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The Role of the Interlocutor
in
Robert Browning's Dramatic Monologues

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the twentieth century, critics of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, with some exceptions, have discussed the poems on the basis of Cartesian idealist tenets regarding subjectivity. Thus, although critics regard the interlocutor as a key feature of the genre, they tend to focus their attention primarily on monologue speakers who, as a result of idealist assumptions held by commentators, emerge from the readings as discrete and autonomous consciousnesses, unaffected by those at whom they address their utterances — their interlocutors — and by their social contexts. Post-Hegelian philosophical theories challenge Descartes' subjective idealism as, I argue, do dramatic monologues: both suggest that subjects do not exist in psychological isolation, but are products of a series of encounters with others, in relation to whom they constantly attempt to gain a sense of their own identity. Post-Hegelian intersubjective and discursive theories can help to explain the psychological significance of the interlocutor for dramatic monologue speakers.

In Chapter One I trace the development of dramatic monologue criticism, showing how theoretical assumptions have affected readings of monologues and in particular our understanding of the function of interlocutors. In Chapter Two I outline the philosophical and psychoanalytical theories of Hegel, Kojève, Lacan and the Bakhtin School. These provide alternative, but closely related ways of conceptualizing the intersubjective and discursive processes at play in monologues and enable me to show how speakers and interlocutors are not simply mutually influencing individuals. Rather, speakers and interlocutors are constantly in the process of constructing, and of being constructed by, each other. In Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six I discuss "Porphyria's Lover," "Andrea del Sarto," "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'" and "Caliban upon Setebos" respectively, in order to show how the interlocutor's presence (whether actual or notional) is inevitably inscribed in the speaker's utterance to the extent that the speaker is inseparable from the interlocutor. These readings of Browning's

monologues shift critical and theoretical emphasis from Cartesian idealism to dialogism and discursive process.

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