

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

SEMESTER 4

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Some scholars interpret dramatic monologue as a predominantly Victorian and modern poetical form growing out of the Romantic epistemological shift to a form of 'poetry of experience'. Since the romantic era poetry has tended to offer the poet's subjective experience of phenomena through a fusion of the perceiving subject and the world. In such a situation the poet's experience is dramatized as an actual event. It is not formulated as an idea and the readers are not supposed to take any discursive position to support or refute that idea. Perhaps such a situation generates a sense of comfort for a majority of readers. Following this argument, critics like Langbaum draw our attention to the continuity between Romantic lyrics like Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and Victorian dramatic monologues as manifestations of 'poetry of experience'. However, there are scholars who have questioned such formulation of the dialectic of unalloyed sympathy and objective judgment. There were different models of writing poems with a single dramatic speaker in the early nineteenth century. There were two main trends of development. One trend arose out of impersonation which was a standard exercise in classical rhetoric. The other form was Romantic monodrama in which a single speaker expresses a series of passions which are often accompanied with music.

Critics like Sinfield argue that the dramatic monologue offered opportunities for oblique self-expression which were fully utilized by the Victorian poets who were desperate to escape the burdens placed

on them by Romantic concepts of poetic subjectivity. Mason, however, observes that Browning's experiment with the drama and the dramatic monologue were shaped by Romantic 'anti-theatrical' attitudes privileging poeticity over action, written text over production and the authority of the author over the interpretation of directors.

Hobsbaum, while tracing the trajectory of the dramatic monologue as a form in the Victorian era, draws our attention to the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century tendency to extract dramatic soliloquies from their contexts and to reprint them in elocutionary handbooks. The decline of traditional stage drama into psychologizing and lyricizing fragments contributed to the rise of the dramatic monologue. Based on the assumption about the connections between nineteenth century 'mental science' and the rise of the dramatic monologue, nineteenth century reviewers approached the dramatic monologue as a new form of psychological poetry. The Victorian dramatic monologues are built upon a complex array of overlapping and interacting relationships among the poet, the speaker, the inscribed or implied auditor and the reader. Whereas Browning typically presents the 'personality' of his speakers from an exterior vantage point, Tennyson typically presents the 'consciousness' of his speakers from an interior perspective, using lyrical and rhetorical rather than naturalistic dramatic modes. So, the Victorian poets, instead of foregrounding a coherent construction of the speaker and its relation to an implied audience, made use of dramatic monologue as a form of writing in radically different ways.