

Charlotte Brontë and the Dramatic Monologue: Tracing the Emergence of the Woman Poet in the Development of a Dramatic Poetics of the Self and its Fictions

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Felicia Hemans had a great influence on the Victorians, who would have been familiar with her monologues, most of which are to be found in her collections of 1828 and 1830. Although she appropriates women's voices of all times and places (Arabella Stuart, Properzia Rossi, etc.), her poems consolidate the authority of the dominant cultural model of femininity. It is interesting to notice that the period in which Hemans published coincided with Charlotte Brontë's first extant poems (1829) and that the younger writer was known to read the 'lady's magazines' which contained some of Hemans's monologues. But, as Glennis Byron confirms, the Victorian female poets who followed Landon and Hemans (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontës, Christina Rossetti, etc.) were far more openly contestatory with respect to gender issues than their earlier counterparts. They were also among the earliest modern women poets to realize that the self is not autonomous, unified or stable, but rather the unfixed, fragmented product of various social and historical forces. Indeed, women poets frequently appropriate the form of the dramatic monologue for the purpose of exploring questions of gender, identity and agency, and this is also true of Charlotte Brontë. The monologue offered one means by which women could safely assume the position of the authoritative speaking subject, without directly exposing their selves. But surprisingly neither Elizabeth Barrett Browning nor Christina Rossetti, as major women poets of the period, made a prolonged or even a much radical use of it.

In his *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005), Ivan Kreilkamp refers to "The dramatic monologue's status as the prototypical poetic genre in a culture of the novel", resembling it "in its depiction of an imaginary voice" (32). And it would be up to

prospective novelists such as Charlotte and Emily Brontë to experiment more extensively with this relatively new form within their respective juvenilia, which was indeed chaotically composed of many other hybrid forms and genres. For them, as inveterate ‘storytellers’, the dramatic monologue might have become just another way of telling individual (hi)stories. In fact, as I believe, the form was infinitely more determining of their future way of writing, influencing the intense plots and character speeches in their novels, namely those of *Jane Eyre* and *Heathcliff*. The layered structure of the genre, for example, allowed Emily to present points of view (or plural perspectives) rather than truth, as such, in her polyphonic poems and only novel.

As Anne W. Jackson states, “We recall [Charlotte] Brontë’s sense of the dramatic, her familiarity with staged and framed dialogue and theatrical conventions, and her developing use of them in the stories she told and wrote in her early years” (“C. B. and the Pleasures of Acting”, 137). She refers in particular to the vivid and troubling example of her brother Branwell regarding the risks inherent in self-dramatization. According to Patricia Ondek Laurence in *the Reading of Silence* (1993), the dramatic monologue would allow Charlotte to develop the ‘inner life’ only hinted at in Austen’s novels “by limiting the social conversation” and further developing “the proportion of inner monologue to outer dialogue” in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* (?).

Of the four full-length novels that Brontë wrote, no less than three (*The Professor*, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*) are significantly composed in the form of autobiography (going from a masculine narrative to a later female discourse). Thus, except for *Shirley*, she did not choose omniscient or third-person narration, which can be considered the mainstream of novel writing. Her distinctive and marked preference for the first-person narrative

perspective in telling stories, which is also the one usually adopted in the dramatic monologue, was already profusely evident in her juvenile writings. The vital sense of truth that is suggested by (an intense) first-person narration has often led her readers to identify Brontë with the heroines of her novels (Jane and Lucy), thus contributing to their immediate success. In comparison, *Shirley*, seems to lack a consistent point of view or a unifying central character, making the story not quite so true or fascinating.

For Carol Bock (*The Storyteller's Audience*, 1992), the atmosphere at Haworth, including the children's 'plays', the adolescent readings of *Blackwood's Magazine* and the works of Byron and Scott, encouraged Bronte to think of storytelling as an interlocutory performance: an energetic debate between author and audience. The 'plays' were dramatic productions: performances executed in the presence of an actual audience – the Bronte children themselves. As for Byron and Scott, they perpetually stroke poses in their writing and played games of identity with their readers. The first, an infamous poseur, adopted a multiplicity of competing narrative voices in his poems; the second created fictional storytellers as variations on the role he himself adopted as teller of tales. This exposure, Bock emphasises, reinforced Bronte's belief that writing was an act of pretence; writers were under no obligation to speak to their readers in consistently authentic or confessional voices. As her numerous pseudonyms suggest, she quite self-consciously adopted the role of storyteller in her writings; these evince the use of techniques such as frame tales, embedded tableaux, unreliable narration and other forms of irony, addresses to the reader, extratextual allusions, prefatory matter, and so on. Bock believes that this is the author's way of acknowledging the competing claims of history and romance or verisimilitude and fantasy.

Indeed, Bronte's creation of a wholly fictitious audience, or narratees, in her earlier stories may have influenced the development of the implied reader in her mature

writing. They provided her, in particular, with a cast of *dramatis personae* that could experimentally enact her ideas. Charles Wellesley, her favourite narrator, nevertheless has a distinctive biased point of view, always telling his tales from a defensive position. This ability to distort the truth, a skill he shares with other Angrian storytellers, sometimes leads to multiple versions of the same event, challenging the reader to distinguish between the false accounts and the actual happenings. That is the case of “The Bridal”, which supposedly gives the true account of events described first, and unreliably, by Charles and then by Captain Bud. What’s more, Charles repeatedly draws attention to his habit of posturing and lying and encourages the reader to look for the truths behind such lies and to share his delight in creating them. Like Browning later on, Bronte was thus consciously playing with the subjective nature of truth.

Again, like Browning, Bronte must have had her own reasons for not writing her autobiography or not revealing herself in her writings. She had an inveterate distaste for self-revelation and had always resented unnecessary publicity and public exposure. In 1849, and recently bereaved, Bronte had written to W. Williams that “[...] it is a deplorable error in an author to assume [...] in addressing the public [...] his own wrongs or griefs”. Not interested in writing a personal record of her own domestic experiences and inward feelings, Bronte chose alternatively to write novels in the autobiographical mode, and one that uses a first-person narration. In *The Professor*, the male autobiographer William Crimsworth places the focus singularly on his self, concentrating on his own conscience and judgement exclusively. Bronte’s employment of a male narrator, a usual practice in her juvenilia, may be related to the lack of a feminine role model and the greater freedom of speech and behaviour reserved for men, giving her a greater independence of expression. In view of the omissions and contradictions of Crimsworth’s narrative, most critics have denounced him as

hypocritical, self-righteous and untruthful. But actually Bronte did not intend her hero-narrator to be an entirely sympathetic character or reliable narrator; hers is an effort to mimic what she believes to be a real self-made man's autobiography. In her last novel, *Villette*, she attempts to do the same with her sullen female narrator, Lucy Snowe, who voluntarily mimics the nun-like feminine behaviour or invisibility dictated by society. In contrast with *Jane Eyre*, she deliberately tones down the descriptions of her sufferings by exercising omissions or concealment. Thus, her narrative seems unreliable and deceitful.

Like the work of other women poets of her period (namely, Augusta Webster), Brontë's monologues suggest the fractured female subject (or fragmented self) produced by Victorian gender ideology ("Frances" is a good example). The form itself allowed a close psychological analysis of the self, something of importance for C. Brontë. The rise of the new school of mental science, namely psychology, mental pathology and mesmerism had a great impact in Victorian writers, and Brontë is known to have had a keen interest in the latter. Her speakers are frequently disturbed or placed in extreme situations that somehow test their emotional sanity. But Dorothy Mermin (1986) states that, in contrast with male monologists like Browning, women poets seem usually to 'sympathise' with their protagonists and they do not tend to frame them with discursive irony; furthermore, the poet and the dramatised speaker in their poems often tend to blur together. We see both things happening in Brontë's monologues: irony is more used for her male speakers and identification for her female ones.

Women monologists tend much more to use fictionalised speakers placed within contemporary society rather than figures from literature, myth or history (as is namely the case of male poets such as Tennyson and Swinburne). But there are some notable exceptions to this, namely Felicia Hemans; and also the case of many of Charlotte

Brontë's poems based on the Bible and on recent or past history, not to mention the monologues based on the private myths of Glasstown and Angria. As Glennis Byron states, in contrast with male monologists, the majority of women's dramatic monologues draw upon the technique of 'inhabiting the conventional' in order to expose it, and the speakers are mainly drawn from mainstream society. When they give voice to marginalised figures, these are mainly prostitutes or fallen women (EBB, Webster, Greenwell, Levy, etc.). This is not the case of C. Brontë, though. Although not socially exceptional, indeed rather plain or obscure, her heroines or female speakers are never disreputable women, even when they are placed at the margins of society.

The sources of the genre in C. Brontë are both historical and contemporary or personal. That is, while she had always been interested in analysing historical figures (both male and female), namely biblical ones, she became progressively more interested in portraying conventional women like herself, if in a dramatic or unconventional way. Indeed, her *speaker other than the poet* often resembles Byron's and can even express himself/herself as a Byronic character (a Harold or Manfred) would do. Critics as Dwight Culler have suggested that the dramatic monologue's origins lie in the classical rhetorical form of *prosopopoeia* or impersonation, in which the poet or orator imagined what a particular historical or literary character might have said in a certain situation. These impersonations constituted for the Victorians "an important exercise in the literary education of youth". According to Cornelia Pearsall, these "fictitious speeches of historical persons" are powerful persuasive representations because the speakers desire to set in motion a series of transformations (2008). Having had a free access to her father's library and lessons, Charlotte cannot have been indifferent to this compelling form of classic rhetoric. Besides, her interest in ancient history was only matched by her interest in more recent history and, particularly, in the characters or

heroes (Nelson, Wellington) that had contributed to it and whose speeches were published in contemporary papers that Charlotte read as a child.

As Pearsall insistently suggests, a monologist “seeks a host of transformations – of his or her circumstances, of his or her auditors, of his or her self, and possibly all these together, in the course of and through the monologue” (36). This central idea is applied by Charlotte in most of her monologues, namely “The Teacher’s Monologue”, “Frances”, “Mementos” and “The Missionary”, and her male and female speakers invariably go through the important process thus described. The first two are hopeless and desperate attempts of a feminine escape from a confined, meaningless existence, anticipating Tennyson’s “Mariana”, while the other two, together with “The Wife’s Will”, are examples that already point toward a successful transformation /emancipation or major change in the lives of the male and female characters. In spite of the fact that the knowing/knowledgeable reader can detect some verisimilitude or features traditionally attributable to Charlotte in her monologues, the poet herself seems to insist on the generic prerogative of a necessary distinction or “an absolute separation between *her-self* and *her speaker*”, either by introducing sporadic differences in their respective biographies (as in “Mementos”) or by cross-gendering (writing as a man, as Zamorna, and in “The Missionary” or *The Professor*). “Two unlike discourses, those of the *poet*, and of the *dramatic monologist*, are conjoined, actively maintaining both resemblance and unlikeness.” (*Modernism’s Mythic Pose*).

One of the themes that occur mostly in Charlotte’s monologues is related to religion or religious figures, be they biblical episodes, missionary work or forms of confession, but in which relevant gender issues are also involved. Among the best achieved is “Pilate’s Wife’s Dream” (1846), in reality a soliloquy because it has no

implicit auditor or listener; in fact, when the female speaker starts from her nightmarish premonitory dream in the middle of the night, she mentions that “None [is] with me” and that “I’d call my women, but to break their sleep, / [...] were unjust”. Yet, we know the poem to possess verisimilitude or an acknowledged historical and biblical context. Besides, she can literally hear and see the preparations for the Calvary crucifixion. Pilate’s wife feels that she has had a revelation regarding both her husband’s grim fate and the role of Jesus in inaugurating a new religion. Like many dramatic monologues, the speaker enacts an acute conflict or dilemma, namely the one of being faithful to her husband or defending an innocent man: she doesn’t know who Christ is but, sensing his aura of goodness, she ardently wishes she can do something to save him, even if she has to confront Pilate directly. Furthermore, at the end of her soliloquy, she anticipates the religious change or transformation about to be operated in human society and, symbolically, the day dawns upon this revelation. Women are thus seen as playing an important historical role in anticipating future events and pointing the way for a better world.

Another important monologue that raises not only issues of faith and gender but also the contemporary topic of British imperialism and colonialism (as Carl Plasa has pointed out) is “The Missionary” (1846). The poem starts as a soliloquy, in which the male speaker, a British missionary already on board his ship, reflects upon his wish for action, exertion and colonial enterprise, but who is simultaneously aware of the sacrifice that his decision to leave England entails. In spite of the fervent missionary enthusiasm and confidence, to bring the ‘light’ of faith to unconverted native peoples, present in his propagandistic discourse, he incorporates a tortured dilemma in his speech (“Nature and hostile Destiny / Stir in my heart a conflict wild”). Even in his vocational moment, the speaker realizes the price to be paid by such chase of glory and expresses it in ironic

pagan terms: “Smouldering, on my heart’s altar lies / The fire of some great sacrifice” (32-33). The nature of this sacrifice becomes clear in the second part of the poem, which becomes a dramatic monologue with an absent auditor or addressee. That is, when he addresses a woman called Helen – someone he had loved and abandoned – and we discover his secret remorse at a dishonourable deed: “Thou might’st not go with me, / I could not – dared not stay for thee!”. In the attempt to justify his motives to Helen, he compares himself to the valiant “soldier of the Cross” and uses the arguments of work and sacrifice, even to the point of martyrdom. Thus, in order to re-present himself and the colonial system he supports in the best of lights, this speaker (hypocritically) appropriates the role of victim that in contemporary reality belonged to the deserted women and the colonial natives of the empire.

Interestingly, an earlier dramatic monologue, entitled “Apostasy” (1837) seems to enact a similar but reverse situation. Its speaker is a dying woman who addresses a Catholic priest intent on hearing her confession, but whose direct replies we do not have access to. The focus is, therefore, on the woman’s speech and “denial of her faith” and we can only infer the auditor’s reactions from her own words. Although he is obviously not a silent listener, the female speaker silences him both with her speech and her heretical faith in love instead of a faith in conventional religion:

‘Tis my religion thus to love,
My creed thus fixed to be;
Not death shall shake, nor Priestcraft break
My rock-like constancy!
(61-64)

It may not be a coincidence that her hostility is principally directed at Catholic forms of worship (“Thy sightless saint of stone”; “prayed to what in marble smiled / Cold, lifeless, mute on me”). Contrary to the previous poem’s missionary, the woman tries to argue that there are in life more pleasurable forms of human worship or idolatry – namely, of the man you love. All the expectations of a Catholic confession ritual are,

therefore, subverted by the speaker. The theme of confession is an especially important one in the dramatic monologue tradition (for example, in Browning), because of what this ritual reveals about the speaking subject at particularly poignant or dramatic moments of his/her life/death. And this woman's 'confession' is daring and extreme. Bronte seems to use the theme for her own purpose: to dare the substitution of religion for love, of dogma for passion – a step she takes in other poems (namely, "He saw my heart's woe").

The theme of love and the power relations that are enacted between the sexes in this same context constitute another major emphasis in Bronte's monologues. While working as a governess at Upperwood House, in Rawdon, Charlotte wrote a daring dramatic monologue entitled "Passion" (1841), whose speaker is an English soldier about to leave for the Indian wars ("Where Seik and Briton meet") and addressing the woman he loves before he departs, hoping to obtain from her "One kind glance" that would make him "hazard death". He wants to know if he will be remembered by her when he is far away; he would not mind dying in the battlefield if he was certain of her devoted passion ("Glad I'd join the death-doomed host"); but if she turns him aside with 'scorn and pride', he promises to 'defeat' her with his own will ("I'll read my triumph in thine eyes") before he falls down in the battle. As Carl Plasa suggests, "the amatory relationship between the two figures is represented in terms drawn from the realm of the military" (2004: 43). The woman's silence is itself an eloquent critical comment on the proud male's narcissistic fantasy of conquest, "whose colonial and sexual politics are troublingly cavalier" (44).

Nevertheless, a possible reply to this soldier's seductive monologue is dramatized in "Preference" (1846) by a determined female speaker, who in her address to her proud male auditor directly states that "I could not love thee, / Wert thou prince

and I a slave". Her almost blunt sincerity is reiterated throughout the poem ("Can I love? [...] / [...] Yes, but not thee"), while she tries to deflate his masculine pride and prerogative ("Dream not, ... I strive to smother / Fires that inly burn for thee"). Indeed, the challenging tone of the poem seems to anticipate Jane Eyre's spirited replies to Rochester. But the specific purpose of the monologue appears to be the one of contradicting the general tendency of women to fall for an adventurous man or a soldier by stating this speaker's distinct 'preference' for a man of letters, whom she characterizes as "man of conscience – man of reason; / Stern, perchance, but ever just". The poem may, thus, constitute either an accurate depiction of Brontë's new personal preference or a more mature and disinterested perspective on desirable masculine qualities. Whatever the case may be, Charlotte's speaker seems to clearly reject a dashing Zamorna-like suitor in favour of an unassuming Heger or professor-like one.

This monologist has indeed come a long way from Brontë's earlier submissive female speakers, like Marian Hume or Mary Percy. The latter appears, for example, in "Stanzas" (1837), addressing the Duke of Zamorna literally from the grave. The ghostly speaker asks this remorseful Byronic figure to pause for a moment and to "think" of her, to recall their "early dream"; she is sure that his love is nothing like hers has been because he would now be suffering with her loss. Already in life she had suspected that he was not faithful to her ("Spoke other love than mine"). Now she fully realizes that while she was only his "transient flower", he was her "god divine". But, in spite of this difference in their love and in their balance of power, she still hopes that "sometimes" his "heart" beats "one pulse" true to her. In the poem that begins "Is this my tomb, this humble stone", another soliloquy by Mary Percy, she still speaks to us from the grave, recalling her former life and wondering if her loved ones still remember her after so many years, only to realize by outward signs that everyone has forgotten her.

The answer to her insistent questionings seems to materialize in a long dramatic monologue entitled “Mementos” (1846), whose speaker is none other than Mary’s former chambermaid and who, many years after her mistress’s death, shows her now inhabited mansion of Alnwick to a mysterious visitor. The woman addresses her auditor directly at several points in her monologue – “Open that casket – look how bright”, “You ask if she had beauty’s grace? I know not”, “Touch not that ring, ‘twas his, the sire” – but he/ she never replies. Nevertheless, this is the fragmentary fashion in which the reader finally learns what happened to both Mary and Zamorna: the first died of abandonment and grief deliberately caused by the latter, who unable to bear his guilt took his own life; the unexpected result of this tragic relationship was a gifted female child, described by the speaker in such a way that almost exactly coincides with the personality of later Brontean heroines, a preview of female characters as charismatic and emancipated as Jane Eyre.

A set of three related dramatic monologues, precisely on the issue of feminine emancipation, seem to occur in the complex and relatively recent historical context of the wars between Britain and France and/or the Napoleonic Wars. In “The Wife’s Will” (1846), an unnamed woman speaker addresses her husband William “After long absence, wandering wide”, only to learn that he will soon have to leave Britain again. Not daring to contest this decision (“Nor by request, nor faintest sigh, / Would I to turn thy purpose try”), she affirms instead her determination to accompany her husband (“With thee I go”, “I cross with thee the seas”), in spite of the many dangers involved. Although not heard, the husband appears to comply with this new feminine determination – “Passive at home I will not pine”. And, indeed, this stated refusal of confinement, inaction and melancholy would constitute the major argument in subsequent poems. Thus, in “The Wood” (1846), this woman’s wish is materialized and

she accompanies her husband on some dangerous Cross-Channel conspiratory venture, which she shares with him in equal terms. While they rest for a while in some wood in Normandy, the wife (who is the monologist) declares her happiness at the possibility of sharing a purpose or cause with her husband, stating not only that “Now I have my natural part / Of action with adventure blent” but that she feels “as born again”. More than expressing her feelings of loving complicity with her soldier husband (the auditor), this speaker wishes to show him by deeds and convincing arguments that he ought to trust her courage and strength both at land and sea. Another monologue entitled “Regret” (1837) seems to be a dutiful lament enunciated years later by the same woman and addressed to the same ‘William’. Besides referring to her very early wish as a young woman of leaving home because it “seemed so forlorn”, the female speaker explains how, after spending some years abroad, she is now returning home alone and in regret or disappointment of her later life, “how utterly is flown / Every ray of light”, concluding that “I no blest isle have found”. This conclusion seems to imply that it may not be simply by escaping confinement and chasing a ‘rainbow’ that a woman’s life will be changed or transformed.

In other more autobiographical monologues Bronte reflects precisely on the confined and limited existence and experience of more conventional middle-class women like herself. In “the Teacher’s Monologue” (1837), the poet-speaker seems to depart from her own feelings as a teacher at Roe Head to digress on the meaning of her own present existence, but her situation has obvious affinities with her sisters’ and eventually other teachers as well. In spite of its title, the poem is more of a soliloquy because there is no auditor and it is divided in two parts. The first one emphasises the memory of and yearning for those that she left behind at home (Haworth), comparing those blissful times to a wearisome and hopeless present existence. The second part is a

rather abrupt change into a digression on the nature of her present poem, whose tone of hopelessness the speaker claims to affect her spirits and creative powers (“In vain I try; I cannot sing; / All feels so cold and dead”). The “drear delay” in her self-fulfilment both as a woman and as a writer, and the fear that “Life will be gone ere I have lived” seem to paralyse the speaker, who questions the purpose of an existence made only of work, grief and longing (“Is such my future fate?”). Charlotte was painfully aware of the fact that both she and her sisters lacked future prospects in terms of either matrimony or the career of letters.

This realization is again dramatized in an 1843 poem entitled “Frances”, about the depressed state of mind and desperate circumstances of a woman named Frances. Although the first nine quatrains are written in the more omniscient third person singular, ‘she’, the remaining ones (48 in all) are in the first person, thus seeming to suggest the form of a soliloquy or monodrama. This is the poignant complaint of a woman that is deprived of love and intercourse with the larger world, of a life fulfilment, and who asks “Must it be so? Is this my fate?” This lack of hope in the possibility of human bliss (probably, marriage) seems to reflect Charlotte’s very recent experience in Brussels (namely her unrequited love for Mr Heger). But it may also constitute an interesting preview of her depressed later protagonist, Lucy Snowe, in her last novel *Villette*. The speaker of the poem is alone and there is no auditor as such; as with Pilate’s wife, her words are addressed “To solitude and to the night”. But it is clear that the monologue enacts a very critical and decisive moment in the life of the speaker; she is an insomniac that, unable to sleep, quits her “restless bed”. The “Eumenides of woe” make her pace the hall and “wring her hands”, and she is so oppressed by her “inward pain” that she is unable to breathe (“The close air of the grated tower / Stifles a heart that scarce can beat”). Going out of the ancient mansion into the moonlit night,

she finally gives vent to her grief, complaining mostly of unrequited love (“Unloved – I love, unwept – I weep”) and of all sorts of limitations to her intellect (“Life I must bound, existence sum / In the strait limits of one mind”). It is significant that she compares her present mind to a “dark”, “imageless” “narrow cell” – “a living tomb”. Thus deprived of ‘light’, the speaker considers two different but complementary courses for overcoming her dejected state: the first form of help is the hope in an after-life offered by religious faith; the other comes in the form of a resolution to make herself more active, find a worthy task and follow it to the end: “Travel, and toil, and full exertion / Are the last, only boon I ask”. Through this carefully etched portrait, the poet not only introduces the element of emancipation in her rewriting of woman’s (hi)story but diagnoses and prescribes her own personal ‘cure’ in the process.