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Fretted Lines:

Di-versification in Augusta Webster's Dramatic Monologues

It seems as if the resistance, so to speak, offered to the plastic despotism of the artist by characteristics accepted, not made, called forth a subtler and a stronger skill than if he had worked with the limitlessness of free invention.¹

I'll find it for you on a whitewashed wall
Where the slow shadows only change so much
As shows the street has different darknesses
At noontime and at twilight.²

- Augusta Webster

1

Nothing seems more to have gratified the modernism of Vita Sackville-West, in the course of a briskly condescending 1920s retrospect of Victorian women's poetry, than to drop Augusta Webster's dramatic poetry into the dustbin of intellectual history: "these blank-verse pieces. . . she probably regarded as vehicles for expressing her sociological opinions rather than as poetry."³ The remark of course is not really about

Webster's intentions, but about Sackville-West's opinion that the verse lies beneath notice. In the following paper all that I have to say arises from the opposite opinion: that Webster's dramatic verse rewards the most careful attention we can muster. But first let me engage Sackville-West's imputation that the poet's chief allegiance was "sociological." I do so because most of the literary criticism Webster's long neglected work has attracted within the last academic generation in effect endorses the sociological premise. It reads her writing for the ideas that are expressed there about socially embedded ideologies –principally of gender – as these were institutionally enforced and personally enacted in a British Victorian context. In pursuit of this quarry, our scholarship on Webster is seldom detained much longer than Sackville-West was by the artistic medium of expression. We now have much better accounts than we did of the poet's life and career, discerning investigations of her feminism, and thoughtful calibration, at a generic level, of the prose and verse kinds she practiced. What remains regrettably scarce is analysis, even appreciation, of her poetry as such.⁴

Victorian reviewers knew better. Whether they commended or chastised Webster's versecraft, they made a point of discussing it; and the contradictory reactions they posted suggest that it may have proved particularly resistant to description within received Victorian categories. Where for one 1860s reviewer "Mrs. Webster's blank verse has none of the sustained music, the organic rhythm, which is necessary to make blank verse endurable," another found it if anything sustained to a fault, complaining about "the too great monotony of the verse. . . . the sameness, the lack of spring and impulse."⁵ This defect struck a successor as still unaddressed in the 1870 collection *Portraits*: "Mrs. Webster's verse, though always smooth and mellifluous, seems to us sometimes wanting in spontaneity"; but that same year another critic suspected instead

that she “composes too rapidly; many of the lines appear to run too easily” and want “concentration.”⁶ The concentrated spontaneity these reviews jointly demand seems a tall order; yet it describes pretty well the result this poet obtained, with remarkable freshness of invention, in the books to which her critics were responding, and to whose formal qualities their criticisms bore authentic if splintered witness. As a more acute contemporary reader of *Portraits* put the case, no doubt with an eye to the blinkered journalistic competition,

Her simplicity is likely to repel the multitude, whose taste has been vitiated by false imagery and sham sentiment. And this simplicity is combined with a subtlety of thought, feeling, and observation which demand that attention which only real lovers of poetry are apt to bestow.⁷

Subtle simplicity, concentrated spontaneity: getting at the characteristics these oxymora name, and appreciating the artistic originality and cultivation that produced them, will require more attention to form than Webster’s latter-day admirers have been accustomed to pay.

Webster is not only an accomplished prosodist but is furthermore, within the metrical tradition certifying that accomplishment, an exquisite innovator in the resources of blank verse. We can more clearly apprehend the innovation, understated and elusive as it is, after a look at how thoroughly she mastered the tradition and knew the trade. For it won’t quite do to join the appreciative reviewer last cited in reporting that Webster’s versification boasts “no showy qualities.” When it suited her purpose she

could stage a scene operatically in the grand style, as when Circe forecasting a storm pulls out the stops –

The hostile wave that rives at the poor sward
And drags it down the slants, that swirls its foam
Over my terraces, shakes their firm blocks
Of great bright marble into tumbled heaps

(“Circe,” 24-27)

- or she could exhibit an ostentatious delicacy in rhythmic mimesis, as when “A Dilettante” flatters his apathy amid a landscape not sublime but awfully pretty:

Feeling the uncadenced music of slow leaves
And ripples in the brook athwart its stones
And birds that call each other in the brakes
With **sudden questions and smooth long replies.**

(25-27)

To special effects like these from *Portraits* might be added, from Webster’s surprisingly different next book *Yu-Pe-Ya’s Lute* (1874), the long, almost uninterruptedly enjambed tours de force that lay out the course of a river journey (52-64) and that imitate the continuous strain of an extemporized passage on the lute (107-26). These set pieces in blank verse stand comparison with Keats and the Rossettis, and it is important to register their presence as evidence of mastery in the craft. But therein lay a problem. By

the last third of the century all had got the seed, as Tennyson complained in a proprietary epigram from 1864, “The Flower.” The great (if nowadays under-esteemed) late-century blossoming of inherited, exhumed, or invented verse forms that employed traditional accentual-syllabic meters flooded the literary market with poets who had learned well how to shift a stress or tune an assonance in rendering action or setting within a represented world of phenomena.

Webster not only evinced such “showy qualities” in her verse now and then; she had a name for them. “Fine crashing lines / That stir one like the marches one knows best” are what the unpoetical Crimea veteran who speaks “Coming Home” (1870) imagines his modern age of railroad travel calls for. Smiling at his taste for kitsch – which we recognize so readily because, along with Webster, we hail it in ourselves – we infer that the poet who wrote these lines aimed for something less conspicuous, that she aimed to modernize her own poetry by stirring pulses otherwise than by militant storm. For this simpler, subtler writing Webster also offers a name, albeit surreptitiously, in a phrase from “Faded” (1893): “all my tale of fretted lines” (28). The speaker has crows’ feet in mind, not metrical ones; yet the juxtaposition of “lines” with “tale” may justify borrowing the phrase to draw out the linkage in Webster’s dramatic poetics between emotional and rhythmic stress, her sense for what correlates the wrinkles that fret a face, or a psyche, or, as the formal incarnation of such things, a meter.

As the imitative splendor of fine crashing lines recedes into background noise, fretted lines come into earshot to foster an intimacy that is finer, and that invites the reader into the creative process of the poem, to collaborate in the construction of a written self. Consistently the fretwork of Webster’s portraiture plays rhythm against meter to script plural intonations for the printed voice (Eric Griffiths), which the reader

is invited to try on, and out, in a process of audition continuous with that tentative self-fashioning which constitutes the leading dramatic action of a monologist's speech. With regard to versification, the double poem (Isobel Armstrong) takes shape as what might be called di-versification.⁸ Webster's fretted lines stage a psychic potential energy that in a given instance may be kinetically realized – as gesture or attitude, tone or stance – in more than one way. A line's utterable difference from itself may harbor a mitosis or alienation that expresses, more than any one decisive realization could do, the speaker's radical truth. This prosodic fractioning in one sense discloses an internal agon ripe for depth psychology; in another sense it remains an altogether superficial matter of corrugation in the poetic texture.⁹ It thus marks close reading's constitutive loyalties both to the sensuous patency of verbal surfaces and to the hermeneutic latency that interpretation plunges to mine. While it's the latter that yields the ethical and political valences of ideological complexity we have come to prize in Webster, that yield lies at constant risk of distortion through neglect of the former. Because poetry, especially dramatic poetry, does not just contain its ideas but performs them, any Webster poem worth more than one reading is likely to reward it with the disclosure of more than one way to imagine its words meant and said. If we mistake the poetic medium for nothing but a vehicle, we are liable to fumble the message, and almost certain to misjudge, as did Sackville-West, this poet's place in modern literary history. It is a place she earned, I shall argue here, by finding her own way past an over-explicitly vehicular deployment of verse into the nuanced performativity of the blank-verse monologues in *Portraits*.

In 1866 Augusta Webster shed her apprentice pseudonym Cecil Home to arrive on the scene in her own right as a poet born ideological. The long centerpiece poem of *Dramatic Studies*, "Sister Annunciata," focally concerns the speaker's commitment to a

convent life and to the otherworldly values that underwrite it: a commitment whose steady reinforcement is necessitated by the persistence of memories and desires that call it into question.¹⁰ Again and again Annunciata half-consciously owns these erotic and secular impulses, then detects and disowns them with vehement explicitness:

Am I mad? Am I mad? I rave

Some blasphemy which is not of myself!

What is it? Was there a demon here just now

By me, within me? Those were not my thoughts

Which just were thought or spoken – which was it?

Oh not my thoughts, not mine!

(546-51)

Whether spoken or thought, ambient or inward, the nun's spontaneous promptings evoke in her a repudiation whose violence lets us gauge the strength of the temptation she recurrently faces. The resulting tug-of-war is what keeps her monologue going, in a reciprocation that an earlier passage epitomizes:

And I shall tread on sin, invulnerable,

As the Saints do at last.

If I, that is,
Might reach the goal I strain at, the one goal
Ambition may seek sinless – though I faint
The goal I *will* attain. I think in truth
My feet are on the road, and, let them bleed
Among the thorns, I still press on.

Perhaps. . . .

(75-81)

Through an ideological punctuation that is formally rehearsed in Webster's breakup of lines and paragraphs, the passage forms a study in irresolute resolve. "If. . . that is," "though," "I think," "Perhaps": conditionals, qualifications, and conjectures keep obliging Annunciata to renew her vows – vows in which we believe the less the more they are insisted on. The vigilant self-regulator who speaks these lines is well on the way to becoming the disciplinarian abbess-in-prospect that Sister Ursula at poem's end remembers her as having bid fair to become (1325ff.). For us, meanwhile, Annunciata remains the uncomputed sum of her contradictions; and what she herself believes is, at any given moment, more than we can say. The poem exhaustively illustrates Webster's root identification of dramatic character with interior ethical conflict, patterned it seems on the poetic doublings-back that typify such examples as Wordsworth's "Tintern

Abbey” and Browning’s *Pauline* – and risking, like those poems, the prolix attenuation to which the explicitness of their shared method of serial retraction can give rise.

Webster pivoted from a poetics of explication towards one of implication in *Portraits* (1870, rev. ed. 1893), a process which a couple of her sixties poems tentatively anticipate, and which one of them obliquely theorizes. “By the Looking-Glass” (1866) is so conspicuously a Victorian monologue of the divided self that a reader has cause to suppose that the title may not only locate the speaking voice but also name its true source: the speaker’s self-image. Is it a young woman who speaks here or her ideologically tinted reflection in the mirror? The answer may not matter much, for wherever she glances, “Alas, it is I, I, I” (25). This line, while reinforcing the speaker’s entrapment at a specular interface between self and image, seems as well a census of her now mutually pitying, now mutually critical subject positions as a woman who, because the world doesn’t find her attractive, is hard pressed to love herself.¹¹ To her credit, she pushes back against this crippling verdict in several ways, the most interesting for us here being prosodic. Webster cast this monologue in an eight-line squeezebox of a stanza: six tetrameter lines whose feet lunge and crumple from duple to triple feet and back, framed by trimeter lines that come to an arresting stand quizzing the speaker’s identity. The poet seems to have taken special pains in versifying these stanzas’ eighth-line halts. Twice they elicit italics, which in Webster’s mature verse are usually there to forestall a metrically prompted misreading: “*My* care is unpitied still” (88), “Though I *am* a woman and young” (160).¹² In both of these cases stress is pre-empted by an accessory term (“care,” “I”) that would probably have received it in a conventional scansion. The italics thus force a line-reading that spotlights the speaker’s idiosyncrasy:

sorry for herself in the first example, but standing up for herself too; in the second, conceding the rules of the courtship game but scorning them all the same.

Nor are these stanzaic round-offs the most interesting of their kind. The interest goes up when Webster forgoes italic intervention and leaves meter and rhythm to face off against one another. How do we scan the end of the second stanza: two iambs plus an anapest (“And **I** have **not** had my **part**”), or a sequence of anapest, pyrrhic, spondee (“And I **have** not had **my part**”) ? An oral interpretation may strike a mean between the resigned and refractory moods these two scansionings respectively indicate, but it will be a good interpretation only once the alternatives have been sifted, and with them the tonal nuances to which each gives access. At such a juncture who the speaker is becomes a function less of how she looks in the mirror than of how she sounds in the kaleidophone of the mind’s ear. Or take line 144: “He woo me! Am I not plain?” Every syllable in this line except the sturdily rhymed last one may be read either stressed or slack, depending which of an array of intonational possibilities we privilege. These possibilities are too many to enumerate here, and indeed perhaps too many to be accounted poetically successful; still, the reader who tries them on for size will find that every rhythmic permutation gives a slightly different contour to the speaker’s prickly frustration, her vulnerable defensiveness in the face of the unforthcoming if eligible suitor from whom she has turned lest he first turn from her. The novelty of the note struck here emerges when we observe how, just a few lines up in the same stanza, Webster has put her character through paces like Annunciata’s: “If he had not changed? – How, *changed* do I say?” (139). The underlying ideological-emotional conflict may be the same; but where the earlier line, in keeping with Webster’s earlier poetic, spells all

out, the stanza's bottom line invites the reader to role-play, and in the process elicits more psychological richness with more thrift. The looking-glass girl is not a more complicated figure than her 1866 peer *Annunciata*, psychologically speaking; but Webster is learning here to give dramatic complication a tighter fold.

For this newly condensed prosody Browning emerges again as influential, by way of the wavering iambic-anapestic colloquy of signature stanzaic monologues from "Two in the Campagna" (1855) to "James Lee's Wife" (1864). Webster appears to have found the influence intriguing but also hard to manage, since the dramatic writing that followed "By the Looking-Glass" was nearly all done under the license of blank verse: a medium affording more occasion, within the individual line or by way of interlineal enjambment, for marked disturbance and recovery of the pentameter norm. The speeches of Pontius Pilate, in the one-act closet-drama from "Anno Domini 33" (1867) that bears his name, show Webster trying the medium with a boldness that departs sharply from the blank-verse explications of "Sister *Annunciata*" just a year before. Most of Pilate's lines are metrically regular, as befits a lawgiver, but this regularity sets off remarkable outbursts that delineate his character as distinct from his profession. Unable to slough off guilt for having decreed the death of a blameless Jesus, Pilate turns his bristling irascibility on the Jews whose city he administers and whose customs he is colonially obliged to accommodate: "Why, he had washed / At the **wrong time** – or had **not washed**, which **was** it?" (227-28). Stressing "wrong" in the wrong metrical place is a nice touch that launches into expression a larger instability: two pyrrhic-spondee pairs in a row, sneering into a feminine-ended final iamb, perform a histrionic

annoyance at circumstances whose real source, we understand, is Pilate's annoyance at himself.

This like other vividly colloquial effects in "Pilate" hinges on Webster's dexterity with the tonal options that monosyllabic pentameter can facilitate: "Truth! / He claimed to know truth, which no man yet knew" (264-65). Choosing here among several eligible emphases entails interpreting Pilate's riposte to Jesus from John 18:38, "What is truth?" – a skeptical parry that, according to the scansion I propose, he here reconsiders and then swiftly reinstates in sandbagging spondees: "He **claimed** to **know** truth, which **no man yet knew**." The real intrigue attaches to the line's first half, where one may initially want to stress the repeated word "truth" rather than "know," but where in accommodating the repetition and following the meter one follows Pilate's (which is Webster's) secular curiosity away from metaphysical ontology onto psychological and epistemological ground. It is the whole premise of this soliloquy that the dismissive "What is truth?" constitutes for Pilate neither a candid philosophical inquiry nor a merely rhetorical question but something murkier, and the character-shaping intermediacy of his stance emerges again in one more question Webster puts in his mouth. Having confessed to a vague moral malaise that "I know not how to name except as dread," Pilate goes on next to ask, "And yet what do I dread?" (337-38). With the pentameter's guidance across these six monosyllables, the question cares less about the dreadful than about the experience of dread itself – which goes beyond acknowledgment into a bid, at least, at confrontation. What Carlyle at an analogous moment in *Sartor Resartus* had done with Teufelsdröckh's italics ("What *art* thou afraid of?"), Webster now has learned to let the meter let the reader do: "And **yet** what

do I dread?¹³ Her first-century-Christian poem is not even so interested in Christ as was Browning's baffled "Karshish" or "Cleon." Rather, its theater is the scene of compromised humanity, unredeemed and sharply observed; its medium a blank verse of pitiless clarity.

To sample for analysis the scenes of prosodic drama that fill Webster's *Portraits* will be the business of the remainder of this paper. But consider first the metapoetic commentary that introduces what may be her strangest, most gothically melodramatic and to that extent least dramatic production, the enigmatic parable called "The Snow Waste" (1866). The central figure inhabits a Dantesque arctic of his own choosing, which consists morally of an absolute emotional apathy, and poetically of a monotonous drone "as though his voice spoke of itself / And swayed by no part of the life in him." The resulting "uncadenced chant on one slow chord / Dull undulating surely to and fro" (15-18) defines by opposition the quickness of interplay we have been observing in Pilate and the "Looking-Glass" girl. While this damned mummer hopes – if that's the word for it – by recounting his story to "come to mean my words aright / And not, as now, like some dull purblind wight / Prating by rote" (88-90), he exits the poem the same phonic automaton as before, with "the droning murmur of his words" (368). Webster has imagined a monster of artificial intelligence who, knowing perfectly what his words mean, nevertheless cannot effectually *mean* them, because he has forfeited the power to infuse into them that affective resilience which lifts poetic speech off the frozen waste of the white page. Here Webster's formal sign for this condition is rhyme: she confines her allegory of emotional frigidity to uttering invariant octaves that obsessively reiterate a single *a*-rhyme apiece.¹⁴ What she does not do – and the passages just quoted show it –

is shackle his “uncadenced chant” rhythmically to the pentameter. This choice proceeds, I submit, from Webster’s conception of dramatic cadence as a vital sign, which whether regular or syncopated becomes a character’s voiceprint when it forms “part of the life in him.” Absent that life, rhythmic variance as such declines from gesture to mere manipulation.

It is the special distinction of *Portraits* to practice a prosody vividly gestural, with rich inventiveness and with a keen ear for the double relation that obtains between ideology and identity. On one hand, and across a broad typology of subject positions feminine and masculine, classical and contemporary, Webster portrays selfhood as the largely faithful performance of a role prescribed by culturally definitive beliefs and the institutions that enforce them.¹⁵ On the other hand, she conjures character out of the mismatch between those conventional scripts and the unmet needs, or the awareness of discrepant realities, to which her imagined persons bear subtle witness. This witness transpires most admirably in the fine turbulence with which they perform in rhythm’s interplay with meter what Webster persuades us is, in a double sense, *what must be said*: the execution of what is expected, but also an irrepressible reckoning of what the duties of conformity cost.¹⁶

Sample this run of a dozen lines from “Faded,” where the speaker is a woman who, although no longer young, is assessing the temptation to seem so. Men financially bankrupted, in contrast to the women she speaks for, are expected to fight loss to the last;

But we in our utter loss, outlawed from life,

Irretrievable bankrupts of our very selves,
We must give ruin welcome, blaze our fact
Of nothingness – “good friends, perceive I am old;
Pray laugh and leave me.” We are fools, we sin,
Abjectly, past all pardon, past all pity,
We women, if we linger, if, maybe,
We use our petty melancholy arts
And are still women some filched year or two –
Still women and not ghosts, not lifeless husks,
Spent memories that slink through the world and breathe,
As if they lived, and yet they know they are dead.

(68-79)

The two opening lines’ prosodic flirtation with technically licit outlawry is remarkable in itself: in line 68 an anapest in second position and a brazen trochee in fourth (“**out**lawed”), a frantic double anapest at the head of line 69. No less impressive is how the verse snaps thereafter into iambic probity, for six strait-laced lines of conformity to a surveillant world’s wisdom that would hurt less if they were merely (as partly they are) spoken in ironic mockery; the speaker knows, for all her protest against its cruelty, that the world is also right. “Maybe,” oddly and poignantly iambic in its perch at the end of

line 74, practices in little the gamble with time that engrosses the whole poem. (“Maybe,” a trochee that sometimes proves, as here, an iamb, is a favorite word of Webster’s for drawing out the hypothetical curiosity that invigorates her dramatic poetry.)¹⁸ Two lines later the chiming spondees “still women” and “filched year” are even more recklessly precarious, forcing bodily and social meanings of the thrice repeated word “women” into competition against a clock that is biological but social too, and whose insistence the meter has come by now to represent. The last two lines, gauging like the first two the stakes of “life,” reprise the passage’s earlier slowdown from anapestic acceleration to dead march; from what the speaker wishes were true to what she has to know is true in fact.

The stakes and proportions are altered in “Coming Home,” but this monologue like “Faded” pits received wisdom against personal witness, and scores their contest in the currency of prosody. “Five minutes here, and they must steal two more” (1): the framing spondees of this opening line box Harry, a veteran shipped home from the Crimean front, into his railroad car at a point when homecoming anticipation is keenest, and sets him impatiently thinking what account he will render of a soldier’s life to a family who he suspects will not understand what he has been through. For one thing, they have not even remotely shared his actual and perhaps incommunicable experience; for another, in their loyal efforts to follow the war by newspaper they are liable to have acquired ideas about warfare that are as firmly lodged as they are wrong.

The task of doing justice to what Harry knows, but doesn’t know how to say, preoccupies him especially in a chain of passages pivoting on the utility monosyllable “just.” Not a literary man himself, he defers to “those men who found out poetry, / And

had to write the things just that they saw” (19-20). Webster cheats a bit by making Harry poet enough to disclose a resolving ambiguity in the rhythmically promoted “just”: inasmuch as his imagined poets wrote just what they saw, he credits them with leaving a just and accurate record. He extends no such credit to war correspondents, though: once he gets back among his well-wishers

I must clear their minds

Of fifty puzzles of the journalists,

Decide what’s true, and make them understand

The battles and the marchings: but my deeds

Have been to just be one among us all

Doing what we were bidden as we could.

(111-16)

A need to set matters straight musters Harry into uniform iambics, yet the truth-telling mission shouldered here embroils him in harder puzzles than the journalists’. Before he can narrate a campaigner’s truth he will have to “decide” what that truth is; and, march honorably as he may, his fancied role as star witness is undermined in advance by an awareness that, in truth, he has little to offer on his own say-so that will command attention. Hence the telltale “but” in line 114, and the hypogrammatical, self-depreciating (while still metrically trim) placement of “just” in the tongue-twisting line

that follows. His deeds have been not heroic but obedient, less individual doings than an uneventful blur of collective “doing.” As a heavily enjambed run of lines goes on to concede, “I only know my part / And theirs with whom I waited. . . / . . . I could not mark” the larger battle plan (125-29). Far from invoking direct experience to “clear” the civilian mind of second-hand noncombatants’ cant, Harry realizes that if anything it must clear his: it will be by consulting the newsprint cherished at home that he may convert memory into meaning and “learn in our snug study what I saw / Among the rush and smoke” (132-33).

The victory of hearsay reportage over eye-witness figures here the advantage that in Webster’s world ideology routinely scores over experience. But advantage is not victory; and Harry like other *Portraits* subjects remains restive under its burden, in willful ways that the versification discloses:

And I must use my unaspiring wits

To **say things** as I see them, going straight;

Just as a **plain man’s life** does, tramping on

The way that lies before one, with **no whys**.

(136-39)

Promoted stresses impede this passage on straight talk as clearly as Harry’s less circumspect former handling of the same theme flowed clear. What looked easy there

now seems hard work, not so plain after all but rather a matter of soldiering on – and, as the unwitting “nowise” homonym of the final spondee puts it, a matter of presenting facts but eschewing the explanations that alone can make them tell. A slight trochaic miscarriage of the keyword “just” in the third line whispers that Harry’s untheorized testimony may not only fall short of, but actually trample on, the truth he is so impatient to deliver.

Di-versification on this order typifies the poetics of *Portraits*, often so as to illustrate a character’s own consciousness of inward schism. “I seem / Divided from myself” (50-51) puts the case of “A Preacher,” with existential blankness if also with a witty enjambment at the dividing line. “An Inventor,” assuming more responsibility for his condition, and a deeper moral interest into the bargain, suspects he is “traitor to myself” (128). Self-division furnishes the very ground-theme of “A Castaway.” There the prostitute Eulalie’s girlhood diary (1), her mirror (26), costume and chambers (70-73), and the extended curriculum vitae these prompt her to extemporize all bespeak the incongruities of body and mind, role and truth, that define who she is:

And now it seems a jest to talk of me

As if I could be one with her, of me

Who am. . . me.

(24-26)

Those last three riddled syllables form the slowest anapest in Webster's book. The spaced delay between the slacks and the stress comprising this long foot performs, not the euphemistic embarrassment it might look like but rather the spontaneous concentration of Eulalie's identity, which consists in not being fully what she is, and consequently regarding herself as an other. Victorian readers would have marked faster than we do her lapse in grammar ("me" for "I"), and would have marked it too as the sign of a direr fall. We are likelier to receive its colloquialism as an earnest of authenticity: we may take her at her word and read "me" as betokening her status as an object, not only to her clients but to herself.

The welcome Eulalie accords a friend whose arrival ends the monologue – "one gets so moped alone" (630) – lets us see that arrival as the lifting of a self-laid siege. Eulalie is never less alone, never less "one," than when she is by herself. She hardly feels society's opprobrium as an insult, because she bears it within as scar tissue and bears up against it time and again, as with these laboring spondees: "**Scorn** or **no scorn**, what **matter** for their **scorn**? / I have **outfaced** my own – that's harder work" (132-33). The habit of seeing double that emerges in her characteristic verbal repetitions – "scorn" here, "modesty" in lines 47-58 – permits neater effects when the same word or phrase bobs in and out of focal stress within a single line. As this working girl toys with the idea of getting away from it all into an obscure early retirement, the fancied place of refuge dissolves into a verbal chimera before she can point to it:

There I might – **oh** my **castle in** the **clouds**!

And **where's** the **rent**? – but **there, were** there a **there**. . .

(224-25)

From where Eulalie sits, there's no there there. Likewise the imagination of her best real chance in life, reconciliation with her brother for old times' sake, is no sooner articulated than undone, confiscated by the utterance itself. "Good God! to think that **we** were **what** we **were**" (608). If the manifold alliterations of this remarkable line yearn for belonging, they yearn in vain against the meter's relentless swap of present for past, stress for slack, and back again. Eulalie's moping soliloquy entertains a floor full of phantoms, divisions of the self for whom Webster contrives no exit beyond the print of ghostly feet.

The human capacity for self-estrangement may have ultimately struck Webster as a special case of our bafflement by other minds. "Even sympathy," she wrote, "will not overcome that inevitable separation of self from self which makes the most closely-knit minds still in so many workings a secret to each other."¹⁹ In equal measure her art appears to spring from this secret and to offer practice in unlocking it, through what she frankly called "studies" of lay figures whom the secret of otherness holds in thrall. The public misprision of his art licenses "A Painter," with an ambivalence recalling that of Browning's Andrea del Sarto, to delegate the affirmation of his identity to undetermined others and postpone authentic selfhood to an indefinite future – "But who can tell / If now I ever shall become myself?" (126-27). The iambic rhythm of this formula rolls so smoothly off the tongue that one can miss the strangeness with which Webster contrives to give less stress to the terminal (off-rhyming) "-self" than to the medial (and also off-rhyming) "shall," drawing out the painter's petulant implication that it's all the fault of somebody else.

The same sort of inverted narcissism may be discerned when Circe poses to her own reflection a rhetorical question that represents self-love as actually other-directed:

Should I be so your lover as I am,

Drinking an exquisite joy to watch you thus

In all a hundred changes through the day,

But that I love you for him till he comes,

But that my beauty means his loving it?

(127-30)

That Circe's prince will come and rescue her from herself is a sure bet for any reader of the *Odyssey*, but within the fiction of Webster's monologue it is sheer fantasy – a circumstance that makes extraordinary the iambic serenity of the last two lines, where not one of six personal pronouns takes stress and yet the tiny preposition “for” does. “I **love** you **for** him”: Circe's auto-affection becomes a proxy marking time against the arrival of a lover she has done no more than dream of (92), yet speaks of here with an uncanny confidence that leaves “him” and “his” unstressed because taken for granted.²⁰ A far cry from the earlier line 72, in which every single syllable of “Where is my love?” can be read either stressed or slack, in a plethora of tonal microvariations – another of Webster's di-versified kaleidophones – that conspires to bring out this speaker's presence as a mythic figure, if not superhuman then larger than life.²¹

The self-worshipping summons Circe issues by the mirror recalls the self-loathing repudiation of courtship on the part of the girl “By the Looking-Glass”: they are complementary versions of the same process, which routes identity through the imagination of other minds and back again. This circuitry pervades the “monodramatic” situations that *Portraits* repeatedly rehearses, and that serve Webster as an alternative to the silent auditor’s presence within dramatic monologues on the pattern of Browning’s.²² By effacing that pattern’s features of rhetorical manipulation, Webster distills to essence the capacity of the genre to draw a reader into privileged cognitive sympathy with a speaker; for reader and speaker alike are strongly invested in modeling an imagined human otherness that returns their own image with a difference. This is the ambient generic circumstance that Webster’s di-versification articulates with maximal finesse. Construing her fretted lines, we rehearse alternative readings cued now by the meter, now by the rhythm our sympathy finds between and behind the lines. The printed voice we hear through this process both is and is not our own, and that is how it becomes, with unprepossessing address, and without our quite apprehending it, so vitally that of her characters.

Such rehearsal and performance of mind-reading seem most accomplished in the monologue I save for last as Webster’s finest, “The Happiest Girl in the World.” Here speaks a young woman just betrothed who, caught up in that culturally optimal Victorian state, discovers in herself, and in spite of everything that ought to forbid it, a reluctant suspicion that to be happiest in such a world is not so very happy after all. A Circe whose man has come, a Eulalie not castaway but chosen, the Happiest Girl like those less happy *Portraits* sisters of hers avidly gauges other minds: her fiancé’s most

prominently, but by way of his her own mind in the recent yet radically different time before she accepted his proposal. “A week ago; and it seems like a life” (13); “I am so other than I was, so strange” (15); these perfectly regular pentameters prepare for a strophe-ending line whose slight rhythmic ripple underscores the strangeness with a soupçon: “And **I** think **nothing**, **only** hear **him think**” (18).

Happy because spoken for, endowed with the strongest validation her social world can bestow, the Happiest Girl has awakened just this morning to the thought of her lover and been unsettled by it: “And did not think I could quite love him yet” (24). The indecisive stressing that plays over “could quite love” takes us into her dilemma, which the lines that come next in one sense resolve and in another sense restate, as she flashes back to the scene of the marriage proposal:

And did I love him then with all my heart?

Or did I wait until he held my hands

And spoke, “Say, shall it be?” and kissed my brow,

And I looked at him and he knew it all?

(25-28)

Unable to “Say” – even, as it were, when rhythmically prompted by that third-line trochee – the Happiest Girl has been literally bespoken, in a verse-stopping “look,” by the one to whom she defers because she holds he knows her better than she can say. He

knows it all – all, that is, except the very thing that her faith in his knowing precludes, which is *her* mind in the matter, an unknown quantity that the intricate triangulations of memory won't suffice to solve for. What my sentence just did with italics, Webster does with metrics, and better: “But how can **I** tell when my love began?” (42); “When **did** I love him? How did it begin?” (35); as the intimations of courtship led up to the proposal, “And had he had no thought which **I** could feel?” (67).

And must I not be glad he hid his thought

And did not tell me then, when it was soon

And **I should** have been **startled** and **not known**

How he is just the one man I can love,

And only with some pain lest he were pained,

And nothing doubting, should have answered “No.”

(91-96)

What has become of the question mark with which the syntax of this troubled sentence ought to end? By withholding it Webster performs in print the conversion of an interrogative mood into a declarative one that is, in a grammatical nutshell, the Happiest Girl's agenda throughout the monologue. But something else is also involved: this speaker can ill afford to leave in question the plain sense of line 96 taken alone, which is that she should have turned her suitor down. (Not that she means to say this in

place of what she does say: flat denial would compass her delicate condition of unutterable incredulity no better than the enthusiastic acceptance she is working so hard to endorse.) This passage's deeper "should" is the one prosodically pointed in line 93, which talks twice in a single breath, saying at once that a premature proposal would have scared her off and that the proposal she got, which according to the Victorian script for such a scene ought to have swept her away with surprise, didn't do anything of the kind. The "should" of idiosyncratic hypothesis and the "should" of conventional prescription cohabit incompatibly within the same phrase.

The Happiest Girl's unanswered questions about what transpired in her fiancé's mind and her own are genuine ones, dearly though she wishes they were rhetorical instead. Surely that is what they ought to be according to every tenet of her gendered education: "I know by books but cannot teach my heart: / And yet I think my love must needs be love, / Since he can read me through" (147-49). That there is something unsatisfactory about outsourcing one's self-interpretation in this way is suggested by the urge to repeat the last hemistich just three lines later, where he who reads her through may be "content" but she, aspirationally the *content* or object of his imputed thought, is not *content*, not quite. Fifty lines further on, she rocks doubt to sleep in a strophe of perfect, heavily anaphoric pentameter (195-203) whose "gentle rhythmic steps" will sustain quotation no better than did the rhyme-locked droning of "The Snow-Waste" (which the later passage oddly, invertedly resembles). Ecstatic recitation of the roles Victorian culture scripts for its happiest girls – "friend," "child," "servant," "mistress," and at last "wife" – serves as ideological analogue for the regulative meter that bears it. Both together form the background from which the Happiest Girl all but conformingly

emerges, once Webster invites us to imagine what fulfillment of those scripted roles might actually feel like. Imagining just this is the speaker's engrossing business, the very thing she is talking about from beginning to end of the poem. Inducing the reader to share that imagination is Webster's business, conducted with riveting *sotto voce* brilliance in a passage like this one:

A week ago; and I am almost glad
To have him now gone for this little while,
That I may think of him and tell myself
What to be **his means**, now that I **am his**,
And know if mine is love enough for him,
And make myself believe it all is true.

(7-12)

There, in early digest, lies the program of the entire poem, and of its principal prosodic devices as well. The Happiest Girl, we have seen, cannot tell where her love began, whither it may lead, or whether for that matter what she feels is love at all.²³ Could she mount an ideology critique of the feminine ideal she is teaching herself again to embody – in this regard both like and unlike Sister Annuciata – she would be happy no longer, at least not in the sense that premisses the poem. But she can't. What she can do is tap out, on the bodily semaphore of that superb fifth line's rebel trochees and spondee, a

coded if subconsciously inarticulate resistance to the life sentence her culture has pronounced: a condition of make-believe that is neither faith nor poetry, but something impalpably in-between. The line of verse becomes a zone where “am” challenges “means,” existence chafes at ideology, being abrades meaning and is upbraided by it, and a selfhood is struck out unawares, only to recede once more into the norms of the script.

¹ Augusta Webster, “Lay Figures,” in *A Housewife’s Opinions* (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. 150-51. This essay appeared first in the *Examiner* for 26 January 1878, pp. 109-10.

² Augusta Webster, “A Painter” (1866), lines 226-29. I quote this and all other poems by Webster from *Portraits and Other Poems*, ed. Christine Sutphin (Peterborough ON: Broadview, 2000).

³ V. Sackville-West, “The Women Poets of the ‘Seventies,” in *The Eighteen-Seventies*, ed. Harley Granville-Barker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p. 124.

⁴ See Melissa Valiska Gregory’s judgment, in recent pages of this journal, that the “individual poems have yet to be carefully read, parsed, and discussed,” her assertion of “the relevance of close reading to recovery” of disregarded women writers, and her call “to zero in on the details before pulling back,” in order to “illuminate the centrality of genre and formalism to feminism”: “Augusta Webster Writing Motherhood in the Dramatic Monologue and the Sonnet Sequence,” *Victorian Poetry* 49 (2011) 48-49.

⁵ *British Quarterly Review* 44 (1866) 551; *Saturday Review* (9 February 1867), quoted in *Portraits*, ed. Sutphin, p. 414.

⁶ *Contemporary Review* 14 (1870) 482, quoted in Patricia Rigg, *Julia Augusta Webster: Victorian Aestheticism and the Woman Writer* (Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p. 146; *Nonconformist* (11 May 1870), quoted in *Portraits*, ed. Sutphin, p. 418.

⁷ *Westminster Review* (1 April 1870), quoted in *Portraits*, ed. Sutphin, p. 415.

⁸ Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁹ It seems too much to say, with Angela Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), p. 193, that Webster “does not set the depths against the

surface of the self.” But Leighton is right to specify “the level tenor of her language” as the dimension along which this poet plumbs psychological depth by exploration of the “social shallows.”

¹⁰ This much was quite clear to Webster’s contemporaries. See for example H. Buxton Forman, *Our Living Poets* 1871; rptd. New York and London: Garland, 1986), on Annunciata’s capacity for self-deception (pp. 177-78).

¹¹ Rigg sees how the speaker’s “dramatic tension” derives “from her attempts to balance her conviction that a plain girl is worth less than a beautiful girl with her resistance to the social forces that, in reinforcing this conviction, unfairly determine her life,” and how this tension “blurs the boundary between social censure and self-imposed criticism” (pp. 94-95).

¹² In the else-emphatic “Sister Annuciata,” italics are rarely and inconsistently applied. “But *then* I only saw” (148) merely reinforces an already clear prosodic direction, and one’s inference that Webster has addressed the typographic boost to the eye (cognition), not the ear (audition), finds confirmation soon when the disyllable “*present*” gets italics without regard to its evident trochaic stressing. Only toward the end of the monologue does the poet venture the sort of vocal counterpoint that will be so noteworthy in *Portraits*: “I look / Clear-eyed upon *that* past” (928-29).

¹³ Thomas Carlyle, “The Everlasting No,” from *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*, ed. C. F. Harrold (1833; rptd. Indianapolis and New York: Odyssey Press, 1937), p. 167.

¹⁴ Albert Pionke, “Erotic, Prosodic, and Ethical-Aesthetic Forms of Triangulation in Augusta Webster’s *Dramatic Studies* and *A Woman Sold* and Other Poems,” *Victorian Poetry* 51 (2013) calls the hyper-rhymed result “a feat, almost grotesque, that reinforces on a structural, syntactical, and phonetic level the sense of over-determination” (p. 467). Pionke also observes (p. 469) how it is only in Webster’s interpolated blank-verse passages that there emerges a conviction of agency, in lines charged with feeling, e.g. “But a sweet plaining voice came out from her, / A voice as of one weeping at the heart” (189-90).

¹⁵ Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) notes in Webster “a split resulting from the difference between the speaker’s sense of self and the sense of self imposed by society, but this is never a straightforward matter of a true inner self and a false outer self. Instead, Webster is more interested in the sense of disconnection caused by the difference” (p. 63). This emphasis helpfully adjusts the major insight of first-wave Webster recovery: Leighton, p. 179, on “a cross-purpose of ideas and opinions, of ideological points of view”; Susan Brown, “Determined Heroines: George Eliot, Augusta Webster, and Closet Drama by Victorian Women,” *Victorian Poetry* 33 (1995) on “the processes of social determination that engender contradiction or discontinuity in a subject” (p. 101).

¹⁶ Pionke identifies as central to Webster “the problem of attenuated, suppressed, or otherwise circumscribed subjectivity” (p. 465). My point – and Webster’s too in the epigraph to my paper – is that this problem constitutes, from an artistic vantage, her central opportunity. A review of *A Woman Sold* (1867) attested the predominance of “endurance and resignation, but under this there is a sub-flavour of wonder and defiance” (quoted in *Portraits*, ed. Sutphin, p. 411).

¹⁸ Impaled on the Victorian dilemma of the Grand Perhaps, “A Preacher” uses “maybe” both ways: trochaic in line 17, iambic at the end of line 57. But when he later, in quietly rereading the text of a sermon he has just ambivalently delivered on the topic of Sabbath laxity, intones “*Harmless it may be*,” just how to stress “may be” is anybody’s guess – including the Preacher’s.

¹⁹ “Lay Figures,” p. 147. Although Webster goes unmentioned in Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), her dramatic poetry would make a superb topic for a supplemental chapter.

²⁰ Webster confessed to John Blackie, in a letter of 30 May 1880, that in "Circe," a special favorite of her husband's, she had "obliged him by making the versification more uniformly smooth than I generally wish it" (quoted in Rigg, p. 129). Here as elsewhere in *Portraits*, smoothness in the prosody need not betoken ordinariness in the speaker.

²¹ This is not to defend sixteen possible readings for this hemistich. Line 72 as a pentametric whole requires two stresses before the question mark, and any reading with three stresses comes off like a tantrum beneath Circe's considerable dignity. Still, within these limits three plausible readings have a definite call on us: trochee-iamb (where can my *lover* be?); iamb-iamb (what's *taking* him so long?); trochee-trochee (my nymphs have great love lives, so what about *me*?)

²² Rigg, pp. 65-69, prefers "monodrama" to "dramatic monologue" as a classification for Webster's soliloquizing character studies. This term affiliates her art with Tennyson's rather than Browning's, and more broadly with the "mask lyric" outlined in Ralph Rader, "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976) 131-51, and with domestic practices of the tableau vivant adduced by A. Dwight Culler in "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue," *PMLA* 90 (1975) 366-85. With all respect to the distance she put between them, I still enroll Webster in the party of Browning.

²³ "The underlying question," Byron observes, "one she could never express, or consciously formulate, is whether she loves him at all" (p. 59). The "resistance she is unwilling or unable to recognise," which I am arguing finds sub-semantic voice in the extraordinary finesse of Webster's di-versification, went right over the head or under the critical radar of her contemporary Forman, who excepted "The Happiest Girl" from the class of Webster poems featuring "the many various moods of self-deception, both innocent and guilty" (p. 180). Rigg sees, as Forman could or would not, that what the poem tenders is "the speaker's sobering enactment of her own duplicity" (p. 131).