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“And I Choose Never to Stoop”: Focalisation and Diegesis in Robert Browning’s Complementary Dramatic Monologues

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“And I Choose Never to Stoop”: Focalisation and Diegesis in
Robert Browning’s Complementary Dramatic Monologues

„Márpedig sértést nem tűrök”: Fokalizáció és diegézis
Robert Browning párverseiben

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Abstract

The first and foremost aim of my thesis is to demonstrate that a comparative analysis of Robert Browning's complementary dramatic monologues, "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence", does not only lead to a better understanding of the individual poems, but also draws the readers' attention to significant aspects of interpretation which otherwise would remain unnoticed.

The first part of my paper gives a short introduction to the genre of the dramatic monologue and the most important critical approaches to it. In addition, in this section I also discuss those characteristic features of the Browningsque monologue – subject, style, and obscurity –, which are going to play a central role in our understanding of the two complementary poems. In the main part of my thesis, I attempt to illustrate the various ways in which "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence" complement each other. The first aspect of my comparative analysis is concerned with the titles of the poems. After discussing their history and significance, I endeavour to examine the thematic as well as the generic expectations that are evoked by them. Afterwards, I analyze the first few lines of the dramatic monologues from the point of view of time references. My analysis is going to demonstrate that besides connecting different time sequences, the analeptic references at the beginning of the poems exemplify the narrative strategy of delay as well. After a short discussion of the role suspense played in Victorian culture in general, I attempt to illustrate how the strategy is employed in Browning's dramatic monologues. On the basis of this, I am going to point out that the difficulty of interpreting the poems lies in the fact that

readers are compelled to read halfway through them in order to understand what the beginning means. Moreover, as the next aspect of my comparative analysis indicates, the problem of intelligibility is further complicated by the unreliability of the narrators. After a brief theoretical overview, I attempt to collect textual indications that suggest the inauthentic nature of the narrations. Finally, on the basis of the assumption that the narrators of dramatic monologues distort their narration because they are aware of the presence of an audience, I examine how the unreliable narrations of the Duke and the Countess can be connected to the silent interlocutors present in the respective dramatic monologues.

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Love, you saw me gather men and women,
Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
Enter each and all, and use their service,
Speak from every mouth, – the speech, a poem.

(Browning, “One Word More”, XIV, 1-4)

1. Introduction

When the name Robert Browning is mentioned, most people immediately associate it with the paradigmatic example of the dramatic monologue, “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”. However, few people seem to be aware of the fact that this particular poem was originally published together with “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence” under the common title “Italy and France” in the third volume of *Bells and Pomegranates* (1842) (Berdoe 141). As a result, most critical analyses tend to focus only on the well-known “My Last Duchess – Ferrara” and completely disregard the examination of its companion piece.

The present paper attempts to demonstrate that a comparative analysis of the two dramatic monologues not only leads to a better understanding of the individual poems, but also draws the readers’ attention to significant aspects of interpretation which otherwise would remain unnoticed.

Before a detailed analysis of “My Last Duchess – Ferrara” and “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence, I would like to give a brief introduction into the genre of the dramatic monologue and those features of Robert Browning’s monologues which will be central to our understanding of his two complementary poems: the subject, the style, and the obscurity of his works.

2. The Dramatic Monologue

According to Chris Baldick’s definition in the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, the dramatic monologue is

a kind of poem in which a single fictional or historical character other than the poet speaks to a silent “audience” of one or more persons. Such poems reveal

not the poet's own thoughts but the mind of the impersonated character, whose personality is revealed unwittingly; this distinguishes a dramatic monologue from a lyric, while the implied presence of an auditor distinguishes it from a soliloquy (72).

As this definition also suggests, the dramatic monologue is a genre that encompasses the three primary literary modes – lyric, narrative, and dramatic –, but at the same time it also reacts against them (Byron 2). Therefore, the generic taxonomy of the dramatic monologue has always been a problematic issue. The uncertainty about the generic classification is best proven by the fact that even Victorian poets themselves were unable to define the new form they were composing. Since the term *dramatic monologue* was not yet invented, they usually considered their works to be essentially psychological in nature, and spoke of “‘dramas of mental conflict,’ ‘dramas of the interior,’ of ‘mental monologues,’ ‘psychological monologues,’ ‘portraits in mental photography’ and poems of a new ‘dramatic-psychological kind’” (Faas qtd. in Byron 44).

One of the first comprehensive attempts at the taxonomy of the dramatic monologue can be connected to Ina Beth Sessions, who in her 1947 article endeavoured to define the genre in formalist terms (Byron 8). According to Sessions, the ideal “dramatic monologue is that literary form which has the definite characteristics of speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present” (508). On the basis of these seven formal features, Sessions distinguished between what she called “Perfect” dramatic monologues and “Approximations”, which are further subdivided into “Imperfect”, “Formal”, and “Approximate” categories. As the names of these sub-categories clearly indicate, the poems belonging to these groups are characterized by the lack of one or more essential features that can be observed in the ideal monologues (Sessions 508).

According to Sessions, one of the “Perfect” dramatic monologues which “splendidly illustrate” all the seven characteristics is Browning’s “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”, in which

[t]he Duke is the speaker; the envoy is the audience; the arrival of the envoy to discuss wedding plans furnishes the occasion; interplay between speaker and audience is constant throughout the poem; the speaker reveals his own character at the same time he is sketching that of the Duchess; action is dramatic, involving the death of the Duchess and the Duke’s plans for his next wedding; and, finally, the action unfolds as the poem develops, giving the reader the impression that this is the original occasion (508-509).

As opposed to this, “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence”, which presents a retrospective narration, is considered by Sessions to be an example of the “Imperfect” dramatic monologue (510). As the critic remarked, “[h]ad the poem opened with the gala queen-crowning activities, and Gauthier and Gismond waged a fight suddenly in the midst of present events, the effects on the reader would have been more exciting. As it is, the air of the poem is quiet, more of the narrative spirit prevailing throughout” (511).

Although Sessions’s approach to the dramatic monologue unquestionably had the merit of making the accommodation of apparently diverse poems within the definition of the genre possible, with the changing conception of genre in general such formalist approaches have gradually lost favour. As David Duff remarks, the second half of the twentieth century has been characterized “by a steady erosion of the perception of genre, and by the emergence of aesthetic programmes which have sought to dispense altogether with the doctrine of literary kinds or genres” (qtd. in Byron 30).

In parallel with the changing conception of genre in general, critics of the second half of the twentieth century turned their attention away from the formalist definition of the

dramatic monologue to the “all-inclusive approach”, whereby the genre was put and examined in a long-standing literary tradition (Byron 31).

One of the most important examples of the “all-inclusive approach” to the genre can be found in the seminal work of Robert Langbaum, in which he attempted to analyse the dramatic monologue as part of what he termed the “poetry of experience”. The “poetry of experience” is an umbrella term covering the diverse poetic traditions of the post-Enlightenment era which Langbaum defines as “a poetry constructed upon the deliberate disequilibrium between experience and idea, a poetry which makes its statement not as an idea but as an experience from which one or more ideas can be abstracted as problematical rationalizations” (28).

According to the critic, the “poetry of experience” proper manifested itself first in the Romantic lyric, in which the fact that the natural scene is actually perceived “and not merely remembered from a public or abstract view of it” is signalled by the extraordinary perspective (36, 41). As Langbaum puts it,

[t]he particular or, more emphatically, the extraordinary perspective keeps the landscape intact by giving evidence of its being looked upon. It locates the poem more firmly by specifically locating the speaker with reference to everything he sees and hears; and this establishes the concreteness not only of the landscape but of the speaker as well, thus keeping the dramatic situation intact as an exchange between two real identities (41).

According to Langbaum, the particular perspective observable in the Romantic lyric is especially evident in the dramatic monologue, in which the reader, as a condition of reading the poem, suspends his moral judgement and adopts the persona’s point of view (132). As a consequence of this sympathetic identification, readers become aware of the fact that the extraordinary perspective offered is no less true to the reality of the perceived object than an

ordinary perspective. In possession of these two different points of view, there arises a “tension between sympathy and judgement”, a discrepancy between the limited understanding the persona has of his own speech, and the more encompassing insight achieved by readers at the end of the reading process (Langbaum 142). As Langbaum contends, it is this disequilibrium which makes the dramatic monologue “an appropriate form for an empiricist and relativist age, an age which has come to consider value as an evolving thing dependent upon the changing individual and social requirements of the historical process” (102-103).

Langbaum’s theory concerning the special effect of the dramatic monologue has been refuted on the grounds that sympathetic identification with the speaker is virtually impossible when he is reprehensible. It has to be acknowledged, however, that by the proposal of the idea of the “poetry of experience”, the development of the dramatic monologue could be considered in relation to its immediate influence, the Romantic lyric.

2.1. Browning’s Dramatic Monologues

2.1.1. The Subject of Browning’s Monologues

In a note dedicating his famously enigmatic narrative poem *Sordello* (1840) to Joseph Millsand, Browning writes that “my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so” (qtd. in Drew 112-113). As this quotation clearly indicates, the poet, out of the numerous subjects open to poetic treatment, intentionally selected that of the human soul. According to Esther Phoebe Defries, Browning believed that the poet’s artistic mission is to develop the innumerable possibilities of the soul “in individual men and women in all the conditions and circumstances of life” (7-8). The key note of Browning’s poetry can be found in his five-act dramatic poem *Paracelsus* (1835) as

well, in which the eponymous character sets out on a quest for absolute knowledge of the word (Hawlin 50):

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
 From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
 There is an inmost centre in us all,
 Where truth abides in fullness;
 [. . .]
 One man shall crawl
 Through life surrounded with all stirring things,
 Unmoved; and he goes mad: and from the wreck
 Of what he was, by his wild talk alone,
 You first collect how great a spirit he hid.
 Therefore, set free the soul alike in all,
 Discovering the true laws by which the flesh
 Accloys the spirit! (22-23)

As this citation illustrates, Browning believed that the final outcome and value of life are to be found not in outward actions, but within the souls of the individuals.

In pursuance of this conviction he takes in his dramatic monologues a human soul, “apparently possessing in itself but little interest”, and places it in a critical situation of high intensity in which it – either consciously or unconsciously – reveals its innermost thoughts and emotions (Defries 8). However, in Browning’s dramatic monologues the emphasis lays not on the outward action but on the hidden sources and motives of human conduct that lead to these incidents (Defries 8). This central characteristic of the Browningsque dramatic monologue was formulated by the poet in his advertisement to the above-mentioned *Paracelsus*, too, in which he claimed that his main purpose was

to reverse the method usually adopted by writers whose aim it is to set forth any phenomena of the mind or passion, by the operation of persons and events instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself in its rise and progress, and having suffered the agency by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not excluded (qtd. in Howard 68-69).

As a result of the fact that in Browning's dramatic monologues personality is "revealed by turning a flash-light upon a soul in a great crisis, illuminating the subtle meshes of thought and emotion" (Howard 69), characterisation becomes of paramount importance. According to Howard, who saw the final perfection of the genre partly in Browning's dramatic portrayal of his narrators, "[s]uch characters as the Duke in *My Last Duchess* and Rabbi Ben Ezra are so real that we often speak of them as we do of Hamlet" (80). In addition, the distinctness and the vividness of the speakers are frequently strengthened also by them being portrayed as representative figures of an age (Howard 79). By selecting the most typical person of an era as his mouthpiece, Browning was able to dramatize a historical age in its fullness; a characteristic which will particularly be evident in his complementary dramatic monologues, "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence" (Howard 79).

2.1.2. The Style of Browning's Monologues

As many critics have pointed out, Browning's poetic language employed in his dramatic monologues cannot be considered poetic in the traditional sense, as he "uses ordinary words, appropriate to the time and place, expressed with normal syntax" (Byron 84).

Moreover, as Philip Drew remarks, the poet's consistent use of everyday language in serious verse was not regarded as poetic in the Victorian period either, since "Victorian poets in general eschewed any forms of language which suggested ordinary speech unless they were deliberately writing comic or light verse" (259).

Nevertheless, Browning's "distinctively rough and prosodic style" is thoroughly adjusted to the direct and energetic expression observable in his dramatic monologues (Byron 83). According to Defries, "Browning excels most other poets in this power of word-painting. As a rule, a good description of external objects is improved by a good illustration, or at least such illustration is possible; but the artist would labour in vain who tried to depict on canvas the actual scene which Browning has described to us" (9). However, Browning's "word-painting", by which we are immediately immersed in a particular social and historical environment, is kept in subordination to the study of the human soul and, therefore, to the sense of the spoken quality of the verse as well (Defries 9). As a consequence, "descriptions are naturalistic rather than imagistic; enjambment and caesura exert pressure on the poetic rhythms"; and the energy of the conversation is provided by hesitations, interjections, disclaimers, questions, and colloquialisms (Byron 85).

2.1.3. Browning's Obscurity

Despite the fact that in his dramatic monologues Browning used syntactically straightforward, everyday language, he was frequently charged with being "wilfully obscure, unconscientiously careless, and perversely harsh" (Corson 87). In a letter, the poet's intimate friend Alfred Dommet warned Browning against the dangers of obscurity in the following way:

As regards your books, I have one first and last request to make or advice to give you. Do for Heaven's sake try to be commonplace. Strain as much for it as

weaker poets do against it. And always write for fools. Think of them as your audience, instead of the Sidneys and Marvells and Landors. Ask someone – the dullest, ploddingest, acquaintance you have – how he or she (if you can find a woman quite stupid enough) would have expressed your thought, and take his or her arrangement. Will you do this? I fear not. Yet I know that herein lies your truest course (qtd. in Palmer 134).

As this quotation suggests, Browning's obscurity arose not only from his unfamiliar syntactical arrangements, but also from the fact that he required his readers to bring an extensively wide knowledge into his poems. According to Drew, the poet's vocabulary "is so varied and so enormous that Browning demands always the full extent of his reader's knowledge of the language, and keeps his faculties always at full stretch. Browning's utter avoidance of the conventional word never allows the reader to relax into the comfortable circuit of a limited number of familiar terms" (76).

3. Focalisation and Diegesis in "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence"

Before moving on to the comparative analysis of Browning's two complementary dramatic monologues, "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence", I would like to give a short overview of the poems.

In "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara, who is showing the portrait of his late wife to the emissary of the Count whose daughter he is going to marry. While describing the Duchess's personality, the Duke reveals that he considered her joyousness, her fresh interest in things, and her generosity intolerable. As the monologue continues, it turns out that he himself ordered that the Duchess's smiles should end. Having

disclosed this fact, the Duke draws his guest's attention to another work of art in his collection, and continues to arrange his next marriage.

The narrator of "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence" is Countess Gismond, who is living in the Southern part of France with her husband and two sons. She is retrospectively relating to her confidante, Adela, the events that happened before her marriage. She was an orphan living in a French noble court with her two cousins. Once on a festival day she was just about to be crowned as the May Queen, when in front of the whole court Count Gauthier, with whom the jealous cousins conspired, accused her of fornication with himself. As the slander was uttered, Count Gismond rose to defend her honour. He challenged Gauthier to a combat, speared him through and dragged him in front of her to withdraw his lie. After taking Count Gauthier's life, Count Gismond led her away to Aix in Provence to marriage and everlasting happiness.

Having briefly summarized the complementary dramatic monologues, we can now turn our attention to the comparative analysis of the poems.

In a comprehensive interpretation of a literary work the title tends to be of fundamental importance.

As has been previously mentioned, the poems that now bear the title "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence" were originally published under the common title "Italy and France" – the former being "No. I. Italy", the latter being "No. II. France" (Corson 101). By 1849, however, the two poems had been separated and given their individual titles that have been used in all subsequent editions since then (Tilton 83).

Whilst at the beginning some critics conjectured about the reason for the poems' original pairing, most of them approved of Browning's revision on the grounds that the two dramatic monologues are patently dissimilar. Moreover, they also claimed that the narration

of “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence” is too straightforward and mediocre to match the epitome of the dramatic monologue (Tilton 83).

As opposed to these deprecatory views which attribute the modification of the title to Browning’s acknowledgment of the “somewhat meretricious” relationship between the dramatic monologues (De Vane qtd. in Tilton 83), I would argue that the poet’s intention with the alteration was, paradoxically, to make the connection between the two poems more obvious. Harrold also points out that Browning’s keen interest in experimenting with titles is a clear indication of his understanding of their importance in guiding the reader from the beginning of the reading process (11). As it turns out from a letter dated 22nd October 1845, it was most probably Elizabeth Barrett who first drew the poet’s attention to the significant role headings play, when in connection with “Oh to be in England ...” and “Nobly, nobly Cape St. Vincent ...” she suggested that Browning should

stoop to the vulgarism of prefixing some word of introduction, as other people do, you know, ... a title ... a name? You perplex your readers often by casting yourself on their intelligence in these things – and [...] it is true that readers in general are stupid and can’t understand [...] and they don’t catch your point of sight at first unless you think it worth while to push them by the shoulders and force them into the right place (qtd. in Harrold 11) [emphasis mine].

Probably as a result of the recognition that the common title “Italy and France” might not be sufficient to indicate the subtle connection between the dramatic monologues, Browning decided to choose two balanced titles which would invite readers to interpret the poems as companions in a more obvious way.

The first step in the formation of the new titles for Browning was to take out from the respective poems the characters of the Duchess and the Count, around whom the texts

apparently centre. As we shall see later, however, our expectations evoked by these paratextual elements will not be justified at the end of the reading process.

In addition to naming the characters of the Duchess and Count Gismond in the main part of the titles, the poet also added the place names “Ferrara” and “Aix en Provence” as subtitles. Although this modification might seem to be a diminutive revision of the original, its significance in the comparative analysis of the complementary dramatic monologues cannot be overemphasized. By the addition of the subtitles, interestingly, Browning not only particularised the geographical settings, but implicitly restricted the historical periods as well. As soon as readers are confronted with the place names, “Ferrara” and “Aix en Provence”, they immediately associate them with the period of the Italian Renaissance on the one hand, and the French Troubadour era on the other. As we shall see later, these frameworks, which are further strengthened by the naming of the characters, are going to govern the interpretation of the poems all through.

Although one might argue that these associations expect too much of the reader by relying rather heavily on their pre-existing frames of reference, it is important to note that Browning never intended his poetry to be “a mere relaxation and pastime” (Defries 11). In a letter written to Mr. W. G. Kingsland, in 1868, he writes:

I can have little doubt that my writing has been in the main too hard for many I should have been pleased to communicate with; but I never designedly tried to puzzle people, as some of my critics have supposed. On the other hand, I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game at dominoes to an idle man. So, perhaps, on the whole I get my deserts, and something over – not a crowd, but a few I value more (qtd. in Corson 90).

As this quotation clearly suggests, Browning did not write for everyone. By his poetry he has called into use the thinking powers of his readership¹; he has challenged his readers to read more into the lines than the literal sense of the words.

In the case of these complementary dramatic monologues, as we have already seen, the first challenge readers face can be connected to the titles. It is important to note, however, that the significance of the paratextual elements lies not only in evoking the readers' frames of reference, but also in creating expectations concerning the poem they are going to read.

On the first reading of the title "My Last Duchess – Ferrara", readers might think that the poem is a lyrical one, a love song dedicated to a still living and beloved Duchess. In this interpretation the possessive determiner "my" emphasizes the affectionate relationship, whilst the adverb "last" means 'the latest' or 'the newest'. In this sense the adverb designates that Duchess who comes at the end of a series; however, it does not necessarily imply that no more will follow.

As opposed to this, if we consider the poem to be an elegy lamenting the death of the beloved wife, the adverb "last" gets a new meaning, namely 'ultimate'. In this sense, the Duchess is shown to be a deceased and beloved character.

At the end of the reading process, however, none of these interpretations turn out to be correct. "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" is neither a love song, nor an elegy, but a dramatic monologue in which the Duke, through portraying the Duchess, reveals his own character in a "sequential and fragmentary" way (Martin 96).

A patently similar phenomenon can be observed in the companion piece, "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence", in the case of which genre expectations are evoked by the title and the first two lines of the poem simultaneously.

¹ "Browning csakugyan 'próbára teszi az olvasót', a szó szoros értelmében" (Szerb 185).

On the basis of the religious terminology and the archaic conjugation of the verb 'to save' ("Christ God who savest man, save most/ Of men Count Gismond who saved me!"), we might think that the poem is a hymn or an ode in praise of the eponymous character. This assumption is further strengthened by the multiple use of the same verb, which lends the sentence a refrain-like quality.

Although the presupposition concerning the genre of this poem seems to be justified many times during the reading process as well, I will attempt to demonstrate that the religious references, which are scattered all through the Countess's narration, are used not merely for their "spiritual value, but for twisting and distorting" them to the narrator's own needs (Harrold 41).

All things considered, it can be argued that the reader's expectations concerning the genre of the poems will be frustrated by the end of the reading process.

In addition, the titles are problematic in terms of focalisation as well. On the basis of the paratextual elements, readers most probably think that the poems they are going to read are centred around the eponymous characters. Although this assumption seems to be strengthened many times in the texts, too; the foci of the poems are, as we shall see later, the narrators themselves. By talking about another person, the Duke and the Countess unconsciously unveil their own personality.

According to Langbaum, this duality constitutes one of the central characteristics of the "poetry of experience", in which "[t]he poet talks about himself by talking about an object; and he talks about an object by talking about himself. Nor does he address either himself or the object, but both together. He addresses the object in order to tell himself something; yet the thing he tells himself comes from the object" (47).

In this respect an interesting parallel can be drawn between the beginnings of the two dramatic monologues in discussion. In "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" the portrait of the

Duchess, which is the first object of the readers' attention, serves as a "springboard from which the Duke plunges deeper into the pool of memory" (Harrold 39). In "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence" it is most probably the eponymous character's return to the castle that acts as a similar motivating force for the Countess's narration. On the basis of Stanza IX, in which there appears to be a window view of the field where the Count and his two sons are glimpsed ("See! Gismond's at the gate, in talk/ With his two boys"), it can safely be assumed that Gismond's approach at the beginning of the poem is also observed by the Countess through the window. As Harrold points out, this window functions as an "artistic frame for the image of the Count" which, similarly to the Duchess's portrait, "sets off a chain of memories concerning the pageant and the drama of her [i.e. the Countess's] challenged honour" (40).

Besides this similarity between the beginnings of the poems, an important difference has to be taken into consideration. Whilst in "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence" the appearance of the Count is most probably accidental, in "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" the presentation of the Duchess's portrait is evidently premeditated on the Duke's part. The reason as well as the significance of these involuntary and purposefully planned narrations will be discussed later.

In addition to the opening images, the first few lines of the poems bear similarity to each other in terms of time references as well.

As a result of the fact that dramatic monologues are "temporal fragments", their moment of narration is always "indefinitely continuous with an implied extratextual past and future of unmarked extent" (Martin 89, 90).

In the case of "My Last Duchess – Ferrara", the extratextual past is indicated by the two deictic expressions and the definite article at the beginning of the poem ("*That's* my last Duchess painted on *the* wall,/ Looking as if she were alive. I call/ *That* piece a wonder, now:" [emphasis mine]) (Martin 97). It is important to note, however, that these linguistic markers

imply an immediate past relevant to the poem's present "that is epistemologically shared by the sender and the receiver of the linguistic message" (Martin 93).

In addition to this "'dramatic' past", as Martin also points out, a more distant, narrative past is also signalled in these lines (97); although on the first reading of the poem this most probably escapes the readers' attention.

As I have already argued with respect to the title, the adjective "last" does not necessarily mean that the Duchess is dead. If we take this interpretation in the case of the first line as well, the phrase "[l]ooking as if she were alive" simply means that for to the Duke, who is an authentic connoisseur of paintings, the portrait of his beloved Duchess is so lifelike that he can no more distinguish between art and reality. However, when the narrated dramatic action reaches its climax in lines 45-46 ("This grew; I gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together."), it becomes clear that the Duchess was quietly murdered out of jealousy by the proud, soulless and arrogant Duke (Harrold 41). As a result of this realization, the adjective "last", as well as the phrase "[l]ooking as if she were alive" at the beginning of the poem must be interpreted as implicit gestures towards a distant past in which the Duchess was still living.

Although on the first reading of the poem the Duke's love of art seems to be supported by the sentence "I call/ That piece a wonder, now:" as well, a careful observation of its punctuation also excludes this possibility. As the colon is syntactically more powerful than the comma, the word "now" falls into the same intonational unit as the rest of the clause. Therefore, instead of a hesitation device, it must be interpreted as a temporal adverb, which suggests a past time, 'then', in which the Duke "did not esteem the painting (or the duchess) so highly" (Martin 97). This fact is further supported not only syntactically, but semantically as well. Although in this context the phrase "that piece" obviously refers to the product of art;

it does so in an intangibly vulgar way, as the term “piece” can also be applied depreciatory to a female being who is regarded merely as a sexual object.

In comparison with “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”, time references at the beginning of the companion dramatic monologue, “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence”, are relatively straightforward to interpret.

In the opening lines of this poem, as it can easily be noticed, there are neither deictic expressions, nor a definite article that would signify “an immediately contiguous past out of which the poem’s moment grows” (Martin 90). Although one might claim that the proper noun, “Count Gismond”, bears the definiteness that implies the immediate extratextual past, such names do not have a corresponding indefinite form. In other words, despite the fact that proper names are, by definition, definite, they do not necessarily imply a shared past experience or knowledge (Martin 93).

On the basis of these arguments, it can safely be assumed that the Countess’s utterance of her husband’s name in the second line of the poem is supposed to be an entirely instinctive and instantaneous reaction to the sight of Gismond in the distance. This observation also corroborates my previous argument concerning the involuntary nature of the Countess’s narration, which will be examined later on.

Similarly to “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”, implications of the narrative past can be found in the first few lines of “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence”, too (“Christ God who savest man, save most/ Of men Count Gismond who *saved* me!/ Count Gauthier, when he *chose* his post, *Chose* time and place and company/ To suit it; when he *struck* at length/ My honour, ’twas with all his strength.” [emphasis mine]). However, as a result of the fact that in this dramatic monologue “the action of the original event has been transferred to a much later stage” (Sessions 510), the Countess’s narration all through heavily relies on such preterits and other syntactic markers that signify completion.

In the case of both dramatic monologues, it is important to observe that besides the immediate dramatic past, which is shared by the narrator and the implied interlocutor, the distant narrative past is also enveloped in the current action since the speakers, who are active participants in both past and present, “are narrating incident by incident” (Harrold 39).

In “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence”, the relationship between the two time sequences is even more emphatic than in the companion piece, as the story narrated by the Countess involves her husband who, as opposed to the Duchess, is also part of the present action (Harrold 38).

In addition to connecting different time sequences, the analeptic references at the beginning of the poems exemplify another characteristic narrative strategy of the dramatic monologue as well. As Martin puts it, this is “[t]he technique of provoking unanswered questions, delaying the useful information that answers them as long as possible, and then, while supplying that information, raising new questions to start the [reading] process all over again” (97).

Before collecting examples of the application of this strategy from the complementary dramatic monologues, it is worth considering the role delay played in Victorian culture in general.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, knowledge about the world and humankind which was thought to have been already established was constantly challenged by new discoveries and scientific achievements, most notably by emerging theories of evolution. The publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), which seemed to disagree with the story of the creation in the Bible; for instance, led not only to disconcerting existential uncertainties and to the loss of coherent religious faith (Byron 33), but also to the need for a radically new and sceptical approach to knowledge, which nineteenth-century thinkers termed “realism” (Levine 10).

As Caroline Levine contends in her book entitled *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism & Narrative Doubt*, the epistemological method of “realism” was borrowed from that of scientific experimentation, which considered the testing of hypotheses inevitable (10). In order to test hypotheses against the evidence of reality, scientists stressed the importance of shedding presumptions and suspending judgements until final verification, whereby experimenters were able to remain open to unexpected truths and results (Levine 3). The significance of shedding preconceived beliefs in scientific experiments was acknowledged by the prominent nineteenth-century physicist John Tyndall as well, who claimed that

[t]he first condition of success [in science] is patient industry, an honest receptivity, and a willingness to abandon all preconceived notions, however cherished, if they be found to contradict the truth. Believe me, a self-renunciation which has something lofty in it, and of which the world never hears, is often enacted in the private experience of the true votary of science. And if a man be not capable of this self-renunciation – this loyal surrender of himself to Nature and to the facts, he lacks, in my opinion, the first mark of the philosopher (qtd. in Levine 43).

Similarly to experimentations in the field of natural sciences, suspenseful narratives, by withholding crucial pieces of information, also expect readers to conjecture and doubt, to hypothesize, to actively speculate, and, above all, to realize that “there is more than one credible ending to the narrative [...]. In this context, closure does not so much dictate an arbitrary conclusion, as it compels us to recognize the *otherness* of the world, the ever-present possibility that the facts may refuse to validate our prejudices. Viewed in this light, suspense emerges as a profoundly subversive literary technique (Levine 47) [emphasis in the original].

Although Levine does not seem to be specifically concerned with narrative suspense in dramatic monologues, it can safely be claimed that her arguments with respect to the application of the technique in prose works are even more pertinent to this genre, since here readers are provided with only one side of a dialogue on which they can base their interpretation.

Having discussed the role of suspense in Victorian culture in general, we can turn our attention to the examples of the strategy that can be found in the complementary dramatic monologues.

In the first few lines of “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”, as we have already seen, the two deictic expressions (“that”) and the definite article (“the”) refer backwards. However, it is not until the fifth line of the dramatic monologue, in which the silent interlocutor is addressed for the first time (“Will’t please you sit and look at her?”), that we can see that the event referred to by the analeptic references is an ongoing conversation between the speaker and the addressee. Moreover, it is not until the fifty-first line of this fifty-six-line poem that we can deduce that the silent auditor is the envoy of that woman’s father who is to succeed the last Duchess (“Of mine for dowry will be disallowed”).

Interestingly, the fifth line of the poem is significant not only because it offers the reader information about the ongoing discussion, but also because it in itself employs the strategy of delay, as it is inserted between two lines (lines 3 and 6) in which Frà Pandolf is mentioned. In the third and the fourth lines, Frà Pandolf is introduced as an accomplished painter who, in a brief period of time, managed to capture the essence of the Duchess’s qualities (“Frà Pandolf’s hands/ Worked busily a day, and there she stands”). As we have already seen, even the Duke himself considers the portrait to be a “wonder”, and here he suggests its authenticity through referring to it by a personal pronoun used to denote females but not objects, which the Duchess is reduced to. In the sixth line the painter’s name is

repeated in a way that aims at calling the emissary's attention to the distinctive style of Pandolf observable in the portrait ("I said/ 'Frà Pandolf' by design"). Although at this point the assertion of the painter's name coupled with the expression "by design" seems to be only a name-dropping by which the Duke intends to dazzle the emissary, lines 16-21 reveal that the painter's unique style arises from the fact that he was most possibly one of the Duchess's flatterers ("Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps/ 'Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint/ 'Must never hope to reproduce the faint/ 'Half-flush that dies along her throat'") (Martin 98).

The narrative strategy of delay can be observed in the description of the Duchess's portrait as well. Although right in the second line the Duke expresses the authenticity of the painting by the phrase "[l]ooking as if she were alive", it is not until the eighth line that we get to know that this quality refers to the representation of the Duchess's passion ("The depth and passion of its earnest glance"). Moreover, it is only six lines later that the Duke specifies this passion as "joy" ("Sir, 'twas not/ Her husband's presence only, called that spot/ Of joy into the Duchess' cheek"), and only thirteen lines later that it turns out that this joy was considered to be indiscriminate by the Duke (She had/ A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,/ Too easily impressed") (Martin 98). Finally, not until line 45 does the narrator reveal that he himself has put an end to his wife's passion ("This grew; I gave commands."). At this point in the narration, readers are also aware of the fact that the Duke regards not only works of art as collectible and disposable, but human beings, too. As a result of this late realization, the ambiguous title as well as the opening line becomes less difficult to interpret. Instead of signifying the affectionate relationship, the possessive determiner "my", which reduces the Duchess to the personal property of her husband, denotes nothing else but the self-centredness of the Duke (Harrold 39).

In this dramatic monologue, as Martin points out, the narrative strategy of delay is generated not only by the conscious organization of content, but by syntactic means as well (98). The first four sentences, which establish a sequence of “unanswered questions about the past”, are composed of free clauses (Martin 98). However, as soon as the Duke begins justifying himself, these simple sentences are replaced by a more complex syntactic structure which Martin, by adapting J. McH. Sinclair’s term, calls “arrest” (98). This term “indicate[s] a sentence in which the onset of a predictable α (free clause) is delayed or in which its progress is interrupted” by a bound clause (Sinclair qtd. in Martin 98). By assigning the letter α to free clauses, and β to the bound ones, Martin describes the fifth sentence of the dramatic monologue (“I said/ ‘Frà Pandolf’ by design [...] How such a glance came there”) in the following way: $\alpha \alpha \beta [\beta (\beta)] \beta [\beta] \beta$ (99).

On the basis of this pattern and the examples given above, it can easily be seen that delays are embedded in delays. As a result, readers have to read halfway through the poem before they can comprehend what the beginning means.

The same reading process has to be adopted in “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence” as well, in which the first stanza, in fact, invites readers to a guessing game concerning the narrative that is to be related (“Christ God who savest man, save most/ Of men Count Gismond who saved me!/ Count Gauthier, when he chose his post,/ Chose time and place and company/ To suit it; when he struck at length/ My honour, ’twas with all his strength.”).

Although the narrator imparts that her honour, which was attacked by Count Gauthier, has been saved by Count Gismond, it is only in the ninth stanza that the two men are referred to again (“Gismond’s at the gate, in talk/ With his two boys [...] Well, at that moment, who should stalk/ Forth boldly – to my face, indeed –/ But Gauthier”). In addition, it is only in the tenth stanza that readers realize the double meaning of the word “honour” uttered by the Countess at the beginning of the poem: it denotes not only the reputation or respect one gets,

but also one's moral behaviour, the quality of doing what is morally acceptable (“‘‘Shall she whose body I embraced/ ‘A night long, queen it in the day?/ For honour’s sake no crowns, I say!’”). Although Gismond’s generous act of saving is referred to again in the first two lines of the twelfth stanza (“‘‘Till out strode Gismond; then I knew/ That I was saved.’’”), readers feel compelled to read until the sixteenth verse if they look for a coherent image of the deed from the incomplete references that are scattered through the four preceding stanzas (He [...] struck his mouth/ With one back-handed blow that wrote/ In blood men’s verdict there. [...] And e’en before the trumpet’s sound/ Was finished, prone lay the false knight,/ Prone as his lie, upon the ground:/ Gismond flew at him, used no sleight/ O’ the sword, but open-breasted drove,/ Cleaving till out the truth he clove.’’). Finally, not until the nineteenth and twentieth stanzas do we realize that the true significance of saving lies not in Gauthier’s killing, but in Gismond’s proposal and the subsequent marriage that secured an untroubled life for the Countess (“‘‘For he began to say the while/ How South our home lay many a mile./ So ’mid the shouting multitude/ We two walked forth to never more/ Return.’’”).

In addition, another apparent and significant delay generated by the opening stanza can be found in that subordinate clause in which the narrator offers suggestive but incomplete references concerning the circumstances of her accusation (“‘‘Count Gauthier, when he chose his post,/ Chose *time* and *place* and *company*/ To suit it’’ [emphasis mine]).

Although fairly early in the poem we are provided with rather specific temporal and spatial references that indicate the time and place of Count Gauthier’s charge (such as “‘‘that miserable *morning*’’, “‘‘My *birthday* song’’, “‘‘descend *the castle-stairs*’’, “‘‘*Under the canopy*’’, and “‘‘*throne*’’ [emphasis mine]), it is only from the ninth and tenth stanzas onwards, in which the accusation is directly quoted, that we begin to realize that the narrator’s words in the first stanza are to be interpreted metaphorically. Instead of signifying an actual time and location,

the Countess's expression refers to the opportunity and stature that would have been provided for her if she had been crowned May Queen.

Besides the temporal and spatial references, an allusion to the conspiratorial nature of Count Gauthier's accusation can also be found in the narrator's utterance. Although at the beginning of the second stanza this suggestion is emphatically strengthened ("And doubtlessly ere he could draw/ All points to one, *he must have schemed!*" [emphasis mine]), not until the next verse are we informed about the participants of the scheme. Interestingly, the narrative strategy of delay is employed in a miniature even at this point, since the people referred to by the cataphoric reference "they" in the first line are identified only in the fifth one ("I thought *they* loved me, did me grace/ To please themselves; 'twas all their deed;/ God makes, or fair or foul, our face;/ If showing mine so caused to bleed/ *My cousins'* hearts" [emphasis mine]).

On the basis of the representative examples given above, it can be seen that the narrative strategy of delay plays a central role in the complementary dramatic monologues. As a result of the fact, however, that suspense affects the narrations in their entirety, readers' active participation is inevitable in order to make the texts signify. As Levine puts it, "Victorian suspense returns us to our hunches and suspicions, inviting us to revise and amend them each time we encounter new evidence and new experience. Its structure is itself an invitation to read twice: to note the laughter in the attic and then to come back to it, again and again, until it has become intelligible" (80).

The problem of intelligibility in the case of the complementary dramatic monologues is further complicated by the unreliability of the narrators.

According to Baldick's definition, an unreliable narrator is one "whose account of events appears to be faulty, misleadingly biased, or otherwise distorted, so that it departs from the 'true' understanding of events shared between the reader and the implied author" (268).

Although in some cases it is extremely difficult to decide whether we are supposed to trust or distrust the narrator's account, most texts offer some clues for the readers on the basis of which they have reasons to suspect the inauthentic nature of the narration. The three major textual signs of unreliability, as the narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan contends, are "the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme" (101).

As we shall see from the following examples, the unreliability observable in the complementary dramatic monologues results from the simultaneous presence of all these indications.

In lines 6-12 of "My Last Duchess – Ferrara", the Duke claims that all those "[s]trangers", who could not understand the expression of the Duchess in the portrait, turned to him and "seemed" as if they had wanted to enquire about the justification of that "glance" ("for never read/ Strangers like you that pictured countenance,/ The depth and passion of its earnest glance,/ But to myself they turned (since none puts by/ The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)/ And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,/ How such a glance came there").

On the basis of lines 12-13, we might think that the silent auditor of the poem, similarly to the "[s]trangers" referred to by the Duke, has also asked about the reason for the Duchess's countenance ("so, not the first/ Are you to turn and ask thus."). However, a careful observation of the eleventh line ("And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst") renders this interpretation highly questionable. If we take the narrator's words for granted, we are aware of the fact that although all "[s]trangers" appeared to be curious about the "depth and passion" represented in the portrait, none of them was brave enough to ask "[h]ow such a glance came there". As a result of the fact that the Duke compares the emissary to other "[s]trangers" and insists that he is not the first to "ask thus", it can safely be assumed that the

envoy present in the palace does not ask anything about the portrait, however intrigued he seems to be. As we have just seen, the difficulty in observing the narrator's unreliability lies in the insertion of the verb 'seem' into a sentence structure which, as Harrold points out, "carries the illusion of a definite affirmation" (48).

The following instance of unreliability can be found in that passage in which the Duke starts answering the unasked question concerning his wife's "pictured countenance". Having disclosed the fact that "'twas not/ Her husband's presence only, called that spot/ Of joy into the Duchess' cheek", the narrator immediately suggests that the painter's, Frà Pandolf's compliments might also have been sufficient for causing his wife to blush ("perhaps/ Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps/ 'Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint/ 'Must never hope to reproduce the faint/ 'Half-flush that dies along her throat': such stuff/ Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough/ For calling up that spot of joy.'").

On the first reading of the dramatic monologue, the Duke's argument seems to be rather convincing; however, the subtle indications undermine the reliability of his narration.

First of all, although the compliments of the painter are apparently quoted directly, the fact that they are introduced by the word "perhaps" clearly indicates that the Duke only imagines them to have been actually uttered. Moreover, even if the artist had complimented the Duchess in such a way, the Duke's belief about Frà Pandolf being one of his wife's flatterers would still not be supported, since the painter, as his name clearly implies, is a friar. As a result of the fact that he is a celibate man and most probably a member of a religious order, the Duke's presupposition that he would really be one of the reasons for "that spot of joy" is highly questionable. Finally, even if the blush on the Duchess's cheek had been evoked by the painter's words, it could still not be righteously taken as a ground for jealousy by the Duke, since, as he himself asserts, the Duchess considered the compliments only as "courtesy".

Before moving on to the discussion of how unreliability manifests itself in the Countess's narration, another interesting example of unreliability from "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" has to be taken into consideration.

The narration of the Duke, as it can easily be noticed, encompasses various indications of oral discourse, such as questions (e.g. "Will't please you sit and look at her?"), hesitations (e.g. "how shall I say?"), and interjections (e.g. "Oh"), which contribute to the naturalistic and smooth forward movement of the poem (Byron 14). As Harrold also points out, "the overall effect of an integrated flowing continuum" is further strengthened by the iambic pentameter lines, the abundant enjambments, and the lack of stanzaic divisions (49). Nevertheless, as a result of the fact that the narrator speaks in rhyming couplets, readers remain aware of "the artificiality of the speech act and the guiding hand of the poet" (Byron 14). As Rader puts it,

[w]e may ask ourselves whether in reading we imaginatively hear the words of the poem as spoken by the Duke, and of course we reply that we do. We may then ask ourselves if we understand the rhymes that we hear in the poem as part of the Duke's speech, and we discover that we do not. This shows that prior to any conscious analysis our imaginations register and respond to the presence of two agents in the intuitive act of constructing the poem – a created actor, the Duke, and the immanent creator Browning (qtd. in Martin 111).

As a result of this realization, we are able to observe the discrepancy between the limited understanding of the speaker and the more encompassing awareness of the implied author. According to Langbaum, the artistic merit as well as the irony of the dramatic monologue arises exactly from the fact that its meaning "is in disequilibrium with what the speaker reveals and understands" (141).

In the case of the hesitations, for instance, it can be seen that they are employed primarily as part of the Duke's rhetorical strategy by which he intends to render his speech

more authentic. However, the abundance and the proximity of demurs (“how shall I say” in line 22, “I know not how” in line 32, and “(which I have not)” in line 36), as many critics have noted, can also be considered as subtle indications of “insecurity and discomfort” (Hawlin 158). According to Herbert F. Tucker, “when a skilled rhetorician [like the Duke] reaches three times in the space of fifteen lines for the same commonplace, especially for this one [i.e. the lack of skill in speech], the commonplace is no longer common but the expression of a private struggle” (qtd. in Hawlin 158). As the critic goes on to argue, the Duke’s unease arises from the fact that despite his attempts to control his wife, the Duchess’s joyful energy breaks into his discourse and challenges him even after her death (Hawlin 158).

Similarly to “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”, examples of unreliability resulting from the discrepancy between the limited understanding of the narrator and the wider awareness of the reader abound in this dramatic monologue as well.

Throughout the narration the Countess expresses herself in terms of falconry² which, as Tilton and Tuttle point out, “are too numerous to be coincidental or meaningless” (“post”, “struck”, “points”, “stoop”, “canopy”, “foot”, “ringing gauntlets”, “flew at him”, “open-breasted”, “cleaving”, “clove”, “dragged”, “Great brow”, “black/ Full eye”) (85). Accordingly, besides being part of the idiom of an avid falconer, falconry terms are to be interpreted primarily as figurative expressions whereby the narrator’s personality and value system are revealed unconsciously (Tilton 86). In other words, the abundant use of falconry terms implies that in the Countess’s system of values every human action is judged by the values of animal nature, and every human being is regarded merely as an animal.

The fact that in her system of values the Countess conceives of both Count Gauthier and Count Gismond as falcons engaged in a bloody fight can be seen right from the beginning of the poem. In the first stanza, the narrator claims that Count Gauthier “chose his *post*” from

² For a detailed account of Browning’s references to birds, see Harrison.

which “he *struck* at length/ My honour” [emphasis mine]. As Tilton and Tuttle explain, the accuser’s choice of “his post” refers to the careful selection of the post in the hawking field from which the falcon begins its flight (86). Moreover, the expression “draw/ All points to one” at the beginning of the second stanza alludes to that part of the hawking in which the bird, while hovering above its prey, waits for the opportunity to strike (Tilton 86).

Similarly, the unconscious comparison of human and falcon actions can be observed in Count Gismond’s representation as well. In addition to the word “struck” that has already been used to describe Count Gauthier’s act, the last three lines of the sixteenth stanza are also suggestive of the fact that the Countess considers Gismond to be a falcon, too (“Gismond *flew at him*, used no sleight/ O’ the sword, but *open-breasted* drove,/ *Cleaving* till out the truth he *clove*.” [emphasis mine]) (Tilton 87).

In addition, on the basis of the numerous minute details concerning the duel and the allusions to the comforting intuition about the outcome of the fight (e.g. “Till out strode Gismond; then I knew/ That I was saved.”), Tilton and Tuttle argue that, instead of being the helpless quarry, the narrator “was herself a hawk observing the fight and awaiting the outcome when she could [...] grasp the opportunity which would best satisfy her needs” (87). The fact that the Countess unconsciously conceived of herself as a falcon is further supported by her claim that her cousins “made me *stoop*/ Under the *canopy*” [emphasis mine]. In this short passage, the verb “stoop” refers to the descent of a falcon on its prey, whilst the word “canopy” denotes that covering which shelters the hawk until the hunt begins (Tilton 87). Although a falcon does not “stoop” from under its “canopy”, the critics suggest that these terms have been introduced in order to help readers visualize the Countess in a hawk-like position (87).

On the basis of the analogies drawn between humans and falcons, it can be seen that in the Countess’s perverted system of values human actions are judged by the values of animal

nature. Therefore, instead of conveying the image of the helpless prey over whom the two men fought, the Countess unconsciously depicts herself as a falcon who swooped on Gismond's proposal without any delay and thereby secured her future.

In addition to the use of falconry terms, the unreliability resulting from the discrepancy between the limited understanding of the narrator and the wider awareness of the reader is indicated by other signs as well.

As I have already mentioned, at the beginning of the narration the Countess refers to the conspiratorial nature of Count Gauthier's accusation. Although in the third stanza we are provided with the suggestion that the cousins of the narrator were involved in the scheme, no further information concerning the alleged plot or the relationship between the plotters can be found. Moreover, although the Countess imputes jealousy as the motivation to the cousins' malevolence, it has to be acknowledged that the movements of her relatives (such as "*glancing sideways with still head*", elsewhere "*all eyes were bent/ Upon me, when my cousins cast/ Theirs down*" [emphasis mine]) can hardly be considered as indubitable signs of jealousy (Tilton 89). As Tilton and Tuttle argue, the narrator "has given herself away again, for in objectively reporting the movements of the cousins in order to interpret them as signs of jealousy, she has provided damning evidence for the reader to interpret" (89). As a result, it seems to be certain that the cousins had discovered the Countess's affair with Gauthier and, therefore, cast their eyes down in shame when "the supposed representative of virtue" was about to be crowned May Queen (Tilton 89).

The cousins' innocence, as Tilton and Tuttle also point out, is further supported by the fact that the Countess does not pray grace for them (91). As opposed to the prayers for Count Gismond ("Christ God who savest man, save most/ Of men Count Gismond who saved me!") and Count Gauthier ("Gauthier's dwelling-place/ God lighten! May his soul find grace!"),

which imply the Countess's sense of responsibility for their fate, the lack of prayer for the allegedly wicked cousins suggests that they have caused the Countess no harm.

In addition, even if the cousins had been jealous of the narrator, it is not at all clear what the reason would have been for Count Gauthier to act at their request and defame the Countess. Although some critics argue that he had been bribed by the cousins, Tilton and Tuttle emphasise that no bribe would have been sufficient for the Count to risk his life (89). As Helen Leah Reed noted, "death according to all the rules of the order of chivalry was not too serious a punishment" for a false accusation against a lady (qtd. in Tilton 89). Therefore, it can be easily deduced that Count Gauthier's act was entirely self-motivated. As he could not tolerate the sight of his hypocritical mistress posing as a virtuous queen, he revealed their illicit relationship. Although Count Gauthier's disclosure was motivated by a real sense of honour ("For honour's sake no crowns, I say!"), he was killed, ironically, by the superficially honourable Count Gismond who, being unaware of the truth, "responded mechanically to the chivalric code" (Tilton 90).

In order to lend credence to her narration the Countess quotes Count Gauthier's last words directly. However, the verbatim report of the confession, paradoxically, undermines the reliability of her words. As Tilton and Tuttle claim, if the accusation of Count Gauthier had been false, he would have said "I have lied *about* her" [emphasis mine] (91). As a result of the fact, however, that he said "I have lied/ *To God and her*" [emphasis mine], he insinuated that he had promised marriage to the Countess in order to seduce her (Tilton 91). In this way, Count Gauthier's last words are to be considered simultaneously both as "an honest confession of his sin and as an implicit accusation of his partner in sin" (Tilton 91).

Similarly to the directly quoted confession, the Countess's unnarrated reaction to the accusation also renders her narration suspicious. When the Countess has reported Count Gauthier's accusation verbatim, the silent auditor most probably inquires about how the

narrator responded to the charge. On the basis of the Countess's answer ("I? What I answered?"), it can be seen that the inquiry shocks her just as much as the accusation did before. Having been for a moment inarticulate, the Countess skilfully prevaricates that "I never fancied such a thing/ As answer possible to give" (Tilton 90).

Before moving on to the discussion of another interesting aspect of the complementary dramatic monologues, it is worth considering how unreliability manifests itself in the last stanza of "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence".

Similarly to many previous verses, the comparison of human beings to falcons can be found in this stanza, too ("Our elder boy has got the clear/ *Great brow*; tho' when his brother's *black/ Full eye* shows scorn" [emphasis mine]). As Tilton and Tuttle remark, the overhanging eyebrows and the large, dark eyes attributed to the boys are characteristics of the peregrine falcon (92).

On the basis of the Countess's description of her sons, the critics argue that the two boys bear a close resemblance to their father, Count Gismond, not only in appearance, but in disposition as well (92). As a result of the fact, however, that the Countess makes a clear distinction between the two boys, Marcella M. Holloway claims that the elder boy with "the clear/ *Great brow*" is most probably Count Gauthier's son, not Gismond's (550). Holloway's interpretation can be further strengthened by the aposiopetic utterance of the Countess as well ("tho' when his brother's *black/ Full eye* shows scorn, it ... Gismond here?"), in which an incomplete reference is made to the contemptuous attitude of the younger boy towards his elder brother.

Besides playing an important part in the description of the two boys, falconry terms are employed by the narrator in order to conceal the real topic of the conversation from her husband, too ("Gismond here?/ And have you brought my *tercel* back?/ I just was telling Adela/ How many birds it *struck* since May." [emphasis mine]) (Tilton 92). As the Countess

is aware of the fact that her narration most probably contains elements of surprise even for Count Gismond, she skilfully addresses her approaching husband and continues her speech with a “small prevarication” (Tilton 92).

All things considered, it can be concluded that the various indications of unreliability in the last stanza of “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence” reinforce what we have suspected all through the poem: far from being slandered by Count Gauthier, the Countess was justly accused.

Having examined how unreliability manifests itself in “My Last Duchess – Ferrara” and in “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence”, we can move on to the discussion of another interesting feature of the complementary dramatic monologues.

On the basis of the fact that soliloquists reveal their innermost thoughts and emotions because they are under the impression of being alone, it can safely be assumed that the speakers of dramatic monologues distort their narrations exactly because they are aware of the presence of an audience. Therefore, it is worth considering how the unreliability of the Duke’s and the Countess’s narrations can be connected to the narratees present in the respective dramatic monologues.

As I have already mentioned, it is only in the fifth line of “My Last Duchess – Ferrara” that the Duke addresses his silent interlocutor for the first time (“Will’t please you sit and look at her?”). In addition, it is only in the fifty-first line of this fifty-six line poem that we can infer that the silent auditor is the emissary of that woman’s father who is to succeed the last Duchess (“Of mine for dowry will be disallowed”).

As many critics have noted, the authority of the Duke’s narration is in itself challenged by the fact that he reveals his intimate secrets to someone who is basically a servant (Byron 21). However, on the basis of the polite questions (such as “Will’t please you sit and look at her?”; elsewhere “Will’t please you rise?”) and the multiple use of the honorific expression

“Sir” (such as “Sir, ’twas not/ Her husband’s presence only, called that spot/ Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek”; elsewhere “Sir, ’twas all one!”), it can be easily deduced that the emissary is not considered by the Duke to be inferior. This interpretation can further be supported by “the lordly waiving of rank’s privilege” observable in the sentence “Nay, we’ll go/ Together down, sir” (Langbaum 78). As Corson suggests, the word “Nay” implies that the emissary, who has just reached the head of the stairway with the narrator, “has politely motioned the Duke to lead the way down” (105). Therefore, it can be safely claimed that the supposed inferiority of the envoy cannot be held responsible for the Duke’s unreliable narration.

Nevertheless, as a result of the fact that the silent auditor is the emissary of that woman’s father who is to succeed the last Duchess, the relationship between him and the inauthentic narration cannot be considered purely coincidental either.

Although there are some critics who suggest that the Duke is “witless”³ in being oblivious to the fact that he exposes himself as a murderer (Hawlin 157), most critical analyses argue that, by consciously informing the emissary of the fate of his late wife, the Duke intends to communicate certain significant information concerning the kind of submissive behaviour he expects of his next wife. As Sessions also points out, the narrator’s implicit warning is so overwhelming that readers (and most probably the emissary, too) get the impression that “if the next Duchess does not heed the Duke’s demands there is likely to be an addition to the portrait gallery” (510).

On the basis of the assumption that the Duke deliberately conveys to the envoy that he demands in the prospective Duchess an utmost devotion to his will, it can be safely claimed that the presentation of his late wife’s portrait is premeditated on the Duke’s part.

In addition to the self-revelatory half-sentence (“This grew; I gave commands”) and the comments on the Duchess’s “pictured countenance”, the Duke’s domestic power and his

³ For a comprehensive account of “Browning’s Witless Duke”, see Jerman.

expectations of the appropriate behaviour of intimidated deference within his household are asserted in other ways as well.

Although the parenthetical digression in lines 9-10 (“(since none puts by/ The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)”) may simply indicate that the Duke considers his wife’s portrait as too priceless to be taken care of by anybody else (Corson 105), the final outcome of the poem as well as the fact that the Duke is the only one who is allowed to pull the curtain aside from before the painting strengthen the image of the Duke’s controlling character.

Moreover, the final sentence of the dramatic monologue, in which the narrator calls the emissary’s attention to yet another masterpiece of his art collection (“Notice Neptune, though,/ Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,/ Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me”), is also suggestive of the Duke’s disciplinarian personality. According to classical mythology, Neptune was the Roman god of water and the sea. As a result of the fact, however, that from 399 B.C. he was identified with Poseidon, Neptune was given the same attributes as his Greek equivalent. Therefore, he was depicted as a robust man with thick hair and matted beard taming a sea horse with a bridle, or a dolphin with a trident (Pintér 93). According to the classical legend, the Nereid Amphitrite became the bride of Neptune after he had abducted her on the back of a dolphin. Later on, she became the Queen of the sea (Pintér 28). On the basis of this legend, it can be easily seen that the Duke projects an analogy between himself and the Roman god on the one hand, and between the Duchess and Nereid Amphitrite on the other. As Hawlin puts it,

Neptune’s ‘taming’ of the sea-horse suggests a display of power and sadism that corresponds to what the Duke believes he has achieved with regard to his last Duchess. He has conquered her wayward nature and reduced her to a work of art. The feminine and the erotic have been reined in, ruthlessly brought

under control. The Duke has tamed his wife from an uncontrollable three dimensions to a very controllable two (68-69).

On the basis of these arguments, it can be seen that the Duke attempts to intimidate the emissary, and through him his prospective wife, too, not only by his distorted narration, but by his symbolic gestures as well.

Before moving on to the discussion of how the unreliable narration of the Countess can be related to the narratee present in “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence”, one more interesting connection between the Duke’s narration and his silent interlocutor has to be taken into consideration.

As it has been already mentioned, Tucker argues that the Duke’s unease discernible from his scattered utterances concerning his lack of skill in speech (such as “how shall I say?”; elsewhere “I know not how”, elsewhere “(which I have not)”) results from the fact that despite his attempts to control his wife, the Duchess’s joyful energy breaks into his discourse and challenges him even after her death (Hawlin 158).

By taking up Tucker’s insight from a feminist perspective, Catherine Maxwell argues that “My Last Duchess – Ferrara” is to be read as Browning’s overturning of the Ovidian myth of Pygmalion. As the critic puts it, Browning’s

poems show how male subjects, threatened by woman’s independent spirit, replace her with statues, pictures, prostheses, corpses, which seem to them more than acceptable substitutes for the real thing. Browning’s male speakers typically invert Ovid’s myth, reducing a woman, even through her death, to a composition of their own creating. They desire feminine simulacra, static art-objects, whose fixed value will reflect their self-estimation. Yet these attempts are always equivocally presented as, time and time again, Browning shows us their fatuity. We see exposed the confusion of values that allows these speakers

their justifications. But not only is the error of judgment made plain; increasingly, as he explores the myth, Browning reveals how the speaker's plan goes askew. The female subject consistently eludes her captor, unmasks the poverty of his suppositions, or returns to haunt him [...] "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" stages a confrontation in which the dead returns to challenge the living, and thereby empties and renders null the gesture of appropriation (qtd. in Hawlin 160).

On the basis of Tucker's and Maxwell's arguments, most critics claim that the authenticity of the Duke's narration is undermined primarily by the "strangely animate yet inanimate presence" of his last Duchess that haunts him over and over again (Byron 21). Therefore, it is often suggested that the Duke, similarly to Coleridge's ancient mariner, will endlessly repeat his story to whoever listens so that he can finally reduce his wife to the lifeless portrait he desires (Hawlin 69).

In addition to the critics' suggestion, I would claim that besides the Duke's narration, the presence of a variety of envoys, and the act of diminishing joyous and generous wives into static objects are also repetitive⁴.

As I have already argued in connection with the title and its repetition in the first line, the adverb "last" may designate that Duchess who comes at the end of a series. Consequently, the possibility that there may have been previous duchesses is not excluded. In addition, the fact that there have been emissaries in the Duke's palace other than the one being present is supported by the fact that the Duke himself compares his visitor to other similar "strangers" ("for never read/ Strangers like you that pictured countenance"). Moreover, when talking about the dowry, the Duke assures the envoy that the new bride's self and not her property is his "object" ("Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed/ At starting, is my object.").

⁴ My interpretation can further be supported by the critics' suggestion that the Duke's character was based on Alfonso II (1533-97), fifth Duke of Ferrara, who was famous for his wives' murders. For further details on the topic, see Friedland.

Although on the surface level the word “object” simply denotes the Duke’s intention to marriage, it can proleptically refer to the sinister future beyond the termination of the poem itself, in which the next Duchess will probably suffer the same fate as the previous one (Martin 99).

On the basis of the assumption that the emissary present in the palace realizes the struggle that is behind the Duke’s narration, it can be expected that, similarly to the wedding-guest, he will also depart “like one that hath been stunned,/ And is of sense forlorn” (Coleridge qtd. in Langbaum 45). According to Langbaum, Coleridge’s “lines apply equally to the reader, who has participated with the observer in the experience of the poem” (45). As Byron goes on to argue, “[w]e could see him [i.e. the emissary] as an internal representative of the reader since we both, envoy and reader, watch the duke struggle – and not for the first time, we suspect – with the mystery of his last duchess, the ‘meaning’ of whom has so persistently eluded him” (23).

As opposed to “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”, in which the Duke addresses his silent interlocutor first in the fifth line, it is not until the ninth stanza of “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence” that the Countess addresses her narratee for the first time (“See! Gismond’s at the gate, in talk with his two boys”).

On the basis of the way the narrator addresses her silent interlocutor, and the interventions of the auditor that are implied by the narrator’s words (“I? What I answered?”), it can safely be claimed that the relationship between the two conversational partners is informal. This argument can further be strengthened not only by the Countess’s allusion to the intimate nature of their friendship (“though no word/ Could I repeat now, if I tasked/ My powers for ever, to a third/ *Dear even as you are.*” [emphasis mine]), but also by the fact that in the final stanza of the poem she refers to her interlocutor by her first name (“And have you

brought my tercel back?/ I just was telling *Adela*/ How many birds it struck since May.”
[emphasis mine]).

Despite the fact, however, that the Countess’s narration contains sufficient information from which we can infer the informal nature of the relationship between her and the silent auditor, the reason for Adela’s visit as well as for the narrator’s introduction of the story about Gismond remains unexplained.

As it has been already mentioned, Harrold argues that the motivating force behind the Countess’s narration is most probably Count Gismond’s sudden return to the castle which is observed by the narrator through a window (40). Therefore, the Countess’s speech, instead of being a purposefully planned act like the Duke’s, can be considered as an unconscious defensive reaction which emerges, independently of the personality of the interlocutor present, every time the narrator catches sight of her husband. This interpretation does not only suggest that the Countess, similarly to the ancient mariner and the Duke, will endlessly repeat her story, but also answers Holloway’s unresolved question why one “Dear even as you are” has not heard the Countess’s story before (550).

On the basis of the assumption that the Countess’s narration is a self-defensive act, it can be argued that she, as opposed to the Duke, does not attempt to intimidate her interlocutor in any way. Her speech is entirely self-motivated and aims at the perpetuation of her deceit.

Although the initiation of her story is an instinctive reaction on the Countess’s part, it is important to note that her narration itself is constructed consciously and skilfully all through. This fact can be supported not only by the deliberately distorted narration of the Countess, but by Tilton and Tuttle’s observation concerning the quickness with which the narrator’s eyes clear sufficiently for observing her husband at the gate as well (“’twas time I should present/ The victor’s crown, but ... there, ’twill last/ No long time ... the old mist

again/ Blind me as then it did. How vain!/ See! Gismond's at the gate, in talk/ With his two boys: I can proceed.") (90).

4. Conclusion

The first and foremost aim of my thesis was to demonstrate that a comparative analysis of Robert Browning's complementary dramatic monologues, "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence", does not only lead to a better understanding of the individual poems, but also draws the readers' attention to significant aspects of interpretation which otherwise would remain unnoticed.

The first part of my thesis gave a short introduction to the genre of the dramatic monologue and the most important critical approaches to it. In addition, in this section I also discussed those characteristic features of the Browningsque monologue – subject, style, and obscurity –, which played a central role in our understanding of the two complementary poems. In the main part of my thesis, I attempted to illustrate the various ways in which "My Last Duchess – Ferrara" and "Count Gismond – Aix en Provence" complement each other. The first aspect of my comparative analysis was concerned with the titles of the poems. Having discussed their history and significance, I endeavoured to examine the thematic as well as the generic expectations that are evoked by them. After the careful examination of the paratextual elements, I analyzed the first few lines of the dramatic monologues from the point of view of time references. My analysis demonstrated that besides connecting different time sequences, the analeptic references at the beginning of the poems exemplify the narrative strategy of delay as well. After a short discussion of the role suspense played in Victorian culture in general, I attempted to illustrate how the strategy is employed in Browning's complementary dramatic monologues. On the basis of this, I pointed out that the difficulty of interpreting the poems lies in the fact that readers are compelled to read halfway through them

in order to understand what the beginning means. Moreover, as the next aspect of the comparative analysis indicated, the problem of intelligibility is further complicated by the unreliability of the narrators. After a brief theoretical overview, I attempted to collect textual indications that suggest the inauthentic nature of the narrations. Finally, on the basis of the assumption that the narrators of the dramatic monologues distort their narration because they are aware of the presence of an audience, I examined how the unreliable narrations of the Duke and the Countess can be connected to the silent interlocutors present in the respective dramatic monologues.

5. Appendix

5.1. “My Last Duchess – Ferrara”

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall, 1
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said 5
 ‘Frà Pandolf’ by design, for never read
 Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
 The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
 But to myself they turned (since none puts by
 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) 10
 And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
 How such a glance came there; so, not the first
 Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ‘twas not
 Her husband’s presence only, called that spot
 Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps 15
 Frà Pandolf chanced to say ‘Her mantle laps
 ‘Over my lady’s wrist too much,’ or ‘Paint
 ‘Must never hope to reproduce the faint
 ‘Half-flush that dies along her throat’: such stuff
 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough 20
 For calling up that spot of joy. She had

A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast, 25
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,
 The bough of cherries some officious fool
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
 She rode with round the terrace – all and each
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech, 30
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men, – good! but thanked
 Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
 With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill 35
 In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
 'Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 'Or there exceed the mark' – and if she let
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set 40
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
 – E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; 45
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet

The company below, then. I repeat,

The Count your master's known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretence 50

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed

At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go

Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, 55

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

5.2. “Count Gismond – Aix en Provence”

I

Christ God who savest man, save most
 Of men Count Gismond who saved me!
 Count Gauthier, when he chose his post,
 Chose time and place and company
 To suit it; when he struck at length
 My honour, ‘twas with all his strength.

5

II

And doubtlessly ere he could draw
 All points to one, he must have schemed!
 That miserable morning saw
 Few half so happy as I seemed,
 While being dressed in queen’s array
 To give our tourney prize away.

10

III

I thought they loved me, did me grace
 To please themselves; ‘twas all their deed;
 God makes, or fair or foul, our face;
 If showing mine so caused to bleed
 My cousins’ hearts, they should have dropped
 A word, and straight the play had stopped.

15

IV

They, too, so beautiful! Each a queen

By virtue of her brow and breast; 20

Not needing to be crowned, I mean,

As I do. E'en when I was dressed,

Had either of them spoke, instead

Of glancing sideways with still head!

V

But no; they let me laugh, and sing 25

My birthday song quite through, adjust

The last rose in my garland, fling

A last look on the mirror, trust

My arms to each an arm of theirs,

And so descend the castle-stairs – 30

VI

And come out on the morning-troop

Of merry friends who kissed my cheek,

And called me queen, and made me stoop

Under the canopy – (a streak

That pierced it, of the outside sun, 35

Powdered with gold its gloom's soft dun) –

VII

And they could let me take my state

And foolish throne amid applause

Of all come there to celebrate

My queen's-day – Oh I think the cause 40

Of much was, they forgot no crowd

Makes up for parents in their shroud!

VIII

However that be, all eyes were bent

Upon me, when my cousins cast

Theirs down; 'twas time I should present 45

The victor's crown, but . . . there, 'twill last

No long time . . . the old mist again

Blinds me as then it did. How vain!

IX

See! Gismond's at the gate, in talk

With his two boys: I can proceed. 50

Well, at that moment, who should stalk

Forth boldly – to my face, indeed –

But Gauthier, and he thundered 'Stay!'

And all stayed. 'Bring no crowns, I say!

X

‘Bring torches! Wind the penance-sheet 55

‘About her! Let her shun the chaste,

‘Or lay herself before their feet!

Shall she whose body I embraced

‘A night long, queen it in the day?

‘For honour’s sake no crowns, I say!’ 60

XI

I? What I answered? As I live,

I never fancied such a thing

As answer possible to give.

What says the body when they spring

Some monstrous torture-engine’s whole 65

Strength on it? No more says the soul.

XII

Till out strode Gismond; then I knew

That I was saved. I never met

His face before, but, at first view,

I felt quite sure that God had set 70

Himself to Satan; who would spend

A minute’s mistrust on the end?

XIII

He strode to Gauthier, in his throat
 Gave him the lie, then struck his mouth
 With one back-handed blow that wrote 75
 In blood men's verdict there. North, South,
 East, West, I looked. The lie was dead,
 And damned, and truth stood up instead

XIV

This glads me most, that I enjoyed
 The heart of the joy, with my content 80
 In watching Gismond unalloyed
 By any doubt of the event:
 God took that on him – I was bid
 Watch Gismond for my part: I did.

XV

Did I not watch him while he let 85
 His armourer just brace his greaves,
 Rivet his hauberk, on the fret
 The while! His foot. . . my memory leaves
 No least stamp out, nor how anon
 He pulled his ringing gauntlets on. 90

XVI

And e'en before the trumpet's sound
 Was finished, prone lay the false knight,
 Prone as his lie, upon the ground:
 Gismond flew at him, used no sleight
 O' the sword, but open-breasted drove,
 Cleaving till out the truth he clove.

95

XVII

Which done, he dragged him to my feet
 And said 'Here die, but end thy breath
 'In full confession, lest thou fleet
 'From my first, to God's second death!
 'Say, hast thou lied?' And, 'I have lied
 'To God and her,' he said, and died.

100

XVIII

Then Gismond, kneeling to me, asked
 – What safe my heart holds, though no word
 Could I repeat now, if I tasked
 My powers for ever, to a third
 Dear even as you are. Pass the rest
 Until I sank upon his breast.

105

XIX

Over my head his arm he flung
 Against the world; and scarce I felt 110
 His sword (that dripped by me and swung)
 A little shifted in its belt:
 For he began to say the while
 How South our home lay many a mile.

XX

So 'mid the shouting multitude 115
 We two walked forth to never more
 Return. My cousins have pursued
 Their life, untroubled as before
 I vexed them. Gauthier's dwelling-place
 God lighten! May his soul find grace! 120

XXI

Our elder boy has got the clear
 Great brow; tho' when his brother's black
 Full eye shows scorn, it . . . Gismond here?
 And have you brought my tercel back?
 I just was telling Adela 125
 How many birds it struck since May.

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