keep on the stretch. (CH Browning: 44)

The consensus among the positive reviewers was that the reader “will find enough of beauty to compensate him for the tedious passages” (CH Browning: 41). In light of these kinds of comment, Browning could be forgiven for believing his readers were prepared to wrestle with difficult poetry. Unfortunately, the bewilderment, and even outrage, with which most reviewers received *Sordello* intimates that he had made a serious error of judgment.

The poem provoked charges of incomprehensibility and bad workmanship, but what made the poem so difficult to read that some readers began to question their sanity? As a way of testing Browning's abilities against the judgment of his contemporaries, I quote below a typically difficult passage from Book I, in the hope of fathoming some reasons behind the mystification caused. The passage describes the conflict between the Guelfs and the Ghibellins, the warring Italian factions of the historical narrative, as both take up their battle cry:

What cry?

‘The Emperor to come!’ 205

His crowd of feudatories, all and some,  
 That leapt down with a crash of swords, spears, shields,  
 One fighter on his fellow, to our fields,  
 Scattered anon, took station here and there,  
 And carried it, till now, with little care –  
 Cannot but cry for him; how else rebut  
 Us longer? – cliffs, an earthquake suffered jut  
 In the mid-sea, each domineering crest



The metaphor (which begins with ‘cliffs’ at 212 and ends with ‘continuous, one’ at 233, and is separated from the surrounding text by a dash at the start, and a colon at the end) intrudes clumsily into the description of the warring Guelfs and Ghibellins, and continues for so long that we have almost forgotten its origin when we eventually return to the cry of the Ghibellins. Long, intricate sentences, convoluted syntax, and the over-extended metaphor, which appears to detach itself entirely from the object it describes, make a first (or second, or third) reading of this passage bewildering. Awkward punctuation and placing of the metaphor serve to foreground the fact that it is a metaphor, something surplus to a simple description, and highlight the informing presence of the poet. The seemingly throwaway parenthesis, “(conceive)” (I, 215), makes us acknowledge the poet's work in conceiving and creating these metaphors, reminding us that this historical tale is constructed through his eyes. These kinds of textual asides lead Richard Cronin to remark that Browning “does not want to astonish his readership into admiration but to invite them to inspect the workings of his poem” (Cronin 2002: 175). The command is as much an imperative to the reader as the poet, calling us to our own work in conceiving the poet's imaginative vision. And work is certainly required to make sense of the passage as a whole; it is difficult to match each part of the metaphor – chokeweed, islets, sunlight – to the corresponding part of the narrative. In the extremely helpful notes to the Oxford edition, Ian Jack notes that, “the cliffs stand for the Ghibellins and the ‘chokeweed’ for the Guelfs” (Jack 1984: 205), but it is hard to follow how he arrives at this conclusion.

As the metaphor is carried along by its own endlessly inventive momentum, it provokes questions about metaphoric language itself. The “hazarding” of “new clasps, ties, filaments”, culminating in “an emulous exchange of pulses” (229-30) resembles the

imaginative process the reader must undertake to make sense of the passage. In the 1840 proof, Browning had written the phrase “use your fancy for my metaphor” alongside “(conceive)”, making explicit the imperative for the reader to engage imaginatively. The chokeweed, “too sure to over-riot and confound” (218), and the “million fibres” (224) which “[d]ispread themselves” and “blaze” (225, 27) depict a riot of imaginative connections in the fusion of the poet’s and reader’s minds. The poet works the metaphor into both the origin and the end of poetic meaning, where the process of making connections between images and their objects results in language multiplying itself beyond the control of the poet, into “growth/ Unfancied yet” (231-2) by him. He demands that we help him create this growth by letting our own imagination roam free with the text. The (surely tongue-in-cheek) comment at the end of the passage, “See you?” (237), is typical of the poem, which is peppered with these interjections into the text. At the end of first reading, we certainly don’t “see”, and the question insists that we turn back and re-read until we do. This passage is characteristic of a poem which continually questions the workings of language and metaphor, and demands that we too are aware of our own imaginative involvement in the text.<sup>3</sup>

These kinds of challenges are met again and again in *Sordello*, and this passage, as with many others, expects the participation of the reader in the creative work of the poet. Problems arose when it became clear that reviewers’ expectations of the balance between work and pleasure in reading poetry had been upset. It seemed as though Browning had broken a gentleman’s agreement that he would not push his readers much beyond their

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible to arrive at a historical reading of this passage, as David E. Latané does when he argues for the passage as explicatory of Browning’s view of history in “‘See You?’: Browning, Byron, and the Revolutionary Deluge in *Sordello*, Book 1”, (Latané 1984), but it is most useful here as an illustration of the way language operates in the poem.

quota of intellectual work, and one reviewer huffs, “he seems to be totally indifferent to pleasing our imaginations and fancy by the music of the verse and of thoughts” (CH Browning: 65). This reviewer's use of the word “fancy” illustrates the discord between his own and Browning's view: where Browning asks us to “use your fancy for my metaphor”, this reader's fancy passively waits to be pleased by the poet. Another reviewer complains that his pleasure has not been satisfied because the “causes of obscurity in the course of the story...detract from the pleasure of perusing it” (CH Browning: 66). One of the more sensitive reviewers of *Sordello*, writing in 1845, explains the vituperative reaction when he describes the poem as “a work requiring so much labour to understand, that common people in self-defence proclaimed it to be unintelligible” (*English Review* Dec 1845: 259). The impression given by these reviewers is not only that *Sordello* required too much work, and gave too little pleasure in return, but that it was written in an art form which many believed should give relief from intellectual work. As a reviewer in *The Monthly Magazine* commented, “the public, as such, is an utilitarian public. Commerce is its employment, and literature its amusement” (*Monthly Magazine* Apr 1840: 433).

Browning's idea of a reader who would be willing to “use his fancy” appeared to be unrealistic. Yet he was not entirely indifferent to the potential plight of the reader, and in the opening of the poem he attempts to assuage the reader's hardship. In the first seventy lines of the poem the narrator introduces himself, setting forth his narrative technique, and explaining how he will proceed to tell the story of *Sordello*. His tone is playful and informal – “I should warn you first” (I, 11) – and rather than deliberately antagonising readers, as the reviewers seemed to believe, he actively courts them. He establishes the narrative technique which will be used throughout, where the narrator interrupts the storytelling to question the reader, or to comment on his own methods or the action. His

offhand but intimate address is Byronic in manner, and plays off the idiom of, for example, *Don Juan*.

The narrator's explicit self-introduction interposes the teller into the midst of the tale, and warns us that we cannot enjoy the story without taking account of the way the story is told. The opening lines appeal to the reader,

Who will, may hear Sordello's story told:

His story? Who believes me shall behold

The man...

I single out

Sordello...

Only believe me. Ye believe? (I, 1-3, 7-8, 10)

The over-insistence that we believe the poet breaks down the suspension of belief that is normally required to read a fictional work. Instead of allowing the reader to escape into the story by simply telling it, the narrator upsets the possibility of such a naive belief by foregrounding it so acutely. The question, "His story?", calls into doubt the notion of "story" itself, and the admission that the poet "singles out" Sordello signals the structuring activity inherent in his poetic narrative. Continuous interruptions of the story with addresses and metapoetic asides hint at a suspicion of the narrative impulse itself, and a desire to jolt the reader out of his complacent belief in the "story". Richard Cronin points out that Browning's use of the rhyming couplets serves "as a constant reminder of the poem's artifice" (Cronin 2002 :175). Browning's narrator continually draws attention away from the story and towards himself as he explains his decision to address the reader.

He begins the story with two words, “Appears/ Verona” (I, 10-11) before interrupting it to give us a “behind-the-scenes” glance into his mental workshop. His initial choice for telling the story would have been,

By making speak, myself kept out of view,  
 The very man as he was wont to do,  
 And leaving you to say the rest for him.      (I, 15-17)

What he could have done, he tells us, is to have created a story by his own imaginative selection, letting “one man emerge” (I, 20), and then hidden himself from view, allowing the reader to “say the rest for him”. Even the syntax confirms the prominent position of the narrator at the same time as it imagines him hiding: the clause, “myself kept out of view”, by interrupting the sentence, ironically belies itself and puts the poet deliberately into view. The narrator claims he would have sat alongside the reader,

watching first to last  
 His progress as you watch it, not a whit  
 More in the secret than yourselves      (I, 22-24)

He implies that his natural state would be alongside the reader, and that he has no secrets, or tricks that the reader does not know about. Instead, however, the narrator informs us that since the current fashion is for writers to “take their stand...Beside” (I, 29, 31) the character they create, “pointing-pole in hand” (I, 30), he too will follow this trend, declaring, “So, for once I face ye, friends” (I, 31).

Browning takes pains to position his narrator explicitly, but what is significant about the contrasting methods he describes? It is worth remembering that *Sordello* was published in the middle of Browning's disappointing career as a playwright. The plays had been a frustrating experience in many ways: *Strafford*, though it gained mixed reviews, only ran four nights, and Browning had quarrelled with his friend and mentor, John Forster, during the rehearsal period. W.C. Macready, the great actor who had played the lead role in *Strafford*, had rejected Browning's second play, *King Victor and King Charles* in 1839, and disputed some of Browning's artistic decisions. Though Browning continued to write plays well into the 1840s, dramatic success eluded him. The narrative position which his narrator rejects, where the poet sits with his audience, watching alongside them, mirrors the position of the playwright watching his plays, who sits out of sight in the stalls (as Browning did for the performance of his plays), allowing the illusion of the story to reign.

Browning's friend Forster had written of *Paracelsus* that

Mr Browning has the power of a great dramatic poet; we never think of Mr. Browning while we read his poem; we are not identified with him but with the persons into whom he has flung his genius... We are upon the scene ourselves, - we hear, feel, and see, - we are face to face with the actors. (CH Browning: 47)

Forster identifies Browning's power as the ability to conceal his presence, and create the illusion that we are watching a scene in a play, complete with actors. In *Sordello*, the narrator renounces the invisibility of the Paracelsusian dramatic poet in favour of a more prominent role, and we are face to face with the narrator, not the actors in the story.

This narrative manoeuvring engages not only with Browning's dramatic ambitions, but with Mill's theories about the conduct of the poet. As well as negotiating a position which moves away from that of the playwright, Browning spurns Mill's injunction that the poet should appear to be unconscious of his audience, that he should be overheard rather than heard. The poet ceases to write poetry, and falls into mere eloquence, according to Mill, when he produces "feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action" (Mill 1973: 80). By addressing his audience, and directly courting their sympathy, the narrator of *Sordello* directly contravenes Mill's assertion that "no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us, must be visible in the work itself" (Mill 1973: 80). All of the poets who appear in the historical narrative of *Sordello*, including the narrator himself, wrestle with their audiences, and their speculations on different modes of poetry complicate and confound Mill's distinction between poetry and eloquence. Mill's essay glosses over the troubled relations which could arise between poets and their audiences, whereas in *Sordello* Browning engages with the multiplicity of audiences whom the poet must address, and the crux of *Sordello*'s poetic development is the continual permutations of his relationship with these audiences.

The negotiations with a multiplicity of auditors are nowhere more evident than the opening of the poem, where several complex relationships with different imagined auditors are negotiated, from contemporary readers to poetic predecessors. As well as addressing his contemporary readers, the narrator conjures up an audience of the dead. He declares that if Fate accords him few living friends, she cannot prevent him from speaking to the "host I muster" (I, 45), and though Fate "can refuse/ Real eyes to glisten more" (I, 38-9), the poet does not have to rely wholly on her for his audience. It is unclear who

makes up the audience of the dead; that they return to “see how their successors fare” (I, 48) and that one is called a “[c]lear-witted critic” (I, 52) implies they are writers. In a passage which is a mixture of belligerence and humility, his turn towards a community of dead writers appears to be a way of asserting himself beyond the authority of his immediate audience, insisting that he does not need their validation because he can conjure up his own listeners from the dead. The narrator's access to this audience of dead writers, an access which we, the reader, do not have, is a way of posturing before his live audience, reminding us that we are not to be the only judges of his work.

Yet he then qualifies his independence by writing,

suppose not I reject

Judicious praise, who contrary shall peep...

To glean your bland approvals. (I, 56-57, 59)

He at once insults his potential audience (whose approvals are “bland”) and courts them. The narrator’s ambivalence towards his audience is not dissimilar to Browning's own, whose ambition often lay uneasily alongside his refusal to pander to popular taste. The contradictory poses struck by the narrator for this petulant and unpredictable audience touch on nineteenth-century attitudes to popularity. Andrew Bennett writes that, “In the Romanticism of Hazlitt and others...popularity itself becomes suspect in the writer of genius”, and that,

In the most well-known texts of English Romantic poetics, the traditional distinction is repeatedly emphasised between two

different kinds of poetic reception: an immediate and popular  
 applause on the one hand and an initial rejection of the artwork  
 followed by more lasting and more worthwhile appreciation on  
 the other. (Bennett 1999: 36, 21)

The narrator is reluctant to become stymied by this distinction: though his evocation of an audience of dead poets asserts his independence from the superficiality of immediate popularity, he is loathe to reject it entirely. He cannot accept either of the two options (the value of immediate popularity against lasting aesthetic value as judged by a small community of writers) which this distinction presents him. Instead, he struggles to find a middle ground and relate to his audience in a way that does not pander to them, yet also pleases them; to find a way of speaking that maintains his integrity as an artist, while keeping open the possibility of influencing others.

His quest to find such a voice continues for the second time as he begins the story, and for a second time is interrupted, this time by the spirit of Shelley who appears with “pure face” (I, 62). The spirits of Aeschylus and Philip Sidney are also evoked, and he banishes them, writing, “this is no place for thee” (I, 64) and

wert thou to hear! What heart  
 Have I to play my puppets, bear my part  
 Before these worthies? (I, 71-3)

By comparing his own poetic methods to those of Shelley, Aeschylus, and Sidney, Browning distinguishes the artifice of his own poetic drama - the “puppets”, the playing

of a “part” - from the purity - “the silver speech” (I, 68), the “pure face” - which the others embraced. Aeschylus represents the dramatist in his purest form, as do Shelley and Sidney the lyric poet, and they contrast with Browning's generic hybridity. Adam Roberts writes that “*Sordello* has no place for Shelley because Browning has chosen to write in an epic mode, which contrasts with Shelley's primarily lyric manner” (Roberts 1996: 9). But what is most interesting about Browning's choice is not simply a matter of genre: both Aeschylus and Sidney were soldiers as well as poets (Aeschylus fought the Persians at the battle of Marathon, and Sidney died fighting for Queen Elizabeth I in the Netherlands). The historical *Sordello* was equally known for his military prowess as well as his poetic virtuosity. Aeschylus and Sidney's significance is not simply that they are generically pure in a way that Browning is not, but that they are men of action, who operate in the political and social world. As poets who wield political and military power, they produce both words and deeds, and this combination is fundamental to the poem.

Though Herbert Tucker sees the evocation of these poets, the lines which “sweetly but firmly enclose Shelley”, as part of Browning's “will to make a new beginning” (Tucker 1980: 109) in terms of escaping Shelley's influence, there are other factors at work. The narrator's wish to banish these figures may stem in part from Browning's sense of unworthiness in the face of his own inaction in the world. Aeschylus and Sidney's banishment is a way of situating what Browning sees as a dilemma of the specifically nineteenth-century poet, to understand how words and thoughts become deeds which act upon others and upon the world, when poets are men of letters, not of action. One of the most important claims that can be made for *Sordello* is that it attempts to explode the distinction between thoughts and acts, at a time when it was feared that poetry was in danger of being confined to a purely mental realm, operating in isolation from the social

and political world.<sup>4</sup> Through Sordello's development, Browning seeks to understand how the poet can influence or change his audience, and bring about action in the world.

After a protracted introduction, the narrator finally begins to tell the story of Sordello. By using the collective plural, “us” (I, 549), he identifies himself with his audience, in accordance with his opening promise that he would guide us through the poem. Yet, even in the first lines of the story, Browning’s diction is a foretaste of things to come. He writes,

Lo, the past is hurled  
 In twain: up-thrust, out-staggering on the world,  
 Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears  
 Its outline, kindles at the core, appears  
 Verona. (I, 73-4)

The reversal of the verbs, thrust up and staggering out, demonstrates the disruptive energies of the poem which seeks to turn words on their head. Hurlled, thrust, rears: the force of the language suggests the strength of the poet’s creative energies, tearing up what has gone before; Verona does not simply appear, it is violently brought into being by the poet. The twisted syntax which places Verona at the end of the sentence is symptomatic of what the poem asks of the reader: that we allow our imaginations to be thrust unknowing into the darkness. The syntax allows the poet’s imaginative conceptions to work backward: first we see the shape and outline, and then we find the object of the metaphor.

In this, as in other passages of the poem, the language works to bring the reader into the

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<sup>4</sup> Such a fear is documented by Alan Sinfield, who argues that poetry was “marginalised” from direct political involvement (Sinfield 1986: 17-19).

process of making metaphors.

However, the reception of the poem shows Browning to have been seriously misguided as to his readers' willingness to keep up with his narrator. The reviewer in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* commented that, "This is not an age in which readers will be content, patiently, to spell out an author's conceits, or dodge after him through an eccentric orbit" (*Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* May 1840: 339). Browning's commitment to following the "orbit" of the poet's soul leads him into sophisticated theorisations about the nature of poetry. As well using complicated syntax to put into practice some of these ideas, he also found an effective way of determining the kind of poetry he wished to write by dramatising the kinds of poetry that he did not, and the first three books are largely a study in how young poets can blunder as they venture into the world. As well as Sordello's aberrations, there are several other court poets who are criticised by the sceptical voice of the narrator. Sordello's mistakes and misjudgments hinge on the way he relates to the crowd, demonstrating that, for Browning, the development of a poet's soul is inseparable from his relationship with an audience. His speculations are complex and even contradictory, requiring hard mental work to unravel the ideas behind them, but they invite us to think about various possible ways in which poets could relate to their auditors.

In Book I the narrator discusses two types of poets by contrasting their relationships with the "crowd" (I, 733). The adolescent Sordello is living in seclusion in the forest and wishes for company that will sympathise with him. The narrator remarks that Sordello's desire for a crowd is in contrast to the poet whose love is "whole/ And true" (I, 730-1) because he finds beauty in an external object rather than his own soul. This second kind of poet is driven primarily by his love of truth and is in thrall to the object he worships. His pure love is

most sure

Of its own truth at least; nor may endure

A crowd to see its face, that cannot know

How hot the pulses throb its heart below...

Souls like Sordello, on the contrary,

Coerced and put to shame, retaining will,

Care little, take mysterious comfort still,

But look forth tremblingly to ascertain

If others judge their claims not urged in vain, (I, 731-34, 740-44)

The passage is confusing in part because the narrator distinguishes between two types but seems ambivalent about the worthiness of either. The first poet has the quality of authenticity: what the crowd sees is what occurs in his heart, whereas the second category of poet, into which Sordello falls, is more concerned with the reception of his work. On the one hand, Browning seems to be opposing the mutually exclusive motivations of the Romantic lyric poet who sings spontaneously of beauty, to the popular poet who adapts his poetry to please the crowd. Sordello puts his fear of the crowd before his love of the object he describes to the crowd, caring “little” for the object of his poetry. At first, it appears that Browning is supporting Mill’s judgment of the superiority of the poet who writes for the sake of beauty and is “overheard” (to use Mill's terms), to the self-conscious poet who is too aware that he is “heard”. Yet Browning complicated these distinctions: for the first poet, there remains an impulse to communicate, to wish the crowd to “know/ How hot the pulses throb”. The crowd remains superfluous to his inner life, but instead of

praising his imagination, the narrator describes his “helplessness and utter want/ Of means” (I, 735), depicting an insufficiency of poetic will.

In contrast, the poet who speaks for the crowd retains his “will”, and is not in thrall to the objects he describes. The passage suggests that for a poet to be concerned with his influence on others is in fact a way of ascertaining the strength of his own will. Matthew Campbell argues that the concept of will is central to Victorian poetry, that “what was for the Victorians a crucial faculty of [the] self, the will, as a deliberating, intending and purposive faculty, invokes issues of responsibility over artistic form as well as human action” (Campbell 1999: 31). While Campbell focuses on the rhythms of Victorian poetry, in *Sordello* rhyme and syntax function as opposing forces of will. Where the syntax of *Sordello* is convoluted, the rhyming couplets impose regularity upon the verse; the complexity of the syntax operates inside the simplicity of the rhyme scheme, and the strain between the two mirrors Browning’s struggle to put into artistic form the actions and motivations of the artist. The emphasis of the masculine rhyme, “will/still” throws the “will” firmly into the foreground, yet the number of clauses means that “will” could just as easily be read as a verb than as a noun, making *Sordello*’s “will” much weaker. The certainty of the masculine rhyme is at odds with the ambiguity of the syntax, and this opposition performs the very conflict it describes: Browning’s technique means that we must decide where the poet’s “will” lies, and how far his “will” can bring to bear on us.

This passage also implicitly challenges Hallam's belief that “Whenever the mind of the artist suffers itself to be occupied...by any other predominant motive than the desire of beauty, the result is false in art” (CH Tennyson: 35). The narrator does acknowledge that there are dangers for the poet who has the wrong kind of relationship with his audience, if the crowd's “will” becomes stronger than the poet's. But rather than suggesting that

paying any attention at all to the reaction of an audience is wrong, he criticises the *kind* of care and attention Sordello initially pays to the crowd. Some lines later, he describes what will happen once Sordello starts to consider what his audience thinks of him:

Once care because such make account,  
 Allow that foreign recognitions stamp  
 The current value, and his crowd shall vamp  
 Him counterfeits enough; and so their print  
 Be on the piece, 'tis gold, attests the mint,  
 And “good” pronounce they whom his new appeal  
 Is made to: if their casual print conceal...  
 Qualities strange, ungainly, wearisome. (I, 786-792, 795)

The speech marks around “good” contribute to the sarcastic, critical tone of this passage which indicts the “crowd”. Monetary imagery – “counterfeits”, “current value”, and “vamp”, slang for “pawn” – emerges from contemporary fears about the commodification of poetry and its existence in a market place policed by reviewers. In this passage, the narrator’s harsh words recall the practices of reviewers, who “pronounce” with authority on poetry, and “conceal” certain qualities by their habit of selective quoting in poetry reviews. The finality of the masculine rhymes, “stamp” and “vamp”, and “print” and “mint”, mixing linguistic and monetary imagery, conveys the strong authority this “crowd” carries, yet they have a false power which, it is implied, cannot recognise the true value of poetry. By ignoring the “Qualities strange, ungainly, wearisome” (criticisms which had been made of Browning’s own poetry by reviewers), the crowd see only their

own “print” upon the piece, assimilating the poetry into their own ways of thinking rather than embracing what is new or strange in it. Once again, the masculine rhymes, “stamp/vamp” and “print/mint” work against the strange and ungainly qualities of Browning’s verse: their thudding straightforward meaning literally tries to stamp out the ungainliness of the syntax. The battle of wills between Sordello and the crowd, where each is trying to stamp the piece, is performed here in the antitheses of the poem’s formal techniques.

The responsibility for this counterfeiting lies not only with the “crowd”; the process occurs because once the poet “cares”, he “allows” the “crowd” to stamp his work. Agency must be grasped by the poet if he is to prevent the crowd from overwhelming his work. These passages convey the difficulty for the poet of balancing his will against that of the crowd, neither allowing the crowd's will to dominate by caring too much for their opinion, nor conceding his own will in his pursuit of beauty. Sordello's negotiations with the crowd, as he seeks to work his will on theirs, form the basis of his maturing process. The language of the poetry, in particular, the rhyme and syntax, enables Browning to portray this process in all its complexity.

In Book II Sordello moves from a purely imagined relationship with an audience to a real interaction with the crowd at Mantua. The narrator is openly critical of Sordello in this book, and interrupts the narrative several times to admonish him. As Sordello makes his way through the forest to Mantua, imagining his encounters there, the narrator interjects,

Steal

Aside, and die, Sordello; this is real,

And this – abjure!

(II, 53-55)

The contempt of the narrator signals that he has no sympathy for poets who inhabit a dream world with an illusory audience, and that Sordello must enter the world if he is to mature. The technique whereby the narrator tells the reader directly of his disapproval for Sordello precludes the more sophisticated dramatic irony of the dramatic monologues, reminding us that, like Sordello, Browning too was in the process of formulating a suitable relationship with his audience.

In Book II Sordello arrives in Mantua, recites a poem to the Court of Love, and wins the prize awarded to the best troubadour. After his return home, he relives his triumph and seeks to understand why he was so successful with the crowd. He ponders why men applaud poets, and repeats to himself some lines he recited, surmising,

If they heard

Just those two rhymes, assented at my word,

And loved them as I love them...

...I needs must be a god to such...

...Have they fancies – slow, perchance,

Not at their beck, which indistinctly glance

Until, by song, each floating part be linked

To each, and all grow palpable, distinct? (II, 155-7, 160, 165-168)

Notably, Sordello singles out a rhyming couplet as the feature which attracts the pleasure of his audience: if his listeners hear only the rhyming couplet, then he will be as a god to

them. In part because the narrator has already made clear that Sordello's behaviour at this point is subject to his disapproval, we are aware that this kind of relationship is inadequate within the ethical scheme of the poem. If Sordello's listeners take pleasure only from the rhyming couplet, then, he imagines, their faculties are vague and they must have fancies, which make no sense until the poet's song has stemmed their drifting and transformed them into a distinct image. Sordello's belief that men's fancies will only become distinct when a poet has linked them together by song contradicts what many critics see as Browning's own belief that "the reader or listener re-creates by using his or her God-given faculties to connect, restore, and bring together again things that seem only a jumble or miscellany" (Hair 1999: 80). And indeed, in the two passages I discuss above, the reader must themselves disentangle the complexity of meaning from the more obvious rhyming couplets, rather than relying on the poet to make his meaning distinct. Sordello's failure to realise that making these kinds of connections is a mutual process, together with his misguided arrogance in assuming that his "song" will gather up men's drifting fancies lead to his decision to be a popular poet, reciting stories which are easy for the crowd to follow.

The narrator immerses the reader in a detailed psychological depiction of Sordello's phase as a popular poet, and aligns himself against Sordello by admonishing him. Sordello claims that "To exercise my utmost will is mine" (II, 428) and in doing so, he will be a poet

whose words, not actions speak,

Who change no standards of perfection, vex

With no strange forms created to perplex,

But just perform their bidding and no more,

At their own satiating-point give o'er, (II, 434-37)

In refusing to push the “crowd” beyond what they themselves wish for, the popular poet will fail to implement any change in the world. By performing just their bidding and no more, the poet remains within the limits drawn by the audience, reflected here by the end-stopped lines on “no more” and “give o'er”. These end-stopped lines contrast with the enjambed lines “vex/ With no strange forms”, which give a brief glimpse of the possibilities these strange forms could open up. At the end of Sordello's speech, the narrator declares, “Song, not deeds...was chosen” (II, 440-41); he believes that “song” and “deeds” are mutually exclusive, where song does not have the potential to act on the world, or cause any change in the hearts of men. When Sordello chooses to fully exercise his own will, he restricts the possibilities of his creativity. His song is “merely verse” (II, 446), it has “one point” (II, 451) and “[m]ust sue in just one accent” (II, 454). The depiction of “song” as having one point or one accent sheds light on Browning's aesthetics of difficulty: Browning's verse is difficult because its purpose is to perform more than “one point”. For song to become “deed”, language must perform more than just the bidding of the crowd. The dramatic irony is that through the end-stopped lines and enjambment above, Sordello's language is itself performing more than he believes; its complexity moving it beyond merely song. Such techniques require the will of the reader, and Sordello's journey leads him to pursue the ability to create poetry that is “deed” rather than “song”.

In the later books, as his relationship with his audience becomes more complicated, “song” begins to find within itself the capacity to become a “deed”. For the moment,

however, though he believes himself to exercise his own will, he remains in thrall to his audience, the world's "pleasure, now his aim/ Merely" (II, 618-19). The result of aiming only to please the world, as Sordello eventually realises, is that entertaining his audience is deeply dissatisfying to him. Each time he pleases his audience,

His auditory recognised no jot  
 As he intended, and, mistaking not  
 Him for his meanest hero, ne'er was dunce  
 Sufficient to believe him – all, at once.  
 His will...conceive it caring for his will! (II, 623-27)

Sordello had hoped his audience would see in him the potential for all the heroic deeds he describes in others, but in reality they care nothing for him, whom they see as a "mere singer" (II, 629). He has focused his energies on the effect of the song on the audience and as a result they enjoy only its effects and are indifferent to him. Artistic integrity has been rejected for the sake of cheap praise, and the result is that "His will" is unable to work upon the crowd. His failure to write poetry which changes the actions of men, to make his words become deeds, leads him to renounce poetry altogether, and join the political struggle. He decides that, "The obvious if not only shelter lay/ In deeds" (II, 709-10).

This decision forms the first half of Book III, where Sordello leaves his home and becomes involved in the Guelf political struggles. By doing so, he believes he can rectify the failure of his will to act upon men, and that he can make them act instead through political leadership: "to be by him themselves made act,/ Not watch Sordello acting each of them" (III, 582-83). In order to correct what he sees as Sordello's mistaken belief that

poetry cannot help mankind, or change their behaviour, the narrator devotes the rest of Book III to defend poetry and his commitment to political action on behalf of mankind through poetry. The story is interrupted as the narrator takes us forward to his own sojourn in present-day Venice, and further clarifies his earlier distinctions when he sets out three different kinds of poet:

For the worst of us, to say they have so seen;  
 For the better, what it was they saw; the best  
 Impart the gift of seeing to the rest: (III, 866-68)

The first two kinds of poet entertain their audience by painting imaginative pictures which produce no response other than enjoyment. They create poetic thoughts rather than poetic acts or deeds, whilst the last and best kind of poet, by enabling others to see, moves beyond descriptive poetry. This kind of poet is the one which the narrator himself aspires to be. He writes of his own poem, that he has

moulded, made anew  
 A Man, and give him to be turned and tried,  
 Be angry with or pleased at. (III, 934-36)

He is not simply telling the story as he sees or imagines it, but gives us the story in order that we can try out certain moral positions (anger or pleasure) in response to it. It is this moral and emotional engagement from the reader which appears to complete the poetic deed as Browning idealises it.

In Books IV and V Sordello moves towards a more complex formulation about the relationship between poetry and political action, in order to redeem himself from his earlier vanity and introspection. Reversing his decision to abandon poetry, he makes a commitment to help the Guelfs by using his rhetorical skills to persuade Taurello to aid their cause. Taurello represents the typical man of action who has no time for poetry; for him, “Thoughts were caprices in the course of deeds” (IV, 855). In order to win him over, Sordello must offer a vision of the way in which poetry could transform the actions of the world, itself becoming an act:

Thought is the soul of act...

and incorporeally affects

The world, producing deeds but not by deeds,

Swaying, in others, frames itself exceeds,

Assigning them the simpler tasks it used

To patiently perform till Song produced

Acts, by thoughts only, for the mind:

(V 567, 570-575)

This passage, written in a complex style suitable to its highly metapoetic subject, sets out one of the clearest formulations of the ideal poetic act sought by the narrator. The poet's thought “exceeds” the frameworks of his readers' minds (just as the passage itself at first exceeds our own capacity to comprehend it) and becomes the spiritual force behind their acts which take place in material reality. Once a poet has accessed this spiritual or mental force, he no longer needs to act in the world himself, because he can produce deeds in others. While others will produce material acts, the poet creates mental acts, acts “for the

mind”, which become material acts operating in the world through others. Whether Sordello then convinces Taurello by his words, and fulfils his own vision of words as deeds is uncertain, because at this point the plot clumsily intrudes. Taurello suddenly realises that Sordello is in fact his son, and asks him to take over the leadership of Romano, offering him great political power. Sordello agonises whether to take on this role, cannot make up his mind, and dies, seemingly of indecision, bringing the story to a close.

Browning succeeds in portraying the ways in which a poet could fail to produce poetic deeds, but it is less certain that he himself found a way of practising poetic acts. The confidence of the narrator (and Browning’s misplaced confidence that the poem would prove popular, De Vane 1935: 73) suggests that he believed *Sordello* fulfilled the qualities of a poetic act. Richard Cronin argues that “Browning writes the kind of poetry that *Sordello* aspires to, a poetry that absorbs neither its poet nor its reader, but rather is produced by an energetic common labour in which poet and reader share equally” (Cronin 2002: 177).

Unfortunately for Browning, that common labour remained purely theoretical. Not only did the obscurity prevent reviewers from getting the pleasure they sought, *Sordello* appeared to frustrate their quest to find any kind of extractable meaning or moral. Studying the reviewers' reactions to the poem offers more than an understanding of why the poem was so unsuccessful in its own day; what they found obtuse in the poem can help us to understand what the poem itself is trying to achieve. Several comments illuminate how the poem frustrated what was expected from the experience of reading a poem. One reviewer metaphorically throws up his hands: “If it were possible to understand the meaning of the writer of this poem, we should be delighted to impart the

information to our readers. It is full of hard words and mysterious sentences, but what they allude to it would puzzle a conjuror to tell” (CH Browning: 66). The reviewer’s expectation is that he will be able to impart the meaning of the poem to his readers: the coincidence of his wish to “impart” with Browning’s formulation that the best poet will “Impart the gift of seeing to the rest” (III, 868) is striking in the way that the reviewer utterly misses the point. It is *Sordello*’s aim that the reader is able to see for himself, rather than simply conveying the meaning. The image of a conjuror is also significant in the suggestion of a cheap trick being played; as if Browning has set out to puzzle purely for the sake of dazzling the reader with his bag of tricks.

The preference for an easily accessible truth over the difficulty of the language is also present in the *Athenaeum*’s review:

the impenetrable veil, both of manner and language, in which he has contrived to wrap up whatever truths or beauties this volume may contain... sometimes when we have succeeded in bringing up a pearl, it has turned out not to be worth the author’s hiding so carefully, or our labouring so hard to discover. (*Athenaeum* May 1840: 432)

The image of the precious stone – the “pearl” – suggests that this reviewer places the highest value not on the “manner or language” of the poem, but on the “truth” which the language conceals.

These comments illuminate that *Sordello* was particularly unsuccessful because reviewers weighed up the moral truths offered by the poem with its formal difficulties and found the balance wanting. It is unreadable on the terms proposed by those who read for

entertainment or moral enlightenment. Joseph Bristow argues that “Browning radically shifted the boundaries of poetry, wilfully violating its rules of decorum” (Bristow 1991: 3). In dramatising the intricate evolutions of the poet's mind, and expecting readers to follow with interest, *Sordello* had indeed violated the terms of reading held by reviewers. Browning's vision of a poetic act required too much intellectual engagement from readers who were unprepared to follow the “eccentric orbit” (*Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* May 1840: 339) of his language. Though his poem addressed readers known to him, it required that they perform feats of intellectual endeavour which would change the way they read. To return to G.H. Lewes' comment that “Walking on a new-ploughed field of damp clayey soil, would be skating compared to it” (CH Browning: 122), it is evident that Browning's Victorian readers did not want to get their feet dirty, preferring to glide easily across more accessible works of art.

Meaning in *Sordello* is always hard-won, and Browning's formal techniques both recognise and reflect the complexity of the processes he is describing. *Sordello* imagines readers who are prepared to engage with the text, but Browning's will was unable to impose itself upon his real readers. *Sordello's* sprawling attempt to formulate a theory of the poet's mind, detailing all the nuances of his relation to the world, has continued to challenge readers up to the present day. At times unwieldy, often difficult to the point of obscurity, *Sordello* nonetheless represents a key moment in the history of poetry, where Browning grapples with the necessary complexity of a style sufficient unto the labyrinthine mind of the poet.

The publication of *Sordello* demonstrated the resistance to new or experimental poetry from many reviewers. In the next decade, reviewers clamoured less for formal innovation and instead for themes which would answer to the problems and identity of the age. The

following chapters will examine how the work of Tennyson and Browning adhered to these demands, and how far their work was shaped by them. Their early work had, of necessity, engaged more with the task of bringing an imaginary audience into being, envisaging how their song would sound to hypothetical ears. The poetry of the 1850s and 60s is defined more by the task of addressing their actual audience, although it still, of course, dramatises fictional auditors. As the wealth of material on their work began to accumulate, and more and more reviewers addressed their attentions to these poets, the dialogue between Tennyson and Browning and their audience intensified.

### Chapter 3

#### The Rhetorical Strategies of *In Memoriam*

“there was scarcely a truer indication of what was called the spirit of any age than [Tennyson's] poetry...[of] what were the thoughts, the feelings, the opinions, then spread most widely through men's hearts.” (*Morning Chronicle* 9 Feb 1853: 6)

Through the 1830s and 1840s, Tennyson bore the reputation of a young poet with great promise, but one who still had notable faults. Reviewers took pains to redirect Tennyson, exhorting him in particular to take up a subject which would resonate with a contemporary audience. He had lingered too long with his mythical creations and his reviewers, including close friends such as John Sterling, felt the time had come for him to take up a greater mantle. Reviews of the 1842 edition of *Poems* continued in the vein of Mill and Fox in their attitude to meaning. John Sterling criticises contemporary poetry for being “so helpless in skill, so faint in meaning” and writes that Tennyson must seek meaning by turning to modern rather than mythical themes: “to bewitch us with our own daily realities, and not with their unreal opposites, is still a higher task” (CH Tennyson: 103, 119). Francis Garden finds Tennyson and Keats lacking because “they so separate the world and the actings of the imagination from this real world” (CH Tennyson: 102). Tennyson was read in terms of a division between his imagination and reality, between beautiful music and socially relevant subject matter.

Tennyson's response to these pressures was the publication of *The Princess* (1848) and *In Memoriam* (1850), both of which took up a subject relevant to contemporary society. Women's education was the subject of *The Princess* and *In Memoriam* wove questions of

Christian faith into an elegy for Arthur Hallam. *The Princess* was reasonably well-reviewed, but did not quite answer the expectations of his critics. It was praised for taking up a subject of contemporary importance but equally felt to be somewhat lacking in seriousness. John Kilham writes that “critics in 1848 found the form of the poem curious, even disappointing” (Kilham 1958: 14); the *Athenaeum* felt that when Tennyson “deals with contemporary life he touches on its customs apart from its passions” (CH Tennyson: 167). Tennyson's critics remained frustrated in their ambitions for his poetry: John Forster exclaimed “he is worthy to be the poet of our time. *Why does he not assume his mission?*” (*The Examiner* 8 Jan 1848: 21).

In *The Princess*, Tennyson had not fulfilled his potential to become the poet of the age, in part because the poem fails to find a way of speaking for its audience in the manner that reviewers had hoped. Tennyson attempted to relate to his audience through a subject of contemporary interest, but the poem, unlike *In Memoriam*, did not capture the hearts of its readers. Two years after the publication of *In Memoriam* his altered reputation was summed up by a writer for the *English Review*: Tennyson is “in fact *the* poet of the day, the poet who has struck just the right chord, just hit the bull's eye. He writes, and as it seems, both thinks and feels exactly *with*, and *for*, and *in* his age” (*English Review* Apr 1852: 108). Comments like this can be found in every decade up until Tennyson's death in 1892. Another reviewer in 1867 stated that, “Tennyson's is the poetry of the age; it reflects its views, its aims, its aspirations; it expresses what we all think and feel, and in the happiest manner” (*Belgravia* Oct 1867: 217).

The very cry for a poet of the age is testimony to the identity of a new reading public in an age of political and economic transition, one which needed a new cultural identity that would give it a grasp on their historical and spiritual present. What was it about

Tennyson's poetry, and in particular, *In Memoriam*, that provoked such an apparent harmony between the poet and his audience? With its internal complexities and loose, even sometimes incoherent form, *In Memoriam* did not exhibit characteristics which would necessarily have made it a popular poem. Marxist critics have argued that Tennyson achieved his popularity by expressing the views of the dominant bourgeois culture. Alan Sinfield argues that *In Memoriam* negotiated “a role for poetry in a developing bourgeois hegemony, addressed typically by constructing poetry as a superior mode of language” (Sinfield 1996: 113). James Hood concurs with Sinfield when he writes that “Tennyson's characters and speakers...all dramatise emotional or psychic rags-to-riches-to-rags...stories, their tales reflecting capitalism's grand economic narrative.” (Hood 2000: 13). These Marxist critics attribute the poem's success to the way it presents ideas which were acceptable to its middle class readers. Other critics have focused on the fact that readers found their own experiences and beliefs reflected in the text, as does Timothy Peltason: “Tennyson was a great public poet not merely because he wrote about politics, wars, the findings of scientists – but because in recording the surge and flow of his own experience, he wrote the private lives of his audience” (Peltason 1985: 46).

Yet it was not simply Tennyson's acute portrayal of Christian faith and doubt, nor his resonant choice of subject matters, that made *In Memoriam* so popular, although these played a part. It was, equally, the way in which these values and subjects were voiced. Readers felt called to, spoken for, and addressed in ways that they found at once challenging and reassuring. A reading of *In Memoriam* which is attentive to its employment of address and pronouns illuminates the reasons for the poem's renown, especially when reviewers' own use of pronouns is also taken into account. Examining the ways in which *In Memoriam* conceptualises the recipients of its addresses and imagines

both ideal and real readers, as well as how this conceptualisation of audience shapes the poetic selves which narrate the poems, is essential to understanding its impact. As in Tennyson's early poetry, poetic voice is formed in the crucible of these relationships. Yet the tussle between music and meaning remains pertinent, and the language of *In Memoriam* is alert to the tension between its imaginative world and its status as a poem that attempts to represent the age. The discrepancy between the speaker's deep and untold grief and his ability to share this grief with readers has parallels with the wordless songs in "The Lady of Shalott" and "The Lotos-Eaters".

Arguably, Tennyson had better learned to navigate his own depths, so that his poetry seemed less alien, less otherworldly. *In Memoriam* appeared to satisfy the moral, emotional and aesthetic expectations of the majority of reviewers. It endorsed a collective identity as well as appealing to the emotions of individual readers. To understand why Victorian readers felt *In Memoriam* to be *their* poem, the poem that expressed their fears, hopes, and beliefs, it is necessary to explore how readers are positioned by the text. The voice of the speaker in *In Memoriam* engages in continuous negotiations with the voices of his multifarious audience. In the poem the voices of an imagined audience enter the poem in a variety of different ways: through the use of pronouns, "we" or "us", in the stock figures from Victorian life who appear throughout, in section VI, for example, and in the imagined conversations between the speaker and critics of the poem in section XXI. As becomes apparent in more detail later in the poem, the speaker is aware of how his voice will be distorted or changed once heard or read by others.

The Prologue is in many ways a microcosm of the relation which the poem seeks to establish with its readers. It opens,

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
 Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
 By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
 Believing where we cannot prove; (Prologue, 1-4)

By beginning with an address to Christ, the poem establishes an association with religious or devotional poetry. Marion Shaw delineates the similarities in metre, diction, and stanza length between *In Memoriam* and Christian hymns. Tennyson used this association with hymns, Shaw argues, to win “the acceptance of familiarity but also...to mask the uncertainty, secularism, and unorthodoxy of the poem” (Shaw, M. 1977: 8). Locating the poem within a traditional Christian context and disguising any hint of unconventionality was a lesson learnt from the publication of Robert Chambers’ *Natural History and Vestiges of Creation*, which had sparked enormous controversy because of its implications of atheism and rejection of Christian orthodoxy.

The religious element of the work did not simply create an aura of conventionality, but also signalled an important departure from the fanciful and mythical quality of Tennyson's previous work. In 1845 George Gilfillan wrote that Tennyson

has never thrown himself amid the heats and hubbub of society, but remained alone, musing with a quiet but observant eye upon the tempestuous pageant sweeping past him, and concerning himself little with the political or religious controversies of his age.

(Gilfillan 1845: 230)

This complaint, as we have seen, was a familiar criticism in the reviews of the earlier works and one to which the Prologue responds by situating the poem within a religious context.

A key word in Gilfillan's comment is "alone", by which he implies that Tennyson had not engaged with his readers. The opening of the Prologue immediately belies this "aloneness" by using the collective pronoun "we", with no "I" appearing until line 33. The "we" colludes with the familiarity of hymns to create an impression that the poem incorporates the voices of others (the difference between a hymn and a poem being that the former can be sung by many, whereas the latter, even if read aloud, can only be voiced by one person). The undefined identity of this "we" allows any reader who has an association with Christianity to feel included. By opening with an address to God instead of a Muse, as occurs in *Paradise Lost*, an antecedent in religious poetry, the speaker portrays a relationship between the human and the divine which was possible for any of his readers, instead of an artistic conceit which, by the nature of inspiration, excludes the reader. God appears to all of mankind, whereas a Muse puts in only a personal appearance. In this way, Tennyson opens up the experience of his speaker to all his readers.

The second line of the poem, "Whom we, that have not seen thy face", constructs an alliance between the speaker and his auditors, as "we" become consolidated on one side of a conversation with God. "We" are talking with God, rather than the poet addressing us, and so, rather than being spoken *to*, we find ourselves speaking *with* the poet, in position alongside, rather than opposite. He speaks *for* us, finding the words we are not eloquent enough to frame for ourselves. The pronouns insist that, together, we "embrace" God, the word kindling a feeling of inclusiveness, whereby we are all partaking of the

same experience. Tennyson uses the rhetoric of communal faith to produce the illusion of a collective voice.

The second stanza complicates this communality:

Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot  
Is on the skull which thou hast made. (Prologue, 7-8)

While Death is a phenomenon which no-one can escape, the ambiguity of “skull”, which could be either singular or universal, expresses that it is also a highly individual experience. The hard monosyllable on “skull” emphasises the harsh reality of the loneliness of death, but also expresses one of the philosophical contradictions of the poem: that our experience of death is both shared and alone, both common, “Too common” (VI, 7), and deeply alienating. This intersection between the individual and the communal is crucial to *In Memoriam*.

The third stanza uses both the collective “us” but also the third person “he”, when the speaker writes of man's inability to face death:

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:  
Thou madest man, he knows not why,  
He thinks he was not made to die; (Prologue, 9-11)

The use of the third person perfectly expresses the difficulty we have in believing that we will actually die: an event which happens to others but not to us. Contrasting with the collective, “[t]hou wilt not leave us in the dust”, “he” expresses our alienation from the



a collective music which emerges from “us”. Both possibilities remain open and the smooth iambic tetrameter works to enhance the feeling of harmony and concord.

Yet as the Prologue nears its conclusion, it shies away from the collective to a more personal “I”. Having established a voice which appears to be communal, the speaker moves into an intimation of his own personal grief. He asks,

Forgive these wild and wandering cries,

Confusions of a wasted youth;

Forgive them where they fail in truth,           (Prologue, 41-3)

Unlike the opening stanza which similarly addresses God, these lines are less inviting to the reader to join them. We are overhearing his address to God, a position for the reader which is highly significant in my discussion of the poem. “Wild” and “wandering” words are poured out in passion, without thought or direction, and with no intention of delivering a message, or of imparting a moral tale to readers. The apology for the confusion of his thought and its unpremeditated nature is a theme which recurs later in the poem and suggests that the poet wishes his readers to read his poem, in part, as a spontaneous outpouring of feeling.

To reiterate, in the Prologue the reader is invited to join in a communal voice which makes “one music”. The reader is thus reminded of his shared humanity and the possibility of its collective voice, but also of his loneliness and singularity. The reader prays with the speaker, but then steps back to overhear an address from the speaker to his God; he identifies with and then observes from a distance the poet's emotions. But what is so significant about the reader's various positions in the Prologue, and how do these relate

to the poem's success? Several critics have pinpointed the shift from the personal lyric mode to a more universal voice. Seamus Perry writes that *In Memoriam* is “marked by the difficult transition between incommunicably private feeling and public accountability” (Perry 2005: 129). Robert Pattison argues that much of *In Memoriam's* “power derives from a resonance between the poem's sincere, lyric plaints, and its universal, bardic utterances. Tennyson was at some pains to achieve this effect” (Pattison 1979: 108). Exactly how Tennyson achieved this “difficult transition” is at the heart of *In Memoriam's* technique and can only be fully understood when examined alongside its literary historical context.

Herbert Tucker has examined the manuscripts and compositional process of *In Memoriam*, arguing that the poem was deliberately constructed in this way, that “[t]he earliest sections Tennyson wrote...display a firmly social orientation” and in the next ten years he added “lyrics that articulate something diametrically opposite: the despair and ecstasy of an intensely subjective experience” (Tucker 1988: 377). In its composition, “the interplay of its genres became an organizing principle” (Tucker 1988: 377). I approach this interplay from a different angle, that of the poem's positioning of the reader, and the responses of its contemporary readers, illuminating the reasons why *In Memoriam* became a poem representative of its age, and expanding upon Tennyson's rhetorical techniques. Once we become aware of the pronominal manoeuvres in the Prologue, it is evident that the voice of the poem is one engaged in a continually shifting relationship with its auditors. The rest of my discussion will focus on the way *In Memoriam* navigates these relationships and engages critically with the expectations surrounding poetry in this period. *In Memoriam* knowingly addresses readers, and debates sincerity, emotional truth, teaching and rhetoric, continually questioning its own employment of these ideas.

In order to fulfil the vocation of a nineteenth century poet, it was necessary that aspiring poets should understand and share the concerns of their fellow-humans. As Aubrey de Vere stated in 1849, “To delineate modern life, the first thing must be to understand human life...The man must feel himself a part of that life which he would illustrate” (*Edinburgh Magazine* Oct 1849: 433). Matthew Bevis points out that in the 1840s and 1850s Tennyson “became increasingly aware of a demand that he speak for as well as to the public” (Bevis 2007:172). In 1842, *Tait's Magazine* wrote that Tennyson had come near to “fulfilling one of the highest offices of a poet; to say that which has been trembling on the lips of others, but yet wanted an utterance” (*Tait's Magazine* Aug 1842: 508). Tennyson's Prologue to *In Memoriam* responds to these desires that poetry should participate in the life of its readers and that it should speak *for* them.

For the poem to be so successful, it had to transmute the experience of private grief into something more universal. In 1845 Edward Fitzgerald feared that

Tennyson's [lyrics] are good: but not of the *kind* wanted. We  
 have surely had enough of men reporting their sorrows:  
 especially when one is aware all the time that the poet wilfully  
 protracts what he complains of...and yet we are to condole with  
 him, and be taught to ruminate our losses & sorrows in the same  
 way. (Baum 1999: 622)

Fitzgerald's comments show that the popularity of a poem was not based simply on its subject matter, that *In Memoriam's* effective portrayal of grief was not enough for it to resonate with its readers. Fitzgerald's view of the memorial poems in their nascent state

portrays a relationship whereby the poet speaks *to* the reader in an essentially lyric fashion, and where he narrates his state of mind. Where the published form of *In Memoriam* avoids the danger of simply reporting the poet's own sorrows is by creating the impression that it speaks *for* the reader. That *In Memoriam* voiced what others thought but could not express, yet does not enact the didacticism Fitzgerald complains of, is born out in several comments: "When he sang he gave voice to what had been already in our hearts" (Carpenter 1893: 21-2), and "though the singer is himself a large part of the subject, it never degenerates into egotism – for he speaks typically on behalf of humanity at large" (*Quarterly Review* Oct 1859: 459). In so doing the poet appears not to be egotistic because he is not describing only his own emotions, but voicing the feelings of others.

As well as speaking for readers, the ideals set forth by Tennyson's reviewers were that poetry should teach, and that it should convey some noble aim. As R.M. Milnes asserted, the "function of the poet in this day of ours [is] to teach still more than he delights, and to suggest still more than he teaches" (CH Tennyson: 138). There is in Milnes' comment a subtle distinction between teaching and preaching which is also found in a comment by John Spedding: Tennyson was beginning to assert his moral soul, Spedding writes, but "not in the way of formal preaching, (the proper vehicle of which is prose,)" (CH Tennyson: 142). Preaching would necessitate speaking *to* one's readers, and its undesirability illustrates the central paradox of poetry which should suggestively teach without appearing too direct or didactic. As Isobel Armstrong points out, "[h]owever much they were preoccupied with the moral function of poetry, critics almost invariably disclaimed didactic theory" (Armstrong 1972: 11).

Bound up with the wish for teaching without preaching was a belief that poetry should

portray emotional truth and avoid falling into a rhetorical mode. In a review of *The Princess* Tennyson's poetry delights those who “wish but to find in any poem they take in hand a moral lesson or a tale of the heart” (*Quarterly Review* Mar 1848: 436). The expectation that poetry should move its readers emotionally at the same time as providing a moral uplift was a difficult one to meet. The quality of sincerity was much sought after, and in 1848 one reviewer complained that Browning

has fallen into the besetting sin of our generation of poets, and *strains* after the simple, which is only pleasing when it is the natural expression of a natural emotion, but becomes ludicrous and always offensive when it is the result of art, and produced with effort. (CH Browning: 110)

Tennyson's turn back towards the self and its emotional trials at the end of the Prologue is a way of orienting his poetic speaker in relation to these clashing demands, and of demonstrating the “natural emotion” in his “wild and wandering cries” (Prologue 41). He creates an atmosphere of sincerity by turning away from the reader to address God.

To take up the thorny issue of rhetoric and unravel its contradictory status in the mid-nineteenth century, we must return to Mill's influential 1833 essay, “What is Poetry?” His famous distinction that “eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard” (Mill 1973: 80) sets up a division between “poetical” and “rhetorical” writing that had an enormous impact on Victorian poetic theory and practice, despite its inherent contradictions. Northrop Frye, who takes up Mill's idea and elaborates upon it in “Literature as Therapy”, provides a useful way in to understanding the implication of Mill's theory:

Poetic language is very different from rhetorical or ideological language. Rhetorical language appeals to an audience to integrate as a unit and to do certain things or avoid certain other things. Poetic language tends rather to turn its back on the listener and set up something which requires the reader to detach himself. (Frye 1993: 32)

In the Prologue to *In Memoriam* it is clear that, according to Frye's definition, the speaker uses both poetical and rhetorical language. He appeals to an audience to integrate as a unit by inviting them to join a communal voice, but he also turns his back on the listener and addresses God with his personal cries.

I use the term rhetorical to mean language deliberately constructed to achieve a particular effect, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others” (*OED*: rhetoric, n.<sup>1</sup> 1a). Significantly the word suffered a fall in fortunes from the nineteenth-century onwards. Of the selection provided by the *OED*, most nineteenth-century examples are negative: in 1880 a verse by Swinburne describes “The limp loquacity of long-winded rhetoric” (*OED*: rhetoric, n.<sup>1</sup> 2c). A passage from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, “If these words had been spoken by some easy, self-indulgent exhorter, from whose mouth they might have come merely as a pious and rhetorical flourish” (*OED*: rhetorical, adj. 1a), demonstrates that the word had taken on connotations of linguistic flourishes without substance, and of falsity or artificiality. Scott Brewster writes that “Mill's clear distinction between rhetoric and expressiveness exemplifies the difference between neoclassical and

Romantic conceptions of lyric” (Brewster 2009: 59), whereby the demand for Romantic values of spontaneity and emotional sincerity meant that rhetoric had to be concealed. The best poetic language had to be free of rhetoric, of the overt attempt to persuade one's readers.

What both Mill and Frye make clear is that a poet must cover his tracks, that what matters is not his unawareness of a reader's presence, but his *seeming* unawareness. Mill writes that “no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself” (Mill 1973: 80). These words expose the contradiction in his argument: that a poet should be unconscious of his audience if he is to be a true poet, yet that this consciousness should be invisible suggests that it cannot be truly absent. A poetic persona which *seems* unconscious of a listener, can (indeed, must) be constructed whilst being conscious of that listener, as long as the poet can conceal his working.

Frye propagates the view that it is possible for there to be a pure poetic language, but falls into the same contradiction as Mill. His phrase to “set up” implies a conscious decision on part of the poet to create a particular effect, therefore to be rhetorical. Frye's claim that the poet can “detach himself” from the reader is particularly dubious. Turning one's back on the reader is, in fact, a rhetorical device calculated to create the illusion that the poet is not deliberately acting upon the reader, that there are no calculations to move the reader in certain ways. Mill, imagining himself as the reader of a poem, desires to be invisible, not only to the poet, who speaks without an awareness of him, but to himself; to see nothing of his own presence in a poem. This wish is commensurate with a desire that poetry should be the sincere expression of emotions, that the access to another's private emotions gained by reading a poem should be authentic, not invented to evoke a particular impression from its readers. In other words, that poetry should be poetical, rather than

rhetorical.

Marion Shaw comments, “most of the reviewers required this 'reconciliation'...between what Francis Garden described in terms reminiscent of Mill as the 'natural', aesthetic tendency of the poet and his acquired 'cultural' duties and sympathies” (Shaw, M 1973: 68). Despite the strong moral belief in the propagation of ideas in poetry, at the same time readers did not want to feel they were being spoken to, preached at, or manipulated. Poets had to express emotional truths, yet these emotional truths had to be congruent with social values. To navigate the contradictory demands inherent in Victorian criticism required poetry of great dexterity and skill and *In Memoriam* was arguably the most successful poem of the mid-nineteenth century to do so, appearing in the eyes of the critics as emotionally sincere, yet fulfilling what Fox had earlier called a poet's “responsibilities to his country” (CH Tennyson: 32) by ostensibly supporting Christian doctrines and dealing with concerns relevant to most people.

The *Melbourne Review* praised the poem because its writer possessed “that essential quality of a poet...sincerity of feeling” (*Melbourne Review* 1883: 29), yet “[i]n it the pre-eminence of love, and its redeeming, purifying influences are elaborately set forth” (Heraud 1878: 15). The word “influences” implies the poem has the potential to shape or change readers, yet the work avoids appearing didactic because it shows “sincerity of feeling”. *In Memoriam's* success depended on this quality. The poem was, for the most part, considered poetical (in Mill's sense) rather than rhetorical; it involved the experiences of a collective group while being admired for the sincerity of its personal emotions.

Valerie Pitt notices that *In Memoriam* displays characteristics of spontaneity which are at odds with the author's methods:

Although Tennyson speaks of “short swallow flights of song”, a phrase which suggests spontaneity in the expression of an immediate grief, he was never in his life satisfied with any such thing. His manuscripts show that his method was entirely different from that of the spontaneous poet. (Pitt 1962: 89)

This is merely one way in which *In Memoriam* is written with an eye always on the reader, even at points where the speaker appears to be entirely unconscious of them. Mill's demand that rhetoric should be invisible in fact requires the most skillful rhetoric of all: that which conceals its own presence. Daniel Albright finds this very quality in the verse structure of *In Memoriam*:

Sometimes the reader feels that emotion is presented so directly, so simply, so economically, without the usual ingenuity of metaphor, even without the usual rhetorical urgency, that love and desolation must utter themselves in tetrameter stanzas, without any intervening artifice. This effect...is the result of superior art. (Albright 1986: 176)

A reading of address in *In Memoriam* explores the working of this superior art on the readers of the poem, and the slippages between rhetorical and poetical language voiced by the carefully constructed persona. Marion Shaw argues that “[v]ery few of the reviewers of *In Memoriam* commented on the poem's subjectivity. Most acclaimed its 'popular' and universal qualities” (Shaw M 1973: 75). Both its subjectivity and its universal qualities,

however, were commented on and appreciated by reviewers fairly widely. In a lecture given at the Bristol Athenæum, S.E. Bengough refers to

the almost entire want of personality which characterised the poetry of Tennyson...The reason of that was that he did not see himself in those things which he represented, he had a wide-spread sympathy – which caused him to lose sight of himself in his subject.       (*Bristol Mercury* 11 Oct 1856: 4)

Yet elsewhere *In Memoriam* was “very highly praised...as the subjective record of the poet's own experience, which linked our sympathies much more firmly with his personal character” (*Hull Packet* 15 Feb 1861: 5). The seeming discrepancy between these two comments illustrates the way in which the speaker of *In Memoriam* charts emotions from both a universal and a personal perspective. It was the balance between the universal and the personal that in part contributed to the poem's apparent lack of rhetoric.

*In Memoriam* was published anonymously, although newspapers and periodicals had revealed the author's identity before its publication. Anna Barton points out that the absence of his name on the book contributes to the presentation of the poem as a collective experience because it becomes “a pilgrimage in which any of its readers may join. The initials [A.H.H.] can be appropriated by any mourner” (Barton 2008: 64). Yet the initials could also denote something irreducibly private, and demonstrate how, even in the title of the poem, Tennyson moves between the subjective and the universal. The author's identity can sometimes be sidelined because he is voicing the feelings of the human race as well as his own. Tennyson himself wrote that “I is not always the author

speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking through him” (Ricks 1987: II, 312). That *In Memoriam's* “I” is sometimes but sometimes not the author, sometimes but sometimes not a collective voice mysteriously beyond the author, necessitates that the reader's relationship to that “I” shifts throughout the poem.

To return once more to the Prologue, where the “I” shifts between God, himself, and his readers, it is possible to see how Tennyson constructed such an effective speaker. By addressing God the directness of the poet-reader relationship is deflected, and the speaker appears, by turning to God, to be turning his back on the reader. The supposed addressee of the plea, “Forgive these wild and wandering cries” (Prologue: 41) is God, giving the impression that the speaker is concerned only to justify himself to God rather than the reader. If the reader detects any hint of rhetorical persuasion in the pleas for forbearance, the rhetoric is directed at God, and the reader remains, as Mill wished, invisible. We are in the position of “overhearing” a plea that also reads as an address to us, since we, and not God, are reading the poem. The rhetorical address to God, in its deflection from the other addressees of the poem, gives the poem an appearance of divesting itself of rhetoric.

Addressing an invisible God from whom there will be no reply was analogous to placing a poem before the public, the unpredictability of the deity no less unsettling than that of Tennyson's reviewers. The pronouns and address in the Prologue do not simply explain why readers of *In Memoriam* read the poem in particular ways, but suggest that the speaker is trying, by placing the reader in different positions in relation to himself, to imagine a reader into the text. The faith (“Believing where we cannot prove” Prologue: 4) and forbearance which is required from the “we” of the Prologue to approach God attempts to create an ideal reader who would also hold these qualities of faith and forbearance with the poet's work. What happened after the publication of the poem was

that the real readers stepped into the role that had already been created for them, and the poem was, for the next forty years, treated with an almost religious veneration.

The rest of the poem enacts a similar shift between a universal and personal “I”, and collective and lyric voice. In the opening sections following the Prologue, in particular II, III, IV, VII, and IX, the speaker employs a series of apostrophes which resemble those associated with Romantic lyric. The speaker addresses the yew tree, Sorrow, his heart, the dark house, and the ship, in part because he can no longer address the dead Hallam. They fulfill the function of the elegiac apostrophe, which, according to Jonathan Culler, “replaces an irreversible temporal disjunction, the move from life to death, with a dialectical alternation between attitudes of mourning and consolation, evocations of absence and presence” (Culler 1977: 67). In other words, these apostrophes to other objects or beings is in part necessitated by grief: to address his dead friend would remind him of the impossibility of a response. W. David Shaw agrees with Culler's formulation when he writes that “As soon as the dark house, the doors, the yew tree, or the burial ship in *In Memoriam*...are apostrophized as ghostly powers or demons, the mourner can also affirm that the presences he addresses, however sinister or menacing, are also alive” (Shaw, WD 1997: 319). Both Culler and Shaw formulate their view on apostrophe from the perspective of the poet's emotions, where Culler describes it as an “act of radical interiorization and solipsism” (Culler 1977: 66), rather than an act of positioning the reader. The apostrophes place the reader in the position of overhearing a private act of address, with the speaker seemingly unconscious of their presence.

Scott Brewster remarks: “apostrophes illustrate that lyric can involve an estranging rather than engaging or familiar voice, and that its mode of address does not necessarily conform to a conventional sender/receiver model of communication” (Brewster 2009: 39).

The apostrophes in these first sections of *In Memoriam* are calculated to estrange in so far as they allow the reader to feel as if they are watching unobserved, and are not being subjected to a conventional sender/receiver mode of address. They foreground the poetic quality of the voice, in Mill's terms, because while reading them, the reader stands outside the lyric apostrophe which involves only the speaker and the object he addresses. Indeed, one reviewer describes the addresses to the ship as “very poetical” (*English Review* Sep 1850: 78), suggesting that the apostrophes succeed in what Culler argues is part of their function, “to establish [voice's] identity as poetical and prophetic voice,” (Culler 1977: 63). In positioning the reader outside of lyric address, Tennyson creates an impression that his emotions are taking place in a private realm which the reader only accidentally overhears, an impression which is itself important in the poem's aura of sincerity.

At the same time as these apostrophes work to place the reader outside of the poem, looking in, they also allow them to identify with the apostrophising voice. When we read the line, “O not for thee the glow, the bloom” (II, 9), we expect that the speaker means Hallam, but a few lines later we realise that he is in fact addressing the yew tree. The deflection away from the personal address to Hallam makes it possible that the reader could substitute their own voice for the speaker's; the address to the yew tree is available to anyone contemplating a grave. This deflection is mirrored in the speaker's refusal to name his dead friend: it is the stones, and not the speaker, “that name the underlying dead” (II, 2).

The projection of agency unto the stones instead of the poet makes the “I” of the section less embedded within the speaker than first appears. Indeed, the speaker does not voice this “I” until the final stanza of the section, and so the first three stanzas, voiced in the impersonal, allow the reader to read the lines with their own voice. In the space created by

these deflections from the personal, the reader is able to identify with the personal emotions being voiced. Passages like this may explain how the poem resonated for readers who had experienced the death of a loved one, Queen Victoria being a famous example.

As with the pronouns in the Prologue, the apostrophes operate in a complex manner, allowing readers simultaneously to occupy different positions. They are watching a poet who is unconscious of them, thus giving the impression that his utterance is sincere, but they can also identify with the emotions being portrayed, reading their own “I” into the “I” of the text. In contrast to the Prologue which invites a collective voicing, the apostrophes temporarily suspend all use of the collective pronoun. This use of lyric convention makes the reader invisible, yet also allows them to identify silently with the speaking voice. One reviewer wrote, “We stand in the presence of a grief and suffer; the intensity of that suffering makes us aware of the grandeur of our being” (*Hull Packet* 3 Oct 1856: 6). His comment illuminates this dual position: standing in the presence of the poet's grief implies observation from a separate perspective, yet this reader simultaneously shares in the collective experience of “the grandeur of *our* being”.

The poem itself is always turning on these dual perspectives. Sections I-IV address symbols, and then in section VI the speaker addresses fellow sufferers and potential readers, “O father” (VI, 9), “O mother” (VI, 13), “O...meek, unconscious dove” (VI, 25). Section V is a turning point between this lyric address to poetic symbols, and the address to particular characters, with the admission that his words “half reveal/ And half conceal the Soul within” (V, 3-4). The speaker's voice manifests these words, in his contrasting manoeuvres towards and away from readers. He reaches out to readers and invokes their voices alongside his own, seeming to reveal himself as one of them, sharing the same

emotions, yet then turns his back, concealing himself as a private figure who speaks only to the symbols of his sorrow. Whilst experiencing the grief of another from a point seemingly unseen in I to IV, the reader is simultaneously comforted by the feeling of sharing in this experience. Albright pinpoints this oscillation when he writes of section VI, “despite these motions towards impersonality, the sheer facts of Hallam and the Tennysons...exert a gravitational pull upon the poet, keep him centred in the specificity of his situation” (Albright 1986: 177). It was this perpetual balancing act between inward emotion and the sense of reaching out to readers that helped make the poem so successful.

Though still imaginative constructions with no specific identity, the father, mother and young woman addressed bring into being the imagined figures of readers who have shared an experience with the speaker, giving the impression that the poem is addressed to characters based on real people. The language of these sections is often in the more general third person, “A hand that can be clasp'd no more” (VII, 5), “One writes” (VI, 1), “O to us,/ the fools of habit” (X, 11-12), appealing to a more universal perspective. The appeal to the family is one which would particularly play on a Victorian audience and, as Pitt mentions, these were stock characters who “belonged to the life of the Victorians but they also belonged to their mythology. Their novels, their plays, their subject pictures always return to this kind of thing” (Pitt 1962: 118). That these come after the more “poetic” apostrophes allows them, by association with the Romantic tropes, to feel like the spontaneous outpouring of feeling rather than a conscious rhetorical manoeuvre.

These shifts between poetry which talks directly to its audience, and poetry which attempts to resist or disguise the presence of that audience are apparent throughout the whole poem. The poem avoids modes of address which would be read as “rhetorical” in order to cultivate that most important quality of emotional sincerity. Tennyson uses the

lyric “I” in a series of postures, both personal and collective, which satisfied contemporary definitions of how poetry should work. The poem is highly aware of itself speaking in ways that cultivate a poetic (as opposed to rhetorical) language at the same time as it is aware of the inherent insincerity of such a voice, which though it may turn its back, cannot cease to feel the presence of the reader.

Throughout *In Memoriam*, the speaker questions his own effects upon readers. In the Prologue he determinedly shies away, as he will do several times across the poem, from claiming that the poem is a document which will provide answers to the problems of its readers, yet this is exactly how the poem was read. The Prologue succeeded in creating the impression that its voice speaks in harmony with the age, yet its intimations of wildness simultaneously bespeak an image of isolation from the people of its age. His modesty in claiming to “fail in truth” (Prologue, 43) is an assertion that he offers no consolation or religious guidance, yet the *Edinburgh Review* called *In Memoriam* “a shrine where sorrow laden mourners of every age will find solace and consolation for their most secret and inarticulate griefs” (*Edinburgh Review* Apr 1886: 489). As if aware of its potential reception, the poem continually debates its status as a poem which carries the purpose of fulfilling a particular narrative. As Seamus Perry points out, “Tennyson’s own sense of the work, declared within the work, is as a directionless, recurrently retrodden path” (Perry 2005: 138).

Yet the sense of aimlessness that Tennyson declares within the work is contradicted at other points in the poem. This contrast between an aim or purpose and an emotional isolation is evident in section XXXIV, where, debating personal immortality, he writes that if this life were all, earth would be “darkness at the core” (XXXIV, 3).

This round of green, this orb of flame,  
 Fantastic beauty; such as lurks  
 In some wild Poet, when he works  
 Without a conscience or an aim.                   (XXXIV, 5-8)

The stanza describes an amoral world of beauty without the comforting doctrine of immortality, yet it seems to tarry longingly over the state it portrays as dark and empty. The section nominally condemns the “wild Poet”, whose disregard of anything but his own passions is part of an amoral worldview, but the fantastic beauty is more attractive than the speaker's own “dim life” (XXXIV, 1). It creates an image of a poet who glories in his own imagination, incommunicable to others, and recalls the young poet of Browning's *Pauline* lost in his dreams and struggling to conceive of an aim which will bring his poetry into the world.

To tie conscience and aim together suggests a connection between Christian morality and responsible poetry. To be a Christian poet, it is implied, is to write with a conscience, and to aim at something, or someone. In contrast to the aimless, wild poet, two sections later, the speaker writes of the Bible, which may be read by he “that binds the sheaf,/ Or builds the house” (XXXVI 13-14). This perfect tale embodying perfect truth, “[m]ore strong than all poetic thought” (XXXVI, 12), is quite clear about the aim of poetry. If the Word can be read by all men, then poetry too, if striving for truth, should be written for an audience made up of common men, with the aim of showing them the truth.

This kind of writing, one which purports to give truth to all men, is also the kind of writing to which several reviewers exhorted Tennyson. The inspiration of private grief, “an inner trouble” (XLI, 18), becomes entangled with the *aim*, of writing, as the Bible

does, for a particular audience. Mixing the Bible's aims with those of poetry illustrates the changing role of poetry in a world of growing religious uncertainty. The primacy of literal biblical truth was threatened by works such as Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) and Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830), and poetry was deeply important to the Victorians as a medium through which to debate these issues.

*In Memoriam* is highly sensitive not only to ideas which were undermining traditional religious thought, but to the status of poetry as a medium which addresses these issues. In stanza XXXVII, the speaker imagines a dialogue with two of the Muses who debate the efficacy of his attempt to be a guide to men. Urania, the Muse of Astronomy invoked by Milton in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, is the first to speak. She tells the speaker,

Thou pratest here where thou art least  
 This faith has many a purer priest,  
 And many an abler voice than thou. (XXXVII, 2-4)

Milton asks Urania for aid to lead him through the Heavens so that he does not “fall/ Erroneous there to wander and forlorn” (Milton 1971: VII, 19-20). The allusion to Milton suggests that Tennyson had in mind the difficulty of writing Christian poetry which offers divine truth to the reader. His insecurity is expressed by Urania's admonition, who tells him to return to his “native rill”, and “hear thy laurel whisper sweet” (XXXVII, 5, 7). The images of stream and hills are associated with lyric poetry of private feeling rather than poetry which offers guidance.

Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy or elegy, responds with her own modest claims: she is “but an earthly Muse”, she owns “but a little art/To lull with song an aching heart” (13,

14-15). As the Muse of elegy, she represents the personal in the poem, whereby the purpose of writing is to assuage the speaker's own grief. In her portrayal, the poem is inspired simply by his feelings and is not aimed directly at an audience. The passage presents a private world of poetic inspiration rather than one of shared, universal experience, and portrays modesty about any attempt to speak for Christianity.

Melpomene represents the individual rather than the collective voice of Christianity. As she broods on the dead Hallam, she murmurs of “comfort clasp'd in truth reveal'd...And darken'd sanctities with song” (XXXVII, 22, 24). Song in *In Memoriam*, as we shall see again, is generally used when referring to the poet singing to himself, without there being any particular meaning. The comfort here is present in a truth revealed only to the speaker and not to the reader. That song darkens sanctities (a word associated with Christianity) implies that lyrical poetry is antithetical to the poetry which would advocate Christian truth and consolation.

The explicit turning away from poetry which would answer to the doubt and uncertainty circulating among Christians is at odds with the actual reception of the poem: readers of the poem certainly found in it the purpose of consolation. One reader found in particular the “comforting assurances [of the kind] conveyed in” biblical texts (*The Welcome* 1884: 103), despite the speaker setting forth his inadequacy to speak for the Christian faith. “The mourner may turn to it for comfort, and the speculative mind will find in it both sympathy and guidance” (Gatty 1860: 16). This reviewer's mention of “guidance” implies that the poet deliberately sets out to guide and console us.

In order to please the reviewers, the poem had to appear to have a purpose and a moral influence yet this attitude is one the speaker at many points explicitly rejects. He writes of the purpose of the poem in XLVIII, commenting that

If these brief lays, of Sorrow born  
 Were taken to be such as closed  
 Grave doubts and answers here proposed  
 Then these were such as men might scorn.                   (XLVIII, 1-4)

In this section the speaker shies away from the idea that the poem is a grand work which could answer mens' doubts and prove their faith, and writes instead that he avoids “a larger lay”, preferring “Short swallow-flights of song” (XLVIII, 13, 15).

Alongside the passages that question the aim of the poem, there are passages which present the speaker as inspired, rather than aspiring to guide. According to the speaker the poem is made up of short lyrics inspired by grief, and does not attempt to speak to the readers of the age. He claims no public voice for the poem: Sorrow “sports with words” (XLVIII, 9), implying a playfulness far from the purposefulness of the socially responsible poet. The phrase, Sorrow “loosens from the lip/Short swallow flights of song” (XLVIII, 14-5) corresponds to what Timothy Clark describes as a Romantic idea of inspiration, where the poet speaks in an animated voice which “is not that of the normal person of the author but mysterious and other” (Clark 1997: 3). It is Sorrow, and not the speaker, who holds the agency in this section, and he appears to be speaking without aim or intent.

There is an apparent contradiction between the speaker's claims of aimlessness and reviewers' interpretation of the poem as a guiding light. One reviewer remarks that Tennyson “desires to make [poetry] operative towards a purpose” (*Meliora* 1859: 241). They also add that in the poem

is a human heart nakedly given us, and we may not reject the  
 lesson...For us, it shall not be the heart of the poet, but the  
 broken heart of the century that wails here in an absolute music.  
 For indeed it is not a particular, but a universal grief that  
 constitutes the poem. (*Meliora* 1859: 241)

Though the word “lesson”, along with his desire to make poetry “operative towards a purpose” could imply that the poet is didactic, Tennyson avoids this charge because the music of his human heart is universal rather than particular. His sympathy with the heart of the century allows readers to *find* a moral lesson in the poem rather than having it imposed upon them.

The word “music” is significant in its associations with spontaneity and inspiration, and the poet's singing in *In Memoriam* contributes to the impression of emotional spontaneity. He takes pains to distance himself from the attempt to speak for his readers, or to guide them in any way using typical Romantic tropes of inspiration. In XXI he writes “I do but sing because I must” (XXI, 1), and speaks of inspiration as if it is a force outside of his control, as if he plays no role in shaping the words. Earlier, in XIX, he writes, “I brim with sorrow drowning song” (XIX, 12), implying that he is so overwhelmed with feeling that he cannot speak at all, and only when his “deeper anguish” eases, can he “speak a little” (XIX, 15, 16), suggesting that voice comes after feeling, and is inspired by it.

In LIV, the speaker writes of his hope that “nothing walks with aimless feet” (LIV, 5). The pun on poetic “feet” ensures that poetry is included in this hope, that it too will have an ultimate aim and purpose. This hope is stated definitively, but collapses in the last stanza with the admission,

So runs my dream: but what am I?

An infant crying in the night

An infant crying for the light

And with no language but a cry. (LIV 18-20)

The first image of the infant presents a child in fear, crying because they are alone, whereas the second shows an instinctual reaction, reaching out for knowledge or enlightenment. Instinct is not calculated, or deliberate and the speaker thus presents himself in the light of one possessed by instinct rather than intention. “With no language but a cry” suggests a language without intent, without a wish to impose meaning on an auditor.

Although the speaker in *In Memoriam* at certain points cultivates a speaker who seems unaware of an auditor, it is also the case that he is concerned with the reception of the poem, and how his motives are interpreted. In section XXI he imagines the voices of readers criticising the poem: instead of the sympathetic readers whom the communal voice of the prologue envisages, these are hostile readers who speak against the poem. Three people enter and complain respectively that the poet indulges a weak sentimentality, that he is singing only to gain praise for his constancy to Hallam, and that it is not time for “private sorrow’s barren song” (XXI, 14) when there is political revolution in the air and scientific discoveries being made. These voices are similar in tone and subject to the voices of the reviewers, who particularly exhorted Tennyson to deal with contemporary problems, and to put them in the poem suggests that they occupy a significant part of the poet's mind.

In response, he defiantly embraces a lyric poetry which excludes rather than includes the reader and proclaims “I sing to him that rests below” (XXI, 1). If anyone hears his song, it is accidental, a traveller passing by, who “hears me now and then” (XXI, 5); his song is meant only for his lost beloved. The stanzas portray poetry as the spontaneous overflow of feeling, poured out with no thought of who is listening.

I do but sing because I must,

And pipe but as the linnets sing: (XXI, 23-4)

declares the speaker, and the words depict a poet who is overcome by feeling and, most important, one who is sincere because inspired. The employment of song and singing throughout this section emphasises the lack of a message to be communicated; the poet is making music, which may be accidentally overheard but is in no way *meant* for the ears of a listener. If the speaker can portray an absence of intention, the impression of his sincerity becomes stronger.

While the speaker attempts to proclaim his independence from an audience, he cannot prevent those voices, voices of imagined criticism, from intruding, suggesting that he has an audience very much in mind even at moments of lyric intensity. An anxiety about a possibly hostile audience emerges indirectly in sections XLV and XLVII. The speaker's discussions of immortality hinge on the nature of selfhood in life and after death, in particular on the ability to recognise others in the afterlife, without being dissolved into the divine being. As a child grows he “learns the use of ‘I’ and ‘me,’” (XLV, 6) and

So rounds he to a separate mind...

As through the frame that binds him in

His isolation grows defined. (XLV 9, 11-12)

The child matures when he becomes aware of his isolation from others, and his negotiations with “I” and “me”, the central pronouns of lyric poetry, are not dissimilar to the speaker's own negotiations with personal pronouns.

In L the speaker addresses Hallam with the plea, “Be near me” (L, 1) which is repeated at the beginning of each stanza. The repetition of this plea reads like a childhood prayer, and equally, the subject of the address is not definitively identified as Hallam. It is possible to read God as the addressee as much as Hallam, and the ambiguity opens up the passage to a more general reading: we could read the passage as a prayer, following the words “Be near me”, and saying them in our own voices. In LI, “Be near me” becomes “Be near us” (LI, 13), and it seems as though the speaker invites us to bring our voices to his, to be merged in one collective voice.

He later writes, however, of his fears about the doctrine that each person will merge after death “in the general Soul” (XLVII, 4). Yet his use of the collective pronoun causes individual readers to be merged into one body, the “we” or “us” who voice the verses. The potential of self to be individual and isolated, or merged into a general, universal body, is also the potential of poetic voice. His fear about the maintaining of individuality in immortality parallels an underlying anxiety about the potential of poetic voice to be swamped by the general Soul of humanity.

The child's binding “frame” (XLV, 11) separates but also protects him from this “general Soul”. “Frame” is a word also associated with poetic structure, connecting the issues of self and poetic voice. The form of *In Memoriam* is distinctive, the employment

of what Tennyson believed was an unique form (“I believed myself the originator of the metre”, Ricks 1987: II, 311) is an attempt to make the poetic voice distinctive.

Eternal form shall still divide

The eternal soul from all beside;

And I shall know him when we meet: (XLVII, 6-8)

The assertion of individuality comes at the point where there is an intense longing to meet Hallam once again. This “we” who “meet” is not collective but refers only to the speaker and Hallam, excluding the reader. The thudding monosyllables of the last line, in contrast with the previous flowing lines, give determined emphasis to the words, as if their force alone can conjure Hallam out of the afterworld. These words are presented with certainty, but this certainty fades as the section progresses, and the speaker's concession that Hallam will seek “at least” (XLVII, 12) to wait and say farewell before disappearing into light reveals his growing doubt. The claim that “eternal form” will preserve “the eternal soul” (XLVII, 6,7) is a hope that the essence of individuality will be maintained in poetry as much as in the afterlife.

The uncertainty that poetic voice or self can be maintained intact once it is released into the world reveals an ambivalence about the very collective voice which *In Memoriam* so skilfully uses. It was not only Tennyson who was ambivalent about the use of a collective “we”: one of the few more negative reviewers of *In Memoriam* criticises Tennyson's “we”. He begins the review by critiquing the practice of anonymous reviewing (though he himself is writing anonymously, an irony he acknowledges). What he finds particularly disturbing is the effect upon the general public of the system by which critics adopt an

anonymous “we” as a personal pronoun. He fears that “[T]he public *will* attach a false importance to the *we*...this *we* appears to involve omniscience and infallibility” (*English Review* Sep 1850: 71).

It is significant that a reviewer who notices the rhetorical manipulations potential in this collective pronoun should also be aware of the effects the language of *In Memoriam* would have on readers. Writing from a position of orthodox Christianity (he accuses Tennyson of accepting the propositions of Chambers' controversial *Vestiges of Creation*), he is particularly sensitive to the passages of the poem which he thinks will flatter or justify non-believers. Of section XXXIII, “O thou that after toil and storm”, he believes that “[w]e can scarcely conceive of more dangerous language than *this* of his – more flattering to the small vanity of a very numerous class already existing among us, and more calculated to lead thousands astray” (*English Review* Sep 1850: 73). The passage which this reviewer picks out contains second and third person pronouns as well as an “I”. He pinpoints another passage which deals with faith and doubt, section XCVI, and writes that “such language as this is infinitely mischievous” (76). The first passage, XXXIII, addresses a general audience with an unspecified “thou” (XXXIII, 1), and XCVI a more specific “[y]ou” (XCVI, 1), the woman who has admonished the speaker for his doubt. Though Ricks has identified the woman in section XCVI to be Emily Sellwood, and the man experiencing religious doubt to be Hallam (Ricks 1987: II, 414), the pronouns remain general: there is a “he” who wrestles with doubt, “[p]erplexed in faith, but pure in deeds/At last he beat his music out” (XCVI, 9-10). The reference to music also suggests that the speaker is talking about himself yet the phrase is couched in the generality of the third person. The reviewer fears that readers are being flattered by finding themselves and their beliefs confirmed through the operation of pronouns and address.

This reviewer is, however, alert to the rhetoric of Tennyson's poem only when he perceives that the ideas it suggests are contrary to his own beliefs, and he insists on seeing unorthodox propaganda. He is one of the few reviewers who perceives a rhetorical element in Tennyson's work, that his language is calculated to achieve a particular effect on the reader. Yet he too is seduced by Tennyson's lyric "I": he admires section XXI, beginning "I sing to him" and writes "we are captivated, we are enchanted, almost against our wills" (*English Review* Sep 1850: 77). The lyric "I" is sacrosanct and the reviewer, though alert to rhetoric elsewhere, has faith in the emotional sincerity of the poem's lyric speaker. What, in part, gave *In Memoriam* its cultural currency, what allowed the poem to speak for the age, was the perceived sincerity of its speaking voice. Another illustrative comment was that Tennyson possessed "that essential quality of a poet...sincerity of feeling" (*Melbourne Review* 1883: 29).

*In Memoriam* certainly uses rhetorical language to incorporate readers' voices and to engage with its audience. The speaker's resistance and ambivalence towards that rhetorical voice emerges in the more "poetical" passages (to return to Mill's definition) of the poem, where he turns his back on the audience. This poetical language parades itself as pure, and more spontaneously inspired by feelings and emotions than by conscience or aim. At various points throughout the poem, the speaker insists that the poem was not written to provide answers on any moral or religious matters, yet the poem was read by many critics as ultimately supporting Christianity. One perspicacious reviewer commented that "[o]ne creed has claimed him for its own, and another creed has fancied he belongs to it" (*Melbourne Review* 1883: 24) and it is clear that some readers mistakenly read one voice in *In Memoriam* where there are many.

By experimenting with contrasting voices and ways of addressing, the poem questions

the distinction between poetic and rhetorical language but also explores how awareness of one's audience actually changes the poet's own voice. There is no clear-cut division between the speaker talking to himself, or talking to an audience. When he claims to be talking to himself, it is often in order to prove to readers that he is doing so. At the same time, he often speaks with rather than to the reader. He incorporates the voices of his readers into the poem yet fears that his voice cannot remain his own when spoken by these others. The speaker is aware of how his voice may change once it becomes, as it were, public property, the voice of the age. Victorian reviewers demanded that a poet must be guided both by feeling and by duty, and that these two (sometimes opposing) elements must be reconciled. It is clear that they felt *In Memoriam* does reconcile them, praising the sincerity of its emotions, and the religious guidance they felt it gave to those with shaken faith. Yet there is no easy reconciliation between the conflicting voices in the poem, and the speaker struggles to find a way of speaking which allows him to channel the "voice of humanity" without the loss of his own.

The kind of audience which he attracted drew some commentators to proclaim Tennyson (both critically and otherwise) the poet of the age. One reviewer wrote cuttingly that "[h]e utters most gracefully the wishes and thoughts of a clique, a large and potent clique we grant...but...outside his particular world he is little appreciated" (*British Review* Oct 1864: 464). Another, full of praise, wrote that "his whole method of thought was in harmony with existing institutions...every line that he wrote, corresponded exquisitely with the status quo" (*The Bookman* Nov 1892: 54). This eulogy was written upon the occasion of Tennyson's death, demonstrating the solidity of his reputation as the representative of the Victorian middle classes.

At the time *In Memoriam* was written, he became

the willing and deliberate champion of vital Christianity, and of an orthodoxy the more sincere because it has worked upward through the abyss of doubt; the more mighty for good because it justifies and consecrates the aesthetics and philosophy of the present age.

(*Fraser's Magazine* Sep 1850: 245)

This reader discerns no possible conflict between Tennyson and nineteenth-century culture. The good faith in which Tennyson's poetry was read is evoked by the mirror imagery found in his peers' opinions. According to the *Edinburgh Review*, "he faithfully upholds his mirror to the living world" (*Edinburgh Review* Apr 1886: 487), or to Morton Luce, "no poet was ever more faithfully, or more usefully, the mirror of his age" (Luce 1893: 66). These comments exhibit a lack of awareness that readers may have already created their own image of themselves, which they project onto Tennyson's work. The mirror is symbolically superficial, where the perceived reflection stymies a more penetrating reading than the initial impression of a correspondence between poem and world.

T.S. Eliot wrote of *In Memoriam* that "it is a long poem made by putting together lyrics, which have only the unity and continuity of a diary, the concentrated diary of a man confessing to himself" (Eliot 1972: 333-34). Eliot overlooks the rhetorical element of the poem, which addresses an audience at the same time as it portrays a man confessing to himself. The unity, or lack of unity, of the poem has been much debated: Christopher Ricks argues that we should accept that *In Memoriam* has the unity of a "congeries rather than of a single poem" (Ricks 1989: 204). Alan Sinfield argues that the stanzaic form,

ABBA, gives “to the whole sequence the harmony and unity which...has been taken as the hallmark of art’s transcendence” (Sinfield 1996: 116). Yet when analysed rhetorically, it becomes clear that the unity of the poem lies not primarily in its structural or formal qualities, but in the unifying principle which operated upon its readers. The very multiplicity of its voices acted as a way of incorporating variant strands of experience in one place, offering readers a coherent sense of their own identity.

The unity which readers found in the poem did, however, bring its own problems. *In Memoriam*’s complexities, which might well have wrongfooted an audience wanting to hear what it already knew, were to some degree ironed out by the adulation it received. That Tennyson’s poetry could be distorted by other voices is clear in the many variant interpretations of his work, and this knowledge in turn shapes the permutations of his own poetic voice. The very considerable success of *In Memoriam* could have proved a stumbling block for any poet. After all, what more is left for a poet to say once he has achieved such harmony with his readers? Tennyson famously, indeed notoriously, reacted against his achievement with the publication of *Maud*, a difficult dramatic poem which initially provoked virulent hostility from many of his readers.

Before engaging with the complexities of *Maud*, however, I shall turn to the careers of Browning, Matthew Arnold, and Arthur Clough. Their poetry in this period constitutes an illuminating counterpoint to Tennyson’s negotiations with his audience and, in different ways, all four poets were asking a very similar question: how was it possible to write for a demanding audience whilst retaining the integrity of one’s own poetic voice? Although a superficial view of the reputation of Browning and Tennyson at the beginning of the 1850s would indicate that their careers had taken very different directions (Browning still languished far behind Tennyson in the popularity stakes and had produced no great work

to rival *In Memoriam*), their poetry is engaged with similar problems. Browning, too, was questioning how to reconcile the needs and demands of his audience with his own imaginative impulses, and in the next chapter, I examine how *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, and *Men and Women* illuminate the problems facing poets of the mid-Victorian age.

## Chapter 4

### The Artist's Vision in Browning's *Men and Women*

“Mr. Tennyson never writes...a line that does not base itself upon some common thought; Mr. Browning never puts down on paper an idea that could possibly have occurred to any man but himself.” (*Quarterly Review* Apr 1869: 340)

In the wake of *Sordello*, Browning doggedly pursued his quest to win over his British audience with both plays and poetry. Yet *Sordello* had left an indelible mark and reviewers found it hard to forgive him his apparent contempt of the reader. Their irritation with Browning proved to be one of the most enduring reactions through the 1840s and 1850s, and they continued to take him to task for the difficulty of his work. From their perspective, he was a poet of enormous potential who could not be brought to heel. He remains always just beyond their grasp, and any praise for him is almost always qualified by frustration. They homed in on his obscurity and speculated on its causes. Was Browning motivated by laziness, scorn for the reader, pride, a cheap bid for originality or sheer perversity? Their very annoyance, however, is evidence that Browning had found his way under their skin. Whether they liked it or not, reviewers found themselves returning to his work, grappling with it, and writing about it in many of the periodicals of the time. One reviewer who complained that *Sordello* was as “inexplicable as the riddle of the sphinx”, had to concede that “there is something in the mass of obscurity so singularly piquant, that...we are prompted...once and again to look into it” (*New Quarterly Review* Jan 1847: 351).

Fundamental to debates that go on within Browning's work as well as in reviews is the

balance of responsibility between the poet and the reader. Critics disagreed about how much the poet should extend a helping hand to the reader and make sure that their efforts were easily communicated, or how far the reader should pursue the poet on his obscure deviations. Some reviewers felt that the reader must make the effort to keep up: “[t]here are character, passion, and poetry, flung down on the paper, and it is certainly the reader's fault or misfortune if he does not perceive them” (CH Browning: 111), and “he is only obscure to those who have not capacity to perceive the delicacy of his conceptions” (*Monthly Magazine* Apr 1843: 357). On the other hand, G.H. Lewes reproaches Browning for being “one standing up to speak to mankind in his speech, not theirs – what he thinks, not what they think” (CH Browning: 120), and *The Gentleman's Magazine* felt that Browning was “writing for his own gratification and to his will, without much regard to the approbation of applause of his readers” (CH Browning: 101). Browning's poetry has its own way of challenging the terms of this debate, and in *Men and Women* he continued the work of *Sordello* in scrutinising the relationship between the poet and his audience.

Twentieth-century critics have found much to admire in Browning's construction of his relationship with readers in his dramatic monologues. Lee Erickson finds that “Browning also thinks of audiences both within and for his poetry in terms of whether they are free or controlled and, since he despises tyranny in any form, seeks to let his readers arrive at the truth of his poetry on their own” (Erickson 1984: 18). That Browning “anticipates the reader broaching gaps in meaning that are inevitably left open” (Bristow 1991: 22) endears him more to a twentieth-century audience than it did to his readers in the 1840s and 1850s. More recent critics have been interested in the new kind of relations with readers and the parallels between characters and readers which arose with the dramatic monologue. As Herbert Tucker states, “Browning's characters are often literally, and

always at least figuratively, readers” (Tucker 1980: 151), and the crossover between characters and readers was intensified in Browning’s dramatic monologues.

Although Browning had published his first dramatic monologues as early as 1836, it was after the disappointing reception of *Sordello* that he turned his attentions more seriously to the dramatic monologue, in a bid to achieve critical success. These shorter dramatic monologues, as Ian Jack points out, “offered him a means of escape from the frustration of a poet who had written long poems which hardly anyone had read and plays which no producer (now) was prepared to put on the stage” (Jack 1973: 74). The poems in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), and *Men and Women* (1855), hinge on relationships: between husbands and their wives, artists and their critics, students and their masters. As Glennis Byron points out, the dramatic monologue is able simultaneously to hold in dialogue a speaker and an auditor, at the same time as the poet and his reader (Byron 2003: 91). This form enabled Browning’s relationship with his readers and reviewers to run parallel with those dramatised in his monologues, and in a more sophisticated manner than *Sordello*. Rather than creating a narrator who comments on the action and interiority of other characters, poet and character are streamlined into one voice, reducing the bulkiness of *Sordello* to the more compact dramatic monologues.

Through this streamlining, Browning creates what Isobel Armstrong terms the “double poem”, a poem with a single voice which is both the “subject’s utterance” and the “object of analysis and critique” (Armstrong 1993: 12). Armstrong argues that the expressive and epistemological models enabled by the double poem allowed Victorian poets at once to explore psychological states and to question the phenomenology of a culture. Browning’s dramatic monologues use this doubleness to question cultural modes of reading and consuming art, often, as in *Sordello*, writing against the grain of readers’ expectations. The

dramatic monologues of *Men and Women* dramatise the psychological state of their protagonists, but also experiment with the various relationships possible between the poet and his audience. The parallels between speaker-auditor and poet-reader provide a rich seam for Browning scholars. Warwick Slinn writes of Browning's speakers:

As they confront the impositions of a world which would absorb them into its own shaping processes, speakers are engaged in defence of their very existence as individuals, and they often retaliate through acts of verbal aggression which attempt instead to subsume the world into *their* web of understanding.

(Slinn 1982: ix-x)

Slinn's comments on the solipsism of Browning's characters apply with equal significance to the pressures which were acting upon poets of the 1840s and 1850s, where artists like Browning had to defend the singularity of their work in a literary milieu which often sought to impose its own "shaping processes" on them. In my own discussion, I wish to examine Browning's relation to his audiences through the idea of vision, and in the context of the reviews written in the 1840s and 1850s.

What emerges as a key to understanding Browning's relationship to his audience is the idea of vision. In *Sordello*, Browning had defined the ideal poet as one who can "impart the gift of seeing to the rest" (III, 868), and both the subjective and objective poet in "Essay on Shelley" *see* the divine spirit and the world more clearly than others (Browning 2009: 576). His notion of the poet's vision was one shared by G.H. Lewes, who wrote that

the man of genius is endowed with vision so keen, that where ordinary men observe only the broad distinctions of character, he detects all the myriad shades of difference...he is enabled to see things in their truth. The greater part of mankind neither see for themselves, nor think for themselves.

*(The British Quarterly Review Nov 1847: 494)*

The belief that the poet possessed a keener vision than his fellow-men was by no means a new idea, but Browning's poetry poses some pertinent questions on the issue. How is the artist to communicate his vision to those who see through different eyes? Could there be an element of coercion on the artist's part in seeking to align his readers' vision with his own? And, equally, if the artist must simplify his vision of the world in order that others understand it, does he compromise his own integrity?

Eyes are important signals in *Men and Women*, and whether characters see through their own or another's eyes tells us who is in control and who is being controlled. The alignment of vision is fundamental to the development of an ethics of relationship between the poet and the reader. Browning's ideal poet will not make us see through his eyes, but help us to see better through our own. Becoming the ideal poet who imparts the gift of seeing to others was, however, more difficult than it may have seemed, and in both the dramas of Browning's poetry and in the reception of his work, there are many deviations from this ideal state.

To begin by reminding ourselves of Browning's position in the late 1840s, it is interesting to note that he was under markedly similar pressures to Tennyson. There had

been an increasing number of requests for Tennyson to publish a long poem which would take up some issue of importance to society, and the same requests were made of Browning. In 1846 he was challenged to show his mettle by a reviewer who believed that “Mr. Browning would be a poet of high order, if he could free himself from his affectations, and set before himself a great aim in poetry” (CH Browning: 113). Another reviewer in 1848 commented that heated discussion over the appointment of a new Laureate revealed “the want of someone whom they [the public] may regard as their spokesman, as the exhibitor of those ideas and experiences which they believe to be the property of their generation” (*Fraser’s Magazine* Mar 1848: 328).

As Browning's characters often seek to coerce or cajole their auditors, Browning himself was not adverse to trying out new ways of writing in order to gain critical and financial success. In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett he claims that “the not being listened to by one human creature would, I hope, in nowise affect me” (Browning 2009: 604). He accompanies his assertion with a witty comparison of publishing poetry to selling cabbages in the marketplace. His remark that

for a dozen cabbages...I might demand...a dozen pence at Covent  
Garden Market...and that...for a dozen pages of verse, brought to the  
Rialto where verse-merchants most do congregate, ought to bring me  
a fair proportion of the Reviewers' gold currency

(Browning 2009: 604)

reveals a cynical but acute sense of the literary marketplace, which, for all his denial, he was sometimes willing to play. Of his 1855 volume, *Men and Women*, he wrote to a friend

“I am writing a sort of first step towards popularity (for me!) 'Lyrics' with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see” (Jack 1995: xiv).

In the preceding volume to *Men and Women, Christmas-Eve and Easter Day*, Browning's modifications to his style and setting show an attempt to answer some of his critics' demands. Published in 1850, in the same year as *In Memoriam, Christmas-Eve and Easter Day* corresponds to Tennyson's poem in a number of ways. Both take contemporary religious faith as their focal point; both are written in the lyric first person and depict a personal response to current religious debates. Despite their affinity, nevertheless, Browning's poem “was totally eclipsed by the success of Tennyson's poem” (Watson 1974: 12). Although it garnered none of the spleen provoked by *Sordello*, it was thought to be “strange as poetry, and mystical as Christianity” (CH Browning: 140), and full of “prosaic triteness” (*Literary Gazette* 13 Apr 1850: 261). In this instance, it is easy to agree with Browning's reviewers; his attempts to modify his poetry, in form and style, resulted in a poem largely deficient in artistic merit, and his endeavour to correct his faults stifled his originality.

*Christmas-Eve and Easter Day* drops the historical dramas of the plays and of *Sordello* for a contemporary first person narrative where the speaker undertakes a spiritual journey to three different religious settings – a Nonconformist chapel, St. Peter's in Rome, and a lecture at Gottingen by a biblical hermeneuticist – and records his impressions of each. While it would be naive to read the speaker of the poem as the voice of Browning himself, it more closely resembles a lyric poem than any of Browning's contemporary works. Rather than a dramatic monologue where the speaker is overheard, in *Christmas-Eve* the speaker directly addresses an assumed reader. With no other characters involved in the conversation, there is none of the energetic tension between a speaker and an auditor

which characterises the dramatic monologues. The speaker remains a detached, invisible observer of those he depicts and there is no conversation or emotional engagement between him and the people he sees. Without this engagement the narrator seems self-absorbed and even superior, and this impression is heightened by his use of the first person pronoun, as when he states emphatically, “Me, one out of a world of men” (406), and describes himself as “I, a man who possesses both [love and intellect]” (735).

Where the pronominal addresses in *In Memoriam* open up the possibility of identification between the speaker and the reader, *Christmas-Eve* closes them off. In contrast to the opening of Tennyson's poem, which invites “us” to share in a communal relationship with Christ, Browning's speaker portrays his relationship with God only in the first person: “I shall behold thee, face to face,/ O God” (363-4). Tennyson balances his personal and universal pronouns, and in doing so, achieves both an authentic emotional narrative and a communal relationship with his readers, but *Christmas-Eve* invites no real empathy from the reader.

When the speaker eventually does try to address the reader, asking, “For lo, what think you?” (375), his address falls flat because he has failed to build any emotional resonance between ourselves and him. About two-thirds of the way through the poem, he switches from the lyric “I” to the communal “we”, writing,

the truth in God's breast  
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed...  
We are made in his image to witness him: (1018-19, 21)

As with his second person address, his use of the communal pronoun does not ring true,

because “we” have not participated in the drama of the poem. The absence of any meaningful relationship between the speaker and the characters he observes, and of any invitation to share in a spiritual revelation, dismantles the empathy of the speaker, and with it the possibility of conveying wisdom. Instead, the text is peppered with didactic, patronising statements which fail to resonate, such as,

Who speaks of man, then, must not sever,  
 Man's very elements from man,                   (296-7)

Browning changes tack in *Easter Day*, where he adds a second speaker in dialogue with the first. The second speaker delivers conventional ideas about religion in order that the first speaker can respond to and complicate these ideas. However, this second speaker remains no more than a transparent vehicle for the ideas Browning wishes to discuss. An exchange in stanza VIII highlights the awkwardness of this technique, where the first speaker addresses the second:

Do you say this, or I? – Oh, you!  
 Then, what, my friend? – (thus I pursue  
 Our parley)   (227-9)

The dialogue between the speaker and his friend seems forced and artificial. Here and elsewhere, the poem lacks any sense of a real conversation between two characters, and, unlike *In Memoriam*, it fails to convey a convincing spiritual struggle. The language of the speaker’s spiritual exploration is formulaic, as in the opening lines, “How very hard it

is to be/ A Christian!” (1-2) and abounds in platitudes. It seems as though Browning’s attempt to write with a more transparent syntax meant that the content of the poem borders on the facile.

As well as attempting to deal with a contemporary subject, *Christmas-Eve and Easter Day* appears to adjust the stylistic methods singled out for criticism by reviewers and Browning's aesthetic choices accord with some of the recommendations made by reviewers. The exuberant, dense language of the early poetry has all but disappeared, and the roughness and obstruction of his syntax have been ironed out. In making the poem more accessible – the narrative of the poem is unusually (for Browning) easy to follow – he was responding to hints about readers' habits. The *Monthly Magazine* had stated that, “[e]very line in [*Pippa Passes*] requires the reader to *think*; a task which the populace detest, and would avoid, if they could” (*Monthly Magazine* May 1841: 538). Less *thinking* is needed to read *Christmas-Eve* than most of Browning's work to date, but the language is anæmic and uninteresting, and in comparison with *Sordello*, its rhyming couplets often sound trite, as in

For the loving worm within its clod

Were diviner than a loveless god.     (*Christmas-Eve*, 285-6)

If Browning had hoped to gain critical success with this poem, his hopes were dashed once again, and in this case, he was exceeded by Tennyson's achievement. More recently, Mary Sanders Pollock has attempted to defend the poem on the grounds that it “has not been understood within the traditions of vision literature or satire”, but her generic attribution, which argues that “Browning dismantles his narrator's authority...to suggest

that no totalizing discourse can be valid” (Pollock 2003: 116, 115), fails to remedy its artistic defects. His narrator's authority is dismantled to the extent that he is unable to build a relationship with his auditors.

Browning's experiment with direct address in *Christmas-Eve and Easter Day* followed a general desire that poets “address themselves...to a world of men who have no time for trifling – even with poetry: we would have them seek to explain, not to mystify, the mysteries of life; and endeavour to attain to that clearness and intelligibility of style” (*English Review* Dec 1845: 262). Though Browning scorned Tennyson and Keats for heeding their critics – why they “go softly all their days for a gruff word or two is quite inexplicable to me” (Browning 2009: 605) – he appears on this occasion to take his own critics to heart. *Christmas-Eve and Easter Day* aspires to a clear and intelligible style, and to explain some of the mysteries of religion, but its mediocrity illustrates that Browning's poetry was not at its best when it set up a direct relationship between the poet and the reader.

It is surely significant that in 1855 both Tennyson and Browning published a volume of dramatic poetry (Tennyson's *Maud* to Browning's *Men and Women*). Their choice not to address their audience directly, but to distance themselves through the medium of a dramatic character suggests the need to carve out a space where poet-audience relationships could be re-negotiated. In the 1840s and 1850s critics grew ever more didactic and commanding as they took poets to task. One reviewer writes in a schoolmasterly tone, “[i]f we valued Mr. Browning's abilities at a lower rate, we certainly should have treated his faults with more leniency” (CH Browning: 173). Both Tennyson and Browning used the dramatic form to reimagine these relationships, and to rewrite the terms under which they served as spokesmen to their age. In Browning's most interesting

work, the poet-reader relationship is always mediated by that of the speaker and auditor, as it is in his dramatic monologues.

One form that this mediation took in the 1840s and 1850s was Browning's relationship with Elizabeth Barrett. His marriage brought about a major shift in his poetic and personal life, and any account of his poetic development must take into consideration their dialogue through their letters and poems. Lee Erickson's study claims that "Browning turns from seeking the applause of a general audience (abandoning explicitly political poetry in the process) and turns towards Elizabeth and the spiritual sustenance of love", and that in *Men and Women* he was writing "to please Elizabeth, not to impress his family, gain fame, or prepare for the stage" (Erickson 1984: 20). Erickson goes too far in his exclusion of Browning's more public readers for the evidence of letters and the poems themselves show him to be as attentive as ever to questions of fame and of his own reception. In separating Elizabeth, a private audience, from Browning's public audience, Erickson also fails to recognise that addressing one's lover in poetry is always a public gesture. As T.S. Eliot writes, "a good love poem, though it may be addressed to one person, is always meant to be overheard by other people" (Eliot 1957: 90), and Browning's poetry is no exception. Other critics have recognised how crucial this understanding was to Browning, and Mary Sanders Pollock writes that, "Elizabeth Barrett enabled him to reconsider the transaction between author and audience which is essential if the written conversation is to continue" (Pollock 2003: 2). The written conversation between the two was carried on in poems and letters, and helped Browning to understand the nature of writing for someone who was at once a flesh-and-blood reader and, at the same time, an imaginary construct, existing both within and without the text.

The impression that *Men and Women* shifts its focus away from a public orientation is

also held by Stefan Hawlin, who believes that for all “its relative withdrawal from politics and the contemporary realm... *Men and Women* is striking for the way it explores a subjective, literary, inner world, focused on the intimacies of love” (Hawlin 2002: 81). In fact, the relationship between the poet and his lover provided Browning with another way of mediating between the poet and reader and these relationships, though sometimes mediated through historical distance, attend to pressing concerns facing artists in Browning’s own time. Love poems such as “Two in the Campagna” and “By the Fireside”, while not directly autobiographical, allowed Browning a different way of imagining how a poet could speak to others.

A reading of Browning’s “Two in the Campagna” alongside Elizabeth Barrett’s *Sonnets From the Portuguese* (written in secret during their courtship and revealed to Browning only after their marriage) shows both poets engaged in an exploration of the closeness possible between two people. They delve into the dark emotions which can arise from love, and examine the dangers and limits of such closeness. The images and ideas thrown up by the two poets deepened Browning’s understanding of poetic relationships, and informed other dramatic monologues in *Men and Women*. Both poets display an impulse to embrace the other, but recognise that this kind of love, if indulged too far, could suffocate and destroy the other. Always close to the surface of their poems is the danger that one lover should take a step too far. In Sonnets V and XXII, Barrett uses the imagery of fire to convey the danger to her lover if he should come too near: she commands him to “Stand further off then! Go” (V, 14), in case the “fires” of her grief should “scorch” (V, 13) him. What is most difficult to attain is an individual autonomy within the union of their love.

In Sonnet VI, Barrett explores this problem and declares that if Doom should try to

separate the lovers, he would fail, and

leave[s] thy heart in mine

With pulses that beat double. What I do

And what I dream include thee, as the wine

Must taste of its own grapes. (VI, 9-12)

There is a hint of ambiguity in the image of the wine, where the delectable liquid produced by the union of the lovers requires the trampling of individual grapes. She risks their autonomy by this physical subsuming of her actions and her dreams, and the two lovers only precariously maintain an existence as separate beings. The sonnet hovers between union and autonomy; her lover is taken into her mind – when she prays, God “sees within my eyes the tears of two” (VI, 14) – but she manages to maintain the sense that they are still “double”.

The fine line between loving inclusiveness and annihilation of the individual is taken up in “Two in the Campagna”, one of Browning's most intriguing love poems. As the speaker and his lover are walking together through the countryside, he imagines them straying in spirit and mind as well as in body. He “touched a thought” (6) about their love which has “tantalized” (7) him with its elusiveness, and compares it to “turns of thread the spiders throw/ Mocking across our path” (8-9). As it runs from the “yellowing fennel” (12) to “Some old tomb's ruin” (14), he asks his lover, “Help me to hold it”, “Hold it fast” (11, 20). The metaphor works to portray the fleeting thoughts that he has about his love; he must chase them to keep up. He imagines the spirit of his lover through these multiplying threads, and asks her, “How is it under our control/ To love or not to love?”

(34-5), acknowledging that they cannot control the play of thoughts they have about each other, or how these thoughts lead them both towards and away from each other.

He then describes his wish to catch hold of this incessant flux of thought, in order to be able to clasp his lover in a moment of closeness:

I would that you were all to me,  
 You that are just so much, no more...  
 Where does the fault lie? What the core  
 O' the wound, since wound must be? (36-7, 39-40)

The innate rift between himself and his lover who cannot be all to him recalls the scene in *Paradise Lost* after Eve has eaten the apple, where “Earth felt the wound” (Milton 1971: IX, 782). Earth's “wound” recognises the fall into knowledge and self-consciousness, which brings an end to the harmonious union between Adam and Eve. Browning's speaker regrets this predetermined barrier, the index of a fallen world, a world of division and alienation, which separates him from his lover.

His wish that it could be otherwise is framed by the bodily imagery of hearts and eyes also present in Barrett's *Sonnets From the Portuguese*. Browning reworks this imagery in the following lines:

I would I could adopt your will,  
 See with your eyes, and set my heart  
 Beating by yours, and drink my fill  
 At your soul's springs, (41-4)

Though the lines present a vision of union where his will is subsumed to his lover's – he would do her will, and see with her eyes – they also hint at a potential darkness. To drink his fill intimates a greediness which takes account of his own appetite rather than the capacity of his lover, or what she chooses to give him. By adopting her will, he could just as easily command it as be commanded by it.

The echoes of Barrett's *Sonnets* heighten this ambiguity. Browning's speaker's address “O my dove” (31) and his image of the heart corresponds to Sonnet XXXV, where Barrett writes,

Open thine heart wide,  
And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.                   (XXXV, 13-14)

The speaker of “Two in the Campagna” responds by confronting the darker possibilities of such a union which could result in a loss of control, or even a kind of tyranny. After expressing his desires, he pauses, and steps back to consider his action. He states emphatically:

No. I yearn upward, touch you close,  
Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,  
Catch your soul's warmth,   (46-8)

By standing away, he establishes distance between the two, and by kissing his lover's cheek, reminds himself that they are two separate bodies rather than one being. Their

pulses will not beat double, and by resisting that impulse, the speaker catches the benevolent “warmth” of his lover's soul rather than the dangerous fire Barrett warns of in the *Sonnets*. The “good minute” (50) of closeness goes, and the speaker must pursue the thread which is “[o]ff again!” (57). The threads are woven by spiders and could easily have become a web to catch his lover and hold her there, but instead they resume their wild and capricious tumble across the landscape, leaving the speaker once again in pursuit.

In Sonnet XXIX, Barrett is also concerned to find ways of loving which do not hamper the autonomy of the other. She subverts traditional gender imagery to imagine the relationship between two lovers. The poem opens with a conventional image of the strong male as a tree who supports the weaker female:

my thoughts do twine and bud

About thee, as wild vines, about a tree, (XXIX, 1-2)

When she realises that this mode of being could trap or suffocate her lover, she declares, “I will not have my thoughts instead of thee” (XXIX, 6). She overturns her image, and commands her lover to

Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,

And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee

Drop heavily down,...burst shattered, everywhere!

Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee

And breathe within thy shadow a new air

I do not think of thee – I am too near thee. (XXIX, 9-14)

The thrice-rhyming of “thee” in this second half of the sonnet imitates the mental shift from herself to her lover. By being like a “wild vine”, the speaker comes once again “too near” her lover to allow him to be an independent being. The growth offered to her own thoughts from his support are perceived to be a selfish impulse on her part, and she wishes his true self to emerge, unhampered by her thoughts. As in “Two in the Campagna”, the impulse to be spiritually and physically entangled is expressed, held up for examination, and ultimately resisted. Sublimated erotic energy works alongside the spiritual aspect of their relationship, but what remains at stake is their proximity, and the wish not to trespass too far into the other's being.

Browning's love poetry and his dialogue with Barrett enabled him to develop an ethics of relating which carried over into his other dramatic monologues. Both poets privilege movement over stasis – Browning will be “[o]ff again!” (57), chasing the thread of their love – and seek open spaces rather than fixed, closed ones. These questions of closeness and harmony, control and power are important in Browning's work as a whole, and love is only one lens through which they are explored. As well as offering Browning this medium for understanding possible ways of relating to poetic auditors, Barrett challenges his relationship to the world, reflecting his own self-image back at him. In Sonnets III and IV, she describes her conception of their differing poetic roles. Browning is described as a “guest for queens to social pageantries” (III, 6), who has a “calling to some palace-floor” (IV, 1), whereas Barrett depicts herself as a “poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through/ the dark” (III, 11). The distinction between the two is symbolised by the chrisom for Browning, a symbol of institutionalised authority, and the dew for Barrett, a natural

image free from any public authority.

At this stage in their careers Barrett was better known and respected, and had been a serious competitor to Tennyson for the Poet Laureate. In contrast to Browning, who was actively involved in the round of dinners, parties, and social events which constituted literary society, Barrett lived in a reclusive style and saw only a limited number of visitors (Cramer 1940: 208). In Sonnets III and IV, she depicts herself as a lonely, wandering poet who sings to herself in lyric fashion, and Browning as engaged in society, singing for the entertainment of others. The two sonnets at first appear to confirm Browning in a superior role, with herself living in “desolation” (IV, 13), but on closer inspection, she equivocates about his position. Browning must “play [his] part/ Of chief musician” (III, 8-9), suggesting that his position is that of an employee who is not autonomous, and must act out his part rather than be himself. The final lines of IV, where she describes her own poetic voice, are particularly ambiguous:

there's a voice within

That weeps...as thou must sing...alone, aloof. (IV, 13-14)

Are the words “as thou must sing” a description or a command? Does “alone” describe her own voice, or the voice she enjoins Browning to take up, leaving behind the glamour of his “social pageantries” (III, 6)? In the final line of III, she writes that “Death must dig the level where these both agree” (III, 14), implying that the two ways of being are irreconcilable; that the lonely poet is radically separate from the poet engaged with his auditors, and that one must choose between them.

The stark choice which Barrett presents here between the lonely poet who appears to

possess greater autonomy and one who pleases his audience is a distinction explored by Browning in *Men and Women*. In this 1855 volume there are a number of poems which take historical artists as their subject and dramatise them as a way of posing dilemmas about his engagement with his own audience. In “Pictor Ignotus”,<sup>5</sup> “Andrea del Sarto”, and “Fra Lippo Lippi”, Browning questions how far an artist should adapt himself to his audience, detach or engage with them, and to what degree an audience can or should change the direction of the artist. The historical distance enabled Browning to play out debates which raged in his reviews, where his critics argued over what concessions Browning should make, and how far his readers should attempt to follow him.

A common image in reviews of Browning around this period is that of the poet soaring off into the skies and leaving the reader far behind. “He soars out of sight, indeed; but it is the spectator’s weakness that he cannot follow him” (*New Quarterly Review* Jan 1847: 352), and “he soars away upon the wings of soliloquial thought where few will care to follow him” (*English Review* Dec 1845: 260). These monologues depict the aesthetic and personal choices of three contrasting artists and correct the impression that Browning soars off into his imaginative world without regard to his readers. Threads which were first woven into *Sordello* are picked up again in *Men and Women*, as Browning continues to explore all the nuances of a poet's relationship with an audience.

As in *Sordello*, Browning situates his discussion in a historical period removed from his own, but unlike *Sordello* he chooses artists rather than poets for his subjects, giving himself a different imaginative route to explore similar questions. “Andrea del Sarto” depicts an artist who is commercially and sexually powerless, and in order to win back his wife's favour he agrees to paint for her friend (whom we suspect is also her lover). Andrea

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<sup>5</sup> “Pictor Ignotus” was first published in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* in 1845 but redistributed to *Men and Women* in *The Poetical Works* of 1863.

must concede the subject, manner, time and cost of the painting to his customer, and his agreement demonstrates that money and sexual power, as much as imaginative inspiration, are the motivating forces of his art. His divided impulses form the basis of his self-knowledge and self-loathing and the crux of the poem is his fear that he has failed as an artist. He sometimes tries to disguise this belief from himself, or to hold the understanding of it at bay, but his sense of failure gloomily pervades the poem. At times self-pitying, petty, even hypocritical, Andrea feels within himself a lack, an absence, an incompleteness which troubles him, and lies at the base of his deficiency as an artist.

There are points in the poem when Andrea's honest self-appraisal about his failings arouses our pity, but elsewhere he shifts responsibility for his failures onto others. The ambiguity of his position has divided critics: Richard Altick admires Andrea's insight into his condition and his admission of the illusion of Lucrezia's love; as a result "our response is chiefly one of pity, dictated not by the painter's ignorance but by his very lack of ignorance" (Altick 1974: 226). Lines such as Andrea's vision of himself as a "twilight-piece" (49) when he realises, "[s]o free we seem, so fettered fast we are!" (51) support Altick's position. Herbert Tucker, however, has a less sympathetic perspective, arguing that Andrea falsely justifies his position in order to evade the spiritual struggles of a great artist: "Andrea purposely intends less than he can perform so that he may number himself among the 'half-men', the glorious failures of art, without enduring their struggles" (Tucker 1985: 197).

Andrea describes himself as "we half-men" (140), and believes,

Had I been two, another and myself,  
Our head would have o'erlooked the world!           (102-3)

At first, he tries to understand his lack through his relationship with his wife, Lucrezia. His desire that she should sit with him in the evening, “[b]oth of one mind” (16), recalls the impulse to be unified with one's lover in “Two in the Campagna”. Andrea attempts to offset his deficiency by blaming the weak union with his wife, and tells her that he might have been great had she encouraged him. “I might have done it for you” (132) he muses, but then prevaricates and admits that “incentives come from the soul's self” (134). He imagines that his rivals Rafael and Agnolo had no need for a wife, and asks Lucrezia, “[w]hy do I need you?/ What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?” (135-6). His question is both belligerent and plaintive, asserting his independence while revealing his own neediness.

His wife, however, is a deflection from the true problem, which lies in his relationship with his former patron, King Francis of France. The reason for his ascendancy in Francis' court is that he paints “with his [Francis'] breath on me...seeing with his eyes” (158-9); by subsuming his own vision to that of Francis, he takes on the perspective of his patron. This alignment of vision suggests that what is now lacking in Andrea's self was previously provided by his patron. He describes how the French court watch him,

such a fire of souls

Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,       (160-1)

Loy Martin argues that Francis' arms are “the protective boundaries of patronage... who both shelters and, in a sense, ‘owns’ Andrea” (Martin 1985: 142). In Browning's poem, this ownership is played out in physical symbolism; the physical body parts of his

audience, the “eyes” of Francis and the “hearts” of the courtiers literally motivate the movements of Andrea's hand. Francis’ breath (which is etymologically connected to inspiration) supplies Andrea with inspiration, the hearts of the French court with emotion, and the king's eyes give him the vision that he lacks. That his heart, breath and eyes are acquired by proxy confirm his image of himself as a half-man. His artistic lack is symbolised by his need to engage the vitality of others’ physical being, where Francis has “One arm about my shoulder” (156), providing a structural support for Andrea’s painting.

Andrea compares himself to the artists he envies in similarly physical terms:

There burns a truer light of God in them,  
 In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,  
 Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt  
 This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine       (79-82)

The physical inferiority conveyed in the images of himself as “low-pulsed” and elsewhere a “weak-eyed bat” (169) symbolises his artistic subordination to his rivals, and the lack of punctuation between the adjectives in line 80 expresses the vitality of these artists, who surpass Andrea's craftsmanship. Andrea pinpoints their greatness in their inability to communicate their visions of heaven to others. Their wills remain independent because they have a vision all their own that they “cannot tell the world” (86). In contrast, it is Andrea's perfect alignment with the French court, the physical fusion of hands, eyes, and hearts to make one being, which precludes his own artistic vision. By painting what his audience already sees or feels he adds nothing to the sum of human knowledge, nor does he challenge their views. Andrea's physical dependence on Francis is symbolic of the

weak artist who sees through the eyes of his audience, and happily aligns his will with theirs.

This delineation can be traced back to *Sordello* where, in his early career, Sordello decided to be a poet who will

vex

With no strange forms created to perplex,

But just perform their bidding and no more (II, 436)

His attitude results in his failure to hold the attention of the crowd, which ultimately dismisses him. Sordello's refusal to “vex” the crowd contrasts with the “vexed beating” brains of Andrea's hero-rivals. Andrea and Sordello's distaste for being vexed, or for vexing their audience, is a key to their lack of self-worth and sense of failure.

Andrea believes,

I, painting from myself and to myself,

Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame

Or their praise either. (90-2)

On the one hand, these lines seem disingenuous in the light of Andrea's evident vanity and egotism. But if we take the “I” to be the “I” of Andrea inhabiting the vision of Francis, the stasis of “unmoved” and the insularity of “from myself and to myself” indicate the undesirable qualities of the artist who takes up the vision of his patron-auditor. In being unable to break out of a circle of harmony with Francis, Andrea breaks no limits, creates

no strange forms, and fails to vex anyone, even himself, with his art.

Andrea's search for a lover to fill the lack in him is similar to that of the speaker in "Two in the Campagna", who also seeks a physical alignment of bodies. Unlike Andrea, he ultimately resists this impulse, proving himself a stronger lover than Andrea is an artist. Andrea reaches out to Lucrezia but, by rejecting him sexually, she refuses to complete him as a man or as an artist. Generally given a bad press for her lax morals, Lucrezia is, in another sense, a corrective force, almost the ideal lover or reader, who throws Andrea back unto himself. In her doing so, he is forced to see through his own eyes; his reach for her exceeds his grasp, and so the conditions for great art are put in motion.

Part of the genius of the poem is the discrepancy between the paintings Andrea creates and the words he speaks to us. The poem that Browning offers us, the drama of Andrea reaching out to a woman who resists him, being forced back onto his own self-knowledge, fulfils the conditions for the kind of art Andrea aspires to create. As readers, our own vision is wider than that of Andrea's and like many of Browning's most skilled dramatic monologues, the protagonist reveals more than he perhaps would like. He slips between moments of self-knowing and self-deception and, following him through these shifts, we are vexed by his slipperiness, having to read between the lines of the image he wishes to present to find the truth, a truth which remains tantalisingly just outside our own grasp.

"Pictor Ignotus", or the unknown painter, has a similarly disaffected artist as its protagonist. Like Andrea, pettiness lurks beneath his grandiose speech, and his opinions are inflected with jealousy of the young rival whom his auditor has praised. He represents the artist who takes the opposite course to Andrea; instead of embracing his audience and pleasing them to the annihilation of his own vision, he disengages and cuts himself off from them. The poem is set in the sixteenth century, and Pictor Ignotus is caught in the

transition from conventional, medieval art to the emergent movement of realism. Unable to adapt to changing tastes, he is eclipsed by his youthful rivals, and attempts to justify his position to an admirer of this new mode of painting.

In the first half of the poem, Pictor speaks in the conditional, describing what he *could* have done, and what potential lay within him. The conditional tense tantalises both Pictor and the reader with a vision of illustrious paintings never to be executed. He tries to demonstrate his imaginative capacity by depicting in words the great paintings he could have drawn had things been different. Passion and inspiration characterise his dream of ideal art, and he writes,

Never did fate forbid me, star by star,  
 To outburst on your night with all my gift  
 Of fires from God...  
 Over the canvas could my hand have flung  
 Each face obedient to its passion's law  
 Each passion clear proclaimed without a tongue (4-6, 14-16)

In “Andrea del Sarto” the great artist is someone whose hand is impelled by his own imagination, not that of others, and Pictor Ignotus recognises this quality when he imagines the freedom of his own hand flinging images onto the canvas. Ironically, the paintings he imagines himself executing contain the very qualities lacking in himself. Where their faces are obedient to their passion's law, his hand is not obedient to the passion and fire he claims exist within himself. While their passions are “proclaimed without a tongue”, Pictor's passion can only be proclaimed second-hand with his tongue

because he has not brought it into existence in his paintings. His art remains inferior because he is unable to bring about a working relationship between his imagination and his hand.

His fundamental error is to believe that the ideal condition of the artist is one of complete sympathy with the world. He imagines that if he had allowed his “gift/ Of fires from God” to flourish, his pictures would go forth into the world and earn him praise and worship, and youths would “lie learning at my feet!” (35). If he had succeeded in this way, he would have lived “I and my picture, linked/ With love about, and praise” (36-7). The harmony that Pictor envisages between himself and his audience, between his expression and their understanding, ill prepares him for reality.

The poem turns half-way through from its conditional, imaginary state to Pictor's description of his experience of the world, and his decision to turn his back on it. Instead of the “loving trusting ones” (45) he had imagined, there are “cold faces” (46) who “press on me and judge me” (47). He is horrified at the philistine ways of the world who “buy and sell our pictures” (50) and count them as little more than furniture. In particular, he abhors the superficial discussions of pictures, the “daily pettiness” (54) of the buyers who proclaim their love or hate without thought. His belief in the union between himself and his picture, who would both be loved as one by the crowd, is an illusion also explored in *Sordello*. When Sordello pursued the career of a popular poet, he was disappointed to find that,

His auditory recognised no jot

As he intended, and, mistaking not

Him for his meanest hero, (II, 623-4)

Pictor's experience of the crowd corresponds with Sordello's in his discovery that the crowd will not necessarily understand what he wishes to convey, nor will they confuse him with his painting, and receive both as one entity.

Pictor's fear and loathing of his audience play into contemporary concerns about the commodification of art, and in particular, what Lucy Newlyn describes as a “a fear that readers were usurping the place of writers, rather than improving their capacity to reflect on what they read” (Newlyn 2000: 43). He frets about the fate of his paintings amongst those who do not know how to value them and will not give him the praise and warmth he feels he deserves. His anxiety is so great that he chooses to relinquish the attempt altogether, and retreats to an empty church where he will paint alone. He claims that, “[a]t least no merchant traffics in my heart” (62), defending his decision to withdraw from the world on grounds of his purity. Where Andrea allows the heart of his patron to replace his own, Pictor cuts off his heart from any contact with his audience.

Our judgement of Pictor hinges on whether we are persuaded by his argument that he is right to hold himself back from the cold world, to remain alone painting frescoes which no-one will see. Loy Martin argues that Pictor is vindicated because he is trapped in a commercial climate he cannot change, and by “the incompatibility between maintaining the integrity of the self and submitting that self to the exchange values of trade” (Martin 1985: 38). But if we return to *Sordello*, it becomes clear that Pictor's position corresponds to a stage of Sordello's career which deviates from the path of the true poet.

Pictor's self-imposed imprisonment is similar to Sordello's solitary lingering in his garden before travelling to Mantua, depicted in the earlier poem as a stopping-point before Sordello's emergence into the political world. Pictor chooses to hide from the

world rather than offer his works to it; he hoards his work despite knowing that his pictures will “moulder” (67) and “gently die” (69) because they will wake no “echoes” (68) in others. This kind of possessiveness is always treated with suspicion in Browning's poetry, in lovers as well as artists, and there is something contemptible about Pictor's decision to remove his art from public life, and pass off his fear as artistic integrity.

“Andrea del Sarto” and “Pictor Ignotus” dramatise two ways in which the relationships between the artist and their audience can weaken artistic integrity. Their contrasting paths depict two extreme reactions to the question of an artist's relationship with their audience, reactions which were explored for the first time in *Sordello*, and are re-imagined in *Men and Women*. An overly sympathetic or a hostile audience surface in manifold forms in Browning's work as he seeks to understand how poets should best respond to them. Both of these artists attend too much to the vacillating opinions of their audience; Andrea lacks the strength to find his own vision beyond what is offered him by the French court, and Pictor lacks the courage to give up his paintings to the caprices of an audience of strangers. Loy Martin argues that Andrea and Pictor face a stark choice:

submit the whole self to the marketplace and a social system in which all exchange is subject to the alienations of a market economy or withdraw, betray the contracts of social life and the laws of economic life in order to be self-sufficient.

(Martin 1985: 149)

Martin's perspective is that Andrea and Pictor are powerless in the face of market forces, and are thus not responsible for their artistic methods. Yet, if we read Browning's artist

poems alongside the manifestos in *Sordello*, it is clear that Browning wished to make at least some aesthetic judgment on his artists.

Andrea and Pictor correspond to the analyses in *Sordello*, where the narrator concludes that there are three types of poet:

the worst of us, to say they have so seen;  
 For the better, what it was they saw; the best  
 Impart the gift of seeing to the rest.           (III, 866-68)

Pictor Ignotus fits the first category because he speaks of the imaginative visions he sees in his mind but is unable to bring into being. Andrea is able to portray what it was he saw through the eyes of his audience. To find the third type of artist, we must turn to one of Browning's most famous painters, Fra Lippo Lippi. All three artists are divided between their own artistic instincts and the influence of their audience. Each swayed to various degrees, Fra Lippo Lippi is the only one who emerges with his integrity intact. He chooses the middle ground, displaying a flexibility which neither Andrea nor Pictor possess.

Where the latter either lose or isolate themselves from their audience, Lippi maintains his individual vision while still being able to communicate with his listeners.

“Fra Lippo Lippi” portrays an artist who is caught between his artistic integrity and the demands of his employers and patrons, but also, on the occasion of the poem, between his artistic impulses and his need to persuade the captain of the guard to let him off the hook for breaking curfew. To fully understand the poem, it is imperative not to extract the ideas about art from the dramatic context of a dependent artist trying to extricate himself from a sticky situation and establish his level in society against that of a soldier. Lippi's handling

of the captain indicates how the artist's creations are always pulled between negotiations with the audience he must address at that moment and the remarkable vision he wishes to offer to the world.

The poem opens as Lippi is caught by a small band of soldiers for breaking curfew; he euphemistically admits he has been visiting prostitutes, thus also breaking his monastic rule. His confident, sarcastic address to the soldier who holds him by the throat reveals that he has a trump card to play: he is under the protection of Cosimo de Medici. Under patronage himself, he patronises the soldiers with his mock hesitation in revealing his protector's name, "he's a certain...how d'ye call?/ Master – a...Cosimo of the Medici" (16-17). His deliberately off-hand manner establishes his superior position, and he mimics the munificence of the Medici house when he hands a quarter-florin to the men and assures them, "Lord, I'm not angry" (27). When the soldiers identify him he responds, "Yes, I'm the painter, since you style me so" (39), acknowledging the contingency of his profession upon the recognition of others. This contingency has been familiar since his childhood when he drew pictures of the monks in his hymn book, and they first "looked black" (135), but when the Prior legitimises his activity, hoping to "[l]ose a crow and catch a lark" (137), he is recognised as a painter.

What he has in common with the captain is that they are both under a greater authority, and share a similarly uneducated position in society. "You speak no Latin more than I, belike" (281), he says, seeking to emphasise their equal footing, and invites him, "[l]et's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch" (44). He presents himself as man of the world speaking to other men of the world, inviting their understanding and complicity, as when he exclaims, "I saw the proper twinkle in your eye" (42), and "zooks, sir, flesh and blood,/ That's all I'm made of" (60-1). He entertains the group with his comic story of

climbing down the window using his bedsheets, and with snippets of Italian folksong. His comic recounting of his misadventures is motivated by a need to win the soldiers' favour, and his position is more precarious than he admits.

The power he derives from his patron's name is not absolute, and he gets into trouble when he lets slip an expostulation against his highers and betters, “[h]ang the fools!” (335). His indiscretion obviously catches the attention of the soldiers (we can almost see them glancing at each other in acknowledgment of his slip, something which could be used against him), and he immediately retracts:

– That is – you'll not mistake an idle word

Spoke in a huff by a poor monk...

Oh, the church knows! don't misreport me now! (336-7, 340)

Suddenly he must switch from the image of a successful painter under the patronage of a powerful ruler into a “poor monk”, from a man whom the soldiers should be wary of, to a man who is too insignificant to be worth reporting. By the end of the poem, he has recovered his position enough to say, “[y]our hand sir...Don't fear me!” (390, 92), reinforcing both their equality, but also a slight excess of power on Lippi's part. By implying the possibility that the captain has something to fear from him, rather than the other way around, Lippi assures his collusion. His verbal shifts and the continual adjustments to the manner and tone of his speech demonstrate the tightrope on which he walks.

In order to keep the captain on his side, he flatters him by assuming his understanding and knowledge of the world: “[y]ou understand me” (270), and “you've seen the world”

(282). But as well as trying to align the captain's vision with his own, he offers him a new way of seeing the world. As in “Andrea del Sarto” and “Pictor Ignotus”, how the artist and the audience “see”, and whose eyes they see through, is of fundamental importance. The monks are “taught what to see and not to see” (167), and Lippi criticises this limitation of their vision. His patrons are still supporters of traditional medieval and iconographic art, which presents the human in its ideal form. Their view is mocked by Lippi's rendering of their proposals:

Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.  
 Your business is to paint the souls of men –  
 Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke...no, it's not[...]  
 It's...well, what matters talking, it's the soul!           (182-4, 87)

The belief that the soul can be painted without the body is made ludicrous by the stumbling contradictions of the monks and the illogic of their argument.

Lippi is part of the Renaissance movement away from idealism to a more naturalistic, realistic art. Rather than simply presenting the choice between these two alternatives as a stylistic one, Browning gives Lippi's aesthetic impulses a much deeper dimension. His vision is not just to convey the flesh of man in a realistic form, but to make his audience see the soul of man through their flesh; “you'll find the soul you have missed” (219) if you choose to see the “simple beauty” (217) of man. He sums up his artistic mission in the lines,

we're made so that we love

First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see; (300-02)

His formulation that the artist can make us see objects in the world anew correlates with the assertion in *Sordello* that the best poet is the one who “imparts the gift of seeing to the rest” (III, 868). Lippi’s correspondence to *Sordello*’s best poet demonstrates Browning’s commitment to dramatising possible manifestations of such artistry, to understand how an artist could impart the gift of seeing to the rest.

Lippi has been frustrated in his mission by the monks who refuse the gift of his vision and insist that art must teach piety and submission, not offer us reality in a different light. His encounter with the captain and his band of soldiers allows him another opportunity of conveying his essential vision of art. He twice offers to paint one of the soldiers, in the first instance claiming “you should see!” (38), and in the second, asking

Have you noticed, now,  
 Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,  
 And trust me but you should, though! (306-8)

As well as offering them a different way of seeing each other, he attempts to re-orient the captain's idea, inviting him, “[y]ou be judge” (280). He reminds him of “the beauty and the wonder and the power” (283) of the world and asks him a series of questions: “[d]o you feel thankful?” (286), “[w]hat's it all about?” (290). His questions invite the captain and his soldiers to look at the world in a different light. He shifts his perspective to make it similar to that of the captain and the soldier, but at the same time, he asks them to look

at the world and each other anew.

That Lippi devotes so much energy to the small band of soldiers suggests that they are a more worthy audience than the monks and aristocrats who patronise him. The monks importune Lippi to create art which fits their preconceptions, and their refusal of his “gift of seeing” (*Sordello*, III, 868) is reminiscent of Browning's own audience, who had for the most part rejected his vision of the world. Lippi ridicules the stance of those who believe themselves to be the guardians of culture, as reviewers did, and instead offers his vision of art to the soldiers. His volte-face recalls the Parable of the Great Feast, where a rich man has invited a series of important guests to a magnificent banquet. When they fail to arrive, sending feeble excuses, he sends his servants into the streets to collect the lame, the blind, and the poor to the feast instead (Luke 14: 16-24). Lippi's own background on the streets and the roughness of the soldiers represents a different kind of milieu to that of the monks and aristocrats. One critic spoke admiringly of Browning's interest in the seamier side of things, writing that he does “not pick his path with delicate step along the world's highway, fearful of dirtying his feet...[he] peers with scrutinising glance into byeways, alleys, and noisome dens...with the living tones of a man who enters into the human and passionate element” (CH Browning: 167).

As readers of the poem, we too are invited to choose which kind of audience we wish to be. “Fra Lippo Lippi” is a rich and complex poem which has drawn critics again and again and the extraordinary number of interpretations of the poem is testament to the way it invites readers to see in many different ways. It opens up our vision rather than insisting that we see the world through the poet's eye. Each of these dramatic monologues present a challenge to the reader, who must fill in the gaps of the narrative and read between the lines to discover the nature of the situation dramatised. We must work out who the artist

is, and how he relates to his historical and artistic age, as well as his personal situation. We must work out when to take these speakers at their word and when to hear them critically. Browning asks us to adjust our vision, to look through the eyes of another, but also to look at others through different eyes.

Yet Stefan Hawlin argues that Browning's openness to relative interpretations has its limits. He writes,

We can be sure that we know exactly what the poet intends us to think of a particular character because...Browning expects us to decode what his characters say in the context of moral norms that we can be certain we share with him. (Hawlin 2002: 65)

Underpinned by his “liberal Protestant Christianity” (Hawlin 2002: 170), Browning has an ultimate moral centre. Yet Hawlin is not entirely convincing. It seems obvious that, say, Fra Lippo is a likeable character, but Andrea del Sarto and Pictor Ignotus provoke more contradictory responses. Hawlin himself asks of Pictor, “[i]s this nervous inhibition, or rather integrity?” (Hawlin 2002: 72), and though he argues the latter, his very question highlights that either reading is possible. When Browning writes that the poet's quest is to “impart the gift of seeing to the rest” (*Sordello*, III, 868), it may be that, as Hawlin argues, he can only ever allow us to see the world through his own eyes. Yet if Browning asks the reader to see further than his own speakers, it is also possible that we can see further than Browning himself did. These monologues offer a vision of the environment in which Victorian artists were working; they are historical parables of the character of Victorian artists and consumers of that art.

Their resonance was, however, largely lost on Browning's immediate readers. If Browning had hoped to bring about a fuller understanding of the way artists worked, his hopes were dashed again. Critics refused to speculate about why Browning might choose to dramatise such a wide range of characters, and generally did not probe the poems for deeper meanings. The *Athenaeum* dismissed the enterprise, asking why Browning preferred “to rhyme the pleadings of a casuist, or the arguments of a critic, or the ponderous discourings of some obsolete schoolman – why he should turn away from themes in which every one can answer to his sympathies...is an enigma” (CH Browning: 157).

It was not just the perception that Browning was writing about obscure matters, of interest only to a few, that drew censure, but the manner in which they were presented. One critic despairs of Browning's methods:

He scorns the good old style of beginning at the beginning. He starts from any point and speaks in any tense he pleases...leaves out (or out of sight) a link here and another there of that which forms the inevitable chain of truth. (CH Browning: 192).

It was “his fashion of presenting incidents so allusively as to baffle ordinary penetration to discover what he means” (CH Browning: 163) that irked readers who had already struggled with *Sordello*. The internal dramas of the monologues largely confused rather than liberated his reviewers, and the gaps he left open in his poems bemused readers.

As with *Sordello*, Browning's explorations of artistic methods were not understood as such, and his reviewers overlooked the rich vein of questioning thrown up by his poems.

Again and again, Browning challenges contemporary modes of reading and consuming art. In “Popularity” he presents an unknown speaker who addresses a poet in a one-sided conversation which we overhear. Rather than artists talking about themselves to a layperson, as in “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Andrea del Sarto” and “Pictor Ignotus”, “Popularity” presents an unidentified speaker talking to an artist, challenging their methods. “Popularity” deals with a subject ever close to Browning's heart. In it, the speaker addresses a “true poet” (1) who is unpopular in his own day, and comments on the poetasters who gain worldly success by capitalising on the work of the true poet. The true poet is associated with Keats, who is named in the final line, and with Shelley, portrayed in the image of a star. Given these associations, along with Browning's own perceived lack of popular appeal up to this point, the poem is generally read to promote the true poet and condemn those who seek to please the crowd at the cost of originality; and the speaker is thought to voice Browning's own feelings. But the assumption that Browning's dramatic speakers articulate his own thoughts is always made at our peril, and on a closer examination of the poem, ambivalence about the speaker's adulation of the true poet begins to emerge.

The poem probes the view that a true poet must write for posterity, a view which had already hardened into a stereotype; as a writer in the *Eclectic Review* remarked, “[t]hat the genuine poet must ever linger in the rear of general recognition has of late become a truism in criticism” (*Eclectic Review* Aug 1849: 204). The legacies of poets such as Keats and Shelley (who were heralded as great poets only after their early deaths) had created a stereotype of the Romantic poet whose genius is unrecognised by his own age and, indeed, that to gain popular appeal was rather vulgar. This belief is, of course, complicated by another more dominant feeling that poets should act with responsibility

towards their audience. Such are the contradictions of any age.

Browning himself was deeply frustrated by his own reception and was caught between his reasonable desire to be appreciated by the public and a powerful sense of his own integrity. He was not adverse to winning an audience for his poetry, and writing of *Men and Women* in a letter he declares, “I am writing a sort of first step toward popularity (for me!) 'Lyrics' with more music and painting than before so as to get people to hear and see” (Jack 1995: xiv). A poem entitled “Popularity” allowed him to explore this deeply personal issue with the impersonality of the dramatic form. The speaker begins by offering to draw a portrait of the true poet, before presenting the central conceit of the poem, an ugly mollusc containing a beautiful blue dye fished up by the true poet. The poetasters – Hobbs, Nobbs, Nokes and Stokes – use the refined dye to colour their works and become celebrated by society, while no-one recognises the true poet for the dirty work of fishing up the mollusc.

Initially, the speaker appears to present the true poet favorably and to praise his integrity, but on a closer reading there is a discrepancy between the speaker's portrayal of his own creativity as against that of the true poet's. Where the speaker works in and for the present - “[m]eantime, I'll draw you as you stand” (21) – the true poet “holds the future fast” (13). The speaker asks God why he has held the true poet “clenched” (11) within his hand, which

Yet locks you safe from end to end

Of this dark world, unless he needs you,

Just saves your light to spend?

(8-10)

“Locks” and “clenched” are emphatic words which suggest imprisonment, and cast an ominous light on the “saving” of the poet's light. In Browning's universe, those who attempt to hold fast to what is precious are reprehended, as in, for example, “Gold Hair” (1863), where a young woman conceals gold coins in her hair in order to take her riches to the grave, the folly of which does not need to be stated.

Though in “Popularity”, God's hand will eventually loosen and “let out all the beauty” (12), God's action contravenes the biblical parable where Jesus tells his followers not to hide the light of God, saying, “[n]o man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light” (Luke 11: 33). By using this imagery, the speaker undermines the conventional idea that the poet who writes for posterity has a greater integrity than the one who courts popularity. The speaker distinguishes between the act of the true poet who delves into the ocean to fish up the mollusc, and the poetasters who use the extract of bottled dye to colour their work. Yet the image of the blue dye forms the basis of the speaker's own metaphoric activity, and he appears to offer us the blue dye in a manner not dissimilar to Hobbs, Nobbs, and Nokes. He creates striking images from the colour blue, which “coloured like Astarte's eyes/ Raw silk” (29-30), Solomon's “abyss of blue” (44), and “the blue-bell's womb” (47). His image-making at first appears to be as derivative as that of Hobbs and Nobbs, until we remember that the metaphor of the mollusc itself originated with him. Though the task he sets himself is to draw the true poet, he gets carried away by his own conceit, and by stanza four the true poet disappears from view to be replaced by the speaker's extended metaphor of the mollusc.

The speaker pitches his own creative powers against that of the true poet, who remains passive and silent throughout, and the poem dramatises a debate between different

attitudes to posterity and popularity, where the artist who creates for the present contends with the poet who writes for the future. The speaker's own creative posturing is the underlying thrust of a poem which spends two-thirds of its length ignoring its subject; the speaker wilfully displays his own creative prowess instead of fulfilling his promise to draw the true poet. His action declares that the artist of the present is just as powerful and creative as the poet of posterity.

In challenging ideas about posterity, "Popularity" also questions current valuations of poets' worth. The metaphor of the mollusc was one which also appeared in Browning's reviews, both before and after *Men and Women*. In a review of *Sordello*, the commentator in the *Athenaeum* complained that "sometimes when we have succeeded in bringing up a pearl, it has turned out not to be worth the author's hiding so carefully, or our labouring so hard to discover" (*Athenaeum* 30 May 1840: 432). The image was a helpful one for reviewers, and *The Dublin University Magazine* used it in their review of *Men and Women*: "[t]here is always a pearl in the oyster-poem, but it is so encrusted with barnacle words and long trails of entangled sea weed sentences, that the reading public would abandon the task of opening the meaning from want of the knife of patience" (CH Browning: 189).

"Popularity" responds sardonically to this image, mocking those who read only to extract meaning, the blue dye which colours artists' works. These critics place importance on the finished article, whereas the speaker of "Popularity" places more emphasis on the exciting process of fishing up the mollusc in all its ugliness. The poem is a defiant riposte to those who criticised the excesses of Browning's style. His description of the mollusc being fished up celebrates its vital qualities:

Yet there's the dye, in that rough mesh,  
 The sea has only just o'erwhispered!  
 Live whelks, each lip's beard dripping fresh,  
 As if they still the water's lisp heard  
 Through foam the rock-weeds thresh. (36-40)

To make sense of the last two lines we must work out that it means, “as if they still heard through the foam the water's lisp thresh the rock-weeds”. The syntax imitates the tangle of seaweed and foam from which the mollusc emerges, making the poetry as close as it can be to the quick of the matter. It invites readers to see with different eyes the possibilities of a creativity which is fresh and immediate rather than polished and easy to understand. This kind of language showcases Browning's daring experimentation in continuing to resist the demands of his critics and pursue his own imaginative vision.

*Men and Women* challenges the terms by which Browning was read, as well as probing the poet's relationship with his audience. Browning closes the volume with a poem that asks us to reflect on our reading of the preceding poems. As the fifty-first poem in *Men and Women*, “One Word More” deliberately stands out on a limb, and announces itself to be a different kind of poem to the dramatic monologues which precede it. The conceit of the poem is that, in order to offer their loved ones a gift which was natural rather than “art”, to “be the man and leave the artist” (64, 71), Dante drew a picture and Rafael wrote a song. While the speaker cannot employ a different art form to poetry, he offers his lover the gift of writing in his own voice rather than in a dramatic medium. Browning had discussed his lyric voice in letters to Elizabeth in 1845 and had promised to “begin and end, – ‘R.B. A poem’” (Browning 2009: 603).

The initials E.B.B. appear at the start of the poem, and R.B. at the end, and the speaker claims to speak as the voice of Robert Browning:

Let me speak this once in my true person,  
Not as Lippo, Roland or Andrea,                   (137-8)

We are invited to believe in the authenticity of the speaker in a way that is contrary to the other fictional dramatic monologues, and to accord him a different kind of authority. As Laurence Lerner argues, “it is not a dramatic monologue. The poet now speaks in his own person, and so conforms, in the most obvious way, to...Romantic theories of inspiration” (Lerner 2006: 107). Yet we are still listening to a speaker address an offstage, silent auditor, and his truth claims are no different from the authority professed by each of the characters in *Men and Women*. Though the poet offers us his so-called true voice he is still intrigued by perspectives on truth, by what he can see and what his readers can see through him.

He tantalises us with images which we cannot see, as when he evokes Rafael and Dante, who

Wrote one song – and in my brain I sing it,  
Drew one angel – borne, see on my bosom!                   (200-1)

The song in the speaker's brain and the picture inscribed on his bosom remain hidden from the reader, reminding us of the limits inherent in reading the world through the eyes of another. His image of the moon, which has one side hidden from the world, is used to

link his vision of Rafael and Dante to a portrait of his wife. While the public may believe they can see her, his knowledge of her surpasses theirs because he can travel to the hidden side. He reveals a little of what we cannot see, enough to prove that there is something there, describing “[s]ilent silver lights and darks undreamed of” (196).

He claims that he himself and each of us

Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,  
One to show a woman when he loves her!           (185-6)

This division between private desire and public performance, between the “two soul-sides”, wracks the artists of Browning's dramatic monologues. To travel between these spheres, the speaker must cross what he describes as the “dubious twilight” (194). This shadowy region between the world and the personal is the realm which Andrea (“[a]ll in a twilight” 37), Lippi (in the “grey beginning” of dawn, 392), and Pictor Ignotus (in the “sanctuary's gloom” 63) all painfully inhabit.

The speaker tells us that we will never be able to see the “soul-side” hidden from the world, but he reveals by describing what is concealed, inviting us to imagine what could be possible were we also to cross the twilight. The invitation to Elizabeth to, “[t]ake them, Love, the book and me together” (3), cannot but be an invitation to the reader too. “One Word More” intimates a different way of reading which throws up questions about how we read the rest of the volume. It asks us to understand the nature of the artist who must navigate the “dubious twilight” between a self to face the world and a self which has secret desires and ambitions. The poetry in *Men and Women* hinges on this troubled relationship between artists and the world that they address.

Though Browning offered many different ways of seeing the artist and his work, his reviewers largely continued to read his work with blinkers. With the help of the pre-Raphaelites, the young generation of Cambridge and Oxford students was beginning to take up his poetry, but their support was not yet enough to turn the critical tide that washed over *Men and Women*. He had hoped the volume would finally bring him critical success and he was bitterly disappointed by its reception. But though many reviews were censorious, they simultaneously conceded the worth of the volume.

Indeed, two of the most severe reviews ended by writing, “[c]ompared with ninety-nine of a hundred volumes of contemporary poetry, these of Mr. Browning’s are a treasury of beauty, and sense, and feeling” (CH Browning: 173), and “we can honestly say that the two new volumes contain more genuine poetry than ninety-nine out of a hundred volumes pretending to that venerable title” (CH Browning: 164). These concessions may have offered Browning cold comfort, following as they do severe criticism of his style and technique, of his “vices” and “imperfections” (CH Browning: 164), yet they reveal the slow but inexorable shift in attitude which would eventually result in the critical and popular success of *The Ring and the Book* fourteen years later.

## Chapter 5

### A Poetics of Failure in Arnold and Clough

“What has society done to them, or what can they possibly have done to society, that the future tenor of their span must be one of unmitigated woe?” (CH Arnold: 48)

Writing in the 1850s, Tennyson and Browning had the weight of two decades of experience behind them. Their navigation of contemporary readers was based on a thorough knowledge of the mores and preferences of their audience. But what of the poets who began their careers in the late 1840s and early 1850s? The 1830s are now seen as a transitional decade which witnessed, in no small part because of the early deaths of Keats, Shelley and Byron, the end of the Romantic period in literature and the beginning of the Victorian. It was a time of deep uncertainty about the future of poetry and simultaneously a transitional cultural phase which provided an opportunity for poets themselves to define the terms by which they might be read. The formal innovations of Tennyson and Browning, most notably the dramatic monologue and their sustained experimentation with poetic voice, are testament to the way their poetry moved powerfully beyond the parameters of taste set up by an earlier generation of critics and other writers.

As Victorian culture took firmer shape, however, it became difficult for the younger poets Arnold and Clough to develop a poetic voice which could address what Arnold identified as a deeply “unpoetical” age (Coulling 1964: 249). Like Tennyson and Browning, they too had to formulate a way of speaking to an audience which was increasingly multifarious and often unsympathetic. Adhering to their own principles, and those of other Victorian writers who believed that poets must *teach*, they struggled to

reconcile their own feelings of alienation from the culture they also wished to “inspirit” and “delight” (Arnold 1979: 655). Feelings of melancholy and even futility emerge in their poetry which were in conflict with the contemporary view that poetry should have an improving influence. In the process of their writing, Clough and Arnold each formulated a voice that was, in significant degree, at odds with beliefs expressed elsewhere, in their letters and prose, about the role that poetry could play. Their beliefs were attuned to contemporary taste, but their poetic voices acted in resistance to that taste.

Schooled by Thomas Arnold at Rugby, they were part of a generation of Victorian men informed by notions of duty and piety, and of what Robindra Biswas called “a particular stream of Victorian culture and achievement...which flows confidently in channels of public service” (Biswas 1972: 5). Their immersion in the Victorian stream of “moral earnestness” (Houghton 1957: 220) fuelled a desire to use their poetic gifts in the service of their society. Biswas summarises Clough's ambitions “to create...a new gospel for his fellow-men, a gospel which re-integrated man's experience” (Biswas 1972: 5) and Stefan Collini writes that Arnold's excitement about the idea of addressing the English public was “the animating purpose of his writing life” (Collini 1994: 5). Yet both Arnold and Clough were at odds with their world and they struggled to fulfil their aims. The young Arnold cultivated an insouciant air and drifted through his degree at Oxford and for several years afterwards, before finding gainful employment as a Schools Inspector, while Clough had several crises of conscience which hampered his career prospects. He renounced a career at Oxford when he was unable to sign the Thirty-Nine Articles which would confirm his Anglican orthodoxy. The discord between their individual conscience and the wider culture they inhabited is mirrored within their poetic writing. What is most fascinating about their poetry is the clash between their personal leanings towards

melancholy and even cynicism and the impetus to reach out to others and effect change on the world. Indeed, the melancholy which riled their contemporaries was, in part, derived from their struggles to fulfil their ambitions that poetry should ennoble their fellowmen.

The poetic careers of both Arnold and Clough are notable for their duration; the lifespan of their poetic writing lasted little more than a decade each and they were overtaken by Tennyson and Browning who continued writing long after the younger poets had stopped. Isobel Armstrong points out that “there is an oddity about this...Strangely, the young are superseded by the old” (Armstrong 1993: 166). Clough died at the age of forty-two but had ceased to write poetry several years before his death. Arnold's poetic writing was gradually superseded by his literary and social criticism, and by his time-consuming employment as a school inspector. The oddity that Armstrong notices is the cause of a perennial fascination with Arnold and Clough: what caused the drying-up of their poetic inspiration and effected this change in their imaginative lives? The idea that Arnold and Clough gave up their poetic writing because they could not find a poetic solution to the problems of their age remains puzzling to critics writing in an arguably less principled age. Charles LaPorte suggests that Clough's disillusion with the Spasmodics he initially championed caused him to stop writing. The Spasmodics at first had offered Clough a solution to his own concerns but “his repudiation of a poetic solution to his religious problems corresponded to a dramatic falling-off in his poetic achievement...Clough's later poetic infertility is...linked to his rejection of the Spasmodics” (LaPorte 2004: 521). Arnold similarly believed that prose would better provide solutions to the moral and spiritual problems of the age than poetry and Auden famously declared that Arnold “thrust his gift in prison till it died” (Machann 1998: 8).

Our fascination with the cessation of Arnold and Clough's writing has led to their poetry

being characterised by what could be called a poetics of failure. The notion of failure is more particularly resonant for Clough than for Arnold, as Walter Houghton explains: “Clough’s friends and critics had become so imbued with the notion of his ‘broken life’ that they continued to excuse him – or to blame him – for the scantiness of his production” (Houghton 1963: 3). Houghton goes on to explain that the perception of Clough as a poet who did not fulfil his potential arises from the discordance between his poetic virtues and contemporary taste (Houghton 1963: 9-11). Of Arnold, D. G. James writes, “[h]abitually his poems seemed to speak against themselves, to question their own right to have been written” (James 1961: 151), and this uncertainty about their own position as poets writing within a particular historical moment they were not always in harmony with is a feature of their work.

Clough and Arnold’s poetry thrives on a sense of its own inadequacy and alienation from their audience. They dramatised a poetics of failure, of a melancholy which speaks through its very belief that it cannot speak *to* its audience. A concern with action is the crux of two of their most famous poems, Arnold’s “Empedocles on Etna” and Clough’s *Amours de Voyage*, and the drama of these poems is driven by the struggle of a voice trying to be adequate to its own ambitions. Empedocles and Claude, the protagonists of Arnold and Clough, dramatised the condition of the poet as someone who longs to act, to play their part in the world, but who is cut off from others by their own morbid self-consciousness. I wish to focus on address and audience in their poetry as another way of understanding their alienation from the audience for whom they wished to write. The end of their poetic writing cannot be explained only by biographical factors, but by the poetry itself: it creates the conditions of its own demise when it fails to find a way of reaching beyond itself and addressing an audience. Pronouns and apostrophe in “Empedocles on

Etna” and *Amours de Voyage* turn back upon themselves and weave a linguistic noose which ends up strangling poetic voice. These linguistic impasses act upon the narrative of the poems but also on the publishing and reception history of the works.

Two poems in particular indicate the crisis within their poetry: “Empedocles on Etna” and *Amours de Voyage* both have a vexed publication history. Arnold published *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems* in 1852 but retracted the title poem a year later. His new edition contained a Preface which justified his retraction and set out his ideas on modern poetry. Clough wrote *Amours de Voyage* in 1849 while visiting Rome, but refrained from publishing it until 1858. Even when he finally published the poem, he chose to have it serialised in an American rather than a British journal, and its reception in England was so low-key that several years later, Walter Bagehot believed it not to have been published before Clough's death in 1862.

The intellectual crises dramatised in these two poems are at odds with Clough and Arnold's early ambitions to teach their fellow-men. The issue of the poet's responsibility to the nation was just as pertinent for Arnold and Clough, as it was for Tennyson and Browning. Arnold and Clough were divided over how this responsibility might best be manifest, but they were united in their belief in its necessity. In regard to subject matter, Clough was noted for writing about the present day, particularly in *The Bothie* and *Amours de Voyage*, where the protagonists are contemporary characters. By contrast, Arnold argued vehemently in the 1853 Preface that the classical past was the most suitable matter for poetry which would “inspirit and rejoice the reader” (Arnold 1979: 655). In *Amours de Voyage*, Clough critiques the ability of the past to ennoble and elevate man.

Their poetry, however, was unable to address itself to a collective audience nor to

provide the instruction and teaching desired by readers. Reviewers of Clough pointed out that his early poem, *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich*, “will not, it is to be feared, be extensively read” (CH Clough: 64) and after *Ambarvalia*, “Mr. Clough must be content with 'fit audience, though few'” (CH Clough: 79). Arnold must have been disappointed when Charles Kingsley asked disapprovingly of his 1849 edition, “When we have read all he has to say, what has he taught us?” (CH Arnold: 42). Lionel Trilling points out that Arnold's poetry addresses itself

primarily for a small group of saddened intellectuals for whom the dominant world was a wasteland, men who felt heartsick and deprived of some part of their energy by their civilisation. To speak of this loss of energy while the rest of England flaunted its own ever-growing strength was to invite contempt and disregard. (Trilling 1939: 79)

Trilling's sense of the contempt this approach would invite is confirmed by a reviewer in 1845 who bemoaned that

each poet...sings for himself and his own small clique, rather than for the world at large: instead of stooping patiently to listen and reply to the “still, small voices of humanity”, he soars away upon the wings of soliloquial thought where few will care to follow him. (*English Review* Dec 1845: 259)

This sense of disappointment characterised reviews of Arnold and Clough; they were reviewed with mixed opinion, attracting neither the extreme censure meted out to Browning, nor the idolisation which followed Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. But though most reviewers credited them with potential, there was a concern about the morbidity of their work and its effects upon a credulous audience. Of their poetry, one reviewer worried that, “remembering also the number of minds that are hampered by too much self-consciousness from fresh impulsive action, we cannot doubt that their indiscriminate circulation will do far more harm than good” (CH Clough: 83).

Though this reviewer links Arnold and Clough together, their relationship with each other was often prickly. Their path from Rugby to Oxford, and their shared religious speculation prompted a firm friendship, which was to weaken over the years. Arnold criticised Clough's poetry in private letters, and Clough wrote a wounding review of Arnold's *Empedocles*, comparing him unfavourably to Arnold's detested rival, Alexander Smith. In her excellent discussion of their rivalry, Armstrong points out that “[b]oth, in public and private, in poetry and in prose, obsessively accused each other of the same faults” (Armstrong 1993: 172). To accuse the other of the faults they had themselves points to the agonising of conscience which characterises both poets, and the sense in which they had become trapped by the very qualities they wished to avoid. Both attempting to move forward, they end up circling back upon the same problems.

The tension between circular and linear symbolism lies at the heart of their poetic crisis. Linear imagery is often associated with the progress towards divine grace that is made by the good Christian. It also represents a linear mode of direct communication between poet and reader, or between an “I” and a “you”. At the same time, however, the circular is a dominant motif in their poetry, where they try but often fail to check the return of the

mind upon itself. This motif is present in much of the imagery, but it is also symbolic of the way that the address in “Empedocles on Etna” and *Amours de Voyage* circles back upon itself, unable to bring its relation with an auditor to life. The struggles of Arnold and Clough’s poetic speakers to dramatise a way of speaking which connects them with their auditors is indicative of their sense of alienation from their audience.

Arnold's early poetry is full of unanswerable longings, of the winding circles of a mind which feels itself “in the sea of life ensiled” (“To Marguerite – Continued”, 1), yearning to break out. To counteract this loneliness, and prevent it falling into the morbidity of which he stood accused, Arnold had to find a way of turning his isolation to good use. In “Resignation”, he develops a theory whereby the poet's detachment is a perspective from whence he can see mankind more clearly and holds a knowledge superior to the rest of humanity. The poem is set in the Lake District where the speaker is walking with his sister. They venture out to follow a path they had previously walked ten years earlier, and the speaker uses their return as an opening into a discussion of a linear or circular mode of action. He begins by describing the nature of those active warriors who seek a goal which, once attained, will give them “repose” (17) and satisfaction. For these types, it is “Pain to thread back and renew / Past straits” (20-21) because they conceive of life as a mission, needing a goal to impel them onwards. Though the speaker names Muslim pilgrims and the barbarous Hun and Goth warriors as this type, their view of life as a linear progression is Christian in spirit, aligning itself with the Pauline notion of life as a race where the Christian progresses nearer and nearer to grace, reaching divine bliss at the end-point of death.

In comparison with these active pilgrims, there are “milder natures” who prefer “serenity” to action, and he counsels his sister to become resigned and not to demand this

“measured race” (34). The contrast between the active and the resigned nature is symbolised by the linear and the circular; the active nature finds it painful to return back upon itself, but the resigned nature is undisturbed by such returns. The form of the poem favours the serenity of resignation; its regular octosyllabics create a peaceful tone, and the rhyming couplets demonstrate the language happily returning upon itself. Rather than trying to break out of a circular, repetitious mode, Arnold tries to find a way of reaching his audience within it. The speaker makes clear that the warriors who break out of circular form by embarking on a linear quest are not to be emulated. But as a careful reading of the poem will show, it is not without contradictions, nor is its language entirely at ease with the declarations the speaker makes.

By resignation, the speaker means that one must become detached from the action of men, in order to look beyond the frames of the present into the past and future. The poet must see rather than do, he must partake of “That general life...Whose secret is not joy but peace” (190-1). To enter into the general life, he must expand his mind beyond the boundaries of the here and now in order to apprehend the eternal, unchanging patterns by which humans live. A group of gypsies is described to present the contrast between those who live only by the present, and are unself-reflexively locked into their own natural laws, with the poet who can look beyond them. Not questioning the repeated habits of their communal life, the gypsies do not have the privileged perspective of the speaker, and are not capable of seeing that “times past” compare “with times that are” (137).

In the long passage 144-198, the poet expands on his theory of resignation and describes how the poet must abstain from action on his own part and instead observe the behaviour of men. The verbs designated to the poet are all passive: he sees, he bears, he subdues himself, he looks down, he hears, he gazes, while others roll, exult, and move



the world if he is to be useful to his peers.

To gain the understanding which would allow him to fulfil the poet's role of *teaching* Arnold must grapple with how his poet is to situate himself in the world. Browning's *Sordello* explored the issue of how poets can act by dramatising a protagonist who is also a soldier and plays a political role, whereas Arnold's poem tries to justify a detachment from the action of the world. Instead of wishing to be a part of all that he surveys Arnold's poet must understand the world not through his own individuality, but by standing back to listen to "the murmur of a thousand years" (188). His ideal poet is one who does not project himself into the environment but observes the repeating cycles of human and natural behaviour. In this way, he can cultivate a detachment which could avoid the morbidity he saw as self-indulgent.

One of the problems with his theory is that he is open to accusations of uncaring detachment and of elevating himself above others; as Alan Grob states, "[c]ompared to other imagined poets given us in nineteenth century poetry, Arnold's poet is pointedly unempathic in his creative powers" (Grob 1988: 28). These objections are voiced by the speaker's sister, Fausta. Presenting his sister's thoughts allows him to air these accusations and then defend himself. She accuses him of breathing "immortal air" (207), and abandoning the "common life of men" (212) to which others are "bound" (210) and cannot escape. In response, he argues that the poet in fact conquers fate by escaping the present. However, the entrance of another voice into the poem is just as important as the thoughts his sister voices, attempting as it does to demonstrate the poet's empathy at the same time as it defends his detachment. The editor of the Longman poems points out that "Fausta does not speak. The poem is a 'dialogue of the mind with itself'" (Allott 1979: 97). The speaker is at pains to show that he is not detached from the common man in his

dialogue with his sister. “So your thoughts I scan” (203), writes the speaker, repeating a word earlier used to describe the poet's mission, where he “Subdues that energy to scan / Not his own course, but that of man” (146-7). The word “scan” implies an observation of what already exists, disguising the poet's own imaginative involvement in rendering his sister's thoughts. She does not speak, and the speaker extrapolates her thoughts from only her “wandering smile”. Though he presents them as an observation, in fact her words are an act of imaginative empathy, a creative re-ordering of her expression into words. The disguising of his creative act is part of the poem's sense of uncertainty about the detachment the speaker seeks to cultivate and the nature of action and poetry.

This uncertainty gives rise to a tension identified by Clinton Machann “between rational and intuitive thought, between the moralist and the lyricist in the poet” (Machann 1998: 23) and these tensions are elsewhere manifest in the poem. There are contradictions in the relation between the speaker's silence and his voice, with the relation between passivity and sound. All the sounds in this passage are made by others: the cuckoo is “loud” and “Is answered from the depth of dawn” (176, 77), and the shepherd is “whistling” (183). By contrast, the poet is silent, cultivating “His sad lucidity of soul” (198). We know he “does not say: *I am alone*” (169), but it is unclear what will replace this speech. Silence characterises the observing poet and raises the problem of how that poet will share his superior knowledge with his fellow humans. If, as Grob suggests, the role of poet in “Resignation” “would seem to be to carry out the structural function of the sage” (Grob 1988: 27), then the question of how that wisdom is transmitted must arise, a question that remains unanswered in the poem.

Even at the close of the poem, the speaker is tentative about the act of voicing. When talking of the hills and streams, he writes, “If I might lend their life a voice” (269),

hesitating to project his voice into the nature that surrounds him. “His sad lucidity of soul”, neatly captures this ambiguity; the word “lucidity” meaning as it does brightness, clearness, intellectual transparency, it asks whether the poet himself sees clearly what others do not, or if he lightens the way for them. Is this lucidity only within himself or directed towards others? Arnold was well aware of the demand that poetry must aid its fellow men, but it is never quite clear exactly how his speaker’s detachment will fulfil this aim.

“Resignation” responds to critical interest amongst his contemporaries in the role of the poet and his relationship to the world he inhabits. Arnold chooses a circular path instead of the linear mode of the warrior who proceeds onwards towards his goal. By returning back onto previous paths, he is able to cultivate a detachment from action which allows him to survey the world. But in renouncing the linear mode, Arnold renounces the possibility of a direct address to his readers. The understanding of man which the speaker cultivates is not communicated to the reader and his knowledge remains in the realm of potential.

The tentativeness of “Resignation” and the absence of a voice which declares its knowledge to the reader in favour of a voice which explores how that understanding could be brought about caused Charles Kingsley to throw his hands in the air and ask, “When we have read all he has to say, what has he taught us?” (CH Arnold: 42). To dramatise a voice which explores the potential to understand humanity rather than declaring that knowledge may make the poem ultimately more daring, but it did not impress Arnold's reviewers. The hesitation to speak his thoughts may have caused the impression that Arnold lacked a strong voice of his own, and reviewers described his efforts as derivative of Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

In his second volume, *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems*, Arnold experimented further with the relationship between poet and world. In the title poem, “Empedocles on Etna”, he employs contrasting modes of speaking and address; three characters speak in the poem, each with a different purpose and a different view of how their purpose might be achieved. Various types of dialogue ensue, from characters directly in conversation with each other to soliloquies which are meant to be overheard. Callicles, the young lyric poet, prepares his songs with the hope of consoling the despairing Empedocles, though he never meets him face to face. Empedocles, the philosopher and magician, designs his long speech in Act I with the purpose of teaching his friend Pausanias some useful knowledge. These interactions allow Arnold to dramatise various ways of addressing an audience, and to experiment with distinctions between poetry that is heard and poetry that is overheard.

“Empedocles on Etna” was the poem which Arnold famously retracted. Carl Dawson and Sidney Coulling both argue that the retraction was a response to the poor reception of “Empedocles” rather than a decision based on his own poetic theory. After all, argues Dawson, “Not to have published the volume in the first place would have indicated doubt about [the poems'] quality; to withdraw them after publication suggested concern about reputation” (CH Arnold: 4). Although Arnold explicitly states in the Preface that he did not retract “Empedocles” “in deference to the opinion” of critics, it is hard to disagree with Coulling's argument that the Preface responds not just to general critics, but to more personal attacks on his work by Clough and other Oxford friends.<sup>6</sup>

In the Preface to the 1853 edition of *Poems*, the volume following *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*, in which Arnold justifies his retraction of “Empedocles on Etna”, he

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<sup>6</sup> For detailed evidence of the arguments of the Preface with Clough and others, see Coulling (1964) “Matthew Arnold's 1853 Preface: Its Origin and Aftermath” and Harrison, Anthony H. (2004) “Victorian Culture Wars: Alexander Smith, Arthur Hugh Clough, and Matthew Arnold in 1853”.

states that poetry must give “a representation from which men can derive enjoyment” (Arnold 1979: 655). “Empedocles” fails to deliver this enjoyment because it portrays a state “in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged...in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done” (Arnold 1979: 656). Arnold had initially chosen Empedocles as a subject because there was much about his situation “that we are accustomed to consider as exclusively modern” (Arnold 1979: 654). In this choice, he was hoping to fulfil the popular demand that poetry should be relevant to contemporary readers, albeit through the lens of ancient Greece.

The key to Arnold's dissatisfaction with his poem is that he believed it had not found a “vent in action”. Arnold's difficulty with action is primarily a problem with how the poet or artist can act upon the world, and the relationship between action and language is one which also drives Browning's *Sordello*. “Empedocles on Etna” is, in fact, similar to *Sordello* in its consideration of how the poet acts in an unsympathetic world, how he develops his own identity at the same time as he must play to a crowd, and how he balances these two concerns. As Howard Fulweiler writes, Arnold's poetry asks, “How does the poet relate himself to the external world; how does he perceive the world objectively and yet retain his own integrity and individuality?” (Fulweiler 1972: 30).

Empedocles is unable to find a way of acting upon the world which balances with his own emotional needs. The inability to reconcile conflicting demands was characteristic of Arnold's work. A problem which arose in “Resignation” was that Arnold could not reconcile his creed of inaction and resignation with a demand that poets should engage with the world. In “Empedocles” he dramatises a poet of resignation in the form of Callicles, but the narrative of the poem shows Callicles to be ultimately ineffective. Empedocles, on the other hand, takes up a different kind of resignation by renouncing the

crowd he once seduced and retreating into the forest, yet he continues to vent his speech upon Pausanias.

The poem opens with Callicles wandering alone in the forest, waiting for Empedocles in the hope of meeting him along the path. His speech reveals that he shares the qualities of the ideal poet depicted in “Resignation”: he remarks of the forest, “A thousand times have I been here alone” (I, 7), but, unlike Fausta, he is untroubled by the repetitious nature of his wanderings. He is content to repeat his paths, and is able to see in his surroundings the eternal patterns of nature. Cool dispassion is evident in his lines, “One sees one's footprints crush'd in the wet grass / One's breath curls in the air” (I, 14-15), where he is detached even from his own breath, able to describe it from an impersonal perspective.

Callicles waits for Empedocles, but instead meets the doctor Pausanias, who is attending the despairing Empedocles. Callicles and Pausanias discuss Empedocles' moodiness and Callicles hopes to console him by singing and playing his lyre. Pausanias dictates the terms by which Callicles can speak to Empedocles. If Callicles is to “inspirit and rejoice” (Arnold 1979: 655) Empedocles, Pausanias believes he can only do so if he remains “unseen”, and if his verse is to seem accidental rather than designed. Pausanias commands Callicles, “Thou must be viewless to Empedocles” (I, 52), echoing both Keats and Byron with the use of the word “viewless”. In Keats' “Ode to a Nightingale”, “the viewless wings of Poesy” (33) carry the poet into his imaginative world, and in *Manfred*, the hero wishes that he “were / The viewless spirit of a lovely sound” (*Manfred* I, ii, 52-3). Helen Vendler writes that, in “Ode to a Nightingale” “it is Poesy which is invisible, because its action is empathic listening and self-projection” (Vendler 1983: 308). For Vendler, “viewless” poetry is a fulfilling proposition, enabling a conversation between a self and an other to which it listens.

If, as Buckler writes, “Arnold was trying to lead English poetry away from the pageant of the naked heart which had been an important manifestation of Romanticism” (Buckler 1973: xiv), then we can assume that Arnold wished to critique this idealisation of “viewless” poesy. Callicles remains “viewless” or invisible and fails to fulfil his mission of consoling Empedocles; his songs of Act II do not prevent Empedocles from plunging to his death. The result is an ineffectual performance where Callicles and Empedocles talk, as it were, on parallel lines, straining towards each other but never meeting. Arnold teases out Mill's formulation about the true poet who must appear to be unconscious of a listener. Callicles is an exact replica of Mill's ideal poet who appears to be (but knows he is not) unconscious of his audience. Arnold displays the artifice of this kind of lyric address by portraying the discussion between Callicles and Pausanias, and questions its effectiveness in acting upon an audience.

Yet though Callicles ultimately cannot dissuade Empedocles from suicide, he offers an understanding of Empedocles' condition. He diagnoses the cause of Empedocles' despair as emerging from his own mind, telling Pausanias,

Tis not the times, tis not the sophists vex him,

There is some root of suffering in himself                   (I, 150-1)

To help Empedocles, Callicles believes he must “keep his mind from preying on itself” (I, 157), demonstrating his awareness of the pitfalls of the dialogue of the mind with itself. But because the poem sets up a drama where Callicles remains always out of sight, he is unable to disrupt Empedocles' mind. The separated nature of their conversations stymies Callicles' potential to disrupt the dialogue of the mind with itself, a dynamic which

becomes more important in Act II.

Frank Kermode writes that Callicles has failed to understand what Empedocles has realised:

Empedocles belonged to a great age of poetry...an age when the poet had a function...in society. But the new age excludes him, or rather he excludes himself from a new society...To the young Callicles there is nothing genuine in the plight of Empedocles. Callicles has not yet understood. (Kermode 1957: 15)

Yet Kermode's reading misses Callicles' perception of why Empedocles may be at fault in his exclusion from the age. Arnold presents Empedocles through the differing perspectives of Callicles and Pausanias. While Pausanias is in awe of the supposed miracle Empedocles performed on a dying young woman, Callicles sees through this power, declares it was no miracle at all and that Empedocles has manipulated a credulous audience. According to Callicles, Empedocles "lets the people...Gape and cry wizard at him" (I, 138-9), even though he knows he is no magician. The poet as a magician or wizard, entertaining the crowds, was also a trope used by Browning in *Sordello*, who explores the artistic consequences of crowd-pleasing. The fault of Empedocles may lie not only in his inability to escape the dialogue of the mind with itself, but with this attitude to the crowd, and with what Pausanias demands from him. To ask for "the secret of this miracle" (I, 132), as Pausanias does, implies that he believes Empedocles to hold a secret power which he himself wants to harness in order to impress the multitude. The secret power is revealed by Callicles to be no more than a charlatan's trick, and Empedocles is

culpable because he has tried to court his audience with such tricks, as Sordello once did. As a result, the same fate has befallen him, that the crowd which once favoured him has rejected him.

Empedocles' long speech in Act I must be viewed within this context of his disillusion. He answers a man who demands of him a magic spell to seduce an audience, but he himself has realised the emptiness of this way of performing; he declares that he will not give Pausanias any spells and advises him instead to seek wisdom. His speech offers this wisdom and teaching, changing his stance from crowd-pleasing to teaching. Within a wider context of the position of the mid-nineteenth century poet, the drama allows Arnold to test different modes of relating to an audience and to highlight the difficult issue of popularity and attempting to win over your audience through spectacle. The extended answer which Empedocles gives to Pausanias enables Arnold to experiment with how a poet might teach an audience, as well as how that teaching might be limited by the demands of his audience.

The speech is introduced by a conversation where Pausanias asks Empedocles to “Instruct” (I, 20) him in the ways of performing healing miracles. Empedocles begins by refuting Pausanias' desire for magic spells, telling him not to ask for the facts of the situation, but to “ask how thou such sights / May'st see without dismay” (I, 109-10). What he wishes to offer is wisdom rather than factual knowledge, in spite of Pausanias' demand. It is useful to make a comparison between “Empedocles” and *In Memoriam*, which was widely regarded as a poem that provided helpful teaching. Empedocles moves, as Tennyson did, from the specific into the general, broadening the remit of his speech into a disquisition on man's role in the universe, his knowledge, and his relation to the gods. This shift is mirrored by the gradation from an individual address to Pausanias to the

employment of collective pronouns, “we” and “us”. But rather than being able to reach out to others in a shared experience, as Tennyson did, Empedocles' employment of “we” serves to emphasise rather than alleviate the tragedy of our aloneness. “We are strangers here” (I, 181), recalls the poet's lament in “To Marguerite - Continued”, “[w]e mortal millions live *alone*” (4). Empedocles portrays the paradox of a collective experience of isolation; his invitation to imagine a communal experience is one which offers no consolation in the way that Tennyson achieves in *In Memoriam*.

Empedocles' description of man's relation to the world further heightens this paradox. Man is in conflict with the world because of his assumption that the “world does but exist [his] welfare to bestow” (I, 176). But rather than an individual in conflict with the world, “we” are all at odds with it. If his “we” refers to a collective humanity, then the relationship between “we” and the “world” is parallel to the dialogue of the mind with itself, where the collective “we” is locked into a battle with the collective “world”. Men are at opposition with themselves, mirroring the individual at war with his own mind. In trying to break out of the dialogue of the mind with itself by addressing a collective humanity, Empedocles succeeds only in drawing a wider circle round the internal conflicts which torment him. Only at the beginning and the end of his speech does Empedocles speak in the first person, and the absence of the “I” from the bulk of his long speech contributes to his inability to break out of a circular framework into a linear address from “I” to “you”, a form of address which Tennyson employs to great effect in *In Memoriam*.

The effectiveness of Empedocles' mode of address can be measured by the response of his auditor. Pausanias, to all appearances, does not take on board the wisdom Empedocles seeks to impart, and indeed does not seem to make any sense at all of Empedocles' speech; he thinks only that Empedocles “is strangely wrought” (I, 480). That he sees

Empedocles as mentally unbalanced suggests that he has not been taught anything, and that Empedocles' purpose has collapsed. It may be that Empedocles is unable to wield his speech to his own purpose, or indeed that Pausanias was seeking the kind of answer which Empedocles refused to give. Is the speaker or the auditor at fault? Pausanias wishes to be given an exact answer, a formula which he can easily apply, instead of seeking a more general wisdom. His expectations of poetic speech were not dissimilar to the demands of reviewers, and Arnold may be dramatising the difficulties of writing poetry which meets their impossible suppositions. Yet Empedocles is unable to turn Pausanias' expectations away from spells towards a deeper understanding. A speaker who cannot communicate and an auditor who does not want to listen characterises Empedocles' speech, and it is under these conditions that the poem is unable to find a "vent in action".

In the soliloquies of Act II, Empedocles returns to the first person, but at this point he addresses only himself, confirming himself in circular rather than linear forms of communication. What Arnold described as finding "no vent in action" (Arnold 1979: 656) is dramatised in the poem as finding no vent for communication. No matter how hard Empedocles tries, he is unable to break out of the circular dialogue with himself. In Act II, the speeches of Empedocles and Callicles run on parallel lines, following on from one another but never meeting in dialogue. Neither addresses the other, and both remain unchanged by the other's words. Their separateness dramatises the condition of poets who could not access a voice which reaches out to others. The contents of Empedocles' speeches in Act II reveal more about his troubled relation to his own voice. When he has finished speaking with Pausanias and has dismissed him, he declares,

For I must henceforth speak no more with man

He hath his lesson too, and that debt's paid; (II, 6-7)

The idea of speaking to man as both a lesson and a debt feeds into the issues continually raised by reviewers. Empedocles no longer wishes to provide lessons for men, particularly now that his former followers have rejected him.

In Act II, his soliloquies reveal further insight into his relation with the crowd. Empedocles sees his public and private self as operating separately; that teaching and self-communion are two different kinds of experience which he is unable to combine. In his attempt to understand himself in relation to others, he oscillates from one condition of being to the other. He first complains of the solitude imposed by Apollo, accusing him,

Thou fencest him from the multitude –  
 Who will fence him from himself  
 He hears nothing but the cry of the torrents,  
 And the beating of his own heart (II, 211-4)

Empedocles speaks of himself in the general third person, as one of Apollo's votaries, in an attempt to stand back from himself and step outside his enclosing self-consciousness. There are two selves in his description, one whose heart beats and one who hears his heart beat, and his plea for someone to “fence him from himself” asks for a way of breaking this dialogue of self-consciousness. A temporary solution is to fly “back to men” (II, 220), who would

help him to unbend his too tense thought,

And rid him of the presence of himself..

And haunt him, till the absence from himself,

That other torment, grow unbearable (II, 222-3, 25-6)

Empedocles is unable to find a way of mediating between self-consciousness and social intercourse. Speaking to others is primarily an escape from self-consciousness rather than an end in itself, and he is unable to find a way of adequately addressing others while maintaining the integrity of the self. To talk to others is to be absent from himself, and he is torn between the torment of his own mind and the wish to return to it.

Empedocles' inability to find a fulfilling relationship to the crowd stems from his previous treatment of his followers. He admits that he was worshipped because he used “not wisdom”, but “drugs”, “spells”, and “magic” (II, 124-7). But instead of being able to change the way he relates to the crowd, as Sordello does, he retreats into isolation. His loneliness and antipathy towards others is reminiscent of Byron's *Manfred* (both are titled ‘A Dramatic Poem’), as when Empedocles addresses himself,

With men thou canst not live,

Their thoughts, their ways, their wishes are not thine...

Thou canst not live with men nor with thyself (II, 18-19, 23)

The feelings of antipathy towards men and loathing of the self are common to both *Manfred* and Empedocles, but the second person address used here is symptomatic of the dialogue of the mind with itself. Empedocles is locked into a linguistic pattern which makes his address reach back into the self rather than towards others.

Michael O’Neill comments that “[i]n Byron, humans have no alliance with a providential deity; in Arnold, the world we inhabit refuses to ally itself with our best hopes” (O’Neill 2006: 116), and this distinction plays out in Empedocles and Manfred’s relation to the elements. Despite his despair, Manfred’s language still holds an incantatory power, summoning and commanding the spirits of nature. Empedocles’ attempt to do the same is a pathetic parody of Manfred’s power. Instead of addressing the spirits of nature, he addresses himself, saying,

turn thee to the elements, thy friends...

And say: Ye helpers, hear Empedocles, (II, 25, 27)

Even as he imagines addressing the elements, he can do so only through a mediating second person address, unable to voice a direct “I” to “you” address. The circular way in which he commands himself to speak to the elements, but in fact addresses only himself, reflects his failure to find a voice adequate to his situation. There is no response from the elements, who remain silent, further confirming the inefficacy of his voice.

Another key difference between Manfred and Empedocles is, of course, that Empedocles chooses suicide, while Manfred retains his defiance until his natural death: “I feel the impulse – yet I do not plunge” (*Manfred*, I, ii, 20). Whether Empedocles’ suicide is a triumph of free will or a cowardly end to his ordeal has been much debated. Does, as Lionel Trilling believes, Empedocles regain mastery over himself in this final ecstatic act and enact “the affirmation of human desires by merging with the All and mingling with the elements”? (Trilling 1939: 89). In his final moments, Empedocles does indeed claim to “breath free” (II, 408) and to throw off the enslavement of his mind, but the degree of

free choice involved is debatable. He has been unable to resolve the oscillation between dissolution in the crowd and tormented self-consciousness, and unlike the stars he addresses, he has not “in solitude / Maintained courage and force” (II, 319-20).

Again, Empedocles shows himself to be foundering within his own heightened self-consciousness, unable to break out of the circles woven by his own linguistic patterns. He is stuck in a mode of thinking which prevents him from formulating a new way of speaking to the crowd, when his previous methods had failed. He invested too much in pleasing the crowd, identifying too much with the times, and so when the fickle tastes of the crowd changed, there was not enough left of his own identity to sustain him.

Empedocles sees the error of his ways and understands that he acted as a magician, trying to please the crowd. But when he attempts to change and teach Pausanias, his wisdom is rejected because Pausanias wants only his magic spells.

Empedocles struggles to see any new linguistic possibilities that could help him to find a way out of his isolation. To draw conclusions about the poem as a whole, however, we must return to the juxtaposition of Empedocles with Callicles. Callicles remains a detached figure, despite his desire to console Empedocles. He associates himself with lyric poetry in the opening lines of Act II, when he says,

The lyre's voice is lovely everywhere;  
 In the court of Gods, in the city of men,  
 And in the lonely rock-strewn mountain glen        (II, 37-9)

The voice of the lyre is the same whether it sings for gods, men, or for itself; ideally unconscious of its audience, it remains unaffected by them. Callicles' lyric qualities,

symbolised by his apparent unconsciousness of an audience, are supplemented by his indifference to human suffering, illustrated in his narration of the myth of Apollo and Marysas. The delight he takes in the gory details of the flaying and his wish that “Fate had let me see...That famous final victory” (II, 125, 7), exhibits the kind of callous indifference to human suffering that Fausta had feared in “Resignation”.

On the one hand Callicles exemplifies many of the qualities Arnold recommends in the Preface: he sings of mythical stories, of Achilles and Apollo and Chiron. His return to a classical tale, with their noble persons and great actions, should, in the terms of Arnold's Preface, “inspirit and rejoice” Empedocles. But a fundamental problem remains: Callicles is unable to see the effects of his words on Empedocles and is therefore unaware that they are unheeded, arrows shot into the void without aim. Arnold wrote that the poem represented “a continuous state of mental distress...unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance” (Arnold 1979: 656), and the continuous monotony of the distress is unrelieved by the attempted consolations of Callicles' words, which do not deflect Empedocles from his course. Through Callicles, Arnold dramatises the difficulty facing the poet who sings without a direct connection to his audience. Although Callicles has the final word, singing a hymn of praise, his song is laden with the irony of his ignorance that Empedocles has plunged to his death. His hymn “contrives to undermine, even as it voices, Arnold's hope, expressed in the Preface, that ‘the dialogue of the mind with itself’ could annul itself through careful attention to the practice of the Greek poets” (O'Neill 2006: 117).

Within the drama of the poem both voices miss their targets, ending alone and unheard. The troubling way in which their speeches slide past each other indicates a crisis in Arnold's perception of the possible voices available to him. What is significant about these voices is their separation: they never enter into dialogue, indicating Arnold's own

anxieties about the difficulties of addressing an unseen and unpredictable audience. These anxieties were fulfilled in the reception of the poem. J.A. Froude, amongst others, found Empedocles' suicide unconvincing:

[Arnold] has failed to represent [Empedocles] as in a condition in which suicide is the natural result...among all the motives introduced, there is not one to make the climb of Etna necessary or intelligible. (CH Arnold: 91)

Froude does not recognise the fundamental crisis of the poem to be one involving the question of poetic voice. It was not a crisis which Arnold's contemporary reviewers regarded with sympathy. In his review of *Empedocles* Clough asked

Does the reader require morals and meanings to these stories?  
 What shall they be, then? - the deceitfulness of knowledge, and the illusiveness of the affections, the hardness and roughness and contrariousness of the world, the difficulty of living at all, the impossibility of doing any thing – voila tout! (CH Arnold: 75)

In “Empedocles on Etna” Arnold resisted using a poetic voice which provided the moral uplift sought by his readers. Later in his career, in his most popular poem, “Dover Beach”, he engages readers and heals the breach between private self and public address. As Kate Campbell states, “[t]he lyrical power of 'Dover Beach' has to do with the way that private

experience is reconfigured in public language” (Campbell 2008: 27). But “Empedocles on Etna” remains a powerful testament to the deeply felt predicament in Arnold's poetry, that of wielding a voice which attends to the public matters he considered important. Clinton Machann points out why the poem is an important landmark of Victorian poetry: “[b]y calling into question the relation of a poet to his times...he invited debate and made himself a target for controversy” (Machann 1998: 39). As with Browning's *Sordello*, Arnold's “Empedocles” challenged the dominant assumptions about the poet's role in society.

Although Clough's last publication, *Amours de Voyage*, takes issue with Arnold on several counts, it ultimately harbours the same crisis in regard to its audience.<sup>7</sup> The same opposition between circular and linear imagery occurs, and the form of the poem, written in a series of letters, mirrors the way that the speeches of the characters in “Empedocles on Etna” slide past each other, making little mutual connection. Clough's visit to Rome during the French invasion of the Roman Republic inspired the setting of the poem, which presents a series of letters from Claude, a tourist visiting Rome, to his friend Eustace back in England, and from Georgina and Mary Trevellyn, also English visitors to Rome, to their friends and family. The political battles are the backdrop to the private dramas played out in the lives of these English tourists. Divided into five cantos, the poem presents the letters framed by the comments of an unnamed narrator, whom we assume to be the voice of the poet.

Where Clough's poem differs from Arnold's is in its more deliberate and self-conscious irony; where Empedocles is an unwilling exile from society, Claude seeks to be a tourist, a detached observer of cities and people. Clough was able to embrace the qualities of the

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of Arnold's charges against Clough, see Deering, Doris (1978) “The Antithetical Poetics of Arnold and Clough”.

tourist as a way of dramatising his own feelings of alienation from the literary milieu in London. As Patrick Scott writes, “Clough found in the figure of the tourist – detached, puzzled, indecisive – an extreme instance of the general tendencies, in thought and behaviour, of the Victorian intellectual” (Scott 1974: 4). Doris Deering points out, “Arnold charged Clough’s poetry with immersion in the ceaseless flux of the contemporary, whereas Arnold tried to create a poetry of detachment” (Deering 1978: 17), yet ironically, it is Claude’s detachment from social and political relations that features most prominently in *Amours de Voyage*.

Walter Bagehot predicted the poem would not attain “universal popularity. The public like stories which come to something; Mr. Arnold teaches that a great poem must be founded on a great action, and this one is founded on a long inaction” (Bagehot 1965: 256). Though Bagehot's comment on a “long inaction” is apt, it is also the case that *Amours de Voyage* punctures the grand ideas set forth in Arnold's 1853 Preface. The anecdotal and knowing self-deprecation of Clough's protagonist, Claude, deflates any exalted claims for the poet. Yet despite his self-conscious irony about the dialogue of the mind with itself, Clough's language, like Arnold's, finds itself weaving its own patterns of isolation.

Love, social convention, identity, and political action are the themes of the poem, but they are worked out through Clough’s own experiments to formulate a poetic voice adequate to its own ambitions. Claude pursues Mary across Italy in a series of unfortunate misses, and his confusion mirrors the catalogue of voices in the poem which never quite catch up with each other. Miscommunication is a key element, both formally and thematically, of Clough's dramatisation of a young, self-conscious intellectual living in the mid-nineteenth century. As in “Empedocles on Etna”, we read the thoughts of characters

who do not hear each other, but in *Amours de Voyage* different voices critique each other more subtly. Claude is a more self-aware protagonist than Empedocles, and more knowing about the causes of his inaction. He seeks to find a fulfilling way of being in relation to others, but is unable to bring a satisfying relationship to bear. His problem is, in part, a linguistic one, and he cannot frame the words which will allow him to connect with his fellow travellers. Claude's personal journey mirrors a linguistic crisis similar to Empedocle's, where the language which will rescue him from his isolation eludes him.

The major event which drives the plot is Claude's flirtation with Mary Trevellyn, who is visiting Rome with her family. Claude is, at one level, an archetypal disillusioned young man who agonises over the prospect of commitment in the form of marriage to a young lady he has flirted with in Rome. He portrays himself as a typical “childless and bachelor uncle” (I, 189), who prevaricates over marriage and commitment, and tries to evade any signs that would lead to an engagement. Mary responds with tact to her evasive suitor and resists the temptation to seek any form of commitment from him. The love story, which portrays the failure of Claude and Mary to connect, mirrors the poetry's concern with its ability to communicate with its readers and, like “Empedocles on Etna”, there is a crisis within the language about the audience for poetry.

In addition to the plot between Claude and Mary, Clough also critiques poetic language by juxtaposing different voices which contradict each other. In the first stanza the narrator combines elements of a timeless, mythical nature with a sceptical outlook on his own words. “[G]reat windy waters” (I, 1) and “clear crested summits” (I, 1) contrast with a sceptical voice which reminds us of the “limitation” (I, 7) of the world. We are invited to go with the narrator to “a land wherein gods of the old time wandered” (I, 3), but then a voice whispers its doubts about this mythical and heroic vision, and argues that travel will

not allow us to escape the world's limitations, for "Tis but to...measure a cord, that we travel" (I, 7). The belief in the futility of trying to escape the "narrow crib" (I, 6) of the world recalls the weariness of Empedocles with human activity.

Alongside the two perspectives presented by an idealising and a sceptical voice, Claude's first letter also deflates the grandeur of Rome:

Rome disappoints me much; I hardly as yet understand, but

*Rubbishy* seems the word that most exactly would suit it. (I, 19-20)

With superb control of tone, his contemporary, anecdotal letter shows up the elegant grandeur of the narrator's vision. Puncturing the idea of grand myth with the everyday and anecdotal was a fundamental difference between Arnold and Clough, one which was also noticed by reviewers. William Whewell praised "The Bothie", in which "the usual conventional phrases and dim generalities of poetical description are replaced by the idioms and pictures of common life" (CH Clough: 68). In his Preface, Arnold refutes the claim that the poet "must draw his subjects from matters of present import" and argues instead that the classical past provides more suitable subject matter for poets. *Amours de Voyage* tests out this theory by imagining the classical past alongside the contemporary, and examines the effects on the protagonist of inhabiting a classical city. Clough's masterful use of the classical hexameter in a modern context is another method of deflating Arnold's classical leanings. As Suzanne Bailey points out, "the meter chosen by Clough...is itself a kind of quotation of classical poetical discourse, a citation which naturally sets in motion various aesthetic and temporal ironies" (Bailey 1993: 159).

Far from idealising the classical past of Rome, Claude writes that "Rome is better than

London because it is other than London” (I, 27). The historic city allows him an altered perspective on himself and an escape from the burden of “having been what one has been” (I, 30). His disappointment with the city and its lack of transformative power in respect of himself leads him to reflect on the nature of identity.

What our shadows seem, forsooth we will ourselves be.

Do I look like that? You think me that: then I am that. (I, 85-6)

These reflections on the social contingency of his identity touch on Claude's experience of society, but also on our own experience of reading. His exploration of the nature of love and social convention takes place in his struggle to understand the self in relation to others. For the reader, this self is both social and poetic: we are unseen auditors of the letters which enact moments of private intimacy, but at the same time these letters are knowingly staged linguistic constructions. Matthew Reynolds highlights the estranging effect of this structure on the reader and the discomfort of discovering “the disparity between [Claude's] private opinion and public actions” (Reynolds 2001: 155). *Amours de Voyage* does not invite empathy from its readers; it “does not create a realm of verse for its readers to inhabit. Instead, we are cast into the role of spies trespassing on a private space” (Reynolds 2001: 156).

Claude's discussion of his relation to others bears upon the poem's relation to its readers, particularly in his consideration of the idea of juxtaposition. Juxtaposition in both love and language are central to the exploration of his relationship to the world and to other people. Marriage is imagined as a series of “harmonies strange overwhelming, / All the long-silent strings of an awkward meaningless fabric” (I, 177-8). Claude's fear is that

companionship will destroy his autonomy, overwhelming it with harmonies he cannot control. To merge with another is to descend into meaninglessness, into a wordless condition of silence. The metaphors used throughout *Amours* to envisage relationships are ones in which language becomes impossible, and meaning cannot be imagined. Claude's incapacity to declare openly his love for Mary hinges on his inability to speak unreservedly. In Canto II, he writes to Eustace, "I am in love...you think", "I am in love, you say", "I am in love, you declare" (II, 250, 51, 52), as if his love can only take place through the observation of another. Unable to say to Mary the conventional thing – "I love you" – pronouns become distorted into "you say I love". Just as Empedocles' difficulties expressed themselves in his mixing of first, second, and third person pronouns, Claude experiences a similar inability to speak to Mary in a normal "I" to "you" mode of communication. Too wary to speak his love to her, he asks

Shall not a voice, if a voice there must be, from the airs that environ,  
 Yea, from the conscious heavens, without our knowledge and effort,  
 Break into audible words? And love be its own inspiration? (II, 279-81)

The voice he seeks resembles an ideal Romantic lyric voice, where inspiration channels a voice through the poet without conscious effort on his part.

Claude struggles to bring into being such a lyric voice, one which could also negotiate conventional social relations. Just after he writes this letter, Georgina Trevellyn, Mary's sister, asks her fiance to speak to Claude and demand he declare his intentions. Claude feels himself torn between an ideal, transcendental love, and the conventions of marriage. The ideal voice he imagines is unable to break through the social conventions he finds so

claustrophobic, illustrating a disjuncture between an ideal poetic voice which is in touch with a lyric, solitary imagination, and one which can function in relation to others. As the young Tennyson and Browning did, he imagines a voice which never becomes embodied in actual words. To “Break into *audible* words” (my italics), words which penetrate the listener and are fulfilled by being heard, seems impossible.

Instead of speaking these “audible” words, Claude believes that “Every word I utter estranges, hurts, repels her” (II, 299). Unable to find a way of speaking *to* Mary, Claude deflects his linguistic energies into his letters, but even writing to Eustace does not prevent him from falling into the same labyrinthine imagery as Arnold. He describes his entry into the Trevellyn circle as a descent into a labyrinth, which “closes around me, / Path into path rounding slyly” (I, 241-2), recalling Arnold's imagery of circles and labyrinths. The difference between Empedocles and Claude is that the former loses himself in the labyrinth of his mind, winding himself into a dialogue with himself but wanting to reach out to others. Claude, on the other hand, feels the social world to be the labyrinth, an “enchanted” (I, 249) but dangerous world where he becomes lost.

Only a cord binds him to the “broad lofty spaces” and the “great massy strengths of abstraction” (I, 254, 55) where he feels safe. He paces through the social world

slowly on, and the fancy,

Struggling awhile to sustain the long sequences, weary, bewildered,

Fain must collapse in despair. (I, 242-4)

The “fancy” and “the long sequences” are suggestive of the poetic imagination, and the long hexameters of the poem itself. The passage depicts a disconnection between the

“broad lofty spaces” of the abstract imagination and the social world. There are dangers, Claude believes, for the imagination if it becomes too embedded in the social world and his weariness recalls that of Empedocles. His creativity would “collapse in despair” and cease to exist if he does not retain his attachment to the realm of the individual mind. Throughout, Claude battles to maintain this autonomy, which he believes to be threatened by being too much with others.

There are two kinds of attraction, he purports to believe,

One which simply disturbs, unsettles, and makes you uneasy,

And another that poises, retains, and fixes and holds you...

I do not wish to be moved, but growing, where I was growing, (II, 265-6, 68)

Only two kinds of relationship are possible, one which uproots the self and demands that it change, and another which allows the self to remain static, but, as the plot of the story proves, does not allow the self to engage meaningfully with another. Claude's belief in the necessity of closing himself off from others collapses towards the end of the poem when he realises the sterility of this belief. On a second reading of the poem, we read his reservations with the knowledge of the emptiness he discovers in them, and his discussions of these matters take on a deeper irony.

He creates grand theories to justify his behaviour; in another letter, he debates the difference between juxtaposition and affinity, preferring the former, though Eustace has recommended he try the latter. Affinity has both a social and a spiritual dimension, meaning kinship or marriage, as well as a natural bond or companionship, whereas juxtaposition is less binding, allowing two people to exist side by side without touching.

He attempts to maintain his distance by writing to Eustace, “Well I know after all it is only juxtaposition” (I, 230), but he cannot avoid, “Fusing” relations, “tying...ties” which must later be “painfully broken” (I, 233, 34, 35). The word juxtaposition is also significant in relation to the form of the poem, which consists of the juxtaposition of letters from different characters, unread by each other.

Mary reveals another perspective on Claude's desire when she recognises that,

She that should love him must look for small love in return – like the ivy  
On the stone wall, must expect a rigid and niggard support,           (III, 37-8)

His niggardly support is tied to his attitude of refusing to participate in any social action which requires merging with another individual or a group. When musing on the Roman rebellion against the French troops, and wondering if he should take the noble action of joining the revolution, he decides that “individual culture is also something” (II, 32). Sceptical as ever, he deflates the Romans' vehemence by asking what happens after the great action has been completed: “[a]rticulations sublime of defiance and scorning, today coll- / Lapse and languidly mumble” (II, 158-9). When the Romans angrily protest he asks, “What is the good of that? Will swearing, I wonder, mend matters?” (III, 63). His scepticism about the Romans' rebellion is framed by attention to their language; their articulations descend to ineffective mumbling and swearing, and he doubts the power of language to produce action.

In Canto V, Claude's lack of faith in either language or action becomes desperate. After attempting to catch up with the Trevellyn family, he despairs of finding Mary and resolves to forget her, instead aspiring “evermore to the Absolute only” (V, 59). But he then has a

moment of clear-sightedness and realises the consequences of his belief in his own independence. Now that he has lost his chance of a loving relationship, he must accept what is left:

I, who refused to enfasten the roots of my floating existence

In the rich earth, cling now to the hard, naked rock that is left me. (V, 66-7)

His self-sufficiency has become barren, and the Absolute which he idealised has been revealed as a cold and unattainable goal. All that he has left are his letters to Eustace, and even they begin to collapse.

The fifth letter in Canto V is the only letter split into fragments, and it is the only one Claude mentions that he does not send:

Yes, it relieves me to write, though I do not send...

...But as men pray, without asking

Whether One really exist to hear or do anything, –

Simply impelled by the need of the moment to turn to a Being

In a conception of whom there is freedom from all limitation.

(V, 70, 71-4)

Having lost his chance for a loving relationship, his impulse to write to Eustace shifts from the structure of a letter into a desperate scramble to express anything at all. His mistake was to believe that to stay within the self was to be without limits, but in this letter he realises the necessity of others, of an audience. Even if unsure whether his

auditors actually hear, the fiction of a structure of speaker and listener must be preserved if Claude is to retain his grasp on sanity.

In the fifth fragment of this letter he remembers his former self-sufficiency, when he could almost believe that he had “Found in my own poor soul a great moral basis to rest on” (V, 97). But now he sees this self-reliance as factitious, and resolves to

refuse, reject, and put it utterly from me;

I will look straight out, see things, not try to evade them: (V, 99-100)

Significantly, his resolve takes the form of a decision to look “straight out”, eschewing the circular images he drew earlier in Canto III, where he talked of the endless cycles of nature. In those earlier passages, he writes of the “needless, unfruitful blossom” of the Tree of Knowledge, part of an eternal cycle of “decaying and flowering ever” (III, 82). Like Empedocles, Claude is filled with a sense of futility by the endlessness of these cycles, of the eternal harmonies of nature, and the repetitions of history which Arnold predicted in “Resignation” would bring inner peace. Although he resolves to look straight out into the world, his final lines see Claude sliding back into his old imagery. Cyclical patterns re-emerge: “the earth will revolve in its axis...the stranger will wander as now in the city” (V, 191-2), and Claude is left, where he started, alone on his travels once more.

The ending of *Amours de Voyage* is similar in structure to “Empedocles on Etna” in that the two main characters remain ignorant of the other’s fate, and fail to meet in dialogue. That we read Claude and Mary’s relationship only through their letters to others, and never hear them speak to each other is highly symbolic. Like Empedocles and Callicles, the characters in *Amours de Voyage* cannot formulate a direct address to each

other, and elision rather than linear communication is the dominant mode.

Both Clough and Arnold felt the pressures of an age which demanded its leading poets should offer moral and spiritual guidance. Their resistance to these demands plays out in their poetry which dramatises a sense of crisis when addressing their audience. The difficulties and circumlocutions of address within the dramas of their poems mirrors the alienation and uncertainty they felt as regards their audience. They dramatised a poetics of failure, of a melancholy which speaks through its very belief that it cannot speak *to* its audience. In both, their strong sense of responsibility conflicts with their melancholy, and their feelings of alienation from an age which both found at times unsympathetic. As with Tennyson and Browning, this conflict led to a division in the poetic self, which must look inward and outward; it must be true to its imaginative integrity, but also follow the responsibility inherent in the poet's role. Unable to speak freely or spontaneously, their self-consciousness becomes morbidly aware of this divide. It was precisely this conflict that fuelled the greatest controversy of Tennyson's career: *Maud*.

## Chapter 6

### Echoes and Voices in Tennyson's *Maud*

“*Maud* is a tale of the time. The whole materials, save the melody, are got out of the time in which we live. Here we have nineteenth century life, with its perplexities, its wars of caste, its heart-breakings and heart-burnings, its pride of wealth and meanness of Mammonism, its craven peace men and its red-rising battle dawn of promise...In the mirror of his hero's private grief the poet shows us the public life of today” (*The Edinburgh News*, 28 July 1855: 5).

*Maud* is “full of unhealthful passions, abounds in querulous and morbid ravings, is seriously insipid in parts, and leaves a dissatisfied impression. The author was evidently suffering physically when he wrote it” (*Our Living and Our Dead*, Feb 1875: 232).

Hans Jauss writes that a work can be characterised as “entertainment art” if no change in the horizon of the readers is needed to appreciate it, if “it satisfies the desire for the reproduction of the familiarly beautiful; confirms familiar sentiments; sanctions wishful notions; makes unusual experiences enjoyable as 'sensations'; or even raises moral problems, but only to 'solve' them in an edifying manner as predecided questions” (Jauss 1982: 25). Though the sophistication of *In Memoriam* takes it far beyond “entertainment art”, Jauss' categorisation certainly corresponds to the *reception* by many readers of *In Memoriam*, where they perceived in that poem familiar sentiments and the resolution of troubling moral problems, in particular the resolution of doubt into faith, where “grief is merged in hope, and loss is crowned with ultimate possession” (Heraud 1878: 16).

To consider *Maud* as what J.R. Lowell called the “antiphonal voice to *In Memoriam*” (Tennyson, H. 1898: I, 393) is to recognise that it produced images strange rather than familiar, ugly and grotesque rather than beautiful; that it refused to resolve problems in an “edifying manner”, and left the moral senses confused, bewildered, and uncomfortable rather than satisfied. Various critics have read *Maud* as a reaction to the publication of *In Memoriam*. Francis O’Gorman writes that “*Maud* endeavoured to define territory for itself...[it was] an act of poetic space-clearing, a challenge driven by the anxiety that a writer’s past might injuriously overshadow his present” (O’Gorman 2010: 302). O’Gorman’s focus is Tennyson’s ironizing of the elegy, where *Maud* takes “the presences, durability, and communicative power of the deceased” and the “language of mourning” (O’Gorman 2010: 303) and unravels them.

My own focus is the way in which *Maud*’s voice unravels the relationships set up in *In Memoriam* between poetic speaker and auditor and in doing so dissolves the bond between the poet and his public. The manner in which *In Memoriam* was hailed as the voice of the age was in effect a commandeering of Tennyson’s voice for a public cause. *Maud* wrests back the poet’s voice from its harmony with its audience and reclaims the singularity of voice, discomfiting the purchase readers felt they had on both the poet and his poetry. Its voice is jagged, edgy, and unsettling, darting swiftly from one mood to the next, continually disrupting where *In Memoriam* lulled, almost to the point of monotony, with its fixed rhymes and structures.

William Rogers makes the point that “One thing that an author cannot do in his own voice is to reject or deny his own voice” (Rogers 1983: 82), and his comment explains in part the necessity that *Maud* take up an assumed dramatic voice if it was to provide a counterpoint to the voice of *In Memoriam*. If Tennyson were to re-negotiate the terms on

which his poetry was read, and indeed, his voice was heard, then he must employ a radically altered voice. *Maud's* resistance to easy assimilation by the culture hints at Tennyson's wariness of re-using a voice that could readily be co-opted by critics to represent the age. It is not, however, accepted that Tennyson deliberately set out to repudiate his audience. Ralph Rader notes that “[t]hroughout his long later life, [*Maud*] was the poem he loved best to read aloud and the one he read most often and most powerfully; it was, above all, the one he most wished others to feel and understand” (Rader 1963: 1). Alan Sinfield corroborates the view that Tennyson may have been as surprised as anyone else that *Maud* received such a hostile response:

[t]he public was remote and its culture was not homogeneous: it was difficult to know how diverse sections would react to this or that poem. The reception of Tennyson after 1850 was a sequence of surprises and disappointments for the bard...Tennyson could not anticipate the conditions of reception. (Sinfield 1986: 155)

In order to understand the poem's resistance to its readers apart from Tennyson's own hopes for the poem, a detailed reading of the way *Maud* addresses readers and conceives of its audience is imperative.

As with *In Memoriam* the subject matter of the poem explains only in part the reception of the poem. Some critics point out that it was the veracity with which Tennyson depicted his own society that caused such controversy: Tennyson portrayed “the moral and psychic fantasies of a puristic culture with more accuracy than was healthy for

sustained popularity” (Kincaid 1975: 114). Chris Bossche adds that “Victorian consciousness is not only the medium of the poem but the subject of it, the narrator's mind only the focus of its contradictions and inconsistencies” (Bossche 1986: 80). While these comments bear out in a reading of the poem and its reception, my own discussion of the poem focuses on its linguistic tropes of apostrophe and address. Matthew Bevis discusses *Maud's* resistance to a community of public and political voices through its addresses: “*Maud* is driven by a need to question the communities forged by political voices...and as a result its structures of address frequently break with rhetorical decorum in order to jolt its readers out of potential complacency” (Bevis 2007: 176). My own reading of *Maud* picks up Bevis' discussion of address in a less overtly political context and examines its addresses in the context of *Maud's* reviews.

To give a brief summary of the poem, the protagonist has fallen in society because his father committed suicide after being bankrupted by a rival, who now lives in the hero's former home. The speaker of the poem, who remains nameless, falls in love with the daughter of his father's rival, but the relationship ends in disaster when he duels with his love's brother and kills him. He must flee to Brittany, where he goes mad and is put into an asylum. At the end of the poem he supposedly recovers his reason and decides to join the Crimean war effort, in the hope that he will die a nobler death than suicide. Much of the speaker's time is spent raging against society and railing against the impoverished position he now finds himself in. The poem was most controversial for its condemnation of British society in peacetime and its perceived glorification of the Crimean war, which had become an unpopular cause by the time the poem was published.

The hero's mental disintegration plays out against a backdrop of alienation from a society which refuses to accept, or even listen to, the expressions of his deep melancholy

as anything other than madness. Controversy and debate ensued when the poem was published, and the widespread condemnation of the protagonist and his opinions illustrate not only the conflicted attitudes towards melancholia and madness in the nineteenth century, but towards the authority of the poet who voices such melancholic words. An isolated protagonist who has no place within society and is shunned by others was an odd choice for the new Poet Laureate; the protagonist is at various points in the poem misanthropic, melancholic, and mad. The poem is a portrait not just of a melancholic character, but of melancholic and mad words, and the drama in the poem is one not just of a man at odds with society, but of a certain kind of poetic language now at strife with acceptable forms of speech. Matthew Campbell picks up on the precarious position of Tennyson's speaker when he writes of the "music *Maud* tries to sound, of the trembling self caught in an activity not of its own choosing, responding in ways over which it has a gradually diminishing sense of control" (Campbell 1999: 135). That such a man should be taken as the spokesperson for the age intimates a crisis either within the age or within Tennyson's poetry. For the most part, its early readers preferred to think that it was the latter. The hero's anxieties about private and public voices allowed Tennyson to dramatise concerns about the role of poetry as a cultural medium. In particular, the way the speaker imagines performing for an audience, and the way his voice might be received and listened to, parallels the concerns of mid-nineteenth century poets writing for an often unsympathetic audience.

On examining the reception of *Maud*, it appears that the initial hostility towards the poem emerges precisely from expectations built up by *In Memoriam*. Where *In Memoriam* was quickly assimilated into the culture, reviewers found *Maud* much more difficult to grasp. Readers of the earlier poem perceived such a strong harmony between

themselves and the poet that they felt betrayed when this harmony was threatened. One reviewer wrote in 1882 that “If there is one living author [with] whom the public a complete mutual understanding might have been believed to exist, that author is Mr. Tennyson” (Walker 1882: 3). When this mutual understanding was broken by *Maud*, one critic felt compelled to ask, “This bitter burst of bitter indignation on an ignoble peace makes us stare and ask, 'Is this Tennyson?'" (*The Edinburgh News*, 28 July 1855: 5)

While Tennyson insisted it was a dramatic poem, titling it a monodrama, the sentiments of the protagonist were indelibly linked by reviewers with the sentiments of the poet. The personality of the poet of *In Memoriam* and the perception that he spoke directly to his readers had made such a strong impression that readers found it difficult to accept that Tennyson could voice thoughts he had not himself believed. One reviewer writes “The blind raving against peace...*may* only be dramatic, but it is in such a form as not to be distinguishable by anyone from the approved sentiments of the author” (*National Review* Oct 1855: 406). Two other reviewers agreed that *Maud* was “almost universally misunderstood” because it had to meet “the prevalent belief that Mr. Tennyson's writings were autobiographical” (*Church of England Monthly Review* March 1859: 121) and because his thoughts “have all been understood by many as the conclusions of the writer himself” (Gatty 1860: 21).

Readers could not dissociate the lyric aspects of the poem from the thoughts of the poet. It was precisely the mix of the lyric style with a dramatic narrative that seemed to disorient and provoke reviewers. Most of the vehemently critical reviews of *Maud* were written in the immediate aftermath of its publication, with reviews written twenty or thirty years later able to discuss more reasonably the poem which had provoked these denunciations. In 1897 *Macmillans Magazine* wrote of *Maud* that, “[Tennyson] extends

the sphere of the lyric to a dramatic narration; and the fresh form introduced into poetry aroused significant hostility” (*Macmillans Magazine* Nov 1897: 62). This critic diagnoses the experimental nature of the form (the hybrid of the lyric and the dramatic) as having been a particular sticking point. The strong sense of the speaker as a personal rather than a universal character prevents the reader from identifying with the speaking 'I' as a possible voice of their own, and so, rather than being able to speak alongside or with the speaker, as in *In Memoriam*, we are face-to-face, opposite him, as if watching a performance on stage. Partly because readers could not identify with the 'I' as universal, they imposed the source of its thoughts onto the poet, believing that “the narrator is a mere morbid mouthpiece” (*National Review* Oct 1855: 395) for Tennyson.

Equally, readers had found in *In Memoriam* a message of faith and hope, and several comments on “shape” illuminate the difference between the two poems. Where Tennyson was praised it was because

The hopes, thoughts, and doubts that have been hovering in the air around us, troubling all of us, and eluding all of us, have been compelled by the poet to put on fitting bodies – to assume a 'questionable shape' (*Edinburgh Review* Oct 1881: 488).

By contrast, in *Maud* “the whole imaginative form is so confused and shapeless, the body of thought so valueless and the execution on the whole so poor and degenerate” (*National Review* Oct 1855: 405). William Gladstone argued in *The Quarterly* that, “Both *Maud* and the lover are too nebulous by far” and asked “What interpretation are we meant to give to all this sound and fury?” (*Quarterly Review* Oct 1859: 460, 61). The lack of an easily

digestible moral or message from a coherent or identifiable speaker caused much consternation among reviewers.

Another aspect of *Maud* is that it delves into social problems which *In Memoriam* had left untouched, causing one reviewer to comment that

No-one can look long or deep [into the poem]...without getting some insight into that dark under-current of misery, selfishness and vice, which runs below the surface of our civilisation and prosperity. To a large part of the middle classes it never shows itself at all. (*University College Magazine* May 1856: 4)

Readers reacted not simply to the content of the poem, but to the way in which they were addressed, spoken to, and positioned by the protagonist of the poem. A poem in which *addressing* and *being listened to* are crucial, *Maud* challenges both the way in which poetic voice speaks, and its collective reception. *Maud* explores the limits of poetic voice in a society where poetry had become more and more trammelled by the commercial spirit which had infiltrated the field of literature and transformed it into a vast publishing industry; it explores how poetry or the poetic survives or manifests itself in an age where this commercial atmosphere was felt to permeate all levels of culture. As Tennyson himself writes, the poem is “the history of a morbid, poetic soul, under the blighting influence of a recklessly speculative age” (Ricks: II, 517). It is a poem not just of social commentary, but one which experiments with the kinds of voices that poetry could take up in its relation to society.

Throughout the poem the speaker's voice continually experiments with itself, exploring

how it will sound as an echo when he talks to himself, “raging alone”, or when he rants against society. Tennyson's experimentation with the lyric voice and the exploration of its performative nature pushed his language to the limits of sane human speech. *Maud* presents poetic voice in a drama of its own reception, where it plays out the character of voice as the poet-speaker imagines it to be heard. The rhetorical tropes in the poem (apostrophe, questions) which plead for a listening, understanding ear, collapse both within the narrative of the poem, and largely in its reception. The drama of the poem is one where a poetic speaker is continually negotiating with unseen or imagined auditors, who ultimately reflect his loneliness back upon himself. The internal drama is followed by the emergence of the poem into the reading public, where it is similarly misunderstood and misread. The speaker is over-anxious about the effects of his voice. Though the poem is made up of soliloquies where he talks to himself, the knowing use of rhetorical language, language which operates to act upon an audience (to persuade, alienate, or win over), suggests that his speech is always shaped by the felt presence of a listening ear. He wishes an audience into being, but is simultaneously aware that no audience will take him seriously, and his sense of being heard or unheard drives the drama of the poem.

*Maud* explores the nature of poetic voice from its conception and inspiration to its realisation, how it sounds to the ear of its speaker, and how it is transformed once an audience begins to listen. If Tennyson's early poems conceived of inner sounds in the poet's imagination, *Maud* dramatises the consequences for these sounds once they have been broadcast to the world and return to the speaker's ear transformed. The madness in the poem is, in part, to do with a terrifying gulf between speaking and listening, between hearing yourself and being heard by others. A dichotomy between private and public voices arises in the poem, and the speaker becomes obsessed with the purity of lyric voice

which no-one else can hear and the corruptibility of voice once it is exposed to others.

Matthew Bevis comments on this dichotomy when he explains that “Tennyson's decision to publish this voice, a voice that calls for communion while also insisting on its own inconvertibility, speaks of a need to be of and apart from what Gladstone refers to as 'the public mind'" (Bevis 2007: 187).

These conflicting needs to be both of and apart from the public mind are played out on a psychological level, where the speaker is tormented by contradictory desires to be left alone, and to love and be loved, and so is unable to resist the lure of reaching out beyond himself towards others. He oscillates between a lyric ideal, evident in his desire to retreat from the world, to “bury” (I, i, 75) himself in himself and live alone, “a philosopher's life in the quiet woodland ways” (I, iv, 150) on the one hand, and the hope of being understood by another on the other. The poem tests Mill's formulation that the poet must turn his back on the reader and inhabit a world of pure lyricism, talking only to himself. Though the poem is drawn to the privacy implied by the lyric voice, it by no means lives out its own idealisations. Voice would achieve Mill's lyric purity if the speaker really believed that no-one was listening to him, but he is only too aware that to speak at all is to be heard by others, to carry meaning beyond oneself, and open oneself to interpretation, and the poem ultimately critiques Mill's idealisation of the pure lyricism of a voice without an audience.

Robert Lougy defines the speaker's attraction to privacy as a belief that “When sense is translated into non-sense, language into non-language, then, and only then, is the poet certain that his own voice will remain intact and inviolate” (Lougy 1984: 421). It is certainly the case that the speaker fears the contamination of his voice, as when he regrets that “Sooner or later I too may passively take the print/ Of the golden age” (I, i, 29-30).

Yet equally, although within the drama of the poem the speaker rants alone, with no auditors, he is obsessed with the repercussions of his own voice.

Two things which most trouble the speaker are that he hears and is heard by others. In Part II, when his madness is at its height, he asks “Do I hear her sing as of old?” and “Alas for her that met me,/ That heard me softly call”. But his anxiety extends beyond his love affair to take in the relation of voice and society more generally. The “idiot gabble” (II, v, 279) which characterises the discourses of public life is condemned by the speaker, but the struggle of the poem lies in his knowledge that escaping this “idiot gabble” is impossible, that the carving out of a purely lyric, private space is an artifice, a painful illusion impossible to sustain. Every word is public, and the speaker's repeated use of rhetoric even when no-one appears to be listening is testament to his knowledge of that public quality.

In order to understand the uncertainty and bewilderment caused by the poem, we must again examine the way the reader is positioned in relation to the text. Eric Griffiths comments that the opening of the poem plunges us into a world where the frame of reference for any object goes no further than the speaker's mind, particularly through the presence of the definite article. The poem opens, “I hate *the* dreadful hollow behind the little wood” (I, i, 1, *my italics*) and Griffiths writes that one would surely expect a story to begin, “There was *a* dreadful hollow”. The effect of the opening is to bewilder the reader: “what possible response could we have to these lines? ‘Oh yes, how fascinating, so do I, so do I’”. Griffiths’ comments remind us that a significant part of how we read is to situate our own ‘I’ in relation to the text. As Scott Brewster writes, “It is the reader, responding to the linguistic effects of the text, who makes the ‘I’ speak in a lyric poem” (Brewster 2009: 34). The linguistic effects of the first stanza make speaking this ‘I’ difficult: the repetition

of 'b's and 'd's in “dabbled”, “blood-red”, “red-ribbed ledges drip” make the verse difficult to voice at all, requiring a slow and careful enunciation if the words are not to descend into a gobbledygook of sound. The verse is difficult to grasp both sonically, and because the words contain a horror which repels rather than drawing in.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth line of this opening stanza reveals much about the nature of listening in the poem: “And Echo there, whatever is ask'd her, answers 'Death'” (I, i, 4). The echo appears to have more agency in controlling the meaning of words than the speaker, reversing the classical myth where Echo has no control over what she says. On a psychological level, the words can mean that the speaker is so fixated with death, particularly the death of his parents, that his utterance cannot escape it. In this way, the metaphor of the echo seems only to symbolise the distorted psychology of the speaker and his internal relationship to his voice. An 'echo' with a small 'e' would imply that the speaker is in conversation only with himself; the phrase “whatever is ask'd her” suggests that in lieu of an available auditor he has repeatedly petitioned the Echo in the hope of a response other than “Death”, to no avail.

Yet the classical model of Echo opens up the metaphor to an engagement with others, where the speaker's voice, once spoken, becomes a separate being outside of his own control. Classical Echo's fate is meted out as a punishment for talking too much, and the removal not of voice itself, but a voice that has its own agency, means that she is misinterpreted a number of times in the myth (by Narcissus, for example). Her voice, empty of meaning, “alive, but just a sound” (Ovid 1986: III, 401) creates a space into which others step, imposing their own meaning on her voice. Tennyson's Echo therefore performs a dual function, defying any passerby to overhear in its self-completing return

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<sup>8</sup> For a Freudian reading of this passage, see Jonathan Wordsworth (1974) “‘What is it that has been done?': The Central Problem of Maud”.

upon the speaker, yet reminding us of the contingency of meaning upon listening. The disjuncture between the speech of the poetic speaker, and the sound of what returns to his ear (whatever he says, all he hears is “death”) demonstrates that a concern with listening to oneself and being listened to is paramount to the poem. Matthew Campbell points out that the Echo signals to the speaker’s awareness that his words will be interpreted without his control: “When ‘Echo’ answers, she may sound the same, but be interpreted with differing meanings” (Campbell 1999: 139). By illustrating the paradoxical psychology of the speaker, who simultaneously wishes to have a hearing, as well as to be left alone, Tennyson establishes a confusion between private and public voices and the speaker’s fear of being interpreted by others over whom he has no control.

This confusion is amplified by the complexity of apostrophe and address, and the difficulty they create for the reader. Like *In Memoriam*, *Maud* begins with a father-son relationship. However, instead of the “Strong Son of God” in whom we are all invited to find a loving relationship, the father has abandoned the son by his suicide. The speaker’s protest about his father’s body, “His who had given me life – O father! O God!” (I, i, 6) conflates his father with God as father, and the imprecation of both strengthens the hopelessness of recalling either his dead father or a silent deity. The improbability of an acknowledgment complicates our response to the drama of the poem. While we may be gripped dramatically by the psychological entanglements of the speaker, the sudden swerve into an apostrophic mode which switches its addressees is disorienting. Without knowing quite who the speaker is talking to, it is difficult to position ourselves in relation to the text: we are overhearing, yes, but overhearing a conversation between whom?

His question, “What! Am I raging alone as my father raged in his mood?” (I, i, 53) draws attention to the fact that the speaker is talking to himself, yet the question implies a

rhetoric which operates upon a reader or listener. Indeed, Matthew Campbell argues that these exclamations require “an imaginative act from the reader to create the implied circumstances, mental, social or political, in which such a turnaround in a single consciousness can take place” (Campbell 1999: 138). The sense of injustice suggests that the speaker wants himself and his father to be vindicated, his angry paranoia attempting to conjure up some external arbiter who would restore his stolen inheritance. In his anger and loneliness, he conjures up imagined auditors on whom he works his rhetoric. His evident desire to be vindicated suggests the psychological need for an audience, whose absence within the drama of the poem, unlike a typical Browning monologue, leaves a gap which we, the real audience, feel compelled to fill. We are both overhearing someone talking to themselves, but also drawn into a situation where the language seems to address us directly.

This position is not dissimilar to that of *In Memoriam*, where readers were directly addressed but also allowed to observe private dramas, but in *Maud* the language is disorienting. When the speaker asks, “Did he fling himself down? Who knows?” (I, i, 9), the questions are obviously rhetorical; he is talking to himself with no expectation of an answer. But the “Who knows?” seems to needle. The speaker's irritation passes to us, refusing to allow us to overhear passively. We cannot help but become involved in the speaker's plight. The question is a rhetorical one because the speaker does know (or thinks he knows) the real reason behind his father's death, the “vast speculation” (I, i, 9) which destroyed his fortune, and he emphasises the veils of secrecy on the part of the speculators. The allegations of conspiracy which simmer behind the question make us aware that the speaker is using rhetoric in order to accuse, and stanzas iii to v seem calculated to persuade that an injustice has been committed and arouse sympathy.

Is the speaker simply lost in self-doubt and recrimination, speaking out loud the circumlocutions of his mind, or is he actually aware of an audience? The rhetorical effects of lines such as “I heard/ The shrill-edged shriek of a mother divide the shuddering night” (I, i, 15-16), where the alliteration of 'sh' heightens the horror of the image, suggests that the speaker's language has an aim of consciously creating effects. He heard this sound in the past, but is now narrating it in a consciously poetic manner so that we too can hear and imagine the sound. Even while talking alone, the speaker uses language calculated to have an effect on its auditors.

In v the speaker's tone becomes accusatory: “Villainy somewhere! Whose? One says, we are villains all” (I, i, 17). The shift from the individual to the general “we” is awkward for there is no logical connection from the villainy of his father's rivals to the villainy of everyone in society. The accusations against a general “we” continue throughout the passage as the speaker hurls abuse at society. As Eric Griffiths points out, there is an “instability in the scope of the ‘we’ [that] pervasively affects the prophetic voice denouncing a society’s ills” (Griffiths 1989: 159). Equally, readers were unlikely to want to identify with this “we” and class themselves as villains, and the following passages of wide social condemnation have the potential to make the contemporary reader complicit with villainy. The speaker lashes out wildly at all of society and, unlike our position in *In Memoriam*, we are not simply standing in the presence of another's grief, but are implicated in its causes. The relationship between speaker and the auditor imagined by him is one of hostility mixed with pleas for sympathy, expressing his wish to be apart from others, at the same time as he desires the compensations of sympathy. *Maud* operates rhetorically on us, positioning us in particular perspectives, but whether the rhetoric comes from the speaker or from the poet is unclear. The relationship between poet,

speaker, and audience is difficult to define, and its trickiness makes the reader proceed with uncertainty as to how they should relate to both the poem and its speaker.

As the poem progresses, the speaker's vexed relationship with his speech becomes ever more confused and his language both turns away from and attempts to bring into being an audience. This mix is reflected in the contradictions between the speaker's intention to bury himself in himself, and his inability to resist reaching out to Maud. His desire to bury himself in himself is expressed as a wish to escape the "cruel madness of love" (I, iv, 156), and any other relationships. The rest of the world, society in general, Maud's brother and suitor are perceived as vile, corrupt, tainted, spotted. He attempts to preserve the purity of being alone, but also seeks to enter into a relationship with Maud.

Maud does not speak in the poem and we experience her second-hand through the speaker's imagination. The love affair is as much a matter of his voice and imagination as it is of love and apostrophe is a crucial indicator of the powers and limits of his poetic voice. The shift from narrative to apostrophe in his relation to Maud illustrates his frustrations with voicing. On first catching sight of her, he simply describes "a cold and clear-cut face" (I, ii, 78) which he sees in her carriage, but then belies his indifference by apostrophising it in the next section, which opens, "Cold and clear-cut face, why come you so cruelly meek" (I, iii, 88). The question of agency is a troubled one, for to ask why the face has come implies the apparition has occurred entirely without his volition, yet the very act of apostrophe is a poetic 'bringing-to-life' on his part.

Apostrophe in the poem is used to test the powers of poetic voice, where the speaker addresses an object in the hope of gaining a response. His hope that the face will speak to him is built up in the expectant verbs, "come" and "Breaking" (I, iii, 89), and in the swelling rhythm of the face "Growing and fading and growing" (I, iii, 94). The sentence

continues for the entire verse paragraph and when we finally reach its end the question mark which should inscribe his question does not appear, implying that the question never quite reaches its addressee and that he has given up hope of reaching her. Unlike the Echo, who torments the speaker with her continual answer, “Death”, the vision of Maud’s “cold and clear-cut face” (I, iii, 88) oppresses him with its silence. Her “growing and fading and growing” portrays a lack of fixity; the speaker imagines her coming in and out of being continually, and the imaginative power that sustains his vision waxes and wanes, never culminating in the arrival of the “real” Maud.

Almost all of the lines in this section begin with a trochee, as if simply by the weight of words the speaker can bring Maud to life. His powers fail when it becomes apparent that he can imagine but cannot animate. Maud's face has the stasis of a painting and her “Passionless, pale, cold face” (I, iii, 91) lacks life and blood. The crux of the failure is Maud's silence, exemplified by the vision of her face “without a sound” (I, iii, 94). The phrase falls exactly in the middle of the stanza, as if her silence is at the heart of the speaker's plight and his words have fallen into place around it, attempting to compensate for the words which fail to come from Maud. If the speaker's apostrophe has failed to create or bring into being another living human being, it suggests a failure beyond the psychological plot, where not just the speaker's heart but poetic voice itself is at stake.

In conventional lyric apostrophe, there is no real expectation that the apostrophised object will respond. Jonathan Culler writes that, “asking winds to blow or seasons to stay their coming or mountains to hear one's cries is a ritualistic, practically gratuitous action, that emphasizes that voice calls in order to be calling, to dramatize its calling” (Culler 1977: 63). Yet the speaker's desire for Maud, and his apostrophe of her face clearly moves beyond ritual to a real psychological need. He calls not simply in order to be calling, but

to evoke a real being who will respond. The speaker's employment of apostrophes demonstrates his continual reaching-out to imaginative objects for a response, and is an expression of his need for meaningful communication.

In the passage just discussed, the failure of apostrophe causes the speaker to indulge in pathetic fallacy. As he listens to the tide he hears “the scream of a maddened beach dragged down by the wave” (I, iii, 99). Ruskin describes two kinds of pathetic fallacy, one is the “fallacy of wilful fancy, which involves no real expectation that it will be believed”, the other is “a fallacy caused by an excited state of the feelings, making us, for the time, more or less irrational” (Ruskin 2005: 609). The speaker’s act is both a wilful fancy endowing the properties of human sound (the “scream of a madden’d beach”) on an inanimate object, and an irrational act induced by the despair of hearing no other voices but his own. Ruskin also writes that, “the temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy is...that of a mind and body...too weak to deal fully with what is before them” (Ruskin 2005: 610). In Ruskin's terms, the speaker's voice is weak because he cannot deal fully with his loneliness and the absence of Maud. Every attempt to conjure up an auditor falls into disarray and so he begins to imagine the properties of human voice into non-human objects.

Throughout the poem, Maud remains out of the speaker's grasp. After their first meeting he is able only to imagine her disembodied face, which, “womanlike” and “ghostlike”, seems an imitation rather than a real person. The “eyelash dead on her cheek” (I, iii, 90) resonates not only with the “Dead perfection” (I, ii, 83) of the preceding passage but anticipates his vision of Maud’s ghost after her actual death, and exemplifies that Maud is at many points in the poem dead to the speaker. Francis O’Gorman comments that “among the doubts about Maud’s reality is the more persistent oddity not

whether she is real but whether she is alive” (O’Gorman 2010: 304). Indeed, in Part 1, XII where the speaker is supposedly describing an episode of love, the language seems to be coded towards death: Maud is “in among the lilies” (I, xii, 423), a traditional funeral flower, she “took the kiss sedately” (I, xii, 425) and shows no sign of movement or life, and the phrase “her feet have touch’d the meadows/And left the daises rosy” (I, xii, 434-5) has the possible meaning that she is buried and her body will become part of the soil of the meadows. Her symbolic deadness expresses both the impulse of voice to reach beyond itself but its failure to find a healthy reciprocal relationship with an auditor.

The episode in Part 1, V, where the speaker overhears Maud singing a popular war-song, is notable for the pronominal instabilities with which Maud is addressed, mixing both second and third person, “you” and “she”. A close analysis of the passage reveals that when the speaker employs “you”, he is referring to Maud's voice, as when he commands, “Silence, beautiful voice!/ Be still, for you only trouble the mind” (I, v, 180-1). At this stage, it is the voice of Maud which the speaker feels he can address, and Maud is a stranger to whom he is related only by her ownership of the voice:

For *your* sweetness hardly leaves me a choice

But to move to the meadow and fall before

*Her* feet

(I, v, 185-7 my italics)

The second person “you” and “your” refers in the passage to Maud's voice, while the third person “her” refers to her body. These referents imply that the speaker can only imagine forming a reciprocal relationship with another voice, and not another person.

Significantly, there is a disjuncture between the nature of the song, “a ballad...a martial

song” (I, v, 165-6) and the manner in which it is sung by Maud, “singing alone” (I, v, 167), for the song is not sung by a group of people marching off to war together, but by a young woman wandering alone, unaware that she is overheard. The passage presents a singer being overheard, idealising the lyric poet who sings unawares of an audience. His adoration of this voice is an envy of a voice which does what he cannot: sing alone and happily without being conscious of an audience. The purity of her voice contrasts with the “sordid and mean” world; she sings of transcendent “Death, and of Honour that cannot die” (I, v, 177), and she is able to voice a “joy” and “glory” (I, v, 182, 83) which the speaker cannot.

The song which Maud sings is described as containing “a joy in which I cannot rejoice” (I, v, 182), implying that the speaker can listen to the song but cannot sing it; in other words, that the possibility of his voice being swept up in a communal voice (a possibility that he seeks again at the end of the poem) is closed to him. Both the possibilities of either a communal voice in song, or a voice in conversation with another, are denied the speaker. This disturbance modifies the way we too listen to the poem. *In Memoriam* invites us to speak the “we”, to join the voice which speaks the poem, but in *Maud* we are shut out from this vocal identification. Though we are told Maud is “Singing of men that in battle array” (I, v, 169), we do not know the words or music of the song. The military songs mentioned several times throughout the poem give a glimpse into a world of community but they are all disturbingly empty of content. As the possibility of a communal voice is lost to the speaker, it is similarly lost to us.

The speaker's troubled relation to a communal voice is mirrored by his relation to Maud. By subsuming her personality into a voice, “Not her, not her, but a voice” (I, v, 189), he creates a series of disconnected images of the woman he obsesses over. In order

to imagine Maud and her voice free of the taint of the world, she becomes a voice stripped of all that would tie her to the world, in particular her sexuality. The only body parts he mentions are her face and her feet, as if he deliberately avoids everything in-between. Eyes and feet occur again and again, for example, when the wind “set the jewel-print of your feet/ In violets blue as your eyes” (I, xxii, 890-91). The confused fragmentation of Maud into “wild voice” and “feet like sunny gems” (I, v, 174, 75) suggests that the speaker's capacity to form relationships is extremely disturbed, and his language reflects and enacts this disorder.

Part I, xviii is nominally the passage where the speaker celebrates the consummation of his love with Maud, yet on a closer examination, his happiness is checkered with many of the same tropes and images that characterised the earlier, more bitter passages. His phrase, “A livelier emerald twinkles in the grass,/ A purer sapphire melts into the sea” (I, xviii, 649-50) echoes the earlier passage condemning the vicious commercial exchange which characterises society: “A million emeralds break from the ruby-budded lime” (I, iv, 102), and “The silent sapphire-spangled marriage ring of the land” (I, iv, 107). The comparative adjectives, “livelier” and “purer” imply that his experience of the world has been heightened but not fundamentally changed, and the jewellery imagery embroils the speaker in the world of commerce he condemns. It is seemingly impossible for him to disentangle a relationship of any kind from the taint of the world.

His disturbing vision of Maud as a “Passionless, pale, cold face” (I, iii, 91) has been, for the moment, superseded by her actual appearance, but these characteristics are transferred to the image of the stars:

Innumerable, pitiless, passionless eyes,

Cold fires yet with power to burn and brand

His nothingness into man

(I, xviii, 636-8)

(the words “passionless” and “cold” linking the two visions). The repetition of 'less' evokes the emptiness of these eyes, defined by their absence of pity, passion, or warmth, but the real question is why the speaker feels so brutally *watched*. The violence of the language echoes and intensifies the idea of the speaker “passively [taking] the print” (I, i, 29), where here he is “branded” by the watching stars. Though he claims to care no longer for the stars, the force of the language makes this difficult to believe. He is unable to enforce any control over these beings which brand him, and it is impossible for him to feel truly alone or to shake off the gaze of others. This lack of control is in part what prompts the apostrophes in the poem, an attempt to bring the forces of nature back under the control of the poet.

In nature he imagines a watching, talking audience even when there is none. In this passage which ostensibly celebrates their love, the result of this blighting influence which 'brands' the speaker is evident in his conceptualisation of Maud and the uncertain nature of their union. He returns to the pattern of pathetic fallacy, imagining her presence in the sounds of nature:

Just now the dry-tongued laurels' pattering talk

Seemed her light foot along the garden walk

(I, xviii, 606-7)

This is not the first time the speaker imagines Maud's feet (in Part I, v, 186-7 where he wishes to “fall before/ Her feet”), and the fetishisation of her feet symbolises his inability

to have a face-to-face relationship, one characterised by real communication. But what is particularly odd about the simile is the attribution of features, since it would be more natural that the sound of the laurels reminded him of Maud's talk, not that the laurels' talk remind him of her feet. The laurels speak instead of her and there is no natural communication between them; he is unable to hear her except through the medium of a simile.

There is more confusion of language, nature and sexuality in lines such as,

Is that enchanted moan only the swell  
Of the long waves that roll in yonder bay?                   (I, xviii, 660-1)

The sexuality implicit in the “enchanted moan” he wishes to hear from Maud adds “a dark undercurrent woe” (I, xviii, 681) to the passage, earlier present in the image of the cedar trees “Shadowing the snow-limbed Eve” (I, xviii, 626), suggesting that the purity of her white skin is at odds with the dark shadows presaging some kind of fall. The rhythmical irregularity caused by the two successive heavy beats on “moan only” make the word “only” stick in the throat and emphasise the desperation of his feeling. Her “enchanted moan” follows the pleas for Maud to “make answer”, “wilt thou not answer this?” (I, xviii, 655, 657) and makes us aware that her silence, as in Part 1, II, provokes the speaker's pathetic fallacy. As he repeats his invocations to a seemingly empty theatre, our impression strengthens that his voice is not powerful enough to conjure up a response.

The tropes employed by the speaker to depict his vision of Maud are disordered in their sense of the relation between individuals and their own voice. Some critics have even questioned whether the love affair is anything more than a figment of the speaker's

imagination. The stability of his mind has vexed contemporary and modern critics, particularly because it is clear that we cannot always trust the veracity of the speaker's words. Tennyson himself wrote of his protagonist that "his mind has been disordered", although he "did not mean that [his] madman does not speak truths too" (Ricks 1987: II, 517).

The mask of madness also allowed Tennyson to express thoughts he would hesitate to call his own, again widening the gap between the poet and the reader, and narrowing the trust which *In Memoriam* had created. What was confusing for readers was the division between the disordered state and the truths which the speaker voices. Although the "mad" episodes are demarcated, his language throughout is disordered and, Tennyson declares, in the opening verse his fancy "is already on the road to madness" (Ricks 1987: II, 519). How is the reader to know when he speaks a truth or slips into madness? Or whether there is truth present even in his disordered language?

The difficulty of deciphering the speaker's state of mind is part of what caused readers' frustrations. But Tennyson was not simply trying to confuse his readers; by associating madness and poetry, he raises disturbing questions about the nature and authority of poetic voice in its relation to its culture. The literary and the real insane occupied a paradoxical position in Victorian society. Though embarrassment and shame surrounded those personally involved, the mad exercised a strong fascination over the general public's imagination. The impulse to hide or separate the mad in fact increased their visibility. Commissions of Lunacy, the legal court cases which would decide the defendant's sanity or lack thereof, were well attended by the public and given prominent reports in newspapers. Akihito Suzuki described how "a strong sense of drama...infused the procedures of commissions of lunacy, the lunatic being a major character" (Suzuki 2006:

29, 32).

The lunatic as a “character” pervades literary as well as real life dramas. However, though occupying a central position in the Victorian imagination, Roy Porter points out that within the movements of nineteenth-century psychiatry, mad people were observed rather than listened to: what they said, “had, above all, no meaning. Nothing that mad people said actually gave you insight into what was wrong with them, and therefore it was better not to hear it, to take it too seriously, or to encourage it” (Porter 2005: 27).

Madmen or women frequently appear in nineteenth century literature and according to Ann Colley “do so because they are nurtured by an age almost overwhelmed by its sense of instability” (Colley 1983: 10). In an 1844 edition of the *American Journal of Insanity* one writer stated that “characters such as King Lear or Macbeth, or even Hamlet and Jaques, 'may be found in every large Asylum” (Faas 1988: 9). The confining of iconic literary figures to an asylum, even in conjecture, reflects the changes in the relationship between literature and madness, where characters once revered find themselves categorised as insane.

These shifts are best documented by Foucault, in *The History of Madness*, who charts the gradual separation of the insane from society after the medieval period. Andrew Scull notes that by the mid-nineteenth century

the insane found themselves incarcerated in a specialised, bureaucratically organized, state-supported asylum system which isolated them both physically and symbolically from the larger society. (Scull 1979: 14)

No longer was the medieval fool or idiot respected for their access to truths unavailable to lesser mortals, and concurrently, it would appear, the literary character who slips into melancholia or madness also begins to lose his authority. The madman had become an exhibit, a spectacle, whose words were lost as soon as they were uttered, used only as evidence against him.

R.H. Hutton's review of *Maud* in Blackwood's comments

We weep over the disordered wits of Ophelia – we listen to the ravings of Misanthropos [reviewer's nickname for speaker] and are nervous as to what may happen if the keeper should not presently appear with a strait-jacket. (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* Sep 1855: 319)

This attitude is corroborated by the reviewer in *The Asylum Journal of Mental Science*, though he praises the author for dealing with the topic of madness; he writes, Tennyson's “new poem is neither more nor less than the autobiography of a madman” (*The Asylum Journal of Mental Science* Oct 1855: 96). While *The Asylum Journal* takes the poem seriously as a psychological study in a way that most others do not, the taint of madness means that the reviewer closes down the possibility of seeing any truth in the poem. In his view the poem can be *nothing more* than the autobiography of a madman. The immediate association which both these critics make between the madness of a literary character and the asylum suggest that they are no longer prepared to give the speaker of *Maud* a fair hearing, and that any meaning he could have is nullified by his mental instability.

What is significant in *Maud* is that the poetic quality of language is foregrounded at

moments of the most intense mental instability. Assonance, alliteration, and metre all conspire to produce the effects of mad speech but in so doing they become inextricably bound to that madness. The alliteration in part I, “muttered and maddened” (I, i, 10), “he walked when the wind like a broken worldling wailed” (I, i, 11) and where he hears “the shrill-edged shriek...divide the shuddering night” (I, i, 15), all represent the horror of the images in the speaker's mind. The association of poetic language with madness suggests not only that the speaker experiences moments of insanity, but draws out similarities between the ways in which poetic voice and the voices of madness operate.

Another instance of the madness of poetic language is in the lines

And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,  
 The hoofs of the horses beat,  
 Beat into my scalp and my brain,  
 With never an end to the stream of passing feet,  
 Driving, hurrying, marrying, burying. (II, v, 246-50)

The insistence on “beat” and reference to “feet” evoke poetic metre. In contrast to the measured language which numbs pain in *In Memoriam*, here the beat of poetry torments the speaker. The consonance of “hurrying, marrying, burying”, where the words stumble over each other reiterates that to speak in poetry, in rhythm, rhyme or consonance, is to succumb to and be swept away by this terrifying march of mad language.

Within the poem, the speaker's language begins to break down into madness because he loses his grip on his position within society. But most controversial was that the speaker diagnosed other forms of public speech with the same degeneracy. In Parts II and III he

begins to show not just how poetic language has broken down, but how the language of public discourse has followed it. In these sections the speaker's madness illuminates certain ideas about language; his mental disintegration plays out against a backdrop of perturbing public speech acts.

In Part II, v, the speaker is in an asylum but imagines that he is dead and buried in a shallow grave, condemned to “have no peace” (II, v, 254) because the noise and bustle of the world torment him. The conditions of his living death soon extend from himself to the public world of statesmen and churchmen. The disintegration of healthy listening relationships or conversations is extended from a poetic speaker to all spheres of public life. He sees

A lord of all things, praying  
 To his own great self as I guess;  
 And another, a statesman there, betraying  
 His party-secret, fool, to the press;  
 And yonder a vile physician, blabbing  
 The case of his patient. (II, v, 270-5)

These figments of the speaker's imagination are used to portray how public speech acts have become distorted into a mockery of their purpose. The first demonstrates that prayer, the conversation between man and God, has collapsed into a one-sided farce, the prayer returning to its speaker because God is not listening. The second and third betray secrets, and make public what should have been private. All portray figures in respected public institutions – the aristocracy, the church, government, and the medical profession – whose

speech becomes inappropriate once it is voiced to a general audience.

What seems most distressing to the speaker in these passages is the transformation of the private:

For I never whisper'd a private affair  
 Within the hearing of cat or mouse,  
 No, not to myself in the closet alone,  
 But I heard it shouted at once from the top of the house;       (II, v, 285-8)

The comic exaggeration of this image reflects the way in which this fear is heightened by madness to a ludicrous extreme. There is ambivalence in the speaker's admission of agency in his own public speech. Whatever he whispers to himself, he then “heard it shouted at once from the top of the house”. It is unclear whether the speaker himself or an unknown party is doing the shouting, and the disjunction between speaking and hearing one's own voice reminds us of the Echo of the opening passage. The speaker's voice is dispersed abroad but his reluctance to admit his own possible agency in this dispersion reveals an unknown process between speaking and being heard. How he imagines he speaks is entirely different from the way his voice is broadcast.

The result of private words becoming public is that they are demeaned to a status of babble and it is precisely when private words are heard by those who shouldn't be listening that words become “idiot gabble” (II, v, 279). Those who speak private thoughts in a public forum, and by implication those who listen to these words – like “the press” – are accused of deviousness or vileness. The paucity of the relationships between speakers and their auditors, where no meaning is conveyed because secrets are selfishly broken,

runs parallel to a conception of poetic voice which is tainted whenever it opens itself up to the world. By presenting images of the corruptibility of voice, the speaker invites us to question our status as listeners to his own private thoughts.

Whilst in the asylum, the speaker has lost faith in voice altogether, whether public or private. His lack of belief in his own voice is evident in his use of apostrophe, which confirms that the expectation of a response has disappeared, and he exclaims “O me, why have they not buried me deep enough?” (II, v, 334). The first “me” reinforces the sense of the question being directed to himself, as if he has given up all hope of being heard; all apostrophe has failed, and so he can only apostrophise himself. The use of the third person, “they”, reinforces the lack of hope of reciprocity: no “you” is possible.

Maybe still I am but half-dead;  
 Then I cannot be wholly dumb;  
 I will cry to the steps above my head  
 And somebody, surely, some kind heart will come (II, v, 337-40)

The relationship which enables one human being to talk to another is broken and he can only cry to the steps in the hope that, through the step, his cry will reach someone. He is not “wholly dumb” if he can still cry *to* someone or something, indicating that voice has power only if someone is listening; to speak without an auditor is to be dumb.

That no-one does respond to the speaker confirms the dumbness of his voice and it is in the light of this utterly bereft state that we must read the final section of the poem. The ending of the poem was the part which caused the most controversy, and reviewers were quick to point out that the speaker was not in harmony with the heart of the nation. *Maud*

was published when the tide of opinion was turning against the Crimean War. What had once been a popular cause was turning into a public outrage largely due to the unprecedented form of war reporting, replete with the first war photographs. How far Tennyson endorsed the opinions of his speaker who finds a glorious cause in joining the war was the crux of the matter for *Maud's* reviewers. The debate for these reviewers, as it is for later critics, is whether or not the speaker has recovered his reason.

Most twentieth-century critics resist a literal reading of the poem's ending, though as Christopher Ricks points out, the return of the speaker's sanity is "a misrepresentation which the poem invites" (Ricks 1989: 248). Most contemporary reviewers believed that he had recovered his reason at this point. They were divided as to whether the decision to go to war was ennobling or foolish, but rarely thought that the madness had not been cured. *The Literary Companion* of New York summarised the ending of the poem as follows: "Maud dies of the shock, the hero becomes mad, recovers his reason, and joins the army now fighting against Russia" (*Literary Companion* Oct 1855: 67), and *The Asylum Journal of Mental Science* (which would obviously claim an authority on the subject) states that "he finds mental restoration in the activity of thought and feeling aroused by the transition from peace to war...He becomes sane and enters heart and soul into the excitement of battle" (*The Asylum Journal of Mental Science* Oct 1855: 102). Most important is the opinion of R.J Mann, whose essay on *Maud* Tennyson endorsed: "In the final scene of all, the hero of the drama once more appears, speaking the words of reason", and demonstrates "the ennobling and energising of the human soul" (Mann 1856: 70, 71). Many other readers also found an uplifting moral in the poem in the speaker's recovery of reason: "The noble and healthy close" is "the setting forth of warning and example to others by the exposure of morbid self-investigation, and the inculcation of the

truth” (*Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* March 1856: 137).

Conversely, the hostile review in the *Quarterly* finds it “strange...that war should be recommended as a specific for the particular evil of Mammon-worship” (*Quarterly Review* Oct 1859: 463). For those who saw no uplifting moral in the ending, Tennyson was meddling in politics inadvisedly. Of the Crimean War the reviewer in *The Asylum Journal* thought, “he rather appears to drag [it] in for the purpose of expressing political opinions” (*The Asylum Journal of Mental Science* Oct 1855: 103). Another that “his attempt to weave into a ghastly story of crime, avarice and insanity a fervid hymn to the moral value of a national War was, to say the least, a little irrelevant” (Harrison 1899: 25). To some extent, readers' political views – whether or not they supported the war, or accepted the diagnosis of social ill in peacetime – dictated the tenor of their reviews.

The poem became, therefore, part of a political debate which moved away from concerns with poetic voice. Reviewers did not engage with Tennyson's dramatisation of a poetic voice which examines its own potential to address an audience or to speak on a political matter. *Maud* stood to serve the political ends of its readers: for *The University College Magazine*, to bring about good conditions in peace is the task of society

and for pointing out the true spirit in which this task must be performed, for nerving the courage and firing the ardour of all who will join in its achievement, Maud may well be recommended. (*University College Magazine* May 1856: 11)

The poem is reduced to a recommendation for a social task which the reviewer believes to be important. Reviewers were not really listening to the voice itself and this pattern

demonstrates in the reception of the poem the way in which the “idiot gabble” and “babble” (II, v, 279, 284) of the language of the public sphere tramples over the private or poetic voice.

When we turn back to the poem, it is clear that the importance of the ending does not lie in the morality of his decision to go to war but in how the speaker has navigated the ambitions and limitations of his own speech. Left in a condition of dumbness in the asylum, the only escape is to appropriate a communal voice. The speaker describes his decision to go to war by narrating himself speaking: “it is time, O passionate heart', said I” (III, vi, 30). The phrase “said I” reveals that he is highly conscious of the processes of his own voice at the very moment he seeks to lose it in a communal voice. There is a tension between his self-referential and lyric apostrophe to his own heart and the following action where he “mixed [his] breath/ With a loyal people shouting a battle cry” (III, vi, 34-5). He seeks to lose the terrible pain of the ever-returning apostrophes of his lyric voice in a martial song not dissimilar to that sung by Maud earlier in the poem.

His success, however, in resolving his crisis by mixing his “breath/ With a loyal people” is dubious. His macabre vision of “deathful-grinning mouths” (III, vi, 52) and “the blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire” (III, vi, 53) can hardly be equated with the patriotic fervour of a loyal people. The seeds of his madness flower even when he seeks to bury finally his own voice. A belief in the unity between himself and the “people” is evoked in the lines, “the heart of a people beat with one desire” (III, vi, 49), but the metre never quite maintains the regular beat which would corroborate this unity. Anna Barton writes that, his “rhythms echo the martial beat of the army with whom he has mixed his breath. The sound of his voice, repeating itself to chime in with the voice of the nation, is less distinct” (Barton 2008: 103). While she is right to point out that his rhythms echo the

martial beat, the speaker never quite achieves the sublimation of his own voice into this martial beat. Matthew Campbell disagrees and writes that “the rhythms are shot through with the exhaustion of the man who speaks them” (Campbell 1999: 153). The metre, though retaining five beats per line throughout, oscillates between iambs and anapests, as if the speaker is trying to find a rhythm which will pull himself, and us, together; as if he tries but cannot quite achieve the regular, beating rhythms characteristic of patriotic poetry. In the line “It is time, O passionate heart and morbid eye” (III, vi, 32), the irregular metre, with its mix of anapests and iambs, makes his voice falter as he remembers his morbidity. When we do come upon a jingoistic line of full anapests, “It is better to fight for the good than to rail at the ill” (III, vi, 57), it rings false; the regularity of the rhythm seems forced when elsewhere the speaker is stumbling over his words.

The final lines of *Maud* return, intriguingly, to the central patterns found by readers in *In Memoriam*:

I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind,  
I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assigned.      (III, vi, 58-9)

It was exactly this unity of feeling which critics read into *In Memoriam*, where Tennyson was felt to be in harmony with the feelings of the nation. The word “embrace” echoes its predecessor in the first stanza of the Prologue of *In Memoriam*, where we collectively “embrace” God (Prologue, 3), yet here we cannot help but feel that this embrace is not a victory. Aidan Day writes of the ending of the poem, “There is a despair at the Christian and the parallel Romantic narrative paradigms of despondency followed by healing, and at last, restitution of hope. The poem constitutes a parody of such narratives” (Day 2005:

184). If the ending parodies a narrative which moves from despair to hope, it is surely also parodying the end of *In Memoriam*, to which reviewers ascribed this narrative countless times.

The resignation and even passivity of accepting “the doom assigned” recalls his fear that he would “take the print/ of the golden age” (I, i, 29-30). “[A]ssigned” connotes not just a general passivity but one specifically connected with authorship (signed, signature), and that the poem ends on this word suggests that the speaker has indeed fulfilled his fear and taken the print of someone else's authority. Throughout the poem he is poised perilously between two impulses: the desire to play the role of a lyric poet who pretends to ignore an audience of which he is agonisingly aware, or to acknowledge an audience unworthy of him, and mix his pure voice with the “idiot gabble” (II, v, 279) of public discourse.

His inability to resolve the impasse between the madness of a private voice and the passivity of a public one leaves the poem vacillating between two conditions and the reader in a state of bewilderment. The ever-varying forms and rhythms, the discontinuous narrative and fragmentation of consciousness, the uncertainty as to quite how far we can take the speaker at his word, all combine to make the poem a perplexing read. Its disturbing qualities are tied to Tennyson's own relationship to the public. To have everyone agree with your work, as Tennyson's readers did with *In Memoriam*, imposes a kind of passivity on your voice. But these readers were unable to read *Maud* in such a way.

*Maud* divided Tennyson's audience and to have a divided audience means that your voice cannot be paraphrased. *Maud* develops as an experiment of putting poetic voice under certain conditions: it takes the transformation of poetic voice once it enters the

world and instils it back into poetry, mirroring within the drama of the poem the transactions between poetry and its audience. The poem perceives the ways in which readers distort poetic voice and attempts to wrest back its singularity. These battles with his own voice lead the protagonist of the poem into the realm of madness. Madness works in both directions in *Maud*: the speaker diagnoses madness within the public speech of government and aristocracy, just as they reject him and his words as mad. If madness is a cultural diagnosis, then there is the possibility that the speaker of the poem is sane, while all around him are mad. But the audience of *Maud* refused to accept such a possibility, and rather than allow the poem to diagnose them, many of them rejected it as nothing more than the ravings of a lunatic; the poem was refused assimilation by some of its readers. And indeed, for several years after the publication of *Maud*, the poem was howled down by an audience who refused to sanction its mad voice.

## Chapter 7

### Re-reading *The Ring and the Book*

*The Ring and the Book* is “doubtless much truer for us than would have been the actual facts and words seen by coarser eyes and heard by duller ears.” (Berdoe 1897: 102)

In their early work, Tennyson and Browning had imagined the poet’s voice coming into being at the same time as they envisaged an audience on which that voice could act. As they progressed into the 1850s their impression of an audience became more and more inflected with the demands of their real readers, and to accommodate these demands, Tennyson and Browning used the dramatic form to renegotiate their relationships with readers. Both, at various points, resisted or deferred to the opinions of reviewers (some of whom were friends and fellow-writers) to write poetry which expressed their own views of the poet’s role. By reshaping speaker-auditor relations within their texts, their poetry opened up a new conversation about ways in which it could be read and interpreted by their real readers.

Ironically, the poem that brought Browning the critical triumph he had been pursuing for decades was one which used the dramatic form to challenge current modes of reading. *The Ring and the Book* was the first publication to bring Browning a resounding popular success. In this fascinating and vivid portrayal of a seventeenth-century Italian murder case, “Mr. Browning’s genius reaches the culminating point” (CH Browning: 331). An epic poem in its scope and range, *The Ring and the Book* was the poem which finally turned the tide of censure into one of praise and satisfied the demands of Browning’s critics. Reviewers commented that “The style...is singularly free from the well-known

faults” (CH Browning: 294), and he had “never written anything more powerful than the tragic story which is there conceived and developed” (CH Browning: 304). Yet, ironically, the conception of truth developed and put into practice by Browning subverts the terms on which critics had judged him.

There are two types of truth proposed in *The Ring and the Book*: an empirical attitude which sees truth as factual, as a neat, self-contained entity that can be extracted whole from its context, and which opposes the other idea of truth as a mercurial and fluid process, unattainable except in flashes, and always just beyond our grasp. Browning makes it clear where his sympathies lie, and the first kind of truth is associated with the villains of the story, the murderer Guido, the unscrupulous lawyers, and the torturers, the second kind with the murder victim, Pompilia, and her rescuer Caponsacchi, as well as the Pope. A correlation can be traced between the discussions of truth in the poem, and the preconceptions of reviewers.

In the previous chapter on Browning I discussed at some length the image of the oyster and the pearl, which first appears in *The Athenaeum* in 1840, then as a conceit in Browning’s poem, “Popularity”, and recurs a number of times in subsequent reviews. Those who use the image envisage Browning's poetic style as an ugly shell, difficult to break into, and which hinders those who wish to attain the valuable pearl of meaning from their reading. Similar tropes are employed again and again by reviewers: in 1863 one writes of Browning's poetry, “The nut is undeniably hard to crack. Whether the kernel is worth the labour of getting at it, we shall not stay to argue” (CH Browning: 229), and “either the symbol itself is so hard and rude, or the meaning is so inextricably deep in it, that, while the concealment is perfect, the revealment is null” (Browning CH: 280). An inner treasure obtainable only once its rough outer covering had been dispensed with was

a common way of perceiving Browning. Those who admired the “power and beauty” (Browning CH: 261) of his conceptions deplored the “crabbed and confused sentences, the absence of graceful grammatic flow, the exceeding harshness and cacophony of metre” (*Fraser’s Magazine* Feb 1851: 174).

Nor was Browning the only poet to fall under such a standard. Comparing Browning unfavourably to Tennyson, one reviewer wrote of the latter that, “the crude husk has fallen more and more away, - his early faults of language have ceased insensibly, and his verse has gradually become the pure, transparent medium of his thoughts” (*London Quarterly Review* Jul 1856: 495-6). In this reviewer's conception, style reaches its apex once it becomes invisible, allowing the reader to see straight through, unhindered, to the poet's thought. At best, style is a necessary “crude husk”, an unfortunate hanger-on to the fine thoughts the poet seeks to communicate. This subordination of style to content entails an artificial separation where it is possible to separate the thing one says from the manner of saying it.

For a poet whose power lay in his dramatic abilities to convey psychology through a poetic style which mimics the perversions and fault lines of his characters, Browning was always going to suffer under these assumptions. Herbert Tucker remarked that “[t]he way to meaning in *Sordello* is through its style, not around or above or in spite of it” (Tucker 1980: 87); the comment could easily be applied to all of Browning's work. With admirable obstinacy, he pursued his own course, and these distinctions between style and content are nowhere more challenged than in *The Ring and the Book*, where the manner of speaking defines the psychology and moral position of each speaker. That the content of the monologues, the meaning to be extracted, is the same story retold ten times over, heightens the emphasis on manner over meaning, redressing the balance upset by critics.

The story related in *The Ring and the Book* is based on a historical murder case which took place in 1698. Browsing the book stalls of Florence, Browning stumbled upon a set of legal documents, bound in a Yellow Book, pertaining to the case, and used it as the inspiration for his poem. In brief, the case involved the trial of the Tuscan Count, Guido Franchini, for murdering his young wife, Pompilia, and her parents, Pietro and Violante Comparini. Pompilia had been plucked from a brothel as a baby, and passed off as Violante's child to the world. In what was a familiar exchange of money for a title, she was married to Guido at the age of twelve, but the plan went awry when it turned out both parties were impoverished. Abandoned by her parents, Pompilia was treated cruelly by Guido, and then rescued by a young priest, Caponsacchi who attempted to spirit her back to Rome. She was caught and handed over to the courts, who placed her in a nunnery as punishment. Feeling that her punishment was not harsh enough, Guido decided to avenge his honour and murdered her along with her parents. He was tried by the courts, found guilty, appealed to the Pope, found guilty by him, and executed. There are twelve monologues, the first and last spoken by the narrator. II, III, and IV are representatives of the crowd of Romans who follow the murder case as if it were a circus. V, VI, and VII are the main characters, Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia; then follow the two lawyers defending Guido and Pompilia respectively. The Pope pronounces judgment in Book X, and Guido speaks again, from his prison cell, awaiting execution, in XI.

The manner of the story-telling, where each monologist presents a different perspective on the same events, heightens the self-reflexivity of Browning's explorations of language. Critics who locate the poem's ultimate purpose in its spiritual or moral themes are still repeatedly drawn by the way the poem contrives to act upon the reader. Stefan Hawlin believes that "The ultimate issue in the poem is a staple of the philosophy of religion:

Why does a good God allow evil to dominate history to the extent it does?" but he also finds that "The poet's aim, and our aim, must be to see through the smoke of lies and confusion to the truth of things" (Hawlin 2002: 191,107). Other critics have also been fascinated by Browning's portrayal of truth and his invitation to the reader to re-interpret complex truths about life and art. Donald Hair finds that "each reader must explore what is given to him, use his imagination on it, and so arrive at its meaning" (Hair 1972: 180), and his impression that *The Ring and the Book* is a poem which demands an imaginative involvement from the reader is supplemented by Patricia Rigg, who asserts that Browning "invites an *active* reading voice to bring the poem 'into being'" (Rigg 1999: 44). An interest in the issue of interpretation leads Adam Roberts to view some of the characters as allegories for reading: there "is the Pope's approach, the approach of the true reader, defining meaning via the heart rather than the head, faith rather than reason" (Roberts 1996: 107). It is this element of the reader's involvement in *The Ring and the Book* which has most intrigued critics, and which is still a fruitful site of investigation.

Lee Erickson argues that the poem "is a form of trial as a metaphor of every man's trial before God and of every monologist's true audience being God" (Erickson 1984: 231). My own study of *The Ring and the Book* gives the lie to the implied insularity that Erickson finds in the poem by contending that Browning dramatises manifestations of his ideal artists and ideal readers, or deviations from that ideal, within a context of critical assumptions made by reviewers about his own poetry, and poetry in general. Each of the speakers represents a manifestation of or a deviation from Browning's conception of an ideal artist or reader. Mary Sullivan writes that each of the speakers in the poem "direct and shape their utterances toward influencing a specific audience" (Sullivan 1969: xii). If this statement is true, it is equally the case that their utterances are shaped by

contemporary modes of writing. Though set in the seventeenth century, *The Ring and the Book* weighs and evaluates nineteenth-century habits of reading and writing. Woven into the monologues are strands from Browning's ideas about his audience. Ways of reading, speaking, and writing in the poem are tested and evaluated against nineteenth century attitudes. There is a wealth of evidence, in the images, metaphor, and phrasing within the text of *The Ring and the Book* which illustrates that Browning was indeed responding to the contemporary literary climate. Situating Browning in his literary historical context illuminates the issue of the reader's involvement in the text.

Nowhere is this literary historical context more important than in the central metaphor which opens the poem, where Browning's narrator discusses the imaginative conception of the book. The conceit is named in the title of the poem, and the narrator describes the process of fashioning a gold ring, where the jeweller mixes the gold with an alloy in order to shape and carve flowers into the ring, before squirting it with acid to get rid of the alloy. The raw material of the gold is equated with the Yellow Book containing the legal documents of the trial; it is the "fanciless fact" (I, 144) waiting for the artist to shape it into an artwork, and the artifice of the process is depicted by the words, "device", "trick", and "artificer" (I, 9, 18).

By using a metaphor of an object which had both aesthetic and commercial value – as beautiful jewellery and an expensive metal – Browning considers the creative process of writing poetry in terms of value and commodity, foregrounding what was for him a central issue, the spiritual value of poetry in an age of commercial literature. Joseph Bristow argues that "the ring is something in exchange with its audience, and, between them, poet and audience have to work out the value of the 'ring' and the 'book' – and how each acts as a metaphor for the other" (Bristow 1991: 30). Bristow rightly points out that "value" is at

stake in the metaphor of the ring and the book, but it is only when the metaphor is read alongside the metaphors used by reviewers to describe Browning's poetry that Browning's claims about value become fully comprehensible. Once read alongside his reviewers, Browning's ring becomes a wonderfully ironic image for the reception of his own poetry. What he offers the "British public" (I, 410) is not just a book, but a book which pretends to value itself on their own terms, and then cross-examines those terms.

He compares the poet's activity to the jeweller's, where the poet is the alloy, who is dispensed with when the final product, the ring or the book, is finished.

my fancy with those facts,  
 I used to tell the tale...  
   such alloy,  
 Such substance of me interfused the gold  
 Which, wrought into a shapely ring therewith...  
 I disappeared; the book grew all in all.       (I, 679-80, 681-3, 687)

If the poet is the alloy which must disappear once the gold ring is finished, then the narrator posits that the poet's activity is the waste material that can be disposed of once the book is created. Such an idea is similar to that expressed in an 1863 review, which described Browning's poetry as "a deep and often a dark and difficult mine; but there is gold to be found at the bottom" (Browning CH: 213). Browning's image of the book as a ring opposes the beautiful finished object against the ugly and unnecessary alloy of the poet's shaping, and suggests that what he now offers the public is the gold without the dark and difficult mine.

However, his conception of the poet as the inferior alloy and his so-called disappearance from the book are disingenuous and belied by the obvious presence of the narrator, who explicitly states his informing presence when he writes, “I led you” (I, 1331), “I point you” (I, 1333), “Let me...slope you back...Land you on mother earth” (I, 1334-5). He complicates and begins to deconstruct his own metaphor in the following lines:

there's nothing in nor out o' the world  
 Good except truth: yet this, the something else,  
 What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?  
 This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine  
 That quickened, made the inertness malleolable  
 O' the gold was not mine, – what's your name for this?  
 Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?  
 Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?           (I, 698-705)

The passage plays with assumptions about fact and fiction, and in particular, about the view that the imagination of the poet is a means to an end, not the end in itself. If we accept the metaphor of the ring in good faith, then we fall in with the assumption that the end is more important than the means, that we must have the ring without the alloy. Readers of Browning, as I have described, tended to privilege the end product over the means: as early as 1841, a reviewer asks, “why should we, ere we could disengage this high and beautiful truth, have had to go through the tedious and disagreeable process of unwrapping?” (CH Browning: 81). In suggesting that he will remove himself from the

ring, the narrator offers to perform this unwrapping for us, but he does so with a double-edged irony, questioning the very assumptions which make unwrapping a necessary process.

“What's this then?” (I, 700), the narrator needles us, “what's your name for this?” (I, 703), this alloy which the poet mixed with gold, refusing to allow his readers to ignore his challenge. By insisting we find a name for this motion, the narrator draws attention to the importance of the wrapping, of the process of creating meaning as well as the meaning itself. For the ring is antithetical to the idea of truth which *The Ring and the Book* supports: it is a fixed, finished object rather than the “motions” (I, 701) of the poet which “quicken” (I, 702) the inert material.

The ring allows Browning to challenge other oppositions, between beauty and ugliness, between the means and the end, between a finished and an incomplete artwork. Walter Bagehot's essay, first published in 1864, “Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry” is a helpful orientation for these ideas. In his definition of pure art, he writes that, “[t]he form is sometimes said to be bare, the accessories are sometimes said to be invisible, because the appendages are so choice that the shape only is perceived” (Bagehot 1965: 334). The notion that style or form should be invisible so that the subject matter shines through is similar to some of the reviewers I have quoted, and the shape which is a “single whole” (Bagehot 1965: 334) separate from its form corresponds to Browning's ring, free from the alloy which shaped it. Browning's ironic image allows him to pretend he is conforming to these definitions of the best kind of art.

Bagehot uses Browning as an example of grotesque art, which, “shows you what ought to be by what ought not to be; when complete, it reminds you of the perfect image by

showing you the distorted and imperfect image” (Bagehot 1965: 353). His comment is a fair reading of *some* of Browning's work, and certainly in *The Ring and the Book* various speakers reveal the truth by their deviations from it. But *The Ring and the Book* itself is a refutation not of the distinctions made by Bagehot, but of the values he places on them. Browning's grotesque is rated last after Wordsworth's pure, and Tennyson's ornate writing, and the irony in Book I is the primary instance of Browning's dissent. Interestingly, when Bagehot came to review *The Ring and the Book*, he believed that, “[o]ut of these various theories...we are to extract the truth of the mystery” (CH Browning: 303). Truth as a single whole which can be “extracted” is exactly the mode of truth which *The Ring and the Book* seeks to contradict (and the word “extract” always occurs in the poem in a negative context, as I later discuss), illustrating in a minor way the discrepancy over ways of reading between Browning and his critics.

This reading of the ring as an ironic image, challenging the ways reviewers had read Browning, suggests a more antagonistic relationship to his audience than previously felt by more recent critics. William Buckler illustrates the confusion which arises when reading the ring as a straight image. He finds it a “troublesome element” because he insists on accepting it without irony, and the only way he can make it fit is to assume, “[t]he imagination or fancy is not withdrawn from the art-work, but merely disappears below the surface” (Buckler 1973: xxii). Patricia Rigg also misses the ironic nuances when she writes that the ring metaphor is “appropriate...because it is circular, without beginning or ending, and thus a symbol of process and continuity” (Rigg 1999: 38). These unsatisfactory readings demonstrates the necessity of reading *The Ring and the Book* alongside Browning's combative relationship with reviewers.

This antagonism rises to the surface in the terse address to the

Such, British Public, ye who like me not,  
 (God love you!) – whom I have yet laboured for,  
 Perchance more careful whoso runs may read  
 Than erst when all, it seemed, could read who ran,           (I, 1379-80)

These lines appear to be a direct response to a reviewer discussing Browning's lack of popularity in relation to his difficulty: “[t]here is a certain poetry which he who runs may read...It is a mournful but an indubitable fact that the majority of the reading public would prefer to do its thinking by deputy” (*The Critic* Mar 1863: 273). The reviewer refers to those who read popular and superficial poetry, which can be read running through the sentences, because there is no need to stop and ponder the meaning. In his 1866 treatise, *Poetics*, E.S. Dallas writes that “[g]reat poetry was ever meant, and to the end of time must be adapted, not to the curious student, but for the multitude who read while they run” (Hughes 2010: 91). Browning’s narrator responds, perhaps those who think they can read will run more carefully than before, when they assumed that reading was a simple matter of racing through sentences, rather than appreciating the labour of the poet.

Reviewers felt this rather bitter aside to be too imperious and sniffily refuted him: “if [the British public] does not like him, it is only because ...he will spoil his finest poetry by hieroglyphics such as these” (Browning CH: 292), and “at present he certainly is not unhonoured” (Browning CH: 297). This interaction demonstrates how *The Ring and the Book* is woven with the threads of what Browning calls “public talk” (I, 893), and this interest continues in Books II, III, and IV, narrated by members of the Roman public, the

crowd who delight in the sensation of the murder trial.

Browning's interest in the crowd is first evident in *Sordello* where it appears as a character in its own right, following a trend which categorised the growing reading public as a mob, a mindless rabble who did not have the requisite taste to judge what was good or bad literature. Books II, III and IV depict anonymous members *from* the crowd who speak *to* other members of the crowd, setting themselves up as mediators or interpreters of the story. Their characters and modes of address play off representations both of the mass reading public and the elite literary coteries, and images and rhetorical habits of reviewers are incorporated into their monologues. By dramatising these figures who made up the various kinds of audiences poets experienced, Browning explores the compromises between truth and rhetoric demanded by addressing these different audiences, and the problems he associates with “public talk” (I, 893).

Browning takes pains to alert us to the characteristics of these first three narrators, and warns us that their version of the story is not to be taken as truth. He exerts a seemingly anomalous effort to undermine the authority of his speakers before their monologues have begun. This method certainly fits with Bagehot's description of grotesque art by showing us “what ought to be by what ought not to be” (Bagehot 1965: 353). In doing so, Browning invites us not just to judge these speakers, but to judge *why* they swerve from truth. Half-Rome is described as a vain character, “no whit/ Aware he is not Aeacus” (I, 867-8). The mention of this classical figure, a son of Zeus who became a judge of the underworld, signals that *The Ring and the Book* is in part a poem about judgment, legal, moral and rhetorical, but in this case the reader must fill in, and occupy the role of Aeacus which Half-Rome fails to fulfil.

The narrator's description of Half-Rome is the first clue to how we must read and judge

his speech. He describes how this speaker has tried to “fix/ Truth at the bottom” (I, 857-8), but has swerved and missed because of his wish to find the “husband's side the safer” (I, 867), and warns us that Half-Rome's speech is,

The instinctive theorising whence a fact  
Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look. (I, 863-4)

The partiality of Half-Rome's eye, which in effect sees only what he wants it to see, duly cautions us not to accept his word as truth. Not only does his eye distort the truth, he wishes to persuade “whosoever of a multitude” (I, 870), of the authority of his vision. He is

wishful one could lend that crowd one's eyes...  
And make hearts beat our time that flutter false:  
- All for truth's sake, mere truth, nothing else! (I, 878, 880-1)

The desire that the crowd will see through his eyes, and their hearts beat with his is, as ever, a suspect aim in Browning's moral scheme, and the wish to control the vision of others is the desire of such villains as the Duke of Ferrara and Porphyria's lover.

Though he appears to be a harmless comic character, by associating Half-Rome with these predecessors, Browning makes us suspect the claims he makes in his monologue, claims which turn out to combine several habits of Browning's reviewers. Half-Rome opens by presenting himself as a mediator. He meets the cousin of the man he suspects to be courting his wife, and persuades him to forgo the crowd pressing to see the dead bodies of Pietro and Violante in the church.

Be ruled by me and have a care o' the crowd:

This way, while fresh folk go and get their gaze:

I'll tell you like a book and save your shins. (II, 2-4)

The figure of a mediator would not have been unfamiliar to Browning, as it crops up in a number of reviews claiming that he needed an interpreter to explain his work to the public. *The English Review* wrote that, “no author more requires interpreters to stand betwixt him and the public” (Browning CH: 128) and *The Saturday Review* that, “[w]e really should think highly of the powers of any interpreter who could 'pierce' the obscurity of such 'stuff' as this” (Browning CH: 159). Half-Rome offers to stand between his auditor and the crowd, and interpret the story of the murder for him, allowing Browning to present an ironic picture of the usefulness of such an interpreter.

The physical battering which Half-Rome's auditor can now avoid – “save your shins” – recalls the concerns of two of Browning's more famous critics. John Ruskin complained to Browning in a letter that his poetry was like “the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed...so full of clefts that half the journey has to be done with ladder and hatchet” (Browning 2009: 690), and G.H. Lewes remarked that “[w]alking on a new-ploughed field of damp clayey soil, would be skating compared to [reading *Sordello*]” (CH Browning: 122). A reviewer in 1856 had similar complaints that in reading Browning, “[w]e grope and stumble along, encountering unexpected obstructions at every turn, now hitting a shin, now fraying an elbow” (*Christian Remembrancer* Apr 1856: 282). These critics prefer to keep their shins safely above ground rather than falling into mud and ice, but their fastidiousness denotes a mode of reading which skates over the surface rather than

engaging in a physical struggle with the poetry, leaving them untouched and unchanged by their experience of reading.

It is possible to “save your shins”, but to do so means losing out on the lived experience of hurtling into the crowd, regardless of a few bruises, for the mediated perspective of another who carries a dubious authority. While others “go and get their gaze”, Half-Rome demands that his auditor gives up his own vision, and his speech is full of invocations to see things through his eyes: “Sir, do you see?” (II, 17), “For see” (II, 52), “look me in the face!” (II, 1469). These attempts to control his auditor's vision are accompanied by rhetorical techniques which anticipate Guido's. Half-Rome pre-empts his thoughts – “What constituted him so choice a catch,/ You question?” (II, 344-5), “I see the comment ready on your lip” (II, 526) – in order to make sure their thoughts are aligned. To keep his auditor with him, he asserts his own impartiality when he claims, “God knows I'll not prejudge the case” (II, 680), and parades his supposed objectivity when he writes, “facts are facts and flinch not” (II, 1049). Although Sullivan argues that “the overwhelming emphasis that Half-Rome puts on *money* [is] the motivating factor for all the evil done in the tale” (Sullivan 1969: 39), it is also clear that Half-Rome's evil can be located within his manipulative language.

The position of the reader differs from that of Half-Rome's auditor because we have the benefit of the narrator's foresight. While we have the requisite knowledge to judge Half-Rome's speech as one which swerves from truth (particularly because we know his underlying motive is to warn his listener's cousin to stay away from his wife), the auditor in the poem fails to make that judgement, and so becomes worthy of censure. He is responsible for giving up his own vision for that of Half-Rome's, and he resembles those who wish to read through an interpreter; he is a feeble reader, resigning his autonomy to

the authority of an unreliable witness, and thus gaining a false image of the truth. Both the speaker and auditor of Book II choose a path that swerves from Browning's ideal.

“The Other Half-Rome” is no better: he is described by the narrator in Book I as “the opposite feel/ For truth with a like swerve, like unsuccess” (I, 883-4). Other Half-Rome’s choice to take Pompilia's side as opposed to Guido's is arbitrary – “a fancy-fit inclined that way” (I, 887) – showing a lack of emotional involvement in the tale. Like Half-Rome, he has an ulterior motive for supporting Pompilia: he turns out to be “co-heir in a will” (III, 1687), in a dispute with the speaker over his “administration of effects” (III, 1688). His criticism of Guido for pursuing his own honour and rejecting the law once it had favoured the other party is framed by his wish to persuade his auditor that recourse to the law is best for all concerned. He rhetorically asks Guido,

What, you may chop and change and right your wrongs

Leaving the law to lag as she thinks fit? (III, 1672-3)

but in reality the question is addressed to his “co-heir”, to warn him to stay within the bounds of the law, and not to take matters into his own hands. This swerve from the nominal to the actual addressee, from Guido to his listener, represents the swerve away from truth described by the narrator.

Like Half-Rome, he continually asserts his reliability and openness, as when he says, “let us avouch,/ Since truth is best” (III, 296-7), and “Come, cards on table” (III, 362). He affects to be concerned with the objective pursuit of truth, asking

How hold a light, display the cavern's gorge?

How, in this phase of the affair, show truth? (III, 790-1)

yet his authority has been already undermined by the narrator, who calls this monologue a “sample-speech”, (I, 896) “a piece of public talk” (I, 893) which, if it touches upon any truth, does so “by no skill but more luck” (I, 885). His hypocrisy is revealed when he criticises the prurient curiosity of the crowd, how they

count her breaths,

Calculate how long yet the little life

Unspilt may serve their turn nor spoil the show,

Give them their story, (III, 225-8)

It is obvious that using the story of Pompilia to serve his own turn is exactly what Other Half-Rome is doing, and his censure rebounds on himself.

In both these monologues, the true motive in the speeches is not a moral conviction but a personal orientation. In one sense, they demonstrate a realistic portrayal of the mixed motives of any “public talk”, which, in Browning's poetry, is always pursuing its own ends. By presenting one opinion, and then its exact but arbitrary opposite, Browning dramatises their discourse as an unreliable, falsifying source. As mediators of the story, they present the truth in a half-light, spotted with their own aims and interpretations, and their unreliable truth allows Browning to reject the necessity of such mediators. Read attentively, they are an invitation to readers to read for themselves, rather than relying on those reviewers who set themselves up as gatekeepers to Browning's work.

“One and one breeds the inevitable three” (I, 914), and in Book IV Browning continues

to satirise the pretensions of reviewers. Tertium Quid, the speaker, is a pompous social climber who presents himself as a greater authority than Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome. He rises above them, judging from his cool and poised social position, and declaims,

allow

Qualified persons to pronounce at last,

Nay, edge in an authoritative word

Between this rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools

Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome. (IV, 7-11)

On the one hand, we may agree with him that the previous two speakers were dolts and fools, and that an authority is needed to sort out the wheat from the chaff of gossip and rumour. But Tertium Quid's prerogative is undermined by the narrator in Book I and his grandiose speech belies his own authority. His superior air recalls the often superior tone of some reviewers, affecting the authority to comment and pronounce with greater wisdom than the crowd.

He pretends to offer a more disinterested judgement by presenting the facts of the case and inviting his auditors to judge for themselves, asking them, "Excellency, your ear!...listen and look yourselves" (IV, 68-9). But though he asks them repeatedly to judge several points of the case, he is not interested in their answers, barely pausing before rushing on to the next part of the story:

Highness, decide! Pronounce, Her Excellency!

Or...even leave this argument in doubt...

what fronts us, the next stage. (IV, 1113-14, 17)

His invitations for the judgment of others are false. Nominally more balanced than Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome, he does not full-heartedly commit to the cause of either Guido or Pompilia, but his impartiality rings hollow when we realise that his motive is to impress his aristocratic auditors. He is incapable of pronouncing judgment because he has no emotional commitment to the story and only wishes to use it as a means to an end.

The book switches between Tertium Quid's assertions of his own authority and the poet's efforts to undermine them. His speech is constantly interrupted when he has to regain the attention of his auditors "– Duke, note the knotty point –" (IV, 930). At the end of his speech, his aristocratic associates simply wander off in boredom, choosing to join a card-game or retire instead. His failure confirms the ironic description given by the narrator in Book I, where he is described as a "critical mind...no gossip-guess" (I, 926), someone who courts "the approbation of no mob,/ But Eminence This and All-Illustrious That" (I, 936-7).

Despite the pomposity and self-indulgence of Tertium Quid's speech, Browning uses him to challenge "public talk" even while he speaks it. There are several metaphors in his speech which probe questions of value attached to poetry. One is the by-now familiar image of the oyster and the pearl, where the speaker interrupts his speech to point to a pearl necklace worn by one of his auditors,

is it a pearl or no,

Yon globe upon the Principessa's neck?

That great round glory of pellucid stuff,  
 A fish secreted round a grain of grit!  
 Do you call it worthless for the worthless core? (IV, 307-11)

When the image of an oyster and a pearl was used of Browning's work, it was generally to complain that what was valuable in his work had to be extracted from an ugly shell of difficult style. The speaker's words remind us of the lowly origins of the pearl and that our valuations of worth are arbitrary; we judge a thing valuable which comes from nothing better than a "grain of grit". The "worthless core" contradicts the reviewers who placed the highest value on the pearl they sought within the shell, and calls attention to the inconsistencies of judging worth.

In another instance of imagery which recalls that used by reviewers, Tertium Quid compares Violante's crime of passing off a prostitute's child for her own to a stone that "you kick up with your foot" (IV, 230). In defending the sin because of the desirable effects (happy parents, a child saved from poverty), he asks,

how long does it lie,  
 The bad and barren bit of stuff you kick,  
 Before encroached on and encompassed round  
 With minute moss, weed, wild-flower – made alive  
 By worm, and fly, and foot of the free bird? (IV, 233-37)

Several writers had compared reading Browning's poetry as an experience akin to wandering through a wilderness. In 1846, an entry in *The Poets and Poetry of England in*

*the Nineteenth Century* commented that, “few will have patience to wade through his marshes to cull the flowers with which they are scattered” (Browning CH: 128). G. Brimley complained that Browning allowed his gifts to “run wild” and “what might have been a beautiful garden is but a wilderness overgrown with a rank and riotous vegetation” (Browning CH: 165). *Tertium Quid* depicts the vital energy of the wilderness to illustrate how an immoral act quickly becomes integrated into the fabric of polite society. These lines, though woven into the speech of a self-important wit, celebrate the idea of a wilderness by endowing it with life, energy, and freedom. They counteract the negative connotations of those critics who felt that poetry should resemble a well-kept garden rather than a wild landscape. Despite the fact that *Tertium Quid*'s voice often concurs with those of the reviewers in his affected superiority, Browning uses him to counteract his critics.

This image is just one instance of the way Browning uses “public talk” against itself, illustrating the dramatic irony of these three books, written in poetry, but dramatising a discourse that is not poetry. The three speakers are all readers of Pompilia's story, who then re-tell that story to another audience, allowing Browning to write the readers of his poetry into the poem; the interactions of these characters parallel Browning's own interactions with his real-life readers. Each speaker uses the story of Pompilia as a means to an end, to illustrate a truth about themselves (a vengeful husband, wronged inheritor, or a superior wit) which they want to communicate to their own audience. They act as mediators between the story itself and their auditors, and the various ways in which Browning undermines their speech allow him to critically examine some of his own readers.

If the gossips of Rome parallel the readers of Pompilia's story, then the next three

speakers represent the poets. Guido Franceschini, Guiseppe Caponsacchi, and Pompilia are the “actors, no mere rumours of the act” (I, 948), and as such, Browning uses them to display qualities which diverge or converge from his notion of an ideal artist. Where the gossips in Books II, III and IV re-tell the story, Guido, Caponsacchi and Pompilia create the story, each informed by Browning's previous explorations of artist's relationships with their audience.

The narrator makes sure that we do not fall into the rhetorical clutches of Guido by informing us of his strategy in Book I; he tells us that Guido first “proffers his defense, in tones subdued/ Near to mock-mildness” (I, 957-8), then moves “from pathos...To passion” (I, 960, 61). Guido's rhetorical techniques and his attitude towards his wife are reminiscent of the Duke of Ferrara in “My Last Duchess”. The Duke ordered his wife's death for looking at another man, and Guido's idea of wifely submission is expressed in a similar trope: he

made her see

What it behoved her to see and say and do,

Feel in her heart and with her tongue declare,       (V, 854-6)

His wish to control what she sees is one of Browning's dominant methods of figuring tyranny. Guido wants to govern not just Pompilia's external actions, but her inner being, regulating how and where she looks. Guido is the natural heir to Porphyria's love and the Duke of Ferrara, and like the Duke he is angered to find Pompilia “launching her looks forth” (V, 900). In response to her independence, he believes he must invade his wife's inner being and manipulate her looks, words and feelings.

What is most significant about Guido's attitude is its correlation with the activity of the torturers, who are described by the narrator in Book I as

pinching flesh and pulling bone from bone

To unhusk truth a-hiding in its hulls           (I, 988-9)

The physical invasion of flesh and bone recalls Guido's incursion upon his wife's heart and tongue. In both, the juxtaposition of a physical body with the metaphysical qualities of truth, in the torturers' case, or soul, in Guido's case, exposes the untenable position held. To believe that truth can be extracted from flesh, or that someone's heart can be subjugated by controlling what they see, is to be morally and emotionally misguided. Within the framework of the poem, those who believe that truth or soul is a thing which can be captured or pinned down with violence are the most erroneous.

Central to this misunderstanding is the inability to perceive the difference between a physical and metaphysical quality, as Guido displays again when he describes how,

With a wife, I look to find all wifeliness,

As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree –

I buy the song o' the nightingale inside.       (V, 604-6)

He conflates the physical product of the tree with the spiritual dimension of nightingale's song, and treats his wife's soul, figured by the bird's song, as a commodity. The image touches on the nature of poetry, as well as of love, and juxtaposes wood, the physical material used to make paper and books, with song, the aesthetic or spiritual element which

exists beyond the physical text. Questions of value and commodity in Browning's work repeatedly conflate love and poetry, where good lovers make good artists, and vice versa. Guido's inability to see Pompilia's soul as anything other than a commodity which he can own and control makes him an immoral lover in Browning's terms.

A bad lover, Guido is equally a bad artist, and his baseness is reflected in the manipulative qualities of his language. Half-way through his speech he asks the court, "Is the case complete? Do your eyes here see with mine?" (V, 1064). He wishes to wrest the vision of the court away from any perspective other than his own; if they see only what he sees, it follows that they will exonerate him. Although he tries to flatter them into thinking the opposite, telling them, "You are the law: 't is to the law I look" (V, 1749), he attempts to have them look only at him. Narrowing rather than expanding the vision of his auditors is the opposite of what Browning's ideal poet would do, who instead would open up new ways of seeing for his audience.

Another characteristic of Guido's speech associated with inadequate artistry is his inability to offer us, the reader, any new vision. He gives no indication of the court's reaction to his speech, as *Tertium Quid* does when he realises his audience is walking off in boredom. His lack of empathy means that he wishes others to see through his eyes, to bend others to his will, but is incapable of reversing that perspective, and seeing others. He demands that the judges, "look on me" (V, 1983), but is unable to offer any picture of them to the reader, and they remain anonymous and featureless to us. As we cannot see the court through his eyes, his speech lacks suspense or drama, and he fails as an artist.

Giuseppe Caponsacchi is the foil to Guido's amorality. In contrast to the featureless audience we see through Guido's eyes, in Caponsacchi's speech the judges immediately appear as convincing characters. Caponsacchi reminds them how they smirked when they

first judged him for helping Pompilia to escape her husband and upbraids them for discounting the threat that Guido presented:

yet now no-one laughs,  
 Who then...nay, dear my lords, but laugh you did[...]  
 There was the blameless shrug, permissible smirk[...]  
 And now you sit as grave, stare as aghast (VI, 9-10, 14, 25)

Browning establishes Caponsacchi's empathy in these lines and reveals his sensitivity to the emotions of others. The judges become real in a way they were not in Guido's monologue and they are visibly moved by Caponsacchi's speech. Where through Guido's eyes we saw nothing but darkness, Caponsacchi shows us the judges through his own eyes, associating him with Browning's ideal poet, who opens up a new vision for his audience.

Browning further establishes Caponsacchi as an ideal poet through his physical imagery. Now that the court comprehends Guido's villainy, they understand, Caponsacchi tells them,

how law might take  
 Service like mine, of brain and heart and hand,  
 In good part. (VI, 134-6)

He also asks the court how they believed he could lie, when “her death/ [is] in my eyes and ears and brain and heart” (VI, 191-2). In *Men and Women*, and particularly in “Andrea

del Sarto”, integrity is figured through physical harmony, where hands and eyes express what the heart and brain feel. The imagery that Browning used in *Men and Women* is employed to portray Caponsacchi's integrity of vision and his moral openness, as when he describes himself standing beneath Pompilia's window, “all eye, all ear” (VI, 724). The harmony between what he feels with brain and heart, and what he expresses with his hand, demonstrates his virtue.

Having established his authority, Browning enables Caponsacchi to turn the tables on the court, and accuse them of failing in their duty. Those who sat in judgment become the judged. Caponsacchi singles out individuals, “You, Judge Tommati, who then tittered most” (VI, 34) and arraigns them for neglecting to protect Pompilia. His anger at the court's laughter recalls the narrator's opening sally in Book I,

Well, British Public, ye who like me not,  
 (God love you!) and will have your proper laugh  
 At the dark question, laugh it! I laugh first.                   (I, 410-12)

These lines reveal Browning’s underlying resentment at the dismissive laughter perceived in his audience, and Caponsacchi's monologue dramatises the opportunity to rebuke an audience for laughing. The dramatisation of an audience as a legal court is hardly a surprising one for the mid-nineteenth century poet, given the way reviewers sat in judgment upon them. Indeed, one reviewer in favour of Browning makes this explicit comparison: “an English or Scotch jury...is the very last tribunal to which a wise man would be inclined to submit his cause...The verdicts of the English public are often in like manner very incomprehensible” (Browning CH: 207).

Under these terms, Caponsacchi's monologue can be read as a rewriting of this relationship, where the audience, rather than the poet is judged. The court as audience is held captive by Caponsacchi – he tells them, “let me/ Make you hear, this time” (VI, 152-3) – even to the extent that one judge begins “weeping!” (VI, 1884). Caponsacchi's power over his audience is represented by his greater capacity for emotional depth. The fact of Pompilia's death,

seems to fill the universe with sight

And sound...

But you may want it lower set 'i the scale, –

Too vast, too close it clangs in the ear, perhaps;      (VI, 66-7, 69-70)

Caponsacchi's senses are overwhelmed with an experience of love and empathy which the court is unable to assimilate. They must “stand back just to comprehend it more” (VI, 71), being unable to embrace the experience with his intensity of feeling.

Taking into account their need, Caponsacchi declares,

I shall give no glare – at best

Only display you certain scattered lights...

Nothing but here and there a fire-point pricks      (VI, 1171-2, 74)

This image recalls certain tropes used by reviewers of Browning, who complained of his unintelligibility using the image of intermittent or “scattered lights”. D. Moir described how “we have now and then glimpses of poetic sentiment and description, like

momentary sunbeams darting out between rifted clouds; but straightway the clouds close, and we are left to plod on in deeper twilight” (Browning CH: 145); and Thomas Powell advised that Browning should improve his style so that readers would better understand him, “[h]e should sit face to face, flashing bright thoughts into the gazer’s mind” (Browning CH: 135). Through the person of Caponsacchi, Browning defends his own position by suggesting that the poet reveals only a part of his own vision of the truth, because his audience is unable to grasp or comprehend its full and startling reality.

“You blind guides who must needs lead eyes that see!” (VI, 1783), Caponsacchi calls the judges, and his are the “lead eyes” who can see with greater strength and moral vision. In dramatising one version of his ideal poet, Browning also dramatises an ideal audience, one which submits to the moral and aesthetic authority of its addresser. Caponsacchi’s authority over the judges, evident in their physical reactions to him, must have seemed enviable to Browning. Yet, as the other monologues show, the opportunity to address such an audience is rare, and Pompilia must address a more difficult set of auditors.

Although some critics have found Pompilia’s character too full of Victorian sentimentality, her speech shows a resoluteness which belies her conventional womanliness. Her monologue is a moving and dignified account of the life of a young woman who has been betrayed at every turn, denied by her parents, and abandoned to a husband who brutally rapes her. Pompilia’s monologue dramatises the strain of a speaker discussing private matters of self and identity to an anonymous public audience. She must defend her integrity to a public audience of spectators who are sympathetic, yet who have no real intimacy with her. The only audience available to her on her death-bed is an anonymous crowd, rather than her family or one friend, Caponsacchi. The crowd, though sympathetic, resembles the first three characters like “Other Half-Rome”, in their

attraction to the sensation of the case.

Privacy is denied her, and the narrator tells us in Book I that,

So, to the common kindness she speaks,  
 There being scarce more privacy at the last  
 For mind than body: (I, 1100-2)

Her life has been lived before the crowd: her parents declared her not their child “before some judge/ In some court where the people flocked to hear” (VII, 140-1), and she must hear “read-out in the public court/ Before the judge, in presence of my friends” (VII, 175-6) the fake letters between her and Caponsacchi. All the private dimensions of her life have been placed before the public, whom she addresses in her monologue. The curiosity of the crowd mirrors the invasiveness and lack of intimacy in her marriage. Pompilia has been left without the usual props of identity – that of family or friends – and must weave a fragile narrative of self out of what remains to her. Her speech stumbles when she forgets that she cannot call Violante “my mother” (VII, 181), and she clings to the exact details of her name and age – “seventeen years and five months old” (VII, 1) – in order to orient herself.

Despite the fragility of her position she is capable of understanding herself and her relationships with others. The retrospective account of her marriage arrangements reveals an insight into the distortions of value which the poem as a whole investigates. She compares her consent to marry Guido to a monetary exchange, where “marriage was the coin, a dirty piece/ Would purchase me the praise of those I loved” (VII, 407-8). The disastrous welding of the material with an immaterial value, of money with love, echoes

Guido's conjoining of physical and metaphysical values. Pompilia understands the fallacy at work, and realises that,

Something had happened, low, mean, underhand

...and I

To pity, whom all spoke of, none addressed:

I was the chattel that had caused a crime.

I stood mute, (VII, 517-521)

Her silence in the face of her tormentors is that of a woman bound by a patriarchal system which values her by money, rather than for herself. Though no-one offers to listen to her voice, she defies them first by running away from Guido, and then by breaking her muteness in the speech she makes on her deathbed.

Like Caponsacchi, Pompilia allows Browning to explore another kind of ideal poet. She is neither swayed from the truth she holds by the presence of the audience, nor does she attempt to manipulate them with Guido's rhetorical tricks. At one point, she gently rebukes them, as when she commends their patience and rapt attention, but reminds them that four days ago, when she was “sound and well/ And like to live, no one would understand” (VII, 908-9). Originally, the crowd believed that Pompilia had been Caponsacchi's lover; where Pompilia saw the “white light” (VII, 922) of her rescuer, the crowd “descry a spider in the midst” (VII, 926), misinterpreting the character of Caponsacchi. Where Pompilia sees the true nobility of Caponsacchi, the crowd assumed the worst, and her aim is to correct their opinion.

Her reproach is tempered with the understanding that the crowd judges from a different

perspective than the individuals involved,

wherefore should I blame you much?

So are we made, such difference in minds,

Such difference too in eyes that see the minds! (VII, 917-9)

Where Caponsacchi rails against the limits of vision in the judges whose neglect allowed her to be murdered, Pompilia forgives her audience their limitations. The hope of her speech is to change the way the crowd see Caponsacchi, “to disperse the stain, / The mist from other breath fond mouths have made” (VII, 933-4). She offers the gift of Browning's ideal poet, that of clearing our vision and revealing a truth previously unseen.

Stefan Hawlin writes of *The Ring and the Book* that “Pompilia and Caponsacchi's actions...enact a kind of revolution, a brilliant and moving recovery of emotional and spiritual norms” (Hawlin 2002: 114). If their actions create a love which redeems the brutality of Guido, then this love is figured in Browning's descriptions of vision. Pompilia speaks of Caponsacchi's love in terms of how they see, and of the equality and concord of their vision. When they first catch a glimpse of each other, he “saw me, as I saw him” (VII, 990), and she ends by declaring, “What I see, oh, he sees and how much more! (VII, 1805). Though God sets on women a divine mark,

weakness mars the print...

leaves the thing men see

– Not this man sees, – who from his own soul, re-writes

The obliterated charter (VII, 1502-5)

Though God creates women with a divine print, human weakness mars the print so that men see the sinful effects rather than the divine within. But where the crowd sees this human fallibility, and assume Pompilia's infidelity, Caponsacchi sees her through God's eyes, associating him with Browning's subjective poet. "Not what man sees, but what God sees...it is toward these that he struggles" (l. 84-6), and Caponsacchi's ability to see Pompilia in her divinity enable him to heal her, "mending what's marred" (VII, 1506). If Caponsacchi and Pompilia recover emotional and spiritual norms, they do so by taking on the characteristics which Browning imagines of his ideal artists.

In contrast to Caponsacchi and Pompilia, the two lawyers who defend Guido and Pompilia, care for nothing other than their own advancement. Both view the case as an opportunity to spar with each other and to further their careers by a demonstration of their legal and rhetorical powers. They provide some comic relief after the weighty monologues of Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia, and the narrator openly mocks them, describing how Arcangeli "Wheezes out law-phrase, whiffles Latin forth" (I, 1151), and Bottini "strives and strains...like the cockerel that would crow" (I, 1203-4). Arcangeli's speech is constantly interrupted by his thoughts of the birthday feast of his son. In the middle of his exposition that even beasts and pagans defend their sexual honour, he suddenly frets that he did not tell his cook to use fennel in the preparation of the liver. The interjection is framed by two comments, shall "man/ Derogate, live for the low tastes alone?" (VIII, 539-40) and returns to the exposition again, "From beast to man next mount we" (VIII, 550), and the interruption casts doubt on Arcangeli's own ability to rise from his bestial, low tastes for food to an understanding of the morality of man.

A darker element lies behind these comic touches, and the lawyers are even more

pernicious than the gossips of Rome. While the three men who represent Rome each have a motive for supporting Guido or Pompilia, the lawyers have no motive other than the eloquence and persuasiveness of their language. In Book I, the narrator describes their law as “the recognised machine...The patent truth-extracting process” (I, 1110, 1114), associating them with the torturers (who extract the truth from bodies) whom they condone. Bottini has “Searched out, pried into, pressed the meaning forth” (IX, 134), and their mechanistic approach allies them to the villain of the poem, Guido.

Caponsacchi and Pompilia demonstrate their integrity by their independence from their audience, where the conviction of their belief releases them from the need to use rhetoric to persuade. In contrast, as Guido's will is bent entirely on his audience, so the lawyers focus on how their work will be received. Though they write alone in their studies, both imagine the reactions of the judges and address these auditors as they compose. That their sole motive is to fit language to the version of the story they have arbitrarily been given, one to defend Guido, the other to defend Pompilia, is a sign of their moral laxity.

Arcangeli reveals his baseness when he says,

We must translate our motives like our speech

Into the lower phrase that suits the sense

O' the limitedly apprehensive

(VIII, 1506-8)

The ease with which Arcangeli can switch between motive and language when he wishes to persuade his auditors of a certain point reveals his lack of interest in pursuing truth. His readiness to change his language to suit the limited apprehensions of his audience is something that Browning himself resisted, despite numerous exhortations to do so.

Arcangeli conceives of his task as finding a suitable level of language, where

Heaven speaks first  
 To the angel, then the angel tames the word  
 Down to the ear of Tobit: he, in turn,  
 Diminishes the message to his dog, (VIII, 1509-12)

He works in the opposite direction to Browning's ideal poet, whose reach must exceed his grasp; instead of aspiring to Heaven, Arcangeli diminishes the truth, taming it to make it suitable for a particular audience. Browning's ideal poet seeks to portray the truth, even if his audience finds it difficult to follow him. Bottini employs a similarly disturbing eloquence, and in Book I the narrator describes how his

Language that goes, goes, easy as a glove  
 O'er good and evil, smoothens both to one. (I, 1180-1)

There is no struggle to find a language adequate to express a complex or contradictory truth. Rather Bottini's speech, oriented purely to persuade, no matter what the content, smothers any possibility of moral judgment.

Bottini, like Arcangeli, deviates from the course of the ideal poet. His speech opens with a long description of his plan to draw a verbal portrait of Pompilia, and he imagines the mental process of a painter commissioned to paint a nativity scene. He believes that the painter should move "Quite away from aught vulgar and extern" (IX, 88), and instead brood "On the inner spectrum, filtered through the eye" (IX, 89). His words recall the

farcical instructions of the priests in “Fra Lippo Lippi”, who tells Lippi that he must “paint the souls of men” (183), rather than seek to realistically capture their appearance.

For Bottini, the aim of such an art would be to produce

Life

Fed by digestion, not raw food itself,

No gobbets but smooth comfortable chyme

Secreted from each snapped-up crudity, –

Less distinct, part by part, but in the whole

Truer to the subject – the main central truth

And soul o' the picture, (IX, 95-101)

Bottini's suggestion that artists produce “chyme” (the semifluid mass of food after gastric secretion) links him to the poets in *Sordello* who create art that is comfortable and easy for the crowd to swallow, and who are dismissed in that poem as popularity-seekers. By breaking down the crudity of raw life, Bottini offers his audience a tasteless mess, baby food which can be digested easily but takes away the possibility of experiencing life in its rawness. Browning's disgust at this vision of art recalls the image in 1 Corinthians, where Paul tells the Corinthians, “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 3: 2). Only with meat will the Corinthians begin to grow in their faith, and Bottini's artistic attempts contravene this tenet. The lawyers who seek to give their audience a comfortable and unchallenging picture are also shown to be amoral in their privileging of rhetoric over truth, and as such, Browning defines those who tame reality in order to fit their audience as reprehensible.

Bottini is also mistaken in his belief that he can present a central and whole truth: in *The Ring and the Book* the truth must be pieced together, part by part, and cannot be extracted as a whole. This idea is reinforced in the Pope's monologue whose conception is opposed to that of the lawyers; he does not believe that torture can extract the truth and describes how “law grew brutal...glutted hunger on the truth” (X, 225-6). Instead of a single, extractable truth, he states that,

Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these –  
 Not absolutely in a portion, yet  
 Evolvable from the whole: evolved at last  
 Painfully, held tenaciously by me. (X, 229-32)

Aware that truth is both dispersed and in no single place, the Pope has a more sophisticated grasp of the complexity of truth than the lawyers. Though it is impossible for him to grasp it as a neat, self-contained entity, it is nevertheless incumbent upon him to evolve a judgment from these portions, to hold tenaciously to a moral course.

The Pope's monologue brings the issue of judgment to the fore. At first, he turns to the authority of the past for guidance, seeking “How judged once, well or ill, some other Pope” (X, 16), but finds only conflicting arguments, and asks hopelessly, “Which of the judgements was infallible?” (X, 151). He concludes that, “I must give judgement on my own behalf” (X, 161), and take upon himself the responsibility for Guido's fate. His monologue is an exploration of how to evolve moral judgments from a whole, and to find the truth which will condemn Guido and exonerate Caponsacchi and Pompilia. If, as he describes, the truth of the human mind is known to God, “Existent somewhere, somehow,



slipperiness of truth in a world where it is inextricably linked with lies, asking

Why, can he tell you what a rose is like,  
 Or how the birds fly, and not slip to false  
 Though truth serve better? (X, 365-7)

Both flowers and birds appear in several of the other monologues as metaphors to describe the central characters, and the Pope reminds us how easily metaphoric language can “slip” from the truth. The lines touch on an old debate about poetic language and its status as truth or lie, notably defended as truth by Philip Sidney in *A Defence of Poesie*. Browning shows how poetic language can be used to manipulate or stretch the truth, but also how truth can be recovered from the “filthy rags of speech...too contaminate for use” (X, 373, 5). The Pope must interpret his judgment from the testimonies of the other characters, and navigate his way through the swerves of metaphoric language.

He must judge the life of Guido, and his basis for doing so is to see life as a

starting-place

To try man's foot, if it will creep or climb,  
 'Mid obstacles in seeming, points that prove  
 Advantage for who vaults from low to high  
 And makes the stumbling-block a stepping-stone? (X, 409-13)

The image recalls the earlier-mentioned letter of Ruskin to Browning, where Browning advises Ruskin not to “stand poking your alpenstock into the holes [of the glacier], and

demonstrating that no foot could have stood there; – suppose it sprang over there?”

(Browning 2009: 691). Ruskin finds stumbling blocks where Browning hopes the reader will vault, as the Pope hopes men will vault over life's obstacles.

The Pope's vision of faith coincides with Browning's ideas about reading poetry, and the Pope also uses the image of an oyster and a pearl, when he declares he is not surprised,

that faith, the pearl,  
Should be let lie by fishers wanting food, –  
Nor, seen and handled by a certain few  
Critical and contemptuous, straight consigned  
To shore and shingle for the pebble it proves,       (X, 1441-5)

The Pope is not surprised that fishermen wanting food ignore the prize of the pearl, the emblem of faith, or that a certain few who find it, value it no more than a pebble, and throw it away, but what does “touch [him] to terror” (X, 1441) is that those who do recognise the value of the pearl, the faithful “residue” (X, 1447), on finding it, turn away, and “with double zest go dredge for whelks” (X, 1449) to make their soup. Some rate the pearl as no more valuable than a pebble, others are at a loss as how to use the pearl, and turn back to search for whelks instead. The lines foreground once again questions of value, and the reviewers who said of Browning's poetry, “Its pearls must be dived for” (CH Browning: 272), are challenged to scrutinise their own valuations.

When the Pope decides that Guido's fate is to be the execution block, he does so in the hope that

So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,  
 And Guido see, one instant, and be saved. (X, 2127-8)

He undertakes the task of the ideal poet, to give Guido the opportunity to see the truth and be saved. To ascertain whether he is successful, we must turn to Guido's second monologue, the last in the poem, and the final speech of Guido's life. Sentenced to death, Guido spends his last night in prison with two old friends, a Cardinal and an Abate, who are there to hear his confession. He defends himself to the last in the hope of persuading them to plead his cause once more with the Pope.

There are moments in his final monologue when Guido's defiance, his refusal to own his crime as a sin, and his insights into the hypocrisy of Church and state resemble Lucifer's rebellion against God. He rages against the systems which have governed his life with a fiery temper, declaring,

Hear the truth, you, whatever you style yourselves,  
 Civilisation and society!  
 Come, one good grapple, I with all the world! (XI, 462-4)

Guido's fierce stand against the world comes close to Lucifer's, but Guido ultimately lacks the stuff of a Satanic anti-hero. When he addresses God,

I am one huge and sheer mistake, – whose fault?  
 Not mine at least, who did not make myself! (XI, 939-40)

his tone is more whining than majestic. He lacks the strength to affirm Milton's dictum that, "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (Milton 1971: I, 254-5), and shifts the responsibility for his actions onto God. He is unable to enact any spiritual transformation of self which would lift him above his pathetic self-pity.

Though his tirades against society have some validity, they must be read through the lens of his un-heroic qualities, and seen for the amoral worldview they reflect. Law, in Guido's eyes, is a "pact" (XI, 535) to prevent men gaining materially from the pain of others, and he argues that we

call things wicked that give too much joy,  
 And nickname the reprisal, envy makes,  
 Punishment: (XI, 532-4)

In his conception, there is no moral value beyond an exchange of "profit" and "forfeit" (XI, 527, 28), and "pleasure being the sole good in the world" (XI, 529). There is no consideration of good or evil in the world, and he believes that moral systems have arisen only to prevent society from descending into anarchy: "thus the world goes round" (XI, 534). Only our basest motives – envy, and greed – have any credence in Guido's worldview. He scorns a popular opera singer because he "squeak[s] and squall[s] – for what? / Two gold zecchines" (XI, 1419-20), and demands why he would want a son, when he can "At promise of a dollar" (XI, 1894), gain similar services of the youths on his estate. Blind to any motivation that is not crudely based on profit, little has changed in Guido's character since his first monologue.

Nor has he become a better artist: he fails to move his auditors, the Cardinal and the Abate, to sympathy, and accuses them,

You too are petrifications of a kind:

Move not a muscle that shows mercy (XI, 2228-9)

Guido's amorality goes hand in hand with his weak ability to move his audience. Capable only of thinking in terms of material value, Guido can offer his audience nothing and can expect nothing in return. It is impossible for him to provoke an emotional reaction of sympathy or mercy because he has no understanding of emotional exchange. He reveals his lack of empathy when he complains that while others laugh at cuckolds for their blindness, when he steps forward to check his wife's contested infidelity, he is expected to

look the heart, that stone-wall, through and through!

Such an eye, God's may be, – not yours nor mine. (XI, 918-9)

Though Guido thinks it impossible that mere humans can see or understand the motivations of others, “[s]uch an eye” belongs to Caponsacchi, Pompilia and the Pope, who have the capacity to see through that stone-wall, the heart.

The inability of Guido's eye to see the hearts of others is commensurate with his lack of insight into the nature of his crime, and his relationship to others. His final hope is that when he is judged by God, He will see

something changeless at the heart of me

To know me by, some nucleus that's myself: (XI, 2394-5)

This image of the self as an extractable nucleus, separate from his actions and his relationships with others, is opposed to the Pope's conception of truth as continually evolving. Guido returns finally to the misguided belief that the truth of his own nature can be lifted and handled as a single object, rather than existing in flux. Salvation is closed to him because of his fatal lack of understanding, and his monologue ends in a desperate cry for any authority to cling to,

I am yours,

I am the Granduke's – no, I am the Pope's!

Abate, – Cardinal, – Christ, – Maria, – God, ...

Pompilia, will you let them murder me? (XI, 2424-7)

*The Ring and the Book* allows Browning to develop an ethical framework for the artist, where ways of speaking and listening, writing and reading, are weighed against the moral behaviour of characters. Through these characters, Browning talks back to his reviewers, challenges their discourse, and at the same time produces a work infinitely richer, denser, more complex than their narrow perceptions of his work could have imagined. Yet paradoxically, the poem which most defied critical patterns was the one which solidified Browning's position as an eminent Victorian poet, second only to Tennyson. Critics began to recognise that they could not simply lift a moral truth from the poem, and that this lack was a strength rather than a weakness. As John Rickards Mozeley stated, “A distinct moral purpose runs through the poem; not a moral, not an obtrusive excrescence, not

anything that can be expressed in a few neatly compacted sentences at the end; but a course of deep meditation on human action and the problems of life” (*Quarterly Review* Apr 1869: 322).

## Afterword

In the period after the poems I have discussed, Tennyson and Browning became accepted, and indeed, lionised by what could be described as the conservative establishment.

Poems such as Tennyson's "Enoch Arden" and "The Idylls of the King", though arguably containing subversive moments within them, were readily accepted by the dominant middle-class reading public. *Idylls of the King* was praised because "[i]t is national: it is Christian...it is universal" (*Quarterly Review* Oct 1859: 468). "Enoch Arden" had "the proud honour of never uttering one single line which an English mother would wish unwritten, or an English girl would wish unread" (*Quarterly Review* Jan 1866: 67).

Though Browning's ascendancy came later than Tennyson's, after *The Ring and the Book* in 1869, he too was assigned in 1887 "a high place somewhere among the immortals" of poetry (CH Browning: 496) and the Browning Society argued that Browning was "the representative modern English poet" (CH Browning: 474).

Their association with the conservative values of the establishment led to an inevitable backlash, which began within their lifetimes. Both Tennyson and Browning were satirised in cartoon and verse in *Punch* in the 1880s and 1890s (most famously, Max Beerbohm's cartoon, "Browning, Taking Tea with the Browning Society). Even the eulogies to Tennyson on the occasion of his death conceded that

[w]e ourselves are no longer the enthusiasts we were. We all remember the inspiration we eagerly drew in our time from 'In Memoriam' and 'The Stones of Venice', and perhaps forget, as now we read them more coldly and critically, how much of us they have built up. (*The Bookman* Nov 1892: 45)



period I have discussed. Both popular editions of poetry and academic work have been drawn primarily to the work produced up to the publication of *Maud* and *The Ring and the Book*. The vibrant and tense relationship between poets and their audience is one element which makes this period so fruitful for poetry. The powerful expectations of their reviewers that poets would produce work that would put into aesthetic form the spiritual and political experience of an entire culture was, in fact, a defining and stimulating presumption that goaded, even as it inspired. In a way that has not been the case in twentieth-century English poetry, the critical arena, though sometimes resembling a circus, also provided a vigorous and animating readership. Though no-one would wish to resurrect Croker and North, twentieth and twenty-first century poets could have cause for envy in the cultural attention paid to poetry in the high Victorian period. The statement that follows is not one that could be written in the twentieth century: “the condition of poetry is a matter of public concern. Above the other arts, poetry stands pre-eminent in its power to influence the mind of society” (*Quarterly Review* July 1873: 1). The assiduous scrutiny paid to these poets is testament to the force of poetry as an aesthetic form of intense cultural importance.

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