

Shock Troupers: Browning, Bidart, and the Drama of Prosody

Herbert F. Tucker

University of Virginia

First, a trigger-alerted disclaimer. This paper on the role of shock in poetic innovation should acknowledge at the outset one conspicuous kind of shock that will be of only incidental concern. Ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please, to the following two exhibits. Prepare to avert your imagination as needed.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
 Perfectly pure and good: I found
 A thing to do, and all her hair
 In one long yellow string I wound
 Three times her little throat around
 And strangled her.¹

Bad enough already, but now hear this:

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

 and then I did it to her a couple of times,--
 but it was funny,--afterwards,
 it was as if somebody else did it . . .

Everything flat, without sharpness, richness, or line.

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

in the first instance, ethical not long afterwards – that each poem retains the power of imparting. Each is repulsively violent in its narrative subject matter; each at the same time weaves into the pathology of murderous perversion a gilt filament of innocent, morally rapt wonder at existence's immense permissiveness, the unbearable lightness of being. "And yet God has not said a word!" (60), marvels Porphyria's lover at the end of his monologue. By that point the affronted reader, his or her moral compass duly recalibrated, can afford to wonder whether the expectant suspense that concludes the poem is in anticipation of God's approval or condemnation. Maybe both, if Herbert White's whiplash is anything to go by: "it was *beautiful*," "*everything* was possible," and yet "a little girl was just lying there in the mud." Forging the genre to white heat at an extreme of that eccentric perspectivism which Robert Langbaum showed sixty years ago was essential to the modern dramatic monologue, both Browning and Bidart make their mark under cover of deviancy carried away into horrid excess.³

One is shocked by this stuff, shocked. Still, as I forewarned you, the species of shock that these imaginative commitments convey will not be my theme. I am more interested in the conveyance itself, because I maintain the poets are too. They are, and always have been, most interested in the formal vehiculation by which a poetic effect not only seizes readers at first blush, or ambush, but then comes home to them for keeps. "Form," Langbaum has observed, "is a better index of a tradition than subject matter"; the latter is "an index of what people think they believe, whereas form is an index of what is believed too implicitly to be discussed" – and what for that very reason, we might add, retains a more stubbornly insinuated power to shock (*Poetry of Experience* 36). Beyond a certain threshold of sex-crime reportage that most of us crossed years ago, we are rather

wearied than electrified by the latest revelation from bedroom or chatroom or courtroom, numbed by the very reiteration of a story that no sooner breaks, it seems, than it breaks down and forfeits its *éclat*. When Ezra Pound, halfway between Browning's time and Bidart's, defined poetry as the news that stays news, he was setting against mere novelty's decay the perennially strange-making durability with which a stroke of art can embed subject matter in form (*ABC of Reading* 29).⁴

Still and all, that preservative feat remains easier said than done. The replication of "news" on either side of Pound's formula may concede an insuperable paradox: today's news, *qua* news, wants to grow old tomorrow; the formal poetic medium, like news media of other sorts, tends on reception to fade like the paper it's printed on. It is the fate of the ruptures that are violently introduced within poetry's formal tradition, especially the ones that most successfully catch on, to become a part of that tradition.⁵ They get assimilated as fixed reference points within the same history in which they originally, saliently intervened, and which their intervention has, by altering, extended. One corollary of Pound's slippery analogy between poetry and the news is that the moral shock fatigue that afflicts the modern condition, the anaesthesia that takes the edge off the awful, has an aesthetic analogue that holds consequences for modern readers' experience of the poetic past. If shock in journalism has a short half life, its shelf life in poetry books may not be all that much longer. Poetic innovation, to the extent that it succeeds in capturing contemporary readers' imagination, and with it the notice of emulative poets, will *ipso facto* forfeit the element of surprise on repeated exposure.

This is why Pound's injunction to poets to "make it new" echoes in the literary historian's mind as a project of *re-novation*. How can one recover – *can* one at all

recover – the original force of poetic shock tactics that, just in proportion as they once transformed contemporary taste and expectation, have been absorbed into tradition to become the terms of latter-day business as usual? It was Henry James who observed, after his late favorite living poet had been interred at Westminster Abbey, that “the mere fact of his lying there among the classified and protected makes even Robert Browning lose a portion of the bristling surface of his actuality” (226).⁶ There’s the rub, or rather the erosion. Inasmuch as, in Wallace Stevens’ acerbic mot, “The freshness of night has been fresh a long time,” the avant-garde agenda of *épater le bourgeois* – goosing the middlebrow – has been slated for a couple of centuries now to outmode itself on a regular basis (“The Man on the Dump” l. 10). The *priyom ostranenie* or making-strange to which Viktor Shklovsky paid homage, like the *Verfremdungseffekt* or audience-distancing preached by Bertolt Brecht, is doomed to superannuation by the very terms of its success.⁷

The challenge readers and teachers of an older literature face is the challenge of feeling afresh the depth charge that slumbers within the classic, reigniting the detonation that still properly forms part of the best poetry’s finer tone. Within English poetry this challenge meets its really hard case, where Langbaum’s literary history from *The Poetry of Experience* would predict, in Wordsworth. For it was Wordsworth who formulated, not only the reflexes of mind by which moderns remember who they are, but also the equably intimate accent in which the modern mind customarily addresses itself and to which every poet in English knowingly or not still pays homage. It’s one thing to have an *idea* of what Francis Jeffrey meant when he declared in a landmark review of Wordsworth’s magnum opus, “This will never do,” or to entertain a *concept* of the

resistance that the poet himself foretold when he pictured contemporaries scowling over the *Lyrical Ballads* and wondering who could ever mistake such stuff for poetry (Jeffrey 1-4; Wordsworth 443). But it's quite another thing to *feel* such resistance in oneself, to forestall its preemption by what remains to this day the invincibly natural-seeming blandishment of Wordsworth's style. The recent vogue in some quarters for patronizing this titan as a deluded maundering egotist may turn out to be the best thing that has happened to him in a long while. It may just free a rising generation of scholar-critics to come again upon his radical weirdness, to be amazed as if for the first time at the wild-eyed aplomb with which he confiscated strange and unruly nature, at the very moment of its effective industrial appropriation, as the inevitable trope for what was most strange and unruly in the mind. It will be a great day for modern poetry studies when a younger set manage to be amazed all over again at that.

Pending such a rebirth of wonder, however, Wordsworth remains the hard case, one beside which it ought to be easy to retrieve the strangeness of that less prevailing modern influence Browning. When James eulogized Browning as greatest of the odd in Poets' Corner, and oddest of the great, he was conceding that Browning had failed, all told, to coopt and customize the dialect of the tribe as Wordsworth had done (225). Certainly Wordsworth was praised after his death as Poet Laureate in 1850 not for strangeness but for its very opposite, Englishness.⁸ By 1870 only the freest-minded of critics, Walter Pater, could glimpse the Wordsworthian alien vision, and even then only out of the corner of his eye. More typical was the common-sense viewpoint of Walter Bagehot, who around the same time enshrined Wordsworth as the standard of English

verse “purity” in the same confident essay that perched Browning on a gargoyle’s niche as apostle of the “grotesque.”⁹ That this last term still feels about right makes my point.

Another way of putting the matter is to observe that the shock tremors of the Wordsworthian or first Romantic revolution were turned into long-playing good vibrations by a more talented set of naturalizing successors than awaited Browning’s revolutionary oddities across the Victorian decades. D. G. Rossetti and A. C. Swinburne, Augusta Webster and Thomas Hardy, didn’t cover Browning’s blast track with the same habituating facility that Byron and Hemans, Shelley and Keats, had brought to Wordsworth’s. For Browning that naturalization paperwork had to wait until the likes of Pound and Robert Frost set about promoting into verse the virtues of good prose, the casual speaking voice, the sound of sense. One measure of this promotion campaign’s success is that a century later, notwithstanding Browning’s persistent reputation for grotesquerie, certain aspects of initial Victorian novelty go analytically unregistered. Certain feats of his colloquial flat-footedness have lost their capacity to surprise, because the twentieth century incorporated them so thoroughly into the background noise of its ongoing vernacularity.

Given such a culturally congenital hearing loss, the best way to get a purchase on Browning’s occulted effronteries may be to study a contemporary poet who does sound mighty strange to us right now – a poet whose license to shock has not yet run out, or not yet been run off with by imitators. Frank Bidart’s production of major dramatic monologues in the 1970s and 1980s follows a trajectory that recapitulates Browning’s from the 1830s through the 1860s. From the criminal mug shots that detained us at the start of this essay, each poet proceeded to anatomies of abjection spoken by victims

instead of perpetrators. Not outlaws now but patients, Browning's deathbed-ridden, tomb-ordering bishop (1845) and, in different straits, his penthouse proletarian Lippo Lippi (1855) and speculative slave Caliban (1864) find modern American counterparts in Bidart's *The Book of the Body* (1977). There the painfully coping amputee of "The Arc" and the suicidal anorectic "Ellen West," even as they improvise partial remedies for a constitutional want of wholeness, can't arrest the cycle of blaming, then absolving, then again blaming themselves for the plight that engrosses their relation to the world. Last, in a climactic fleshing-out of that self/world relatedness which is the dramatic monologue's abiding generative theme, each poet's greatest work confronts head-on the burden of history.¹⁰ The ways in which Guido, Caponsacchi, Pompilia and the Pope in *The Ring and the Book* lift or shed this burden form strands in the poet's own fabric for sustaining the duties of historical consciousness – duties that Bidart for his part unsparingly levies, and lavishly pays, through the modern footwork of that astonishing 1983 performance "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky."

As this swift overview may suggest, Bidart's career fulfills a developmental logic much like Browning's: both writers reach for an ever more broadly grounded awareness of the human condition in space and time, culture and history, and concurrently for an ever more sophisticated means of refining this awareness in words. To draw a bead on this moving target – poetry's conjuncture between message and medium as it has shaped up in the dramatic monologue – is, as I read it, the assignment Langbaum gave to critics of the genre many decades ago; and in what follows I seek to discharge that assignment in a direction that *The Poetry of Experience* leaves largely unexplored, the line a poet lays down by versification. For Bidart as for Browning, it's the reciprocation of thematic with

technical motives that drives the drama of prosody. The less precedented the thing each poet has to say, the more fertile his invention of new generic modalities; the newer the tools he has put together, the fancier the tricks he can ask them to do – and, being a true artist, therefore *will* ask them to do. That Andrea del Sarto has the tools sharpened but won't take them to the edge is, as Browning limns this painful case, his artistic tragedy. Conversely, before Nijinsky can choreograph “the Nineteenth Century's / guilt, *World War One*,” he must first “have invented a far more / accurate and specific notation for dance” (pp. 49, 29). This creative duty stands in for what Bidart, in an interview-manifesto, has called his own project of “discovering a prosody, figuring out (among other things) how to write down, how to ‘fasten to the page’ the voice – and movements of the voice – in my head.”¹¹

Since the 1980s Bidart has moved, as Browning did after 1870, through the monologue into other forms, most notably into experiments in classical translation. I think it not just coincidental that Browning after 1870 did something of the same kind. This late development suggests that to make prosodic notation more precisely strange and new was what attracted both poets to the monologue form in the first place. Each of these poetic ethicists at his *début* committed dramatic excesses of deviancy, enlisting the reader's moral indignation so as to train it on portraiture instead and so convert a reflex of awakened conscience into a humane reflectiveness. By the same token the drama of compromised consciousness became for each poet the spur to increasingly bold work at the level of the poetic *mise en scène*, which is to say of prosody. The possibilities for *posture* and *gesture* are maximized by dramatic situations. Given the Shelleyan premise both poets share – what Bidart quoting the *Defence of Poetry* hails as “the great secret of

morals, *the imagination to enter / the skin of another*” – it becomes the self-illustrating case that “You believe not in words but in words in / lines, which disdaining the right margin. . . .” (“Curse” p. 26; “Winter Spring Summer Fall” p. 24.) Such prosodic drama obtains not just in the imagined world of the monologue scenario where dukes pull curtains off frescoes, but first and foremost in the environmental voiceprint of the text, where poets pull off effects like this:

--E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive. (“My Last Duchess” 42-47)

Where “choose” at the end of the first full line, and “stands” at the end of the last, round off rhyming couplets yet thrust ahead syntactically across gaping enjambments, the result is a hesitation that shimmers between focused menace and an underlying bewilderment to which that menace, as a deepening acquaintance with the poem will disclose, is a responsive coping mechanism. “There she stands,” read in its enjambed isolation, adumbrates an ongoing ghost story to whose uncanny *fort/da* frisson the Duke is still wedded, and in which the monologue presents itself as a symptomatic chapter. Likewise the word “without,” ending the line at the middle of this quotation, turns the same open closure to an effect nearly playful: “Who passed without”? Halt, who went there? Was the duchess’s smile for some outsider in the passage? If so, it remains an inside joke: hers, the poet’s, the prosody’s.

What Browning achieves here has the force of prose realism in verse drag, thumbing its nose at the couplet and saying “E’en” and “Whene’er” only to set off the prosaic “no doubt,” “Much the same,” and the ominously flatfooted spondee “This grew.” Only a bit less impressively does the passage from “Porphryia’s Lover” with which I began braid the plain flannel of “A thing to do” and “one long yellow string” into the tinsel of cheap poeticism: stuff like “surprise / Made my heart swell,” “mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good.” The shocking prosiness of it all – what Oscar Wilde couldn’t forgive his brainiest Victorian precursor for – is something one can learn to find in Browning, and to find the more assuredly shocking, thanks to the parallel contemporary instance of Bidart.¹² When Bidart avails himself of the twentieth-century poet’s liberty to incorporate swatches of prose right into the poem, readers of the *Cantos* and *Paterson* don’t even blink. Numbered instructions for stump bandaging in “The Arc,” notes duly filed by clinical staff members on the inscrutable anorexia of the hospitalized “Ellen West,” biographical excerpts from long-suffering Romola Nijinsky, bound by wedlock to a genius unhinged from her by madness, all serve as prose foils setting the verse off by a technique now nearly standard. (At the same time, reading backwards from Bidart through Williams and Pound can furnish new eyes for the paratexts in bracketed talking-heads verse and prose with which Browning experimented in “A Death in the Desert” [1864] and the reissued *Sordello* of 1863.)

These prose breathers in Bidart are needed, all the same, because what’s genuinely unsettling in his writing is not the presence of prose, but the quality of the verse it highlights by contrast. Here, for example, is his tortured Nijinsky in full prosodic career:

I can understand the pleasures of War.

In War –

where *killing* is a virtue: *camouflage*

a virtue: *revenge* a virtue:

pity a weakness –

the world rediscovers

a *guiltless* PRE-HISTORY

“civilization” condemns (p. 30)

The indentation, the lineation, the double- and single-spacing all mark to the eye as free verse what is, in its substance, profoundly unpoetical matter: namely the process of sentence-making that typifies the prose intellect hard at work making sense. The very scrupulosity of registration that discriminates the colon from the dash, and stress italics from scare quotes and uppercase thinking caps – with, in other passages nearby, plenty of uppercase italics and colonic dashes into the bargain, to match the semicolon dashes one might these days mistake for emoticons in “Herbert White” – all this notational zeal serves to render Nijinsky as Man Thinking, for all the world as if his sanity depended on it. As, to be sure, it does: Nijinsky’s moral heroism consists in reasoning out his place as the bearer of history’s staggering horror, the greatest dancer of his time become poor, forked, unaccommodated man. Getting this right calls for the bluntest and drabest accents Bidart can contrive. It *looks* like poetry, kind of, much as it may be supposed “My Last Duchess” *looked* like poetry to the few readers whom it found in 1842. And

yet, like the tongue-cluckers Wordsworth imagined stumbling on *Lyrical Ballads* in his 1798 “Advertisement” (a.k.a. “Warning”), Bidart’s readers “have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title” (443). When a young Turk in training named Byron sprang (anonymously) to the defense of generic decorum, gloating to pillory Wordsworth as a “mild apostate from poetic rule” who, “both by precept and example, shows / That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose,” who would have predicted that Lord Byron’s own most shockingly original work *Don Juan* would draw its life from the interplay between a gaudy corset of rhymes and a brilliant confidant’s unbuttoned, prosy chatter (Byron ll. 236-42)?

Every reformer of poetic diction, every redactor of poetic form, speaks on behalf of a world whose beautiful, terrible exigency prevailing poetic customs have, by reason precisely of their prevalence, lost the ability to communicate. The shock treatment that formally experimental poetry administers to custom is meant to deliver the jolt of the real. Witness Bidart’s ideal project of getting the world onto the page by writing as if the earth opened and spoke (p. 241). Of the earth, earthy, poetry in order to redeem itself needs to build from the ground up. So does Nijinsky’s choreography for *Le Sacre du Printemps*:

she dances,--

at first, in paroxysms
of Grief, and Fear:--

again and again, she leaps (--*NOT*

as a ballerina leaps, as if she

loved the air, as if
the air were her element--)

SHE LEAPS

BECAUSE SHE HATES THE GROUND.

(pp. 33-34)

When at length the sacrificial virgin collapses in a heap, “and her last breath / is the reawakened Earth’s / orgasm” (34), the reason for such stylistic deflation is not far to seek:

training in the traditional
“academic” dance,--

emphasizes the illusion
of *Effortlessness*,
Ease, Smoothness, Equilibrium . . .

When I look into my life,
these are not the qualities

I find there. (p. 35)

Bidart’s pierced and scarified poetic is likewise figured in the way starving Ellen West remembers her ego ideal Maria Callas – “ravenous, still insatiable,” struggling “with the *shreds* of a voice”:

I felt I was watching
autobiography –
an art; skill;
virtuosity

miles distant from the usual soprano's
athleticism,--
the usual musician's dream
of virtuosity *without* content . . . (p. 115)

No shortage of content in this poem, either: the raw nerve of the subject, and the punctiliously hesitant explicitness of its painstaking articulation, vouch for each other in an eloquence driven miles past pretty into the industrial parks of prose. “Who is a poet needs must apprehend / Alike both speech and thoughts which prompt to speak”: thus the long-playing 1873 anatomy of a grisly mutilation that Browning called *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (lines 3281-2), where the operative verb “apprehend” belongs with Bidart’s “fasten”; the sight of “our innards” with which Pound credited Browning means nothing until the poet as psychic spy and cop arrests the inner life for remobilization in the footage of verse (Mesmerism” p. 13). This broad truth about poetry the psychodramatic tenders of the impersonative monologue bring out with especially memorable force. As Bidart has acknowledged, “In lyric there is often a great deal of psychic violence, but usually little (say) murder. (Even in Browning’s lyrics.)” (Travis 87). Little (say) murder, but lots of the little murders that go unsaid until they get caught in (say) “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” from the 1842 collection Browning entitled *Dramatic Lyrics*.

Content, no matter how harrowing, when left to its own devices cannot but fail at the trick of manifesting the real and making it stick. To induce a shock that will last takes magic, and the spell by which to conjure the really new, or newly real, involves in practice a cure of the ground, a tilling of the soil that is prosodic history. Such formal

Robespierre, how blood, amputation, and rubble

give her dimension, resonance, and grace. (p. 93)

That Keatsian “phantom hand” of the speaker’s corresponds to a phantom pentameter of the poet’s: invisible yet undeniable; palpable only within, yet thereby capable of grasping in earnest the para-dimensionality of what has gone yet refuses to quit.¹⁴ Amputation and imputation, long-lost Latin cognates, embrace amid an imperial rumble of the tongues. And the moment of truth for this ghost-written prosody of Bidart’s comes when the roman numeral “XVI” pops its pronunciatinal quiz. An anglophone reader sensing the fore-shocks of pentameter like tremors under foot will read that numeral out as, not “the Sixteenth,” but “Seize.” Says who? Says the embedded, embodied meter. Says, too, an emergent internal rhyme from earlier in the line: “Paris is. . . Louis XVI”: an effect fanned further out in the next line when “rubble” double-echoes “Robespierre” and “blood.” Seize the day, says Bidart, far enough along in the avant-garde to have stolen a march on the rear of the ancien régime and let his winged speaker at last say – unresentfully, shockingly – grace. As the poet declares in “Borges and I” (1997) – at the beginning of that prose poem and also at the end, and therefore with a difference – “We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed” (pp. 9-11).¹⁵ Such change is one of the things meant by “drama”; and the chief means to drama in poetry, perhaps its leading motive, is prosodic form.

Notes

¹ “Porphyria’s Lover” (1837), in Robert Browning, *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins 1: 381. Subsequent reference to Browning’s poems cites this two-volume edition and is given parenthetically in my text.

² Frank Bidart, "Herbert White," in *In the Western Night: Collected Poems 1965-90* 127. Subsequent reference to Bidart's poems and interviews contained in this volume is given parenthetically in my text.

³ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*.

⁴ The accelerated contemporary half-life of the new engrosses three signal books just issued within the same year from the same academic publisher: Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New*; Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*; and Robert Pogue Harrison, *Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age*.

⁵ Witness, on the poet's violent calling, Pound's claim that "He must live by craft and violence. His gods are violent gods" ("The New Sculpture" 68). Or Wallace Stevens's definition of poetic nobility as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" ("The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" 36).

⁶ James will have had a francophile's sensitivity to the newness of his term "actuality."

⁷ Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917); *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. Willett 143-45 *et passim*. Willett dates Brecht's conception of the alienation-effect from his 1935 exposure in Moscow to Chinese theatre and Shklovsky's ideas (p. 99).

⁸ See Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians*.

⁹ Pater's essay on Wordsworth (1874) was collected in *Appreciations* (1889). Bagehot's 1864 review essay is "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry."

¹⁰ This special journal issue affords an occasion to remark that *The Poetry of Experience* is one of a handful of landmark Victorianist studies from mid-century to have laid down lines for inquiry that were resumed, recognizably if in a different rhetorical key, by a later generation. Langbaum's insistence on the particular perspective of dramatic monologue speakers in the Browning tradition anticipated patterns of thought that proved focal for new historicism at century's end: its binaries of personal agency and governing context were his expressive and situational (subjective and objective) frames of reference new-minted.

¹¹ The phrase Bidart quotes is Robert Frost's, and it serves as centerpiece to the essential collection *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, ed. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson. For discerning juxtaposition of verse theory and practice in Frost and Bidart, see the essays there by Langdon Hammer ("Frank Bidart and the Tone of Contemporary Poetry" pp. 7-21) and Dan Chiasson ("Presence: Frank Bidart," pp. 22-30).

¹² Wilde's bon mot occurs in "The Critic as Artist" (1891), reprinted in *Literary Criticism of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Stanley Weintraub, p. 202. It remotely forecasts Donald Hall's apposite comment, when reviewing *The Book of the Body* in 1977, that "When I read poems that are 'not poetry,' and yet 'wholly genuine,' I know that I am in the presence of something new. Everything truly new has always begun as 'not poetry'" (*On Frank Bidart*, p. 108). For choral reprise of this observation by later reviewers of Bidart see, in the same volume, Helen Vendler on "devices to forbid the audience's sinking into conventional expectation," p. 113; David Lehman on "what would otherwise be prose," p. 124; Garth Greenwell on this poet's "unlyrical. . . rebuke of lyricism," p. 201. Hall adduces Wordsworth as an earlier practitioner of not-poetry; see also Anne Winters, p. 142.

¹³ See chapter 6 ("The Lyrical Element") of *Poetry of Experience*, especially pp. 197-200.

¹⁴ Chiasson grounds his comparison of Bidart to Frost in the former's disclaimer of pentameter: "my own speech just wasn't, as so much English has always been, basically iambic" (p. 51). The orthopedic iamb-finding in "The Arc," while exceptional, is not unique in Bidart's oeuvre.

¹⁵ (Borges, incidentally, composed a dramatic monologue on Browning's decision to become a poet.) What Bidart imputes to self-fashioning Borges he reasserts, with a generalizing lyric force, in the invocation that ends the sequence *Music Like Dirt*: "Teach me, masters who by making were / remade, your art" ("Lament for the Makers," in *Star Dust*, p. 22). Or the still later Shakespearean Globalism of "Little O," where "as the conventions / the world offers out of which to construct your / mirror fail, to see your face you / intricately, invisibly reinvent them" (*Watching the Spring Festival*, p.43).

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