

Heteroglossia in Browning's Monologues: a Dialogic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

'Heteroglossia' in literature refers to diversity of voices. Mikhail Bakhtin used the term to describe the multiplicity of voices in literary compositions. 'Dialogism' owes a debt to the writings of Bakhtin especially after their translation into English during the 1970s and 1980s. According to Bakhtin it is the interaction between two or more persons that gives birth to language. Language is never born in isolation. Even in an expression which is not explicitly interactive, dialogue could be found. In every speech there are remains of speeches by others. It was under the influence of Modernism that dialogism gained access to the realm of poetry. This essay attempts to explore the dialogical mode that could be traced in the monologues of Robert Browning, the Victorian-Modern.

Keywords: Mikhail Bakhtin, Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Robert Browning, Poetry.

There is no voice, but voices. 'Heteroglossia' (literally, different-tonguedness) in literature refers to multiplicity of voices. Literature is a space in which one encounters multiple voices. It is, as Salman Rushdie has observed, "the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way" (16). 'Dialogism' is indebted to the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin especially after their translation into English during the 1970s and 1980s. Dialogism implies dialogue between texts, between meanings, between applications, between speaker and speaker and between speaker and reader. According to Bakhtin it is the communication between two or more individuals that gives birth to language. Language is never born in isolation. Even in an expression which is not explicitly interactive, dialogue is to be found as "all utterances involve the, as it were, 'importing' and naturalization of the speech of others, all utterances include inner tensions, collaborations, negotiations which are comparable to the process of dialogue" (Hawthorn 46-7). Bakhtin asserts that any word is shop-soiled by its previous user(s) and in order to use the word, the present user is to engage in a scuffle i.e. discourse with the past one(s). He reminds us of the fact that, "of all the words uttered by us in

everyday life no less than half belong to someone else" (*Dialogic* 339). In the Bakhtinian framework, a word is like a baton passed from player to player where the touch of the earlier runner cannot be gainsaid. He puts emphasis on 'languages' instead of 'language.' Dialogism proposes that there is only 'we' and no 'I.' It undermines one's individuality which, according to Bakhtin, is nothing but an illusion. In order to define ourselves we must use our voices. An individual becomes meaningful only when he does engage himself in dialogue. In Bakhtin's words, "in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is – and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well" (*Problems* 252). Language is social in nature and 'dialogism' is a social callisthenics. To Bakhtin a literary text is not just a piece of writing whose meanings are created by the "play of impersonal linguistic or economic or cultural forces, but a site for the *dialogic interaction of multiple voices*...each of which is not merely a verbal but social phenomenon" (Abrams 63; emphasis added). In every utterance there are remains of utterances by others. In his illuminating article "Re-Reading *The Waste Land*: A Bakhtinian Approach" L N Gupta opines that this "double-voiced" nature of language is "crucial in literary discourse" (24).

Language is like the double-faced mythological Janus. Bakhtin takes interest in 'heteroglossia' i.e. "multiplicity of social voices" (Hawthorn 101). Voices very diverse in nature compete with each other for supremacy. Michael Holquist sums up, "in Bakhtin there is no *one* meaning being striven for: the world is a vast congeries of contesting meanings, a heteroglossia so varied that no single term capable of unifying its diversifying energies is possible" (24; emphasis original). Bakhtin is also known for the idea of 'polyphonic' ("many-voiced," Hawthorn 177) novel. In his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929, translated from Russian into English in 1984), Bakhtin contrasts the novels of Dostoevsky with those of Tolstoy. In his view Dostoevsky's novels are in the dialogic form where the voice of a character is heard along with other voices, including the author's personal voice as well, but no single voice rules the roost. In Bakhtin's words, they are liberated to speak "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices ... a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world" (*Problems* 6). In contrast, Tolstoy is often held to be monological since he is the supreme voice in his novels. Though it is better to avoid this kind of sweeping generalization since Tolstoy could be dialogical in his own way. While "one idea" passes through "many characters" in Dostoevsky, in Tolstoy, "many ideas pass through one character" (Gupta 25).

It was under the influence of Modernism that the dialogical mode infiltrated into the domain of poetry by creating a novel form, a semi-narrative string, made of fragmented episodes, operating by the accumulation of disjointed lyric moments that signal towards a narrative concurrence never reached and ever deferred to some point beyond the periphery of the poem. Browning, the Victorian-Modern, with his dazzling array of dramatic monologues, becomes quite relevant here. In his "Porphyria's Lover," in presenting the obsessive world of the lover, Browning is close to the spirit of Dostoevsky's novels. Let us take, for example, these lines from the poem where the lover is conversing with himself:

While I debated what to do,
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do ...

(*Robert Browning's Poetry* 102;
henceforth referred to as *RBP*)

Or "Andrea del Sarto" where Andrea, the painter is apparently speaking to his wife Lucrezia but actually to himself, "Why do I need you? / What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo? / In this world, who can do a thing, will not; / And who would do it, cannot, I perceive" (*RBP* 239). In "Fra Lippo Lippi" where Lippo, the painter-monk, caught in a rather disreputable part of town describes a watchman's face: "I'd like his face – / His, elbowing on his comrade in the door / With the pike and lantern, – for the slave that holds / John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair / With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should say) / And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!" (*RBP* 149), the argument is rather between Lippo and Lippo. Let us go to those eternal lines in "The Last Ride Together" with which the lover consoles himself:

I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to-night?
(*RBP* 202)

In actuality, the discussion is as if between the two selves of the lover. In "My Last Duchess" when the Duke informs the envoy about his last Duchess, "How such a glance came there" (*RBP* 83) or "t was not / Her husband's presence only..." (*RBP* 83), he is actually speaking to himself.

Another very interesting sort of dialogue crops up with the 'silence' of the listener(s). Hearing the 'audible silence' of the listener, we break into our own noisy response. Browning seems to have found a poetic gadget to provoke the response of the reader. Let us take, for example, the words of the lover (in "Porphyria's Lover") to the forever-silent listener i.e. the dead Porphyria, "No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain" (*RBP* 102) or "Laughed the blue eyes without a stain" (*RBP* 102) or "her cheek once more/Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss" (*RBP* 102) or "The smiling rosy little head,/ So glad it has its utmost will,/ That all it scorned at once is fled,/ And I, its love, am gained instead!/ Porphyria's love" (*RBP* 102-3). In reality, the dead cannot answer – but we can. Had Porphyria been able to know it beforehand that it would end up in this, she would have been the last person to come – we assume. We may remember the stornellos in "Fra Lippo Lippi":

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*Flower o' the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!
Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?*
(RBP 150; emphasis original)

And then...

*Flower o' the rose,
If I've been merry, what matter who knows?*
(RBP 150; emphasis original)

Again,

*Flower o' the pine,
You keep your mistr . . . manners, and I'll
stick to mine!*
(RBP 154; emphasis original)

Automatically, we start arguing and an imaginary dialogue is formed. We may also consider the anxious questions of Lippo:

Much more the figures of man, woman,
child,
These are the frame to? What's it all about?
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
Wondered at? oh, this last of course! –
you say.
But why not do as well as say, – paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
God's works – paint any one, and count it
crime
To let a truth slip.

(RBP 155)

We are prompted to answer that painting any of the God's creations can never be a crime. In "Andrea del Sarto" when we encounter the lines: "That Cousin here again? he waits outside?/ Must see you—you, and not with me? Those loans? /More gaming debts to pay? you smiled for that? (RBP 241) – we cannot but say, "Lucrezia, this is not fair." When the Duke (in "Porphyria's Lover") remarks upon the Duchess, "She had/A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad, /Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er/She looked on...as if she ranked/My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/With anybody's gift" (RBP 83-4), the dead cannot say anything, nor can the envoy, but we can. In "Two in the Campagna," the lover asks:

How say you? Let us, O my dove,
Let us be unashamed of soul,
As earth lies bare to heaven above!

How is it under our control
To love or not to love?
(RBP 265)

We are undoubtedly provoked to say that it is really not in our control to love or not to love. In some cases, apart from the silent listener(s), God is also held to be a party to the conversation where the responsibility, in turn, again comes to the reader. We may remember the very last line of "Porphyria's Lover" that has been a bone of contention, "And yet God has not said a word!" (RBP 103) or the lines from "Andrea del Sarto": "The very wrong to Francis! — It is true/ I took his coin, was tempted and complied, / And built this house and sinned" (RBP 242). The painter appears to be deep in conversation with the God. A little later, we face the line, "you see/How one gets rich!" (RBP 242) – by this "you," Andrea refers to a) Lucrezia b) himself and c) God. By the end of the poem Andrea appears to be entreating the God, "In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance — /Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,/Meted on each side by the angel's reed,/For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me"(RBP 242). In "Last Ride Together" also, the lover seems to be asking, "Might she have loved me? just as well/ She might have hated, – who can tell!/ Where had I been now if the worst befell?"(RBP 202) or, "Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?" (RBP 204) or, by the end of the poem, "And heaven just prove that I and she/ Ride, ride together, for ever ride?" (RBP 204)

As a result we cannot but answer and what appears to be a monologue ends up with some obvious dialogues. In fact, given the dialogic relation between speaker and reader, the very word 'monologue' appears to be something of a misnomer. While directed to others, speech is an "exteriorizing" (Calderwood 95) act; it is a "presentational" (Calderwood 95) act, even when addressed to the self or overheard. Bakhtin argued that works of art cannot be organic 'unities' because language is essentially dialogic. A text is always a part of a dialogue with previous and following texts, and is always composed of several voices in dialogue within the text. Heteroglossia controls the course of meaning in the kind of utterance known as a literary text, as it does in any utterance. Any utterance is heteroglot in the sense that it is formed by "forces whose particularity and variety are practically beyond systematization" (Holquist 70). Each utterance is multi-accentual, and meaning resides in the relations between

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this utterance and what goes before and after. As if each word looks “before and after” and probably “pine(s) for what is not.” No word stands alone, rather gives birth to another word or words. Every expression is a stimulus or response or concord or discord. Thus in the dialogic scheme of things there is no full stop or final resolution. In Bakhtin's own words, “the contexts of dialogue are without limit” (*Speech* 170). In the end, we can just say that there is no end.

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