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The Politics of Masking: Browning's Art of Dramatic Monologues

Sutirtha Chakraborty

State-Aided College Teacher (Category-I),
Dept. of English,
Hijli College,
Kharagpur, West Bengal.

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Abstract:

After the failure of "Sordello", Browning moved towards dramatic monologues. His inability as a playwright gave rise to his poetic prowess. Dramatic monologue is a poem which is based on a single speaker and a silent interlocutor. Its ancient origins can be traced back to Theocritus and Ovid. But the genre developed finally in the Victorian Era in the Hands of poets like Browning. There are certain characteristics which differentiates it from the other types of poems. Self-condemnation by the speaker is foremost of the all. But this is actually a psychological approach of masking where the true self of the speaker is hidden under the mask which he portrays. From Lippo to the Duke to Andrea ---all the major characters of Browning uses this technique to vindicate their own world-view and to influence the silent listener.

Keywords: Browning, Dramatic Monologue, Masking, Silent Listener, Victorian Era.

Like Joyce, *Sordello* is Browning's Portrait of the Artist as a Young man, a kind of *Bildungsdichtung* (Poetry, acquired with many elements, acquired by semi-skilled education, which requires the reader to have an appropriate level of education.) The poem is criticized by almost everybody for its complexity and psycho-therapeutic attempts to present the developments of the soul. Even at the level of storytelling, Browning lacked the power and felt almost paralyzed. Sir Henry Jones rightly opined,

It is uncompromisingly and irretrievably difficult reading. No historical account of the conflict of Ghibelline and Guelph, no expository annotation of any kind, not even its own wealth of luminous ideas or splendor of Italian city scenes and solitudes, can justify it entirely as a work of art. (Honan 162)

After this failure and the harsh criticisms of the critics, Browning slowly turned towards the much-celebrated form of dramatic monologue which gave him the opportunity to be objective and to create a persona separate from the self.

A dramatic monologue is generally a poem in which one imaginary speaker addresses an imaginary audience. Though a Victorian genre in its most developed form, its origins can be traced back to 3rd Century BC to the Greek Theocritus in the compendium, known as the *"Idylls of Theocritus"*. Ovid's *"Heroides"*, also known as *"Epistulae Heroidum"* (*"Letters of Heroines"*), focused on interiority and dispensed the action part, which later became the hallmark of Victorian dramatic monologue. Emotional and domestic viewpoints presented by Ovid makes him the very first male writer (outside the theater and some girls' choruses by the Spartan poet Alcman) to write in a woman's voice reflecting the view of Philip Freeman who has written,

Almost everything written in ancient times, from Homer to Saint Augustine, was composed by men. Even on those occasions when men bothered to write about women, the words come to us from a male point of view, full of ignorance and prejudice. (xxii)

There are certain characteristics of such poems which can be clearly revealed only through the dramatic monologue format. The central character through whose speeches we discover the entire action is mostly found to be condemning himself through those speeches. He can be weak, vain, brutal or all three. But unlike the drama where we sympathize with the tragic protagonist, in the monologue there is no opportunity to do that. A particular point of time that is in the present, the poem takes place. Only through the words of the protagonist we can guess his past. It is not in the proper sequential form. The reactions of the audience in a drama proper are far more complex than the reader in the dramatic monologue, which is a reason behind the so called failure of monologues in the dramatic tradition. Though there are speeches in the plays of Shakespeare which reveals the character of the speaker, they are generally part of a contextual situation and are far more integrally attached to the core of it. According to Hobsbaum's study *"My Last Duchess"* gives us the essential Ferrara; *"If it were done"* does not give us the essential Macbeth" (228).

Browning became a poet extraordinaire only because he was a faulty dramatist. His superiority lies in the fact that he was a master of plotting. How he heightened a circumstance relevant to the core of the poem can be gauged by the example of “*Fra Lippo Lippi*”. Vasari’s anecdote of how Lippo was incarcerated by his patron Cosimo de’ Medici becomes the *raison d’être* of the entire monologue. Lippo says:

Zooks, what's to blame? You think you see a monk . . .

Aha, you know your betters . . . Who am I?

Why one, sir, who is lodging with a friend

Three streets off-he's a certain . . . how d'ye call?

Master-a . . . Cosimo of the Medici,

I' the house that caps the corner... (qtd. in Hobsbaum 235)

This takes us directly into the centre of the plot. The suspicion of the guard prompts Lippo to clarify and this makes the case for Lippo’s breaking loose:

I'd been there three weeks shut within my mew,

A painting for the great man, saints and saints

And saints again. I could not paint all night-

Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air.

There came a hurry of feet and little feet . . .

And a face that looked up-zooks, sir, flesh and blood,

That's all I'm made of ... (qtd. in Hobsbaum 235)

This is followed by a revelation of the character which in turn directs us to his past life. In totality it reflects a dramatic situation in which Lippi being confronted by the guards speaks out the entire narrative. The guards are the interlocutors whose reaction to the narrative creates a counter point. The heightened circumstances are also followed by Browning's skill of paring. Deliberately Browning skips the mentioning of Lippo's capture at the sea by a Moorish ship and subsequent imprisonment of eighteen months at Barbary. It was probably trimmed to avoid disruption in the narrative of Lippo as a monk. The present clash with the guards evokes this self-explanation and this clash symbolically stands for all manners of contretemps with the society. The creative tension is undoubtedly between what is said and how it is being said. The restriction of action highlights the fact that the art of dramatic monologue is at once restrictive and economical in the true sense of the term.

“The specialized dramatic monologue he (Browning) developed served rather as a mask through which he revealed the psychic disruptions of his times. Under its varied disguises he brought the era's inarticulate troubles the mediation of self-talk” (Wenger 226). The dramatic monologue stands midway in this trend from soliloquy and aside to interior dialogue and stream of consciousness technique. In most of his works Browning portrayed the mental crises of an end period. During the first phase of his poetic career he focused mainly on characters that were not of his own age. As a result of it the aloofness can be clearly visible in the portraits. In the last three decades his preference shifted to personalities belonging to his own time. The psychic disturbances of his time gets their due place in the characters who stands baffled and storm-tossed trying to rationalize their mental dilemma. As Wenger rightly observes, “That neither he nor they manifest conscious awareness of the crumbling social order is the crowning piece of evidence to prove the monologues an unwitting masquerade of the disintegration process” (227).

In “*My Last Duchess*”, the Duke is marked by internal strife and utters the monologue to control the action which might solve his difficulties. Apart from the speakers the auditors too play a great part in the making of such monologues. They always stand mute. Though passive hearers sometime they serve as the critic of the whimsical actions of the central protagonists.

They act as a foil to the dominant selves of the speakers. They act as a kind of inner voice which gives the victims their self-expression. Garratt is keen in his observations when he says,

The subtle development of Browning's monologues lies in a kind of double objectification on the part of the poet, where in addition to the primary creation of the character or speaker, there exists a secondary creation, a mask, which the speaker utilizes in dealing with his auditor. This secondary mask, distinguished from the primary mask-the character himself -in that it is demanded by the dramatic interaction of the poem, is in the form of a rhetorical strategy, designed to conceal some aspect of the speaker's personality and replace it with another more favorable to the speaker's purpose (116).

This pattern is repeatedly used in the works of Browning. The dramatic situation of the speaker brings forth an explanation. This explanation is pointed towards a listener whom the speakers want to either confuse or influence as per the demand of the context. The speaker is almost obligatory in his attitude towards the listener. This strategy of persuasion is directed towards bringing the listener into the fold of the speaker. Browning's characters are mostly cautious, reflective and not open like Ulysses. The Duke of Ferrera uses this masking technique to show his controlling capacity. The Duchess somehow escaped from his control and this point holds the key note in the poem. The phrase "*her looks went everywhere*" and her frequent smiles actually stand as a challenge to the Duke's "nine- hundred -years- old name". So he gave a command and the Duchess stopped smiling. Though she stopped smiling, this reflects the fact that the Duke is in less control than he seems to hold. He is not a spontaneous soul and needs everything in order. Even when he is retelling the story, the Duke almost loses control and tells too much. Undoubtedly he is a brilliantly drawn character but at the same time he has his flaws too. This infatuation with control is apparent as the Duke speaks with pride about the looks of the dead Duchess. But he would have never done that had she been alive. There is a sense of security as the Duchess is confined within a canvas and cannot disobey the Duke. He controls the strings of the curtains which covers the portrait of the deceased Duchess. The need for conviction arises out of the fact that the Duke does not know what to do with a woman who receives flowers from other men and blushes when she is noticed. For the Duke love and trust does not go along and the fear of losing control stems out of it.

In "*Andrea del Sarto*" too, Andrea employs the same trick as the Duke to impress the listener, his wife Lucrezia but eventually diverts into a soliloquy or inward conversation. The concept of self-esteem is essential to create a sense of triumph in Andrea's life while the truth is; he is a failure both to his wife and to his art. For the Duke the mask was of strength and control to appear as the master; for Andrea However, it is made up of weakness and non-control to represent himself as a victim. By playing the victim card brilliantly he tries to highlight Lucrezia as Cruel hearted and tyrant. As a patient husband, he is devoted and complimentary. He is careful in his rhetoric and tries to assess how he is being perceived. He is constructing a trap cleverly so that when Lucrezia leaves for the "*Cousin*", Andrea wins from his wife by losing to the "*cousin*". In actuality Andrea himself is the target of his remarks and this makes the entire poem a kind apologetic excuse for failure. He is constantly trying to awaken the guilt in his wife's heart. The mask then is in reality worn by a loser who portrays himself as a winner. Andrea utilizes the weakness which the Duke would never show and acknowledge.

The same sort of ambiguity is present in "*Andrea del Sarto*," in which the silence of the painter's wife, Lucrezia, is motivated not by fear, as in "*My Last Duchess*," but by indifference. I can never imagine her listening to del Sarto's words, but rather for the whistle -signal of her "cousin" out- side. Del Sarto's monologue is to some degree a delay tactic to keep her indoors with him for once. While, however, she is temporarily held captive by the painter's desire to speak - and perhaps by a momentary but shallow sense of politeness - the apparent irrelevance of his speech to her behavior or thoughts is thematized in the poem precisely as the painter's own, crushing fault (Wagner-Lawlor 291).

Thus, the key issue in the aforementioned poems is of a character playing a character in order to convince or persuade. The dramatic monologue pits the character in a certain situation and the character tries psychologically using the mask to survive and overcome that particular situation. The masking helps the speaker to portray an image akin to his own world view to influence the auditor. The strategy of the poet is to make us realize the scrambling effect of the masks and once we realize it the poem becomes more potent and our interest grows towards a deeper understanding of the character. An important feature of the dramatic monologues is that

the speaker of such monologues remains unconscious of their true nature. They act as self-deceivers. Their actions and behaviours reflect their real essence but they are afraid to speak about it. This in turn creates a double ironic effect. G. K. Chesterton argues,

With Browning's knaves we have always this eternal interest, that they are real somewhere, and may at any moment begin to speak poetry. We are talking to a peevish and garrulous sneak; we are watching the play of his paltry features, his evasive eyes, and babbling lips. And suddenly the face begins to change and harden, the eyes glare like the eyes of a mask, the whole face of clay becomes a common mouthpiece, and the voice that comes forth is the voice of God, uttering His everlasting soliloquy. (202)

To conclude with Wagner-Lawlor,

The self-image that the speaker delineate is only achieved when the reader distinguishes her/himself from the shadowy passivity of the listener's silence, and pulls away from a sympathetic association with that manipulated figure. And in turn, the reader, while performing the action of constituting the speaker, will also delineate - in her own image - the form of the silent listener. In this kind of poem, silence is "made man," created in the image of the second person "I" that refuses to be effaced, that is, the "you" the reader (pp. 298-299).

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