

Annika Merk

The Contemporary Dramatic Monologue  
in Britain and Ireland

Walter Göbel, Therese Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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Annika Merk

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# 1. Introduction

Almost two hundred years after Robert Browning composed his world-renowned poem “My Last Duchess” (1842), the dramatic monologue continues to fascinate readers and scholars alike. “Arguably the flagship of Victorian poetry [and] [w]idely regarded as the most significant poetic innovation of the age” (Slinn 2007: 80), an extensive range of nineteenth-century examples are invariably included in every anthology of Victorian poetry, and the genre’s experimental nature is regularly discussed both in surveys of Victorian Literature and in studies of poetic form.<sup>1</sup> What is more, far from simply reproducing fossilized understandings of the dramatic monologue for students’ handbooks only, literary scholarship continues to engage critically and innovatively with the genre, the best example of which is Cornelia Pearsall’s *Tennyson’s Rapture: Transformations in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue* (2008). Her study, which uses the concept of rapture to argue that “far from betraying themselves with words that are beyond their control, Simeon, Ulysses, Tithonus and Tiresias are the last great orators, who [...] rapture themselves and their audience in deliberate performances” (Barton 2008: 333), was met with overwhelming critical acclaim and hailed for being a most significant contribution to the study of the dramatic monologue (Gray 2008).

This ongoing scholarly interest in the genre is moreover reflected in the Browning Society’s decision to convene a conference titled “Re-assessing the Dramatic Monologue in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Browning, Before, Beyond” in commemoration of the famous Victorian poet’s 2012 bicentenary. Yet, the conference brought to the forefront something which can be discerned in the entire field of research conducted on the dramatic monologue: i.e., the extraordinary absence of criticism on dramatic monologues that were produced after 1945. Despite the fact that the first call for papers was met with great interest in general, so few of the submitted proposals actually focussed on an aspect of the genre not directly connected to the nineteenth century that the convenors had to publish a second call, whose original wording reads thus:

The first call for papers has generated considerable interest in the conference and particularly from speakers on an array of nineteenth-century writers and topics. The organ-

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1 Due to the vast profusion of anthologies of and studies on Victorian poetry published each year, only a small but nevertheless representative selection can be mentioned here. For some of the most recent anthologies, cf. Ricks 2008, which comprises a convincing mixture of established and hitherto neglected poets; O’Gorman 2004, offering full annotations; and Leighton and Reynolds 1999, an anthology of Victorian women poets which includes a large number of Victorian dramatic monologues written by women and rediscovered in the last three decades as a result of expanding the canon of Victorian poetry. For surveys of the dramatic monologue included in publications on Victorian poetry, cf. Pearsall’s chapter on the dramatic monologue in Bristow 2000, as well as Slinn’s chapter in Cronin, Chapman and Harrison 2007. Hurley and O’Neill’s *Poetic Form* (2012) is the most recent study that includes an in-depth consideration of the dramatic monologue.

isers are now looking to augment this with an additional call for papers on the dramatic monologue in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, although further papers on the Victorian dramatic monologue are also welcome. (“Additional CFP” 2012: n. pag.)

However, even this frank appeal to the scholarly community could not prevent the otherwise extremely stimulating conference, held at Royal Holloway, University of London from June 28-30, 2012, from being predominantly concerned with the Victorian age. Merely six out of the thirty-four papers presented focussed on the twentieth century and even fewer concentrated on dramatic monologues written after World War II.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of critical response could of course simply be an indicator of the possibility that the dramatic monologue might no longer be a source of inspiration for poets writing in the contemporary age, the result of which would mean the genre’s quiet decline in the twentieth century. Yet, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, Glennis Byron, in her renowned survey of the dramatic monologue for the Routledge’s *New Critical Idiom Series* (2003), comes to the conclusion that

[t]he widespread commodification of personality and authenticity over the past twenty years might lead to the expectation that the poetry market would have been saturated with nothing more than endless variations of Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’. And yet the dramatic monologue, with its fictionalised voice and its central dynamic of self and other, has not only survived but has undergone a significant resurgence of popularity during this time. (130)

Her assessment is supported by the fact that Carol Ann Duffy, who was appointed Great Britain’s poet laureate in 2009 and who is probably the country’s most popular living poet, rose to prominence with her collection *Standing Female Nude* (1985), whose eponymous title poem is a dramatic monologue written from the point of view of a nude model. In the following years, Duffy published a number of other poetry collections, most of which contain predominantly dramatic monologues, culminating in her most popular monologue sequence *The World’s Wife* (1999). Other famous British and Irish poets known for their frequent use of the genre are Edwin Morgan, Eavan Boland, Simon Armitage and Anthony Thwaite. In the US, Richard Howard won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his neo-Victorian collection of dramatic monologues called *Untitled Subjects* (1969), while Ai’s widely anthologized oeuvre almost exclusively comprises poems written in that form.

Despite the significant number of twentieth-century poets creatively engaging with the genre, the amount of published material on the contemporary dramatic monologue is, relatively speaking, even scarcer than the conference programme has already revealed. Up to the present day, not a single monograph has been written on that topic,

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2 The five papers on the dramatic monologue after WWII were: Virginia Ricard, “Listening to Lolita: Nabokov and the Dramatic Monologue”; Anca Radu, “The Dramatic Monologue in Prose and the Literature of Crisis: Alice Munro’s ‘Child’s Play’”; John Morton, “Mick Imlah’s Dramatic Monologues, 1983-2009”; Deidre Osborne, “From Monologue to Monodrama: A Self-Revealing Act”; and Annika Merk, “Negotiations of Postcolonial (British) Identity in the Contemporary Dramatic Monologue”.