Chapter 3 discussed how place informs constructions of the poet. This chapter explores a form more usually associated with the post-Romantic period, the dramatic monologue, to suggest that the egoistic personae developed by Wordsworth and Smith in effect deconstruct a particular kind of poet. Read by many as establishing the use-value of the autobiographical within Romanticism, much of Wordsworth’s poetry is discussed as arising from a particular function of self-reliance; in the same way, Smith has emerged as a prime user of biographical details to underpin her expressions of unhappiness. I want to trouble this conclusion, and will do so first by projecting the dramatic monologue back to, initially, the 1790s as dramatized monologues, a fine distinction that is meant to acknowledge how Smith and Wordsworth write performances of selfhood. They model several versions of Poet through an emphasis on revealing, discretely, how speakers perform questionable identities, in the process undoing their own poetry; Smith and Wordsworth concentrate on establishing the parameters of the Poet, filtered through an exploration of the artfully constructed Self. In some of the most composed of the Elegiac Sonnets, in “Beachy Head,” in Lyrical Ballads, and in The Prelude, the “theatrical,” to use Judith Pascoe’s term, underpins and indeed creates the personalized narrators of the poems. Often read as thinly disguised autobiographies, their presentations of sincerity and authenticity are, this chapter contends, dramatized, the position of Poet itself a role. Anticipating (or perhaps providing the template for) the Victorian dramatic monologue, the personalities speaking the poems reveal aspects of themselves despite their best efforts at concealment; Wordsworth and Smith write Selves that are simultaneously Self and Other. The Keatsian egotistical sublime, instead of functioning as an unconscious revelation of solipsism, becomes a tool by which the poets
can act out fantasies of unified subjectivity. For the late eighteenth century, fascinated with an emerging culture of celebrity and individuality, Smith's and Wordsworth's poetry helped to form an expectation that the poetic was personal. It also undermined such expectations and created a space within poetry that critiqued these narrow parameters. In this way, the Romantic dramatized monologue, like its later version, relies on the power of the artful to expose the limitations of the personal.²

Keats is so very matter-of-fact in his identification of the “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” and its contradistinction from his own version of the “poetical Character” as chameleonic and without identity that his definition goes by and large unchallenged.³ With its lower-case “w,” “wordsworthian” becomes an adjective, detached from the person Wordsworth although derived from how Keats read him: as overwhelmingy inhabiting his poetry, and as a Self defined by an excessive writing of the Self. It is not difficult to see that for Keats, Smith’s poetry would occupy the same space: writing wherein the “nature” and “identity” of the poet, far from being “annihilated,” take center stage and claim full readerly attention (Keats, pp. 279, 280). Smith, of course, encourages this response with her increasingly detailed and personalized Prefaces and Dedications; Wordsworth may be more retiring but the force of the poetry remains the same.⁴ However, to describe the autobiographical – perhaps more accurately called the meta-autobiographical – poetry of the two as dramatic or dramatized allows us to interrogate the certainty of Keats’ formulation. As far back as 1957, Stephen Maxfield Parrish described “The Thorn” as Wordsworth’s dramatic monologue; his work established the feasibility of moving the development of the genre back a poetic generation.⁵ Even for Parrish, however, “The Thorn” was proto-Victorian in its enactment of the monologue: Wordsworth wrote a poem not about a mother or a tree, but about a speaker whose nature was revealed through his own first-person narrative (p. 101 passim). Turning to the meta-autobiographical poems of both Smith and Wordsworth allows for a more specifically Romantic version of the dramatic monologue to emerge: one in which the egotistical sublime is the pose rather than the drawback, and in which the writing of the Self is achieved through deliberately literary inscription and blissfully unaware elocution.

In many ways this is also about how the “Romantic” is read back into the poetry. The Wordsworth and Smith of the 1790s, in their experimental mode, use poetry as a conduit to different models of knowledge and understanding. Their continual explorations of form, content, and the ideas derived from each supports their rendering of a poetry that,