My last duchess and othello: striking comparisons

Literature, Russian Literature

In the dramatic form, be it monologue, dialogue or full theatrical scene, the author cannot step into the action to comment or interpret for us, as he can in a novel. We must draw our own conclusions from what we see and hear, and this makes for powerful effects, as a character reveals him- or herself to us by what he or she says or does. In the monologue My Last Duchess Browning misleads us with great skill before we realize that we are listening to a criminal lunatic.

The dramatic force lies in the surprise we feel as the truth finally emerges. In Act IV, scene iii ofOthellothere is again an agonizing irony for the viewer, who knows more than Desdemona and is of course impotent to help her. Shakespeare works like a dentist without an anesthetic, and the pain for the audience derives from the unbearable innocence of the doomed Desdemona, who is surely something like the Duchess in Browning's poem, helpless and bewildered in the face of a murderous insanity in her husband.

Browning's Duke sounds so sane! He is wonderfully gracious and articulate – " Will't please you sit and look at her?" (5). As he tells his story he seems to weigh his words with great caution, as if he is quite free of the distorting power of anger or any other passion, and is keen to avoid any unfairness in his judgment: " She had / A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad" (21-2), "... but thanked / Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked..." (31-2). He never raises his voice, and speaks with a measured confidence that quite takes us in.

At first we might be tempted to believe that his attitudes are reasonable: " Sir, ' twas not / her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek" (13-15). His manner is restrained even as he hints at her

infidelity. The painter flattered her about her appearance, as of course he would, being a Renaissance artist totally dependent on patronage, but she was charmed by it – foolishly, the Duke suggests. " She liked whate'er / She looked on" (23-24). She was delighted by the beauty of the sunset, and the little tribute from the man who gave her the cherries, just as much as " My favor at her breast" (25).

What he seems to be objecting to is herfailureto be properly selective and aristocratic in her tastes. This is a rather extreme sort of snobbery, but perhaps not unprecedented; we may not find it attractive, but we may accept it as a feature of a proud man. In Browning's My Last Duchess, the murder is implied. It is not described in explicit terms as in Othello. In the lines, " Paint/Must never hope to reproduce the faint /Half-flush that dies along her throat" , the speaker adores the ' faint half-flush' on his wife's face that no paint could re-add and at the same time leaves a slight hint that she had been throttled to death[dies along her throat]. The intelligent monologue is enough to make the point overt and covert at the same time.

All the time, Browning is luring us up the garden path. We begin to detect the problem. The Duke is immensely proud, a man of great heritage, while she is free of snobbery, charmed by the delights of the world and human kindness, and genuinely innocent. (Infidelity does not now seem to be the Duke's concern.) Then we begin to see how his pride is really pathological arrogance. " Even had you skill / In speech – (which I have not)" (35-36), (he lies, of course) to explain your objection to her behavior – which is clearly quite " normal" – it would involve " stooping, and I choose / Never to stoop" (42-3).

So, rather than speak to her about his dissatisfaction, which would involve impossible condescension by him, he chose to solve the problem rather more radically: “ This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped altogether” (45-6). It takes a moment for us to register what he did, so unbelievable is it and so evasively phrased.“ ..... 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,”- the last part of the speech clearly brings forth the envy rankling in the speaker’s heart!

The unbending pride of the Duke comes out through the turns of phrases of this part of this long monologue, “…. and if she let/Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set/Her wits to yours , forsooth and made excuse,/-E’en then would be some stooping and I choose/Never to stoop.” The Duke can hardly ‘ chose to stoop’to give in to the childish demeanors of his beautiful wife.

Again, jealousy seems to be prevalent in the tone of these words: “..... Oh , Sir, she smiled no doubt,/Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without /Much the same smile?” Then having confessed to murder, or, rather, boasted of it, he continues his negotiations for his next Duchess, celebrating, incidentally, one of his favorite art works, “ Neptune... Taming a sea-horse” (54-5), the very image of the brutal control that he has himself exerted over his innocent last Duchess.

The willow scene from Othello works differently, of course, because it is a dialogue, though it is the inner workings of Desdemona’s mind that the dramatic form reveals here, just as much as is the case in Browning’s poem There is an almost intolerable pathos about this scene because Desdemona is so helpless. She has a good idea of what is going to happen – “ If I do die

before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of those same sheets” (24-5) and is impotent in the face of her fate.

There seems to be no defence against the ruthless execution of Othello’s enraged will. She is in a sort of trance, a hypnosis of shock. All she can do is wait for the end, and the pathetic simplicity of her reflections here is the sign of a wounded spirit in retreat from reality. The tragic atmosphere is given additional poignancy by the occasional interruption of the everyday details of “ undressing for bed”, the habitual continuing because there is nothing else to do in the face of the worst – “ Prithee unpin me” (21).

She continues at moments to pretend that this is just an ordinary night: “ This Lodovico is a proper man” (35), not a comparison of Othello with her country forms, but a pathetic attempt at gossip. But her real thoughts emerge in the obsession with the willow song, which she cannot resist. It is the perfect mirror of her own fortune: “ And she died singing it; that song tonight / Will not go from my mind” (30-1). Like a detail from a psychoanalyst’s casebook comes the unprompted line in the song that gives away the deepest thoughts of the willing victim.

–Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve, —

Nay, that’s not next. Hark! Who’s that knocks?

–It is the wind.” (51-3)

She corrects herself, but the absolute terror of realisation goes through her. Compared with Desdemona’s helplessness in the face of the corruption of Othello, Emilia’s jokes have an immensely remedialhealth. It is not a

criticism of Desdemona, but it is a firm placing of trust in the human by Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare's Othello, the Moor can hardly be blamed for his rash decision of murdering Desdemona, who had been black-painted by his ' honest Iago' and it was Iago again who had sown the seeds of jealousy in his mind. Desdemona pleaded her innocence at last and asked to call for Cassius but Othello ran berserk maddened by sexual jealousy.

Othello could hardly be blamed for the attitude, as he was a Moor and unfamiliar with the ways and manners of the Venetian Republic. Naturally, he fell victim to Iago's insinuations and committed the murder of hi beautiful wife, Desdemona, who was actually, innocence incarnate.

In Act IV, sc ii, Othello in reply to Desdemona's pleading innocence disgustingly cried out, " O Desdemona, away! away! away!" Desdemona , being totally unaware of the handkerchief she lost tried to reason with her husband, " Am I the motive of these tears my Lord?" It might have been possible that Othello could have turned deaf ears to Iago's vitriolic comments or aspersions cast on Desdemona, but as he was new to their society andculture, it became easy for Iago to prison him against his wife, a paragon of beauty.

By way of rejoinder , when Othello speaks out, " Had it pleased Heaven/To try me with affliction ; had they rained/All kinds of sores and shame on my bare head/Steeped me inpovertyto the very lips/Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes/I should have found in some place of my soul/A drop of patience....." and at last turns to the question of " complexion" , " Turn

thy complexion thee.. ...Ay there look as grim as hell!", we find Othello a dejected, frustrated , lost soul feeling small for being a Black Moor who was lien to the Venetian culture! Question of Culture and Identity assails him, no doubt!

Othello decided to put an end to the life of his unfaithful wife at last and as he uttered the words in Act V, Sc ii, " Yet, I'll not shed her blood;/Nor scar that whiter skin of hers thansnow/And smooth as monumental alabaster/Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men", Did he not sound the same as the Duke of My Last Duchess who had been driven mad by sexual jealousy? The murder could not be justified, but , Othello was quite a lover and a compassionate person than the Duke. He needed evidence to prove Desdemona's betrayal, he had to fight immensely with his own conscience to come to the decision of murder.

As a person, Duke was cold-blooded, but Othello was emotional and irrational at he same time. If this had not been so, "...I will kill thee,/ And love thee after. One more and this the last./So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep/ But they are cruel tears ; this sorrow's heavenly ;/IT STRIKES WHERE IT DOTH LOVE," could he utter such words? The Duke of My Last Duchess was never so overpowered with emotions to give vent to his pent-up goodness. Did he have any goodness, if at all?

In Act V, sc i, Othello is making his mind up to vent his rage upon Desdemona. Here he again finds enough reason to slaughter Desdemona. On hearing the footsteps of Cassius, he blurt forth, "'Tis he;-O brave Iago, honest and just.....minion your dear lies dead/and your unblest fate hies, strumpet I come"

Till Lines 31 of Act V Sc ii, we find Othello raves and rails on the murder of Desdemona. Othello seemed to give a chance to Desdemona to prove her innocence by saying, “ If you bethink yourself of any crime/Unreconciled as yet heaven and grace /Solicit for it straight.” But he meant the murder and perpetrated it! In Act III , Sc iii, when Othello grows blind in rage provoked by “ honest Iago’s” words, he finds every reason to kill Unfaithful Desdemona and utters, “ Monstrous , monstrous!!”

On hearing Cassio’s dream-mutterings on his secret affair with Desdemona, Othello got green with anger and envy and saw betrayal from the cruelest possible angle. He found terrible monstrosity in it, profound mendacity in the whole episode, running on the sly.

When Emilia came after the murder talking of Desdemona’s profound love for her husband , Othello could not keep his cool, he blurted, “ O cursed slave!/Whip me ye devils/From the possession of this heavenly sight/Blow me about in the winds, roast me in sulphur/Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire...O Desdemona, Desdemona, DEAD!!”[Act V, Scii] Could we ever expect the Duke speaking in such touchy, sentimental terms after committing the murder? No, never!!!

Works Cited

1. Shakespeare, William: Othello, Arden, London, 1974.

2. Young, W. T.: Browning’s poems, Macmillan, London, 1975.