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*Autobiographies dramatiques : la voix poétique se construisant elle-même dans
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Dramatic Autobiography: the Poetic Voice Recreating Itself in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'The Bride's Prelude'

Autobiographies dramatiques : la voix poétique se construisant elle-même dans « The Bride's Prelude » de Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Raphaël Rigal

- 1 Several of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poems include what can be identified as autobiographical elements: 'Dantis Tenebrae', a homage to his father, draws from his personal experience of and attachment to Italian medieval literature; some sonnets from *The House of Life* echo his personal life and loves; a couple of sonnets and some poems were written on the occasion of his trip to France and Belgium, or after particularly important aesthetic experiences in England. Other texts, such as 'My Sister's Sleep', are realistic enough to suggest an autobiographical background—or at least sufficiently so that William Michael Rossetti felt the need to specify in his 1901 preface to *The Germ* that the poem was not based on any actual events.
- 2 But rather than in the sonnets, it is in the dramatic monologue that one should look for autobiographical material—though not of Rossetti himself. This poetic form recreates the stories of a life, to quote from Browning's dedication letter that accompanies 'Sordello' (Browning 527), by focusing on 'the incidents in the development of a soul'. Rossetti's dramatic monologues differ from Browning's in that they depict entire lives, instead of the neatly circumscribed episodes one can find in 'Porphyria's Lover', 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister', or 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation'; by doing so, they can be read as narratives of whole lives told by the people who actually lived them—thus fitting the definition of autobiography.
- 3 A theoretical tendency emerged in the 1970s toward a strict definition of the genre, excluding a myriad of texts considered more or less autobiographical, as Marine

Renouprez notes (Renouprez 1). Authoritative definitions such as Lejeune's, presented in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1973), do not encapsulate all autobiographical narratives: they exclude memoirs, diaries, static self-descriptions, and cast doubt on what is not in prose. And yet, the characteristic elements described by Lejeune are present in dramatic monologues, such as the retrospectivity of the autobiography, the superposition of narrator and 'hero' of the narration, and the dynamic presentation of the self and its evolution.

- 4 I would argue that Rossetti's dramatic monologues—for example 'Jenny' or 'A Last Confession'—fit most of the conditions set by Starobinski and Lejeune; the conditions that these poems do not meet are not, in my opinion, essential, as even texts that would appear to meet them often flaunt Lejeune's contract or Starobinski's stylistic constraints. The poetic form has been recognized as having the potential for autobiography, in Lejeune's more recent work (Lejeune 2015, 45 *sqq*). The poems lack any strict equivalence between the author and the narrator; but poetry and art that follow the Pre-Raphaelite program should be sincere and heartfelt, and this sincerity leads to a personal investment of the author in the work to a degree that the question of equivalence between author, hero, and narrator becomes moot—although the author does not appear in the poem, voices and characters therein are direct imprints of the poet, who blurs the limits between fictional persona and real self, or between the projected *I* and the writing *I*. This blurring of boundaries between the real and the fictional is also a characteristic of the autobiographical genre: as Olney and Saunders have studied, the referential discourse tends to become a fictional narrative, or to pass as such—just like Pre-Raphaelite poetry and art blurs the limits between what is real and what is realistic.
- 5 These poems are fictional autobiographies: they deal with a fictional narrator's life, told by this same narrator, directly to the reader. Rossetti's theory of the inner standing point is the main source of their structure: the idea that a poem can only drive its message home, and give its full necessary force to artistic beauty, by taking everything into account and pulling the reader into the small but fully fleshed out world that the poem's characters live in. This blurs boundaries between narrator, author, and reader, and draws the dramatic monologue closer to the autobiographical genre. I would further argue that this construction is a way to present, through the distance of fictional autobiography and of temporal displacement, a challenge to social norms and to mechanisms of oppression; indeed, although several of Rossetti's dramatic monologues are told by male-created female characters, and can thus be seen as a male appropriation of female voices, the whole point of the inner standing point and of the Pre-Raphaelite attention to heartfelt detail is to go beyond the normative divisions which would prevent a full, intimate understanding of events and situations presented—this understanding making it possible in turn to raise ethical questions about said normative divisions, through the transitional experience produced by the identification between projected male author and female character.
- 6 This will be shown in this paper by focusing on the way 'The Bride's Prelude', written between 1848 and 1870, is constructed as a dramatic autobiography questioning gender norms and patriarchal oppression. I have chosen to exclude more obvious choices, such as 'Jenny', 'A Last Confession', or 'The White Ship', for several reasons: first of all, the temporal distance that can be found in 'The Bride's Prelude' but neither in 'Jenny' nor in 'A Last Confession' is essential to the point I make. Then, the autobiographical

dimension is more powerful in ‘The Bride’s Prelude’ than in ‘The White Ship’, which is a fictionalisation of history and, as such, more prone to distortion of truth than the ‘Prelude’—entirely fictional, and thus not liable to distort a non-existent external truth. Finally, although the three poems share several characteristics with ‘The Bride’s Prelude’ and ultimately present the same challenges to the Victorian frame, they are also complex works in which the power of fictional autobiography should be studied on its own.

- 7 I will start by presenting how ‘The Bride’s Prelude’ can be considered a dramatic monologue though it does not seem to fit the definition of the genre, and how it creates a self-space, an actual and mental position from which the narrative of the self can unfurl. I will then explore how this self-space builds up a new contract with the reader, based on sympathetic alterity. Finally, I will present how the games of distance and proximity between author, narrator, and reader help bring about social criticism.

Creating a Self-space

Genres and Definitions

- 8 According to the definition given by Meyer H. Abrams, the dramatic monologue is characterized by three elements:
- (1) A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment . . . (2) This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors’ presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker. (3) The main principle controlling the poet’s formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker’s temperament and character. (Abrams 70)
- 9 ‘The Bride’s Prelude’ flouts some of these elements; the main character’s direct speech, for instance, does not make the entirety of the poem, and the addressee is known and directly seen by the reader. But the difference between the speaker, Aloÿse, and the poet is clearly marked; the speech is uttered in a specific situation, well defined and described, and at a critical moment, right before Aloÿse’s wedding; and the subject matter of the poem is the revelation of Aloÿse’s experience, thoughts, and feelings. Besides, Abrams also says that the coexistence or simultaneous presence of the three elements is not necessary. It is thus fair to assume that ‘The Bride’s Prelude’ can be thought of as a staged dramatic monologue, as the core of the poem is Aloÿse’s speech, the rest being mostly decorative and contextual *parerga*².
- 10 As for the autobiography, Lejeune’s definition is clear and strict: ‘a retrospective prose narrative of a real person’s own existence, this person putting the emphasis on her/his individual life, and especially on the history of her/his personality’³ (Lejeune 1975, 14). His definition sets forth four basic elements: a prose narrative, the identity of the triad author/narrator/character, the retrospectivity and dynamism of the story, and the story of an individual life. Lejeune further considers that the identity between author and character and between character and narrator is the most important one—all the while considering that it is also the most problematic criterion.
- 11 Starobinski’s earlier definition, exposed in ‘Le style de l’autobiographie’, is looser and more accepting: ‘the biography of someone made by that same someone [Its

conditions are] for the narrator and the hero of the narration to be the *same* entity; . . . for it to be an actual *narration* and not a description' (Starobinski 1970, 257). His definition encapsulates more narratives than Lejeune's, by making autobiography an umbrella concept rather than a narrowly defined genre—something Starobinski deems impossible because of the sheer variety of forms, from memoirs and diaries to chronicles.

- 12 There is no doubt as to the adequacy of 'The Bride's Prelude' with Starobinski's definition of the autobiography: Alojse is telling the story of her own life, and it is a dynamic narrative and not a mere description. The poem fits rather less adequately Lejeune's definition, because of the poem's nature as a dramatic monologue: Rossetti and Alojse can hardly be mistaken and 'The Bride's Prelude' is written in rhymed stanzas and not in prose.
- 13 But overall, I would argue that the discrepancy between Rossetti's poem and Lejeune's definition is not important enough to deny any autobiographical dimension to Alojse's speech. One must keep in mind that the character's speech, as I said previously, is staged: in 'The Bride's Prelude', a heterodiegetic narrator shows 'listless Alojse' telling her personal story to 'busy Amelotte' (l. 1-2); this story is intimate, '[flinging] the doors apart | Of one dull chamber in [her] heart' (l. 914-5); finally, Alojse's speech acts feature many enjambments, which make the narrative dynamic and erase the artificiality of poetic construction. What really characterizes 'The Bride's Prelude' and makes it stand at the crossroads between dramatic monologue and autobiography is something that can be found in both kinds of texts: the creation of a self-space, to expand upon the idea set forth by Frédéric Regard on the spatiality of life-stories in his introduction to *Mapping the Self* (Regard 2003, 19 *sqq*). This space is a textual or discursive *locus* where the life of the character/narrator, and sometimes of the author as well, can be presented safely—a self-space, where life-stories can unfold at will, which becomes a safe-space, where everything is under the main voice's control and any unpleasant event can be confronted or altered if needed. The safety of this safe-space is created by two elements, which are common to the material manifestations of the autobiography and of the dramatic monologue: the combined presence of an abstracted hearer, who is so discrete as to seem absent, and of an empowered speaker, who controls all parameters of the story, including its credibility.

The Abstracted Listener

- 14 Starobinski's theory superimposes two aspects of the listener's figure. On the one hand, 'the *I* is confirmed as a permanent subject by the presence of its corollary, *you*, which gives the speech its reason for being' (Starobinski 1970, 260); on the other hand, in the case of Rousseau's autobiography, 'the presence of the imagined *recipient* strikes from the first lines onward One can notice the pervasive presence of the *reader* . . . , a potential witness who is most often reduced to an impersonal third-person [and on which] are bestowed the objections of common sense and social norms' (Starobinski 1970, 262-3).
- 15 This same process is at work in 'The Bride's Prelude'. Apart from Alojse, the voices present in the poem are the heterodiegetic narrator and her sister Amelotte. The former appears as a simple eye, recording what's happening but unable to do anything more than serve as a medium between Alojse's speech and the reader: the poetic voice

is shown (l. 261-5) to have but limited knowledge of the young woman's feelings, saying that '[her] voice did not weaken here, | Yet by her sudden pause | She seemed to look for questioning'.

- 16 As for the latter, Amelotte, she has already heard Aloÿse's story; on first hearing, as described l. 121-40, she was asleep, and thought it was a dream. On the second occasion, which is the one told in the poem, she is still symbolically absent; she spends the first part of the tale hiding her face: 'because strained thought demands | Quiet before it understands, | [she] Darkened her eyesight with her hands' (l. 168-70), 'her face | Was shut within her hands, | As it had been throughout the tale' (l. 271-3), she 'spoke not any word | Nor moved she once, . . . | And kept in silence the same place' (l. 291-92, 295). Later, she is shown with her back turned on Aloÿse (l. 391-405), or looking elsewhere (l. 411-5).
- 17 The main recipient of the dramatic monologue, as noted by G. Rohwer-Happe, does not need to be conscious, present, or visible; one could even say that this recipient does not need to be alive or to have any tangible existence, as can be seen in some of Browning's monologues ('Porphyria's Lover', 'Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister'):
- Leaving out of the picture an actual figure of listener, or using one that is without consciousness . . . fulfils thereby in the same amount the function achieved by the presence of a potentially active figure of listener . . . , because it is precisely either the silence or the absence of reaction of the person spoken to which can be thought of by the figure of the speaker as a provocation. (Rohwer-Happe 72)
- 18 This provocation, according to Rohwer-Happe and the sources she quotes, is the reason why the monologist will reveal previously hidden elements. 'The Bride's Prelude' strays slightly away from this in that Aloÿse reveals more willingly what happened to her; if provocation there is, it does not come from Amelotte's silence as much as it comes from her scarce interventions. But the result is essentially the same: speaking to a silent recipient, who often appears shocked out of her mind, is what makes it possible for Aloÿse to tell her story, because it creates a specific power-relationship between the two sisters.
- 19 There is one last listener, who appears in several autobiographies and many dramatic monologues: God—established by Augustine as one of the major interlocutors of autobiographical narrators (Bogel 499), and suggested in several monologues by Browning ('Porphyria's Lover', 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation') and Rossetti ('A Last Confession', 'My Sister's Sleep') as the implicit target of the discourse. Aloÿse and Amelotte do address God, Mary, and Christ, directly and repeatedly. But the lack of any response from the entities invoked, the occasional ironical tone used by either of the sisters, and the anecdotal frequency of these addresses compared to the poem as a whole emphasize the absence of the divine presence.
- 20 There are some mentions of God's power, and they fall into two categories: invocation of His judgment, which I will discuss later, and mentions of Aloÿse's tale being authorized by God— 'God would not permit | That I should change thine eyes with [this tale]' (l. 119-20), and 'At last my face was hidden: so, | Having God's hint, I paused | Not long [and talked]' (l. 126-8). These rare occurrences of a direct mention of the divine, despite the medieval and highly religious setting of the poem, confirm one defining element of Aloÿse's speech: that her listeners must be carefully selected, and subjected to a double review, both by her and by God.

Empowered Speakers

21 This discretionary power of selection reveals the second defining element of Aloyse's speech and, more generally, of the autobiographical dramatic monologue: the position of power gained by the character-narrator thanks to the delivery of the story. Aloyse is a victim, through and through, and her tale is not enough in itself to give her any form of power; but telling it to a silent Amelotte allows her to pause, to adapt her rhythm, to say only what she intends to say and present her story the way she intends to present it: 'in that way, the figure of the listener has to be seen as the impulse for the use of a particular strategy of self-representation on the part of the figure of the speaker, and therefore as integral to the self-exposure of this figure' (Rohwer-Happe 73).

22 This possibility for Aloyse to present the story of her personal life in any way she wants, in short, the fact that '[the] loquacity of the dramatic monologue is a world-view imposed as a power structure on others' (Leighton 193), allows her to regain control over a traumatic event. This is particularly visible thanks to the flouting of some characteristics of the dramatic monologue. The heterodiegetic narrator mentions an evolution in the body-language of both Aloyse and Amelotte; the former starts the poem as a frightened creature, keeping to the shadows, and closing in on herself, especially l. 86-90:

The bride turned in her chair, and hid
Her face against the back,
And took her pearl-girt elbows in
Her hands, and could not yet begin,
But shuddering, uttered, 'Urscelyn!'

23 The feeble protection she seeks against the reiteration of the trauma is quickly reversed, and when she pauses after telling of Urscelyn's first love declaration, Amelotte has become the one who is afraid, as shown l. 396-400:

That listening without sight had grown
To stealthy dread; and now
That the one sound she had to mark
Left her alone too, she was stark
Afraid, as children in the dark.

24 The situation endures, and Aloyse grows stronger as the tale goes on, while Amelotte becomes more and more detached; the pauses in the former's narrative are more and more controlled, and the memory of the child she gave birth to is the only one forcing an unrequired pause (l. 751-2). This evolution mirrors what Judith Butler, inspired by Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives*, presents in *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

This theory of the 'outside' to the subject radicalizes the ecstatic trend in the Hegelian position. In [Cavarero's] view, I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no 'you' to address, then I have lost 'myself.' In her view, one can tell an autobiography only to an other, and one can reference an 'I' only in relation to a 'you': without the 'you,' my own story becomes impossible. (Butler 32)

25 This relation between the two persons of the narrative is what leads to the exposure, or presentation, of the *I*, and thus to a tentative control of such an exposure: the enunciated (and enunciating) *I*, the individual on which the autobiographical narrative and, in this case, the dramatic monologue focus, is 'a self over whom I maintain narrative control' (Butler 81). Its existence is conditioned to the existence of something

else, a scene that is narrated and an other to whom it is narrated. It is this contact with the other, real or not, which makes it possible to assume a ‘posture of narrative control’ (Butler 81), and helps the self pretend to be in control of the autobiographical narrative: the distance that is established by narration helps ward off the threat of dissolution which the self faces.

- 26 The self-space constructed by the power relation between speaker and hearer and, more generally, the complex interaction between speaker, hearer, and story, is the founding stone of a new contract. This new contract is based on another intersection, this time between the inner standing point, an essential tool of the Rossetian dramatic monologue, and the sympathetic alterity established between reader and character-narrator.

Contact and Contract: The Inner Standing Point and Sympathetic Alterity

The Narrator’s Universal Self

- 27 In *The Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum explains that ‘there is a kind of existential hierarchy by which the speaker is justified not because he is more right than the other characters . . . but because he is more alive’—or because ‘he is the only character who is characterized lyrically, and therefore the only character whom we know from inside’ (Langbaum 202). Although this assertion is true in a majority of cases, ‘The Bride’s Prelude’ works somewhat differently: as the tale goes on and as Aloyse becomes stronger, she also seems to become more alive, growing away from her ‘listless’ initial self (l. 2). As her speech grows and as her story is revealed, the reader gets closer to her, feeling what she feels and sharing in her experience, as per Rossetti’s theory, exposed in *The Stealthy School of Criticism*:

A treatment from without might here be possible. But the motive powers of art reverse the requirement of science, and demand first of all an *inner* standing point. The heart of such a mystery as this must be plucked from the very world in which it beats or bleeds; and the beauty and pity, the self-questionings and all-questionings which it brings with it, can come with full force only from the mouth of one alive to its whole appeal. (Rossetti 15-16)

- 28 Aloyse becomes more alive both as a character and as a narrator, because of the control she has over her self-space, which helps her resist the numerous moments of weakness that she experiences. But this process is also the one that constitutes her as an inner standing point in her own narrative: as she becomes less and less the listless girl who stays in the shadows, she also grows into this figure of a ‘heart . . . [which] beats or bleeds’.
- 29 And yet, her faintness continues. Even though she is progressively shown as stronger than Amelotte, and even though she keeps on speaking despite the pain that the recollection brings her, she is still characterized throughout the text by words and phrases such as ‘trembling between shame and pride’ (l. 435), ‘The bride’s voice failed her’ (l. 751), ‘It seemed to [her] that the whole | Day’s weight lay back on her | like lead’ (l. 756-8), or ‘grown fainter’ (l. 821). But this coexists with some measure of self-control, which makes it possible for ‘her despair | By stubborn will [to be] kept underneath’ (l. 487-8).

- 30 This paradox goes beyond the discrepancy between two psychological poles identified by Langbaum as characteristic of the dramatic monologue, and can be explained through references to both Starobinski's definition of the autobiography and Rohwer-Happe's study of the dramatic monologue, both of them stressing the distance that is created, during the narrative, inside the character-narrator. According to Starobinski, 'the role of the *I* in the narrative [is not] "existentially" taken up by anyone; it is a referentless *I*, which refers only to an invented image' (Starobinski 1970, 258). In the dramatic monologue, for Rohwer-Happe, 'the figure of the speaker unknowingly projects a different character than what was intended' (Rohwer-Happe 64).
- 31 Aloiÿse is not herself—not only because of the duality of the autobiographical authorial voice explored by Lejeune in *Je est un autre*, but because the narrative she weaves and the way in which it is told change her, and change the way she projects herself through the *I* she uses. Her narrative—her retrospective *I*—explains step by step why she is so listless and so faint. Her interactions with Amelotte—her contemporary *I*—reveal dimensions of her personality that could hardly have been guessed in the first stanzas—her sarcastic tendency, her experience, her self-confidence. And yet, she is not the person we see in the narrative; the recollected Aloiÿse is seized by passions and fears, and even if the recollecting Aloiÿse is hurt by the repetition of her past life, she does seem stronger still.
- 32 The superposition of these different *I*s is the key both to the diverging faces of Aloiÿse and to her capability as the vessel of an inner standing point: to quote Starobinski, 'the constant repetition of the "first person" ends up being equated to the unfolding of a "non person"' (Starobinski 1970, 260). This does not mean that the first person is altogether erased; its status changes, from a singular point in space and time, bound by social norms, gender categories, or hierarchical status, to a 'non person', whose individualizing identitarian characteristics are abolished. This non person becomes thus transparent enough for the *I*'s narrative to take on a universal dimension. The multiplicity of diverse first persons helps a single character take on multiple guises in which an equal multiplicity of diverse readers can find an echo of itself. The diversity of readership finds itself welcome in a character whose feelings and behaviours fits all sorts of gazes and individualities.

The Reader's Sympathetic Self

- 33 If the coexistence of multiple selves in Aloiÿse makes it easier for the reader to identify with her, it also gives way to another essential tension, between sympathy and unreliability.
- 34 As noted by Langbaum, the dramatic monologue (and the 'poetry of experience' in general) is essentially a 'poetry of sympathy' (Langbaum 79); its quality as a monologue 'helps to determine our sympathy for the speaker, since we must adopt his viewpoint as our entry into the poem' and consequently witness the 'facts from within' (Langbaum 78). Aloiÿse's tale fits this pattern: the reader has no knowledge of what happened, and discovers it progressively, as her story unfolds. This narrative is wrought with expression of pathos, for instance Aloiÿse's fit of folly when learning of Urscelyn's betrayal, l. 641-50 and following:

Then I spake all: I turned on one
And on the other, and spake:

My curse laughed in me to behold
 Their eyes: I sat up, stricken cold,
 Mad of my voice till all was told.

- 35 The repetition of 'spake' and of the construction 'on one'/'on the other' hints at Aloyse's troubled mental state, which affects her speech, otherwise quite polished. What really gives away her failing sanity is the psychological dislocation that pierces through this stanza: her voice seems set apart from her conscience and her 'curse', by which she means her secret relationship with Urscelyn. This fit, which constitutes a first account of what befell her, reveals an internal impulse to talk which cannot be quenched, and echoes other remarks made throughout the poem, for instance 'she heard | The inward voice (past help obey'd) | which might not slacken or be stay'd' (l. 297-9).
- 36 Aloyse's speech is periodically marked by similar occurrences of pathos. These are mostly tokens of her scarring experience of deception and violence—from Urscelyn's first false declarations at the onset of their relationship, which help him get to Aloyse's room and make it possible for him to declare his love for her (l. 356-75), to the civil war that results in Aloyse's family castle burning (l. 596-620), and to Aloyse's brothers threatening to kill her when she tells of her love (l. 721-25). But they might also be a reflection of the ultimate form of Ruskinian pathetic fallacy, described in *Modern Painters* as an impression so strong made by the world on the speaker that this impression crushes any possibility of expression: 'the men who, strong as human creatures can be, are yet submitted to influences stronger than they, and see in a sort untruly' (Cook and Wedderburn, XII, 209).
- 37 As a possible form of pathetic fallacy, these fits of pathos can throw some doubt on the veracity of Aloyse's narrative. Indeed, even if they correspond to actual episodes whose truth cannot be denied, they also echo obscure passages, during which the speaker seems to hide parts of the narrative. One example of these can be found right after Urscelyn's declaration, when Aloyse states that 'at [her] own heart | [She thought] great wonder was not stirr'd' (l. 377-8), or in the account of one of their first encounters, when Aloyse claims that 'what grace his lips did crave [she] knew not, but [she] know[s] [she] gave' (l. 439-40).
- 38 Faced with such statements, the reader can be torn apart. The piteous fits that Aloyse experiences are strong, and are thus likely to make one feel for her and share her pain, especially given that there is hardly any possibility to step away from a discourse that is delivered directly and to adopt a critical gaze on it. But on the other hand, the reader might also find themselves in a position similar to Amelotte's: close to Aloyse, close enough to receive her pain directly and be affected by it, but at a fair distance that allows doubt at times. The abundance of feelings is the entryway into a poetry of sympathy; but because of the doubt created by Aloyse's possible unreliability, the mechanism of the inner standing point works differently: the reader does not so much stand inside Aloyse's discourse as inside the poem in general, witnessing the story unfold beside Amelotte and having to make up their mind with the same information as her.

Criticism Through Proximity and Distance

Criticism at Close Quarters

- 39 However unreliable Aloyse's narrative may be, the story of her hardships cannot be ignored, and the vividness of her account might lead the reader to lean towards sympathy rather than judgment. The hesitation between sympathy and distrust is due to the reader's inner standing point, close to Amelotte's; but it is resolved by two elements: the realization in the beginning of the story that there is something wrong with Aloyse, and the autobiographical quality of her tale. The former point is in a way a part of the story learnt beforehand: since Aloyse tells her story from the point of view of her present self, she utters it from a position close to that of martyrdom, as someone who testifies to her suffering. This shows in her body language—l. 86-90, but also in the very first lines of the poem (l. 6-10), which introduce the two sisters in a starkly contrasted way:

Amelotte laughed into the air
With eyes that sought the sun:
But where the walls in long brocade
Were screened, as one who is afraid
Sat Aloyse within the shade.

- 40 Not only is Aloyse associated to shadow while her sister is directly linked to the sun; the future monologist is isolated within the stanza: despite being the grammatical subject of the second clause, she is rejected to the last line, after the main verb, after also the mention of the walls, of the brocade that covers them, and of the 'screen' that this brocade constitutes. The use of the phrase 'within the shade', rather than the more common 'in the shade', reinforces this isolation, by plunging Aloyse in the shadows instead of giving the reader mere topographical information.
- 41 Setting out this contrast at the onset of the poem is a way of warning the reader of an upcoming sombre tale; this warning is reiterated in the following stanzas, during a unique direct intervention of the heterodiegetic narrator, l. 56-65, and in the vagueness of the first words she says to her sister: 'Sister, . . . I had | A *thing* to tell thee of | Long since, and could not' (l. 66-8, author's emphasis). The juxtaposition of this indefinite 'thing' and of the impossibility of its utterance is a further sign of some dark secret about to be let out in the open. It is not even a secret, or an affair, but a thing, something that cannot be determined, or that will not be determined by Aloyse—much in the same way as she cannot remember some details of her relationship with Urscllyn.
- 42 As the introductory narration leads up to Aloyse's own narrative, it seems obvious that something happened—if only because the embedding of her tale within the whole poem stresses the personal aspect of what she tells. According to Starobinski,
- There would not have been sufficient motive for an autobiography, had there not been, in a past life, a modification, a radical change. . . . The past me is *different* from the current *I*, which is why the latter can truly assert itself in all its due rights. The *I* will not tell only of what happened to it in *another* time, but rather of how it has come from the *other* it was to itself. (Starobinski 1970, 261)
- 43 This is what happens in 'The Bride's Prelude'. The mere existence of Aloyse's story, coupled with the delay in its delivery and with the uncertainty that surrounds it, suggests that the reader is going to be confronted to something quite different from the

conventional dramatic monologue, in which the inner standing point is inescapable, unforeseen, and deeply rooted in the speaker's narrative. Aloyse's story sits slightly away, because we are not immediately faced with it; but this distance is a way to favour sympathy over judgment, by announcing the arrival of a tragic, life-changing tale and by building up to the revelation of hardship.

Medieval Sympathy over Victorian Judgment

- 44 When Aloyse's story finally starts and unfurls, it arouses more sympathy than judgment, to use the two defining bases of the dramatic monologue theorized by Langbaum. This is helped in part by the fact that, as summarised by Howard in the case of 'A Last Confession', 'the speaker is a pole for the reader's sympathy precisely because he is the poem' (Howard 22). Here, Aloyse is the poem: there are a lot of elements outside her discourse that are of the utmost interest aesthetically speaking, there is evidence of a precise research into medieval architecture and craft, but there is more than anything Aloyse's own tale, which stands out both in terms of number of lines and in terms of evocative and dramatic power.
- 45 But there is still the possibility of judgment, if we take into account the specific positions of Amelotte and the reader as witnesses of Aloyse's tale, and if we pay attention to the Victorian context in which the poem was written. This possible judgment comes in part from the untrustworthiness built by Aloyse's omissions, whether they be voluntary or not. But it comes also from the fact that, innocent as she might feel, she can still be seen by Victorian society as guilty of 'criminal conversation', as adultery and sex out of wedlock were referred to in the Victorian judicial system. Some of her omissions even read like the testimonies of the 'fallen women' sheltered by Foundling Hospitals and other institutions whose archives Florence Pellegrin analysed: Aloyse takes care to stress her passivity and innocence when telling of her encounters with Urscllyn, like many actual young women seem to have done (Pellegrin 2013, 2017).
- 46 Her first courtly talk with Urscllyn in the garden is summed up very quickly: 'little we said; nor one heart heard | Even what was said within | And, faltering some farewell, I soon | Rose up' (l. 346-9). The content of the discussion, which might at this stage be quite innocuous, does not surface—nor do the feelings themselves, which seem suppressed by either actual or past Aloyse. The same suppression of feeling seems to direct their first private encounter in her chambers: 'At mine own heart | I think great wonder was not stirr'd. | I dared not listen, yet I heard | His tangled speech, word within word' (l. 377-80). Not only are feelings suppressed in this instance, but the senses in general are shut, Aloyse seemingly refusing to listen to Urscllyn, even as she cannot help but hear him. The next step in their relationship, which is the first physical contact between them, still blends in the same way suppression and admission: 'That night, his passion could but rave: | The next, what grace his lips did crave | I knew not, but I know I gave' (l. 438-40). Once again, Aloyse's claim to innocence can only withstand the veracity of her tale thanks to a wilful suppression of what actually happened, which erases either consent or struggle to replace them both with some abstract fact that seems impossible to escape.
- 47 This game of cat and mouse between suppression of memory under pretence of innocence and half-uttered truth climaxes in the second half of the poem, right before the moment when Aloyse tells of the civil war or uprising that forced her away from

the family castle. After having spent nearly a year seeing Urscelyn in secret and fearing for this hidden relationship to be known, she mentions (l. 586-590) a mysterious sickness that befell her:

About the spring of the next year
An ailing fell on me;
(I had been stronger till the spring;)
'Twas mine old sickness gathering,
I thought; but 'twas another thing.

48 This mysterious sickness is later revealed to be an unwanted pregnancy, which becomes the core of Aloÿse's falling off with her brothers, and leads her to describe herself and be described as a mother several times over the next four hundred lines.⁴ But once again, it remains shrouded by a thin cloud of mystery, under which the reader has to peek; even if this secrecy is often just a pretence, used to deflect the accusations of impropriety that could be levelled against Aloÿse, it is also a way to represent the social condemnation that she could expect, were she to tell the whole truth.

49 Amelotte is Aloÿse's only witness, however, and as such the only fictional person who could actually condemn her, and judge her directly. But her position evolves through the poem, and this evolution is precisely what might make the reader lean towards sympathy rather than judgment. Indeed, Amelotte appears at first to perceive the world and her sister's behaviour through the prism of the social norms she is used to; lines 106 to 110 testify to this:

So she said only: 'Aloÿse,
Sister, when happened it
At any time that the bride came
To ill, or spoke in fear of shame,
When speaking first the bridegroom's name?'

50 Although the reader might already have guessed that Urscelyn played a role in Aloÿse's present state, Amelotte is clearly missing this information; all she knows is that being negatively affected by the mere name of one's future husband is not something for ladies to do. As the poem and the story unfurl, and as Amelotte and the reader piece together the different parameters of Aloÿse's story, the sister's position changes. This change is not directly perceptible, Amelotte leaning towards anger and condemnation before knowing anything ('Lest when 'tis told | I should be prone to wrath...', l. 161-2); denial even takes the upper hand on a few occasions, most notably when Amelotte starts to understand that Urscelyn is the mysterious man seducing Aloÿse. But the change is consummated when Amelotte refuses to judge her sister, l. 491-495, leaving all judgment to God:

'Sister,' said Amelotte, 'abide
In peace. Be God thy judge,
As thou hast said—not I. For me,
I merely will thank God that he
Whom thou hast lovèd loveth thee.

51 By renouncing her ability to judge Aloÿse, Amelotte does not show acceptance of what happened, but refusal to take any moral stance of her own. The appeal to God partakes in the network of invocations and prayers drawing divine presence in the poem as an abstracted listener. Beyond this structural role, God is doubly useful to the narrative, ethically speaking: first of all, from a homodiegetic point of view, the divine stands as a substitute for a human listener. Amelotte's ear is not the main receiver of Aloÿse's confession anymore—she diverts this task to God, whose judgment should be fairer and

purser; as an abstracted and absolute listener, God is not affected by any contextual element that might affect judgment.

- 52 This diversion from the human to the divine is thus a way for Amelotte to withdraw from personal wrath, and to let an external entity decide what is wrong and what is right. But from a heterodiegetic point of view, hers is not the only judgment that is withdrawn: the appeal to God also renders moot any criticism from the reader. The use of an external, omnipotent, and omniscient entity establishes a limit to the inner standing point, which can lead to knowledge and understanding, but not to condemnation: only this higher being has the necessary view to really judge the quality of the confession, and the reader, projected onto a character, cannot escape the reduced vision of this character—and so cannot perfectly pass judgment. This once again echoes typical autobiographies (Chateaubriand's, Augustine's, Rousseau's) and dramatic monologues (Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover', Rossetti's 'A Last Confession'), as in all cases the reader, despite identifying with the narrative *I*, is limited to bare facts, without any right to judge them.

Conclusion

- 53 Even though 'The Bride's Prelude' is neither a typical autobiography nor a typical dramatic monologue, the poem as a whole and Aloÿse's embedded story in particular share several common points with both genres. By standing at the crossroads between two types of direct address by a character to the reader and of dramatic retelling of the character-narrator's life, 'The Bride's Prelude' makes it possible for the reader to access a critical discourse on the female condition, despite this criticism being coded and half hidden by the narratological processes at work in the poem and by the multidimensional intersections between past and present, here and there, she and her.
- 54 What the poem achieves, like several of Rossetti's dramatic monologues, is the creation of a self-space that is specific to the poem, under the speaker's control, and still accessible to the reader, who might find in this carefully organised mental space a place from which to understand the plight of the downtrodden and the mechanisms of oppression. The creation of the poem as a self-space uses and expands upon Potolsky's analysis of Rossetti's reinterpretation of tropes, myths, or genres, '[challenging] the habitual tendency . . . simply to look "through" the work to its true original (the natural world, the didactic lesson, the biographical fact)' (Potolsky 169): the focus on Aloÿse's mental space makes the poem at least secondary, if not transparent, and thus lessens the cognitive distance that the work of art usually establishes with its original.
- 55 This blend of transparency and obstacles serves a higher ethical purpose: rather than projecting one's desires onto a female character, the creation of Aloÿse's female and oppressed *I* in its own self-space and safe-space allows for a projection *into* the character. The transparency lets the subject shine through and the reader access the character directly; the obstacle of the discourse itself, which relies on the unsaid, on codes and references, and on a subtle game of sympathy, trust, and veracity forces the reader to understand and sympathize without judgment, as an abstracted persona unbound from social prejudice and gender norms.

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NOTES

1. The version used for this study will be the 1881 text made available by J. McGann on his website Rossetti Archive, being reliable and easily accessible to everyone; <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1881.1stedn.rad.html> (last accessed 09.06.22).
2. Etymologically, *parerga* are decorative elements that surround or complement the core of a work of art.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author of this article.
4. This fact, explicitly mentioned in the poem, defeats Waldman's Lacanian interpretation of Urscllyn as '[lacking] real phallic power' and using a barred family crest to signify his castration (Waldman 132)—if he begot a child, he clearly is not impotent or castrated, or at least not literally. Despite the Pre-Raphaelites' interest for budding psychology and psychiatry, I would argue that Urscllyn's particular shield should rather be interpreted from two other points of view: the historical and the narratological. The bastardization indicated by the barred family crest is a historical element indicating his ties with Aloyse's family, and probably informed by Rossetti's readings on heraldry and medieval costume; this significance of the barred crest is also a narratological element preparing the double betrayal of their incestuous relationship and of Urscllyn's participation in the uprising.

ABSTRACTS

The dramatic monologue is one of the most important of the new Victorian poetic forms, and was designed to decipher the soul and probe into it, with the objective, to quote Browning's dedication to John Milsand in his poem 'Sordello', to lay stress on 'the incidents in the developments of the soul'. As such, this poetic form helps recreate a life, through the fictitious reality of the poetic voice: by talking about itself and primarily to itself, the poetic persona of the dramatic monologue builds up an imaginary autobiography. Some of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poems which can qualify as dramatic monologues use this fictitious autobiography to give a voice to marginalized populations, for instance 'The Bride's Prelude'. This poem presents a woman about to be forcefully married to a man who deceived her and abandoned her, as she explains to her sister why she cannot look forward to this marriage. Her explanation of what happened constitutes a dramatic autobiography, or an autobiographical monologue: a genre at the crossroads between autobiography and dramatic monologue, in which a voice which is rarely heard is given the opportunity to tell its own version of the story. This recreation of a life story gives the artist the opportunity not only to paint a vivid picture of a time long gone, but to question mechanisms of power in a way that might resonate in Victorian times. For an author such as Rossetti, who stayed clear of politics most of his life, fake autobiographies might be seen

as a way to engage with contemporary issues, through the prism of someone else's life and borrowed autobiographical voices.

Le monologue dramatique est l'une des innovations poétiques victoriennes les plus importantes. Elle cherche à décrypter et sonder l'âme, et vise l'étude des « développements d'une âme », comme le souligne Browning dans sa dédicace à John Milsand au début du poème « Sordello ». En tant que telle, cette forme poétique aide à reconstituer une vie, à travers la réalité fictive de la voix poétique : en parlant d'elle et principalement à elle-même, la *persona* poétique du monologue dramatique tisse une autobiographie imaginaire. Certains des poèmes de Dante Gabriel Rossetti que l'on pourrait associer au monologue dramatique utilisent cette autobiographie fictive pour donner une voix à des populations marginalisées ; c'est le cas de « The Bride's Prelude ». Ce poème présente une femme que l'on s'apprête à marier de force à un homme qui l'a trompée et abandonnée ; on la voit expliquer à sa sœur pourquoi elle redoute ce mariage. Son récit des événements constitue une autobiographie dramatique ou un monologue autobiographique : un genre au croisement de l'autobiographie et du monologue dramatique, dans lequel une voix que l'on n'entend que rarement donne son point de vue de l'histoire. Cette recréation de l'histoire d'une vie donne à l'artiste la possibilité non seulement de peindre un tableau frappant d'une époque révolue, mais de proposer une remise en question des mécanismes de pouvoir qui peut trouver écho à l'époque victorienne. Pour un auteur comme Rossetti, qui s'est gardé toute sa vie de la politique, la fausse autobiographie peut être vue comme un moyen d'affronter des sujets contemporains, par le prisme de la vie d'une autre personne et des voix autobiographiques empruntées.

INDEX

Keywords: Victorian poetry, dramatic monologue, fictional autobiography, Rossetti (Dante Gabriel)

Mots-clés: poésie victorienne, monologue dramatique, autobiographie imaginaire, Rossetti (Dante Gabriel)

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