

## Dramatic Monologue

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The dramatic monologue, usually associated with Robert Browning<sup>1</sup>, was particularly popular between 1830 and 1930 and is often defined as a poetry form in which there are a first-person speaker (persona) who is not the poet<sup>2</sup> and who arouses some sympathy because of his complex personal history; a silent or at least unheard listener (auditor)<sup>3</sup> who cannot help but hear (someway in the role of a secret witness); a situation characterized by a specific time and place (occasion); and an argumentative, rhetorical language which distinguishes the dramatic monologue from the soliloquy. Besides, one will notice a marked and often ironical discrepancy between the speaker's view of himself and the poet's implied judgement at the revelation of the persona's character between the lines, a discrepancy that the reader is usually supposed to adopt. The reader's job is to pick up on the cues offered between the lines and appropriately imagine the larger frame within which the speaker's talk is unfolding.

This definition, however, is far too restrictive and can only be applied to a handful of representative poems by Browning and Tennyson.

There are poems, for example, in which the speaker is used as a mouthpiece for the poet's view, as is the case with Lippo Lippi in Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi", whose view of art, the physical world and the soul, as we know, had Browning's approval. Sometimes the poet's opinions are represented by making them arise in the speaker in an incidental or unintentional way.

On the other hand, there are also satirical monologues that make the reader react *against* the speaker, as is often the case with religious matters, like Browning's "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" or Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites", which will be examined later in this paper.

Such a restrictive definition as seen at the beginning of this paper also implies a decline of the dramatic monologue since Browning's time, while in reality there have been excellent dramatic monologues written by twentieth-century poets like Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Frost, Maters, Robinson, both Lowells, Amy and Robert, as well as contemporary poets.

Robert Langbaum, one of the most important authorities in this field, sees the form as a continuation of an essentially Romantic "poetry of experience" in which the reader experiences a gap between sympathy and judgment. For him, the dramatic monologue originates when Victorian poets write a Romantic lyric of experience in which the voice of the characters is separate from their own. Contemporary readers of Browning's poems, however, found them very different from Langbaum's Romantic model, as Glenn Everett has argued.

There have been and still are many discussions as to how the dramatic monologue should be and many books have been written on this subject, but if we really want to understand what dramatic monologue is, we have to go *beyond* any form of restrictive criteria and understand what the dramatic monologue is essentially *doing* (giving facts "from within"), as M. W. MacCallum explained in a Warton Lecture in 1925:

*"But in every instance... the object [of the dramatic monologue] is to give facts from within. A certain dramatic understanding of the person speaking, which implies a certain dramatic sympathy with him, is not only the essential condition, but the final cause of the whole species."*<sup>4</sup>

As has been the case with confessional poetry in the 50s and 60s, sometimes the dramatic monologue has been criticized for revealing too personal experiences of the author. Browning's first published work, "Pauline", for example, has been accused of being too autobiographical. John Stuart Mill wrote: "The writer seems to be possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being" — a criticism that deeply disturbed Browning and made him add a disclaimer to the second edition, emphasizing the imaginary character of much of his poetry. However, Browning's innovations were just part of a general change of sensibility, not an imposition.

One of the most famous and successful dramatic monologues is certainly Browning's "My Last Duchess", whose relevance consists in arousing in the reader that feeling of sympathy that the dramatic monologue is supposed to convey: the duke's blatant wickedness provokes the split between moral judgement and sympathy that is the basis of the dramatic monologue:

*Ferrara*

*That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
Frà 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": such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had*

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*A heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad,  
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
 The bough of cherries some officious fool  
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
 She rode with round the terrace — all and each  
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,                 30  
 Or blush, at least. 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. Who'd stoop to blame  
 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
 In speech — (which I have not) — to make your will  
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this  
 Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
 Or there exceed the mark" — and if she let  
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set                         40  
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
 —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. Will't please you rise? We'll meet  
 The company below, then. I repeat,  
 The Count your master's known munificence  
 Is ample warrant that no just pretence                         50  
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!*

Tennyson goes even farther than Browning. In his dramatic monologues, the personae display an emotional perversity that verges on the pathological. Such is the case, for example, with "St Simeon Stylites", in which the saint's asceticism is regarded as essentially demonic and diseased. Browning, as already briefly mentioned, has written a similar dramatic monologue, "Johannes Agricola in Meditation", but his work lacks the pathological distortion and the unsuspected, morbid motives of Tennyson's.

In Browning, we always perceive a motive, for example also in "Porphyria's Lover", in which the speaker strangles Porphyria with her own hair, which might appear as a completely irrational act, but is indeed the extraordinary complication of a perfectly understandable motive, as we come to understand in reading the monologue.

In Tennyson, we also perceive a certain life-weariness and a longing for rest through oblivion, notable in his best dramatic monologue, "Ulysses". Ulysses is an old man whose

appetite for life exceeds his real abilities. His last journey is undertaken with a sense of resignation. He has to undertake it, but he doesn't expect too much from it, it is rather a journey to death:

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are.*

Oscar Wilde then introduced a new concept in the dramatic monologue. While the Victorians traditionally based their dramatic monologues on the *tension* between poet and speaker, he focuses his attention on the *connection* between them (although this had occasionally happened also among the Victorians). He was namely convinced that what we call insincerity is a device by which we can multiply our personalities, thus anticipating Modernism, as Carol Christ remarks. In particular Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were fascinated by the dramatic monologue.

Pound's dramatic monologues in "Personae" specifically follow Wilde's theory of the multiple masks, as he confessed to Gaudier-Breska:

*"In the "search for oneself", in the search for sincere "self-expression", one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says "I am" this, that, or the other thing, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing. I began this search for the real in a book called Personae, casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem. I continued in long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks."<sup>6</sup>*

The best modernist works in which this fragmentation of the self is exemplified, however, remain Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1920) and Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), as well as his "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) with its highly evocative images (what Sinfield calls "moments of "~-intense apprehension"), which is partly also the result of the Modernists' tendency to experiment with poetic voice. In "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", for example, the fragmentation of the self is the result of Pound's experimentation with quotations, translations and first- and second-person speech, something that had never been attempted before in the dramatic monologue. In the end, the multiple fragmented voices or masks become one composite voice though, the voice of the poet who finds his true self in them.

The dramatic monologue didn't end with the modernists. Although it was not as popular as during the modernist movement, in the 40s and 50s, it was still used by some poets, like Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, in particular as an instrument of social critique, until in the 60s it experienced a growing revival mainly through the work of Richard Howard in America and Edwin Morgan in Scotland, who both use it to focus on the issues of communication and representation, although in different ways, Morgan being much more experimental than Howard, whose monologues are still strongly influenced by Browning and primarily deal with history.

Throughout "Untitled Subjects", Howard implies that in history, the past is invariably misrepresented and important parts of it left out. History is make-belief, as Jane concludes in "A Pre-Raphaelite Ending".

Morgan, on the other hand, as already briefly stated, is highly experimental and creates unfamiliar situations often emphasizing the problem of communication. In some of Morgan's monologues, we don't even sense the presence of the auditor. Morgan's most striking poem is probably "Message Clear" (1968), a combination of dramatic monologue and concrete poetry in which the speaker is Christ on the cross and the whole poem is shaped as an I in fifty-five lines arranged as a column.

In spite of today's commercialization of personality, the dramatic monologue is experiencing a remarkable revival, although not in its traditional form, be it in theatrical monologues like Anna Deavere Smith's "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992" (1992), song lyrics or even country music.

Springsteen's lyrics are particularly worthy of mention in this context because of the social critique he exercises through them, a feature we have already seen in the dramatic monologues of the 40s and 50s. In particular in "The Rising" (2002), which was written in response to the dramatic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, he adopts different personae, achieving a very interesting effect.

He is not the only one who makes social critique the focus of his work. It will here suffice to mention such poems as Duncan Bush's "Pneumoconiosis" (1985), in which the speaker is a miner speaking of his illness, or Paula Meehan's "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" (1991), in which the speaker is a fifteen-year-old Irish girl who dies giving birth to her baby, along with the baby himself.

A particular category of contemporary dramatic monologues are the revisionist dramatic monologues, which use characters from literature, history or myth in order to prove the fixation and formalization of cultural beliefs and tradition. It is a form particularly popular among women, like Rita Ann Higgins's "Donna Laura" (1996), in which Petrarch is exposed as a swaggerer.

As we can see, the dramatic monologue is far from defunct, and I think we are lucky it isn't, as it is one of the most beautiful and deepest poetry forms.

### **References:**

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Sinfield, Alan, *Dramatic Monologue*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London 1977

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1 Although Robert Browning did not invent this form, which was present in poetry preceding him, he is believed to have vastly contributed to its development.

2 This is what Browning meant when he called many of his poems "dramatic": the story is not told by the poet, but by some actor in it ("The Athenaeum", January 1890)

3 As Glenn Everett points out, the listener must remain silent until the work is known as a whole.

4 "The Dramatic Monologue in the Victorian Period", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 1924-25, p.276 Unfortunately, MacCallum failed to extend his principles beyond the Victorian period, that is to say he fails to understand the implications of his own insight.

5 Pound, E. Gaudier-Brezka, *New Directions*, New York, 1970