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Structure and Meaning in Browning's "My Last Duchess"

JOSHUA ADLER

READERS of Browning's "My Last Duchess" have seldom failed to notice that the poem both begins and ends with a work of art; nor has the emblematic nature of the sculpture described in the concluding lines escaped attention. What does not appear to have been observed, however, is that these factors are part of a structural device which provides a clue to the meaning of the poem. Once we are aware of this, it becomes easier for us to confront the problems on which critics have been divided over the years: namely, whether the Duke is "witless" or "shrewd," what exactly were the "commands" he gave, and how we are to assess his aesthetic perceptivity.¹ No less important for an understanding of the poem, its structure corresponds to a view of human relationships extremely widespread in Victorian literature.

Browning's method in this poem is to begin and end the monologue with a double frame: an outer one of aesthetic interest and an inner one of social convention. The first four lines show the speaker adopting from the outset an aesthetic posture:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

The conclusion of the monologue shows the speaker again drawing attention to a work of art:

Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

¹See especially R. R. Jerman, "Browning's Witless Duke," *PMLA*, 72 (1957), 488-493; Laurence Perrine, "Browning's Shrewd Duke," *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 157-159; B. N. Pipes, Jr., "The Portrait of 'My Last Duchess,'" *VS*, 3 (1960), 381-386; R. F. Fleissner, "Browning's Last Lost Duchess: A Purview," *VP*, 5 (1967), 217-219; William Cadbury, "Lyric and Anti-Lyric Forms: A Method for Judging Browning," *UTQ*, 34 (1964), 49-67; Roy E. Gridley, *Browning* (London, 1972), pp. 57-59; William F. Harrold, *The Variance and the Unity* (Ohio Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 37-51; Ian Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 90, 93-95.

Within this outer frame of aesthetics is an inner one of social courtesy. "Will't please you sit and look at her?" (l. 5), coming immediately after the first part of the aesthetic frame, is matched by "Will't please you rise?" (l. 47), which introduces the second part of the social frame continuing down to the aesthetic conclusion of the poem quoted above.

The Duke's account of his relationship with his last Duchess and its termination is thus clamped within a double frame. I hope to demonstrate that this structure, reflecting as it does the Duke's whole mode of living, is an integral part of the meaning of the poem. I shall also attempt to show that the pattern of self-enclosure thus established brings "My Last Duchess" into close relationship with two major concerns in Victorian literature: the superiority of the dynamic, spontaneous mode of life over the static and self-imprisoned, and the problem of culture and ethics in modern society.

Both of the frames referred to above point inward to the central section of the monologue, for in both of them the Duke's formulations betray that obsession with power and that cynical determination to use it which have been the undoing of his victim. The works of art to which he draws his hearer's attention in the aesthetic frame are pointed out not so much for their intrinsic beauty as for the fact that they are evidence of their owner's fine connoisseurship and ability to commission the most skillful artists. This is complemented by the demonstration of his insistence that his authority shall not be trifled with: only he may draw aside the curtain covering his wife's portrait. And while he feels he has an uncanny gift for reading his companions' thoughts, they dare never, he thinks, ask the question whose answer might satisfy the curiosity aroused by the depth and passion of the sitter's glance. Similarly, the "rarity" at the end of the poem, the possession of which is an instance of his prowess as an art collector, is obviously an emblem of his own condition—Neptune taming a sea-horse, a creature symbolic of vitality and freedom.²

This resolute assertion of power is what unites the aesthetic frame of the poem to the inner one, that of social convention. "Will't please you sit?" and "Will't please you rise?" are couched as questions but are in fact commands issued by a social superior. This is ironically emphasized by the over-courteous, "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir"—no standing on the order of precedence. To appreciate the Duke's motives fully, one must notice how

²George Monteiro, "Browning's 'My Last Duchess,'" *VP*, 1 (1963), 234-237, describes the statue as "a personal allegory" and relates it to the fashion for allegorical portraits in the Italian Renaissance.

carefully he has staged the interview. It occurs in the course of negotiations, which have already begun and are probably nearing termination, with the father of the next Duchess, she who is the real “object,” to use the speaker’s own word, of the whole conversation. The financial arrangements have been as good as concluded; his repetition that it is not money that really interests him, tinged with just a touch of flattery—or is it merely the politeness demanded by convention?—regarding the Count’s reputation for generosity, rings false. We are left unconvinced that the daughter is more important than the money, but what does emerge as a certainty is that the emissary is expected to deliver the message that the Duke will brook no trifling with his honor or his feelings. Above all, the Count would be well advised to instruct his daughter appropriately if he does not wish her to share the fate of her predecessor. With this in view, the Duke has arranged a gathering at his palazzo, during the course of which the Count’s emissary is drawn aside and led to an upper gallery suitably adorned with *objets d’art*, one of which is the former Duchess’ portrait, concealed by a curtain in front of which a seat has been placed. It is in this seat that the Duke’s guest is virtually imprisoned for as long as is needed to deliver the monologue culminating in the sinister, “I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” and rounded off by the cynical, “There she stands / As if alive,” which, by taking us back to where we started, is a sign that the Duke considers the main business of the conversation as done. Throughout the interview the Duke is, in effect, manipulating his guest as if he were a puppet—sit down, stand up, look at this, notice that—and his manner is indicative of his whole attitude to life, for in the main body of the monologue the same habits are revealed as in the double frame. The structure of the poem thus corresponds perfectly to its content: just as the monologue is cramped in and the listener held down, so had the Duke attempted to confine his wife within the bounds imposed by his inflexible will.

Unfortunately for the marriage, the wife had, however, proved less docile than the Duke’s present interlocutor. Her ways are, indeed, totally incompatible with the static, hierarchic principle represented by her husband. Not closed in on herself, she is seen as constantly on the move and responding appreciatively to all the good things life has to offer. She is in harmony with the universe at all levels—the natural in her enjoyment of the sunset, the animal in her rides round the terrace with her white mule, and the human in her ready acceptance of the painter’s compliments and the “bough of cherries some officious fool / Broke in the orchard for her.”

All this is gall and wormwood to her husband, whose iron sense of the hierarchies of life is offended by such unseemly spontaneity. That his favor at her breast or his gift of a nine-hundred-year-old name should rank together

with the rest is intolerable, and so we find him consumed by envy of his own inferiors—even of his duchess' mule!³ This leads to sexual jealousy of other men, which his disdainful nature can express only by terms of contempt—Fra Pandolf's compliments become “stuff,” the offerer of the bough of cherries an “officious fool”—and it leads further to a grossly unjust view of his wife as a woman too easily impressed by compliments, with the additional innuendo that she has a roving eye: “her looks went everywhere.” What seems to exasperate him most of all is her all too indiscriminating smile; this it is that finally has to be stopped forever. By the time we reach this point the Duke has revealed himself as hardly less pitiable, in his rage and frustration, than his victim.⁴ He is reduced to the ignoble pastime of comparing himself unceasingly with lesser beings whom he despises, and also to dissimulation. For we cannot believe his claim that he has no “skill / In speech”; he shows himself to be a master of the art of suggestion. It has even been claimed that his skill in speech is “the prime argument for the Duke's shrewdness. . . . His disclaimer of such skill is part of the evidence for it, and should remind the reader of a similar disclaimer by Shakespeare's Mark Antony in his oration on Caesar, for it serves a similar purpose. It is a rhetorical trick, to throw the listener off his guard” (Perrine, p. 158). Moreover, his further assertion that he would not stoop to remonstrate is disproved by his own revelation that his wife had answered him back, that she had plainly set her wits to his and made excuse—“forsooth”!

The Duke, then, stands exposed as a cunning, ruthless pursuer of his aims who nevertheless had fallen victim to rage and jealousy because his beautiful and delectable wife, who would have been such an admirable addition to his art collection if she only *had* let herself be lessoned, had possessed too independent and spontaneous a spirit for the prison-museum which it was her duty to share with him. A further manifestation of the Duke's egoism and possessiveness is the reference to her as “*my* last Duchess” in the first line and the fact that the poem ends with a work cast in bronze “*for me*” (my italics). This is accompanied by the related habit of treating people as objects. He is able to enjoy possession of his wife fully only when she has become a painting on the wall: then he can call that *piece* a wonder. Similarly, with a tell-tale ambiguity, his next duchess' fair self is his *object*.

³Cf. Joseph Solimine, Jr., *Expl*, 26 (1967), item 11: “If the Duke was suspicious of his wife's friendliness only towards other men, it could be said that he was another Othello. Because the innocence of the Duchess, like that of Desdemona, could easily provoke the passions of a proud man, one might justifiably sympathize with the Duke. But when the Duke's jealousy encompasses a mule, when he can allow himself to become unsettled over his wife's devotion to her pet, then it can be inferred that the Duke's hold on reality is tenuous indeed.”

⁴Ollie Cox, “The ‘Spot of Joy’ in ‘My Last Duchess,’” *CLAJ*, 12 (1968), 70-76, discusses at length the Duke's frustration caused by his wife's equating him with everyone else.

At this point, it is right that we should pause and ask ourselves if we are doing full justice to the poem by this perhaps too moralistic reading. Many critics would argue that we are depriving ourselves of considerable pleasure by thus ignoring the complexities in the presentation of both protagonists in the poem. The Duchess, for example, may not have been quite the innocent we have taken her to be. If we try to picture the daily round of her married life we find ourselves coming up against a tantalizing ambiguity in Browning's depiction of her that must be taken into consideration in attempting to judge the Duke. We are not told what exactly is the degree of her innocence. As we have seen, she would appear to have been spirited enough to answer back rather than "let / Herself be lessoned." The question therefore arises as to whether her ready responsiveness to others may not have been partly put on as a provocation to a tyrannical and possessive husband—whether, in other words, she did not take pleasure in seeing his efforts not to wince at every sign of appreciation bestowed elsewhere. We cannot tell. The blush would suggest the contrary—that her appreciation was genuinely spontaneous. But as we do not know what words passed between her and her husband when she plainly set her wits to his and made excuse, and as we are not otherwise admitted into her secret thoughts, the question must remain open.

Nor is the depiction of the Duke himself entirely unambiguous. "My Last Duchess" has always been read, rightly, as an imaginative reconstitution of a past historical period. Browning's purpose was to convey the spirit of Renaissance Italy with particular reference to the marriage relationship, as his aim in its original companion piece, "Count Gismond," was to represent France in the age of chivalry. "My Last Duchess" accordingly portrays all the ruthlessness, the cynicism, the contempt for human life, the lust for power, and the worldliness that the nineteenth-century Protestant associated with the Italian Renaissance. The irony of the fact that these heinous moral blemishes should be accompanied by a fastidious yet enthusiastic patronage of scholarship and the arts was a repeated source of reflection in nineteenth-century literature and forms the basis of, to name only one other work, "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church." The question we are faced with is whether Browning is inviting us to enjoy this irony or to deplore it. Is he holding the Duke up to us for our aesthetic contemplation, as if he himself were a Renaissance *objet d'art* (say a portrait of a nobleman by Moretto), or is he appealing to our moral sense by raising issues having particular relevance to modern times? Or is he perhaps attempting both things simultaneously?

Criticism of this poem over the last few decades has in fact revealed two diametrically opposed approaches towards the Duke: the aesthetic and the moral. The former would wish us, in contemplating him, to take a stance common in twentieth-century art appreciation, namely adopting the "psychological distance" enabling us to "*savor* the emotional situation presented and

the form in which it is presented"; to let the poem enable us to experience "what it feels like to take up such and such an emotional attitude in a situation, to hold such and such beliefs, and . . . apprehend this in feeling whether or not we ourselves do ordinarily take up that particular emotional attitude or hold those particular beliefs."⁵

The most influential reader of this school is Robert Langbaum, who, insisting on the Duke's "immense attractiveness," tells us that we "suspend moral judgment because we prefer to participate in the duke's power and freedom. . . . Moral judgment is in fact important as the thing to be suspended, as a measure of the price we pay for the privilege of appreciating to the full this extraordinary man."⁶

The other class of reader will demur that in asking us—at least partly—to historicize our moral judgment, Langbaum neglects to take into account that while the Duke is a Renaissance personage, he is nevertheless the product of a Victorian imagination. This class of reader will reply with L. Robert Stevens that our identification with Browning's hero "must be only temporary . . . for in our final assessment we know that the Duke is an irretrievably lost soul."⁷

If we adopt the "aesthetic" approach, we are ensured the pleasure of sharing Browning's presumed delight in conjuring up for us a character so sublimely indifferent to moral imperatives, so secure in his power and social position, that he can afford to be blithely *insouciant* as to the possibility of his interlocutor's being appalled at the realization that he is negotiating to confide his master's daughter to the tender mercies of a demon—might in fact even derive an extra and perverse enjoyment were he to observe the dawning of such a realization on the emissary's face. We will find support for this reading of the poem in Browning's obvious delight in creating other villains like the Bishop of St. Praxed's or Mr. Sludge or in granting us access to the mental world of psychopaths such as Porphyria's lover or Johannes Agricola. It should be noted, however, that we are not absolutely forced to make the choice, for the "moral" attitude does not necessarily exclude the "aesthetic" one; on the contrary, it can be taken as subsuming it, thus being enriched by it and giving us a poem, not a tract.

The "moral" view would, accordingly, while recognizing the Duke's attractiveness and Browning's ability to let his imagination make itself at home in the private world of such characters, read the poem with a view to seeing whether it contains any obvious justification for placing it within the broader context of the abiding Victorian concern with the problem, precisely,

⁵Harold Osborne, *Aesthetics and Art Theory: An Historical Introduction* (New York, 1970), p. 260.

⁶*The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (London, 1957), p. 77.

⁷"Aestheticism in Browning's Early Renaissance Monologues," *VP*, 3 (1965), 19-24.

of the relationship between art and morality. If we attempt this, we shall immediately be struck by the juxtaposition of two characters, one immovably absorbed in the pursuit of his own ends and the other vibrating in sympathy with her fellow creatures, ever open to the beauty and goodness in the universe. This contradistinction is so integral a part of the Victorian literary sensibility and so widespread in the fiction of the period that no reading of a text involving a relationship such as that described in "My Last Duchess" can afford to ignore it. That this polarity of attitudes was present to Browning's own mind is strongly suggested by its existence in a related poem, begun the year "My Last Duchess" was published: "The Flight of the Duchess." One must not, of course, fall into the error of confusing the protagonists of the respective poems. The two Dukes are emphatically not the same character; neither are the two Duchesses. But the parallels between the two relationships are too manifest to be ignored. In both works we have a wife incarcerated in a palace or castle where, as the later poem has it, she was merely to know "Her duty and station," and in both she proves temperamentally incapable of repressing "the life and gladness / That over-filled her" in order to subserve the soul-destroying demands of her husband's ego. The two Duchesses, moreover, share certain important traits of character. Like her southern counterpart, the Moldavian Duchess "was not hard to please," was responsive to all the life around her (witness the description of her arrival at the castle), had the same knack for conveying appreciation and the same kindness to animals:

As for us, styled the 'serfs and thralls,'
She as much thanked me as if she had said it,
(With her eyes, do you understand?)
Because I patted her horse while I led it.

The egotism of the two Dukes, both such sticklers for form, has its artistic counterpart in Andrea del Sarto, the "Faultless Painter"—"faultily faultless" as Tennyson might have called him, engaged as he is in an utterly solipsistic and inhuman concern with his own activity:

I, painting from myself and to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
Or their praise either.

Andrea's one redeeming feature, absent in the Duke, is that at least he knows—and even seems partly to deplore—that he is living in a moral twilight. This enables him to appreciate his rivals' superiority over him as expressed in their blushful response to other men's opinions—the same blush and the same heart "too soon made glad" that introduce the Duke's catalogue of grievances: "The sudden blood of these men! at a word— / Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too."

The amorality which the Duke shares with the painter, relative in the latter, absolute in the former, has caused the faultless artist to degenerate into a "low-pulsed . . . craftsman" and the aristocratic collector into a travesty of

the art lover. The implications of this similarity are more far-reaching than at first meets the eye, as becomes clearer if we also consider another Browning monologist, the Bishop of St. Praxed's, in the context of this divorce between morality and art. Both he and the Duke, when stripped of their Renaissance trappings, can be seen as exhibiting those shortcomings which Victorian writers generally considered to be the besetting sins of their upper- and middle-class contemporaries: hypocrisy, materialism, self-indulgence, snobishness and, worst of all, a cold, inhuman spirit of calculation in all their dealings with their fellow men.

L. Robert Stevens' article cited above develops the theme that "My Last Duchess," at one level, "is an exploration of what aestheticism may or, more correctly, may not offer as a testament of life." In this light, "My Last Duchess," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "Pictor Ignotus," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea del Sarto" are discussed in terms of "assessing the role of aesthetics in the scheme of life" and are related to Tennyson's "The Palace of Art." This is a useful starting point, but I believe the problem is much wider and more disturbing than the question of aestheticism as an individual choice. In my view, the poem we are discussing makes a statement on a theme that caused the gravest concern to almost every major writer of the Victorian era. From *Sartor Resartus* to *Heart of Darkness* the reader finds himself involved in a continual, anxious examination of the quality of life as it had developed in the Western world after centuries of cultural evolution.

In "My Last Duchess" and "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," as in Tennyson's "The Palace of Art," we see some of the highest attainments of Western culture perverted to diabolical ends. In a sense, the personae of all three poems may be regarded as representing the danger of moral decay situated at the very heart of the idea of civilization, the only antidote for which, once orthodox faith has lost its hold, is the Sympathy preached by the Romantics and their Victorian successors. It is worth recalling, in this respect, that Browning's Duke has two first cousins in later Victorian fiction—George Eliot's Grandcourt (*Daniel Deronda*) and Henry James's Gilbert Osmond (*The Portrait of a Lady*), another fastidious art collector. These are not merely three stereotypes: the emissary's interview with the Duke would have proceeded differently had he been dealing with either of the other two—just as the three heroines all have their individual personalities—but all three husbands eventually reveal themselves, through their treatment of their wives and their manipulation of others, to have been concealing a hard core of brutality beneath their polished, hyper-civilized exterior, while one at least—the cold, haughty Grandcourt—is repeatedly described in imagery reducing him to an almost reptilian level. The implication in these works would seem to be that once an individual, a class, or a society has reached a certain point of over-refinement, the dark forces of human nature lurking underground threaten to wreak a terrible vengeance for

their unnatural suppression. These works are thus part of the ongoing Victorian diagnosis of the disruptive forces menacing the fabric of Western society.

The Duke is as cunning and ruthless as Grandcourt and Osmond in his drive towards the attainment of his ends. He is indeed a shrewd negotiator, but the nicety with which his every word and gesture are calculated does not negate the fact that he is also profoundly sick. The obsessive glint in his eye is only too obvious. Accordingly, our knowledge of what exactly were the commands as a result of which “all smiles stopped together” is less important than our realization that the Duke embodies that particular form of evil which places technical efficiency and social correctness above human values. B. R. Jerman recalls the well-known story of Browning’s own ambiguous reply to the question of whether his intention had been that the Duchess was to be killed: “‘Yes, I meant that the commands were that she should be put to death.’ And then, after a pause, he added, with a characteristic dash of expression, and as if the thought had just started in his mind, ‘Or he might have had her shut up in a convent’ ” (p. 489, n. 7). My own view is that one’s natural, immediate assumption on reading the poem is that the Duchess was in fact put to death. This not only would be in keeping with the widely held nineteenth-century view of the Italian Renaissance as the age of the stiletto and the poisoned goblet but would also enhance the irony of the Duke’s enjoyment of the lifelike appearance of the portrait. But the precise nature of the Duke’s commands and the manner of his wife’s death are subsidiary to the issue discussed above as being a main theme of Victorian literature—the precarious balance between human decency and social or aesthetic refinement in an over-ripe civilization.

As obsessed in his role of art collector as in that of jealous husband, the Duke has also, I think, developed a discriminating taste and is, as has been argued, “a man of considerable artistic perceptiveness” (Pipes, p. 386). But the poem emphasizes that what impresses him in an artist is his skill and reputation, not his insight. Fra Pandolf has indeed painted body and soul together, in accordance with Browning’s ideal as expressed in “Fra Lippo Lippi,” but the Duke is blind to this, for his shallow judgment of the painter’s *art* as opposed to his admiring discernment of his *technique* causes him to attribute the “spot of joy” in the portrait to the sitter’s naive response to flattery. What he takes for silliness, and what the painter has captured in the “depth and passion of her earnest glance,” is precisely that dynamic responsiveness which he cannot appreciate but which enables the Duchess to elicit the affectionate gesture and the spontaneous compliment, a gift elaborated on in the middle of the poem. Graceless and lonely in contrast, the Duke can command obedience from his inferiors but not love, and he is exhibited to us firmly confined, like his monologue, within the frame of his own megalomania.