

Modifying the Mask:  
The Transformation of the Dramatic Monologue Across the Works of  
Robert Browning, Norman Dubie, and Frank Bidart

Kristin Gulotta

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2016

Committee:

Andrew Feld

Linda Bierds

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Creative Writing

©Copyright 2016

Kristin Gulotta

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Modifying the Mask:  
the Transformation of the Dramatic Monologue Across the Works of  
Robert Browning, Norman Dubie, and Frank Bidart

Kristin L Gulotta

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Director Andrew Feld  
Creative Writing

A look at how the dramatic monologue as a poetic form has transformed since the 19th century by examining representative works from poets Robert Browning, Norman Dubie, and Frank Bidart.

In the mid-twentieth century, the New Critics championed a novel way of examining and critiquing literature: instead of considering the artist's life a necessary component for understanding and appreciating his or her writing, the New Critics believed in examining a work's strengths as a "self-contained, self-referential object" (Abrams). Although the movement itself was fairly short-lived, to me there still seems merit in the ideas, especially when I consider how I create my own poetry. I am most often drawn to writing in voices that are not my own, and instead of highlighting myself, I prefer to write from the perspectives of others, in dramatic monologues. Consequently, my personal biography would not seem to give any insights into my work or to determine whether or not a reader should like or dislike it.

However, since I am avoiding myself in my poetry, I often feel that what I write might be considered irrelevant, and I wonder whether or not it is possible for me to write meaningful work if it is not in my own voice. I also often struggle to understand how to capture the other in a poem without seeming dated, especially when dealing with historical figures, and I am concerned with poetic license and how appropriate it is when giving voice to another. Lucie Brock-Broido speaks to these concerns in an interview with Ricardo Maldonado for *Guernica Magazine*: "In the long past, I would write exclusively in personae. So frightened was I of 'confession,' I would write no poem in my own voice. . . . All this has changed, and dramatically—it is I who speaks now. No masks." This makes me wonder if it is necessary to "change," or to remove the mask, in order to say something true.

By examining the works of other poets who write dramatic monologues—specifically, by looking at the shifting manifestations of the form in the hands of Robert Browning, Norman

Dubie, and Frank Bidart— along with these poets’ and their critics’ explanations for donning or removing masks, I hope to have a greater understanding of the form’s continuing relevance.

### **Key Features of the Dramatic Monologue**

The most basic, defining features of the poetic dramatic monologue are that it is written from the point of view of a single, imaginary speaker—someone distinctly not the poet, but one who is being created or borrowed by the poet—who is within some sort of dramatic situation or definitive moment, which serves to relay the story of the poem and to cast light upon some aspect or aspects of the character. Additionally, the dramatic monologue addresses an imaginary audience, usually an implied, silent listener or “interlocutor,” whose “role and reactions are inferred from the speaker’s words” and who “focuses the reader’s sense of time, place, and occasion” (Cuddon 237, 240). As S. S. Curry, in his work *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue*, points out, this listener “has said something and . . . his presence and character influence the speaker’s thoughts, words, and manner” (7). Instead of being “a speech in which some truth or purpose is being argued” dramatic monologues present “the mind in the process of thinking as it is being affected by some other individual” (13). Often, there is also an abrupt beginning that will “arrest attention and suggest the [dramatic] situation” as well as the listener (9).

In addition to being “one end of a conversation,” dramatic monologues often incorporate vernacular that is distinctly and authentically the speaker’s—as opposed to the poet’s—and within the monologue, the speaker will often lay “bare his deepest motives” (7, 20). Curry

describes the monologue as “a study of the effect of mind upon mind, of the adaptation of the ideas of one individual to another, and the revelation” that occurs by these interactions (13).

However, the revelations are typically offered without overt analysis or commentary; instead the reader must not only decipher the situation of the poem, but also interpret any deeper meaning within the speaker’s words (“Poetic Technique”). Ideas are not handed over directly, but only hinted at, and those ideas are not “universal or impersonal truth,” but “the opinion of a certain type of person” (14-15). D.W. Shaw, in *Origins of the Monologue*, describes this so: “because the speaker of a monologue never merely describes something, his utterances are always partly self-referential and therefore partly dense or opaque” (26). Ultimately, the monologue does not explain the mysteries of life but only portrays people in the midst of dealing with those mysteries, which necessarily makes the monologue also dramatic.

Shaw describes the form as working similar to “Socratic dialogues” in that monologues “interrogate, turn inside out, or blaspheme” cultural customs, because they “fragment rather than consolidate cultural authority”: the speaker is not one of the “status quo, but . . . a Socratic interrogator of it” (4). So, although we may find truth in them, monologues do not force a truth upon us. We tease out the truths by coming to understand the personality of the speaker—and this truth is not necessarily a generally understood version, but what is true for the speaker.

Poets who write dramatic monologues find their subjects in characters from history, mythology, popular culture, from other pieces of literature, or simply, in their imaginations—as long as that character, as editors Stacey Lynn Brown and Oliver de la Paz write in their anthology *A Face to Meet the Faces*, is “distinctly different from the poet-author” (2). The dramatic monologue also often “highlights a ‘minor’ character from a more major, well-known

narrative—perspectives that were, until now, largely unspoken or unsung” (Brown and de la Paz 3). These retellings of narratives by “unimportant” characters are a way of learning the full story—or, at least, a more complete one (3). The reasons poets choose to write in voices not their own include a “common . . . desire to step outside of oneself and imaginatively inhabit the world of someone or something else,” which can be “exhilarating and fruitful” (4-5). It can be equally liberating for the reader “in the post-confessional landscape of contemporary poetics, where the modern audience tends to read for the (auto)biographical in a poem to experience the clear-cut boundaries of assumed identity” (5).

The dramatic monologue has its roots in the theatrical monologue, yet differs from it in several key ways. Francis Carelton, in *The Dramatic Monologue: Vox Humana*, describes the dramatic monologue as “a rich and flexible form” that “[i]n smaller compass than an art of full-fledged drama,” by its “concentration. . . on the fleeting instant expressively balances thought and feeling so that even the timing of vocal effects impregnates the dramatic ‘incident’ of the poem with meanings that extend beyond” (3). Shaw describes those differences as such: A script is “a means toward a further artistic end: the performance of a stage play. A dramatic monologue . . . is a transcript of speech that is not intended to be translated again into oral speech. . . . The utterance of a monologue’s dramatic speaker is a speech act in flesh and blood” (27). Another major difference is in the multiplicity of interpretations that the dramatic monologue allows. Whereas in a stage play monologues are, of necessity, meant to be voiced, the dramatic monologue might be thought of as “the printed voice” that allows the reader the pleasure of giving the words “different patterns of stress, which we may want to linger over and ponder” (18-19). These

different intonations allow for nuances of meaning that are not apparent in the theatrical use of the monologue.

Moreover, as a poetic form, the monologue “provides more opportunity than an actor’s script for a poet to speak with two minds upon a subject” because of the ambiguities or delayed meanings that can be created through line breaks and even punctuation (Shaw 20). Finally, there is more freedom to explore the emotions and fantasies of a speaker in a dramatic monologue than there is in a theatrical one, because there is no other voice to challenge the speaker’s. This is the reader’s job; monologues “make the reader himself a theatre, and so dispense with the externalized elements of theatrical performance” (Griffiths qtd. in Shaw 34).

### **The Nineteenth-Century Dramatic Monologue: Robert Browning**

Victorian poet Robert Browning is often credited as the first to employ the monologue as a form of poetic expression, and his peak period of writing dramatic monologues is considered as beginning with his publication *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, running through *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), *Men and Women* (1855), *Dramatic Personae* (1864), and culminating in *The Ring and the Book* in 1869 (Carleton 136). However, in his early writing career, Browning was also a playwright. According to Saxe Commins in his introduction to *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning*, Browning was often quite frustrated by the collaborative aspect of theatre—especially since it seems he was forced to work with unprofessional actors, who asked for re-writes, new characters, new lines, even new titles, which resulted in a “mutilated version” of Browning’s work (Commins xiii). These annoyances may have led to his later development of the poetic dramatic monologue, as a sort of cross between playwriting and poetry. With this

form, Browning was free to bring life to, and maintain control over, his characters—without the interference of personalities outside his work.

In Browning's hands, the more common features of dramatic monologue are clearly discernible: who the speaker is, who he is speaking to, where they are, and when they are talking. Browning generally sets up the dramatic situation in the first lines of the poem, as in his 1855 work "Andrea del Sarto (Called the Faultless Painter)," which makes the historical subject clear in its title, and then begins with the lines: "But do not let us quarrel any more, / No, my dear Lucrezia! bear with me for once: / Sit down and all shall happen as you wish" (74:1-3). Through the abrupt start—beginning in mid-conversation—we learn who the silent interlocutor is (Andrea's wife, Lucrezia), and we are placed within the dramatic situation by Browning's use of the adverb "any more," which quickly reveals the tumultuous nature of the relationship between Andrea and Lucrezia. The poem is grounded in historical references, yet we are not simply given facts. Browning reveals the drama of a man who has lost his renown—and his sole reward or comfort is the "love" of a wife who, though beautiful, undermines him, is adulterous, and spends his meager income frivolously. As Curry puts it, "The disenchantment in [Browning's] monologues may be just as sentimental as the rapture of Tennyson's lyric. . . . But the pathos comes now from the gesture of breaking through the picture frame and suggesting that the whole performance is an exercise in play acting, fantasy creations, and the loss of identity through self-deception or bad faith" (189).

Though Andrea outwardly claims a contentedness with having a wife, as opposed to fame or fortune, as in the line "You loved me quite enough, it seems to-night," he also reveals an

underlying discontent by the many times he professes his love—as well as in the last lines of the poem:

For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me  
To cover—the first three without a wife,  
While I have mine! So—still they overcome  
Because there's still Lucrezia, —as I choose”  
(Browning 80:262, 267-70)

Browning's theatrical background also seems to have contributed to what has since been termed the “Browningesque” aspects of his writing: dashes and ellipses that give a sense of action taking place and that allow the reader to feel the immediacy of his work and allow for multiple readings. For example, the use of the dash before those final words (“—as I choose”) complicates the sentiment. The words seem hurried, as if only added to appease the listener—perhaps to avoid further quarrel. The dash also undermines the content. Finally, it signals a resignation to fate, allowing the reader to understand del Sarto perhaps better than he knows himself.

Much of Browning's work in the dramatic monologue went under-appreciated during his life, mainly due to the difficulty readers had in understanding how this new form worked as poetry. As Wordsworth disdainfully referred to Browning's monologues, they seemed like “talking upon paper” (qtd. in Shaw 24). Instead of presenting pure feeling, as in lyrical poetry, or of presenting the reader with a message or lesson to be learned, Browning simply gave voice to different personalities, letting their words fall as they might in real-life discourse. For example,

in “A Woman’s Last Word,” the speaker is coaxing her love to forget about questions, possibly pertaining to her fidelity (or lack thereof), as is clear in the first few stanzas:

Let's contend no more, Love,  
Strive nor weep:  
All be as before, Love,  
—Only sleep!

What so wild as words are?  
I and thou  
In debate, as birds are,  
Hawk on bough!

See the creature stalking  
While we speak!  
Hush and hide the talking,  
Cheek on cheek! (23:1-12)

As Curry explains, because the medium is poetry and not theatre, “the listener or reader [turns] within himself, and he feels in his own breast the response to her words” as opposed to the passive response created while watching a performance in which those answers are provided—or even as opposed to reading other types of poetry in which some truth or message might be more explicitly stated (7). Shaw describes it as “creating dramas for both the eye and ear,” by which the “dramatic monologue cultivates a taste for two-way meaning that can best be satisfied in a private theatre of the mind” (5). As such, we are given the woman’s words as she seems to speak them in response to her “Love,” the implied listener, and the only sense that a poet might be involved comes through the incorporation of the exclamation points that intensify the feeling

of urgency in her monologue. The poem is clearly occasional and concerned with a particular moment in time in the speaker's life, and we are given this moment in the speaker's voice—without commentary or judgement; we are simply shown life in the course of living. It is the reader's responsibility to create a message for himself, if there is to be one: "We must take hints here and there and put them together [until] a distinct picture is slowly formed in the mind" (Curry 5).

In order to do justice to the subject and speaker of the poem, the "monologue must be true to the character of the speaker. [The poet] must faithfully portray, not his own, but the attitude and bearing, feelings and impression, of this character" (21). And it must be addressed not to the "you" as a general reader of the poem but to some very specific listener. In reading a dramatic monologue, the reader is required to infer what this unspeaking "you" is like, deducing the identity and behavior by what is observed in the speaker's descriptions. In many such poems, we can detect what some of the addressee's reactions must be from what we realize are the speaker's reactions in turn to these. For example, in Browning's lines above, the "Hush and hide the talking" gives us cues that the listener has been responding to or questioning the speaker—and allows the reader to deduce that there is something the speaker wishes to hide from the listener; though the listener may be fooled by the speaker's sweet words—at least for a time—we understand that the speaker's quick changes of topic must make her culpable of some transgression. We also clearly understand—through the woman's words alone—the attitude and feelings of the listening husband. The many times she must attempt to distract him from speaking to or questioning her allows us to understand that he continues to be suspicious of her. Without

understanding who he is or how he feels, we cannot completely understand the situation or the poem.

In Browning's dramatic monologues, a strict adherence to presenting characters distinct from himself is apparent. In "A Woman's Last Word," the speaker is female, making the distinction quite clear; "Andrea del Sarto" presents a historical figure, and the inclusion of the named listener Lucrezia allows the reader to read be caught up in the life presented in the poem, as opposed the life of the poet. As Curry states, the "essence of the monologue is to bring what a man says and what he is into harmony" (21). For Browning, it seems that harmony would be disrupted by any inclusion of the poet's personality. However, the idea of maintaining a strict separation between the speaker and the poet shifts in the twentieth century. Brown and de la Paz point out that

Modernist versions of the dramatic monologue emerged in the early twentieth century, Pound and Eliot using personae as both poetic alter-egos and foils to their own narrative perspectives. . . . allowing the poet to voice the unspeakable and think the unthinkable without direct ownership, consequence, or reproach. In this way, the idea of "hiding behind the mask" can be utterly revealing and liberating. (2)

Although the techniques Browning developed through his dramatic monologues are regarded as some of his most important contribution to poetry, in contemporary poetry, according to J.A. Cuddon in *Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, since Browning's time, dramatic monologues have become "indistinguishable from interior monologues"; "often, poets create

personae distinct from, and yet connected with, themselves,” as is true of Norman Dubie’s work in the form (241).

### **Twentieth-Century Transformation of the Dramatic Monologue: Norman Dubie**

The bulk of contemporary poet Norman Dubie’s oeuvre—to date—is written in the voices of others, and, as Brown and de la Paz put it, he “broke the genre wide open by trying on a number of outfits, perspectives, and characters, and creating a rich body of work that cemented the importance—and limitless possibilities of—writing beyond oneself” (2). In fact, David St. John claims that Dubie “once called the dramatic monologue ‘a chosen profession’” (“A Generous Salvation” 25). His work includes monologues from the perspectives of artists, scientists, as well as historical and literary figures. He has a predilection for stories or narratives, and the narratives he presents seem like they are taken from the journals of his characters; they feel like stories we have not yet learned about those figures, yet ones that also feel genuine by their inclusion of fine detail. In comparing Dubie’s techniques with Browning’s, Vernon Shetley states, “One might say that Browning takes a tape recorder to the past, Dubie a camera. [The latter] seeks to evoke emotion through a highly particularized rendering of a world of objects” (“Norman Dubie”). In fact, Dubie’s work seems almost cinematic in its focus. As he states himself: “I use all kinds of cinematic devices in my poetry, and I’m aware of it” (“Dark Spiralling Figures”). For example, we see this in his work “The Trees of Madame Blavatsky,” which begins:

There is always the cough. In the afternoon  
They go out for long walks as partners,

Arms linked, woman and woman, (62:1-3)

and the “I” of the poem follows behind, watching, like the eye of a camera.

However, his poems do not simply present characters from a sort of cinematic distance. As David St. John writes in “A Generous Salvation: The Poetry of Norman Dubie,”: “Dubie’s poems. . .are more basically meditations on thought itself and the nature of perception, on the process of *seeing* and *thinking* that is common to us all but which, in some, seems raised to a higher power” (21-22). In *Boston Review*, Ian Tromp notes Dubie’s talent for “inhabiting a persona and making convincing representations of another person’s life, taking on a different view and experience of the world.” Tromp also recognized the influence of Tibetan Buddhism on Dubie’s work, a practice Dubie took up in the 1990s, particularly in the tenet of Buddhism that emphasizes the “exchange” of oneself for another’s reality, which Tromp argues, is found throughout Dubie’s poetry: “Dubie’s texts might be seen as more than dramatic monologues: they would then take on the aspect of spiritual exercises of identification, exchanges of self and other.”

Dubie once claimed that he aims to “challenge whatever the assumed limits of the lyric are” (“Norman Dubie”). It also seems he would like to challenge whatever the assumed limits of the dramatic monologue are. As an example, we might consider Dubie’s “Elsinore in the Late Ancient Autumn.” In the title, we are given, as Browning was wont to do, the reference Elsinore, which clues us in that we are dealing with a historical, literary giant—namely, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. But quickly, we understand that the “I” of the poem is not Prince Hamlet. The point of view is shifted to reveal the life of a more minor character, Yorick, whom we only know in the

original work by his skull and Hamlet's famous monologue. In Dubie's work, we are given Yorick's voice, made clear in the opening lines:

I hear a dead march. A thin wrist is mincing roses  
In the diagonal lights of the castle's arbor.  
It is the nun at her stone bench.  
We need new quantities  
Of perfume for our palpable dead!

The landlord is no longer at war. Someone whispers

To me, "Yorick? Yorick?" (174:1-7).

Although, throughout the poem, we are grounded by allusions and references to Shakespeare's work and characters, as is typical in a dramatic monologue. However, unlike in Browning's work, the dramatic situation of the monologue seems to be lacking, for, instead of any continued interaction with the nun or the "someone" of line six, the next line reads, "There are four gates to the cemetery," and this description of the cemetery gates continues and leads to Yorick's meditations on the wind and weather (174:8). As is common in much of Dubie's work, this poem is more contemplative than dramatic, because there is no discernible listener to point to as prompting or driving any action or situation. We might more truthfully call this soliloquy rather than dramatic monologue. Although Browning's earliest work in other voices was also often in soliloquy, such as the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," he seems to have put these aside in favor of the poems that include a silent interlocutor for the speaker to interact with, thereby adding drama to the poem. Dubie, on the other hand, seems to have taken the opposite tack—perhaps, again, as a way of pushing the limits of the dramatic monologue. However, Dubie's critics, and Dubie himself, often describe his work in other voices as dramatic monologues. As

such, it seems there must be a dramatic situation. In “Elsinore in Late Ancient Autumn,” we might consider the drama as coming from our background knowledge of the original work and how that interacts with the information provided by Dubie’s version in this new point of view, creating tension between what we once understood as “truth” and what we now know.

It also seems there must be a silent listener, and we do feel while reading that this is Yorick speaking to someone. Yet, the listener is an ambiguous one, so the role of the listener seems ambiguous as well. In fact, it seems the speaker is unsure of to whom he should address his thoughts. This may be tied to Cuddon’s claim that the dramatic monologue has evolved to become more of an interior monologue. And, in fact, when asked to describe what he sees as the role of the speaker in his poems, Dubie responded,

Because I’m reluctant to be myself in my poems and to speak about my life, because I don’t have the instinct to be autobiographical, I have to acquire another kind of authority. So I did discover early on that I could adopt a persona and then, somehow superimpose my life, my primary voice, against the endearment of this adopted persona, and arrive at a transcending voice that doesn’t really conform to the idea of what a persona is, as we knew it, say, in the work of Robert Browning. There is that confusion to it, and it always seemed a healthy productive confusion. I didn’t have the authority of an autobiographical voice. And so I did this deceitful thing with masks and, consequently, no one’s noticed so far that my mouth is moving and that I’m the [ventriloquist’s] dummy.

(“Dark Spiralling Figures” 7)

But even though he is, as St. John puts it, “cloth[ing] autobiographical urges and urgencies in the voices of history and in the concept of the ‘other,’ Dubie still treats every voice and every speaker as if it were himself; he speaks with the urgency of that self and so makes each narrative monologue in some part autobiographical” (28). Because of the melding of voices in Dubie’s work, it seems much more difficult to tease out whose voice is whose, however. In an interview with Mary Gannon titled “Return from Silence,” Dubie shares that although there is “a lot of vivid detail from [his] life” in his poems, he has “moved away from all the notions of the Confessional poets, the Lowell gang”; it is “very common for [him] not to know who the hell is speaking in the poem” but to have a “very real sense that’s it’s someone” that is not him. “Often,” he continues, “as I conjure up another draft, it will suddenly dawn on me who is speaking, and then changes are made to accommodate that voice” (“Return from Silence”). Perhaps the “productive confusion” that is inherent in Dubie’s writing practice is why the resultant work is a more complicated manifestation of the dramatic monologue.

The way in which Dubie plays with time in “Elsinore in Late Ancient Autumn,” moving between Yorick’s present dead state and his memories of time spent while alive, also complicates the form, giving the feeling that we are experiencing an almost dream-like condition, or maybe a kind of purgatory. Unlike Browning’s dramatic monologues that give a clear sense of being within one critical moment in time, we are presented with Yorick’s thoughts about different critical moments, a kind of existential mulling-over of his life—while in death. Although an existential crisis may be just what Andrea del Sarto is in the act of experiencing in his exchanges with Lucrezia, in Dubie’s poem, Yorick does this outside of time. As St. John puts it, “Dubie, in his rescue of the dead and their visions, is able to forestall that sense of passage [of time]” (25).

There is an intriguing similarity in the works of Dubie and Browning, however. Like Browning, as David Wojahn points out in an 1978 *American Poetry Review* interview with the poet, Dubie also incorporates confusing “methods of punctuation and . . .line breaks”; Dubie himself admits to “a mannerism of ending a line with a preposition” and, similar to Browning and his ellipses and dashes, the intended effect is “that it’s a little lever that being thrown that takes the reader forward: that gives the poem momentum” (8). It also seems that his punctuation choices add to his works’ contemplative quality—and, as in Browning’s work—allow for a multiplicity of reactions. For example, when Yorick is describing the birth of Prince Hamlet:

The night of Prince Hamlet’s birth,  
It was said,  
Worms came up out of the earth  
Without a promise of rain to summon them?  
(Dubie 175:50-1)

The question mark at the end of what seems to be a declarative statement is unexpected and causes the dual feelings of surprise and doubt: surprise, first at the statement itself, which is the amplified by the question mark; we come to understand that Yorick feels just as surprised by that we do reading it. But, it also causes us to have doubts—not only about the truth of the statement and who it was originally said by, but also about Yorick’s reliability as a narrator. The inclusion of this small bit of punctuation creates a distinct feeling of distrust that undercuts Yorick’s account.

Despite the similarities or differences with Browning in regard to dramatic monologues, what makes Dubie’s work feel authentic, as St. John states, are the questions Dubie asks in his

monologues: “What is it that grants this speaker a unique place along the continuum of history? What, in each figure, is *like us*; what in fact is universal and human?” (25). The act of making a dramatic monologue could be characterized as a somewhat less human practice, however. In *Origins of the Monologue*, Shaw describes the poet’s act of using the life of another in one’s work as almost vampiric in nature (191). One might describe the more contemporary dramatic monologue as creating a Frankenstein’s monster, or giving life to a character who, because of the poet’s influence and perspective, is not fully his or her own flesh, not quite the creator’s, and not quite a fabrication, but some fusion of all three, as is even more apparent in the work of Frank Bidart.

### **Continuing Transformations of the Dramatic Monologue: Frank Bidart**

In his youth, Frank Bidart considered becoming an actor or director, but this changed when he took a literature course at university, was introduced to the works of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and then started writing poetry. In an interview with Mark Halliday, Bidart states that “reading Pound’s *Cantos*” was “tremendously liberating in the way that they say that anything can be gotten into a poem, that it doesn’t have to change its essential identity to enter the poem—if you can create a structure that is large enough or strong enough, anything can retain its own identity and find its place there” (13).

Bidart certainly seems to have given a place to most anything in his poems; as Dan Chiasson states in his essay “Reading Frank Bidart Pragmatically,” “Bidart is a poet of ‘subject matter,’ and his subjects have at times shocked readers; his poems treat, among other things, incest, necrophilia, anonymous sex, and phone sex” (81). He is best known for his dramatic

monologues “Herbert White,” told from the point of view of a necrophiliac serial killer, and “Ellen West,” which presents a suicidal woman dealing with anorexia nervosa. He is lauded for being able to contain excesses and create “living expressions of a consciousness moving through guilts and unmastered desires without resorting to easy resolutions” (“Two Poems”). Carol Moldaw writes that in these dramatic monologues, Bidart may have been either “possessed by a voice or possessing a mask, disappearing into a persona or making it into himself,” though whichever it may be, “those poems too were acts of biography, portraying an individual consciousness in the context, the flesh, of its life. His personae are people chained to their identities, their bodies, their memories, their selves, though most of them. . .struggle against this” (48). However, Bidart wants us to understand these speakers as more than their pathologies. At core, in his striking monologues, Bidart is most concerned with “[exploring] individual guilt, the insoluble dilemma” (Louise Gluck as qtd. in “Frank Bidart”).

Gluck’s claim that Bidart is exploring his speakers’ guilt in his dramatic monologues seems valid, especially when examining “Herbert White.” The first clue we have are the quotation marks that enclose the poem and signal it as the direct speech of Herbert White, but that also give the feeling that this is a confession of sorts, being told to explain his behavior.

Where as in Browning’s “Andrea del Sarto,” the repetitive declarations of love finally cause the reader to understand del Sarto means the opposite, Herbert White seems to have spent time contemplating his nature, so there is not much that is covertly revealed about Herbert White that will surprise us; instead, we are shocked by the graphic details by which we enter the poem:

"When I hit her on the head, it was good,

and then I did it to her a couple of times,—

but it was funny,—afterwards,  
it was as if somebody else did it...

Everything flat, without sharpness, richness or line.

Still, I liked to drive past the woods where she lay,  
tell the old lady and the kids I had to take a piss,  
hop out and do it to her...

(Bidart, *In the Western Night* 127:1-8)

However, because Bidart is not content to have his works seen as simply depicting the sensational, we also come to understand the humanity of Herbert White. The contemplative nature of the poem, which is, as with Dubie's work, more akin to soliloquy, does reveal a figure who feels remorse for his acts. Herbert White's consistently mentions how "somebody else had to have done that," but by the end of the poem admits that "...one night, / nothing worked..." and that he "couldn't, couldn't, / get it to seem to me / that somebody else did it" (26,124-5, 128-30). We also understand something of the home life that seemingly helped to create his pathological nature: he shares how his mother would tell him that "'Man's spunk is the salt of the earth'" and implies that she was unfaithful to her husband; Herbert's father is equally unfaithful and seems to have deserted the family<sup>56</sup>.) So, although the poem's horrifying beginning sets us up to think of Herbert White as a monster, Bidart's use of empathy, his act of giving some of his humanity to Herbert, allows him to make the monster more human. Herbert White is a character with a family, a mother, a rough childhood; we can recognize something of ourselves in his voice, if not in his actions.

Like both Browning and Dubie, Bidart uses unusual punctuation and typography in his work. As Langdon Hammer writes in “‘Maker and Collector’ Frank Bidart,” the poet’s “early work was marked by his eccentric, expressionistic use of punctuation and typography, which dramatized not only the extreme states of mind of his speakers, but also the poet’s. . . struggle to find an adequate form for their mental and spiritual intensities” (63). Bidart explains this so:

“It is the only way I can sufficiently . . . express the relative weight and importance of the parts of a sentence—so that the reader knows where he or she is and the ‘weight’ the speaker is placing on the various elements that are being laid out—is [through] punctuation. . . Punctuation allows me to ‘lay out’ the bones of a sentence visually, spatially, so that the reader can see the pauses, emphases, urgencies and languors in the voice. (“Frank Bidart”)

Whereas these unusual elements in Browning’s and Dubie’s work lead to interesting ambiguities, it appears Bidart is intent on removing ambiguity by playing with punctuation and typography. The eloquence of the lines, for Bidart, is tied inextricably with the way his words exist on the page: “Each line has to be written with a feeling for its place in the shape, the pulse of the whole: if it does that, it is authentically part of the whatness of the thing. It then has its own eloquence” (Travis).

This particular sort of eloquence is evident in Bidart’s “Ellen West, ” with its use of capitalized words, strange punctuation, and spacing that allow us to understand Ellen’s struggle with anorexia:

—My doctors tell me I must give up

this ideal;

but I

WILL NOT ... cannot. (Bidart 109:9-12).

The dash at the start of the stanza shows an interruption of the previous train of thought, which dealt with Ellen's imagined true self. The line break at "give up" allows for the dual reading: we at first think her doctors are telling her, nefariously, to give up her self or her fight, but when we read on, we understand that they are trying to help her to rid herself of her thoughts that are related to her destructive thought patterns: "this ideal." The capitalized "WILL NOT" show her adamant desire to maintain control of her body, and the ellipses that lead to the seemingly much smaller "cannot" show how she is losing control. Conversely, Bidart's control over his poem allows us to see Ellen as a more complete figure.

In an interview with Henry L. Hix, Bidart describes in detail how he came to write from the perspective of an anorexic woman—and how she became a sort of amalgam of himself and the actual person Ellen West, a woman who did struggle with anorexia and who was written of in a case study by Ludwig Binswanger:

Realism applies because it starts with an experience of either oneself or the world or of oneself in the world. . . .For example, I love Maria Callas. . . .In "Ellen West" I felt so lucky to be working on a poem in which suddenly there could be a passage about Maria Callas. In which I could say things that in fact I think are true, but I couldn't say in my own voice, because I couldn't quite justify them. Whereas if the person talking is Ellen West, who is anorexic, she has a certain drastic sense of

possibilities, of the dominating issues, and this gives her a severe insight into Callas' life. I think what she says in the poem is true, though it's not the kind of thing you can put in a scholarly article. It's realism insofar as it grows out of an authentic experience. Not just an aesthetic emotion; not something made up; not an "as if" - even though there's a fiction involved. Ellen West as a person did exist - but the crucial thing is not whether she literally existed, but that she corresponds to my sense of human experience, and the nature of human experience and the possibility of human experience.

Like Dubie, who states that although he writes voices in his head that are clearly not his own but nonetheless incorporate details from his own life, Bidart, has given Ellen a part of himself—his love of Maria Callas—and found a way to make the melding of his voice and Ellen's seem authentically Ellen's. Bidart's talent lies in dealing with speakers whom no one wants to hear from—and making us want to hear what they have to say.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The ways in which the dramatic monologue has evolved keep the form relevant and worthy of examination. Though, of course, handled differently over time and by different poets, the form allows one to uniquely experience life from another's perspective. It is an "act of empathy," as Brown and de la Paz put it—one that allows the poet to escape the self. As Dubie shares,

The wittiest answer I've ever heard to this question [of I-vs-you, poetry of the self] is John Ashbery's. When asked why the pronouns in

his poems seemed to shift so maniacally at times, Ashbery said that it was because he just didn't have a strong sense of self; that is: he really didn't have much sense of who he as an I was (177).

Conversely, it also allows one to express truth without having to directly own that truth. Oscar Wilde said it best: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (*The Critic as Artist*). Ultimately, though, what makes a dramatic monologue successful, as I or as others work in the form, is how it elucidates the human experience and allows us to connect with the voice on the page—not necessarily with the poet who is presenting that voice.

## Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H. "New Criticism." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999. 180-182. Print.
- Bidart, Frank. *In The Western Night: Collected Poems 1965-1990*. New York: Harper & Collins, 1990. Print.
- . "In Conversation with Frank Bidart." Interview with H.L.Hix. *Literary Review*. 53.1 (2009):191-98, 221. *Proquest*. Web. 12 Apr 2016.
- . Interview with Mark Halliday. *Ploughshares*. 9:1 (1983): 11-32. *Jstor*. Web. 15 Apr 2016.
- Brock-Broido, Lucie. "Doing Wicked Things." Interview by Ricardo Maldonado. *Guernica*, 2013. Web. 24 Oct. 2015.
- Brown, Stacey Lynn and Oliver de la Paz, eds. *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*. Akron: The University of Akron Press, 2012. Print.
- Browning, Robert. *My Last Duchess and Other Poems*. New York: Dover Publications, 1993. Print.
- . *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning*. New York: The Modern Library, 1934. Print.
- Carleton, Francis Bridges. *The Dramatic Monologue: Vox Humana*. Austria: Institut fur Englische Sprache, 1977.
- Chiasson, Dan. "Presence: Frank Bidart." *Raritan: a quarterly review*. 20:4 (2001): 117-38. *Proquest*. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.
- . "Reading Frank Bidart Pragmatically." *One Kind of Everything: Poem and Person in Contemporary America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Print. 79-108.

- Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. Print.
- Curry, S.S. *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue: Nature and Interpretation of an Overlooked Form of Literature*. Boston: Expression Company, 1908. Print.
- Dubie, Norman. "Return from Silence." Interview by Mary Gannon. *Poets & Writers Magazine*. 32.6 (2004): 34-42. *Proquest*. Web. 22 Oct. 2015.
- . "Dark Spiralling Figures: An Interview with Julie Fay and David Wojahn." *The American Poetry Review*. 7.4 (1978): 7-11. *Proquest*. Web. 2 Apr 2016.
- . *The Mercy Seat: Collected and New Poems 1967-2001*. Copper Canyon Press, 2004. Print.
- "Frank Bidart." *Poetry Foundation*. Web. 14 Apr 2016.
- Greenwell, Garth. "Frank Bidart: Lyric Poet." *Parnassus*. 29.1/2 (2006): 330-47, 407. *Proquest*. Web. 2 Apr 2016.
- Hammer, Langdon. "'Maker and Collector' Frank Bidart." *The American Scholar*. 77.2 (2008): 62-3. *Jstor*. Web. 2 Apr 2016.
- Moldaw, Carol. "Frank Bidart's Poetry: The Substance of the Invisible." *The Antioch Review*. 62.1 (2004): 48-57. *Jstor*. Web. 2 Apr 2016.
- "Norman Dubie." *Poetry Foundation*. Web. 12 Apr 2016.
- "Poetic Technique: Dramatic Monologue." *Academy of American Poets*. 21 Feb 2014. Web. 13 Mar 2016.
- Shaw, W. David. *Origins of the Monologue*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Print.
- St. John, David. "A Generous Salvation: The Poetry of Norman Dubie." *Where the Angels Come Toward Us*. New York: White Pine Press, 1995. Print. 17-31.

Travis, Adam. "An Interview with Frank Bidart." *Bookslut*. Jun 2005. Web. 4 Apr 2016.

Tromp, Ian. Review of *The Mercy Seat, Collected and New Poems 1967-2001*, by Norman Dubie. *Boston Review*. 1 Feb 2001. Web. 4 Apr 2016.

"Two Poems from Metaphysical Dog." A Review of *Metaphysical Dog*, by Frank Bidart. *Pen America*. Web. 19 Apr 2016.

Wilde, Oscar. The Critic as Artist. *The Literature Network*. Web. 24 Oct 2015.