

REVIEWS

Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God by W. David Shaw. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1999. xii, 250 pp. ISBN 0802047181. \$50.00.

In *Origins of the Monologue* David Shaw extends and amplifies the arguments of his fine monographs on Browning's rhetoric and Tennyson's style and his later excursions (as in *The Lucid Veil*) into Victorian theology and the history of ideas. His present range is impressively wide, from Socrates, Chaucer, and Donne to Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell; and his grasp on the examples he adduces is consistently sure. But his primary emphasis falls, as we should expect, on the monologists of the major Victorian poets and, a bit surprisingly on the talking ghosts of William Morris's Pre-Raphaelite first volume *The Defence of Guenevere*.

In defining the monologue, Shaw distinguishes between the printed word meant to be read and the stage drama written to be spoken and directly heard, and he assigns to the reader an ability (denied to a spectator in the theatre) to absorb two or more interpretations at once and so to consider possible inherent ambiguities in the text. Where it seems useful, he also draws comparisons with prose fiction, especially the novels of George, Eliot, Dickens, James, and Hardy. By varied allusion and apt illustration, he creates a new impression of the monologue's quality and its central place in the history of modern poetry.

Shaw demonstrates the strength of the genre as a whole by perceptive analyses of its component parts, a patient review of specific examples. Some of his readings, especially of Browning's most successful pieces, he carries over from his earlier books, but he enriches these in a new context of evidence from later discoveries. To each interpretation he brings an admirable sensitivity to style and rhetorical effect, a true delight in the technical skills of his chosen poets. He argues persuasively that "the manner of writing a dramatic monologue becomes its most important subject," and he alerts the reader to inherent ironies and "double ironies" of which the speaker may be quite unaware. The prosody--the beat of the line, the fall of the caesura, the ring of the rhyme--may often, he contends, dictate a meaning contrary to the surface statement. He quickly identifies and evaluates poetic tropes, explores verbal roots with linguistic precision, and parses involved speeches with the zeal of the Renaissance grammarian. He detects puns and latent puns and exercises the wit of words in his own commentary--as when he entitles the final section of his argument "From Hamilton's God to Hamlet's Ghost." Shaw's close reading is essentially an updated version of the New Criticism, but its progress now is somewhat slowed by his heavy citation of secondary sources, many of which are less cogent than his own explications.

Yet analysis here, however, acute, subserves a larger design: a search for the "origins" of the dramatic monologue and, specifically, according to the