

Zsolt Maróti**Poets and Masks**

István D. Rácz: *Költők és maszkok – Identitáskereső versek az 1945 utáni brit költészetben* [Poets and Masks – The Quest for Identity in British Poetry after 1945] Orbis Litterarum Series 1, Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1996.

“The objective of this series,” say the general editors of Orbis Litterarum, “is to publish high quality monographs and thematically homogeneous volumes containing the latest achievements in the study of classical and modern literature, thus providing the authors with publicity in academic circles.” The first piece in this series is the work of István Rácz with the title *Poets and Masks - The Quest for Identity in British poetry after 1945*.

In the “Introduction,” defining his aims and methods, Rácz identifies the search for identity as one of the central categories in 20th century literature. He sets out to examine this effort from the point of view of poetics, through the genre of the dramatic monologue. Dramatic monologue is situated somewhere at the intersection of the three main poetic categories but usually categorised as a basically lyrical genre holds a special place in British poetry – especially since the age of Browning and

Tennyson. The author seems to agree with Randall Jarrel, according to whom dramatic monologue has become the yardstick for all modern poetry.

The main body of the book, framed by the “Introduction” and the “Summary,” falls into two larger sections: in “Theoretical Questions” the author’s prime concerns are to give his own definition of the dramatic monologue, to list its subtypes and to examine the role played by dramatic and narrative elements in this lyrical genre; in the second, much bulkier section, the concept of the search for identity is approached through the literary text itself, through analysis and interpretation. Rácz hastens to point out that Part 2 is not simply Part 1 put into practice, since it deals with a series of new problems and aspects which arose during the process of analysis. (Due to a lapse of attention the title of Part 2 given in the table of contents slightly differs from the one within the book, on page 45.)

The first section opens with an enumeration and comparison of the various, usually largely divergent definitions and concepts of the dramatic monologue as a poetic genre. Mixing elements borrowed from the theories of M.H. Abrams, Robert Langbaum and Ralph W. Wader he arrives at a definition which he himself considers to be rather vague and wide: “a dramatic monologue is a lyrical poem in which the

poet presents the individual experience from the point of view of a fictitious speaker, in a 'reality' perceived by him/her." Sensing the inherent dangers of such a loose category Rácz finds it necessary to break down the genre into subcategories. Relying on Ralph W. Wader he draws a distinction between dramatic monologue proper and mask lyric. While in the former the speaker in the poem addresses his/her words to someone belonging to the imaginary world of the poem itself (Browning's major poems are mentioned as examples), the latter addresses itself directly the reader. In Rácz's theoretical system these two subcategories are in coordinate relation, though he also admits in a footnote: "The categorisation which treats the dramatic monologue as a subtype of the mask lyric or the role lyric is widespread. We accept it as a possible typological viewpoint ..." At the same time he takes issue with Rader about the justification for his creating a third subcategory, the so called dramatic poem.

In the second chapter of the theoretical section Rácz embarks on the difficult task of defining the concept of identity and mask. Having accepted that the represented figure (the author here uses the term 'character' borrowed from narratology) is one of the most important (if not the most important) elements one is overwhelmed by a

number of questions concerning the nature of the relationship between the poet and the character(s) in his/her poem. In an effort to answer these questions Rácz has to go beyond the boundaries of poetics, since as he observes: "it is related to the universal human problem of searching for or building an identity." For help and theoretical background he turns to 20th century social psychology, relying mainly on the findings of Gordon W. Allport, Erving Goffman, Eric Berne and Erich Fromm. He attaches particularly great importance to Goffman's concept of role distancing. He practically places a sign of equality between the unconscious role-playing in our everyday life (which is an important element of identity building) and the fully conscious literary role-playing performed by the author of dramatic monologues. He points out that role playing and role distancing are not identical with the negation of identity, what is more, they constitute a crucial step in identity building. Since on the level of form this identity building often manifests itself as mask creation Rácz – once again invoking the authorities of social psychology – feels it necessary to define the concept of mask as well: "Mask in this work is interpreted as the poetic rendering of a stage in the process of identity building when a temporary, conscious and artificial unity is created between the inner self and an outside

self.” He compares the mask concepts of several British poets of the first half of the 20th century (Wilde, Yeats and Eliot) and offers a brief survey on their influence on the post-war generation of British poets. Listing the possible intentions behind mask creation he mentions the ‘mask of age’ (preferred by younger poets) and the character, less complex and sophisticated than the poet himself, which is created with the intention of eliminating self-pity and sentimentalism.

In the third chapter of Part 2 Rácz concentrates on the dramatic and narrative qualities of dramatic monologues. He notes that the epic elements of a dramatic monologue do not form a complete, coherent story, but it is in this fragmentariness that the main strength of this genre lies. Another very important characteristic feature of the dramatic monologue is its embeddedness in time, which once again connects it to the epic. The third parallel can be observed in the field of character-drawing: similarly to modern novels, direct character-drawing is not to be found in dramatic monologues, while, at the same time, the character characterises himself indirectly and unintentionally by everything he says, and by the way he speaks.

Rácz goes on to explore the similarities between the theatrical monologue (as part of a work of art) and

the dramatic monologue (as a self-sufficient piece). He concludes that the mask lyric can be related to the theatrical monologue, while the dramatic monologue proper (i.e., where the presence of the listener addressed by the speaker can be sensed) is closer to a stage dialogue in which we hear only one of the two participants. In Rácz’s interpretation the elements of the three traditionally separated general categories of poetic literature get emphatically mixed in poems dealing with the search for identity or identity-building: “The lyric I is dramatised in an epic environment.” Before winding up the theoretical part the author points out that in the dramatic monologues of contemporary British authors the question of identity-building is almost inseparable from the problems of language, self-expression and communication.

Part 2, entitled “Dramatic monologues in British poetry after 1945,” is comprised of five chapters which, exploring the oeuvres of seven poets (Philip Larkin, Geoffrey Hill, James Fenton, Ted Hughes, Carol Ann Duffy, Paul Muldoon and Derek Mahon) and analysing some of their major poems, present the different stances a poet or the lyric I can possibly take up. (Rácz justifies the choice of the year of 1945 as a dividing line by saying that the

poetic career of the Movement poets started around that time.)

The chapter dealing with the poetry of Philip Larkin, who, for Rácz, embodies the agnostic lyric I, is the dominant part of the whole work both by its length and the depth of insight. Working himself through the oeuvre volume by volume he traces Larkin's effort in experience distancing, its modifications and aesthetic-poetic consequences. As a starting point he chooses Larkin's novels, (*Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*) in which he believes he has discovered the main characteristics of mask creation employed fully fledged in Larkin's volumes of poetry. What also sets this chapter apart from the rest is the author's heavy reliance on biographical data and biographical methods. Having collected an impressive amount of material on Larkin (his personal letters, interviews with him, memories of his friends, etc.) he is determined to map out the intricate system of correspondences between Larkin the everyday man, his poetic I and the various masks to be found in his poems. He points out that Larkin himself, who on the basis of his self-definitions and his manifestations had constitutionally a lyric turn of mind and who, of course, achieved world-wide fame as a poet, regarded the novel as the most mature genre of the age. Citing from one of Larkin's letters he even

finds some (not very convincing) evidence that the poet showed a strong striving for dramatic effect and for dramatisation. Having analysed the problems of identity and difference and the relationship of the objective and the subjective side he concludes that the typical speaker of the Larkin poems, which appeared in the late 1950s, is a mask. He traces the development of this mask in the volumes *Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings*: during the detailed analysis of individual dramatic monologues he focuses on differences to be found in the relationship between the lyric I and the speaker of the poem. He finds that in most cases the lyric I stays in the background and the experience itself is pushed into the foreground (e.g., "Deceptions").

In certain poems there is a point where, due to the identity of experience, the speaker and the lyric I merge into one (e.g., "Church Going," "Days"). Rácz views Larkin's obsession with the conservation of the acquired experience as a manifestation of the poet's ontological conservatism. The author identifies a separate group of poems within Larkin's oeuvre ("Mr Bleaney," "Dockery and Son," etc.) which he terms as "dramatic lyrics based on the tripartite system of speaker-person, remembered-third, neutral party." In Larkin's last volume, *High Windows* the character of the dramatic monologues undergoes

considerable changes: the reader is faced with an embittered, cynical and rather vulgar person.

Rácz believes that the main conflict in the monologues of the last volume is generated by the conflict inside Larkin between "the romantic poetic I" and the "disillusioned Movement poet." He concludes that mask lyric and dramatic lyric were more appropriate for Larkin's poetic cast of mind than dramatic monologue proper.

In the second chapter we have two poets grouped together who apparently do not have much in common. What makes the author treat Geoffrey Hill and James Fenton under the same heading is that he discovers the same kind of scepticism in their poetry. Hill's poetry, though firmly embedded in Christianity and history, is characterised by a sceptical view of both religion and the historical past. As Rácz points out this scepticism often gives birth to seemingly impersonal dramatic or mask lyrics in which the poet's inner world is projected onto outside reality. Interpreting Fenton's poetry he focuses on the ongoing struggle inside the poet, the result of which is a "curious blend of personality and impersonality."

In the third chapter the poetry of Ted Hughes is presented by the author as the opposite of Larkin's oeuvre: while Larkin's works abound with images of decay, in Hughes' poems they are

counterbalanced by images of vegetation and fertility. Rácz emphasises the consistency with which Hughes, throughout his poetic career, sticks to his lyric I. This lyric I, as he notes, always measures himself against nature and as a result he is (similarly to the poet himself) in constant interaction with everything in the outside world. That is why his lyric I often puts on the mask of a shaman capable of communicating with the different elements of nature. In Rácz's interpretation Hughes' dramatic monologues and mask lyrics are the projections of the inner struggle of a lyric I who is striving for unity with nature. The comparative analysis of Ted Hughes' "Daffodils" and William Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" is one of the best and most original passages of the book.

Chapter 4 on the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy entitled "The you and the I" fails to provide us with a new angle. The analysis is once again revealing and sharp, but still one does not feel his choice justified.

The closing chapter of Part 2 does present us with a new angle but this time one cannot help feeling that the author has grasped too much. He is struggling with his material, trying to cram an enormous amount of information into a chapter of a couple of pages. The result is quite disturbing: it is enough to mention the overcomplicated title and

the way the author's mind flits from Jorge Louis Borges and the Koran to W. B. Yeats and Louis MacNeice. This topic, i.e., the search for national identity in the poetry of Northern Ireland could only be discussed properly within the framework of a separate book.

On the whole Rácz's book is impeccably researched and annotated, and he gives some penetrating and thought-provoking analyses. It is a valuable contribution to the study of the genre of dramatic monologue.

Béla Polyák

The Story Goes On

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy: *Világregény - Regényvilág* [The Novel of the World – The World of the Novel] Orbis Litterarum Series 2, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 1997.

The foremost Hungarian critic of contemporary American literature has at long last disclosed some of the secrets hidden in his drawers – or disk files, times being what they are. Those in the know had long been aware that he had kept something from us, and even the less attentive readers might have spotted the six relevant references in Abádi-

Nagy's previous work, which, in a gesture not unlike those of some of the authors he analysed, sent us looking for a book not yet published, basically whirling us in a time warp. The previous critical volume, published in 1995, tells us that interviews with certain renowned American authors are available in a book called *The Novel of the World - The World of the Novel*. However, this latter work came out two years later, although, obviously, it was in the making at the time its predecessor was put together.

The Novel of the World – The World of the Novel is Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's fifth volume of criticism. He started out with *Swift, a szatirikus és a tervező* [Swift: Satirist and Designer" Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1973], went on with *Válság és komikum – A hatvanas évek amerikai regénye* [Crisis and Comedy – The American Novel in the 60s" Magvető, 1982], which latter proved to be the first in a series of critical works covering contemporary American fiction from the late fifties up until December 31, 1999. No kidding. After *Az amerikai minimalista próza* [American Minimalist Prose" Argumentum, 1994] came *Mai amerikai regénykalauz, 1970-1990* [A Guide to Contemporary American Novels" 1970-1990] and *Világregény - Regényvilág* [The Novel of the World – The World of the Novel, hereinafter: NOW-WON], and there is no stopping: Abádi-Nagy (hereinafter: ZAN) is already working on the next volume, which both