

Interview with Bob Hicok

DANIEL GODSTON

[note on Bob Hicok tk]

Daniel Godston: *What are some unique characteristics of the dramatic monologue? What opportunities does it provide the poet?*

Bob Hicok: On its website, poets.org, the Academy of American Poets gives the following definition of the dramatic monologue in poetry:

Dramatic monologue in poetry, also known as a persona poem, shares many characteristics with a theatrical monologue: an audience is implied; there is no dialogue; and the poet speaks through an assumed voice—a character, a fictional identity, or a persona. . . .

Taking this definition into account, it's hard not to think of all poems as dramatic monologues. By and large, we accept the notion of the self as a fiction, a construction that is not reliable, that shifts and which the individual, the self, offers with motives that vary. With this in mind, the dramatic monologue strikes me as honest about how much of this stuff is made up, how much we write what we want to write, how fundamentally we're constructing identities in our poems.

DG: *It is interesting to think about the relationship between the poet and the speaker in a dramatic mono-*

logue, who may or may not be one and the same. Your poem "In These Times" put me in mind of this. On one level, it is interesting to wonder whether your sister and brothers are out of work, or even if you have a sister and brothers, but on another level it doesn't matter, because their presence in the poem feels poignant and authentic.

BH: In this case, those are my family members, and they were out of work at the time I wrote that poem. But I agree: I don't really care about reality in a poem, except whether or not a poem is consistent with its own reality, its own logic.

DG: *Would you comment on the dramatic monologue, in the larger context of poetic voice? For instance, the voices that come through Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and Robert Frost's poetry can be thought of as extended personas. Then there's Pessoa, who created several personas.*

BH: Voice for me is the conveyance of personality. To the extent that the dramatic monologue gives the poet other bodies to wear, other lives to use to render his or her own life, dramatic monologues are essential to getting across who the poet is or how the poet wants to be seen. But again, I now think, because of these questions, of all poems as dramatic monologues: all of this, all writing, is the taking on of an unverifiable personality, of a personality that is

removed from a pure experience of that self. This remove is inherent to language. Because the word is not the thing, we have to deal with overcoming this divide, with filling in the gaps in our knowledge. Where there are gaps, we construct.

DG: *Is this what happens in your poem "Weather," in which the speaker of the poem talks about his grandmother?*

BH: I barely knew my grandmother. She was a soft and loving presence several times a year. I suppose a poem like that negates this non-experience, acts as wish fulfillment. I wish this was my experience with my grandmother, with the past of my blood, my flesh. That may be the strongest impulse behind imagination: to construct the willed, the wanted world.

DG: *Are there certain themes that feel you can best explore in a dramatic monologue?*

BH: It's not so much that—themes—as a natural channel for invention. Once you accept the notion that you can create entire people or simply edit the nature of people you know, the nature you'll give them on the page, then the field opens to an almost infinite space. At that point, there is nothing you won't have someone say or do or think, if it fits the context, the moment. Most of my poems are fictions that present themselves as truths. And I can't say I've ever decided to write a dramatic monologue, but I never set out to write a particular kind of poem. I think my primary job is to try to translate what's going on in my imagination in such a way that it can enter someone's consciousness as an experience of the poem's construction, of the moment it came to life. In doing that, I freely mix... whatever I need.

"Chrysanthemums towed
one fountain, because schiz-
ophrenic sheep
telephoned two Klingons,
and five mats tastes thirsty.
Quark tickled five dwarves.
The elephant auctioned off
Jupiter."