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Self-Revelation in “My Last Duchess”

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Certainly, the title of “My Last Duchess” is deliberately equivocal. It offers, firstly, the impression that the Duchess is the *final* Duchess, though we soon surmise her to have been merely the *latest* Duchess; and secondly, and more importantly, it suggests that the poem will focus upon and in so doing reveal the Duchess—just as the Duke reveals her portrait by pulling back the curtains—though actually it is the Duke who is himself unveiled. “My Last Duchess,” in the form of a dramatic monologue, turns out then to be not so much the portrayal of a painted lady, as an exercise in self-revelation.

. . . Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile?

There can be no doubt that here, as elsewhere, a picture of the deceased Duchess is revealed, but its lack of importance is underlined by the shallowness of that picture, at least compared to the one offered of the Duke. By the poem's conclusion, our understanding of the Duchess extends scarcely beyond what we read from the above quotation: her unwillingness to grant the Duke the respect and reverence he demands as his right. To further undermine the importance of the Duchess, we might recall that her portrait, as far as the reader is concerned is painted not by “Frà Pandolf's

hands,” but by Alfonso’s mind: a mind twisted with pride and vainglory. In this way, the *manner* of the presentation is clearly seen to take precedence over the *object* of the presentation.

Indeed, since everything we read in the monologue comes from the point of view of the speaker—at least we will, for the moment, limit ourselves to this assessment—it would perhaps not be an over-statement (though to the charge of over-simplification the plea is guilty) to suggest that everything else: the situation, the painting, even the envoy and in turn ourselves—in so much as we might be equated by the similarity of our role of auditors—is nothing more than stage properties. Certainly the situation of a private meeting is a convenience—much like a confessional—which fosters a certain obtuseness and perhaps engenders, in part, the lack of verbal restraint we witness. As for the emissary, his role as agent for the future Duchess—or rather the father of the future Duchess—is of little consequence. Whether or not the Duke does remarry is not resolved (though the implication of the title suggests that he does) and is itself of minor importance. The role of the emissary does provide a context for the Duke’s monologue, providing an added rapport to his reflections, though we can picture with equal ease the same words spouted at almost anyone—including ourselves. Only the portrait holds a position slightly superior to that of prop, for it shows itself to be more in the order of a foil.

If we are now in agreement with the Duke himself, granting him pride of place, the focus of “My Last Duchess” in our eyes if not in the eyes of the Duchess, we might now turn our attention to several particulars of this self-revelation.

One question that comes to mind is the appropriateness of the self-exposure. If there is no actual confession of murder:

. . . I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together

there is at least a sinister suspicion of the “commands” that so soon stopped those liberally and impartially bequeathed smiles. Besides this, the Duke exposes his pride, his insolence, lust, truculence and his scurrilousness. This, we should recall, is disclosed to an agent responsible for assessing the Duke’s suitability as future husband to the daughter of a Count. None of this is to say, of course, that the Duke is a fool. His art collection and his language show him to be a man of thought. Unfortunately the thought spins tempestuously around itself, raising up his self image in the fury of the forming waves. Though *we* see his candidness as being counterproductive to the task in hand, the Duke’s ego precludes this self-perception. What we, and perhaps the emissary, see as weakness, the Duke sees as strength. What we see as vice, the Duke sees as virtue. As well as *allowing* no criticism, the Duke, by virtue of his position, is shown to be *immune from* criticism. There is, accordingly, no need to conceal his character and actions, even if he could see reasons—which of course he cannot—for doing so. No fool then, but a man cognisant of no morality outside that of his own creation. The Duke is able to deceive himself, though not the reader. It is here that we see the ironic tone of the *poet’s* voice.

With this mention of the poet, we might briefly turn to our attention to the poetic form of the monologue, by which I mean the rhyming couplets of the Duke’s anathema. This demands one of two things from the reader: a greater effort in the “suspension of disbelief,” or the recognition that the voice we hear is not entirely that of the Duke, the speaker, but also of the poet, the writer. Though each response seems exclusive of the other, the reader might in fact make use of both, if not simultaneously, then in

parallel,¹ All we have examined, thus far, has made use of that extended “suspension of disbelief;” but if we note the existence of that second voice, of the poet, then we find that “My Last Duchess” offers another level of self-revelation.

To begin with, there is the similitude between the Duke and the poet. Where the Duke considers the portrait to be, virtually, an actual person, certainly not identical to his wife but an improved version—one which conforms more closely to his ideal, the poet considers, likewise, the portrait of the Duke, painted in words rather than colours, to be equally actual and equally a person. Their similarities do not end there, for the Duke’s control of the portrait, by means of the curtain, is much like the poet’s control—on a higher level—of the Duke. What we see then is the Duke’s conviction that *owning* art permits control, mirrored with the poet’s conviction that *creating* art permits control. Notice also the parallel roles of the emissary and the reader, each silent—and doubtless contemplative. But with this awareness of the poet’s voice, the reader’s position has changed. He can no longer equate himself completely with the emissary, for now it is the poet who speaks to the reader and the Duke to the emissary.

Also, the irony of the poem, rendered by the difference between what the Duke means to mean and what he is shown to mean, exposes the position of the poet regarding the Duke’s character. As we have noticed in the different levels of control, there seems a message from the poet not so much in condemnation of power, but more a lamentation that such power can rest in

¹By this I mean to avoiding confusion by reading with the *awareness* of the alternate response, though making use of each in its turn and not simultaneously.

unworthy hands.

Certain dangers and complications are inherent in this separating of the narrative voice from the poetic voice, and, in many cases, it proves a fruitless as well as useless exercise. Where we find an ironic tone *behind* such a monologue though, as we do in “My Last Duchess,” the procedure seems unavoidable, for it is indicative of a view different from that of the narrator. And, though outside the scope of this paper, this separation begins to illuminate the problematical relationship between the work of art and the viewer of the work of art.

In conclusion, we might appropriately turn to the last lines:

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

Perhaps nowhere else, in this succinct poem, do we find such revelation of character in so few words. Not only do we see the Duke’s love for art, but also his immense fortune, which allows him not only to purchase art, but also to *order* art made. This might easily be viewed as a displaced creative urge, above the urge of the artist in so much as it requires power rather than effort.

Certain hints have already been made to a godhead quality of the Duke self view, as well as a code of morality which bears witness to that perception. Certainly there is an impression that the Duke, in drawing the statue to our attention, bestows it with particular importance, which leads to the not far fetched hypothesis that the he identifies strongly with the god Neptune, as well as the power demonstrated in the subjugation of the sea horse. As well as this and in support of this, we can hardly deny that the Duke estimates himself to be a “rarity.” And, forming part of that ironic

subtext—which is to say, according to the poet, the vague suggestion that the statue, cast in bronze, possesses the same lack of humanity as the Duke.

As we have seen, the importance of the Duchess—portrait as well as remembered wife—lies chiefly in the service she provides in causing the self-revelation of the Duke's diatribe. The Duke is obsessed not with the lack of respect shown him by the Duchess, but with the discrepancy between the respect she offered and that postulated by his "nine-hundred-years-old-name." This ancient name also forms the basis for his grandiose self image and the sense of being beyond even the touch of time—hence his inclination towards young brides. When the Duke relates her granting favours to others, the real grievance is her inability to grant him special status—the favours are given equally, and equality, to the Duke, is a blasphemy to his own godhead.