

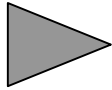
PERSON TO PERSON: RELATIONSHIP IN THE POETRY
OF TONY HARRISON

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Abstract

In this article we will demonstrate that the way in which the grammatical categories of person (first, second and third) are distributed across Harrison's poem "Long Distance II" emphasizes its basic theme of estrangement, of loss of person to person contact.

Keywords: person, estrangement, personal pronoun, distancing, participation



Introduction

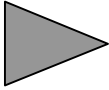
“You weren’t brought up to write such mucky books!” is the final line in italics of Tony Harrison’s poem “Bringing Up”. It refers to what his mother said when he showed her his first volume *The Loiners*, and it epitomizes the social dislocation of a working-class boy who won a scholarship to Leeds Grammar School and subsequently graduated in Classics.

In this article we will demonstrate that the way in which the grammatical categories of person are distributed across Harrison’s poem “Long Distance II” emphasizes its basic theme of estrangement, of loss of person to person contact. We will also underline a significant distinction between the pronouns of the first and second person (*I* and *You*) on the one hand and those of the third person on the other (*he, she, they*). The former are terms of address *to* talk to people, while the latter are terms of reference used to talk *about* people. In other words it is only the first and second person that are actually participating in a speech event. They are equals in terms of communication, in that their roles are potentially transferable as the speech event proceeds. The third person is not associated with any positive participant role; it has a distancing effect and people referred to in this way are cut off from communication.

Starting from this fundamental distinction we will show that at crucial junctures in the poem the use of certain second and third person items is artfully blurred. This linguistic ambiguity appears to reflect that in his relationship with his parents the poet feels both intellectually detached and emotionally involved.

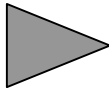
In addition to this we will also point out some other formal and linguistic features dramatizing this state of mind and come to the poignant conclusion that this patterning of language and casting of emotions in a poetic mould would have been lost on his parents. Both the ambivalence and the estrangement will persist.

The article is an example of how seemingly insignificant linguistic details can be related in such a way that they confirm and expand our initial responses to a poem. It also demonstrates that language as such is “innocent”, but that it loses this innocence and becomes a “loaded weapon” (cf. Bolinger, 1980) as soon as it is used in communication, that is in social *discourse*.



Estrangement expressed by pronouns

The particular poem that is analysed is one of a pair among a number of poems in the volume *The School of Eloquence and other Poems* (1978) which are about the relationship between the poet and his parents. A recurring theme is the one of disparity of values and guilt that his scholarship has estranged him from them and their working-class ways. Even his portrayal of them is a kind of betrayal, since it can only be based on the dissociation of his experience and expressed in a poetic idiom they cannot understand. He cannot talk about his parents in the same way he talked to them. What comes across in these poems is a sense of exile and uncertainty of the self. They express an ambivalent position, a dilemma of identity: they are intellectually detached with descriptions distanced in the third person – the poet apart from what he describes – but at the same time he is emotionally involved in the first person, a part of it all as well. The poem is therefore one of several variations on the theme of estrangement:



Long Distance II

Though my mother was already two years dead
 Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
 put hot water bottles her side of the bed
 and still went to renew her transport pass.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
 He'd put you off an hour to give him time
 to clear away her things and look alone
 as though his still raw love were such a crime.

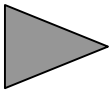
He couldn't risk much blight of disbelief
 though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
 scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
 He *knew* she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
 You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,
 in my new black leather phone book there's your name
 and the disconnected number I still call.

At the most obvious referential level of paraphrase summary this poem is about family relations and their severance by bereavement. It is about communication and its loss in two respects. Physical contact and emotional ties, telephone connections and human relationships, the one expressed in terms of the other. It is about being cut off, disconnected, and distanced.

Linguistically, human relationships are mediated by means of the grammatical category of person, and in particular the personal pronouns. To quote from the *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*: “You use **personal pronouns** to refer to yourself, the people you are talking to, or the people or things you are talking about” (Sinclair 1990: 29). It is through the categories of person that we make a connection between self and others and establish positions of identity. This can serve as the starting point for the present analysis.

The first and second person pronouns identify the participants and provide the necessary terminals, whereby people are connected in communicative interaction. They coexist in the same plane of involvement. Thus they are, in principle, interchangeable in the turning of talk: the second person is a potential first person, and each presupposes the existence of the other. The same person shifts role into the different grammatical persons of “I” and “you”, addresser and addressee. In spite of the term given to them they are not pronouns. They can be used in association with nouns, as when they are specifically identified, but they have no proxy function.



Further distancing from parental figures

In contrast to the first and second person, the third-person pronouns indicate a non-participant role; they are terms of reference rather than of address. When people are referred to in third-person terms they are distanced, removed from involvement with first-person self, no longer interactants. When talking about people in the third person, rather than in the second person, one disconnects them from communication.

Thus the first two lines of the poem establish the relationship between the child in the first person and parents in the third person: “my mother”, “Dad”; me, the poet, and them. There is a difference, though, between these two expressions. The first of them is a straightforward term of reference. The second, “Dad”, however, can serve as a term of address also, a vocative, so, although it is used here in the third person, it carries the implication of involvement, indeterminate, between reference and address. He is not just being talked about in detachment, but is also marked as a potential participant. “Dad” seems appropriate as suggesting a continuing relationship: he is still alive. “My mother”, already two years dead, is distanced as

a third-person entity by the use of the standard referential phrase. One might consider the difference of effect if the lines had been otherwise:

Though mother was already two years dead,
My father warmed her slippers by the gas

There is a further observation to be made about the distancing effect of these terms. "Dad" is not only to be distinguished from "my mother" because of its address potential, it is also a less formal term and expresses closer familiar ties, more personal involvement. The version which is unmarked for such affect is "Father", just as the marked versions for the address term "Mother" or "Mum" or "Mam". These affectively marked terms can also be used for reference as well as address. They are used in this way by Harrison in other poems. For example:

I asked mi mam. She said she didn't know. ("Wordlists")

Since mi mam's dropped dead mi dad's took fright. ("Next Door")

Here too the use of dialect forms is a further device for reducing distance, expressing empathy, identifying the first person with third-person description.

Here there is a fusion of participant address and non-participant reference perspectives. It might be suggested that there is a set of three terms of reference of increasing affective involvement in Harrison's poetry:

my mother	my father
Mi mam	mi dad
Mam	dad

If these possible alternatives are used in the first two lines of the poem under discussion, with other modifications to retain the metrical pattern, we can propose a number of variants:

Though mam was then already two years dead,
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas ...

Mi mam was then already two years dead,
But dad still warmed her slippers by the gas ...

Though mi mam was already two years dead,
Mi dad still warmed her slippers by the gas ...

Each variant represents a different a relationship with the parents. The father, unlike the mother, is still affectively connected; the relationship is alive as a potential participation. However, it is to some degree distanced by third-person

reference. The writer is connected in a way, and yet, in another way disconnected. The ambivalence mentioned earlier is already present in the first two lines of the poem, represented by the very choice of referential expression. In this sense, the end of the poem is anticipated by its beginning.

So a question arises with reference to the lines in between. They too express this ambivalence. And it is again the grammatical category of person that is crucial. For this purpose we should consider the first two lines of the second stanza. It occurs three times, but it does not have a participant sense. It is the informal equivalent of the third person impersonal pronoun "one":

One couldn't just drop in, one had to phone ...

And this is the non-participant equivalent of the first person pronoun "I":

I couldn't just drop in, I had to phone ...

Again, there is distancing, but at the same time some retention of affective involvement represented by the residual participant force of the second-person pronoun "you".

The third person is used to talk about the father in the poem. In the first verse, there is an account of what he actually does, his physical actions, expressed as a series of objective statements. In the second verse, there is an interpretation of his action. It is not a matter simply of what he does, but why he does it. The first person intervenes to give reasons and adduce motives and he is drawn into subjective involvement. Moreover, in the third verse he is drawn even further in. It is not just a matter of interpreting action but attributing feelings and attitudes to the third person which would normally be associated only with first-person expression:

I couldn't risk his blight of disbelief ...

I'm sure that very soon I'll hear the key ...

I knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

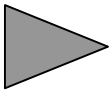
It is obvious that in these three verses there is an increasing involvement, a gradual identification of the first person with the third person until they fuse one into the other and the son articulates the feelings of the father in the father's idiom. And yet he retains some detachment and separate identity: phrases like "my blight of disbelief" and "end his grief" express his thoughts in his idiom carried over from the last line of the second verse: "as though his still raw love was such a crime".

These verses represent an ambivalent position of the first person: he is both apart from and a part of what he describes, detached from the actions, and able to comment on them, but drawn into empathy with the feelings. In the first line of the

last verse this ambivalence disappears with a definite assertion of separate and independent identity with the first occurrence of the first-person pronoun:

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.

The tone is clear and straightforward enough; a change of tone, a first-person assertion of present reality in contrast to the parental illusions of the past that he has been recounting. This shift is also marked by a change in the rhyme scheme in the last verse. Life ends with death; there is no ambivalence or uncertainty. In the next line, however, the second-person pronoun appears again, but this time it is used in its full participant sense: he is addressing his parents. They are both dead, and life ends in death and that is all, and yet he is talking to them reviving the relationship by this direct address. The ambiguity of this relationship is resolved into the definite distinction between first and second persons “I” and “you”.



Conclusion

The poem ends on the same note. Ultimately, what the son believes is also undermined by concession. His certainty has no more substance than his father's. In spite of his assertion, he behaves like his father, and is subject to the same disbelief in spite of what he claims to believe. There is even a recurrence of lexical items to link them. The ambivalence remains unsolved, except in the resolution that its representation provides in the very patterns of language of the poem. For, although the poem is referentially about disconnection, the patterns, the prosodic regularities, the links and correspondences, represent the opposite. The end of the poem paradoxically connects up with the beginning. This patterning of language is a mode of communication which his parents would not have understood or recognized as significant. As the ambivalence persists, so does the estrangement. The persons, parents and son, first, second, and third, ultimately remain distinct.

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