The Politics of Monologist Representation

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Abstract

This article proffers a deconstructionist reading of the dramatic monologue and examines its rhetorical strategies and the politics of monologic representation, by which the first-person speaker/ monologist monopolizes discursive space and over-represents himself, while silencing other voices in the text and refusing them the freedom and space to express themselves. Through a close analysis of monologist representation of the Other in various texts, including “Mending Wall” by Robert Frost, “Devonshire Street W. 1” by John Betjeman, as well as Ron Carlson’s short story “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” (albeit a dramatic monologue in prose), this article seeks to expose the ways in which the poetic persona is always partial, interested, and subjective, with not-so-subtle an agenda, a speaker who passes value judgments on the human objects of his overbearing tone. By examining the politics of monologist representation against both Aristotelian ethos and Bakhtinian intonation, the article suggests that readers and critics can give voice to the voiceless in this elastic genre and abandon their sympathetic interpretations that practically absolve monologists of any bias towards their absent enemies or any politics of representation.

Keywords: dramatic monologue, representation, objectivist posturing, reader’s enthrallment,

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أمل لبيب التصوير المونولوجي

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ملخص

تقدم هذه الدراسة قراءة تفكيكية مضادة للمونولوج الدرامي وتحليل الأساليب البلاغية وألعاب التمثيل التي يلجأ إليها الراوي المونولوجي لاحتكار الفضاء الخطابي من خلال التمثيل الذاتي المفرط، واسكات الأصوات الأخرى في النص وحرمانها من الحرية والفضاء للتعبير عن أنفسها. فمن خلال التحليل الدقيق لمثلثات الأتراك في بعض القصائد الإنجليزية مثل "إصلاح جدار" لروبرت فروست، "شارع يفنيشر غرب 1" لجون بينجامن وقصة رون كارلس "الغول اختطف زوجتي" (وهي مونولوج نثري)، تبين هذه الدراسة الأساليب التي تظهر بها الشخصية الشعرية دائمًا متحizzle وغير موضوعية، مع أجندة مكشوفة، كمحدث ببحث مشكلة على البشر عبر نبرته المعجرفة. من خلال تحليل ألعاب التمثيل المونولوجي مقارنة بتئصينات أركسيو وباختين، يقترح المقال أن القراء والنقاد يمكنهم التعاطف مع من لا صوت لهم في هذا النوع الأدبي المرن والتخلي عن تفسيراتهم المتعاطفة التي تبرئ الراوي المونولوجي عمليًا من أي تحيز تجاه أعدائه بينهم أو أي ألعاب تتمثيلية.

مفاتيح البحث: المونولوج الدرامي، التمثيل، التظاهر بال موضوعية، أسئلة القارئ

لا تعبير الافكار الواردة في المخططة عن أفكار هيئة تحرير المجلة أو عمادة البحث العلمي في جامعة بيت لحم. يعتبر المؤلف المسؤول الوحيد عن مضمون المخططة أو أية أخطاء فيها.
The Absent Adversary and the Generically Mandated Silence

More often than not, the dramatic monologue is occasioned by a crushing crisis in the life of the monologist, a bitter sense of embattlement, or a resounding defeat. As such, it is a carefully chosen fragment of retrieved history narrated in retrospect with a will to vengeance, recovery, or setting the record straight. Thus, a defeat in the past can be converted post factum into a cathartic verbal victory in the present through the act of representation. Hence also the ubiquity of masks worn by monologue speakers, which goes to explain the structural imbalance in the representation of the militating self and that of the embattled other. The first-person speaker/monologist, perhaps unconsciously, is keen on over-representing himself while under-representing the third-person other. Because the third-person other is not allowed enough space, if any, to represent him/herself, representing them by the first-person speaker is tantamount to practically silencing them.

It should be noted from the start that the focus of this paper is on the politics of monologist representation rather than on the historical development of the dramatic monologue per se. However, because such politics is found not only in the dramatic monologue but also in other cognate genres, the scope of this paper will naturally extend beyond the dramatic monologue template. Through a close analysis of monologist representation in such poems as “Mending Wall” by Robert Frost, “Devonshire Street W. 1” by John Betjeman, as well as Ron Carlson’s short story “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” (albeit a dramatic monologue in prose), this study examines how an ostensibly detached narrator assiduously but smoothly cultivates his objective image in the mind of the reader so that when he later proceeds to scold and denigrate the other characters in the poem or story, such verbal whipping will pass unnoticed and, if noticed, unprotested.

Though not the first to come to grips with the dramatic monologue, Ina Beth Sessions was definitely one of the earliest literary critics to attempt a standardized definition of the baffling term. In her 1947 PMLA taxonomic article “The Dramatic Monologue,” Sessions tried to clear the confusion that attended earlier critical attempts to assess and define the genre whose popularization, if not origination, is generally attributed to Robert Browning. While noting an already established critical consensus regarding the three quintessential ingredients of a dramatic monologue (i.e., a speaker, an audience, and an occasion for the speech), Sessions added her own spices, “revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action and action which takes place in the present” (508).
Without these seven elements, the dramatic monologue would be “imperfect.” Where one of the three quintessential elements is compromised, the monologue is called by Sessions an approximate monologue, a catch-all in which she lumps all those poems that do not fit her strict definition of the term.

Robert Langbaum, however, was apparently irked in 1957 by the popular acclaim Sessions’ definition seemed to enjoy. With a view to an ontology that locates the dramatic monologue as a reaction to Romantic lyricism, Langbaum has no patience with superficial formal analysis. The importance of the dramatic monologue, according to Langbaum, resides in the dramatic tension between the *sympathy* we feel for the speaker of the poem and the moral *judgment* we are ultimately positioned to make as a result of the apparent silence of the poet (85). In commenting on Langbaum’s analysis of Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” Megan Painter sympathetically says:

> On the surface, the most obvious reason for the necessity of this process [from initial sympathy with the speaker to ultimate judgment] is the absence of the poet as our interpreter. We are then left to our own devices as readers and must make sense of the character’s speech as it occurs in the poem. (25)

Painter goes one step further by arguing that the dramatic monologue, by its very generic nature, favors the readers by allowing them “to participate more fully in the creative and poetic experience precisely because of the absence of the poet from the forefront of the poem” (29).

Likewise, A. Dwight Culler argues that the use of irony in the dramatic monologue, though not peculiar to the genre, undercuts the monologist’s reliability and thus slants his perception of things to suspicion by the reader (367). As such, the reader is called upon “to reconstruct the truth from the telltale hints the speaker unconsciously lets fall” (Culler 368). Taking his cue from Jerome Christensen’s injunction “to read the differentials” we find in the dramatic monologue, Herbert F. Tucker, on the other hand, concludes that “the dramatic monologue is our genre of genres for training in how to read between the lines” (547). Calling the dramatic monologue “the poem à clef” or, a la Wordsworth, “poetry of the unlocked heart,” Tucker explains that “In the reading of a dramatic monologue we do not so much scrutinize the ellipses and blank spaces of the text as we people those openings by attending to the overtones of the different discourses that flank
them. Between the lines, we read in a no man’s land the notes whose intervals engender character” (547). Tucker laments that the critical failure, especially among the New Critics, to take note of this process of character-construction in the dramatic monologue is “a contributing cause for the depression of Browning’s stock” (547).

Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, however, counters Tucker’s complaint by lamenting that “Foregrounding the aggression and rhetorical power of the speaker has thus tended to allow the effacement of the second-person addressee in favor of exploring the complex brush-work in the speaker’s self-portrait” (576). Though fruitful and promising in numerous ways, Wagner-Lawlor’s study spends much less time examining another equally generically mandated silence: that of the plaintiff’s adversary, the absent third-person. She focuses on the “generically mandated silence of the auditor” (576) as a result of the speaker’s “hermeneutical tyranny” (588) and “rhetoric of enthrallment” (589), both of which in turn lead us, the real readers, to be lured into “the speaker’s verbal webs” (578).

My point of departure with past approaches to the dramatic monologue is precisely to distance ourselves from the speaker’s “rhetoric of enthrallment” and to denude the “verbal webs” he carefully knits around his readers in order to have them acquiesce in his petty battles against a conveniently silenced adversary. It is time we played the devil’s advocate, the devil here being a silenced other (neither the textual auditor nor the actual reader of the monologue) who is often maligned and demonized by the speaker. By giving voice to the voiceless, it is also time we abandoned such sympathetic interpretations that practically absolve monologists of any bias towards their absent enemies or any politics of representation.

**Rhetoric of Enthrallment Exposed**

Robert Frost’s famous poem “Mending Wall” is a dramatic monologue that polarizes two mentalities represented by two antithetical country neighbors: a benighted traditionalist and an enlightened rationalist. As is to be expected, the role of the rationalist is assigned to the omniscient poetic persona who acts not only as his own representative but also on behalf of his adversary-cum-neighbor. The poetic persona is a playful, seemingly reasonable character who, unlike his neighbor, cannot understand why neighbors should have fences between them.
The enlightened rationalist starts his monologue with a seemingly objective demonstration that even nature itself revolts against the erection of walls between neighbors:

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. (lines 1-4)

He goes on to contrast the wanton and total destruction of the wall by hunters (“But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,/To please the yelping dogs” lines 8-9), and the partial destruction caused by nature. The destruction of the wall by nature is not just imperceptibly gradual and subtle but also perennial:

The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there. (lines 9-11)

It is also a paradoxically constructive destruction, i.e., designed to open a path just wide enough for two people to cross over to each other as is expected of good neighbors. Yet, his neighbor beyond the hill—itself a natural fence—insists on rebuilding the artificial wall every year at springtime. Though the task is represented in retrospect as gratuitous, Sisyphean, painful, and futile, the speaker resignedly but humorously dubs it a bizarre “kind of out-door game/ One on a side” (lines 20-1).

No extent of reasoning seems to work with this benighted, blind follower of the time-honored cliché, “Good fences make good neighbors” (line 27). Because his is a hand-me-down knowledge, “He will not go behind his father’s saying” (line 44) and venture into the risky realm of dialogue. He shields himself from the heresies of critical, innovative thinking by withdrawing into the comforts of the trodden path of his ancestral wisdom.

According to the speaker, who each spring cannot desist from wondering “If I could put a notion in his head” (line 29), the incorrigibly benighted neighbor does not seem to grasp the annual message of nature that there is no need for walls between neighbors. If nature destroys the wall every year, his superstitious nature—or so opines the poetic persona—tells him it is the work of elves:
‘...Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.’ I could say ‘Elves’ to him,
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
He said it for himself. (lines 36-9)

One cannot help noticing the insincere objectivist posturing of the poetic persona who pretends to rein in his mocking, judgmental impulses in the interest of allowing his adversary the full benefit of free thinking and expression. Yet, this feigned restraint has the rhetorical effect of baiting the reader into consigning the traditionalist neighbor to superstitious thinking when in fact, the reader has no proof of this except the speaker’s tantalizing, half-withdrawn suggestion. Having decoyed the reader into the fray dexterously, and through the hypnotic power of suggestion tilting him/ her against the traditionalist neighbor, the poetic persona can now proceed to cap and seal his representation, unchecked, unhindered:

I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me—
Not of woods only and the shade of trees. (lines 39-43)

Indeed, it is no small wonder that this final summation—this rhetorical triumph of the modern civilized citizen over the primitive savage of the cave—comes towards the end of the poem, and that the last three lines of the poem do not so much constitute a calculated elaboration of the poetic persona’s drawn-out argument against his adversary as an anxious, if only passionate, reinforcement of this argument:

He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.” (lines 44-46)

Ironically, thanks to the traditionalist neighbor’s intransigence, the poetic persona loses as a neighbor, but his moral and philosophical vision to which he rallied his audience emerges monologically victorious. Though the poetic persona obviously recognizes that his loss is a real event that irretrievably belongs to the past, still, not all is lost. With a few calculated strokes from his brush, such
a defeat can be verbally varnished and rhetorically represented under a different light. For this task, the monologist wears the mask of humor and playfulness to hide the bitterness of his defeat at the hands of an ignoramus. Perhaps unconsciously, the monologist is keen on over-representing himself while under-representing his ignorant neighbor. Thus, out of a 387-word monologue, the poetic persona allows his adversary to speak no more than five words directly to the reader, which are repeated verbatim in the last line of the poem, words that are bracketed amid or after intense negative reporting. This editorializing is likely to paralyze the reader’s moral independence and consequently pit him/her against the traditionalist neighbor who is given no equal opportunity to present his own side of the story or personally represent himself. Indeed, Robert Faggen, for instance, seems to fall for the speaker’s verbal webs when he calls the traditionalist a “laconic neighbor” (69), though Faggen has already noted the “rhetorical power” of the speaker who “makes a crafty, wise case for openness against what appears to be the crude creator of barriers and boundaries” (68). On the other hand, Jay Parini, Frost’s biographer, calls him the “taciturn neighbor” who can only “mutter... a proverbial line quoted often in almanacs of the nineteenth century” (emphasis added, 138). Parini then adds rather diffidently (and parenthetically, too), “One could, perhaps, make something of the fact that the neighbor is capable of saying nothing himself except an old proverb” (139).

In either case, the neighbor is blamed for being no match to the persuasive prowess of the speaker; he is either “laconic” or a “mutter[ing]” semi-brute. Yet, neither Parini nor Faggen takes note of the imbalanced representation given by Frost to his contestants. Were the speaker of “Mending Wall” to read these ego-gratifying comments, he would probably gloat like the smug speaker in Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”:

And thus we sit together now,  
And all night long we have not stirred,  
And yet God has not said a word! (lines 58-60)

Frost’s speaker sits in good company, too, with not even a hint of blame or censure. This proves Langbaum’s thesis that the very generic nature of the dramatic monologue “helps to determine our sympathy for the speaker, since we must adopt his viewpoint as our entry into the poem” (4). Hence the need for a contrapuntal reading that puts matters in their right perspective. By exposing the politics of monologic representation, contrapuntal reading purports to denude
how a speaker discreetly warms himself up into the confidence of his readers, builds his case against an absent enemy, only to have these readers participate in his quarrels with a conveniently silenced, antiseptically quarantined other. I will elaborate on this issue in my next critique of John Betjman’s poem “Devonshire Street W. 1”

A Contrapuntal Reading Required

Devonshire Street W. 1

The heavy mahogany door with its wrought-iron screen
Shuts. And the sound is rich, sympathetic, discreet.
The sun still shines on this eighteenth-century scene
With Edwardian faience adornments—Devonshire Street.

No hope. And the X-ray photographs under his arm 5
Confirm the message. His wife stands timidly by.
The opposite-built brick house looks lofty and calm
Its chimneys steady against a mackerel sky.

No hope. And the iron nob of this palisade
So cold to the touch, is luckier now than he 10
‘Oh merciless, hurrying Londoners! Why was I made
For the long and painful deathbed coming to me?’

She puts her fingers in his as, loving and silly,
At long-past Kensington dances she used to do
‘It’s cheaper to take the tube to Piccadilly 15
And then we can catch a nineteen or a twenty-two.’

In his stylistic analysis of John Betjeman’s above-cited poem, Peter Verdonk rightly identifies three perspectives or voices: “that of the man, his wife, and a detached observer” (24). Verdonk’s overall analysis takes the poem as a prime text of literary discourse that is both similar and dissimilar to non-literary discourse. The major difference, according to Verdonk, is that “The meanings of literary discourses are indefinite, undetermined, unstable, and indeed often
unsettling” (22). Perrine and Arp have long expressed similar doubts, “… the correct determination of tone in literature is a much more delicate matter than it is with spoken language, for we do not have the speaker’s voice to guide us” (145).

So, what does this view of the poem as discourse entail upon the relationship among the three speakers within the poem, on the one hand, as well as upon the relationship between these speakers and their audience, on the other? M. H. Abrams says that “To conceive a work as an utterance suggests that there is a speaker who has determinate personal qualities, and who expresses attitudes both toward the characters and materials within the work and toward the audience to whom the work is addressed” (217). Though Verdonk proceeds from a similar premise that “a discourse is a context-bound act of communication verbalized in a text” and that “a communicative act is inherently an interpersonal activity between two parties” (22), the fact that the omniscient narrator masks his presence—by not using a first-person pronoun—makes him such “an unidentifiable voice” (23) that Verdonk eventually assimilates him with the voice of the man. 1 Unfortunately, Verdonk fails to see this seemingly objective posturing either as an example of Aristotelian ethos projected by the narrator within the course of his communicative act and designed to function as a subtle means of persuasion (see Abrams, 217); or as an example of Bakhtinian intonation which is normally “oriented in two directions: with respect to the listener as ally or witness and with respect to the object of the utterance as the third, living participant whom the intonation scolds or caresses, denigrates or magnifies” (cited in Abrams, 218). Rather than seeing the verbal absence of the first-person pronoun in the voice of the so-called detached observer as a contrived, calculated speech act, Verdonk sees it as proof of the absence of the very voice itself.

As shall be argued later, both the Aristotelian ethos and the Bakhtinian intonation are so strongly present in the discourse of the omniscient narrator that it is impossible to mistake him for another voice. W. J. T. Mitchell’s analysis of Robert Browning’s poem “My Last Duchess”—seen also as a representation of a speech act—can be useful in this context. Although Betjeman’s “Devonshire Street W. 1” is only a cognate of the dramatic monologue, it can equally benefit from reading its politics of representation as symptomatic of the poetic genre. And just as the duke’s “manipulation of representations” is designed to place the reader “in a position of weakness and servitude, forced to hear a repugnant speech but deprived of any voice or power to counteract it” (Mitchell, 19-20), so does Betjeman’s narrator subsume the two other voices and deprive them of
any voice or power to counter his own. Thus, if “Devonshire Street W. 1” can be shown at least as a cognate of the dramatic monologue by a single *dramatis persona*, then it will become clear why the two other speakers are reduced to mere stagehands.

The most intuitive objection to Verdonk’s summation is his reversal of the order of perspectives in which they originally appear in the poem. Readers of the poem are, in fact, treated to the perspective of the so-called “detached observer” *before* rather than *after* they are treated to that of the man—a stylistic feature not void of a motivated choice, as we have been taught by Verdonk himself (5-6). Another glaring omission on the part of Verdonk is that the number of lines over which each perspective spans passes completely unconsidered. Out of a total of 16 lines, the so-called “detached observer” narrates 12 lines of the poem, while husband and wife are allowed to make a 2-line fragment each. A third objection has to do with the reluctance of Verdonk, who uses the Betjeman poem to illustrate the question of the diversity of perspectives in literary discourse (23), to see any stylistic significance whatsoever in the fact that the perspectives of husband and wife are mediated, indeed conveniently filtered, through the overshadowing perspective of the poetic persona. This filtering process allows the poetic persona to choose *where* and *when* to deliver or postpone the two other perspectives at will.

Finally, the most obvious objection one can make to Verdonk is occasioned by the latter’s hastened disavowal or renunciation of his initial distinction of *three* perspectives in the poem. “But on closer consideration,” retracts Verdonk, “things are not so simple” (24). He cites the very linguistic complexity of the description of concrete details as the first piece of evidence of the convergence of the perspectives of the poetic persona and the man:

> The very fact of linguistic elaboration here implies a heightened perception of detail. Who then, we might reasonably ask, would perceive these things in such a way? There would be no motivation for the detached observer to do so, but there would be for somebody who has effectively just received a death sentence. So what we have here, we might infer, is the condemned man’s first-person perspective on reality. It would seem that from the moment he leaves the specialist’s surgery, his perceiving senses are in a state of high alert. (24)
But this conclusion, conjectural as it is, flies in the face of the unmistakably petulant irrationality of the shocked patient who puts the wrong question to the wrong people about why he was thus singled out for undeserved punishment. And it is a great wonder, indeed, that a man, who has just been informed that he is terminally ill, should nonetheless observe, *inter alia*, that the door of the clinic that has just pronounced his death sentence is a heavy mahogany with a wrought-iron screen!

Verdonk makes another conjectural conclusion that further mystifies the notion of the “diversity of perspectives” he has already set out to illustrate:

> Of course, we might interpret this detailed awareness in different ways. Perhaps it intimates the acute sensitivity and heightened activity of the senses of someone who knows he is going to die, and therefore now takes in everything around him in a world he is soon going to leave. (25)

This tentative suggestion (indicated here by “Perhaps”) becomes an unquestionable conviction (indicated by “In fact”) one page later and routs, once and for all, the putative third perspective in the poem, thus curtailing the three perspectives Verdonk postulated before to two only. Just as Browning “seems to paralyze the reader’s normal moral judgment by his virtuosic representation of [the duke’s] villainy” (Mitchell, 21), so does Betjeman’s omniscient narrator impress his own virtue and objectivity upon Verdonk to the extent that it does not occur to the latter to offer a contrapuntal reading, to use a phrase frequently used by Edward Said. It seems that Verdonk thinks the narrator is too detached to be true and thus consigns him to virtual nonexistence.

Yet, one cannot help wondering how the patient’s senses can, despite all appearances to the contrary, be said to be in a heightened state of perception, while his single utterance is inarguably that of a man gripped by a fit of hysteria. On the contrary, the heightened perception of concrete detail suggests a “detached observer” who is calm, cool, and collected—a luxury the infuriated patient cannot afford. As a matter of fact, the perspective of the poetic persona itself is more complex than first meets the eye and thus warrants closer consideration. At first, one notices that it is of two distinct kinds, depending on *what* or *whom* it is directed to.
The first is a perspective on the concrete objects which clutter the poem’s scene (lines 1-10). The perspective here is heavy with details and is presented with apparent detachment. What Aristotle calls ethos is also projected here by the ostensibly detached narrator, and for the first ten lines of the poem, the suave narrator works assiduously but smoothly to cultivate his own objective image in the mind of the reader. Coupled with his abstention from using the first-person pronoun—in itself a very effective rhetorical mask—this calculated move is directed towards the reader and designed to establish the narrator’s objectivity. After this goal is achieved, readers will naturally find themselves primed, if not cajoled, to become the narrator’s allies or witnesses. Bakhtin’s idea of intonation exactly! Thus, when the narrator proceeds to scold the patient and denigrate his “stupid” wife, such verbal whipping will pass unnoticed and, if noticed, unprotested.

The second is a perspective on the two other humans who each make a fleeting appearance in the poem. It is a perspective that is scanty of detail and is presented with apparent involvement. No longer flaunting detachment, the poetic persona becomes a subjective commentator with not-so-subtle an agenda, a speaker who passes value judgments on the human objects of his overbearing tone. Here we are faced with a skewed perspective that presents the patient and his wife in a negative light. It is noteworthy that in his rapport with these two characters who make up the cast of the poem, the poetic persona comes off as a round character: callous, nosy, opinionated, stereotyping, egotistic, domineering, editorializing; while husband and wife come off as flat characters: the one as a petulant hysteric, the other as a silly, insensitive miser. It is further noteworthy that the perspectives of husband and wife are embedded within—indeed prefaced with—editorializing comments superfluously made by the poetic persona.

The question of the placement of the direct statements of husband and wife within the overbearing discourse of the poetic persona should not be glibly bypassed or facetiously glossed over. I think the poetic persona plants these two statements in such strategic locations as would effectively serve his own agenda. The poetic persona’s editorials, as it were, bespeak a deep-seated anxiety that prospective readers, presumably benighted and juvenile in their judgment of human character, might miss the point unless they are chaperoned by a wizened old hat who has an unrivaled knowledge of the odd couple.
The inevitable question is: Are those two fragments the only utterances this odd couple made? Most probably not. Why, then, did he drop the rest of what they are likely to have exchanged in a trying moment like that? And why of all what they might have presumably said, should the poetic persona choose only these two stupid statements? What if he were to put the wife’s statement at the beginning or in the middle of the poem rather than at the end? Did he really want to close an ostensibly sober narrative, marked by reasonable punctuation, on an anticlimactic note? Did he wish his readers to leave the poem shaking their heads at the wife whose words will forever reverberate in their ears with their lack of tact and propriety?

While the speaker pretends to allow the patient and his wife the freedom to express themselves directly to the reader in the form of direct rather than reported speech, he is keen on bracketing their respective speeches within tendentious hints about their behavior. Yet upon closer inspection, one can also notice that his views of husband and wife are not the same. At worst, he can be accused of nonchalance towards the tragedy of the death-bound patient, as is evident in the banal statement, “The sun still shines…” (line 3), while line 2 should be seen as a sarcastic comment by the poem’s speaker rather than an expression of sympathy. However, the same cannot be said of his attitude towards the patient’s wife. One can even detect a touch of misogyny in his discourse about the wife. As early as in line 6, the wife—having just learned of her husband’s fatal disease—is reported to be standing “timidly by.” That is to say, she is just “the grammatical subject of helpless actions” (Verdonk 26). The sound of the mahogany door, on the other hand, is “rich, sympathetic, discreet” (line 2). One cannot help noticing the double irony here: the reaction of the humanized door is not only far more tactful and sympathetic towards the husband’s tragedy than that of the insensitive wife, but it is also reported by the speaker first. And this cannot be without significance. Then just before the wife makes her sole debut in the poem in the purportedly disinterested form of direct speech, her act of putting her fingers in her husband’s is dubbed as both “loving and silly” (line 13). This reserved show of loving and silliness, we are baited to conclude, is not just an occasional expression elicited by the enormity of her shock, if she was shocked at all, but an abiding trait of her personality that goes as far back as “long-past Kensington dances” (line 14). Thus, her tactless, impromptu proposition to take the underground as if nothing momentous happened comes as no surprise to the reader, who has already been duly forewarned by the wise, all-knowing speaker.
Though the speaker consistently uses a present-tense perspective, his one lapse into the past tense—“She puts her fingers in his as, loving and silly,/At long-past Kensington dances she used to do” (emphasis added; lines 13-14)—is rather striking. Apparently, this lapse, aided by the use of the comparative particle as, is designed to give a capsule history of the wife’s antics. And what better way of doing this than by surreptitiously smuggling the past into the present! Moreover, the wife’s silliness, expressed in words as well as in deeds, is made manifest in the deliberate omission of an appropriate comma or colon to offset her reported silly act from her direct silly speech. In other words, the wife’s silly deeds and words are literally presented in one and the same breath. In addition, the jumbling of tenses and the omission of appropriate punctuation further mystify the time reference in the wife’s stock phrase, “It’s cheaper to take the tube to Piccadilly/And then we can take a nineteen or a twenty-two” (lines 15-16). There is a deliberately ambiguous hint that leaving the clinic after hearing the dreadful news of her husband’s imminent death elicits from the wife the exact same verbal response as leaving a dance hall used to do in the distant past. Thus, her silliness in the past and the present, in words as well as in deeds, comes full circle. Apparently, the speaker is an old acquaintance of the couple, and he seems a particularly keen observer of the wife’s silly antics since she used to go to Kensington dances with her husband a long time ago. Thus, his bracketing comments are designed to relate/ conflate past and present in a single rhetorical tour de force and ultimately to put her words and deeds in the ‘right’ perspective.

Evidently aware of how first-person representations can be skewed and manipulated, Carlson ironically undercuts his narrator’s reliability by making him vacillate in calling the place of his much-raided residence a village, a town, and a city alternately. In the course of the narrative, the speaker’s enemies, too, are made to lack a stable identity: at times, they are called Visigoths (91), at others Huns and Exogoths (92), Retrogoths, Niligoths, Maxigoths, and Minigoths (93), then again Visigoths (95).

But unlike writers of verse dramatic monologues, Carlson’s critical distance from his antihero can never be mistaken. This awareness of a speaker’s manipulative representation is never keener than in Carlson’s two other short stories, “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” and its companion piece, “I am Bigfoot.” In the first one, the narrator is a deserted husband who justifies his wife’s disappearance, to use the phraseology of one blogger, by chalking it up to Bigfoot, the most unlikely candidate to seduce somebody else’s wife into eloping with him. The apparently
distraught husband is further wounded by a lack of sympathy (from friends, relatives, neighbors) for his hard-to-believe version of the story. “The problem is credibility,” he says in the opening sentence. “The problem, as I’m finding out over the last few weeks, is basic credibility. A lot of people look at me and say, sure, Rick, Bigfoot stole your wife. It makes me sad to see it, the look of disbelief in each person’s eyes. Trudy’s disappearance makes me sad, too…” (79).

It seems that the look of disbelief in people’s eyes saddens him even more than his wife’s disappearance. It is true that he recalls the premonitions he had during his two and a half years of a troubled marriage that someday he would come home to find his wife gone. But these premonitions were prompted by his wife’s repeated warnings, “One of these days I’m not going to be here when you get home” (emphasis in original), and he simply dismissed them as not so-out-of-the-way huffing and puffing, “things like that, things like everybody says” (79). It is also true that he blames himself in retrospect now for not having taken her threats more seriously—“How stupid of me not to see them as omens” (79)—but getting his wife back is not really his concern—as he has already settled to the conviction that he probably wouldn’t see her again. His most urgent concern is indeed to counter the look of disbelief in people’s eyes. And counter disbelief he does—in retrospect. The problem of basic credibility, as he calls it, moves him to represent the past (of the last few weeks) in the most favorable and convenient of ways: the dramatic monologue. But he inadvertently lets fall enough scraps of evidence along the way to indict himself—much like those that fall from the mouth of the speaker in verse dramatic monologues.

Thus, Rick chooses to chalk up his wife’s disappearance to Bigfoot, an improbable rival. But from Rick’s view, what is even more improbable is that Bigfoot will have a chance to represent himself. And so, blind to, and oblivious of, such an eventuality, he proceeds to present his case against Bigfoot, but never against Trudy herself, whom he takes to be an unwilling victim of kidnapping. Instead of taking responsibility for not seeing the cracks—such as the incompatible age difference between them (to him she is just a “kid”), his spending more time at horse races than at home, late-night outings, and late afternoon risings—that finally led to the breakdown of his marriage, he decides to stretch the truth to ridiculous heights. But in order to win the sympathy of his readers (after all, his narrative is written in the form of a tabloid exposé), he resorts to the rhetorical device of pathos where he slyly conflates his first-person “I” with the second-person “You” of the reader: “You come home from the track having missed the
Daily Double by a neck, and when you enter the home you are paying for and in which you and your wife and your wife’s collie live, and your wife and her collie are gone as is some of her clothing, there is nothing to believe” (emphasis added, 80).

Suddenly seeing his world shattered through his own negligence, the deserted husband—like the verse monologist—seamlessly grafts himself into the trust of potentially sympathetic, Bigfoot-weary, male readers by suggesting that what happened to him is/ could also be their own problem. In the above quote, we notice how the speaker prefaces his loss of wife and dog by the lesser loss of the daily double, highlights his pitiable underprivileged economic status as a poster-boy of the proletariat, and how his wife (Trudy) and dog (Buster) are deliberately made, albeit temporarily, to lose their names in a pathetic attempt to universalize an otherwise individual, self-inflicted loss. Having played the trebly and wrongly injured loser, the speaker caps his rhetorical game of pathos with a self-serving fiat: “Bigfoot stole her. It’s a fact. What should I do? Ignore it?” (80). The irony of these two rhetorical questions is a) they sharply contrast with a proven history of negligence on the speaker’s part, b) no practical action will ever be taken to make good their quixotic bravado, c) they purport to absolve the speaker of any responsibility for wrongdoing in the past, and, d) consequently exonerate him from any future commitment to retrieve his wife.

To highlight his narrator’s propensity to stretch the truth to the zenith of incredibility, Carlson allows Rick to tell another, harder-to-believe story and thus discredit himself again—something not so flagrantly done in verse monologues. The story is about how, “When I was thirteen years old, my mother’s trailer was washed away in the flooding waters of the Harley River and swept thirty-one miles, ending right side up and nearly dead level just outside Mercy…” (81). Addressing his fabricated or (at least) exaggerated story, apparently never told before, to a future audience, Rick hopes that it will demonstrate that since childhood he has been the victim of extraordinary circumstances; thus to have his wife lured away by an irresistible, larger-than-life creature like Bigfoot is, from the vantage point of the present, a déjà vu, nothing extraordinary. Yet, he is aware that he will be up against another problem of basic credibility: “Now who’s going to believe this story? I mean, besides me, because I was there. People are going to say, come on, thirty-one miles? Don’t you mean thirty-one feet?” (81). Through this second unbelievable story, one can say that Carlson has given his monologist yet one more rope to hang himself with. Rick, however, is undaunted
and continues to tap into our proletarian sympathies through the cheap device of pathos:

My mother, because she didn’t have the funds to haul our rig back to Griggs, worried for a while, but then the mayor arranged to let us stay where we were. So after my long ride in a trailer down the flooded Harley River with my friend Nuggy Reinecker, I grew up in a parking lot outside of Mercy, and to tell you the truth, it wasn’t too bad, even though our trailer never did smell straight again. (83)

One need not be detained by the facetious stoicism of the “to tell you the truth, it wasn’t too bad.” Deserted at last by his lonely wife, Rick’s situation can’t be worse, the more so because of people’s willing suspension of belief. The fact of desertion stabs him hard in the core and shatters his faith in himself. Thus the restoration of this faith is his only means of survival. Though this is a fair and legitimate pursuit in itself, it is sought by foul means: denial, bravado, and argument by fiat. This explains the pathetic, not to say elegiac, note on which “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” concludes:

Bigfoot stole my wife.
She’s gone.
Believe it.
I gotta believe it. (83)

Much to his chagrin, however, Rick is literally big-footed by his rival, who makes an unexpected riposte in a separate monologue of his own entitled “I Am Bigfoot.” Ron Carlson is obviously capitalizing on the double entendre of “bigfoot,” whose other meaning, according to the dictionary definition, is a “prominent or influential person, esp. a journalist or news analyst.” In the whole tradition of dramatic monologues, perhaps this is the first time a demonized adversary (after all, Bigfoot is a sort of humanoid monster in popular American lore) is allowed equal “access rights to discourse.” Outraged by Rick’s audacious misrepresentation of him, Bigfoot decides to go “public” in order to set the record straight. Interestingly, of all the tabloid exposés he read, “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” is the only one that distempers him. For instance, to the last tabloid headline, “Jackie O. Slays Bigfoot,” he nonchalantly responds, “You can’t go around and correct everybody who slanders you” (84). And because Bigfoot
insists on having direct access rights to discourse, he laughs off the idea that a lawyer represent him, “As for libel, what should I do, go up to Rockefeller Center and hire a lawyer? Please. Spare me. You can quote me on this: Bigfoot is not interested in legal action” (84).

And so, smugly confident Bigfoot holds a “press conference” to big-foot Rick and beat him at his own game of representation. “Why I came forward at this time concerns the truest thing I ever read about myself in the papers…. Now I read the article, every word. Twice. It was poorly written, but it was all true. I stole the guy’s wife. She wasn’t the first and she wasn’t the last” (85). Ironically, however, it is not the preposterous falsity of Rick’s discourse that moves Bigfoot to counter-discourse, but its truth. It is the truth that Rick inadvertently reveals, the truth that Trudy was a lonely, neglected woman who bolted out of an unfulfilling marriage in order to reclaim her life. That is why Bigfoot flatly and emphatically denies that he willfully lures anybody’s wife. “And, in each place I’ve been, there’s a woman. Come on, who is surprised by that? I don’t always steal them, in fact, I never steal them, but I do call them away, and they come with me” (85).

The fact that such women are neglected by their husbands, who are “out there in another world” (86), practically makes them takeaway prizes to the likes of Bigfoot. “[W]ondering why their lives aren’t like movies,” thousands of women shuffle in “the soft twilight of malls… just biding time until things get lovely” (85). This is a real, though unfortunate, fact of married life, a fact whose simplicity is too deep for the likes of Rick to fathom. Bigfoot’s monologue, in his own words, is “kind of a confession, I guess; kind of a warning” (85). His adversary is not a single individual named Rick, but a universal type, a husband whose wife is frustrated and lonely. Bigfoot, as it turns out, speaks from a long experience gathered from extensive travels all over the world. “I’ve been, as you probably have read, in all fifty states and eleven countries” (85). And he knows what a desperate, lonely woman looks like when he sees one, “And I’ve seen thousands of women standing at their kitchen windows, their stare in the mid-afternoon goes a thousand miles” (85).

Here we have an ironic juxtaposition whose significance is not lost on the judicious reader. The juxtaposition is between Rick, who lives in denial and shows total disregard towards his wife before and after her disappearance, and Bigfoot, who understands lonely women better than their insensitive husbands. The net result of this? Highlighting Bigfoot’s gynocentric ethos serves to accentuate Rick’s
callous character as the veritable humanoid monster who had actually deserted his wife long before she did. The slowly emerging humanity, indeed the chivalry, of Bigfoot climaxes in the concluding remarks he addresses to his mesmerized male auditors-contestants, “At present, I am watching your wife. That’s why I am here tonight. To tell you, fairly, man to man, I suppose, I am watching your wife and I know for a fact, that when I call, she’ll come” (emphasis added, 86).

While Bigfoot’s timely rebuttal—an alien luxury in verse monologues—gives us a more balanced picture of the husband-wife-seducer triangle, Trudy, though at the center of this imbroglio, is the only player denied free access to discourse. In both monologues, she is vicariously represented. In Rick’s monologue, she is quoted once as saying, “One of these days I’m not going to be here when you get home” (79), and though we hear more about her, but never from her. Like the Duchess of Ferrara, she is conveniently silenced. In Rick’s monologue, she is a passive victim; in Bigfoot’s the conscious author of her own fate. From the dearth of information, Rick drops here and there, we can gather enough material to make a physical silhouette of her—though some hints are inadvertently dropped as to her motives for leaving. In Bigfoot’s monologue, on the other hand, these motives are better explained and elaborated. Furthermore, though Bigfoot does not even refer to her by name, he offers us a credible psychological portrait not only of Trudy but of thousands of Trudy-like women all over the world. The irony is clear: a misunderstood wife stands in a better light when represented by a total stranger than by a spouse. The plaintiff turns defendant, the representer represented. He stands corrected, exposed, and defeated.

In her revisionary study of the dramatic monologue, Glennis Byron notes that Victorian practitioners of the genre exploited it “not simply to animate the past but also to interrogate history and the historical subject, to demonstrate that any attempt to reconstruct history will always be partial and interested” (5). Thus, a survey of seminal works shows that “the dramatic monologue begins as a poetry of contestation” (Byron 3). Moving away from Romantic lyricism and its emphasis on the autonomous individual, Victorians began to focus on the individual in relation to others and on his/her position in society. According to Byron, this shift naturally led to questions of representation and interpretation, which became central to the form, and the exploration of these questions led in turn to various developments in the genre. One such development was to “explore the possibilities of duologue, where two distinct but related monologues are juxtaposed” (Byron 5). By definition, the duologue, as an offshoot of the
monologue, makes possible the experimentation with multiple voices—a luxury too uncongenial for its generic progenitor to afford.

In our own age, Carlson’s experimentation with the duologue illustrates not just the generic shortcomings of the monologue and its unavoidably partial politics of representation and interpretation but, ironically, also its adaptability to contemporary exigencies. Though Carlson borrows the monologue’s technique of contestation, he does not subscribe to its suasive projections. He simply uses it as a conventional form of confessional discourse to critique contemporary conventional assumptions about subjectivity and truth. Recognizing its congenital defects as an objective discourse, Carlson combines two thematically related monologues into a duologue and thus adeptly articulates in prose a much-needed dialogic poetics of representing the self and the other. The monologue has come a long way, and its journey from the early Victorian period to our globalized world and the innovative ways in which it was exploited is a testimony not only to the elasticity of the genre but also to the growing pluralistic character of our world.

Endnotes

1. Throughout this paper I refer to the omniscient narrator in the masculine singular as a simple matter of convenience without any assumption on my part as to his/her gender.

Works Cited


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