

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AND THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM

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Drawing on a sustained reciprocity of critical concerns in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867) and "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) – notably on Arnold's effort to understand political modernity as a literary function – I argue that the Victorian dramatic monologue underlies the idea of criticism at the time and serves to negotiate the conceptual apparatus of Victorian modernity. Moreover, with its emphasis on reconciling tragic excess to melancholy self-reflection, the dramatic monologue heralds the arguments of twentieth-century critical theory about the ideation of modernity (Walter Benjamin; Carl Schmitt), so much so that the Victorian position seems accommodated, even redeemed, in the twentieth century. In an attempt to put this case together for critical investigation and historical assessment, I also draw on dramatic monologues by Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson and the Rossettis.

Key words: dramatic monologue, criticism, modernity, Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson

91

1. DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

Alan Sinfield's book on the dramatic monologue begins with a telling excerpt from an anonymous Victorian review of Robert Browning's *Men and Women* (1855):

Why one who can pour out his thoughts, fancies, stores of learning, and emotions, with an eloquence and direct sincerity such as this, should, so often as Mr Browning has here done, prefer to rhyme the pleadings of a casuist, or the arguments of a critic... is an enigma no less painful than perplexing, the unriddling of which is possibly reserved for no contemporary. (1977: 1)

Given its signal placement in Sinfield's book, the scathing review of *Men and Women* is evidently meant to summarize the idea of dramatic monologue, that "major innovation in nineteenth-century British poetics" (Greiner 2021: 515). It so happens that the dramatic monologue begins as impure criticism, for Victorian and twentieth-century critics alike, which is designed to sustain a painful and perplexing enigma of language, just as (Victorian) criticism is thereby claimed for an improper intimacy with literature, its coherence being one of conceptual pollution. That the dramatic monologue should eventually go "from being an *exception* to being the norm", and "come to serve as the implicit model for the lyric in general in Anglo-American criticism and lyric pedagogy" – so much so that John Crowe Ransom, for instance, would "imagine other forms of lyric as unlawful" – is, in the words of Jonathan Culler, "a *strange* process" (2015: 264–265, emphasis added).¹ What Culler calls "strange" is perhaps no more than a reflex of the Victorian "enigma", which finally testifies to the failure of criticism to absorb fully the Victorian conceptual impurity. The Victorian dramatic monologue, in other words, serves to negotiate the idea of criticism at the time only to secure that a similar negotiation remains formative to criticism in the twentieth century, a process initiated in the 1830s by Browning and Alfred Tennyson, and claimed for criticism most pointedly perhaps by Matthew Arnold in the 1850s and 1860s. The anonymous Victorian reviewer may have been right: the unriddling of the dramatic monologue is possibly reserved for no contemporary, which is exactly why the dramatic monologue is essentially a modern format – a crisis unrelieved by criticism.

Pollution also bears on the format of the dramatic monologue. The emphatic first-person speaker, who addresses a silent *you* (a *you* that never replies) and explains himself, occasionally herself, to that *you*, assumes the position of a defendant on trial, presenting their case to judge and jury. The formal fact that the *you* of the dramatic monologue, while urgently addressed, remains uniformly silent only supports this proposition: like judge and jury, this *you* is appealed to, but is in no formal obligation to respond in the acute now-time of the monologue, only to hear out, if that, which is how the crisis of the present tense is foregrounded and the monologue becomes an index of radical modern historicity. Hence perhaps the "rhyme" – the meter – that Sinfield's Victorian reviewer found excessive: formally an instance of *invocation*, the dramatic monologue is suspended in *incantation*, its language fated to enact and acknowledge this suspense as its own tragic (dramatic) condition. When Isobel Armstrong claims that "[t]he dramatic

¹ See Jackson and Prins 2014: 7 for "the modern consolidation of lyric as a genre of critical reading". See also Redfield 2016: 63–67.

monologue is literally two things at once, lyric and drama concurrently", a "double form" (1996: 123), she addresses precisely the tragic aspect of the dramatic monologue, whose voice, poised for invocation, is asked to work a near-psychotic split into incantational lyricism. Not to mention the historical fact that tragedy begins in ancient Athens as a "social thought peculiar to the fifth-century city, with all the tensions and contradictions that appear in it when the advent of law and the institutions place in question the old religious and moral values", so that the audience in a Greek theater "constituted a kind of popular assembly or tribunal" (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 88).² The format of the dramatic monologue reflects, quite accurately, this historical, and democratic, circumstance; it is suspended equally between invocation and incantation, and between fault and judgment, its early history framed by the First and Second Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 respectively. Judgment in the dramatic monologue is forestalled and a sense of errancy is left to linger, that being the intellectual, and political, condition of its present tense. That the Victorian reviewer should have brought together casuistry and criticism (plea and argument) is a case in point: not only does the dramatic monologue deny a functional separation of plea and argument, law and criticism, morality and institution – it also spells out radical modernity, which is historical and political, because its casuistry remains short of judgment, and criticism short of philosophy.³

The narratives in Victorian dramatic monologues tend to reflect this arrangement and reinforce its formal intelligence. Browning's "My Last Duchess", "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto", all from *Men and Women*, begin as stories of errancy or worse but stop before judgment is passed, so that lingering criminality remains foregrounded and guilt is suspended. This then is advanced as an intellectual situation of modern critique *and* criticism; Armstrong would say, the format released Browning "into the possibility of making a cultural critique" (1996: 138). In "My Last Duchess" the Duke of Ferrara presents himself to an emissary to his Renaissance court as a likely murderer of his first wife. While distressing, the Duke's guilt is left unacknowledged in the poem; instead, the Duke's casuistry is a frame for an extensive discourse on his late wife's portrait by a "Frà Pandolf" (Browning

² "Greek tragedy... also makes language itself a sufferer" (Segal 2019: 44).

³ The Victorian reviewer echoes in Armstrong: "Browning was never free of casuistry and is prepared to run the risk of his theories by exposing them as casuistry" (1996: 145). See Langbaum 1963: 93 for the argument that "we must suspend moral judgment, we must sympathize in order to read" the dramatic monologue; I would rather argue that the formal intelligence of the dramatic monologue relies on suspending both judgment and sympathy, or empathy. For "cognitive dissonance" of the format and its "abruptly alienated" sympathy, see Adams 2012: 43, 46.

2013: 198) – an instance of nascent, or proleptic, modern criticism, to be imagined as a harbinger, say, of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*.⁴ James Eli Adams calls this a "powerfully equivocal view of art", one that "will be a recurrent preoccupation not only of Browning's monologues but of Victorian critical reflection" (2012: 47); criticism remains inflected in casuistry, one the alibi for the other.⁵

The same arrangement is accentuated in "Fra Lippo Lippi". Lippi explains his debauchery and misdemeanors to the Medici guards who are about to arrest him for, essentially, escaping house arrest. Yet Lippi's plea amounts to a rationale for painting, his own paintings spelling out, at once, arrest *and* emancipation of humanity. His art is advertised as an index of the modern *conditio humana*, so that proleptic modern criticism is once again framed in casuistry, and vice versa. In a letter to Ruskin, Browning couches his Lippi poem in much the same terms. He begins by duly stating that, "out of Vasari alone, I can produce the authority you require. I shall abridge, annotate and transcribe the various passages to save you the trouble of reference" (2013: 478). His Lippi case thus assembled, Browning concludes that, "in the midst of his irregularities, [Lippi] was decorous enough in his picture preachments" – only to add that "[f]rom a passage, however in Vasari, I conclude he was the first on record to treat sacred subjects indecorously" (479).

Andrea del Sarto, called the *Faultless* Painter, addresses his *judgmental* wife Lucrezia. His one fault, it turns out, is greedy marital eroticism and, by extension, a failure to discriminate between greed, eroticism and art. While Sarto's marital greed is perhaps not a crime in and of itself, it serves the purpose of negotiating greed and eroticism, marital or otherwise, into a criminal prospect in which universal humanity is implicated, so that art, Sarto argues, is faulted even when apparently faultless insofar as it is human. Once more casuistry is a frame for criticism and substantial ekphrasis. That faultless Sarto, rather than sinful Lippi, should overdo the language of judgment when discussing art ("yourself are judge", "I am judged", "I am glad to judge/ Both pictures in your presence", "To hear them

⁴ "My Last Duchess" was first published in November 1842 as "Italy" (see Browning 2013: 197); Ruskin published the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843.

⁵ Dante Gabriel Rossetti's much revised "Jenny" (2003: 60–69) may be the most outrageous example; Rossetti's speaker, likely but inconclusively the poet/ painter himself, elaborates to a sleeping prostitute on why his being her patron should be absolved precisely as an instance of cultural critique. Jerome McGann notes: "First version composed in 1847–48; completely reworked in 1859–60 into a dramatic monologue; buried in 1862 with his other poems in his wife's coffin. Rossetti recovered it in 1869 and reworked it again for printing in the 1870 *Poems*" (Rossetti 2003: 381) – to then employ it as a key text "in 'The Stealthy School of Criticism,' his 1871 critical response to [Robert] Buchanan's attack on his poetry" (McGann qtd. in Rossetti 2003: xxv).

– that is, Michael Angelo – / Judge all I do") only highlights the unredeemed fault that informs modern humanity and, as such, lingers in the idea of criticism.⁶

Thus faulted and critical, Browning's many speakers – his Renaissance dukes and painters, his Caliban, Cleon, Johannes Agricola... – are ultimately functions of radical historicity that goes into the making of the present tense of the dramatic monologue; theirs is a modern humanity which, because radically historical, is also redundant. It is in this condition that criticism implicit to the Victorian dramatic monologue is inflected; criticism begins as an acknowledgement of its own present tense as tense present.

2. TENNYSON'S PHILOLOGY

Not only in Browning's poetry: the same alignment informs Tennyson's "Ulysses", one of the first if not the first Victorian dramatic monologue (written in 1833 and published in 1842).⁷ Tennyson's aged Ulysses, returned to Ithaca after the Trojan War, explains to his men his decision to set sail again, now clearly in dereliction of his duties as king, father and husband, and of his human destiny, being an old man. He thereby offends both *polis* and *oikos*, the state and generation, and consequently his own historical humanity; Tucker calls it "a secession from generation itself, a valediction to the genealogies of natural and cultural history alike" (1988: 210). As such, his is also a secession from Homeric authority in which the idea of Western literature is founded, and this, paradoxically perhaps, is how Tennyson's "Ulysses", and the Victorian dramatic monologue, *begin* as criticism: Tennyson's Ulysses self-identifies as a historical thought which, removed from epic *order*, is

⁶ See Browning 2013: 394, 395, 399, 402. Rae Greiner rightly points to an affinity of the Victorian dramatic monologue and ekphrastic poetry at the time; ekphrasis, I would argue, is implicitly critical. See Martens 2011 and 2024 for comparisons of the dramatic monologue and Victorian genres whose focus is on criminality, like detective fiction and execution ballad.

⁷ A brief, possibly conflicted chronology: according to Herbert F. Tucker, "Tennyson invented the modern dramatic monologue in 1833, several years before Browning, with 'St. Simeon Stylites'" (1988: 191), and wrote out "Ulysses" "more or less at a stroke (his manuscript specifies *October 20, 1833*)" (209); see also note 194 by Christopher Ricks for "20 October 1833" being "dated in manuscript" of "Ulysses" (Tennyson 1968: 342). Cornelia Pearsall reports that "[i]n *early November 1833*, Tennyson read 'St. Simeon Stylites,' the first of its kind, to a group of friends, while Browning was first in print, publishing 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' in the *Monthly Repository* in January 1836. At the time the poets did not know each other, and cannot have known of their concurrent experimentation with what was to become a new genre" (2000: 69). Emphases added.

headed for the tragic *flaw* – for *hamartia*. That is exactly the drift of the poem. It opens with a reference to epic anomaly ("[u]nequal laws" are meted "unto a savage race"), and ends with a reference to tragic humanity ("that which we are, we are"), the two being negotiated by one – Ulysses – who is "become a name" (also Nemo, no one) and is therefore a mere function of "knowledge" whose trajectory is "[b]eyond the utmost bound of human thought" (Tennyson 1958: 66, 67).

Tennyson revisits the same alignment in "Lucretius", in 1868, suggesting that a Victorian history of the dramatic monologue is contained in the genre's capacity to bind critical reflection and tragic flaw. Like Ulysses, Tennyson's Lucretius begins by addressing the law in terms of anomaly, a philosopher turned casuist: his one true law is Epicurean atomism ("If all be atoms, how then should the Gods/ Being atomic not be dissoluble,/ Not follow the great law?"), yet his philosophical position entails an anomaly insofar as it relies on a human mind which is subject to the same dissolubility ("Meant? I meant?/ I have forgotten what I meant: my mind/ Stumbles, and all my faculties are lamed").⁸ The narrative amplifies this design and reinforces its formal intelligence: Lucretius is unaware of the fact that his wife Lucilia has been feeding him a harmful love potion, yet succeeds in reconciling his drug-induced ravings with Epicurean philosophy, by unpicking his own speech into an atomic spin – his voice is reassembled from humoral overspill and Venus, a dissoluble love goddess, is assigned the role of the silent listener.⁹ His tragic flaw, therefore, is not his weak flesh but his very thinking humanity; his mind is not deficient even when drugged – it is only that his mind's logical human destination is suicide: "Why should I, beastlike as I find myself,/ Not manlike end myself? – our privilege" (Tennyson 1958: 350).

Kept inside a monologue, tragic flaw becomes tragic excess, and the tacit listener a pressing index of the historical world. Hence the radical melancholy of the speakers in Victorian dramatic monologues; Tennyson's Lucretius calls it the "sound of human sorrow" (1958: 347). These Victorian voices seem to herald precisely the idea of criticism whose self-acknowledged derivation in the twentieth century is from melancholy (Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt), and whose conceptual apparatus relies on negotiating the historicity of tragedy into the modernity of the mourning play.¹⁰ As such, these Victorian voices also point

⁸ See Tennyson 1958: 347.

⁹ See Auerbach 1984: 16 for the figural function of Venus in *De rerum natura*.

¹⁰ To the Victorians, tragedy was "a genre that combined dramatic monologues and dialogues with choral odes", allowing them "to write in different literary forms" (Prins 2017: 31). That the dramatic monologue may have begun as a format of mourning is supported by Tennyson's remark about "Ulysses" being written soon after Arthur Hallam's death: "There is more about myself in

to a likely correlation of melancholy and tragic excess as it plays into twentieth-century critical theory. The underlying philology of this position is laid out in "Lucretius": Tennyson identifies Lucretius' writings as "the Hexameter", and true Epicureanism only in the moments when truth is made to resound in "rhythm" and "living words" (345, 350), his Lucretius an exemplary poet-philosopher (whose meter harks back to Homer and, by extension, to the figure of Ulysses).¹¹ Tennyson's philology is consistent in fact with Erich Auerbach's observation that Lucretius often calls atoms "'forms,' *figurae*, and that conversely one may often translate *figurae*... by 'atoms'", just as it is in Lucretius that we first find the word *figura* "employed in the sense of 'dream image,' 'figment of fancy,' 'ghost'" (1984: 17). Lucretius, according to Auerbach, was "the most brilliant, though not the most historically important contribution" to the theory of *figura* – a tragic flaw, therefore, which bears upon modern philology itself.¹²

3. ARNOLD'S ANTIGONE

The format of the dramatic monologue folds onto itself as a function of criticism most fully perhaps in Arnold's "Dover Beach", published in 1867, but outlined probably between 1849 and 1851.¹³ Arnold's speaker, likely but inconclusively the poet himself, explains to his lover or new wife why he is unable to shield their romance against a melancholy world whose condition is one of warfare: "we are here as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night" (1965: 243), that being the end of the

97

Ulysses, which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end. It was more written with the feeling of his loss upon me than many poems in *In Memoriam*" (1968: 342).

¹¹ I retain the capitalized Hexameter in line with the manuscript of the poem whose digital copy is available at <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-O-00015-00033/9>, accessed 27 November 2025. See Arnold 1862: 53–57 for a critique of Tennyson's blank verse being imagined as an equivalent of Homeric hexameter, even as blank verse is embraced for English translations of Homer. See Mackenzie 2007: 163 for Matthew Arnold's complaint in March 1866 that Lucretius was his idea, for a tragedy no less, that had been leaked to Tennyson. See Prins 2017: 79 for Elizabeth Barrett Browning's report to Robert Browning about her 1833 translation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, "the iambics thrown into blank verse, the lyrics into rhymed octosyllabics & the like", so that she resolved "to wash away the transgression, and translate the tragedy over again" in 1845.

¹² See Greenblatt 2012 for a modern history of *De rerum natura*.

¹³ For date of composition, see Kenneth Allott's note in Arnold 1965: 239–240, and Collini 2008: 39.

poem. If Arnold's speaker is criminal, he is immanently so, being of the historical world to which warfare is immanent; he is a function of worldness as it were.¹⁴ The claims that "Dover Beach" is a dramatic monologue only tentatively, because its speaker comes too close to the poet's self, are therefore ungrounded: Arnold's fundamental problem here is that he cannot arrive at an ahistorical self, or an ahistorical language.¹⁵ That Arnold should invoke Thucydides in the last lines is a case in point: not only is Arnold's Victorian voice inflected in the voice of an Athenian historian and *strategos* – the reference is to the self-defeating Battle of Epipolae (413 B.C.), when, according to Thucydides, "[t]he Athenians were getting into a state of... great confusion and perplexity... in a battle by night... how could anyone know anything clearly? [...] they not only became panic-stricken but came to blows with one another" (1965: 243).¹⁶

Attic tragedy is explicitly identified as the founding language of the poem. "Sophocles long ago", the speaker says, heard a thought-inducing sound which draws on the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the sea amid the "naked shingles of the world", one whose "note" and "cadence" now inform the rhythms of "Dover Beach" (Arnold 1965: 242, 241). The reference may be to the *Antigone* in particular. Because what comes across as "the grating roar/ Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling" in Arnold's poem (241) is exactly one such being sucked back by and into the language of the *Antigone*: I am referring to the lines about "waves/ That speed over the ocean/ Depths dark as the under/ World and churn/ Up black sand from the sea/ Bed and with harsh/ Winds hurl it beating/ Against headlands/ That groan and roar" (Sophocles 2003: 79–80). It is telling that the quoted lines from Sophocles, while in support of Antigone's claim to chthonic laws, should be assigned to the chorus: being choral, they also reflect the underlying intellectual, and vocal, situation of Arnold's dramatic monologue,

¹⁴ See Jameson 2024: 206, 303 for worldness in twentieth-century theory. While it is true that Arnold the critic praises peace as an index of modernity (1910: 47–48), this peace appears to be wrenched from warfare and has all the trappings of a historical interval.

¹⁵ See Byron for there being "few signals that it is not the poet speaking" (2003: 14) in "Dover Beach".

¹⁶ Quoted in a note by Allott. Additionally, Arnold references "the failure of the Athenian expedition to Syracuse" and "the modern *thought* in Thucydides" (as well as "a modern *feeling*" in Lucretius) in his lecture "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1910: 65, 70–71). Warfare was the world's function to the classical Greeks; in the words of Jean-Pierre Vernant, "war is natural to the classical Greeks" ("[p]our les Grecs de l'époque classique, la guerre est naturelle" [1999: 13, translation mine]). This anticipates Benjamin's position on the Thirty Years' War as an early index of modern historicity; Benjamin attributes to it the "awareness of mutability" which "impressed itself upon European humanity" (2019: 243).

whose one speaking voice turns out to be more than one and one no more.¹⁷ The Sophoclean chorus is equally a comment on the situation of the listener in "Dover Beach": if the speaker's footing in Arnold's poem is firmly Antigonic (his humanity a petrohumanity and his language a petrolanguage, a grouping of sound shingles), the silent listener – a lover? a new wife? – is in fact cast in the role of Haemon being asked to forego sexual reproduction and espouse Dover beach as the couple's true (petro)dwelling. It is exactly a placement which is anticipated in Arnold's own early "Fragment of an 'Antigone'" whose speaking parts are assigned to Haemon and the Chorus; the lines of the Chorus far outstrip *and* frame Haemon's lines, as if to suggest that the choral lines are Haemon's acoustic burial chamber – Haemon is allotted only 13 lines out of the total of 103 lines in the "Fragment".¹⁸

It is also a placement which anticipates. Arnold's Sophoclean "naked shingles of the world" adumbrate, almost uncannily, Schmitt's description of the core "historical reality" (2009: 48) in modernity being "the mute rock upon which the play founders, sending the foam of genuine tragedy rushing to the surface" (2009: 45) – this in Schmitt's 1956 discussion of *Hamlet*, an exemplary early modern mourning play (*Trauerspiel*), *pace* Benjamin, Schmitt writing in the wake of a *world war*.

In short, the *Antigone* summarizes the conditions of Arnold's dramatic monologue. On the one hand, the *Antigone* supplies the argument whereby the founding criminality of the Victorian dramatic monologue is shown to entail an ideation of the law and, by extension, modern democracy in the making – precisely the condition of England as the Second Reform Act was being passed in 1867.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Derrida 1994: xx, 3 for *le plus d'un* as a function of mourning in relation to the intellectual, and vocal, situation of nineteenth-century political philosophy. The silent listener occasions a similar – choral – unpacking: Armstrong contends that "Dover Beach" is as much "a love poem" to Arthur Hugh Clough "as the occasion of Arnold's marriage, which accomplished an effective separation" (1996: 205); see Cunningham 2011: 216 for rebuttal.

¹⁸ See Arnold 1965: 60–64; "Sophocles is Arnold's supreme 'prop'" (Cunningham 2011: 442). Allott's guess is that the "Fragment" was written in 1847–1848 (Arnold 1965: 60). The same placement informs "Empedocles on Etna", a dramatic poem Arnold wrote 1849–1852; Arnold's Empedocles is a function of petrodwelling, his suicide inside Etna a match for Antigone's being buried alive, just as his natural philosophy, which spells out petrohumanity, is a match for Antigone's chthonic commitment. See Jukić 232–233. Furthermore, Allott remarks that "a pencilled autograph of ll. 1–28" of "Dover Beach" is "on the back of a sheet of [Arnold's] notes about Empedocles" (Arnold 1965: 239). See Barrow 2018 for Arnold's dramatic format in "Empedocles" being implicitly modern, and critical.

¹⁹ "Out of all the extant Attic tragedies, there is none that is more concerned with the role of law (*nomos*) than Sophocles' *Antigone*", says Edward M. Harris, and argues that "Antigone has

If Arnold's speaker is criminal, that is, he is criminal as Antigone is criminal. On the other hand, the *Antigone* exemplifies the language that remains or, rather, the remaining itself of poetic language against the historical odds. Its "eternal note of sadness" is a foil for humanity's radical historicity: for "the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery" (Arnold 1965: 241).

4. CRITICISM

This is also the situation of Arnold's criticism. Arnold's concluding claim in "The Study of Poetry" (1880) is that "the poetry of the great classics" is a "touchstone" against which the remaining of poetic language is tested: not because "the world's deliberate and conscious choice" would command it, but, rather, out of "the instinct of self-preservation in humanity" (1903: 54, 55). Touchstone, in other words, is not of the order of law (*νόμος*), but of melancholia, and it is as such that touchstone informs criticism *and* humanity. Also, touchstone does not require full formats of poetry, but can do with hard and sharp fragments; "[s]hort passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently," says Arnold (17).²⁰ The naked shingles and pebbles of language serve as the foundation of Arnold's criticism – a tenacious language, as Sophocles' Antigone is tenacious. Arnold anticipates this argument already in 1853, when he writes that an "action like the action of the *Antigone* of Sophocles, which turns upon the conflict between the heroine's duty to her brother's corpse and that to the laws of her country, is no longer one in which it is possible that we should feel a deep interest" (1904: 288). Instead, "clearness of arrangement, rigour of development, simplicity of style, these may to a certain extent be learned; and these may, I am convinced, be learned best from the ancients" (Arnold 1904: 287–288). Put otherwise: what interests Arnold is not Polynices' hold on Antigone, but rather Antigone's hold on Haemon.²¹

It follows that touchstone is to criticism what the speaker is to the silent listener in the dramatic monologue: touchstone is that remaining of literary

a strong legal case in viewing Creon's command not to bury Polynices as an order (*kerugma*) and nothing more. To qualify as a law (*nomos*), it would have to apply to all Thebans or a broad category of people" (2006: 42, 63). See also Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 113–114.

²⁰ Touchstone, J. Hillis Miller observes, was "a way of telling whether a given lump was a genuine piece of gold, because it would make a mark on the touchstone" (Morris and Miller 2015: 105).

²¹ See Joseph 1981 and Meltzer 2011: 169 for attempts to reconcile Arnold's appreciation of the *Antigone* to that of other Victorian authors.

language which is truly tested only when literary circumstance is rubbed against it for historical worth. This is why criticism is circumstantial and historical – and modern. Arnold's own criticism is acutely responsive to this arrangement, especially his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). Arnold the critic, that is, is fundamentally a Haemon.

Published in 1867 but written earlier, "Dover Beach" is in many ways an invocation of Arnold's essay on the present tense of criticism, *and* a tombstone to Arnold the poet, touchstone and tombstone revealed to be a Sophoclean reciprocity. W. H. Auden intuited this particular aspect of Arnold's poetry when he "famously quipped that Arnold the poet 'thrust his gift in prison till it died'" (Collini 2008: 38); it is inside a "*living tomb*", underlined, that Arnold places his stanzaic self in "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse" (1965: 288).²² It follows that – if Arnold's critic is a Haemon – his *raison*, his rationale, is a function of Antigone's disinterestedness in him. When Arnold claims in "The Function" that "*disinterestedness*" (1865: 18) is a summary rule of criticism, his reference is to the kind of disinterestedness patterned by Antigone, or the speaker of "Dover Beach"; the critic's task, like the silent listener's, is not to become one such speaker but rather to unpack their arguments into a historical circumstance of humanity, that being a true index of criticism's modernity.²³ To Arnold, "the man is not enough without the moment", which is why criticism, too, is not enough without the moment, insofar as criticism is a human function; it is only logical therefore that, "life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it" (1865: 5, 6). The essay's title is indication enough, because Arnold writes not so much about the function of criticism as about the function of criticism *at the present time*: like the dramatic monologue, Arnold's essay is premised on acknowledging its own tense present and the present tense, and this is precisely why its condition is critical.

For Arnold, the Victorian present is strongly impacted by the French Revolution; the French Revolution, he writes, "is, – it will probably long remain, – the

²² Another, similar intuition: according to Hillis Miller, the "proper literary form" for Arnold's overall authorial "situation is the elegy, the form of expression fitting for a man who sits by the body of a loved one whose death is the death of the world" *and* "tends to fulfill the law of his being in the same way as iron fillings tend to orient themselves in a magnetic field – if the field is strong enough" (1973: 39–40, 42). "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse" was "probably mainly written 1852 and revised 1853–5" (Allott qtd. in Arnold 1965: 285).

²³ Stefan Collini notes that Arnold's "disinterested" does not, it ought to be unnecessary to say, mean 'uninterested' (2008: 56). For the reception of Arnold the critic in twentieth-century English criticism, see Collini 2019.

greatest, the most animating event in history" (1865: 12). The French Revolution has created "an *epoch of concentration*", Arnold underlines, yet "in opposition to itself" (14), because no literary format is a match for the current historical concentration as Aeschylus was a match for fifth-century Athens or Shakespeare for early modern England.²⁴ While tragedy is thereby identified as the true language of radical historicity (a fit for the *Antigone* in "Dover Beach"), the task of criticism, it turns out, is not to supplant this language, but, like Haemon, to align its modern deficit with a crisis of *political* reason.

Hence the central placement in Arnold's essay of two revolutions, the English and French, whose conceptual split is evocative of the *Antigone*. In Arnold's words, "1789 asked of a thing, Is it rational? 1642 asked of a thing, Is it legal? or, when it went furthest, Is it according to conscience?" (10). Because reason is "absolute, unchanging, of universal validity" (19), it fails at being historical and entails tyranny. Law, on the other hand, is historical and therefore more truly political: "what is law in one place, is no law in another; what is law here to-day, is not law even here to-morrow; and as for conscience, what is binding on one man's conscience is not binding on another's" (10). Criticism mediates between these two positions: criticism "tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces" (1865: 6).²⁵

Tellingly, the same arrangement informs "Dover Beach." The speaker is placed emphatically between France and England, and the poem's very name points to the extreme exposure of England to France, at the time when the democratic legacy of the French Revolution is about to give way to the Second Empire (assuming the poem was outlined between 1849 and 1851). Indeed, the speaker begins by observing that "on the French coast the light/ Gleams and is gone" (Arnold 1965: 240), so that the ending, about ignorant armies clashing by night, is a fitting closure to such one opening. Arnold sustains the same trope in his essay "Democracy", in which "France the State" is hailed as "the *lode-star* of Continental democracy" insofar as it has adopted the "ideas of 1789" (1904: 13–14, emphasis added). Also, the speaker of "Dover Beach" is caught in the middle between England and France as Sophocles' *Antigone* is caught in the middle between her father/brother's Thebes and her father/brother's Athens, to then address Haemon. After all, in his essay "On the

²⁴ See Arnold 1865: 41.

²⁵ Arnold's language echoes (again, almost uncannily) in Auerbach's claim, in 1946, that the French Revolution triggered in Europe a "process of temporal concentration, both of historical events themselves and of everyone's knowledge of them" which "demands a perpetual and extremely difficult effort toward inner adaptation and produces intense concomitant crises", resulting in "modern tragic realism based on the contemporary" (2003: 459, 458).

Modern Element in Literature" Arnold remarks that "the fifth century in Greece before our era is a significant and *modern* epoch" (1910: 61, emphasis added). That modern element is also retained in the argument of "The Function": like Sophocles' Thebes, Arnold's England spells out conflicted concepts of law and conscience; like Sophocles' Athens, Arnold's France spells out a reasoning out of democracy.²⁶

Additionally, "The Function" supplies the reason for Arnold's decision to abandon poetry for criticism: if no literary format is a true match for the historical concentration in the nineteenth century as Aeschylus' tragedy was a match for the fifth century in Greece or Shakespeare's for early modernity, then Victorian poetry, striving in vain for transformative intelligence, registers little save its own melancholy effort. With its emphasis on reconciling tragic excess to melancholy self-reflection, the dramatic monologue may well be a record of that endeavor; Arnold's stanzaic self calls it "[m]y melancholy" (1965: 289). What Arnold describes as the *melancholy, long, withdrawing* roar of sounds in "Dover Beach" is actually an apt description of the dramatic monologue: too long for a lyric poem yet a lyric all the same, the dramatic monologue is a record of tragedy's historical withdrawal, whose own intelligence, therefore, can only be melancholy.

The speakers of Victorian dramatic monologues are Saturn's children. What is taken to signify their "monomania" (Tucker 1984: 125), "insanities" turned "perversions" (Tucker 2014: 145), their "morbid violence, the intensity and extremity of feeling" (Armstrong 1996: 148), qualifies as the language of melancholia – "[m]elancholy reigns over Victorian poetry" (Cunningham 2011: 323). As late as 1887 Browning speaks of "mock-melancholy" and "bilious mood" in "With Bernard de Mandeville" (1887: 26); as early as 1832 Tennyson registers "the influence of mild-minded melancholy" (1968: 115) in the Choric Song of his Homeric lotos-eaters.²⁷ The speakers in Victorian dramatic monologues are likely

²⁶ See Zeitlin 1990: 144 for Thebes being cast in Attic tragedy as "an anti-Athens". That the arrangement of "Dover Beach" may be Sophoclean is also suggested by "Calais Sands", a poem Arnold wrote in August 1850: not only is Calais a French counterpart of Dover (the "sands" a counterpart of the "beach"), but the poem was apparently meant to record a crisis in Arnold's courtship of his future wife, who was at that time traveling with her father, a judge, from England to *Calais* – as Antigone was traveling with her father, King Oedipus, from Thebes to *Colonus*. See a note by Allott about the critical moment in Arnold's courtship in Arnold 1965: 230, also for a comment that Arnold did not publish "Calais Sands" until 1867, "probably because it was too intimate a self-revelation". Arnold invokes Thebes most pointedly perhaps in "Empedocles on Etna", as if to underline an intellectual continuity between Antigone's chthonic commitment and Empedocles' atomism. A similar continuity is underlined when Tennyson references Theban chthonic "Cadmean teeth" (and Nature as "the womb and tomb of all") in "Lucretius" (1958: 346, 350).

²⁷ See note 112 by Ricks for the dating of "The Lotos-Eaters" (Tennyson 1968: 316).

stepping stones to some of the keystones of twentieth-century critical theory: not only to Benjamin's discussion of the mourning play, and to Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl's critical anatomy of melancholy, but also to Sigmund Freud's analysis of the keenly truthful, yet unsustained melancholy ego.²⁸ As Arnold would say, in "The Buried Life": "from time to time, vague and forlorn,/ From the soul's subterranean depth upborne/ As from an infinitely distant land,/ Come airs, and floating echoes, and convey/ A melancholy into all our day" (1965: 274).²⁹

Modern criticism begins, Arnold suggests, once melancholia is relegated to the poetry with no consistent recourse to tragedy, that being the founding split of criticism. The Victorian dramatic monologue may be where this split is at its most evident, the speaker accommodating, to the point of cancelling the idea of self, the melancholy overspill that a critic or casuist cannot afford to acknowledge.³⁰ In Tucker's words, "[w]hen is a speaker not a speaker? When he is a 'voice,' nay, an Arnoldian 'lyric cry'" (2014: 152). Or a roar, as in "Dover Beach", which is how the language of the dramatic monologue is brought even closer to reflecting on Antigone's chthonic imperative, with Haemon as a silent listener not only inside the dramatic monologue, but also to an unacknowledged Victorian theory of lyric.³¹

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²⁸ See Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 2019: 449–452 for a detailed history of their research in the 1920s. See Freud for "heightened self-criticism" (1957: 246) in melancholia, the tendency of melancholia to "change round into mania" (253), and for the "conflict within the ego, which melancholia substitutes for the struggle over the object" (258). Christina Rossetti's "My Dream" (1855, 1862) reads in many ways as an anticipation of the psychoanalytic situation, in which the speaker in a dramatic monologue is assigned the role of a psychoanalytic patient and the listener the role of an analyst. See Rossetti 2008: 48–49, 417. Rossetti herself reportedly marked the piece "not a real dream" (418) in a copy of her collected edition of 1875.

²⁹ "Date of composition unknown, but clearly 1849–1852", notes Allott (Arnold 1965: 271).

³⁰ See "On the Modern Element in Literature" for melancholy being a "testimony to... incompleteness" (Arnold 1910: 79); "[m]uch good poetry is profoundly melancholy" (Arnold 1904: 413). See DeLaura 2014: 204, 267 for Arnold's critical skepticism about melancholia.

³¹ This paper was written as part of the research project *A Glossary of Transatlantic Literature in the Long Nineteenth Century* at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences; funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.

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S a ž e t a k

107

DRAMSKI MONOLOG I FUNKCIJA KRITIKE

S fokusom na recipročnost kritičkih pozicija Matthewa Arnolda u dramskom monologu “Doverski žal” (“Dover Beach”, 1867) i eseju “Funkcija kritike u sadašnjici” (“The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”, 1864) – posebno na Arnoldovo razumijevanje političke modernosti kao književne funkcije – razmatram međusobnu uvjetovanost viktorskijskog dramskog monologa i zamisli o kritici te njihovo mjesto u pojmovnom aparatu viktorskijske modernosti. Nadalje, analiziram kako viktorskijski dramski monolog, u nastojanju da pomiri melankoličnu samorefleksiju i jezik tragedije, najavljuje kritičku teoriju dvadesetoga stoljeća, osobito teze o ishodištima modernosti (Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt). U svojoj se argumentaciji oslanjam i na dramske monologe Roberta Browninga i Alfreda Tennysona te Dantea Gabriela Rossettija i Christine Rossetti.

Ključne riječi: dramski monolog, kritika, modernost, Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson