

8. An Experiment in Reading: Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"

In the previous chapters I have discussed some kinds of evidence that may be helpful in determining how a text should be experienced, including punctuation, spelling, typography, and the relationship between length and difficulty. In the following three chapters I shall deal with single texts and search them for evidence, to determine how they should be experienced. In discussing these texts in some detail it will also be possible to give more substance to the claim, made earlier in this study, that the question of how poetry is experienced should be an integral part of literary studies.

In this chapter, I should like to show how closely the interpretation of a text is linked to the way it is experienced. I have chosen for this purpose Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," for two reasons. As a Dramatic Monologue it raises the question whether it should be listened to or read in particularly pointed form; the text may even be considered as a drama. Further, the poem is central enough to the corpus of English literature to have elicited extensive and interesting critical comment. In particular it offers an opportunity to show that the tension between sympathy and judgement, which A. Dwight Culler has singled out as a central characteristic of recent views of the Dramatic Monologue (Culler 1975, p. 367), is related to the way the text is experienced.

Recent definitions of the Dramatic Monologue have been fairly broad. Alan Sinfield, for example, describes it "as simply a poem in the first person spoken by ... someone who is indicated not to be the poet" (Sinfield 1977, p. 8). This definition alludes to the problem of determining the relationship between the poet and the speaker. It is too inclusive, however, to be useful. It does not take into account other features that have traditionally been associated with the Dramatic Monologue, like the individualized speaker. In "My Last Duchess," for example, we are confronted with an idiosyncratic method of wooing, and the Duke's words are meant to reveal his character.

The Dramatic Monologue, in the more common narrow sense of the term, also implies the existence of a partner, to whom the speech is addressed, and thus a clearly defined situation internal to the poem. The partner is essential for our understanding of the poem: the monologue may be designed to influence him. The speaker may try to conceal things from him, he may even lie to him. In "My Last Duchess" our attitude to the Duke will be determined by our discovery that he has disposed

of his former wife and is now addressing an envoy who has come to settle the contract for a new marriage.

There are many reasons why the Dramatic Monologue flourished in the early Victorian period. Only three will be sketched here, those that may have directly affected the expectations of the audience. These are the awareness of the poet's self, the state of the theatre in the period, and the tradition of monodrama.

Robert Langbaum (1974) has shown that the Dramatic Monologue can be derived from the Romantic poetry of experience, in which the experience of the individual poet in a particular situation establishes truths that are of general value. The poet has the role of the seer, even, in Shelley's words, of the "unacknowledged legislator of mankind." As we have seen in chapter 7, The Dramatic Monologue is also a reaction against the Romantic poetry of experience, both an attempt to preserve the poet's self¹ by covering it with a mask, a persona, and an attempt to write as an "objective poet" (Browning 1895, p. 1008), to use Browning's term.

The second reason for the emergence of the Dramatic Monologue involves the state of the theatre in the early nineteenth century, a period in which drama and the stage increasingly diverged. The Romantic and Victorian poets tried to create a drama of the soul, a model for which they mistakenly saw in Shakespeare, while the theatre had become increasingly interested in sudden, isolated, sensational effects, as in the acting of Edmund Kean. Poets therefore either hesitated to have their plays performed, like Byron, or had little success in the theatre. Browning must be counted among the latter group. The interest in isolated effects on the stage, however, also produced a type of text that is of particular interest for the history of the Dramatic Monologue. Anthologies of "beauties"² include great passages from Shakespearean and other plays, which, in isolation, look very much like Dramatic Monologues.

Finally, a third possible factor crucial to the form's rise may be found in the monodrama, a type of play introduced by Rousseau³ in France. In the monodrama a figure, accompanied by music, expresses its emotions in a situation of personal crisis. The form was popular all over

¹ Browning, too, had to face this problem. After he had published *Pauline* in 1835, John Stuart Mill told him that its hero-narrator, and, implicitly, the poet himself, were "endowed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being" (Litzinger et al. 1970, p. 3).

² The most influential of these was Charles Lamb's *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*. See Hobsbaum 1975/76, p. 231.

³ Cp. his *Pygmalion* (1770). – For an interesting comparison of "My Last Duchess" with a monodrama, see Culler 1975, p. 383.

Europe. In England Robert Southey published several monodramas between 1793 and 1802; and in 1855, Tennyson's *Maud* was referred to as a monodrama.

Under these circumstances it is difficult to say with what kind of expectations Browning's monologue would have been approached. To his audience, insofar as it was accustomed to take the "I" in the poem for the poet, it would have looked exceedingly strange. Insofar as the poem was associated with anthologies of "beauties" and monodramas it would have seemed fairly familiar. This situation offers us an opportunity to test different possibilities of how the text may have been meant to be experienced,⁴ and to discuss how these may affect the interpretation of the poem.

"My Last Duchess" looks as if it could be read as a text to be performed by actors in front of an audience. The text implies scenery. There is a piece of furniture for the envoy to sit on; there is a painting of the late Duchess on the wall; the painting can be covered with a curtain; and there is at least one more objet d'art, a statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse. There is also some action. The Duke reveals the painting, and explains to the envoy, who sits down in front of it, why he had to get rid of his former wife. In the end they leave together, and the Duke insists that the envoy should walk beside, not, as convention would demand, behind him. None of this is indicated by stage-directions; Browning uses the Shakespearean method of controlling scenery, movement, and gesture by implying them in speech. The very first word of the poem is a demonstrative:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,⁵ (line1)

⁴ When the poem was first published in 1842, it appeared under the heading "France and Italy" and was entitled "I. Italy," which linked it to "Count Gismond," then entitled "II. France." This juxtaposition brings out the themes of national character, and of the nature of the marriage bond. In 1849 the link between the two poems was severed (de Vane 1955, p. 107). The temporary linking of the two poems complicates the argument, but does not seriously affect its results. William E. Harrold (1973) discusses the complementarity of the two poems, pp. 37-51. "My Last Duchess" will be read first, in any case, and "Count Gismond" will only follow when the reader becomes interested in evidence for the Duke's character (see below). The inclusion of the second poem in his analysis will lead the reader to narrow the poem's meaning and parallel elements will gain in importance (cp. Harrold 1973, p. 50). In Harrold the reading of the Countess' character is affected by that of the Duke's.

⁵ This and the following quotations are taken from *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Roma A. King, vol. III (Athens, Ohio, 1971), pp. 201-202.

The text contains questions demanding some response, probably non-verbal, from the person addressed, e.g.,

Will't please you sit and look at her? (5)

This close relationship between language and situation makes the tone of the Duke's speech very lively and informal, an effect that is enhanced by the variation in sentence length, by elliptical syntax, by the Duke's piling up of parallel clauses instead of forming complex sentences, by his vocabulary and by his groping for words:

She had
A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; (21-23)

The heroic couplets, in which the speech is cast, do little to blur this effect of lively informality. They are handled with such unobtrusiveness and freedom that they hardly do more than intensify the effect of the Duke's eloquence, authority, and self-confidence. Only in lines 49 to 53 the verse is very regular, which contributes to a change in tone that supports the point of the poem (see below, p. 71).

Although the part of the Duke offers material rich enough for an impressive performance, "My Last Duchess" cannot possibly be performed on stage. The text is obviously too short – performance would take no longer than three or four minutes;⁶ and into this short time so much material would have to be packed that the audience could hardly follow it. The kind-hearted character of the Duchess is described, the function of the Duke's partner is revealed, and these in turn are meant to illuminate the character and position of the Duke himself. Meanwhile, the allusions to persons and events must remain obscure even to an educated audience.

The main problem in performance, however, would be presented by the envoy. He does not speak, but is referred to all the time. He would appear as an exceedingly pale and somewhat ridiculous figure, totally defined by the Duke's words. Browning uses all his ingenuity to make it possible for the envoy to remain silent. The extreme comes in the Duke's remark:

[Strangers] seemed as they would ask me, if they
durst,

⁶ See Bowen et. al. 1978, pp. 216-219, who discuss two readings of the poems by Alexander Scourby (3 min. 4 sec.) and Frank Silvera (3 min. 42 sec.).

How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. (11-13)

Not only are gestures and movements recorded but also words, words we should expect to hear in performance.

This somewhat odd procedure indicates that the scene cannot be meant to be staged; it confirms what the wealth of references to scenery and to action suggests. The envoy and the scenery do not help to constitute the meaning of the Duke's speech, as they would in drama. On the contrary, it is the Duke's speech that gives meaning to everything else; we see everything from a single point of view, his – a characteristic that the Dramatic Monologue shares with fictional texts.

If "My Last Duchess" cannot be performed on stage, it may be that it can at least be recited in front of an audience. The conflict between the scene created in the Duke's speech and the reciter on the platform would make this difficult, too. The tone of the Duke's speech would invite some acting on the part of the performer, but as Geoffrey Crump has observed, the audience will then immediately feel the need for the partner's presence (Crump 1964, p. 61). On the other hand, if all acting is avoided, the delivery will be relatively formal – a procedure in conflict with the presentation of the Duke in his speech. At the same time, the problem of allusiveness and compression is as serious in recital as in stage performance. Indeed, as Richard D.T. Hollister has observed, for a recital of the monologue to be successful, the speaker needs to introduce and explain the situation⁷ on which the poem is based, and thus, it may be argued, has to give away the point of the poem. Outside of the text⁸, Browning only provides the title, which focuses our attention, and an indication of place.

⁷ Hollister 1955, p. 500. Hollister gives the text of such an introduction:

In "My Last Duchess" the scene is laid in an upper room of a duke's palace, where on a wall behind a curtain is a fine painting of the Duke's former wife, his last duchess. The duke has been showing his art treasures to an envoy, from a count, who has come to arrange for a marriage between the count's daughter and the Duke. Among the Duke's art treasures is the picture of his last duchess. As the Duke draws back the curtain that hides from the public stare the beauty and the purity of his former wife he is fascinated for a moment, for it is a beauty and a purity that was, and is, beyond his power to comprehend fully and to possess for himself in a spiritual way. As he gazes intently on the picture, so intently that she seems to become alive - which, deep down within him, he may wish could be true, - the Duke says half to himself in the presence of the envoy, "That's my last duchess, looking as if she were alive." (pp. 500-501).

⁸ Browning takes "advantage of the directness and vividness which the method of presentation through characters in dialogue affords, and yet

"My Last Duchess" can only develop its full force if it is read in a book. Despite the difficulties of performance or recital, however, it is essential that one should imagine the scene on the stage of one's mind. The poem may therefore be called a "closet drama," in a sense that has nothing derogatory about it.

The eloquence of the Duke's imposing personality pulls the reader along, and to quite some extent the reader identifies with the addressee of the Duke's speech. He learns about the Duke's love of the arts, about his former wife, and may perhaps wonder about his pride and jealousy. Towards the end of the poem the reader experiences two shocks. He learns that the Duke has got rid of his wife (lines 45/46), and even more stunning that the Duke's words have been addressed to the envoy of a future father-in-law (line 51).

The effect of these two points on the reader would be lost if the situation in the poem were explained beforehand, but the effect is strong in the poem. The reader wonders why the Duke should have told all this to the envoy, what his motives are, and in general, what kind of person he is. These questions send the reader back to the text.⁹

Reading the poem again, the reader has changed his attitude towards it. He no longer tends to identify with the envoy, since he now knows who he is. Instead, the reader is trying to get an understanding of the Duke. He approaches the text in the way a detective might read the transcript of an incriminating tape. He re-reads and studies it in search of revealing contradictions and other clues, and by way of induction¹⁰ tries to arrive at certain conclusions about the Duke. The speech has become evidence – evidence of motives and intentions, of character.¹¹

The motives and intentions of the Duke¹² are the battleground for the critics of "My Last Duchess." Some

to write in freedom from the limitations which condition the form of a play." (Prior 1947; 1964, p. 224).

⁹ Cp. Jack 1973, p. 93.

¹⁰ The inductive reasoning of the detective reminds one of the fact that the prototype of all detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," was first published in 1841, one year before "My last Duchess." But in the poem - as in Browning's later crime story *The Ring and the Book* - the reader has to do without the assistance of a master detective. The limitations, not the triumph of inductive reasoning, are shown.

¹¹ Browning's "strategy for forcing the reader to work his way fully into the speaker's point of view also affords the patient reader the imaginative pleasure of discovering the links between words and thoughts" (Sinfield 1972, p. 29).

¹² An exhaustive treatment of the views expressed up to 1970 is offered by R.J. Berman (1972).

commentators believe that the Duke delivers his speech as a warning to be conveyed to his future wife.¹³ Others have objected that the Duke is more interested in obtaining the dowry than a submissive wife. If the envoy were to report this speech to the count's daughter it were unlikely that either the dowry or the submissive wife would be forthcoming. Therefore, these critics take the Duke's speech to reveal a lack of self-control (Sinfield 1972, p. 5). They argue that the Duke believes his egoistic carriage to be proper to his great nobility; or they contend that he is stupid or simply mad (Langbaum 1974, p. 79), and "does not realize that he has given himself away" (Jerman 1957, pp. 488-489) to the count's emissary.

Given this diversity of conclusions, a careful analysis of the external evidence is considered essential, and Browning scholars have spared no efforts in doing this, especially in trying to specify the historical events that may have served Browning as a source, starting from the only authorial note: "Ferrara," following the title of the poem. The Duke is usually identified as Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the sixteenth century, his last Duchess would be a daughter of Cosimo de Medici named Lucrezia, who died under mysterious circumstances in 1561. Even the envoy has been identified, one Nikolaus Madruz,¹⁴ the emissary of Maximilian II, King of Austria.

This knowledge, however, does not help us very much. Browning does not seem to have been after such historical accuracy. The two artists' names that are mentioned – Frà Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck – sound as if they were meant to be familiar to an educated audience; but both are fictional.

Not even appeal to the author's intentions helps us further. When Browning was asked what the Duke means by saying: "I gave commands," (45) he replied: "Yes, I meant that the commands were that she be put to death," but a moment later he added: "Or he might have had her shut up in a convent."¹⁵

Thus, external evidence does not lead us anywhere, and we are again driven back to the text. In the end, the reader is forced to realize that his conclusions finally depend on the position he himself takes, in other words, that all his results will be relative.

Browning's "My Last Duchess" then invites two approaches. Though they are contradictory, they need not directly conflict with each other in the reader's experience.

¹³ This opinion was first expressed by Mrs. Sutherland Orr [1885] 1895, p. 251.

¹⁴ *Complete Works*, ed. King, vol. III, p. 371.

¹⁵ Quoted in *Complete Works*, ed. King, vol. III, p. 372.

Because the questioning points are placed at the end of the poem, the approaches may follow each other in time. In one the reader is carried along; in the other he keeps his distance. In one he is moved by the lively and energetic speech of the Duke; in the other he tries to work out its implications. In one he lets himself be impressed by a personality; in the other he deals with a case. One approach is invited by the informal, even colloquial language, the other by the obscurity of the Duke's motives. In one the language may be said to serve eloquence, in the other evidence.

This distinction between two attitudes towards the text, between two ways of reading, is reflected in the interpretations of the poem. As we have seen, attempts to give definite reasons for the Duke's behaviour fail. That path does not lead to an interpretation of the text. Robert Langbaum concludes that "when we have said all the objective things about Browning's 'My Last Duchess,' we will not have arrived at the meaning until we point out what can only be substantiated by an appeal to effect." (Langbaum 1974, p. 76). In Langbaum's view this is

that moral judgment does not figure importantly in our response to the duke ... What interests us more than the duke's wickedness is his immense attractiveness. His conviction of matchless superiority, his intelligence and bland amorality, his poise, his taste for art, his manners - ... these qualities overwhelm the envoy, causing him apparently to suspend judgment of the duke, for he raises no demur. The reader is no less overwhelmed. We suspend moral judgment because we prefer to participate in the duke's power and freedom ... (Langbaum 1974, p. 77)

Here the Duke is seen as a Promethean Romantic hero, as heir to the "I" of the Romantic poetry of experience. Moral judgement is only important "as the thing suspended, as a measure of the price we pay for the privilege of appreciating to the full this extraordinary man." (Langbaum 1974, p. 77).

Philip Drew contradicts Langbaum's view. He sees Browning's poetry as "essentially a poetry which demands judgements of the reader and normally provides him with fairly plain hints as to what his judgement is expected to be." (Drew 1970, p. 27). He summarizes Langbaum's account of "My Last Duchess" and continues:

If this is so, it is important that when we suspend moral judgement for the sake of reading the poem, this should mean not an anaesthetizing of the moral sense for the duration of the poem but a recognition that our acquaintance with the speaker depends on a provisional acceptance of his point of view, an

acceptance which is continually revised and qualified by our judgements ...

Sympathy with the speaker does "not preclude a moral judgement of [him], just as we are able to love people and judge them." (Drew 1970, p. 28).

The difference between Langbaum's and Drew's interpretations is obviously based on different ways of reading the poem. Langbaum reads it as an example of eloquence, and it is no coincidence that he comes very close to identifying the reader's position with that of the silent envoy. Drew's attitude, on the other hand, is more distanced. His approach fuses Langbaum's reading with the analytic one associated with the term evidence.¹⁶ It is significant that he rejects Langbaum's argument concerning the acquiescence of the envoy by insisting that "this is not, of course, the same as transcending the reader's moral sense." (Drew 1970, p. 28).

Both readings are invited by "My Last Duchess" and neither brings out its full force. Langbaum over-emphasizes the reader's attitude towards the poem as eloquence over against evidence; Drew minimizes the difference between the two attitudes. But it is the tension between the two on which the effect of the poem depends. First the reader is impressed by the personality of the Duke, and by the richness of his life; then the revelation of the major dramatic points causes the reader to reconsider the figure from a more distanced point of view, to try to find out the truth about the Duke, and to judge him. The tension between sympathy and judgement is thus closely related to two ways of reading the text, pacing –adapted to the Duke's eloquence – and study.

This example shows us how the interpretation of a text is related to the process of experiencing it, and how conflicting ways of experience may create tensions that are essential to an understanding of the text. These tensions will appear again in the following chapters – in a radical form, however, which instead of enhancing the experience may disturb or destroy it.

¹⁶ Drew (1970) distinguishes three stages in the reading of a dramatic monologue: 1) "the drawing of inferences to complete the poem" (p. 15); 2) "the next stage is normally one of comparison" - with external and internal elements, or with our own views (p. 16); 3) "an assessment of the speaker and his views" (p. 17). Drew emphasizes that "those reactions to the monologue, which I have for convenience divided into successive stages, are not so divided when we read the poem. They overlap and continually modify one another." (p. 17/18). In any case, all the stages distinguished here are concerned with what I have called "evidence."