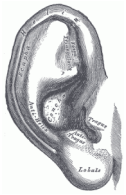


The Dramatic Monologue: Browning's Hearing

sophie.ratcliffe@lmh.ox.ac.uk

1) One event described in the New Testament has, in the long run, had a great cultural influence, namely, Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit on that occasion is generally called the gift of tongues. It might more aptly be called the gift of ears […] What happened at Pentecost was […] a miracle of instantaneous translation […] for the first time, men were willing to speak and to listen not merely to their sort of person but to total strangers.

W. H. Auden, 'Words and the Word' in *Secondary Worlds* (Faber: London, 1968), 122.

1b) [E]very great artist is a teacher--namely, by giving us his higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate **acoustic** or optical instrument, bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us.
George Eliot, *The Westminster Review,* LXIV, (July 1855)

2) When last words are recorded and re-played, they acquire the potential to be something altogether disconnected (even alienated) from the person who first spoke them. Edison lists as one of the essential features of the phonograph, '[t]he captivation of sounds, with or without the knowledge or consent of the source of their origin'; in the presence of a phonograph, a speaker's language becomes no longer only his or her own, and is subject to 'captivation' and possibly unwanted reproduction. It was as if speech were now, for the first time in history, subject to those same dangers and vagaries which we have known since Plato to be the lot of writing. It is the authorial possession ('knowledge or consent') of final words, which the phonograph threatens by defining a speaker as no more than the 'source' or 'origin' of a voice.

Ivan Kreilkamp, 'A Voice without a Body', *Victorian Studies* 40.2 (Winter 1997): 211–244, 217. Kreilkamp quotes from Edison's article, 'The Phonograph and Its Future', *North American Review* (Jan- Feb 1878): 527- 26, 530.

3) **Reviews of Browning**
'*not* readable' (Macready, 1840), 'totally incomprehensible' (Lowell, 1848), 'muddy and unmusical' (Alfred Austin, 1870).

'the poet's *penchant* for elliptical diction, interjectional dark sayings, *multum in parvo* (and, sometimes, seemingly *minimum in molto*) "deliverances", flighty fancies, unkempt similitudes, quaintest conceits, slipshod familiarities, and grotesque exaggerations is unhealthily on the increase', *Bentley's Miscellany*, 29 (1856).

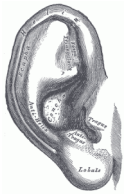
4) Of the *thing* now gone silent, named Past, which was once Present, and loud enough, how much do we know? Our 'Letter of Instructions' comes to us in the saddest state; falsified, blotted out, torn, lost and but a shred of it in existence; this too difficult to read or spell.

Thomas Carlyle, 'On History Again' (*Frazer's Magazine*, No. 41, 1833), repr. in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* III, pp. 167-8.

5) When all my works wherein I prove my worth,
Being present still to mock me in men's mouths,
Alive still, in the praise of such as thou,
I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so over-much,
Sleep in my urn.

Robert Browning, 'Cleon' (1855)

6) Just a few key dates and statistics
Between 1880 and 1825 about 580 books appeared each year
By 1850 – over 2,600; By 1900 – over 6,000; 1830s – steam replaced hand operation in printing press; Paper now machine (not hand) produced; 1836 - newspaper tax reduced to a penny stamp; 1853 – newspaper advertising dropped1864 – stamp duty repealed; 1850s and 1860s – development of



The Dramatic Monologue: Browning's Hearing

sophie.ratcliffe@lmh.ox.ac.uk

printing factories; high-speed presses from America – reprinting easier due to paper-mould stereotyping (avoiding a complete resetting); 1851 – window tax ended

7) *a public of three millions*--a public unknown to the literary world; unknown, as disciples…unknown, as an audience, to the distinguished English writers of our own time.

Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words,* 21 August 1858, 271-222.

9) 'Deaf and Dumb'
A Group by Woolner

ONLY the prism's obstruction shows aright
The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light
Into the jewelled bow from blankest white;
So may a glory from defect arise:
Only by Deafness may the vexed Love wreak
Its insuppressive sense on brow and cheek,
Only by Dumbness adequately speak
As favoured mouth could never, through the eyes

11. [when reading the novel] we hold intercourse with a variety of characters…we behold the workings of their feelings

John Ruskin, 'Essay on Literature' (1836)

12. Twas the so-styled Fisc began,
Pleaded (and since he only spoke in print
The printed voice of him lives now as then)

Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, Book I.

13. The consideration of mind, as universally present and presiding – at once the medium of all the knowledge which can be acquired, and the subject of all the truths of which that knowledge consists, gives, by its own unity, as sort of unity and additional dignity to the sciences',

Thomas Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Mind* (1822), 2 vols. 19th edn. (1851), p. 102

14) true morality [is] the active participation in the joys and sorrows of our fellow-men in a word, in the widening and strengthening of our sympathetic nature.

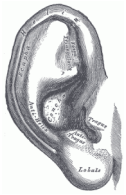
George Eliot, 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young,' *Westminster Review* 66 (1857): 1–42, repr. in *Essays and Leaves from a Notebook* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1884), 1–78,

15) If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book II, Chapter XX

16) He only, Caponsacchi 'mid a crowd,
Caught Virtue up, carried Pompilia off
Through gaping impotence of sympathy
In ranged Arezzo

The Ring and the Book, Book I



The Dramatic Monologue: Browning's Hearing

sophie.ratcliffe@lmh.ox.ac.uk

17) 'Deaf and Dumb'
A Group by Woolner

18. Like to Ahasuerus, that shrewd prince,
I will begin,— as is, these seven years now,
My daily wont,—and read a History
(Written by one whose deft right hand was dust
To the last digit, ages ere my birth)
Of all my predecessors, Popes of Rome:
For though mine ancient early dropped the pen,
Yet others picked it up and wrote it dry,
Since of the making books there is no end.
'The Pope', *The Ring and the Book* [1868] 10. 11.1-9.

19. And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books [there is] no end; and much study [is] a weariness of the flesh.
Ecclesiastes 12.12

20. 'Of writing many books there is no end'
Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* [1856],l.1.

21. Browning's 'half-open doors' into long disappearing corridors of quotation upon quotation, the great tradition of poets interlinked one with another only by the high hopelessness of the enterprise they share.
Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 180.

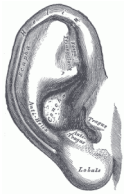
22. I wake in such decrepitude
As I had slidden down and fallen afar,
Past even the presence of my former self,
Grasping the while for stay at facts which snap,
Till I am found away from my own world,
Feeling for foot-hold through a blank profound,
Along with unborn people in strange lands,
Who say – **I hear said** or conceive they say –
"Was John at all, and did he say he saw?
Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!"
Robert Browning, 'A Death in the Desert', ll.188–197

23. Why must I hit of this and miss of that,
Distinguish just as I be weak or strong,
And not ask of thee and have answer prompt,
Was this once, was it not once? – then and now
And evermore, plain truth from man to man.
Is John's procedure just the heathen bard's?"
'A Death in the Desert', ll. 525–530

23b. Mimic creation, **galvanism** for life,
But still a glory portioned in the scale
The Ring and the Book

24. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it.
Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism,* 2nd series (London: Macmillan, 1888), 1.

25 Rey Chow, in her essay "Postmodern Automatons," argues that becoming animated in this objectifying sense—having one's body and voice controlled by an invisible other—is synonymous with becoming automatized, "subjected to [a manipulation] whose origins are beyond one's individual grasp."16 In a reading of Charlie Chaplin's hyperactive



sophie.ratcliffe@lmh.ox.ac.uk

physical movements in Modern Times (1936), Chow suggests that film and television, as technologies of mass production, uniquely disclose the fact that "the 'human body' as such is already a working body automatized, in the sense that it becomes in the new age an automaton on which social injustice as well as processes of mechanization 'take on a life of their own,' so to speak" ("PA," 62, italics in original). For Chow this automatization of the body, as an effect of subjection to power, coincides with the moment the body is made into the object of a gaze; being animated thus entails "becoming a spectacle whose 'aesthetic' power increases with one's increasing awkwardness and helplessness" ("PA," 61).

Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 99

ONLY the prism's obstruction shows aright
The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light
Into the jewelled bow from blankest white;
So may a glory from defect arise:
Only by Deafness may the vexed Love wreak
Its insuppressive sense on brow and cheek,
Only by Dumbness adequately speak
As favoured mouth could never, through the eyes

For further Reading
and where these ideas might take you, PTO

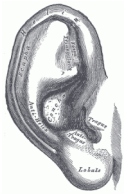
For me, the best work on 'hearing voices' that I know is still Eric Griffiths's 1989 work, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*. For other discussions of the 'phenomenology of disembodiment' and the 'abstraction of audience', see Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History* of *Ventriloquism* (2000), and W. David Shaw, *Origins of the Dramatic Monologue* (1999), as well as Yopie Prins' 'Voice Inverse' in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Spring, 2004 http://www.jstor.org/stable/i40000162. Also great is Valentine Cunningham's *Victorian Poetry Now*

Victorian Technology
John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003) and Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005) may provide ways of thinking about the nineteenth century and telegrams, phonograph, shorthand, etc.

On Victorian Psychology
See George Eliot's 1859 novella, *The Lifted Veil*, with a fascinating and useful introduction by Helen Small. Also Ekbert Faas, *Retreat Into the Mind* (1991); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of the Mind in Victorian Britain* (2000), Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture* (2000).

Emotion and Sympathy in the Nineteenth Century
Emma Mason, 'Feeling Dickensian Feeling'
http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/454
Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Sympathy and the Victorian Marriage Plot* (2007) and *The Feeling of Reading* (2010)
Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (2008)
Brigid Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy* (2007)

For thoughts on deafness



sophie.ratcliffe@lmh.ox.ac.uk

You might begin with Dickens' terrific short story 'Dr Marigold's Prescriptions'. Or Wilkie Collins' *Hide and Seek.* See also Lennard J. Davis's interesting article, 'Deafness and Insight', *College English*. Vol. 57, no. 8, dec. 1995.

For allusion

Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (see his essay on Tennyson)
Robert Douglas Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth Century Literature* and 'Tennyson's Weeds' in *Victorian Shakespeare*, ed. Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole (Palgrave, 2003).
Robert MacFarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in the Nineteenth Century* (OUP, 2007).

On Browning's religious verse/texts/intertexts

Shaffer, E. S. *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770–1880* (CUP, 1980)(for more on higher criticism – learned and astute)
John Schad, *Victorians in Theory: From Derrida to Browning*
(Birmingham UP, 1990 – witty, heavily theoretical in a Derridean way)
Kirstie Blair, *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry*