

‘Thinketh: Theory of Mind and the Dramatic Monologue
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In its conventional origin myth, the dramatic monologue springs into being independently in the minds of the two men who would become the preeminent poetic voices of the Victorian period: Tennyson wrote one first, while Browning published one first. (Or, if a slight temporal compression is employed, one might say that the genre emerges “simultaneously” within the distributed poetic consciousness of the age.¹) The fact of the genre’s appearance, and subsequent popularity, within its particular historical moment is indeed one topic I will want to touch upon here, but at the moment I’d like to begin from the probably uncontroversial premise that the publication in 1836 of Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” has perhaps as good a claim as any event to the status of inaugural moment in the history of the genre. If we take this to be the case, then the monologue form makes its first appearance with a grim little melodrama whose opening lines have traditionally been discussed as an instance of the pathetic fallacy, or as evidence of the homicidal speaker’s “solipsism” (Byron 40):

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake...

It in no way detracts from such readings, of course,² to point out that the speaker here is also exhibiting an animistic tendency to attribute a set of mental and emotional states to an inanimate reality, in a manner that Victorians would soon learn from their anthropologists to associate with a “primitive” cultural level. Alone, surrounded by a world of objects, he nonetheless perceives a theater of volitional agents. As the poem progresses, the speaker’s habits of mental attribution become yet more problematic: even as his murder of Porphyria serves to swell the ranks of that same inanimate world, his own mind continues its production of (increasingly dubious, as well as macabre) agency. “No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain,” he asserts after the crime, before proceeding to describe a (lifeless) body which he experiences as intensely animated:

I warily oped her lids; again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before...
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will...

The monologue form, a genre conspicuously premised upon the representation of mental alterity as it were “from within,” thus makes its debut on the stage of literary history with

a depiction of a mind itself engaged in a cognitive habit of “primitive,” or perhaps “pathological,” subjective investiture, the external attribution of a specious agency, and specifically of states of mind clearly inflected or conditioned by the speaker’s own.

I want to suggest that this figure’s runaway powers of mental attribution, like a wide range of other cognitive phenomena exhibited by Browning’s speakers, may usefully be grouped and discussed under the rubric of “Theory of Mind”—the evolved ability (as most interested in this panel will probably know) to theorize or simulate mental states in others: a concept which Lisa Zunshine and others have used in recent years to construct powerful models for the operation of (primarily novelistic) literature. If, as has been argued, we all progress ontogenetically through discrete stages of Theory of Mind acquisition, beginning with the development of an infantile capacity to “[distinguish] between agents, who have an internal source of energy permitting them to operate on their own, and inanimate or inactive entities” (Meadows 208), then this speaker’s folk theory of mind seems decidedly underdeveloped or otherwise askew.

In fact similar characteristics are strikingly common in Browning’s work. Another example can be found, for instance, in the erudite speaker—or, as the poem is not technically a monologue, writer—of “An Epistle, Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician,” certainly a more sophisticated figure than the murderer of Porphyria. Karshish has recourse, throughout his letter, to a number of theories (in the conventional sense) of mind and brain, ranging from a medical account of “mania” to a quasi-Lockean description of the role of experiential “inscription” on the blank “walls” of the mind, as well as speculation as to the effects of suddenly acquired “knowledge” upon an “impoverished brain.” But he nonetheless proves susceptible to a

similarly “primitive” attribution of a threatening agency to the inanimate world, reporting “A moon made like a face with certain spots / Multiform, manifold, and menacing.” (Though, indeed, the “hard” dualism forming his philosophical bedrock,³ his tendency to see machines populated by ghosts, partakes surely of the same conceptual economy, or cognitive logic; it is the more intellectually respectable obverse of the animistic coin.) Yet more striking, perhaps, is the sprawling proliferation of acts of mindreading within the poem, its staging of multiple scenarios of intersubjective inference, performed at different “levels” and, often, recursively interlaced in complex ways—as when Karshish reports his misgivings about one figure’s mental state to his imagined interlocutor, simultaneously anticipating that interlocutor’s likely response. (The Barthes of *S/Z* would doubtless identify this related set of cognitive acts as a tracery of proairetic codes woven throughout the poetic text.)

Some of these imaginative acts of attribution are portrayed as (to borrow from the vocabulary of speech act theory) felicitous, including Karshish’s (spot-on, one imagines) anticipation of his correspondent Abib’s point-by-point reactions to the letter, as well as his somatically-based reading of animal desire—stalked by a hungry lynx, the doctor interprets its behavior, presumably correctly, as motivated by “Lust of my blood.” Most of the attempts at mindreading depicted within the poem, however, must be judged as, at best, ambivalent successes, or, more often, arrant failures. There is, to begin with, the messenger to whose doubtful care Karshish must entrust his missive, and whose presumptive state of mind thus inflects the scene of textual production itself, being the condition of possibility for the poem’s very existence. “[W]ho knows his mind, / The Syrian runagate I trust this to?” frets Karshish, trying in vain to interpret the former’s

facial signs as indices of sufficient trustworthiness to justify writing at all—or, having written the letter, sending it. In the end he “risk[s]” it, but his parsing of the “ambiguous Syrian’s” possible actions into a set of outcomes whose radically, yet precisely, stochastic nature recalls a Borgesian lottery (“he may lose, / Or steal, or give it thee with equal good”) points, surely, to an essential, and perhaps unbridgeable, intersubjective barrier.

More centrally, Browning not only depicts Karshish’s protracted struggle to grasp the inner workings of the risen Lazarus’s mind, but also presents, in layered fashion, the doctor’s careful report of Lazarus’s own inability, in turn, fully to conceive the fact that his soul-changing experience of the divine is fundamentally incommunicable: his face radiates a “stupor” signaling his amazement “That we too see not with his opened eyes.”

Examples of problematic or, as in the case of the speaker of “Porphyria’s Lover,” grotesque or parodic acts of mindreading (as well as reflexive accounts of the same⁴) in Browning might, again, be multiplied. But how does one explain this fact? Why are his own explorations of imagined minds themselves so densely populated by mindreaders, and more particularly by a disproportionate number of “primitive” ones, ranging from childlike madmen to a mud-sprawled ape-man?⁵ I propose in what follows briefly to explore connections between the emergence of the dramatic monologue and modern accounts of how our minds generate models of subjective alterity, moving from (these few) selected Browning poems to suggest, albeit in abbreviated fashion, some possible reasons for the genre’s emergence in the nineteenth century, as well as to speculate about the functions it may have served within Victorian culture. I’d like first, then, to attempt to situate the monologue within a larger set of cultural projects of “mindreading.”

In at least one prominent account, we are to credit the contemporary revolution in Theory of Mind research less to any “natural” progression in the brain sciences than to the multifarious, real-world challenges of radical mental otherness, from the prospect of intelligent machines to the brains of children, other species, and sufferers from various cognitive disorders. “Cognitive scientists,” in a word, “were awakened by a series of encounters with alien minds” (Baron-Cohen xiii).

I want to contend that a similar set of cognitive encounters (indeed, to a great extent the same set) confronted nineteenth-century Britain, prompting a variety of responses in the field of culture. The specter of subjective, and intersubjective, alterity—in all its diversity, complexity, radical unknowability, and danger imagined or real—loomed, in other words, as a central problem for the British imagination, which found itself face to face (if I may put it that way) with a perhaps unexampled range of other minds. Colonial expansion, evolutionary speculation, and urban concentration all, for instance, sparked anxious speculation about the nature of alien subjectivities, prompting in turn manifold attempts to represent, model, simulate, and theorize other minds.⁶ I mean to invoke here a wide range of possible fields of cultural production that might be said to partake in such a project, from (for instance) Richard Burton’s well-publicized simulations of “Oriental” subjectivity to the “ethnographical” accounts by Mayhew and others of, among other things, the “mind” of the swelling underclasses.

Also conspicuous were related projects undertaken in the realm of scientific and cultural theory. Alongside the emergence of modern sciences of mind and brain—the discovery of “unconscious cerebration,” the project of physiognomy, and the work of thinkers in psychology and philosophy today canonized as key figures in the “prehistory”

of cognitive science—there were, as well, a number of figures we might specifically term early “theorists of theory of mind,” engaged in speculation and research recognizably anticipating contemporary attempts to plumb the mysteries of self-recognition and other-speculation. Julian Paul Keenan lists, for instance, a number of nineteenth-century figures engaged in mirror-recognition tests on apes, monkeys, and children (to echo the title of Juan Carlos Gómez’s recent book). Among these was Darwin, whose interest in extending the evolutionary paradigm to the realm of psychology culminated in his magisterial genealogy of inner emotional states and their (putatively universal) outward signs.⁷ The emergent “sciences of man” also constructed suggestive models of the “primitive” mind and its workings. Perhaps most notably, Edward Tylor would develop a tremendously influential theory of “animism”—in effect a “theory of theory of mind” imputing to “primitive” cognition a habit of overattribution not unlike that invoked by Browning, the imaginative creation of agency throughout the objective world.

It is also suggestive to consider, in this connection, a trope used with striking frequency to conceptualize the intersubjectivity of the colonial “other”—namely, the fearful specter of the “native telegraph.” This phrase and its (conceptual) variants can be found in a host of imperial texts ranging from the “mutiny” novels of F. A. Steel and G. A. Henty to John Buchan’s *Prester John*, in which he warns of the dangers of African “native telepathy,” continually invoked as a sinister, vastly superior foil to Western telecommunications: “Fool that I was, I had forgotten the wonders of Kaffir telegraphy” (132). The constant here is the attribution to the “natives,” via a culturally available metaphor, of mysterious, preternaturally efficient powers of intersubjective communication. Is this potent and durable trope not reminiscent of the cognitive

deficiency, associated with autism, through which a subject unable to “read” the manifold signals involved in everyday communication perceives such exchanges as magical, telepathic?⁸ The British imperial imagination, then, might be seen as generating as it were “autistic” responses, recognizable patterns of attributive failure, to the mysterious, presumptively threatening communication of the “native.”⁹

In proposing, then, to place the monologue among such cultural responses, I am suggesting that it could be used as a way of responding to the specter of a threatening, perhaps radical, mental otherness. An excellent example of such a perceived threat is embodied, I would suggest, in the speaker of Browning’s monologue, “Caliban upon Setebos.” This incarnation of Shakespeare’s creation has, to be sure, often been seen as a kind of overdetermined “other” within the Victorian period; I want to focus here chiefly upon the poem as an intervention in contemporary disputes over the status of the human mind as an evolutionary inheritance. While the question of whether Browning had yet actually read *The Origin of Species* is an unresolved one, the influences of ambient evolutionary speculation on “Caliban” have been exhaustively probed, with the speaker serving for many commentators as a type of the primitive or subhuman, perhaps even the “missing link” itself.¹⁰ Given that the poem follows so intricately, and at such length, Caliban’s thought processes—both contained inwardly and spoken aloud—it is not surprising that many readers have focused on the text’s representation of mind as well. Gillian Beer, for instance, points to the counterintuitive fact of a “‘primitive’ mind uttering pithy, cramped, and sybilline insights in Shakespearean pentameters” (32). In light of my larger argument, I am particularly interested here in reading the poem as a response to a specific, culturally intelligible threat, namely of the disconcertingly

proximate subhuman mind. It is surely significant that the poem's date of composition (it was published in 1864) must fall somewhere within a half-decade that witnessed key, parallel debates concerning the dividing line between human and animal cognition: one centered upon perhaps the most conspicuous index of "mind," the other upon a physical component of the brain.¹¹ I want to focus on the first dispute, which concerned the possession of language: where one strain of Darwinist saw continuity between animal communication and human speech, another camp, ably represented by Max Müller, the rock star of Victorian philology (he was invited to lecture the queen herself), took their stand against any such encroachment upon the province of humanity. "Language," Müller wrote reassuringly, "is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it." A comforting image, this: on one side of the river, the rational discourse of humanity; on the other side, the meaningless gibber of the zoo—and never the twain shall meet.

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner—to whose work I want to turn presently in concluding my argument¹²—would identify in this menacing image a radical temporal "compression": it is really evolutionary time which presents the putative threat to humanity, in the form of an unwanted degree of kinship with the "brute." But this deep temporal span, essentially unrepresentable, here finds conceptual realization as a spatial tableau, the alleged developmental chasm (I am myself falling into the same traps as I try to describe it) imagined as a physical barrier.

I'd like to suggest that in Browning's *Caliban* we might discern the work of compression in similar ways: as the above observation by Beer would indicate, the poet "blends"—to invoke once more the terminology of Fauconnier and Turner—selected aspects of various levels of putative cultural and/or phylogenetic development to form a

single figure. I will want to return shortly to the particular “blended space” occupied by Caliban, and more generally, perhaps, by any speaker within the monologue as an emergent genre; first I’d like briefly to suggest that Caliban’s own theory of mind might help us to see how the poem, and potentially the genre, makes a statement about the intertwined nature of both self- and other-awareness.

Caliban is, of course, like so many of Browning’s speakers, acutely concerned with representing or “reading” other minds. The poem’s very epigraph—“Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself”—traditionally read in terms of the text’s treatment or critique of anthropomorphic projection, is also eloquent as a kind of slogan for Theory of Mind.¹³ His speculations, scrupulously recorded by Browning, of the possible mental states of Setebos and the entity he calls “The Quiet,” for instance, take up much of the poem (knowing the mind of a fickle deity is a matter of crucial importance to him: Setebos is only “Placable if His mind and ways were guessed”). Caliban’s depiction of his own consciousness, of course, seems to employ the same mechanisms of representation he uses for imagining the operation of other minds, as is famously signified by his oscillation between third and first person forms (of verb and pronoun) throughout the text. John Woolford ably captures the sense of Caliban as a developing subject whose “consciousness...is *in process of formation*” (90, emphasis in the original), recording in particular the Chinese-box slippages that are threatened within the poem between and among not only the speaker and his projected deities but also speaker and poet. Caliban, in such a view, comes to define himself by a process of “demarcation,” separation, and difference from others. Perhaps, though, it is also possible to read the development of self-consciousness as proceeding by *analogy*, with Caliban’s sense of self

emerging as a new kind of “other,” as a kind of (as yet incomplete, or imperfectly integrated) blend combining a model of other minds with an inchoate sense of “self” associated, for instance, with his own particular set of experiences—a state, again, indicated by the seeming primacy of the verb form represented by “Thinketh,” the emergence of his subjectivity first within linguistic prompts associated with alterity, and only subsequently by inhabiting a Benvenistean “I.”

I’d like to conclude, then, by sketching some prospective parallels between Caliban’s attempt to reconcile two pronominal “spaces” and the larger project of intersubjective exploration embodied in the new monologue form. I would begin by suggesting that the genre might itself be usefully examined as a blend in the Fauconnier-Turner sense. More broadly, indeed, it might be productive to consider (all) genres in terms similar to those these thinkers use in considering such artifacts as language and cathedrals: namely, as “prompts for [conceptual] integration” (143). Genres, too, are cultural possessions offering among other things conceptual “spaces” for the exercise of creativity, and evolving over time in response not only to other genres but also to other cultural forces (careful attention to the insights into conscious and unconscious acts of combinative creativity provided by Fauconnier and Turner would thus surely enrich existing genealogies of literary form).

Of course, the monologue’s blended status is peculiarly conspicuous, signaled in its very name—perhaps even more prominently in the denomination favored by Browning, the “dramatic lyric.” It is difficult to conceive a critical account failing to devote significant attention to the genre’s essential and self-advertised hybridity. It seems to me, then, that the detailed and nuanced account provided by Fauconnier and Turner of the

particular cognitive mechanisms involved in the production of conceptual “hybrids”—an act which they hold to be a fundamental habit of the mind—might be especially illuminating as a tool for examining the emergence and development of this form. I cannot do more than sketch some possible directions here, but it would seem a useful starting point to look closely at the structure that emerges when the “space” of lyric subjectivity—as a culturally dominant, prestigious set of coordinates for exploring self-awareness and self-consciousness—is blended with one or more modes of representation associated with the “dramatic” (or, perhaps, “medical”?) construction of character, when the Romantic “lamp” is merged with a paradigm of authorial exteriority or distance.

Such a blending of modes of representation associated with, respectively, self and other may in fact help to explain why the new form generated initial resistance in many readers, yet rapidly established itself as a central nineteenth-century mode of poetic expression. As Fauconnier and Turner compellingly argue, the ruling principle involved in the production of culturally successful blends is the drive towards “achieving human scale,” the creation of cognitive shortcuts that help our minds conceptualize otherwise unrepresentable chunks of (for instance) space and/or time. Such projects as Browning’s, then, may have offered his culture a project of integration aimed at subjectivity itself, in all of its burgeoning variety, complexity, and inscrutability—its reduction to manageable “scale” by blending it with the familiar space of lyric self-presentation.

Finally, the genre might be said to offer its own “theory of mind,” one speaking perhaps to the need to develop new models of consciousness in the modern world. For while an initially tempting connection, or at least a striking analogy, might be drawn between (on the one hand) evolutionary narratives that would place the emergence of

Theory of Mind capacities after the development of self-consciousness, and (on the other) the generic transition from lyric to dramatic monologue, perhaps such projects as Browning's invite the construction of an alternate scenario, one that offers intriguing parallels to current thinking on the relationship between our mental representations of self and other.

Researchers today are increasingly coming to see self-awareness and Theory of Mind as intimately, perhaps constitutively, connected; it may be, indeed, that the same mechanisms employed in theorizing or simulating the mental states of others may be used in the self-representation of one's own mind.¹⁴ Might the emergent form of the monologue, at least in Browning's hands, argue for a similar interconnectedness? This may be particularly true if, given the process of mutual inflection and transformation at work in any such blend, the "space" of lyric subjectivity must in turn be modified by the encounter, acquiring a new flexibility or fluidity, an openness to both a wider range of subjective possibilities and, more fundamentally, to alterity itself. Perhaps, then, as much as the new form offers a rogue's gallery of "abnormal" characters for its readership to gaze upon with fascination or horror, it also points the way towards new procedures of self-understanding.

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Notes

¹ I here adapt Kate Hayles's terminology.

² Indeed, I believe that a "brain-based" criticism, to modify Gerald Edelman's phrase, can serve to illuminate and enrich such accounts.

³ A position first articulated within the poem's opening lines, as Karshish invokes:

(This man's-flesh [God] hath admirably made,
Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,
To coop up and keep down on earth a space
That puff of vapour from his mouth, man's soul)

⁴ In "Fra Lippo Lippi," for instance, the speaker gives a developmental account of his own, particularly powerful and nuanced, theory of mind—his artist's gift for capturing and representing the mental states of others—as a skill that emerged within a struggle for survival quite as grim as any Darwinian or Malthusian scenario. The young Lippo evolved his mindreading abilities (not unlike Darwin) by closely studying human and animal faces:

Watching folk's faces to know who will fling
The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
And who will curse or kick him for his pains...
...nay, which dog bites, which lets drop
His bone from the heap of offal in the street...

⁵ A number of speculative explanations suggest themselves. For instance, could Browning's speakers, in their rich variety of "levels" of intersubjective development, constitute diegetic embodiments of Browning's own project, his striving to create a new form for imagining other minds? Perhaps such representations of failed, dubious, "primitive," or otherwise problematic acts of mental attribution and conjecture reflect or symbolize the author's, or the emergent genre's, own birth-pangs, their own struggles to evolve an art of subjective representation. Another intriguing connection might, perhaps, be made between the disproportionate number of aberrant, insane, and otherwise menacing figures in Browning and the fact that Theory of Mind is presumed to have developed in response to the need to anticipate the likely actions of potentially hostile and threatening subjectivities.

⁶ If it is true that Theory of Mind emerges as an evolutionary response to "complex systems," (Baron-Cohen, discussed in Zunshine 129) we may speculate that the perceived complexity of new forms of subjectivity and new paradigms of intersubjectivity might have prompted a host of new, Theory of Mind-recruiting productions.

⁷ There is, surely, at least an intriguing superficial resemblance between aspects of Darwin's research programme, in which he asked correspondents to identify the emotional states exhibited by photographed subjects, and modern tests for autism.

⁸ See for example Temple Grandin’s self-reported experiences to Oliver Sacks, cited in Zunshine 130-31.

⁹ It is worth mentioning here that the new technologies of representation, too, beginning with the telegraph and the photograph, themselves brought, through the dissemination of information, image, and narrative, the proverbial “other” closer to home than ever before.

¹⁰ He served as “inspiration” for an 1873 text on the subject: *Caliban: The Missing Link* (Beer 33).

¹¹ This was a bitter dispute between Huxley and Owen over the simian possession of the hippocampus minor.

¹² I will draw freely in what follows upon the theory of “conceptual blending” developed in their *The Way We Think*, without, given the constraints of this paper, elaborating the workings of that theory in detail. (I am also indebted to Michael Booth for many illuminating conversations about the book.)

¹³ Of course, that anthropomorphism, like the other habits of attribution I have been discussing here, might itself be analyzed as a product of these cognitive tactics.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Keenan et al.