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**THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES OF ROBERT BROWNING**

The dramatic monologue is characterized as a hybrid literary form which erases the boundaries between the two genres it has originated from: lyrical poetry and drama with its monologues and soliloquies. The development of the dramatic monologue, though it appeared to be sudden and revolutionary in its time, was a logical step forward. This is supported by the fact that no new form or genre can be created without combining already existing ones with emerging voices, technologies and media, or without combining the dominant art forms with older and neglected, yet still vital literary forms. As Kennedy points out, the dramatic monologue “was filling a need that the nineteenth-century theater was no longer able to supply. Certainly there is a connection between the decline of vigorous new drama in nineteenth-century England and the development of new skills in the writing of dramatic poems.” (Kennedy, 2007:86)

The very form and nature of the dramatic monologue imposes polyaccented and polyphonic features onto the monological structure of the poem. It is in the nature of the monologue to require a stable and dominant perspective. Even though it may encompass reflection or discussion of a subject or event that includes multiple parties, aspects or perspectives, it ultimately makes a definitive judgment on it or it conveys a dominant attitude through which all the other elements are filtered and to which they are subjugated. This approach is characteristic for a number of traditional literary genres, such as the epic, the lyrical and the ode which authority has been established and cemented in the past and in that form have been present in the moment of history in which Browning is writing. Yet, these poetic genres are no longer capable or suitable to meet the demands of the new social and historical tendencies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This fact is confirmed by the failure of Romantic poetry and its monological lyrical subject to deal and properly portray the multiplicity of voices and realities of the new societal reality. In response to this quandary, poetry turned to another literary genre that is inherently polyphonic, yet it is much closely linked in its evolution to poetry then to the novel, i.e. drama.

The first characters that appear in the dramatic monologues from the 1830s by Tennyson and Browning (“Simeon Stylites”, “Porphyria’s Lover”) are characters existing at the boundaries of the socially acceptable, normative and normal. They live in a state of duality and psychological dilemma of which on the surface they might not be aware, but their inner monologue indicates they are in conflict with the norms and laws of society. This conflict in its self gives birth to the multiplicity of voices within their inner or intimate monologue, something which is characteristic of the monologue in a play, thus allowing for the development of a new complex and multilayered genre. These initial monologues contain the seeds, but also serve as harbingers of the possibilities of this new hybrid genre of the dramatic monologue or the monodrama, as this new form was called at the beginning. The depicted psychological, but also social conflict attests also to the fragility and the breaking of the monolithic and monological structure of traditional forms of poetry and drama. Furthermore, this exposed their inability to cope with, depict and interpret the new tendencies and phenomena in society, especially by utilizing previously established fixed literary subgenres and forms.

Usually, the analysis of the dramatic monologues by Browning, as well as of the genre itself focus on the psychology of the main character and the specific structure of the monologue which helps to expose hidden psychological motives and reveal the full psychological profile of the *dramatis personae*. In our paper we want to show how this open-ended, fragmented and multilayered narrative structure allows the representation of the repression, duality and essentialization that is the result of the pressures inflicted by the dominant ideology and discourses of society. Loy D. Martin states that “The technique of provoking unanswered questions, delaying the useful information that answers them as long as possible and then, while supplying that information, raising new questions to start the process all over again, constitutes one of the central rhetorical strategies of the dramatic monologue” (Bloom, 2001:28-29). It is this that makes the dramatic monologue such a productive and receptive form for criticism and analysis of society and its pressing issues, conflicts and doubts.

### **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

One of the most important features of the dramatic monologue is the role played by the *dramatis personae*, representing the central character of the monologue through whose words we are informed about all the events talked about in the poem. It is the only window through which we can see and experience the themes and content, but also the other characters in the poem. The *dramatis personae* is the main and the only narrator in the work, thus according to the classification by Genet it is a homodiegetic narrator that even pushes into the background the author himself. We have this impression because the monologue seemingly does not leave room for any other authorial intervention or narration within the framework of the poem. Secondly, by being the main narrator the *dramatis personae* is striving to assume the role and the authority of the omniscient narrator, though it always fails to meet those expectations inherent to the literary form, as well as the expectations of the reader who puts his or her trust in it during the process of reading. This act of betrayal or failure, the gap between the objectivity of the author and the fictional objectivity of the *dramatis personae* opens up room for doubt by the reader, which is the primary prerequisite for closer analysis and evaluation. This fissure also allows to put into doubt the objectivity, truthfulness and authority of the text itself, but also to cast a suspicious eye on the ideology and societal reality which the text represents and portents to embody. The reader is forced through the process of interpretation to take a better and more attentive look at the underlying ideological structure and thus to have a chance to uncover the hidden and repressed meanings, denials and deletions of certain undesirable values and realities, an act which is always part of the ideological process of the representation of reality..

## **THE FEATURES OF THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES OF ROBERT BROWNING**

In the treatment of the *dramatis personae* in his dramatic monologues, Robert Browning is very close to Keats' concept of negative capability, which demands full objectivity and loss of identity from the author in favour of ensuring complete immersion into the voice of the character and his or her narration of the events. This tradition in English literature can be traced back to the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare, who is singled out by Keats as the ideal author whose own voice could never be truly heard or identified in his creations. The hand of the author in the dramatic monologue can only be sensed and seen on the level of the organization and distribution of the various voices within the structure and narration of the poem, something that Browning has proven to be a true master of. This dovetails nicely with what Bakhtin has stated that the hand of the author is not just led by his ideas, creativity and skills as a writer, but also is impacted by rules and limitations of the genre he is working in, as well as the social conditions and circumstances in which he or she is living and creating. That is what we think comprises the main obstacle to the rise of new voices in literature, especially in works based on traditional forms, genres and topics.

Browning is utilising lyrical and dramatic forms which are mature and have well established structures, rules and limitations which sometimes contribute to the difficulty of discerning the real meaning and intention of the author, as is unfortunately often the case with the interpretation of his work. Yet, on the other hand, Browning's masterful use of versification and meter, his profound erudition and lexical range, his inventiveness and keen eye and ear for experimentation have helped him achieve a delicate poetic balance. In his more famous monologues such as "My Last Duchess" and "Fra Lippo Lippi", he transcends the limitations of the genre with supreme confidence. We also have to note that Browning never intended to debase or simplify his style in order to appease his readers, because he believed that each poem should represent a challenge, a process through which the reader should go in order to reach its meaning. It can be also concluded that in this manner the reader helps intensify and strengthen the occurrence of the new voice embodying that given historical period allowing it to be better heard, come to life and then be incorporated into the newly formed identity of the society of the time.

### ***MY LAST DUCHESS***

Robert Browning's best known dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" provides us with an excellent example how Browning utilizes a dominant narrator and voice. The Duke of Ferrara, who is reminiscing to a visitor about his deceased wife in front of her portrait, wants throughout the poem to control the narration. This is also fully incorporated into the nature of his character. His title brings with itself an inherent aristocratic authority, the weight of his family background and high position in society. The Duke is used to being the institution and authority that determines, controls and defines reality for all of his subjects. At the same time he is a patriarchal figure and head of his Duchy, the embodiment of the patriarchal system of values which is also one of the defining features of Victorian British society.

This dramatic monologue is written in rhymed heroic couplets, a verse form popular in the Neo-classical poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and used to narrate heroic works, famously implemented by Alexander Pope in his translation of the Iliad. This stylistic device serves to signal to the reader that the presumed starting point for the interpretation of the character of the Duke is that of a heroic character. Yet, this form was also used in Neo-classical poetry as a vehicle for parody of the genre of the epic and heroic through the development of the mock heroic genre in the works of John Dryden and Alexander Pope, thus preparing the reader for the undermining and problematizing of the heroic status of the main character, as well as for the failure to meet the expectations and the values he is supposed to embody. Furthermore, the form of the dramatic monologue is directly linked and originates from the dramatic soliloquy, a scene in a play where the character often contemplates and reveals the true psychological condition and character profile. This is a further signal for the reader to be careful and to analyze the text and the speech of the Duke in order to properly diagnose the true state of the main character and narrator. This way, we see how Browning through the choice of the genre, literary form, structure and meter of "My Last Duchess" prepares the stage and sets the scene for the story to unfold, but is also guiding the reader through the already pre-established parameters that are positioned within the triangle created by the author, literature (tradition) and the reader.

The conflict within the narration and the testimony of the Duke is evidenced in his speech. The structure of his speech is the first signal that we are dealing with a poem which is addressing themes which are relevant to its contemporary context, while the language is stylized and archaic to a certain degree, it is till the English language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This serves Browning to indicate that his intentions with the poem is not a mere restoration or illustration of a distant historical period for the diversion of his readers, but rather to use it as a background to construct a discussion and meditate on certain universal topics, though from the vantage point of the value horizon of English society in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is a language befitting a Victorian gentleman, aristocrat and a patriarchal figure, yet also language which is easily understandable for the Victorian public. Thus, the poem is a suitable medium for the introduction and discussion of contemporary topics, enabling the contemporary reader to more easily understand and receive subconsciously the messages hidden behind the seemingly solid and authoritative speech of the Duke.

Browning skillfully depicts the relations present in patriarchal society with the very first words uttered by the Duke in his monologue when presenting the portrait of his late wife. Her presence in the memory and her perception by society is solely mediated through the framed picture commissioned by her husband, the person who has sole control over it and decides who can see it or not. A picture by its nature is silent and lacks a voice of its own, even though it tells a story, yet it needs an external authority to read, interpret and communicate her story. In this case that is the role of the Duke of Ferrara, whose authority is derived not only from his person, but is also designated and sanctioned by patriarchal society itself. Browning exposes his authoritative position not only through the structure of the dramatic monologue, but also through the depiction of his speech and the syntax and phrases that he uses. It is a subtle procedure to undermine from the very start the dominant position of the Duke both in society, as well as in the organization of the dramatic monologue.

The introduction of the Duke's interlocutor, the envoy of the Count of Tirol, helps Browning to further open up the structure of the poem and fully utilize the potential of the dramatic monologue as a narrative form. The introduction of a second character and voice brings to life the polyphonic and heteroglossic aspects of the dramatic monologue. At the same time, when the Duke describes the portrait of his last Duchess, he also incorporates the voice of the painter Fra Pandolph by quoting his compliments given to the Duchess.

*“perhaps  
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, “Her mantle laps  
Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat.”*

However, the word perhaps tells us that the Duke was not present at the time of the conversation, thus making the voice not a fully corporeal voice that could potentially represent not just the artist, but also the discourse of art and the role of the artist. Rather, Fra Pandolph words are just a screen behind which we can discern the ugly face of the Duke's jealousy. They are just mere echoes of the real voice of the character of the Duke masked behind the patriarchal and aristocratic discourse provided to him by society and whose position in society requires him to make use of and be guided by them. Browning, also, seems to incorporate the voices of all other male visitors to his court who have had the chance to see the painting like the envoy, but once again they represent voices only formally because their main function is to intensify our awareness of the Duke's paranoia:

*„Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned”*

They are designated as “strangers”, a curious lexical choice that indicates that the Duke is expressing emotions that he doesn't want to admit, but that also do not belong among the official values and norms of the behaviour of a patriarchal husband and man, nor should they be part of the patriarchal discourse. The analysis is indicative of the presence of a number of different voices, but also psychological, emotional, ethical and social discourses struggling within the character of the Duke. His words indicate a deep internal conflict, with all the voices refracting within his own and destabilizing and fragmenting his voice and speech. This is best illustrated by the syntactical, lexical and grammatical choices and disruptions that Browning uses to a great effect.

*“She thanked men—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift”*

However, the most important voice that is repressed is also a voice that in the present is silent and by all evidence dead. That is the voice of the Duchess, which in the monologue is only represented by her portrait. The image in itself is inanimate and can only speak through visual language that needs to be given a voice, to be

interpreted and told by another person. In this instance this function is not performed directly by the poet as an objective observer and narrator, Browning instead leaves this to the Duke.

*“This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive.”*

Still, as our analysis has shown, the Duke is far from an objective narrator, moreover he wants to completely control the voice and the identity of the Duke. That he fails at the end and the traces of the truth emerge from his speech as is seen in the passage above, just adds to the conclusion that language cannot fully control reality or the perception of it.

Finally, we hope that through this brief analysis of the role of the voice of the *dramatis personae* in the dramatic monologue “My Last Duchess” we managed to showcase how Browning plays in a subtle manner with the structure of the dramatic monologue, but also effectively demonstrates its nature and potential as a narrative form. The reader of a dramatic monologue is put in a position to follow the plot, be introduced to the content and the various meanings and symbolism of the poems through the narration of only a single character. This at first impression looks like a case of limited focalization that is fully controlled by the poet. However, just like the main character, the poet can never, no matter how much he desires, hide or limit all the repressed meanings that inevitably emerge on the surface with every new reading and interpretation. This is what makes the dramatic monologue as a genre a proper challenge both for the poet and the reader, a trait that certainly contributed to its popularity and vitality as a poetic form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.