My Last Duchess

Ferrara

“My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning is a dramatic monologue set in Ferrara, at Alfonso II d’Este’s castle, during the Italian Reinassance. The speaking voice, which is different from the poet’s one, belongs to the Duke of Ferrara, who is showing his addresser a portrait of his last wife.

Right from the title the reader might make some conjectures about the content of the poem: the adjective “last”, which refers to the word “duchess”, implies that the duke will never have another wife, while the possessive adjective “my” suggests a very close and possessive relationship between the duchess and the speaking voice.

The presence of deictics (specific references of space and time), which is typical of this poetic genre, is evident right from the first line: “That’s my last duchess painted on the wall”. The speaking voice, whose words recall the title (“My Last Duchess”), is showing to someone a fresco whose subject is his last wife. The young woman is dead, but it looks as she were alive in the painting. The duke thinks the portrait is wonderful, adding that Pandolf, a friar, worked one day to do it and inviting his interlocutor to sit and contemplate the painting. In particular, the duke addresses the observer’s attention on the “depth and passion of its earnest glance”: no one but he and Frà Pandolf had never looked at the fresco, for he is the only one who “puts by the curtain”. It is interesting to notice how little the reader comes to know about the duchess’ personality (whose image is also filtered by the duke’s point of view) and how strong is the presence of the speaking voice along the text: the personal pronoun “I” is repeated over and over again in the monologue and it is also recalled by assonance by the words “by” (line 6) and “my” (line 1). Moreover, the image the reader gets of the duke is that of a possessive and jealous man, self-centred and obsessed by the portrait of his dead wife.

At line 13 the speaking voice says that the addresser is not the first one to ask how did such a glance come to that painting, which is quite absurd as in a dramatic monologue the protagonist usually speaks without receiving an answer. Then the duke calls his addresser “Sir” (the reader might therefore think the observer is a noble man) and he adds that it was not only his presence to provoke that “spot of joy” on the duchess’ cheeks, reporting the friar’s words: “Her mantle laps over my lady’s wrist too much”; “Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint half-flush that dies along her throat”. It is from this passage that the reader might think that is was the duke himself to order his wife’s murder and to ask Frà Pandolf to do a portrait of hers after her death, thanks to the expression “faint half-flush that dies along her throat”.

The duke’s deep jealousy and obsession is even more evident in the following lines: he couldn’t bear that his wife smiled and blushed to everybody in the same way she smiled at him, even if it was just for courtesy. In his opinion, her heart was “too soon made glad, too easily impressed”: she liked everything she saw and her looks went everywhere; she thanked men, talked with people and she equally liked “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”, ranking his “gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name with anybody’s gift”.

The duke’s “ego” is so strong he didn’t even want to tell his wife what disgusted him about her behaviour: “E’en then would be some stooping, and I choose never to stoop”. His jealousy grew day by day, she continued smiling whenever someone passed her (“but who passed without much the same smile?”), until he “gave commands, then all smiles stopped together”. Therefore, the reader understands it was he who gave commands to kill the duchess, who now stands “as if alive” in the fresco, smiling only at his husband.

At line 47 the speaking voice asks his addresser to stand up and “meet the company below”. From the following lines the reader gets some more information about the observer’s identity: since his “master” is a “Count”, he is probably a sort of messenger whose task is to discuss about the future wedding of the Count’s daughter with the duke. Indeed, the speaking voice asserts that he doesn’t want the girl’s dowry, since he is interested in “his fair daughter’s self”.

The poem ends with the duke showing to his visitor a statue that well symbolizes his attitude with his last duchess, that will probably reflect his future behaviour with his next wife: Neptune taming a sea-horse.

On a stylistic level, the reader might notice the large variety of speech elements in the text (“how shall I say?” – line 22, “I know not how” – line 32), the presence of several deictics of space (“There”- line 4, 12, 46, “That” – line 1, 3, “below” – line 48) and time (“now” – line 3), all features belonging to the poetic genre of the dramatic monologue. In addition, the speaking voice addresses himself directly to an interlocutor (“Sir” – lines 13, 25, 43, 54) who doesn’t answer, but whose presence is made evident also by some direct questions that make the conversation seem more realistic (“Will’t please you sit and look at her?” – line 5, “Will’t please you rise?” – line 47).