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THE POLITICS OF DRAMATIC FORM

To begin with Mill, Browning's poems, 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola', constitute a running dialogue with his ideas. The two *Repository* monologues emerge as parodies of his aesthetics and their politics. They draw out and expose the implications of Mill's thought with devastating rigour and virtuosity. Mill's apologetics, 'What is poetry?' and 'The two kinds of poetry', make a fundamental distinction between two kinds of knowledge.[1] One is the knowledge granted by expressive feeling and psychological experience. The other is the knowledge granted by the scientist. The poet describes the lion affectively through the emotions, the scientist neutrally, abstractly and literally (the lion becomes a locus classicus of Utilitarian aesthetics, making an appearance in George Eliot's famous justification of realism in *Adam Bede*, 1859).[2] Hallam had granted knowledge to the poet of sensation as well as to the poet of reflection. In denying the poet knowledge Mill effectively removes poetic knowledge into the post-Kantian realm of the aesthetic, cut off from discursive rationality and instrumental activity. But, despite his emphasis on emotion, the representation of the poet's lion must take place without self-conscious displays of subjectivity. This was the ground of Mill's objection to *Pauline*. His attack on its morbid self-consciousness this side of madness is perfectly consistent with his belief in expressive emotion. Like Fox, he believed that the poet educates feeling, but unlike Fox he believed that poetry educates by belonging to the domain of private feeling and not by negotiating the public world of power. His distinction between the poet of nature (Shelley) and the poet of culture (Wordsworth) rests on his belief that the drama of expressive presentation actually transcends the immediate social order and has its own form of truth. The poet of nature frees feeling and emotions, returning a refreshed and purified experience to the society from which he has escaped in order that the social can have access to a new aesthetic order, a harmonised and healthy order, which becomes a form of control on excesses of emotion.[3] Here is initiated the idea of poetry as therapy, an alternative poetics which attempts to erase the political by proposing to cure the neurosis of social division rather than to analyse it.

This view was to be influential in the nineteenth century, from Arnold to the later Morris. Mill, borrowing from the ideas of Dugald Stewart, preferred the lyric experience which was 'synchronous' (he speaks of using the language of the philosophers) because it *orders* feeling.[4] Random, sequential associations interfere with the pure experience, whereas synchronous, instantaneous experience controls and shapes emotion.

The purest form of expressive lyric is feeling *dramatised* as 'soliloquy', but this drama is not a public transaction between actor and audience. The distinction between poetry and 'eloquence' follows. Whereas the orator is the self-conscious scientist of feeling, publicly manipulating emotion and using psychological states instrumentally in the cause of action, or influence, the true poet is unself-conscious and alone with his affective, emotional condition which never goes beyond itself. 'All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy'.[5] All poetry is a construct, a representation, but the poet of soliloquy eliminates the evidence of its own construction.

> [Poetry] is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds . . . poetry . . . is soliloquy in full dress, and on the stage. . . . But no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself. The actor knows that there is an audience present; but if he acts as though he knew it, he acts ill . . . he [the poet] can succeed in excluding from his work every vestige of such lookings-forth into the outward and every-day world. . . . But when he turns around and addresses himself to another person; when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end . . . then it ceases to be poetry and becomes eloquence.[6]

Poetry is '*heard*', eloquence is '*over*heard'. Inward-looking, private feeling, Mill says, apparently with enthusiasm, approaches almost to 'monotony',[7] and goes on to extend his distinction between poetry and eloquence to opera. With this formulation, constituting poetry as private production, Mill seals a distinction between poetry and the external world which, defining the poetic as the solitary work of the speaking subject over and against communality, was to have consequences for the rest of the century. It is a poetics of exclusion. We are back with the claustrophobia which *Pauline* struggles against. The poetics of exclusion generates a politics of exclusion or enclosure as the speaking subject in his or her private cell of subjectivity communicates if at all by accidental empathy. No audience is required, and the isolated lookers-on gain no knowledge except that of an equally isolated and dissociated psychological condition.

The two monologues, printed originally as 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' (later their order was reversed and their titles extended), come

into being as analytical experiments in the logic of Mill's closet poetics. Significantly they were later called 'Madhouse Cells'. They are a parody of the private utterance overheard rather than heard, the drama of soliloquy 'unconscious of being seen'. Nothing Browning had done before has their concentration and economy. Through them the fallacies of the poetics and politics of exclusion are explored. They achieve what was not achieved in *Pauline*, the poem which is simultaneously expressive utterance *and* reversed as objectified feeling, so that the speaking subject is at once self-analytical and capable of being the object of analysis which goes beyond the self. The parody of Mill's drama points up the central element of drama which is excluded in soliloquy: these poems are about acting and *taking action*, the construction of roles and their connection with volition and agency which relates people to the world. Browning takes those areas which were coming progressively to occupy the status of private experience of the self in his culture – sexuality and religion – as test cases. These were, in fact, the experiences which Mill was later to say were outside the jurisdiction of public morals.[8] The poems chart 'conditions of extremity'. 'Porphyria' narrates a fictional episode in which a sexual murder takes place as the woman named in the title arrives on an illicit visit to her lover. The title of 'Johannes Agricola' refers to the historical character who was an extreme Antinomian in believing himself to be one of the elect. Johannes Agricola is not required, so he argues, to act. Alone with an (almost certainly imaginary) lover, alone with one's God, this is the logical conclusion of Mill's solitude. The cold and greedy violence of these monologues establish a privacy in which the external world disappears. Where Tennyson depicts a self alienated and excluded from the world of choice and action, Browning depicts its opposite but dialectically related experience, a condition in which the private encroaches on and absorbs the public world to the extent that the public world is non-existent. The ultimate action for Porphyria's lover becomes the choice to kill: 'surprise/Made my heart swell, and still it grew/While I debated what to do./ . . . I found/A thing to do . . . /And strangled her' (33–41). Johannes Agricola lives in a world where to act is unnecessary because God has predestined all experience; 'I lie where I have always lain,/ . . . God said/This head this hand should rest upon/ Thus, ere he fashioned star or sun' (11–20): 'Be sure that thought and word and deed/All go to swell his love for me' (26–7). The self 'swells' in both poems, to exclude all else.

The critique of overheard drama raises a number of crucial problems. If the soliloquist is solipsist, speaking to himself, who is the addressee of private poetry? A relationship with a looker-on or an audience is excluded so that no space for dialogue can exist. Both monologues are remarkable for the silencing of the voice of the other as the speakers live in a world without reciprocity to the extent that their own speech is almost redundant too. Porphyria 'called me', but 'no voice replied' (15): and the poem ends,

'And yet God has not said a word!' (60). God predetermines every word for Johannes Agricola, so that his own praise of God is unnecessary, for God is speaking to himself through him. The syntax here points two ways as the infinitive verb makes it unclear whether it is God or Agricola who engages in the act of blessing: 'ful-fed/By unexhausted power to bless' (41–2).

The solipsism of expressive emotion privately experienced leads to another consequence – mania, delusion, paranoia and visions of total power as the speaking subject relinquishes relationships. When Porphyria enters, dripping from a storm, and proceeds to undress and seduce her strangely passive lover, it is not clear whether or not she has been conjured by the fantasist's dream of a seduction which is at the same time a form of mothering. He watches his seduction as he watches the process of stripping.

> Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl . . .
> let the damp hair fall,
> And, last, she sat down by my side
> And called me. When no voice replied,
> She put my arm about her waist,
> And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
> And all her yellow hair displaced,
> And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
> And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
> Murmuring how she loved me.
> (11, 13–21)[9]

The enclosing curtain of hair recalls *Pauline*, but this poem explores power and mastery in sexual relations with far more intensity. If the speaker is actually indulging in sexual fantasy he gains power and mastery over his seductress in imagination because she is his object. He does not speak, not from catatonic passivity, but because of a sense of control: the fantasist has no need to participate in human discourse with the productions of his fantasy. She is literally not there. Porphyria's voice is his ventriloquism. As he repeats but reverses her seduction by taking charge of the strangled woman, the depersonalised female body changes to 'it'.

> I propped her head up as before,
> Only, this time my shoulder bore
> Her head, which droops upon it still:
> The smiling rosy little head,
> So glad it has its utmost will,
> That all it scorned at once is fled,
> And I, its love, am gained instead!
> (49–55)

The ambiguity of the reversible possessive 'its' in 'its love' points up the blurring of subject and object in fantasy. The speaker is both possessor

and possessed, for 'love' both owns and is owned by 'it'. The same process goes on in 'Johannes Agricola' where Johannes is an object of God's 'content' (30) by loving him and literally the 'content' of God's love itself. Logically he *is* God.

A second consequence of solipsist soliloquy is the emergence of private contracts which come about directly as a result of the speaker's belief that they are exempt from public contracts and institutional agreements. Their contracts become a parody of legal and socially agreed definition. Definition, in fact, becomes an entirely private matter. Porphyria is the sexual property of another man but desires another contract, to 'give herself to me forever' (25). Johannes Agricola places himself and his relationship with God outside the sordid bargaining process involved in the economics of praise and good works expressed essentially as an economics of *repayment*. He refuses to 'bargain' (59), 'paying a price' (60) of praise, but he can do this precisely because God has already made a prior bargain and invoked legality to ensure his election – a guarantee and a 'warrant' (33), 'irreversibly/Pledged' (29–30) – God 'pays him off' as Mill said of *Pauline*. The vulnerable and suspect status of public contracts, and the equally vulnerable status of identity when it deems itself exempt from them, is exposed in these negotiations. Johannes speaks of the non-elect forced to 'win' (47) God's love, thus turning contract into a wager and identifying God with arbitrary chance, or worse, with the idea of competition. So a further question emerges – what is a law if it applies to some people and not others, or if there are two kinds of law for different kinds of people?

Lastly, solipsist soliloquy carries in its train, following on from madness and the dissolving of the notion of contract, the abolition of time. The speakers exempt themselves from temporality and history because their actions need not take place as a causal sequence. Mill's objection to the successive experience is taken literally, and it becomes clear that the 'synchronous' experience is incoherent. Agricola speaks in the present tense, and the monologue is held together in simultaneity by the ironical reiteration of 'I lie': I stay in the same place and I am untruthful. The arrest of temporality occurs because there is no need for agency in a preordained world – 'I lie where I have always lain' (11). God bade him '*grow*/Guiltless forever' (22–3) (my emphasis) but growth depends on becoming, and becoming cannot occur if futurity has been attained already, as the beginning of the monologue implies – 'For in God's breast, my own abode . . . I lay my spirit down at last' (8, 10). God's breast is his dwelling place, but as his abode and God are identical, again, logically, he is God. The intention ('For I intend to get to God' (6)) has already been preempted in the fact of predestination. Thus Agricola has no past, but his exemption from temporality actually depends on assuming that the rest of the world is not exempt. Temporality is there to define his freedom from it. The physical universe of suns, moons and stars which his mind cuts

through to God is overcome as if it did not exist, transcended or 'passed' (9). But transcendence is only possible if the material world of process, capable of 'passing' into death, exists. The crowds of passionately believing men, women and children God has 'undone' (54) before the world began are ruthlessly condemned to 'striving' (50) in time, in order to be transcended by the elect Johannes Agricola. The incoherence of the doctrine of the elect, not to speak of its political implications, points remorselessly to the incoherence of Christian notions of heaven and hell.

'Porphyria' works as a successive narrative, but by the end of the poem the events have turned into the 'synchronous' totality of a retrospect – 'And thus we sit together now' (58). If the poem is a memory, the speaker has a past. If it is a fantasy nothing has happened – 'And all night long we have not stirred' (59). Delusions invent an illusory temporality which is quite independent of historical time. God cannot intervene in imaginary time and withdraws from it. Hence he 'has not said a word' (60). The monomaniac hubris of these two monologues works in contrary motion one to the other, but with the same result. In one, God and creation are indistinguishable because time has been abolished. In the other, God has disappeared because time is imaginary.

The derangement of these monologues comes from Browning's remorseless understanding of the structural problems which arise from the expressive poet's abolition of externality, of agency and action, time, and above all the obliteration of the reader. The characters obsessively read themselves, and if we understand the poems in terms of expressive psychological moments, they effectively suppress the fact that they are being read or 'heard'. They obliterate the active, critical presence of the reader because they obliterate their status as *texts*. So what of the politics of 'heard' poetry, or drama? Through Fox's alternative theory of drama as oratory, as an open, public transaction in which the work, like the actor who recognises the existence of his audience, declares itself as oratory and ideology, it is possible to turn these poems around and to see them as psychological texts rather than psychological expositions or expressions, a second poem created with exactly the same words as the first. This takes us some way into the extraordinary complexities opening out in Browning's work. But in these poems Browning took on a double debate with both Mill and Fox, and a reading of them is not complete without an understanding of the way in which they begin to reach towards another poetics. It is this which enabled Browning to become a political poet, not because he wrote directly of radical problems, but because it released him into the possibility of making a cultural critique in terms of the structure of the monologue itself. If a direct, working-class-based political poetry was closed to him by virtue of his middle-class status, he could write poetry which became cultural critique by presenting and dramatising a politics of poetics. For 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' constitute a politics of Mill's poetics. They achieve this by engaging with further strategies which

go beyond the tactics of the immediate lampoon. What these are can be derived from Fox's understanding of 'heard' poetry.

Fox's writing on literature constitutes a conscious and deliberate effort to develop a *Utilitarian* and radical aesthetics. While this rests on a fundamental politicising of all literature there is simultaneously, as has been said, a sustained effort to deepen, expand and enrich the Benthamite concept of pleasure through a less mechanistic reading of the process of association than was customarily identified with Benthamism. It is through dramatic poetry that the poet exercises 'one rich ministry of pleasure'. Where the legislator, philosopher and divine must postpone pleasure and fulfilment in different ways the poet 'seizes upon the soul' immediately.[10] Indeed, Fox vigorously defended Bentham from the charge of narrow mechanistic thought. Though Mill depoliticises his expressive poetics, and is otherwise very different from Fox in his aesthetic thought, he shares in Fox's project to explore a new, associationist theory of poetry. But Fox's theory of poetry was fully dramatic and public where Mill's interest was directed to private soliloquy and opera. Significantly, Horne describes opera as the concern of the élite and aristocratic in the impassioned call for the reform of contemporary drama and the economic stranglehold of patent monopoly which prefaces his translation of A. W. Schlegel's lectures on drama. Which class, he asks, responds most to drama? Opera is an aristocratic pursuit comparable to the fighting of mock medieval battles, as in the farcical revival of tournament by Eglinton.

> Is it the aristocracy? They prefer the opera, the scenery, the wardrobe, the heroic Eglintonian pageantry. Is it the middle classes? They are the very followers and only supporters of the true drama. Is it the working classes? The large minority delight in the impassioned drama, and humbly reverence its power: the majority flock to the external shows.[11]

Fox's development of a Utilitarian poetics goes hand in hand with his attention to drama. If the prerequisite of the poetry which 'influences the associations of unnumbered minds' is that it is 'oratorial', open and 'heard' as a public transaction, then it must be rhetorically self-conscious and aware of itself as text and as ideology. In a remarkable passage on preaching, Fox speaks of the presentation of doctrine in preaching which must go on in detachment from the minister's subjectivity, which must go on, indeed, even when his own feelings are not identified with what he says. He compares his work to that of the actor, who deliberately manipulates and constructs a role and generates emotion through it.

> On certain days, nay, at certain hours, and even minutes, he is bound publicly and solemnly to tell his God that he is in a particular state of mind and feeling, when perhaps he is in a very different state of

> mind and feeling. He modulates his voice, as he reads the liturgy, to the emotions of reverence, contrition, supplication, thanksgiving, sympathy etc; but who is so totally ignorant of the human mind as to imagine that these emotions either do or can arise within him at his bidding, and in their prescribed order of succession?[12]

So though these poetics are based on a theory of emotion they are not based on complete psychological identification with feeling on the part of either author or reader but on an analytical, detached, dramatic rendering of feeling in which there is an active, critical participation on the part of the audience. Poetry tasks the 'intellect' as well as the 'senses' because it makes use of 'the science of mind', that is, the discoveries of associationist psychology. Such analytical poetry is democratic in three ways. In the first place, it is democratic because it either contains or is structured in terms of *dialogue*. Fox insists that all poetry is dramatic even when it is not dramatic in form. Mental phenomena are externalised as events so that they are the equivalent of a set of incidents which can be publicly examined and mediated. 'Then a poem, however short, should be a narrative, or a drama, and have something of that sort of interest, and consequently of pleasure, which we experience in being conducted through a chain of events to a catastrophe'.[13] The drama may be constructed out of the associative process itself, not 'the current of outward circumstances' but 'that of the phantoms which are ever passing in long procession through the brain'. A poem may be dramatic without the existence of literal dialogue, but there *will* be a dialogue constituted by opposition and conflict within thought and feeling. 'By dramatic we do not mean that the poet should have recourse to personae and dialogue; but he should at least employ those defined and contrasted feelings which will, in very narrow space, shadow forth the strivings of the external and literal drama'.[14] The radical aesthetics of drama turns on the existence of dialogue or its equivalent because it is in dialogue that there is space for debate within the text and between text and reader. Moreover, it is only through dialogue that there is the active possibility of *change*. Schlegel based his definition of drama not on the fact of conversation between characters where 'the poet does not speak in his own person', but on the presence of dialogue. 'It is dialogue', Schlegel says emphatically, which is the very foundation of drama, for this *changes* us as intellectual and moral beings.

> When the characters deliver thoughts and sentiments opposed to each other, but which operate no change, and which leave the minds of both in exactly the same state in which they were at the commencement; the conversation may indeed be deserving of attention, but can be productive of no dramatic interest.[15]

Drama, then, refuses to 'leave the mind . . . in exactly the same state' as

it was at the start. That is its essence. And inherent in this is action, action as energetic, non-passive involvement, as well as literal action, for action is 'life itself'.

The second democratic aspect of analytical drama is consequent again on the poet's access to the 'science of man', associationist psychology. The dramatic poet, as Fox says in his essay on Tennyson, can project himself into the subjectivity and associative complexity of any psychological state. But he will be particularly concerned with analysing the 'modern' psychological condition. Hence he abrogates the epic of Troy as against the French Revolution as the materials of poetry. But it is important to see here that Fox is not simply asserting that the modern reader is given access to contemporary subjects. He includes the open inspection of political events within the provenance of the science of man, but such topics are the result of a deeper analytical purpose. This is the exploration of psychological conditions as historical entities, as the product of different forms of culture: 'the whole should be based upon a profound knowledge of human nature, its constitution and history, its strength and weaknesses, its capabilities and its destiny; and where there is this science of man in the poet's mind, its existence will be ever felt'.[16] The poet has access to a radical historical and cultural analysis in which particular associative configurations occur at particular moments in history. Poetry is critique. Here poetry becomes a form of knowledge reached through the emotions and the critical intellect. 'It is an essence distilled from the fine arts and liberal sciences; nectar for the gods. It tasks the senses, the fancy, the feelings, and the intellect, and employs the best powers of all in one rich ministry of pleasure'.[17] Where Mill made a distinction between poetry and science or knowledge, Fox puts the two together.

Lastly, dramatic poetry is democratic because it deals with objectified materials which are capable of eliciting a responsive associative train in readers, who can corroborate or dissent from its delineations by reference to their own experience and build new patterns of association from the poet's explorations. This is very different from the disruptive, subversive function that the poet's breaking of associative patterns achieves in Hallam's aesthetics. Fox's poet and reader proceed by negotiation, Hallam's poet–reader relationship proceeds by a series of non-rational ruptures. Mill, of course, does not make provision for a relationship at all. For Fox the objectified representations of poetry are to be as *material* as possible. The poet 'must give us pictures'. It is impossible for language to produce 'actual' pictures but the poet must enable the reader to come to an independent mental representation of external things and develop 'new combinations' by appealing to the physical experience of the senses. 'His words should be such as are associated with the most common and most vivid recollections of those external objects whose presence most gratifies the senses'.[18] Here is an attempt to formulate poetic realism at the same

time as recognising that the world is mediated through representations, and the ever present possibility of new representations.

Fox's curious combination of Benthamite materialism and rational philosophy of pleasure with Coleridgean idealist passion is strange. He can say that the finest poetry 'almost identifies poetical with religious inspiration' and almost in the same breath speaks of the poet in terms of the crudest psychological and social engineering: 'A great master of the art can play upon the nervous system, and produce and control its vibrations as easily as the well-practised performer can try the compass and power of a musical instrument'.[19] Thus democratic negotiation and a preoccupation with power belong uneasily together.

What did Browning take from Fox and what did he reject? There is no doubt that he was experimenting with the dialogic drama of externalised psychological narrative in 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola'. There are times when he describes his analytical procedures almost in Fox's words. In the preface to *Paracelsus* (1835) he claims that his poem is an attempt to 'reverse' the usual procedures of writing so that the literal external conditions of action are displaced by an analysis of the subject's internal drama. In *Strafford* (1837) he speaks of analysing action in character rather than character in action. In fact in the process of dialogic objectification Mill's expressive poem becomes the anti-expressive poem. In 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' Browning relies on the hermeneutic shock created by the absence of dialogue. Characters so patently talking to themselves force a conscious intervention, force the reader to be aware of his or her exclusion and simultaneously force that awareness into a consciousness of *reading*, understanding the poem as the object of analysis and thus as ideology. So the structural relationships set up in the poems themselves become a political paradigm of change through an evolving, participating dialogue with the protagonist. Subsequently Browning refined the dialogic process and made it more complex by introducing a silent listener within the monologue itself, so that the poem is doubly a text, but the rudiments of this structural politics are all here in these early poems. Dialogic action declares power relations and thus their presence becomes one of the factors included in the process of analysis. In these poems the very extremity of the speaking subject's will to power and possession – one speaker virtually worshipped by God, another by his lover – is enough to indicate the implications of the act of appropriating which conceives the world as that which harmoniously answers one's own needs. The storm at the start of 'Porphyria' both echoes the speaker's mood with its vexation and 'spite' and yet he enters into a kind of power struggle with the elements conceiving their very animation and aggression as turned against him. This is an example of the way in which acts of mind are seen as a drama of changing events in dynamic relation to the reader.

It is clear, too, that Fox's understanding of political poetry as cultural

critique, in which psychological states are rooted in history, is at work in these poems. The de-institutionalised private union with God, the curious reversal in which the self as God worships the self, the translation of this in an economics of relationships which is both repudiated and exploited in a contradictory way by the speaker, all this is an analysis of cultural forms in which experience is implicated in ideas of payment. Similarly, in 'Porphyria', the displacement of sexuality outside the institution of marriage, as the illicit affair becomes the consequence, the mirror image of licit, contractual union, is a brilliant social analysis of the way in which marriage and adultery are bound together in bourgeois society. So, too, is the objectification of the woman's body. A. W. Schlegel thought of the *modern, romantic drama as a drama about dividedness and about the* distorted desire which emerges from such alienation. The division of labour and the objectification of commodity occur in psychological forms. Browning's poem is a study of alienated desire, literally the desire for an object, a dead object. It is a cultural fantasy produced by social organisation. Whereas in Mill's terms these would be the expression of diseased subjectivities, in Fox's terms the poems would be a commentary, a critique of constitutive modern structures, religious, economic and sexual, which create diseased subjectivity and the madness of individualism. The reader is forced from one kind of recognition to the other, from the perception of diseased subjectivity to an analysis of its cultural form, because the poems parody expressive lyric.

It is Fox's account of realism, and the attempt to account for representation, which is least developed in his theory. The 'mental reproduction' of reality in 'new and becoming combinations' leaves the poem unanchored in the material world and is in danger of returning representation to solipsist subjectivity. It endorses that curious split in Fox's work between an assent to imaginative construction and positivist, technological instrumentalism. Browning's work, on the other hand, seems to develop very arrestingly and agnostically the whole problem of representation. There was, however, a paradigm for the work of art as pure construct. It is Bentham's theory of fictions. Fox may be dealing tentatively with the paradigm when he talks of 'new' combinations, though the question of direct influence is much less important than the nature of this model of fiction, which was certainly available at the time. Bentham's theory of fictions grants the work of art the status of cultural construct. The possibility for conscious investigation of representation *as* fiction is built into his theory. At the same time it is a model which enables the artist to speculate on the nature of the kind of intervention an imaginative construction makes in the world. It invites more complex and problematical political questions than Fox asked. Above all, it provides for a theory of poetic language. So one can see Browning's poetry developing a Benthamite poetics beyond Fox's theories.

THE DRAMATIC POEM AND THE THEORY OF FICTIONS

Browning never failed to acknowledge that the materials of art are the representation of 'external' objects, or objects where general cultural agreement about their representation exists. Thus the work of art is democratic because it is open to inspection and analysis, as Fox saw. To anticipate a prose work of 1851, Browning's prefatory essay to a collection of letters he supposed to be by Shelley, this is the ground on which the 'objective' poet is formed. There is, however, a more decisive and sophisticated shift from realism to representation than in Fox's work. The objective poet stays within the world of received and *experienced* representation. He can 'reproduce things external [either the scenic universe or the human heart and brain] . . . with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction'.[20] Either he produces an 'intelligible whole' for inexperienced readers, or he provides material for 'corroboration' and amplification by more adventurous readers.[21] Readers, indeed, are in a position of critical awareness. They not only corroborate but actively bring their own imagination and intelligence to a reading and *develop* it. This must be the only guarantee of the real, and constitutes a democratic poetry which brings the active reader's interpretative power to the poem. Browning's account of the objective poet's work allows for access to the poem by Fox's uneducated readers. The poor for whom the middle-class poet cannot, according to Fox, write effectively, are granted a participatory role. The objective poet's art is Browning's attempt to ground poetry in common representations and to reclaim an area for the ideologically disabled middle-class poet. The objective poet is objective because he allows for his work to be a critique and become the object of a critique.

We 'covet' the objective poet's biography because he is necessarily detached from his material. The objective poem is 'substantive', 'projected from himself and distinct'.[22] Such distinctness is a way of precluding that appropriation of the external world from which Fox's account of psychological projection is not free. The coveted biography is eliminated. True to the *Repository*'s belief in drama as the only ideologically liberating form, Browning writes that objective poetry 'is what we call dramatic poetry', when 'even description, as suggesting a describer, is dispensed with'. Thus the reader is forced to hear, not overhear, a substantive and public poetry. 'The man passes, the work remains'.[23]

Having established the dramatic poetry which is available to critique, Browning seems to undo this work by reintroducing Mill's 'overheard' private *expressive* poet in his account of the 'subjective' writer. We 'necessarily approach the personality of the poet' and read biographically because such subjective poetry is the 'effluence' of unique vision. This move is baffling until we look again at the Platonic terms of this description. It is

an attempt to look much more rigorously than Mill at the structural part played by the subject in the creation of a work of art. For of course it is not possible to eliminate the psychology of the writing subject in art, and nor is it desirable. But the utterance of the poet is precisely not the inward monody of pure feeling: 'the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand – it is towards these he struggles': 'Not what man sees, but what God sees'.[24] The objective poet sees and portrays what *man* sees and stays within the limits of the human subject. The subjective poet – and there is a Promethean impudence here – struggles to create as *God* creates. He is supremely external and analytical and deals with the constitutive elements of experience and not with superficial expressive forms. His art is a construct, one of 'the primal elements of humanity' and not a 'combination' of experiences.[25] The analogue of God's mind is the human mind and its *fictions*, pictures 'on the retina of his own eyes'.[26] The subjective poet is Browning's effort to allow for the existence of what Fox barely conceived, constitutive fictions.

The work of the subjective poet has always been seen by Browning's interpreters as the rendering of an inner life, of human essence over and against a history. As we shall see by turning again to the two *Repository* monologues, Browning was never free of casuistry and is prepared to run the risk of his theories by exposing them as casuistry. But here Browning claims that the subjective poet is immersed in history. Not only do the poet's imaginative fictions intervene in history but they must be constructed on the model of Plato's 'Ideas' out of the human mind and its experience which is 'the nearest reflex' of divine mind. Mind does not transcend itself because mind itself is the model for the creation of fictions. On the other hand, mind is not at the mercy of its own psychological experience either.

Browning is in a complex dialogue with Mill and Fox which involves him in both displacing and recentring the subject. Mill's unified expressive subject turns out to be the fragmented victim of psychological moments. If Fox's solid, analytical dramatic poetry is invoked to redress the privacy of Mill's poet, that drama is now displaced from the immediate external world to become a function of shared *representation*. What a representation can be is further sophisticated by the introduction of the idea of fictions. As Browning makes clear, objective and subjective forms are never produced as pure forms distinct from one another. But it is fiction, rather than the subject itself, which is at the centre of art. It is characteristic of Browning's restless deviance that the introduction of fictions makes a genuine political poetry at once harder to achieve and more possible. And it is absolutely typical of him that in the notion of the fiction as it is explored in the *Repository* poems, he chose the most politically disreputable and least credible model to hand in radical circles, the dangerous power of the legal fiction. For it is in the legal fiction that the concept of fiction was circulating at this time, the legal fictions which Bentham had con-

demned as despotic and tyrannical, the tools of power and injustice. And moreover he had associated legal fictions with the corruption of language. It is no accident that 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' are obsessed with legality and the guarantee of contract which turns out to be exploited for private power, or that legalism and language are explored together.

As 'objective' poems, 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' are immediately apprehendable as 'intelligible wholes', melodramatic and vivid representations of madness and psychosis. The *logic* of psychosis and its cultural significance is laid bare for the reader who wishes to develop and explore the nature of madness. Here Browning's readings are consonant with Fox. As 'subjective' poems, going further than Fox, they represent the fictions of madness and become explorations into the status and language of fictions themselves. And it is here that Browning places the fiction at the most dangerous edge of casuistry. The importance of this is that it is a casuistry from which Bentham himself was not free, for he recognised that human language finds it impossible to do without fictions. 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' are experiments in the concepts he termed first-order fictions, love and God. Real entities are those things which have a correspondent image in experience. Fictional entities, love and God, are those things which do not have correspondent images in experience, and that is their problem at the same time as it can be their justification.[27]

In the review of Coleridge in which Fox developed his political aesthetic, he refers to a radical Utilitarian defence of Bentham in the *Westminster Review* which disputes conservative readings of Bentham. The article quotes liberally from Bentham's writings and concentrates on his attack on legal language and fictions. It demonstrates conclusively that the law for Bentham was the crucial institution because it is where conservative oppression manifests itself openly and issues directly in action and control. Mill's famous defence of Bentham as a codifier, on the other hand, in the essay to which I have referred, weakens the violence and political intensity of Bentham's attack on despotism. The writer of the Bentham article is at pains to show, first that Bentham condemned legal language because its eloquence was *aesthetic*, and secondly that legal fictions are the product of this aesthetic language. Forms of words are substituted for arguments (one example is the speaker who, like Johannes, says 'I am of the number of the Elect') and forms of words begin to have an autonomous life of their own which depends on 'the music of the maxim, absorbing the whole imagination'.[28] They prevent the listener from perceiving 'the nothingness' of a statement. Nevertheless, this 'nothingness' perpetrates actions. For legal fictions are constructions of events which substantively effect people's lives, making the innocent guilty and the guilty innocent. The writer means not merely chicanery and quibble but the train of precedent and legalism which actually result in contradictions in the real world, such as the acquittal tax on the innocent.[29] So fictions *intervene* in the world however

aesthetic they may seem. To fight them we have to behave as if they were true. The writer savagely derides as conservative a reading of Bentham which actually justifies legal fictions aesthetically on the grounds of their internal coherence, and characterises it as mere 'sport' – 'the construction of an independent system artificially deduced out of its own technical principles etc'.[30]

'To be spoken of at all, every fictitious entity must be spoken of as if it were real', Bentham wrote elsewhere.[31] 'Nothingness' fictional entities might be, but they are essential to language and the process of conceptualisation. 'Every fictitious entity bears some relation to some real entity'.[32] Fictions are entities for this reason. They have an analogical base in physical and psychical experience but cannot be reduced to it. They cannot be translated or substituted for a real entity – words such as God, love, soul, are examples. But by exhaustive redescribing, metaphorising and *linguistic* substitution you can point to the fictional entity by reference to the real entity and demonstrate the structural relationship of the fictional to the real entity. This is a subtle route through the philosophical extremes of nominalism and realism, the independence of language from the world, and the referentiality which ties words to things. It neither consolidates pure representation nor identifies the sign and the thing signified. Curiously, its advantage to an artist is that it confirms the necessity of fictions and places them as central to the process of thinking, in spite of the discreditable purposes to which they may be put. Moreover, it asserts that fictional constructs intervene substantively in the world and affect choices and actions however fictional they may be. They are as enabling as they are disreputable. Lastly, the theory of fictions is a theory of language, which sanctions the ceaseless productions of language (as paraphrase, metaphor, metonymy) not as rhetoric but for the purpose of clarifying the structural relationships fictional entities bear to real entities. Bentham wrote:

> To language, then – to language alone – it is, that fictitious entities owe their existence; their impossible, yet indispensable, existence.[33]

It is a justification for a poetics. Ironically, this theory of 'nothingness', which evolved from an attack on the dishonesty and violent power of the law, *is* an aesthetic theory. It is a successful aesthetic theory. It is a successful aesthetic theory simply because it was an attempt to explain and understand the *effectiveness* of fictions. For Bentham it would be ineffectual idealism in the face of the law's fictions to assume they could be spoken of as if they were not real. The importance of the theory lies in Bentham's willingness to speak of a fiction 'as if it were real'. It is a flagrantly, almost perversely, paradoxical theory.

It is a short step from legal to aesthetic to psychological fictions. The importance of a theory of fictions to Browning is that it provides him with

an account of the imaginative construct which is an intervention in the world and which escapes from solipsism and a subject-centred discourse. It also produces an account of poetic language in terms of definition and demonstration which depends for its being on abundance, on repetition and redescription in the public forum. The truly poetic language is a forensic language, is a product of legal debate. Both the form in which a fictitious intervention occurs in the world of choice and action and the way in which its language evolves secure a truly public, politically open situation in which questions can be investigated without mystification or the exploitation of power relationships. But more significant than all this, a theory of fictions is important because it is paradoxical. Browning's poems are not demonstrations of the nature of the fiction, but, like everything he did, a sceptical enquiry into it. Hence they are test cases of his own and Bentham's fictions, explorations of the casuistry which treats a fiction 'as if it were real'. At one and the same time this is firm political ground, and ground which gives under one's feet.

Agricola's fiction, that he is one of the elect, appears to concern only himself and God and yet it involves a ruthless rejection of other kinds of worshipper. Its exclusiveness has a substantive function in shaping his relations with the world. 'God' is a fictional entity at what Bentham calls 'the first remove', formed, presumably, on analogy with its noun 'man'.[34] Not only does God have human characteristics, such as anger and pride, but He is more human than Agricola, possessed of a past, planning and determining the future, exercising arbitrary power, expressing emotion, capable of the energy of thought and calculation. He performs all the functions Agricola has abrogated by resorting to passivity. This is the logic of treating God as if He were 'real', exactly like a human being. Agricola's mind creates God in his own image of despotism. Fictional entities, Bentham says, often control, dominate and organise our understanding of real entities, as if the fictitious body were a stake, and the real body a beast tied to it.[35] The connection between a word and its import is 'altogether arbitrary' but coercive. That is why war 'with all its miseries' emerges from language itself.[36] The blasphemous irony of this monologue is that Agricola is only doing what Christians ought to do in thinking of God as 'real'. The reader can only enter the complexity of the fiction by entering into the poem as if it were 'real'.

The remorseless process of sceptical exploration is directed to another problem in 'Porphyria'. What is the status of the 'murder'? If it is imaginary, what is the difference between a fiction and fantasy or delusion? And how does each materially intervene in the world? For they all seem to work in the same way. What is the status of an *imagined* or fictional action? Such 'actions' do not appear to impinge on the world and yet the conviction that something has 'happened' has to be dispelled by treating it 'as if it were real' – that is to say, to disprove anything, its possibility has to be

taken seriously. The morbid violence, the intensity and extremity of feeling is substantive, produced by and producing the fiction. Porphyria's lover, however mad, has to be initially granted belief, and there is some strange sense in which the murder *is* in existence with the contemplation of its possibility, particularly as truth might be stranger than fiction. The pure idealism of the fiction is constantly shown to have material effects on the world in the most disturbing of contexts. In fact, fictions and the language of fictions, since they impinge on and create action, are crucial to political life, and indeed to all experience. Browning did not so much directly politicise his material in these two monologues as begin to write a politics of fictions.

In words which recall 'Porphyria' in an eloquent analysis of the contiguity of fiction and hallucination, Browning considers in the case of Shelley whether 'the idea of the enamoured lady following him to Naples, and of the "man in the cloak" who struck him in the Pisan post-office, were equally illusory, – the mere projection, in fact, from himself, of the image of his own love and hate'.[37] He quotes Shelley himself – 'To nurse the image of *unfelt caresses*/Till dim imagination just possesses/The half-created shadow', and adds, 'of unfelt caresses, – and of unfelt blows as well?'[38] The 'unfelt caresses' of Porphyria and their problematical status reappear in this essay, written nearly fifteen years later. Porphyria may be a projection of 'his own [the lover's] love and hate', but before we can discover whether this is an 'entity' of fiction or a hallucination the poem has to be read seriously, and in this way it has already intervened in the world. The strange syntax of the later title, meaning the lover *of* Porphyria and the lover *possessed* by her, suggests how the 'fictitious' erotic 'body' ties meaning to the stake.

The discovery of the fiction and its potential for a new poetics and a new poetry was of critical importance to Browning. It also led to a politics which stems directly from an account of consciousness and human action, for paradoxically the idealism of the fiction may *determine* action. In the *Monthly Repository* of 1835, Horne spelled out the problematical relationship between consciousness and politics through a discussion of Hazlitt's *On the Principles of Human Action*. 'Mind is the only criterion of all things; the only type and proof of reality; the only measure of creation. . . . The only fixed datum for metaphysical speculations, is consciousness'.[39] Even though, as Hazlitt says, 'self' is a fiction, 'this fine illusion of the brain and forgery of language' grounds human action.[40] Consciousness is constructed from memory and memory is a series of constructs. It is through the fictions of memory that the fiction of the future is established. The future is a projection of memory.

> And in truth, it requires a considerable effort of abstraction clearly to distinguish and separate the objects we frame for the future,

> from those we have been conscious of in the past; so much are our imaginations mixed up with memory. In some cases this almost amounts, speaking abstractedly, to a solecism. I contemplate a statue or a figure, in imagination, having heard of it only: a few days after, I contemplate as near as possible the same idea, i.e. the memory of a former or past imagination. Is it not then a reasonable paradox, that the future is often unconsciously identified in the mind with the past?[41]

We can already see Browning's great epistemological lyrics of the 1850s in these speculations. Horne goes on to ask what '*real* interest' he could have had in the statue if he sees it in reality and discovers it to be quite different from his imagination. And yet knowledge of the existence of the 'real' statue makes possible his imaginary construction of it. Such epistemological speculation, he claims, is not ideal, for it affects the sphere of moral and practical action. For 'The Sun of hope is a fiction which the wisdom of the Creator has implanted in our minds with all the force of anticipated reality'.[42] All action is the product of the repetitions of the past in consciousness and a product of imagination. Belief in political action must depend on a projection in which the 'past wrongs' of a people are redressed through that mental process which identifies the past with the future. So action is based on a risk. This principle of action is at once utterly sceptical and completely affirmative. Consciousness only guarantees that 'Man stands like a speck upon a progressive point, between two eternities'.[43] And yet this negation of certitude must be the very ground on which action, and the future itself becomes possible. In 'Porphyria' and 'Johannes Agricola' Browning began a formative experiment, the exhaustive agnostic exploration of the risks of fiction.

The essays of Fox and Horne can be seen as markers for the formation of a new kind of Victorian poem. The different, oddly discrepant pressures of radical Utilitarian aesthetics, Shelleyan idealism and a Benthamite concern with fictions, combined to make possible the dramatic lyric or what has come to be known vaguely as the dramatic monologue. From Fox came a conviction of the ideological necessity of drama and a programme for drama as externalised conflict objectified as the materials for democratic participation. From Horne came a belief in the central structural importance of dialogue and an epistemological concern with the importance of the fiction or construct as the determinant of action. And behind both is the presence of Bentham. In Browning's work all these possibilities for a poetics and practice are opened up sceptically as problems. But his heard drama, originally in a parody of Mill's overheard drama, shifts the poem from psychology to epistemology and the textual complexity of the fiction. The possibility of agency and the structure of consciousness itself are at stake in the status of fictions. Browning's poetry becomes a dare with the status of the fiction, an analytical process which ceaselessly investigates

the nature of utterance and its representations and their cultural meaning. Included in his poems is an understanding that they are made of language and that though they pretend to be speech, they are writing – not actually heard, but read. We read them self-consciously as texts. But it is through this process that they become forms of knowledge rather than the expressive emotion which Mill distinguished from truth. They belong to Benthamite science rather than liberal feeling.

The possibilities of the dramatic lyric came slowly to Browning. His contemporaries were preoccupied with political drama in the form of plays, and his attempts to become a dramatist and to write plays for the theatre continued until beyond the mid-1840s. Later, Browning's instinct for what was radical in the dramatic was reinforced not only by the Benthamite fiction but by a new account of oppressed consciousness which was ultimately to be described by Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*. William Morris, directly in touch with Ruskin, became the practitioner of what Ruskin termed 'Grotesque' art. I discuss this new theory of radical poetry in connection with Morris in Part II. But when people described Browning as 'grotesque', as they frequently did later in his career, they implied a social theory of art which sees the longings, deviancy and violence of the grotesque consciousness as the product of the distorting nature of Victorian society, and particularly of oppressed labour. Certainly, Browning's poetry was transformed when he was able to work in the grotesque mode rather than in formal drama.

The plays, though not as frightful as some people believe, are not as successful as other works. *Paracelsus* (1835) began the move to drama, and seems to be a first attempt to redress Mill: Paracelsus, paralleled throughout with Luther as a liberating power, chooses to stand on knowledge rather than love and feeling, though it is the dichotomy itself which is under attack. *Strafford* (1837), the play which so exasperated Macready, was clearly written with political intent. Seventeenth-century politics were interpreted in terms of the nineteenth-century struggle for democracy. Browning's Strafford is a single-minded royalist who cannot understand the complexities of a new situation which demands an understanding of the working of a parliamentary system. It is actually more muted in its condemnation of Strafford than John Forster's *Life*, which Browning helped to complete, and it is typical of Browning's detached interest in equivocation and his refusal to take a standard radical line that this is so.[44] However, a comparison with the reactionary *Philip Van Artevelde* makes it clear that it is a very different kind of political play.

Though the later plays were more daring, much the most radical plays at this time were being written by Thomas Noon Talfourd. On classical themes, static, starchy and undynamic, but with a clear political implication, they deal directly with slavery, despotism and the exploitation of privilege. In *Ion; A Tragedy* (1836), the protagonist struggles against

tyranny and becomes king on condition that republican democracy be established at his death.

> Swear to me
> That ye will seek hereafter in yourselves
> The means of sovereign rule: – our narrow space,
> So beautiful, so bounded, so compact,
> Needs not the magic of a single name
> Which wider regions may require to draw
> Their interests into one; but, circled in
> Like a bless'd family by simple laws,
> May tenderly be govern'd; all degrees
> Blent into one harmonious frame may glow
> A living form of beauty, free to smile
> In generous peace, or flash with courage bright,
> If tyranny should threaten. Swear to me
> That ye will do this![45]

Assent being given, Ion, demonstrating idealism but extraordinarily little political sense, promptly kills himself to bring democracy about. His mistake is to see democracy as a *future* state rather than attempting to bring it about in the present.

Though Horne was committed to drama, his most successful political poem was an epic, *Orion* (1843), which obeys Fox's principles in the sense that it portrays a series of powerful conflicts which can be, as Horne's preface remarks, 'perfectly intelligible to all classes of readers'.[46] It is 'an experiment on the mind of a nation' and its price, a farthing, indicates the attempt to reach a wide audience.[47] Effectively, Horne's epic is about 'the principles of action'. Orion the giant, who represents the enchained energies of the oppressed, goes through a series of experiences (and mistresses) which include orgy, famine, revolution, blindness and social reconstruction, though he is doomed to hope rather than achievement. The poem is an attack on mindless labour and exploitation. 'Toil' is 'Unvaried, ending always in itself'.[48] The power to change the conditions of labour is almost impossible to gain.

> Clearly I see this,
> And know how 'tis that toil unequally
> Is shared on earth; but knowledge is not power
> To a poor man alone 'gainst all the world,
> Who, meantime, needs to eat.[49]

Orion confronts the power-loving Akinetos and the reactionary Encolydon who is 'Hater of all new things' and 'Stood'st in improvement's doorway'.[50] The answer *is* action, though not revolution. Change seems to depend on mind, not on the pure 'principles of thought' expressed by Orion at the

start of his progress, but on the constant reconstruction of consciousness. The symbolic blinding and regaining of sight – one man's mind and thought can 'like a star go out' – is the obliteration and reconstruction of belief, the 'star' of fiction.[51]

Horne's poem, even though it attempts to bring the classical epic into the provenance of popular poetry, is not innocent of being the product of the middle-class, gentlemanly looker-on. Orion, indeed, seems more like that figure at times than the giant strength of an exploited populace. *Orion* is not without its anxieties, just as Browning's poems are not. Browning sought ingeniously to find an authentic form, through *Sordello* (1840) with its tangle of epistemology, politics and poetics, and *Pippa Passes* (1841) with its looser dramatic form. It is the story of a factory girl who is unaware that her song, or fiction, impinges on others and transforms their actions. She is unaware that the intervention of her song actually affects her life too. Interestingly, the poem begins with Pippa's celebration of sunrise, glancing back to the ironies of 'Sunday. A Poem'. The Browning of the 1840s is as uneasy as Tennyson is, though for different reasons, as the acted drama he wrote failed to find a popular audience. He turned tentatively to dramatic lyric in the cheap pamphlets of *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841–6) and to poems with a context in the civil war, but these also failed to find a substantial readership. He was an experimental poet throughout his life, but the experiments of the 1840s are anxious, undirected works in spite of their daring.

In the end, both Tennyson and Browning settled for being middle-class poets, in order to be heard rather than not heard at all, one in England, one as an ex-patriot. Their major work is often seen to belong to the 1850s. However, it is impossible to overestimate the intellectual importance of the early period. The poetics of conservative and radical thought were formative. They created the possibility of a founding rhetoric for Tennyson and Browning which addressed cultural and ideological questions of fundamental significance. They also created the terms in which subsequent poetics and poetry evolve. Later writers select, reconfigure and synthesise elements of the founding aesthetics in different contexts. In both groups the double poem emerges in all its complexity from opposite political theories. The topics of the Tennyson debate, mythic structures and the nature of culture, the poetry of sensation, poetry and sexuality, the Tory Wordsworthianism of common feeling, Taylor's anti-anarchic, rational morality, the poetry of affective moral empathy, reappear in new forms to the end of the century. The topics of the Browning debate, the nature of an interventionist political poetry, poetry and class, poetry and feminism, the expressive psychological poem, the poetry of therapy, the critique embodied in dramatic form, the status of fictions, reappear, though never with the sharpness with which they were evolved earlier, and never with the radical edge of the first decade of Browning's work. Arnold and Clough, the so-called

Pre-Raphaelites, Swinburne and others, make new syntheses of these explorations, as did the women poets of the century. Sexuality, power and language reappear as preoccupations. A study of the early decades of Victorian poetry leads to an understanding of the anxieties of the century and the sophisticated response they called forth. The great critical effort, as Arnold would have said, of the 1830s and early 1840s, is indeed a crucial moment in the century.

It was perhaps a critical moment in poetry and aesthetics because the great critical effort of these early years struggled to evolve new concepts to describe and articulate a changed political situation which had emerged definitively with the consolidation of industrial society at this time. What has been called the aesthetics and politics of civic humanism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries could not be adapted to a new economic and social structure.[52] A different theory of art and politics responding to perceptible changes in social and economic organisation began, with difficulty, to be developed among both post-Benthamite and post-Coleridgean groups. Civic humanism had assumed that the model of a republic of taste or letters could be sustained as a reasonable account of the relations between artist and audience. Anyone capable of *governing*, capable of taking on powers and duties in the state, was deemed to belong to this 'republic' of taste. Thus the idea of the 'public' was restricted to this closed and highly selected body of male participants in the ruling hierarchy. One of the results of this definition was that art was placed firmly in the public sphere, subject to the same responsibilities and judged in the same terms as other public enterprises. But civic humanism crumbled under the pressure of an economic order which necessitated competition rather than the ideal of an organic hierarchy based on shared accounts of responsibility. The division of labour forced an increasingly fragmented, individual and privatised account of both work and art to displace the earlier ideals of 'public' cohesion. The growing recognition of the formation of a mass industrial working class destabilised and made obsolete the classical definition of the shared and privileged 'republic' of taste among ruling-class equals.

By the time Talfourd attacked Hazlitt for his anti-democratic definition of the aristocracy of taste, civic humanism had collapsed under its own weight as the republic of taste became indistinguishable from the aristocracy of taste and its private pleasures.[53] The struggle of the 1830s and 1840s was to define a new public account of the aesthetic, its provenance and its function: the discursive shift, indeed, can be seen in the change from a terminology of the 'public' to a terminology of the 'people', from the hierarchical presuppositions of Burke to the cultural and racial analysis of writers such as Schiller and Herder.[54] Herder, as we have seen, provided interpretative possibilities for both conservatives and radicals. Each could theorise from him a more inclusive account of popular culture, cultural identity and race and nation which, almost for the first time in the

discourse of literary production, conceptualised that mass which belonged neither to the aristocracy nor to the middle classes. The new situation required a new language, and this was forged during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The people, the common people, the poor, the crowd (the word used in Browning's *Sordello* to designate a mass audience), the populace, the peasantry, the artisan, the labourer, all these words were given a new semantic range during this period; the Fox and Hallam groups were continuing the work of definition in their own ways, work which had been begun by Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge and which was to be further elaborated by critics as different as Ruskin and Arnold. We shall see Arnold later telling Clough with mock amazement how implausible the notion of the 'people' seemed to him.[55]

Hallam's theory of the unifying myth which healed the division of labour and assuaged class bitterness by replacing it with the collective imagination, and Fox's attempt to work out a theory of genuinely democratic dramatic poetry, both constituted a 'critical effort' to deal with what was perceived as a crisis in class and social relations and a corresponding crisis in the nature of literary production. Interestingly, however different their politics and their solutions to the problem, they were at one in their diagnosis of oppression. Tennyson mythologised and to some extent occluded oppression in poems such as 'The Lotos-Eaters': Browning's critique was more overt. The 'Cavalier Tunes' of 1842, for instance, cavalier both politically and morally, commemorate the revolution of 1642 by representing the careless confidence and assumptions of power and the right to rule among the landed interest, synonymous with the royalists; and in 'Incident of the French Camp' (originally 'Camp'), the second burial of Napoleon is attacked. In poems of 1845 (in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*), such as 'The Lost Leader', attacking Wordsworth's acceptance of the laureateship, and 'The Englishman in Italy' (originally 'England in Italy'), which ends sharply on the gravity of the corn-law debate, he continued to make explicit political allusions.

Both groups share an understanding of oppression with the working-class poetry of the period, and this may have been the only time in the century when middle-class and working-class poetry ran almost *pari passu*. Protest against pauperism, industrial conditions and factory labour are common in broadside songs. The refrain of 'The Pauper's Drive', with its ironical play on 'owns', points to the collapse of social and family relationships when property relationships supersede them: 'Rattle his bones over the stones,/He's only a pauper whom nobody owns'.[56] A poem such as the 'Collier Lass' demonstrates the way working-class labour maintains middle-class life:

> By the greatest of dangers, each day I'm surrounded,
> I hang in the air by a rope or a chain,

> The mine may fall in, I may be killed or wounded,
> May perish by damp, or the fire of a train.
>
> And what would you do, were it not for our labour?
> In wretched starvation our days they would pass
> While we can provide you with life's greatest blessing,
> O do not despise a poor collier lass.[57]

It is possible to see the generic relationship between Ebenezer Elliott's writing and Manchester hand-loom-weavers' songs of protest about the factory system. John Grimshaw's bitter refrain, 'You tyrants of England, your race may soon be run', in his 'The Hand-Loom Weavers' Lament', and the anonymous attack on factory regulations 'Where high build chimneys puff black clouds/And all around the slaves do dwell,/Who are called to labour by a bell', share a quality of fierce resistance to conditions created by the powerful.[58] On the other hand, it is necessary to be cautious in comparing Elliott's work with the broadside ballad. Elliott in fact made money out of the industrial system and deliberately addressed his poem to the 'Bees' or professional middle classes rather than to the working class. In some sense he represents the dilemmas of the consciously literary working-class writer and these explain why the preoccupations of middle- and working-class writing fracture during the century, as Fox always saw they might. While the middle-class writer was uneasily aware of the necessity of gaining access to a wider public whose existence and power was only just beginning to be recognised, the working-class writer knew that there was always a danger of alienating middle-class sympathy. If, as in trade-union songs and, later in the period, in Chartist poetry, a powerful class identity was asserted, making a sharper analysis of the structures which maintained economic conditions as they were, the common bond of understanding and outrage between classes could dissolve, as middle-class interests were threatened. Pity and outrage are always easier to produce than analysis. It is interesting that Elliott disapproved of the Chartist movement and dissociated himself from it.[59]

We can see, nevertheless, that a longer tradition of satirical and burlesque working-class protest poetry than Fox acknowledged continued into the early 1840s, when it met a kind of polemical poetry developing from Chartism (discussed in the next part of this study). By then working-class poetry was attracting guarded middle-class attention, treated as a new phenomenon, perhaps, because the aristocratic patron of the self-taught poet of the early years of the century was giving way to the subscription list and a different economics of publication and dissemination. Middle-class critics tended to construct artisan writing in terms of a romantic 'Burns' tradition, rather than taking a stand for a genuine working-class poetry, as Fox did.[60] Thus in many ways they muted and distanced its sharpness. However, poets such as Alexander Rodger and Samuel Bamford,

the Manchester weaver and early radical, whose writing goes back to the first two decades of the century, wrote with an irony which is later taken up in the work of William Thom and W. J. Linton. Thom's 'Whisperings for the Unwashed' (1844), describing the weaver 'Supreme in rags' weaving in tears 'The shining robe your murderer wears', with its intermittent chorus, 'Rubadub, rubadub, row-dow-dow!', and Linton's 'Bob Thin, or the Poorhouse Fugitive' (1845), another weaver poem, with its fierce itemising of poor-house rations in the "regulation" human stables', inherit the irony of Rodger's 'George, the Regent's, chaste and wise,/Castlereagh's an honest man,/Southey tells no fulsome lies,/England's free – likewise Japan'.[61] R. H. Horne's 'Political Oratorio' is an attempt to expand middle-class writing to include this subversive satiric energy. Samuel Bamford, whose writing career spanned forty years, continued to write subversive lyrics into the 1860s. The cheerful cynicism of his 'The Landowner' (1864), who reckons that the influence of family connections and power in the army, the church and court cannot be given up without immoral irresponsibility, is recognisably in the tradition of Rodger's work: 'To leave good things behind we find,/Is sin of high degree,/I'll sin for nobody, no not I./Whoever may sin for me'.[62]

It is significant, however, that though Bamford was a committed radical, suffering imprisonment more than once in his early years, he explicitly censored his volume of 1843 on the grounds that 'exciting public interest' in contentious topics makes it impossible 'to forget and forgive' class conflict, even though it might 'disappoint some over pertinacious friends'.[63] Bamford wrote union songs which in some ways differ little from Chartist songs in their powerfully generalised rhetoric – 'When woe, and want, and tyranny/Shall from our isle be swept away, – The grand epoch of liberty/Awaits a faithful Union' – but he refused to associate himself with Chartism.[64] For him 'freedom' signified 'reform', just as 'patriotic fire' ('Union Hymn') signified the united *legal* activity of combination.[65] What could be seen as ultimately directed to the good of all classes, promoting solidarity in and between classes through constitutional and legal action, drew his support. The logic of Chartism seemed to be different: it seemed to entail a divisive class aggression and an operation outside the law, from which he recoiled. The cost of class alienation seemed too much. Even the terminology of his 1843 Preface is uncertain, making reference forthrightly to 'the working classes', but softening this to 'the labouring class', and 'the working man'.[66] This uncertainty is important because, as will later be seen, it is typical of a number of poets. Though on occasions he could develop a rhetoric of bitter, apocalyptic critique, it was never used in the Chartist cause. He reprinted some earlier polemical poems in 1843, but his account of the poor engages pity and affective feeling rather than forming the social analysis which is so vigorously made in his autobiographical writing. Here, the poor woman's 'nook' is not a place of safety

by a fire but a freezing doorway whose shelter is insecure, and to which she has no right. The urban context deeply ironises the pastoral associations of 'nook', but the poem is lyrical rather than analytical.

> God help the poor! An infant's feeble wail
> Comes from yon narrow gate-way; and behold,
> A female crouching there, so deathly pale,
> Huddling her child, to screen it from the cold!
> Her vesture scant, her bonnet crush'd and torn;
> A thin shawl doth her baby dear enfold:
> And there she bides the ruthless gale of morn,
> Which almost to her heart hath sent its cold!
> And now she sudden darts a ravening look,
> As one with new hot bread comes past the nook;
> And, as the tempting load is onward borne,
> She weeps. God help thee, hapless one forlorn!
> God help the poor![67]

Elliott and Bamford exemplify the instability of a momentary convergence of working- and middle-class perceptions in the 1830s and 1840s. But although it would be true to say that there was always a divide between working-class and middle-class poetry, the resilience and expressiveness of urban poetry and the industrial ballad in particular is often remarkable. Middle-class poets from Tennyson to Kipling often seized upon (and plundered) the ballad as a way of reaching a popular audience, as other poets appropriated dialect writing or the satire and stoicism of later music-hall songs. But this was a one-way passage: self-taught artisans who adopted consciously literary forms and language tended to be ignored by the middle class and estranged from their own class because their non-literate audience was unable to read their work. A poetry which crossed class boundaries was never sustainedly arrived at by either middle- or working-class poets. The extraordinary excitement of new theory and cultural analysis in the 1830s and 1840s was not matched by a commensurate practice. Only Ruskin, as we shall later see, understood why. And perhaps this failure partly explains why the aesthetics which was to dominate the century was a liberal aesthetics which modified its precursors, as Mill's concentric middle-class circles began to intersect, rather than the specifically conservative or radical thinking of the early decades. But if this was a 'critical effort' that failed, it was still a formative effort: the circles never quite converged into a liberal poetry and poetics. A radical and conservative tradition continued to coexist throughout the century, challenging one another and 'centrist' liberal theory. Subsequent chapters of this book concentrate on moments when poets were confronted with, and made, crucial aesthetic and political choices.

6 J. S. Mill on *Pauline*, quoted in *Robert Browning, The Poems*, John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, eds, 2 vols, Harmondsworth, 1981, I, 1022.
7 Ibid.
8 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VI (1832), 641.
9 'On the condition of women in England', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VII (1833), 217–31. Women of all classes are *trained* to be slaves, 'a species of prostitution' (218).
10 Harriet Martineau contributed numerous poems, tales, reviews and articles to the journal between 1822 and 1834 (see F. E. Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent: The Monthly Repository 1806–1838*, Chapel Hill, 1944, 397, 414–17). In addition to the article on women and divinity already noted she wrote, 'On female education', *Monthly Repository*, XVIII (1823), 77–81. Her interests were wide, ranging from prison reform to associationist psychology and theology. Her work was coloured by her interest in women. See, for example, her two articles, particularly the latter, on witchcraft: 1830, 744–59; 1832, 545–55. See also 'Negro slavery', N.S., IV (1830), 4–9.
11 'On women of no party', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., X (1836), 79, 80.
12 Pettigrew and Collins, *Browning, The Poems*, 1027.
13 'What is poetry?', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VII (1833), 60–70; 'The two kinds of poetry', ibid., 714–24.
14 *Monthly Repository*, XIV (1819), 403. See Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent*, 132, on the advanced principles of biblical criticism developed in the journal.
15 *Monthly Repository*, XIV (1819), 403.
16 'Schleiermacher's critical essay on the Gospel of Saint Luke', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., I (1827), 38.
17 P. B. Shelley, *Alastor: Or, The Spirit of Solitude* (1816), *Poetical Works* (Oxford Standard Authors), Thomas Hutchinson, ed., 1934, ll. 121, 126–8.
18 Compare 'Tintern Abbey', ll. 43–6, in Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* (Oxford Standard Authors), Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt, eds, 1936, 164: 'Until, the breath of this corporeal frame/And even the motion of our human blood/Almost suspended, we are laid asleep/In body, and become a living soul'.
19 The *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, III, 569, gives W. J. Fox as author of *Westminster Review*, XII (1830), 1–31. Poetry produces the 'monster' of mechanical personification if the poet is unable to project his own thoughts creatively. The author of the discussion of Bentham, *Westminster Review*, X (1829), 367–93, is not identified.
20 *Westminster Review*, XII (1830), 12, 13.
21 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VIII (1834), 571.
22 Ibid., 711.
23 'The Copse', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., IX (1835), 91–2: 92.
24 'A Dream', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VI (1832), 257–9: 259.
25 'How, in such places, varying according to the character of the country, different modes of life, and, finally, states sprang up': 'Religion, under some form or other, is coextensive with, the human race . . . it was transmitted from age to age by means of symbols . . . which in time ceased to be understood even by the priests, and thus a dead form was left in place of a living doctrine', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VI (1832), 37, 96.
26 'The Vision. A Dramatic Sketch', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., IX (1835), 605–10, 656–64, 610.
27 Ibid., 657, 658, 662.
28 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VI (1832), 190.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 191.
31 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VI (1832), 36. The commentary on Herder takes every opportunity to reiterate the importance of a popular literature, without which there *is* no nation. A truly popular literature can tap the language of the feelings which can almost transcend the division of labour and its mutilating effects: 'literature, which addresses itself to the people, must have a popular spirit and character . . . in communities, where there is no *people*, there can be no public and no nation – no language and poetry – that is properly our own and has a living agency in our hearts' (86).
32 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VI (1832), 193.
33 Ibid., 196.
34 'Sunday. A Poem', *Monthly Repository*, N.S., IX (1835), 623. This poem, published anonymously, was enthusiastically reviewed and favourably compared with the work of Elliott.
35 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., X (1836), 10–14, 90–2, 149–52, 215–18, 286–8. 'Songs for the Bees', stanzas 1, 10.
36 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., IX (1835), 37–44.
37 Ibid., 40, 41.

5 The politics of dramatic form

1 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VII (1833), 60–70 ('What is poetry?'), 714–24 ('Two kinds of poetry').
2 'What is poetry?', 63.
3 'Two kinds of poetry', 715
4 Ibid., 716. Mill is deeply ambivalent about the two kinds of poetry. Though Wordsworth is never 'ebullient' (718), Shelley lacks 'mental discipline' (719), even though ideally the poet of nature such as Shelley should be superior to the poet of culture in whom thought dominates.
5 'What is poetry?', 65.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 64.
8 J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859.
9 Quotations of Browning's poetry are from *Robert Browning: The Poems*, John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, eds, 2 vols, Harmondsworth, 1981.
10 *Westminster Review*, XII (1830), 5.
11 A. W. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black, ed. R. H. Horne, 2 vols, 2nd edn, London 1840, xxx.
12 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VIII (1834), 535.
13 *Westminster Review*, XII (1830), 4. Compare his analysis of Browning's *Pauline* in terms of 'scenery', 'agencies', 'events': *Monthly Repository*, N.S., VII (1833), 254.
14 *Westminster Review*, XII (1830), 5.
15 Schlegel, *Lectures*, 21. In reading unacted drama we are compelled, he writes, to read in a participatory way, 'to supply the representation ourselves' (24).
16 *The Westminster Review*, XII (1830), 5.
17 Ibid. The review begins with a defence of intellect in poetry, claiming Bentham as an imaginative poet, and Milton as thinker. The attributes associated with poetry and prose are deliberately disrupted to demonstrate that these are artificial, culturally made categories.
18 Ibid., 4.

19 Ibid.
20 Browning's introductory essay, dated 1851, to twenty-five letters of Shelley, later discovered to be spurious, was first published in 1852. It was reprinted in 1881. See 'On the poet objective and subjective; On the latter's aim; On Shelley as man and poet', *Browning Society Papers*, F. J. Furnivall, ed., I, 1881, 5–19: 5.
21 'On the poet objective and subjective', 5.
22 Ibid., 6, 5.
23 Ibid., 7, 6.
24 Ibid., 7.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 *Bentham's Theory of Fictions*, C. K. Ogden, ed., London, 1932, 12. 'A fictitious entity is an entity to which, though by the grammatical form of the discourse employed in speaking of it, existence by ascribed, yet in truth and reality existence is not meant to be ascribed. Every noun-substantive which is not the name of a real entity, perceptible and inferential, is the name of a fictitious entity' (12).
28 *Westminster Review*, X (1829), 367–393: 387. For the discussion of 'nothingness' in language, see 386. For reference to the elect, 385. The author is at pains to demonstrate Bentham's intense and deeply considered attack on the despotism of the law.
29 Ibid., 391.
30 Ibid., 389–90, 390.
31 Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions*, 13.
32 Ibid., 12.
33 Ibid., 15.
34 Ibid., 9, 11. Bentham argues that ontological propositions such as God can be derived by inference and thus it is arguable that ultimately they are real entities. But it is also clear that *perceptible* experience alone, which has repercussions in the world of sense and in the immediate materiality of experience, produces the only securely non-fictional terms of existence. See also 44.
35 Ibid., lxviii.
36 Ibid., lii.
37 Browning, 'On the poet objective and subjective', 17.
38 Ibid.
39 *Monthly Repository*, N.S., IX (1835), 484.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 485.
43 Ibid.
44 For a discussion of the politics of Browning's plays and their relation to the prose *Life of Strafford*, see Stephen Hawlin, 'The Development of Browning's Religious Sensibility', unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1986, 55–69. Hawlin's very interesting chapter on *The Ring and the Book* (255–332) argues for Browning's continued commitment to democratic politics in this poem. He puts the case with moderation, though arguably it could be made rather more strongly, judging by the powerful evidence he supplies.
45 Thomas Noon Talfourd, *Ion; A Tragedy*, 1835, V. iii. 99–100 (privately printed). Talfourd removed the reference to tyranny and substituted 'foreign power' when the play was published.
46 R. H. Horne, *Orion, An Epic Poem – in Three Books*, 1843, prefatory 'Note'. John

Lucas has recently discussed R. H. Horne and the Browning circle as dissidents, arguing that *Strafford* is a republican statement on the imminent death of William IV. See *England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688–1900*, London, 1990, 165–9.
47 Horne, *Orion*, 'Note'.
48 Horne, *Orion*, I. iii. 31.
49 Ibid., I. iii. 32–3.
50 Ibid., II. ii. 58.
51 Ibid., III. i. 90. This, the concluding book, sets out the principles of action: 'When thought guides action and men know themselves' (89).
52 For the discourse of civic humanism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries see John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, New Haven and London, 1986, 'Introduction: a republic of taste', 1–68. I am indebted to this chapter for my remarks on the 'classical' aesthetics of civic humanism and the analysis of its breakdown under changing economic conditions.
53 Barrell (ibid., 308–41) ends his book with the decadence of civic humanism in the writing of Robert Haydon and Hazlitt. Talfourd's critique of Hazlitt is one of the moments in the formation of a new discourse of democratic art.
54 In different ways the 'classical' definition of the 'public' was put under strain in the early nineteenth century. See Barrell on Blake, ibid., 253–8.
55 See below, p. 210.
56 Quoted by Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature*, London, 1974, 301. The first chapter of this very important study, 'Street ballads and broadsides: the foundations of a class culture', 8–59, discusses the production, dissemination and content of popular broadside songs.
57 Ibid., 298.
58 Ibid., 287–8 (John Grimshaw); 47–8 ('The Factory Bell', anonymous ballad).
59 Ibid., 97. For trade-union songs see 60–93.
60 See *The Poor House Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain*, Brian Maidment, ed., Manchester, 1987, 281–320, for examples of middle-class analysis of working-class poetry by Thomas Carlyle, Robert Southey, George Gilfillan, William Howitt and others. See 305–7 for a discussion of 'Burns and his school' by Charles Kingsley.
61 Ibid., 34, 82, 31.
62 Ibid., 31.
63 Samuel Bamford, 'To the Reader', Preface, *Poems*, Manchester, 1843, vii.
64 'The Union Hymn', *Hours in the Bowers*, Manchester, 1834, 31.
65 In the Preface to *Hours in the Bowers*, Bamford explicitly glosses 'freedom' as 'reform': 'that, in short, he has been confined in a greater number of prisons, for the cause of freedom (by which he means that of reform,) than any other Englishman living'.
66 Preface, *Poems* (1843), iv (for 'the working classes' and 'the labouring class'), viii ('the working man').
67 Ibid., 101.