Interweaving Power Discourse: An Analysis of Dynamic Interaction Between the Dramatic Monologue and Imago of Confinement in My Last Duchess and Andrea Del Sarto

Xiaomin Wang[1,a,*]

[1]*Language and Literature College, Yunnan Normal University Business, Kunming, Yunnan, 650000, China*
a. xiaobanruo@haokeduo888.cn
corresponding author

Abstract: Robert Browning, based on a story and a painting, reconstructed the inner voices of the story's protagonist and the figures in the painting within his poetry. His skillful use of "dramatic monologue" provided a stage for the characters' inner activities, and the image of confinement set the stage for conflicts between the characters and the flow of power discourse. This interactive and intertwined "dual stage" enhances the power of narrative and dramatic elements in Browning's poetry. The purpose of this paper is to find out the closed imagery employed by Robert Browning in *My Last Duchess* and *Andrea del Sarto* combined with Foucault's concept of "power discourse" to analyze how they interact and the change of "power discourse" in protagonist within the dramatic monologues, and further explore "transgression" within two poems. The author finds that the dramatic monologue offers a "big stage" for the conflict. Still, reading Browning's poetry needs to pay more attention to the "small stage" provided by the closed imagery, where the speaker who holds the power of speech changes his identity with the closed imagery and achieves the "transgression" through it.

Keywords: image of confinement, power discourse, transgression

1. Introduction

Known for its brevity, clarity, and straightforward imagery, *My Last Duchess* stands out as Browning's early masterpiece of dramatic monologue. The subtitle "Ferrara" identifies the Duke of Ferrara as the speaker. Browning uses historical records to reshape the Duke's image, portraying him as a violent and jealous husband while unraveling the mystery behind Lucretia's demise. In contrast, Browning's *Andrea del Sarto* reinterprets the work of the Italian Renaissance artist Andrea del Sarto. It reveals a stark departure from the autocratic Duke. In this poem, Andrea appears depressed, has low self-esteem, and is completely subservient to his wife, Lucretia. Navigating Browning's poems, like *Climbing a Glacier*, requires close attention to his use of imagery.

Interpretation of Robert Browning's poetry often fixates on narratives of male aggression towards women. Browning's skillful use of dramatic monologue maintains reader neutrality and draws attention to the poem's contradictions. Rich imagery becomes a starting point for exploring the speaker's aims. Enclosing imagery, which serves as a stage for gender confrontation, heightens the

layers of conflict. Steven Shaviro, using Freudian and Nietzschean philosophy to analyze Browning's "Caliban on the Natural Theology of Setebos or the Island," identifies numerous enclosures such as curtains, stones, eggs, and balls [1]. Enclosure from the domination of a higher power solidifies 'victims' within the context.

This paper analyzes the dynamic interplay between dramatic monologue and power discourse by concentrating on closed imagery within two poems. These images offer a platform for power discourse and speaker self-transgression. Prior research on power discourse and closed imagery in these poems does exist, but it fails to consider variations in power discourse within central and clustered closed imagery. The power dynamics within the closed imagery group require exploration; the power and identity of the speaker can shift based on changes in the closed imagery. Closed imagery shapes the discourse of dramatic monologues, while imagery heightens the ambivalence in dramatic dialogue.

2.   The Enclosed Imagery

Heilmann said, "A self-conscious artist does not repeat worthless and accidental details" [1]. One of the characteristics of the dramatic monologue is that the reader only "accidentally" hears an unprovoked inner voice of the speaker, and everything else needs to be supplemented by the author's hints. Moreover, these hints are always realized in the imagery. The repetition of the same kind of imagery is not accidental either. These images play an essential role in the presentation of Browning's poetic themes, the formation of the structure of the poem, and even the refinement of the form of the genre [1]. Imagery in Browning's poetry often has a suggestive role. Many of Browning's poems show the theme of women being oppressed, damaged, and silenced, so the closed imagery naturally suggests the beginning or climax of the conflict in the dramatic monologue, so naturally, the closed imagery and the theme of the poems are tightly linked.

Based on this relationship, closure imagery often also foreshadows the relationship between the speaker and the silenced woman. This relationship is either fixed or fluid because of the different combinations in which closure imagery appears in the Psalms.

2.1.   Closure Imagery Distribution

Closed imagery appears in these two poems with different combinations. In *My Last Duchess,* closed imagery serves as the central imagery of the whole piece, as the heart of the entire dramatic monologue and the climax of the conflict in the plot. This combination fixes the speaker's identity, and other closed imagery in the poem serves the central image, often with the effect of deepening the central image. It is worth noting that *My Last Duchess* also has opening images. These opening images are contrasted with the closed imagery, which presents the two sides of "light and darkness" and "life and death" and has the same effect of deepening the layer of the poem's central image. *Andrea del Sarto* has many closed imageries that can be classified into different closed imagery groups. Closed imagery is piled up one by one to reach the climax of the plot, and this combination makes the speaker's identity keep changing and also presents different ways of women's oppression and silencing.

2.2.   Central Enclosed in *My Last Duchess*

The central closed image of *My Last Duchess* is "That piece a wonder" [2], which is a portrait of the Duchess. Only later in the poem, Browning reveals that the Duke brutally murdered the Duchess. At the poem's beginning, Browning hints that "that piece a wonder" looks lifelike, nailed to the wall. The metaphor behind this central enclosing imagery is that a closed frame encloses the Duchess's life and silences her voice. The life of the Duchess is frozen on the wall, covered by the curtains. "That

piece a wonder" becomes the object of the Duke's introduction to the emissary and the center of the Duke's monologue. With the progress of the monologue, it becomes evidence of a brutal murder. Through the Duke's own words, Browning also portrays the Duke as a selfish and furious husband, an arrogant aristocrat. Therefore, the closed imagery of "That piece a wonder" appears as a prop, and it also becomes the central imagery of the poem. The other appearances are all for the service of this central imagery. In the first and second lines of the poem, the Duke's monologue has clearly left suspense in the story. In the beginning, the reader recognizes that the Duchess is dead; the reason why the portrait can be called "That piece a wonder" is because it "looking as if she were alive" [2], and the Duchess's portrait looks so lifelike is because Pandolf's skillful painting, and also because of the duchess's "the depth and passion of its earnest glance" [2].

The imagery of "glance" appears twice in the poem, which has an opening meaning in terms of the reality of the gaze. This openness contrasts with the closeness in "That Piece a Wonder."

The first time belongs to the lively and beautiful duchess; this "glance" compares with the later imagery "curtain" [2], which presents an open and closed contrast between freshness and death. The Duchess in life had the most sincere eyes and hope for life, but now the Duchess is imprisoned in the still and silent world of the canvas; Duchess Ferrara's world is closed, bounded by a frame, and covered by a curtain. The second "glance" belongs to the guest, although the guest's gaze on reality is still "open." However, the ability to see the Duchess's portrait is controlled by the Duke's "curtain." The second "glance" has a close meaning on a symbolic level. So "curtain" serves "that piece a wonder," and the appearance of the curtain makes the reader realize "That piece a wonder "is the Duke's private possession, and the only medium that can link the Duchess to the world is the narrator, is the Duke's narration [3].

As the monologue continues, the reader wonders what the Duchess has done to cause her tragedy. Two opening images, "spot of joy" and "smile" [2], become the cause. Although on the surface, the Duke is describing the good qualities of the Duchess during her lifetime. But Duke interprets "spot of joy" and "smile" as frivolity, undesirable, and disobedient to authority. Thus, the Duke thought that her character of being kind to others was detrimental to the reputation and social status he brought, that is, the "nine-hundred-year-old name" that appeared in the later text [2], so he chose to kill her cruelly. Finally, he turns his wife only as "That piece a wonder," a private aesthetic that can only appear after the "curtain."

The two open images in the latter part of the poem perfectly serve the central closed image, making the reader understand that the cause of the tragedy is the Duchess's vitality, giving more layer to the central closed image, and turning the beautiful portrait at the beginning into a bloody evidence of the patriarchal society. The entire poem revolves around a central closed imagery, perfectly portraying the speaker, Duke, as an aristocrat who does not allow any freedom or democracy, and everything he says is to disguise himself as a noble art lover. Yet, the readers have long understood that the Duke is a mastermind of atrocities from the variety of Browning's ingenious hints.

2.3. Series of Enclosed Imagery in Andrea del Sarto

In *Andrea del Sarto,* the author divides the closed imagery into three groups, namely "hand, closed building," and "perfect ear, face" [4], which are closely related to each other. Through the painter's monologue, one can know that he is a man who believes he is unrecognized for his talent. Still, he works hard to satisfy his wife, whom he considers the most significant flaw and weakness on his way to success because she is an unfaithful, gold-digging, and manipulative woman. However, by carefully analyzing these three sets of closed imagery, the author believes the real reason for the writer's failure is not due to his wife, and the real villain in their marriage is not his wife; Andrea seems to have been using his weakness as an excuse to punish himself and justifies his manipulation.

The image of "hand" appears nine times in the poem, from the painter's bitter courtship of his greedy wife to the painter's display of manliness or, to resentment fate is in the hands of God, to the painter's insanity and his memories of past successes, and finally to his acceptance of the truth and begging of his wife to be his muse again. On a symbolic level, the hand often means "control" nine times in different scenes. The author believes that Browning's primary purpose is to show Andrea's repeated sense of lack of control and his desire to regain it. Also, clearly, the reason for this feeling comes from the knowledge of one's weaknesses. However, Andrea can't do anything about it. Andrea tries to accept his wife's leaving by blaming everything but himself. Browning seems to have been faithful to the story of Andrea del Sarto, as presented by Giorgio Vasari, who considered that "what Andrea del Sarto's art lacked was "a little more fire and boldness of spirit." Even though Andrea del Sarto's art was "free from errors, and perfect in every respect," he lacked those adornments and that grandeur and abundance of manners that have been seen in many other painters" [5].

If takes "hand" as the leading closed image group, the other two groups are why the painter's monologue will have great ups and downs. A series of "closed architecture" imagery forms the second group of closed imagery: "This chamber," grange,"; "Fontainebleau" [4]. Andrea's home is a clash of realities: commercial paintings oppress him for his wife's happiness. This conflicting reality and his artistic ideals turn his living space into a gloomy prison, where he loses control and pleads for peace. Yet, in art, Andrea transforms from a disillusioned husband to a meticulous artist. The third set of images, "perfect ear and face," signifies his desire for his wife's perfection to inspire his ideal painting. Now, the chamber becomes his controlled space to scrutinize his artwork. However, with the introduction of "grange" and "Fontainebleau," the artist begins to calm down, torn between complaints about his wife and the allure of finding gold for her, leading him to consider abandoning his artistic pursuits.

3.   Power Discourse

The relationship between power discourse and closed imagery is a fundamental aspect of literary analysis. As Wellek-Warren astutely noted, "The 'tokens' of a writer's early work often turn into the 'symbols' of his later work" [6]. Closed imagery, in essence, represents the oppression of one party by another and becomes symbolically associated with power discourse when repeated. Michel Foucault's assertion that "Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" underscores the close connection between discourse and power [7]. Wherever there are human beings, discourse exists; where there is discourse, there is power.

3.1.   The Relationship between Power Discourse and Enclosed Imagery

This intertwining of power and discourse is evident in the dynamics of Browning's poetry, particularly in *My Last Duchess* and *Andrea del Sarto.*

My Last Duchess serves as an illustrative example of the power dynamics in Browning's poetry. In this poem, the Duke's power discourse is centered around the portrait of the Duchess, referred to as "that piece of wonder." The Duke seeks to establish his image of masculinity and social status by meticulously describing the painting to the messenger. As the monologue progresses, it becomes apparent that the Duke values his "nine-hundred-years name" far more than the Duchess does 2]. He views her smiles, which she generously bestows upon all, as trivial and easily replaceable. In a chilling act of control, he has her smile preserved in the portrait, hidden from view behind curtains. In this way, the living Duchess is transformed into a lifeless object, subjected to the Duke's authority. This transformation echoes the myth of Pygmalion, where a sculptor creates an ideal woman according to his own imagination, reducing women to the product of male fantasy [8].

However, discourse is not static; it can bolster and undermine power. When the Duke claims, "I gave commands then all smiles stop together" [2], he reveals the limitations of the Duchess's existence. She can only be an object of gaze, stripped of her voice and agency. The Duchess's smile becomes a subtle act of defiance as she responds to the Duke's possessiveness by asserting her individuality. Her smiles are no longer exclusively reserved for him, challenging his patriarchal dominance and hierarchical beliefs. This defiance, though symbolic of freedom and democracy, proves ultimately insufficient and tragic, leading to the Duchess's demise. Each time the Duke displays her smile, it becomes an indictment of his brutality, gradually eroding his authority.

In contrast, *Andrea del Sarto* features fluid relationships that can be categorized into three distinct groups: husband to wife, artist to commoner, and victim to abuser. These relationships interlock to portray a painter striving for perfection while denying his own flaws. In the painting "The Painter and his Wife," Andrea distorts his wife Lucrezia's image and words to exert control, ultimately establishing a discourse of power [1].

3.2. The Duality of Power in Andrea del Sarto's Discourse

The repeated imagery of "hand" serves as the central motif, with the initial appearance signifying a comforting gesture from Andrea to his wife, defining their relationship as husband and wife. Concurrently, Andrea's monologue insinuates that Lucrezia is avaricious and will leave him if he doesn't paint tirelessly, positioning himself as a victim.

Andrea's love is primarily aesthetic in nature, with sexual desire playing a secondary role [9]. As their relationship deteriorates, the "soft hand" becomes a symbol of women's vulnerability and Andrea's desire to reaffirm his masculinity as a husband. With the introduction of the third set of closed imagery, "perfect ear," the speaker shifts from husband to artist, emphasizing Lucrezia's aesthetic significance over her identity as a wife. Andrea accuses her of piercing her ears to be admired by all, transcending the confines of their marriage.

As the monologue progresses, Andrea grapples with the reality that he cannot retain his wife's affection or return to the grandeur of the Fontainebleau palace. He becomes increasingly fearful of leaving home and portrays himself as a victim, comparing himself to a bat trapped in a barn. The use of closed imagery, such as "trap" and "grange," symbolizes Andrea's entrapment and contributes to his discourse as a victim. These three sets of closed imagery interact to attribute Andrea's failures to various factors, including his wife's imperfections, divine interference, spatial isolation, and psychological struggles, simultaneously establishing his discourse as an artist and a victim [9].

Harold Bloom's analysis suggests that Andrea del Sarto knows his artistic limitations but chooses not to surpass them. Instead, he accepts these limitations to avoid the pain of artistic failure or the glory of genuine artistic success [10]. Andrea's failure is undeniable, but his discourse as an artist-husband dominating his ordinary wife and as a victim of her imperfections becomes apparent.

3.3. Transgression

The concept of "transgression" is central to understanding the power dynamics constructed through closed imagery. Georges Bataille's idea of "transgression" involves negating the negation of animality, which defines human nature. It encompasses taboo subjects related to sexuality, excretion, and death [11]. In *My Last Duchess,* the Duke transgresses the boundaries of sexuality, suppressing the Duchess's natural sensuality and indulging his fantasies. This transgression occurs within the confines of the frame, where the Duke denies the Duchess's animalistic nature, unleashes his brutality, and achieves a form of transgression.

For Andrea, transgression takes a different form as he distorts his wife's words and images to evade the fear of artistic failure. His monologue reflects Foucault's notion of boundaries and transgressions

as a complex interplay akin to lightning illuminating a dark night [12]. Andrea's transgression involves multiple reinterpretations of his identity, allowing him to explore different explanations for his artistic shortcomings. His acts of transgression serve to name the various possibilities for his failures, much like lightning briefly illuminates the night sky.

In conclusion, Browning's poetry, exemplified in *My Last Duchess* and *Andrea del Sarto,* showcases the intricate relationship between power discourse, closed imagery, and transgression. These poems illustrate how power and discourse are interwoven and how transgression is pivotal in constructing power dynamics within the confines of art and society.

4.   Conclusion

Reading Browning's dramatic monologues goes beyond the plot, delving into Browning's nuanced conception. Attending to the speaker's inner voice and Browning's dramatization techniques is crucial. The monologue serves as a grand stage for the poem's drama, while closed imagery constructs a smaller stage for gender conflicts, maximizing the theatricality. This interaction enhances the monologue's drama, as the speaker establishes authoritative discourse on the "big stage" and enacts personal transgressions on the "small stage."

While this study sheds light on Browning's profound artistry, it acknowledges its limitations. The complexity of Browning's poetry invites multiple interpretations, and this analysis represents just one lens through which to view his work. Future research could explore alternative perspectives and delve deeper into the cultural and historical contexts that influenced Browning's creations. As readers navigate the intricate relationship between closed imagery and power discourse, it leaves room for continued scholarly exploration.

References

[1]   Xu, S. F.: On the Enclosed Imagery in Browning's Dramatic Monologues. Journal of Zhejiang Media College (06), 18-20 (2008).

[2]   Browning, R.: Selected Poems of Robert Browning: My Last Duchess (E-book ed.). Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (2001).

[3]   Ruan, S. Q.: Starting from Unreliable Narration: Narratorial Authority in My Last Duchess. Jixi University Journal (01), 115-116 (2011).

[4]   Browning, R.: Andrea del Sarto. Men and Women, 7-15 (1855).

[5]   Vasari, G.: The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects. 1ndedn. Random House US, New York (2006).

[6]   Wang, Y.: Imagery Criticism. 2ndedn. Chengdu: Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House, Sichuan (1989).

[7]   Liu, M. Y.: Discourse, Discipline, and Resistance: An analysis of Fences from the Perspective of Foucault's Theory of Power and Discourse, Inner Mongolia University, Inner Mongolia (2021).

[8]   Ren, Z. J.: A Withered Flower in the Mirror of Patriarchy: An Evaluation of Robert Browning's My Last Duchess. Ningbo Radio and TV University Journal (01), 30-32+112 (2007).

[9]   Fei, B. "Perfect" Elegy. Appreciation of Famous Works (04), 24-30 (1999).

[10]   Browning, R. Bloom's Major Poets, edited and with an introduction by H. Bloom. New York: Info Base Publishing (2001).

[11]   Zhang, S. On Bataille's Transgressive Theory: Animality, Taboo, and Totality. Journal of Tongji University (Social Science Edition) (03), 9-15+26 (2016).

[12]   Jin, W. F.: Transgression and Literary Writing. Journal of Changchun University of Technology (Social Science Edition) (05), 140-145 (2012).