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## The Frame Story in Robert Browning's *Balaustion's Adventure*

### Abstract

This essay examines the way in which narrative diegesis and dramatic mimesis interact in Browning's *Balaustion's Adventure, Including a Transcript from Euripides*, a long poem in blank verse made of 2705 lines. The complex structure of this poem may be divided into four main sections: 1) an opening narrative frame, where Balaustion tells her four friends how she saved herself by reciting Euripides' *Alcestis* at Syracuse; 2) the full version of *Alcestis*, which is not only recited by Balaustion but also commented upon; 3) a personal version accompanied by a new interpretation of the play; 4) a closing narrative frame, where Balaustion affirms *Alcestis*' extraordinary value. In particular, the essay focuses on the frame with the aim of exploring the structural originality of the poem and its hybrid texture: with regard to the literary genre, the frame blends drama, historical narratives and epics; as for the mode, mimesis and diegesis alternate in almost every section. What lends continuity to the text is Balaustion, narrator and main character, spectator and performer: with her performative speech-acts, it is she who directs the succession of diegesis and mimesis. Finally, the poem has also a metapoetic function, that consists in the glorification of the extraordinary power of poetry.

### 1.

In its most typical form the dramatic monologue presents a first-person narrator who tells a story to one or more implicit and silent listeners. In this sense it can be considered exemplary of the interaction between narrative diegesis and dramatic mimesis: in fact, both modes of narration are present in this complex poetic form.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this essay is to examine Browning's *Balaustion's Adventure, Including a Transcript from Euripides* from this specific perspective. The author presents his work – a long po-

<sup>1</sup> All essays that deal with the dramatic monologue (the definition of the genre, its formal characteristics, the audience) notice, in a more or less explicit way, the presence of both modes of narration. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I will only mention the still fundamental contributions by Sessions 1947 and Langbaum 1957, and the more recent studies by Pearsall 2000 and 2008; Morgan 2007; Martens 2016; Luu 2016.

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em in blank verse made of 2705 lines – as an occasional *divertissement*: in the dedication to the countess Cowper, who suggested him to translate Euripides' *Alcestis*, he calls it “the most delightful of May-month amusements” (Browning 1999: 7) and, in a letter to Isabella Bladgen, “my little new Poem” (Browning 1951: 362). Nevertheless, it reveals a considerable level of complexity when compared to classical dramatic monologues.

As far as its structure is concerned, *Balaustion's Adventure* is made up of four sections: 1) an opening narrative frame, in which Balaustion, a young Rhodian woman with profound admiration for Athens and Euripides, tells her four friends of an adventure she had a short time before: she tells the story of how, together with a group of her fellow citizens, she sailed from Rhodes to Athens, of how they landed at Syracuse – a city allied to Sparta – after being driven away from their course by a storm and pursued by pirates, and of how she saved herself and her companions by reciting Euripides' *Alcestis* (ll. 1-357); 2) the full version of *Alcestis*, which is not only recited by Balaustion, as she had done in Syracuse, but also commented upon: as a result, her additions interrupt the translation and infuse it with critical observations ranging from didascalical remarks to passages in which she introduces the characters and interprets their words (ll. 358-2396); 3) a personal and alternative version of the tragedy in which Balaustion uses the previous comments as a starting point for reshaping the characters and changing the ending of the story: a strategy which allows her to formulate a new interpretation of the play (ll. 2397-660); 4) lastly, a closing narrative frame where Balaustion once again affirms *Alcestis'* extraordinary value: this play has not only saved her life and that of her fellow citizens, but also inspired many artistic and literary works (ll. 2661-705).

Among Browning's works, *Balaustion's Adventure* is neither the best known nor the most studied. Scholars have identified its sources (Los Hood 1922; DeVane 1935): the framework is based upon Plutarch's *Life of Nicias*, the central section reproduces Euripides' *Alcestis*, and many other classical references deepen its texture. Needless to say, Browning had a great knowledge of Greek drama and in particular of Euripides: his *Artemis Prologizes* (1842) draws inspiration from *Hippolytus*, in *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), he translates *Heracles* and in 1877 publishes the translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Critics have also frequently focused on the intertextual relations between *Balaustion's Adventure* and *Aristophanes' Apology* – a poem that develops Balaustion's story and narrates her return trip from Athens to Rhodes<sup>2</sup> – and between *Balaustion* and Browning's masterpiece *The Ring and the Book*, which precedes the poem by a short span of years only (1868-

<sup>2</sup> See Brooke 1902; Jackson 1909; DeVane 1935; Policardi 1946; Marucci 1991; Hair 1999; Riley 2008.

69). What has often been foregrounded is, on the one hand, the affinity between *Balaustion* and *Pompilia* and, on the other, Euripides' apology (Langbaum 1970; de Loach Ryals 1975; Marucci 1991).<sup>3</sup> The most extensive field of enquiry is the autobiographical one: the story told in Euripides' *Alcestis* is, supposedly, analogous to Browning's, who lost his wife Elizabeth in 1861. In this case, the focus is on the alleged identification of Browning with Admetus and of Elizabeth with *Alcestis* or with *Balaustion*; of course, the identification with *Balaustion* might be applied to Browning himself.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the widespread opinion that *Balaustion's Adventure* is not to be considered a mere translation of Euripides' *Alcestis* (an idea which is already suggested by the subtitle, "Transcript from Euripides"),<sup>5</sup> scholars have identified the relationship between the frame and Plutarch, and yet the central section is usually ignored and very little has been said about the specificity of the translation and its techniques.<sup>6</sup>

In my opinion, *Balaustion's Adventure* can be regarded as Browning's attempt to integrate a dramatic structure within a narrative discourse (as is well known, theatre was one of his abiding, but fruitless passions). What I would like to focus on in this essay is the analysis of the narrative frame (I will come back to the central sections on another occasion) and of the narrative aspects grouped by Genette under the categories of "mood" (chapter 4 in Genette 1980: 161-211) and "voice" (chapter 5 in Genette 1980: 212-62). To my knowledge, this kind of investigation has never been carried out before: the aim of this essay is to illustrate the hybrid texture of the frame and the way in which it moves between mimesis and diegesis in order to explore the poem's structural originality.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.

Normally, the dominant "mood" of a text is influenced by the literary genre to which it belongs. Nevertheless, as the previous segmentation of *Balaustion's Adventure* shows, it is quite arduous to define the genre of the poem.

<sup>3</sup> Of great interest DeVane's remarks about the connection between Browning's two works as for the rescue theme (DeVane 1966: 108).

<sup>4</sup> See DeVane 1935; Highet 1949; Fairchild 1951; Friend 1964; Hair 1999; Sanders Pollock 2005; O' Gorman 2007.

<sup>5</sup> According to Moulton's famous definition, *Balaustion's Adventure* is a "beautiful misrepresentation of the original" (qtd in Berdoe 1909: 58). See also Dowden 1904; Butler 1937-38; Friend 1964; de Loach Ryals 1975; Hair 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Some interesting observations are to be found in Tisdell 1917; DeVane 1935; Albini 1961 and Paduano 2004. See also Riley 2008, who compares Browning's translations of Euripides (*Alcestis* and *Heracles*) and Aeschylus (*Agamemnon*).

<sup>7</sup> See also Richardson 1988.

This persistent difficulty in classifying Browning's poem is at the centre of various critical assessments of the text.<sup>8</sup> Its narrative structure incorporates a tragedy, *Alcestis*, or, to say it better, quite a faithful translation of Euripides' play (section 2) and then an alternative version of the story (section 3). And yet, it is not a dramatic piece: the recital of *Alcestis* is not recorded in the text in its original drama form (mimetic), but through Balaustion's narrative of her own performance of the play, where the girl plays all the parts and smoothly intermingles her own comments with the original text.

We might affirm that the first section of the poem is chiefly diegetic because it narrates events which have already taken place in the past; that the second and the third sections are mostly mimetic, since they consist in the text of the tragedy of *Alcestis* (even though mimesis is, in fact, interspersed with narrative comments); and that diegetic narration is resumed once again in the fourth section.

However, on a closer look, we find that the frame blends and hybridizes many literary genres: it shares some features with drama, with historical narratives (there are several references to real events, circumstances, places and characters drawn from Plutarch's *Life of Nicias*), and with epics (this is implied in the temporal distance of the narrated events from the moment when the narration takes place).

Also, what emerges clearly from the analysis of its subsections is the continuous shift from the narrative to the dramatic-dialogical dimension. The initial frame, which constitutes a kind of prologue, may be divided into eight segments of different lengths: 1. the first and longest section (ll. 1-137) densely interweaves events and discourses: the narrative parts portray the various incidents of the voyage from Rhodes to Syracuse, whereas the discursive parts include two speeches delivered by the Rhodians, two speeches by Balaustion, one by the Captain and, in the end, the dialogue between the Captain and the Syracusans; 2. an analeptic digression concerning an analogous event in Syracuse (ll. 138-81); 3. a speech made by the Captain to introduce Balaustion to the Syracusans (ll. 182-216); 4. Balaustion's third and last speech in which she promises to recite the entire *Alcestis* (ll. 217-34); 5. the clarification of the performance's effects and the narration of the journey to Athens (ll. 235-74); 6. the introduction of Euripides (ll. 275-88); 7. the narration of Balaustion's visit paid to the tragic poet and the speech by the crit-

<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of Browning's monologues Righetti (1981: 29) examines the "precarious and magical equilibrium between storytelling and drama" (my translation). DeVane (1935: 313) calls *Balaustion's Adventure*, "a play within a play within a play", Hair (1999: 226) speaks about "nested plays", Sanders Pollock (2005: 207) about "double-framed, narrative-dramatic story", "clearly a narrative adaptation of a dramatic work", he also affirms (215) that "*Balaustion's Adventure* is novelistic"; see also Woolford 2012: 564-5.

ic who disapproved of Balaustion's Syracusan recital (ll. 289-335); 8. the preamble to the new performance in front of Balaustion's friends (ll. 336-57).

The closing frame of the poem – a kind of brief epilogue – is made up of four sections, which are composed of just a few lines: 1. Balaustion's interpretative conclusions about her version (ll. 2661-3); 2. the second speech by the Syracusan critic and a reprise from Elizabeth Barrett's epigraph (ll. 2664-71); 3. the description of a painting by Frederic Leighton (ll. 2673-97); 4. the final praise of *Alcestis* (ll. 2698-705).

It is clear that none of these segments is immune from the combination and interconnection of mimesis and diegesis: we find diegesis in the narration of an "adventure" (4) – a story about remarkable events – and mimesis in the dialogical dimension and in the interference of second-degree dramatization. So, it seems quite interesting to explore the reason that lies behind Browning's decision to include two versions of *Alcestis* within a narrative frame made up of a vast diegetic structure and constellated by many mimetic parts.

### 3.

To date no agreement has been reached as to what literary genre *Balaustion's Adventure* belongs to, and, as suggested above, its mood of narration continuously sways between diegesis and mimesis. Textual continuity is only guaranteed by the presence of Balaustion, who first narrates her "adventure" (4) and then recites and makes comments on *Alcestis*: from the beginning to the end of the text it is her words that mark the alternation of moods and voices.

The starting point is dialogical, since the text is presented as a speech made by Balaustion and since – according to the stylistic conventions of the dramatic monologue – it is addressed to an internal audience composed of four silent Greek girls, mentioned at the beginning ("Petalé, / Phullis, Charopé, Chrusion!", ll. 4-5)<sup>9</sup> and at the end of the opening frame ("we five", l. 340) and then in the closing frame ("you, friends", l. 2703), and who must have implicitly expressed their willingness to listen to their friend's adventure. Therefore, Balaustion's acknowledgement of her audience (Genette 1980: 232) serves as a pretext to give credibility to her own narrative.

<sup>9</sup> These names are drawn from the letters of Alciphron, an Athenian sophist of uncertain epoch: Petalé's name is mentioned in the *Letters of Courtesans*, Letter 8 [1.35] and Letter 9 [1.36]; Phyllis' in the *Letters of Farmers*, Letter 13 [3.16] and in the *Letters of Parasites*, Letter 9 [3.45]; Charopé's in the *Letters of Fisherman*, Letter 11 [3.1]; Chrysius's in the *Letters of Courtesans*, Letter 14 [1.39] (Benner and Fobes 1949). Cfr. Deane 1914 and Los Hood 1922.

Balaustion has a double status: she is both a narrator who creates a story featuring many other characters, and the main character of the narrative; that is to say, in Genettian terms, she is an extradiegetic-homodiegetic and autodiegetic narrator. Moreover, her character plays two different roles, as the use of personal pronouns shows: sometimes she assumes the function of protagonist and speaks in the first-person (“I”),<sup>10</sup> at other times she identifies herself with the collectivity she represents and disguises her role by creating an effect of shared focalization (“we”).<sup>11</sup> Balaustion’s narrative fiction, with its blending of diegesis and mimesis, has some parallels both in Odysseus’ narration of his adventures to the Phaeacians in Books IX-XI of *Odyssey* (even though, in this case, we find a second-level story embedded within a heterodiegetic narration) and in the *rheseis* of tragic messengers (from which it differs in two important details, such as omniscience and the fact of having a protagonist).<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, Balaustion is both a spectator and a performer: when she was a girl, she attended the performance of *Alcestis* in the city of Kameiros, in Rhodes (“I, when a girl, heard in Kameiros once”, l. 2); then, assuming the role of performer, she declaims the play for three days before her Syracusan audience (“Told it, and, two days more, repeated it”, l. 252), recites it once again to her friends (“Hear the play itself!”, l. 336) and, finally, offers them a personal version of the story. It is a very peculiar performance, in which Balaustion plays all the roles, a performance that is closer to the narrative than to the dramatic dimension. This ambiguity is revealed by her own expressions (“and plain I told the play”, l. 246; “Told it, and, two days more, repeated it”, l. 252; “while I told my tale”, l. 2703): the idea of a play that is so similar to a tale perfectly fits the hybrid structure of the dramatic monologue and seems to anticipate the modern experience of narrative theatre (on which see Szondi 1987).

The other agents are represented by singular or collective voices, who can be locutors or listeners, supporters or opponents. Balaustion introduces their discourses and temporarily hands over the narration to them or, more rarely, reports their words indirectly. The length of these talks can vary from a few to thirty lines, covering more than one third of the frame story: the ship’s Captain makes four speeches (three in a direct, ll. 59-66, 93-6, 183-216, and one in an indirect way, ll. 109-16), the Rhodians speak twice (ll. 13-16, 53-4), the Syracusans deliver three speeches (ll. 91-2, 97-108, 128-37) and make some

<sup>10</sup> Lines 2, 11, 19, 22, 41, 74, 181, 217, 218, 224, 231, 232, 233, 245, 246, 247, 248, 254, 256, 257, 263, 264, 267, 271, 272, 275, 276, 277, 305, 344, 345, 351.

<sup>11</sup> Lines 46, 49, 51, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 69, 73, 83, 87, 89, 90, 91, 117, 125, 129, 139, 181, 234, 249, 253, 268, 271, 275, 279, 289, 340.

<sup>12</sup> On the messenger’s *rheseis* see Paduano 1978; de Jong 1991; Barrett 2002; de Jong, Nünlist and Bowie 2004.

brief observations (ll. 238-40, 242), the Syracusan critic speaks on two occasions (ll. 308-16, 2664-6) and so do Euripides' detractors (ll. 159-60, 283-5).

The three speeches pronounced by Balaustion (ll. 23-41, 77-80, 217-34),<sup>13</sup> are particularly important since they provide precious clues for the interpretation of the text: each of them is a performance addressed to an audience (the first two unfold in front of the Rhodians, while the third is delivered to the Syracusans), with the aim of persuading by arousing the emotions and affecting the opinions of the listeners. In fact, Balaustion's words are followed by diegetic comments focused on the operative efficacy of her remarks (ll. 41-9, 81-9, 235-74)<sup>14</sup>.

The multiplication of voices and audiences bestows a mimetic dimension upon the story: everybody speaks aloud, just as actors do in a play (the verb that most frequently introduces the speeches is "cry");<sup>15</sup> the characters "hear"<sup>16</sup> and "see",<sup>17</sup> like spectators in a theatre. Here, as in every mimetic representation, sight and hearing are the privileged communication channels.

Therefore, it is Balaustion who, with her performative speech-acts, directs the combination and succession of diegetic and mimetic moments, it is she who chooses the events that are to be narrated and the ones that are to be represented through direct discourse.

#### 4.

This peculiar structure of the text contributes to the introduction – in both the mimetic and diegetic parts – of some passages of literary criticism. In

<sup>13</sup> To these it is possible to add a discourse reported by the Captain and embedded in his speech (ll. 202-5).

<sup>14</sup> See Mermin 1983: 2: "His words [the speaker's] are intended to have an immediate effect on his auditor"; 47: "What interests him [Browning] is why, how, and to what effect the speaker speaks"; Pearsall 2000: 68: ". . . a major feature of this poetic genre is its assumption of rhetorical efficacy. Speakers desire to achieve some purpose, looking toward goals that they not only describe in the course of their monologues, but also labor steadily to achieve through the medium of their monologues".

<sup>15</sup> "cried", l. 13; "cried", l. 22; "cried", l. 60; "cried", l. 129; "cried", l. 159; "I cried", l. 217.

<sup>16</sup> "heard", l. 2; "hear", l. 22; "hear", l. 70; "heard", l. 96; "we heard", l. 97; "we heard", l. 98; "to hear", l. 294; "to hear", l. 321; "hears", l. 323; "hear", l. 333; "hears", l. 335; "Hear", l. 336.

<sup>17</sup> "he saw", l. 56; "seeing", l. 73; "saw", l. 83; "saw", l. 83; "Saw", l. 84; "I see", l. 171; "I saw", l. 224; "I saw", l. 247; "I saw", l. 248; "I saw", l. 248; "to see", l. 270; "I saw", l. 275; "saw", l. 289; "she saw", l. 309; "to be seen", l. 309; "she had seen", l. 315; "sees", l. 321; "seen", l. 326; "see", l. 333; "sees", l. 335; "see", l. 350.

fact, the frame contains a series of reflections through which the speaker expresses a value judgment on Euripides (on the characteristics of his poetry and on his relationship with the Athenian public, ll. 275-304), formulates a theory of aesthetic reception (ll. 305-35) and a performance theory (ll. 343-57), and establishes an intertextual dialogue with other literary and artistic works (epigraph, ll. 2667-97).

The narrative fiction of the frame is preceded by an epigraph from Elizabeth Barrett's *The Wine of Cyprus* (ll. 89-92).

Our Euripides, the human,  
With his droppings of warm tears,  
And his touches of things common  
Till they rose to touch the spheres.

What we find here is an extremely meaningful definition of Euripidean poetry. The first line recalls a well-known epigrammatic remark of Aristotle's *Poetics*, according to which Σοφοκλῆς ἔφη αὐτὸς μὲν οἴους δεῖ ποιεῖν, Εὐριπίδην δὲ οἴοι εἰσίν, 1460b33-5, ("Sophocles said that he drew men as they ought to be, Euripides, as they are"; my translation). The second line sees in the emphatic representation of suffering the central tenet of Euripides' play. The last two lines show the ability of the tragedian to transpose everyday matter into myth and humanity into the divine. The paratext can be viewed as a kind of declaration of intent: indeed, the poem is generated by the desire to explicitly state and confirm its meaning (in fact, as we shall see later, Barrett Browning's words recur several times in the text).

At the poem's centre is *Alcestis* and Balaustion reveals the reasons for choosing it: it is a love story which glorifies the overcoming of death ("that strangest, saddest, sweetest song", ll. 1 and 220); its perfection is rooted in beauty and, again, in the power to elicit the spectator's emotional identification ("the perfect piece / Its beauty and the way it makes you weep", ll. 226-7).

By analyzing each single section we will see that the metapoetic function consists in the glorification of the extraordinary power of poetic diction.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, all the strategies used in the frame story contribute to enhancing this idea.

<sup>18</sup> See de Loach Ryals 1975: 34: "The first 357 lines of the poem . . . are . . . devoted chiefly to proclaiming the redemptive power of poetry". In his 1940 essay Smalley refers to the metapoetic value of *Aristophanes' Apology*: ". . . this piece affords us some of our most interesting, and not our least valuable, evidence of what Browning himself thought and felt about poetry" (Smalley 1940: 823). More recently, this same idea has been advanced by Woolford in relation to *Balaustion's Adventure*: ". . . *Balaustion's Adventure* not only responds to his contemporaries' readings (and writings) of the classical drama on which it is based, but also plays a critical role in the evolution of Browning's aesthetics, and makes a significant contribution to nineteenth-century debates over the value of Euripides and classical drama" (2012: 564).

5.1

In the opening lines of the poem Balaustion assumes her role as narrator and announces the narration's retrospective and proleptic features. Her intention is to tell her friends the story of an adventure which has saved her life.

About that strangest, saddest, sweetest song  
I, when a girl, heard in Kameiros once,  
And, after, saved my life by? Oh, so glad  
To tell you the adventure!

Petalé,

Phullis, Charopé, Chrusion! You must know,  
This 'after' fell in that unhappy time  
When poor reluctant Nikias, pushed by fate,  
Went falteringly against Syracuse;  
And there shamed Athens, lost her ships and men,  
And gained a grave, or death without a grave.  
(ll. 1-10)

The diegetic elements are foregrounded through the use of specific temporal and spatial coordinates: as time references and verbal forms show, the adventure belongs to the past and takes place in the period of the Athenian expedition to Sicily (415-13 BC); an expedition which had disastrous consequences for Athens and led to the capture and execution of the strategist Nicias. Historical events are not presented in a neutral denotative way. They are, instead, filtered through the narrator's emotional perspective, intensifying thus the pathos of the story.

The opening lines also indicate the place in which the story unfolds: "I was at Rhodes – the isle, not Rhodes the town, / Mine was Kameiros – when the news arrived" (ll. 10-11). A revolt breaks out when the news of the Athenian defeat reach Rhodes ("Our people rose in tumult, cried", l. 13) and Balaustion uses direct speech for reporting the people's reaction.

"No more  
Duty to Athens, let us join the League  
And side with Sparta, share the spoil, – at worst,  
Abjure a headship that will ruin Greece!"  
(ll. 13-16)

The inclusion of the words pronounced by the Rhodians transforms narrative diegesis into dramatic mimesis.

## 5.2

Balaustion attempts to oppose the uprising by urging the Rhodians to stay loyal to Athens. This is the reason why she introduces herself: “Girl as I was, and never out of Rhodes / The whole of my first fourteen years of life, / But nourished with Ilissian mother’s milk” (ll. 19-21). And it is precisely her characteristics (her young age, her inexperience, her passion for Athens) that mark her as an orator who is able to influence her fellow-citizens. Her personal involvement also determines the tone of her first speech, which is introduced by the expression “passionately cried” (l. 22). The girl addresses a small audience, chosen by her from the people with whom she shares an affinity (“to who would hear / And those who loved me at Kameiros”, ll. 22-3).

“No!

Never throw Athens off for Sparta’s sake.  
 Never disloyal to the life and light  
 Of the whole world worth calling world at all!  
 Rather go die at Athens, lie outstretched  
 For feet to trample on, before the gate  
 Of Diomedes or the Hippadai,  
 Before the temples and among the tombs,  
 Than tolerate the grim felicity  
 Of harsh Laconia! Ours the fasts and feasts,  
 Choës and Chutroi; ours the sacred grove,  
 Agora, Dikasteria, Poikilé,  
 Pnux, Keramikos; Salamis in sight,  
 Psuttalia, Marathon itself, not far!  
 Ours the great Dionusiatic theatre,  
 And tragic triad of immortal fames,  
 Aischulos, Sophokles, Euripides!  
 To Athens, all of us that have a soul,  
 Follow me!”  
 (ll. 23-41)<sup>19</sup>

Her peroration is rooted in the idea that the predilection for Athens is incontestable and the existence in Sparta impossible (ll. 23-7). According to Balaustion, the contrast between the two cities embodies the opposition between the light emanating from the cult of beauty and the darkness of aridity: a clash of civilizations that cannot but lead to the Athenian hegemony.

What follows is a fiery tribute to Athens’ architectonic, military and theatrical glory in which Balaustion recurs to visual suggestion and to the

<sup>19</sup> Browning uses the standard Victorian transliteration of Greek names: Aischulos instead of Aeschylus, Sophokles instead of Sophocles, etc.

rhetoric figure of accumulation. She attempts to persuade her fellow-citizens by recalling the monuments (ll. 27-35), the victories against the Persians (ll. 35-6) and, eventually, the triad of great tragic authors (ll. 37-9).

Her awareness and sense of belongingness to the city is underlined by the recurrence of the possessive adjective "Ours" (ll. 32, 33, 37), and is strongly affirmed by the imperative forms which culminate in the final exhortation (ll. 40-1).<sup>20</sup>

Moving back to the diegetic dimension, Balaustion emphasizes the persuasive efficacy of her own speech: "And I wrought so with my prayer / That certain of my kinsfolk crossed the strait / And found a ship at Kaunos" (ll. 41-3). The effect produced by her words is highly subversive because the Rhodians – a small group of people who attach great importance to Athenian culture and civilization – are persuaded to change their minds: they leave for Kaunos, in Asia Minor, and from there they embark for Athens and sail on a ship steered by a pro-Athenian captain (ll. 41-9).

From this moment onwards Balaustion will not use the first-person pronoun for a long time; moved by a profound emotional sympathy, she completely identifies with the community she belongs to ("A few like-minded as ourselves", l. 46; "We", l. 46; "our heart", l. 49). This identification is necessary since it paves the way for the diegetic narration that will follow: in fact, the concealment of personal identity is a strategy that turns the attention to the events.

### 5.3

Three climactic narrative moments contribute to the compelling description of the journey which first puts the Rhodians in danger and then determines their survival (ll. 49-89). The first one (ll. 49-55), which opens on the adversative "But" (l. 49), is centered on the change of direction caused by the adverse winds that sweep the ship off course near the promontory of Malea and on the following days of dead calm: the Rhodians address the Captain with brief, anguished and insistent questions that are left unanswered ("But whither bound in this white waste?' we plagued / The pilot's old experience: 'Cos or Crete?'" , ll. 53-4).

<sup>20</sup> Ll. 27-36 recall two letters by Alciphron: ll. 27-31 recall Letter 15 [3.51], in which the parasite Laemocyclus parodies the heroic speech on suicide; ll. 32-6 recall Letter 11 [3.1], in which Menander, who lies sick in Piraeus, writes to the courtesan Glycera of Athens; he declines the invitation to go to the Egyptian court of Ptolemy I Soter and justifies his refusal on the grounds of his strong attachment to Glycera and Athens and concludes by listing the city's most significant sites (the Kerameikos, the Agora, the courthouses, Salamis, Psyttalia and Marathon). See Deane 1914.

The shift to the second episode (ll. 56-9) is introduced and marked by the conjunction “While” (l. 56). A warning shout of the Captain, to whom Balaustion hands the narration over, signals a pirate assault on the ship (“The Captain’s shout startled us”, l. 57). In order to avoid the risk of being captured by the pirates, in his first speech (“the Captain cried”, l. 60) the Captain exhorts his crew to row in the direction of what he thinks is the island of Crete (ll. 59-66).

The feeling of terror, the frantic rowing of the seamen and the hideous threats of the pirates – (“That we could hear behind us plain the threats / And curses of the pirate panting up / In one more throe and passion of pursuit”, ll. 70-2) – provide the context for Balaustion’s second oration. She thus assumes, once again, a guiding role (“I”, l. 74) and chooses the altar of the ship as the solemn place from which to address the audience:

I sprang upon the altar by the mast  
 And sang aloft – some genius prompting me, –  
 That song of ours which saved at Salami.  
 “O sons of Greeks, go, set your country free,  
 Free your wives, free your children, free the fanes  
 O’ the Gods, your fathers founded, – sepulchres  
 They sleep in! Or save all, or all be lost!”  
 (ll. 74-80)

The song reproduces the exhortation which, according to the Messenger in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, was pronounced by the Greeks after their victory at Salamis.

ὦ παῖδες Ἑλλήνων ἴτε,  
 ἐλευθεροῦτε πατρίδ’, ἐλευθεροῦτε δὲ  
 παῖδας, γυναῖκας, θεῶν τε πατρῶων ἔδη,  
 θήκας τε προγόνων: νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀγών.  
 (Aeschylus, *Persians*, ll. 402-5)

[“On, you men of Hellas! Free your native land. Free your children, your wives, the temples of your fathers’ gods, and the tombs of your ancestors. Now you are fighting for all you have.” – Trans. by H. Weir Smyth, Aeschylus 1926]

While in her first speech Balaustion invoked the values of culture and civilization, in this case her argumentation rests on the authoritative lines written by Aeschylus, which symbolize a confident assertion of the Greek society’s self-awareness. The second oration acquires an injunctive power and produces the effect of making the seamen row faster until they catch sight of land (ll. 81-9): the lasting power of poetry is transfused from the

Greeks, who have defeated the Persians, to the Rhodians who manage to escape from the pirates.

Once again Balaustion merges her individual self with the collectivity ("We", l. 83) and provides an accurate and detailed *ekphrasis* of what she sees ("saw", ll. 83 and 84): after a wide panoramic view of the land, she gives a close-up picture of the hills, of the city and its towers and, eventually, of a large and a small bay (ll. 83-7). The aim of the description is not only to emphasize the objectivity of the narration, but also to create suspense by slowing down the action and showing the places as they appear to the eyes of the characters. The third episode comes as quite a surprise to the Rhodians when they realize that the ship has reached neither Crete, let alone Athens, but Syracuse, an ally of Sparta ("We ran upon the lion from the wolf", l. 89).

The narrative-descriptive passages (the stormbound voyage, the attack of the pirates, the mistake in making landfall) build up an emotionally tense situation which precludes to the unexpected reversal of events and are, therefore, distinctly propulsive.

#### 5.4

The narration of the landing at Syracuse opens up an entirely dialogical scene. Having introduced the first two remarks (ll. 90-1 and 93), Balaustion momentarily disappears from our view: when the ship enters the harbour the Captain is asked a series of questions and the dialogue between him and the Syracusans is of fundamental importance for the survival of the Rhodians (ll. 90-137). When the Syracusans ask him to reveal his identity and explicitly state his standpoint ("Who asks entry here / In war-time? Are you Sparta's friend or foe?", ll. 91-2) the Captain tries to convince them that Rhodes has lined up with Sparta (ll. 93-6). But the hunted fugitives are denied entrance because the Syracusans, who have heard Aeschylus' song ("Ay, but we heard all Athens in one ode / Just now! we heard in that Aischulos!", ll. 97-8) and have understood that the ship is carrying pro-Athenian citizens, are well aware of the mesmerizing power exercised by poetry: "We want no colony from Athens here, / With memories of Salamis, forsooth, / To spirit up our captives" (ll. 104-6).

The Captain's speech assumes then a prayerful tone ("prayed them", l. 109) and is reported through indirect discourse (ll. 109-16). Both its indirect form and its formal style ("Then the grey Captain prayed them by the Gods, / And by their own knees, and their fathers' beards", ll. 109-10) reveal its communicative inefficaciousness, which is later explicitly confirmed ("Vain! / Words to the wind!", ll. 116-17): the failure of his attempt shows that his persuasive abilities are inferior to those of Balaustion.

In this atmosphere, the tension builds up further (“So were we at destruction’s very edge”, l. 125) until the Syracusans ask the Rhodians if, apart from knowing Euripides’ verses, they are acquainted with those of Aeschylus as well.

“That song was veritable Aischulos,  
 Familiar to the mouth of man and boy,  
 Old glory: how about Euripides?  
 The newer and not so famous bard,  
 He that was born upon the battle-day  
 While that song and the salpinx sounded him  
 Into the world, first sound, at Salamis –<sup>21</sup>  
 Might you know any of his verses too?”  
 (ll. 130-7)

The two authors stand in clear contrast to each other because they belong to different temporal horizons (“Old” / “newer”), and have achieved a different kind of fame (“glory” / “not so famous bard”). In the first phase of the journey it was the appeal to the cultural values of Athens that led the Rhodians to change their minds and it was the authority of Aeschylus that motivated them to row faster. Now, it is the poetry of Euripides that brings them good luck.

## 6.

The request made by the Syracusans – to which Balaustion responds as if guided by divine inspiration (“Now, some one of the Gods inspired this speech”, l. 138) – provides her with the opportunity to introduce a new story. The episode she refers to had taken place in the same city of Syracuse; its opening and closing narrative segments are indicated by the chronological expression “last year”, which moves the episode back in time; it has not been experienced first-hand, but is well-known by the community (“Since ourselves knew what happened but last year”, l. 139; “I say, we knew that story of last year”, l. 181). What we have here is an analepsis within the analepsis, which revisits the paragraphs of Plutarch’s *Life of Nicias* dealing with the consequences of the Athenian defeat and the vicissitudes of the prisoners in Syracuse (29.1-4).

<sup>21</sup> The common tradition fixes Euripides’ birth on the day of the battle of Salamis (23 September 480 BC), even though he was probably born around 485 BC. The information Browning draws on is contained in various biographical writings on Euripides such as γένος Εὐριπίδου and Satyrus, *Life of Euripides*; see Arrighetti 1964; Jackson 1909.

τῶν δ' Ἀθηναίων οἱ μὲν πλεῖστοι διεφθάρησαν ἐν ταῖς λατομίαις ὑπὸ νόσου καὶ διαίτης πονηρᾶς, εἰς ἡμέραν ἑκάστην κοτύλας δύο κριθῶν λαμβάνοντες καὶ μίαν ὕδατος, οὐκ ὀλίγοι δ' ἐπράθησαν διακλαπέντες ἢ καὶ διαλαθόντες ὡς οἰκέται. καὶ τούτους ὡς οἰκέτας ἐπώλουν, στίζοντες ἵππον εἰς τὸ μέτωπον: ἀλλ' ἦσαν οἱ καὶ τοῦτο πρὸς τῷ δουλεύειν ὑπομένοντες. ἐβοήθει δὲ καὶ τούτοις ἢ τ' αἰδῶς καὶ τὸ κόσμιον: ἢ γὰρ ἠλευθεροῦντο ταχέως ἢ τιμώμενοι παρέμενον τοῖς κεκτημένοις. ἔνιοι δὲ καὶ δι' Εὐριπίδην ἐσώθησαν. μάλιστα γάρ, ὡς ἔοικε, τῶν ἐκτὸς Ἑλλήνων ἐπόθησαν αὐτοῦ τὴν μουσάν οἱ περὶ Σικελίαν: καὶ μικρὰ τῶν ἀφικνουμένων ἑκάστοτε δείγματα καὶ γεύματα κομιζόντων ἐκμανθάνοντες ἀγαπητῶς μετεδίδοσαν ἀλλήλοις. τότε γοῦν φασι τῶν σωθέντων οἴκαδε συχνοὺς ἀσπάσασθαι τὸν Εὐριπίδην φιλοφρόνως, καὶ διηγεῖσθαι τοὺς μὲν, ὅτι δουλεύοντες ἀφείθησαν ἐκδιδάξαντες ὅσα τῶν ἐκείνου ποιημάτων ἐμνήμητο, τοὺς δ', ὅτι πλανώμενοι μετὰ τὴν μάχην τροφῆς καὶ ὕδατος μετέλαβον τῶν μελῶν ἄσαντες.

[Most of the Athenians perished in the stone quarries of disease and evil fare, their daily rations being a pint of barley meal and half-pint of water; but not a few were stolen away and sold into slavery, or succeeded in passing themselves off for serving men. These, when they were sold, were branded in the forehead with the mark of a horse, – yes, there were some freemen who actually suffered this indignity in addition to their servitude. But even these were helped by their restrained and decorous bearing; some were speedily set free, and some remained with their masters in positions of honour. Some also were saved for the sake of Euripides. For the Sicilians, it would seem, more than any other Hellenes outside the home land, had a yearning fondness for his poetry. They were forever learning by heart the little specimens and morsels of it which visitors brought them from time to time, and imparting them to one another with fond delight. In the present case, at any rate, they say that many Athenians who reached home in safety greeted Euripides with affectionate hearts, and recounted to him, some that they had been set free from slavery for rehearsing what they remembered of his works; and some that when they were roaming about after the final battle they had received food and drink for singing some of his choral hymns. – Trans. by B. Perrin, Plutarch 1916]

Plutarch adds another example which celebrates the Syracusan passion for Euripides (29.5):

οὐ δεῖ δὴ θαυμάζειν ὅτι τοὺς Καυνίους φασι πλοίου προσφερομένου τοῖς λιμῆσιν ὑπὸ ληστρίδων διωκομένου μὴ δέχεσθαι τὸ πρῶτον, ἀλλ' ἀπείργειν, εἶτα μέντοι διαπυνθανομένους εἰ γινώσκουσιν ἄσματα τῶν Εὐριπίδου, φησάντων ἐκείνων, οὕτω παρεῖναι καὶ καταγαγεῖν τὸ πλοῖον.

[Surely, then, one need not wonder at the story that the Caunians, when a vessel of theirs would have put in at the harbour of Syracuse to escape pur-

suit by pirates, were not admitted at first, but kept outside, until, on being asked if they knew any songs of Euripides, they declared that they did indeed, and were for this reason suffered to bring their vessel safely in. – Ibid.]

Balaustion uses many of the details contained in the first part of the story – although heightening the pathetic tone of the whole<sup>22</sup> – and focuses mainly on the means through which the prisoners achieved their freedom: what saved them was neither wealth nor wisdom or the poetry of the ancient tragedies (ll. 146-54), but their ability to recite some passages from Euripides' plays (ll. 154-76). Plutarch juxtaposes the two episodes (the account of how the prisoners were released thanks to their knowledge of Euripides and how the ship from Kaunos, which happened to be pursued by pirates, ran into the harbour of Syracuse and was received for the same reason), so that the latter might provide evidence for the former. Contrary to Plutarch, Browning uses the episode of the ship from Kaunos as the main frame-story and introduces the vicissitudes of the Athenian prisoners as a preamble that occurred the year before. The two episodes are linked by a mirroring effect which foregrounds the transformation of the past into legend (ll. 139, 181) and the continuity with the present moment (both the prisoners of Syracuse and Balaustion with her fellow-citizens save themselves by reciting Euripides and eventually pay him a visit in Athens).

In addition, the analepsis contributes to the hermeneutical line: Balaustion's first speech (ll. 23-41) already contains a glorification of Greek theatre (ll. 37-9); what is praised in this case is the supreme grandeur and the universal dissemination of tragic writing ("Old glory, great plays that had long ago / Made themselves wings to fly about the world", ll. 153-4).

So, after having openly acknowledged their preference for Euripides over Aeschylus, the Syracusans delineate their relationship with Sophocles:

Not one such man was helped so at his need  
 As certain few that (wisest they of all)  
 Had, at first summons, oped heart, flung door wide  
 At the new knocking of Euripides,  
 Nor drawn the bolt with who cried "Decadence!"

<sup>22</sup> She also takes the chance for including another quotation, this time from Sophocles: when mentioning the horse-head brands she introduces a brief interjection "– ah, 'Region of the Steed'! –" (l. 145), which echoes a line from *Oedipus at Colonus* in praise of Athens ("Stranger, in this land of fine horses you have come to earth's fairest home, the shining Colonus", ll. 668-70). The inclusion of the Sophoclean line intensifies the pathos of the narration.

And after Sophokles, be nature dumb!"  
(ll. 155-60)

In the end, the prisoners who gain freedom are not the ones who distrust innovation, but the few who are able to appreciate Euripides – an emblematic figure of modernity.

By reflecting itself in Balaustion's speech the retrospective story produces two significant effects: it proves the salvific power of poetry and heightens its authenticity and truth.

7.

The following two sections are still mainly mimetic in style and focus on the moment when the Captain delivers his longest discourse (ll. 183-216) and Balaustion speaks for the third time (ll. 217-34). After the flashback (ll. 138-81), the story resumes from the point where it was interrupted: the Captain responds enthusiastically to the Syracusans' request (l. 137) – ("Therefore, at mention of Euripides, / The Captain crowed out", ll. 182-3) – and introduces Balaustion (ll. 182-6). At this point the layering and interweaving of voices becomes rather complicated because a secondary character undertakes the task of introducing the protagonist-narrator: in presenting Balaustion, the Captain throws a new light on her and places the character in a new perspective (a perspective which is slightly different from the one suggested by Balaustion herself). He uses a series of metaphorical images for conjuring up the girl's extraordinary abilities and natural talent, and for demonstrating that she is able to fulfill the Syracusans' request (ll. 189-91, 195-9, 200-1).

The Captain, in turn, directly reports Balaustion's words and her suggestive definition of Euripidean poetry:

"So sang Euripides", she said, "so sang  
The meteoric poet of air and sea,  
Planets and the pale populace of heaven,  
The mind of man, and all that's made to soar!"  
(ll. 202-5)

Thus, he confers on her a sort of investiture and asks her to save her fellow-citizens by singing a strophe from Euripides (ll. 214-16).

Hence, she emerges, once again, from invisibility and definitively distances herself from the community. She takes the floor for the third time and brings the proposal forward.

But I cried "Brother Greek! better than so, –  
Save us, and I have courage to recite

the main of a whole play from first to last;  
 That strangest, saddest, sweetest song of his,  
 ALKESTIS; which was taught, long years ago  
 At Athens, in Glaukinos' archonship,  
 But only this year reached our Isle o' the Rose.  
 I saw it, at Kameiros, played the same,  
 They say, as for the right Lenean feast  
 In Athens;<sup>23</sup> and beside the perfect piece –  
 Its beauty and the way it makes you weep, –  
 There is much honour done your own loved God  
 Herakles, whom you house i' the city here  
 Nobly, the Temple wide Greece talks about!  
 I come a suppliant to your Herakles!<sup>24</sup>  
 Take me and put me on his temple-steps  
 To tell you his achievement as I may,  
 And, that told, he shall bid you set us free!"  
 (ll. 217-34)

What she had to do in the first two cases was to convince a group of fellow-citizens; now that she has to persuade the hostile Syracusans she will not limit herself to reciting just a few lines (as was the case with Aeschylus' *Persians*) but will declaim the whole play of *Alcestis*.

The Captain's lack of persuasive abilities (ll. 116-17) is now replaced with Balaustion's *ars rhetorica*, which is acknowledged as a proof of sublime eloquence.

## 8.

According to Balaustion's artistic conception, poetry is a shared universal value which has the power to settle conflicts and generate harmony, which stirs up and transmits emotions: "Then, because Greeks are Greeks and hearts are hearts / And poetry is power" (ll. 235-6).<sup>25</sup> In fact, her third speech is greeted with great jubilation by the Syracusans and their joyful reaction is narrated both in an indirect way and through brief direct statements:

<sup>23</sup> The second Argument to *Alcestis*, attributed to Aristophanes of Byzantium, states that the tragedy was staged when Glaucinus was archon and was not performed during the Lenaia but during the Great Dionysia of 438 BC.

<sup>24</sup> Neither of the two temples of Syracuse was consecrated to Hercules; but Plutarch mentions a temple dedicated to this god and refers to the way the Syracusans honored and worshipped him (*Life of Nicias* 24.6). See Los Hood 1922.

<sup>25</sup> These lines will reappear in *Aristophanes' Apology*, 496-7.

– they all outbroke  
 In a great joyous laughter with much love.  
 “Thank Herakles for the good holiday!  
 Make for the harbour! Row, and let voice ring,  
 ‘In we row, bringing more Euripides!’”  
 All the crowd, as they lined the harbour now.  
 “More of Euripides!” – took up the cry.  
 (ll. 236-42)

Thus, placed upon a kind of stage near to the temple of Heracles (“there they stationed me / O’ the topmost step”, ll. 245-6), – an act that consecrates her as a performer – Balaustion recites the tragedy for three days in a row (“Told it, and, two days more, repeated it”, l. 252). The choice of Heracles’ temple is important because the demigod saves Alcestis in Euripides’ tragedy, and acquires even greater importance in Balaustion’s version; furthermore, since Heracles is the pan-Hellenic hero who had to travel all over Greece while performing his labours, his temple is the most appropriate place for a performance intended to generate harmony between the Rhodians and the Syracusans.

Balaustion also clarifies the relationship between her recital and the theatrical performance and several times underlines the fact that it perfectly corresponds to the performance she attended at Kameiros (“I saw it, at Kameiros, played the same”, l. 224; “and plain I told the play, / Just as I saw it; what the actors said, / And what I saw, or thought I saw the while”, ll. 246-8): therefore, the act of reproducing the play is both a receptive activity – substantiated by the autopsy (“just as I saw it”, l. 247), – and an interpretative one (“or thought I saw”, l. 248). To say it in other words, the fact that Balaustion has personally seen the play makes her credible and reliable as a performer.

Apart from the freedom for the Rhodians, three more elements are closely related to her: a wealthy Syracusan gives her as a gift a talent and Balaustion decides to leave it in Hercules’ temple as a thanks-offering to the god (ll. 254-60);<sup>26</sup> a group of Athenian prisoners give her a crown of wild-pomegranate flowers (ll. 260-4); a young man falls in love with her and follows her to Athens to marry her (ll. 265-74).<sup>27</sup>

The tension, which had steadily been building up to the point where the ship entered the Syracusan harbour, is now eased; it is resolved with a happy ending involving both the Rhodian and Syracusan communities and Balaustion’s personal destiny.

<sup>26</sup> What is made explicit here is the parallelism between her personal story and that of Alcestis “– For had not Herakles a second time / Wrestled with Death and saved devoted ones? –” (ll. 258-9).

<sup>27</sup> The text refers here to Euthukles, a character from *Aristophanes’ Apology*.

## 9.

The metapoetic reflection and the narrative discourse are intertwined even further, almost inextricably, as the character of Euripides enters the scene. Once in Athens, Balaustion pays a visit to “The master” (ll. 275, 290), and approaches him with a feeling of profound reverence (“held the sacred hand of him / And laid it to my lips”, ll. 290-1).

This literary device provides the opportunity for Balaustion to express her views on Euripides, and it is worth pointing out that the stance she takes is in stark contrast to the general disapproval of the playwright (a disapproval which, by the way, was widely shared by the members of the society to which Browning belonged).<sup>28</sup>

The collective thought (“They”, l. 280) associates Euripides’ figure with misanthropy (“A man that never kept good company, / The most unsociable of poet-kind, / All beard that was not freckle in his face”, ll. 286-8) and isolation (“Meantime, / He lives as should a statue in its niche; / Cold walls enclose him, mostly darkness there, / Alone”, ll. 297-300),<sup>29</sup> and counterposes him not only to Aeschylus and Sophocles (“He was not Aischulos nor Sophokles”, l. 282), but also to more recent tragedians (“Then, of our younger bards who boast the bay, / Had I sought Agathon, or Iophon, / Or, what now had it been Kephisophon?”, ll. 283-5).<sup>30</sup> In the end, this intense aversion is directed towards Socrates as well (“Nor do they much love his friend

<sup>28</sup> Many of the comedies written by Aristophanes adopt an attitude of derision towards Euripides (see the *Acharnians*, *Thesmophoriazusae* and, above all, *The Frogs*) and of disapproval towards Socrates (*The Clouds*). This sharp criticism is revived and revised during the Romantic period: in fact, in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808) A.W. Schlegel formulates what has been called the *damnatio* of Euripides and argues that tragedy reached its apogee in the plays of Sophocles, while Euripides precipitated its decline. In 1872, a year after the appearance of *Balaustion’s Adventure*, Nietzsche publishes *The Birth of Tragedy* where he levels his charge against Euripides and Socrates and holds them responsible for the death of tragic art. On the nineteenth-century interpretations of Euripides see Jenkins 1980; Michelini 1987. DeVane (1935: 31) argues that “Even *Balaustion’s Adventure* seems to have risen out of a desire to vindicate the reputation of Euripides from the aspersions of contemporary scholars”. Smalley (1940), O’Gorman (2007: 162), Riley (2008) see *Aristophanes’ Apology* as another work which calls for a reassessment of Euripidean art.

<sup>29</sup> The description of Euripides’ aspect (including the bushy beard) and personality and the legend that he lived in a solitary cave near the sea in Salamis correspond to the information contained in γένος Εὐριπίδου and in Satyrus’ *Life of Euripides* 39, ix-x. See Jackson 1909.

<sup>30</sup> These three poets are mentioned in Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*: Iophon (ll. 73 and 78) and Agathon (ll. 83-4); in particular, as can be deduced from some passages (ll. 944, 1408, 1452-3), Kephisophon was believed to have collaborated with Euripides, who is mocked and treated with contempt.

/ Sokrates", ll. 292-3), who is Euripides' friend, his privileged interlocutor and spectator of his plays (ll. 293-7).

For Balaustion, on the contrary, this separateness reveals the unacknowledged wisdom of the poet: ". . . unless some foreigner uncouth / Breaks in, sits, stares an hour, and so departs, / Brain-stuffed with something to sustain his life, / Dry to the marrow's mid much merchandise" (ll. 300-3). Nevertheless, the disaffection shown by his fellow-citizens ("Men love him not: / How should they?", ll. 291-2; "How should such know and love the man?", l. 304) is countered by the high esteem accorded to the poet outside Athens ("The story how he saved us made some smile: / They wondered strangers were exorbitant / In estimation of Euripides", ll. 279-81).

Balaustion herself perceives the narrow-mindedness of the spectators during her recital of *Alcestis* at Syracuse: a malevolent detractor, who gives a predetermined and one-sided interpretation of the play, disagrees with her comments on the emotions conveyed by the characters' faces; he objects to the fact that she talks as if she had seen their expressions *through* the masks ("The girl departs from truth! / Pretends she saw what was not to be seen / Making the mask of the actor move, forsooth!", ll. 308-10; "As she had seen each naked fleshly face, / And not the merely-painted mask it wore!", ll. 315-16). The critic's intervention has some far-reaching consequences for the hermeneutical line. In my opinion, rather than drawing attention to the historical truthfulness of the performances in the fifth century BC, his remarks on the masks worn by the actors highlight the gap between the conventional and stereotypical conception of the critic – "a brisk little somebody, / Critic and whippersnapper" (ll. 306-7), unable to go beyond appearances – and Balaustion's understanding, which intends to prove the power of poetry: her idea is that her peculiar form of performance is capable of transcending the masks and of capturing the emotions and feelings that underlie them.<sup>31</sup> Here she hints at her role as an interpreter and commentator, the one that, in the following section, she will claim for herself, and that will soon emerge in her performance.

Balaustion, who had already proclaimed the absolute power of poetry (l. 236), now defines the language of poetry as the language of poiesis, as a creative and productive ability ("What's poetry except a power that

<sup>31</sup> See Marucci 2006: 70 ". . . Balaustion, per bocca della quale Browning assolve – esalta, anzi – la licenza poetica, la legittimità di ogni alterazione purché funzionale, e di ogni manipolazione che incrementi la pregnanza e serva l'espressività" [" . . . Balaustion, through whom Browning condones – or rather exalts – poetic licence, and the legitimacy of any change as long as it is functional, and of any manipulation that increases meaningfulness and serves expressiveness"; my translation].

makes?”, l. 318).<sup>32</sup> She conceives art as an indivisible unity where all languages converge and whose condition of intelligibility is grounded upon the mutual exchange between the senses of perception (ll. 319-34).<sup>33</sup>

The conclusion Balaustion arrives at is that her recited performance parallels the dramatic representation of the play: “Who hears the poem, therefore sees the play” (l. 335). In other words, the distance between the action of listening and seeing is dissolved in a dimension which embraces both.

## 10.

The closing part of the frame (ll. 336-57) is still diegetic and metapoetic in nature; it is the only one (apart from the direct discourses and the hermeneutical passages) to be formulated in the present tense. So, the purpose of narrating the adventure is to generate a new action: the recital which will be presented in the following sections.

Standing on her third stage – described as a *locus amoenus* (“Under the grape-vines, by the streamlet-side, / Close to Baccheion”, ll. 337-8) – Balaustion gets ready to start the performance in front of her friends and addresses them with an exhortation to listen (“Enough and too much! Hear the play itself!”, l. 336). Now, she claims her last role, that of the interpreter who is free to link her personal words with the Euripidean text.

'Tis the poet speaks:  
 But if I, too, should try and speak at times,  
 Leading your love to where my love, perchance,  
 Climbed earlier, found a nest before you knew –  
 Why, bear with the poor climber, for love's sake.  
 (ll. 343-7)

Balaustion's transformation from a performer into an interpreter who makes remarks and adds her own comments is conveyed by an elaborated metaphor (ll. 344-57): she invites her friends to look at the temple of Dionysus, where the ivy grows up and spreads over the pillars, festoons about the marble, enriches the roof, plays with the bees and the birds. If the tem-

<sup>32</sup> In *The Defence of Poetry* (1840) Shelley defines the nature of poetry as follows: “it reproduces all that it represents” (Shelley 1852: 16). On the relationship between Browning and Shelley, see Drew 1963 and Collins 1964.

<sup>33</sup> Typical of the period before Romanticism, this way of conceiving art foregrounds the analogies between painting, music and poetry; the triumph of the synesthetic blend of different sensorial spheres will then be fully developed during Symbolism and Aestheticism.

ple represents Euripides' play, then the ivy corresponds to Balaustion's voice: this is a proud assertion of the originality and the specificity of one's voice, which is able to enlighten the old text, enrich it with new values and new meanings, restore its vitality and generate deep aesthetic delight.

The closing part of the frame presents, therefore, a situation completely different from the one outlined at the beginning: Balaustion has turned from an inexperienced, fourteen-year-old young girl into an acknowledged orator, skilled in the art of persuasion, from a spectator into a performer, interpreter, and commentator.

## 11.

The closing frame at the end of the poem (ll. 2661-705) plays a conclusive and a more explicitly hermeneutical role. Balaustion believes that her version of the tragedy has warded off criticism against Euripides and offered an answer to it: "So might our version of the story prove, / And no Euripidean pathos plague / Too much my critic-friend of Syracuse" (ll. 2661-3). But here the voice of the detractor again waves her words away and belittles the *Alcestis* by saying that it won the second prize in the tragedy competition after Sophocles – "Besides your poem failed to get the prize: / (That is, the first prize: second prize is none). / Sophokles got it!" (ll. 2664-6).<sup>34</sup> She responds to this with the idea that both poets deserve to be held in great esteem ("Honour the great name! / All cannot love two great names; yet some do", ll. 2666-7).

The last segment demonstrates the qualities of *Alcestis*. From a literary point of view, the value of the tragedy is foregrounded by the fact that it exerts an extraordinary influence and Balaustion proves this by making an allusion to authors whose works have been inspired by Euripides: in particular, she refers to Elizabeth Barrett, by quoting a line from her epigraph (ll. 2668-71),<sup>35</sup> and to Frederic Leighton's portrayal of *Alcestis* (ll. 2672-97).<sup>36</sup> There is thus a shift from an internal to an external perspective which pro-

<sup>34</sup> This idea has already been mentioned in ll. 2398-9, "They say, my poet failed to get the prize: / Sophokles got the prize, – great name!". The detail that Sophocles had beaten Euripides into second place also derives from Aristophanes of Byzantium.

<sup>35</sup> See also l. 1412.

<sup>36</sup> Leighton's painting "Hercules Wrestling with Death for the Body of *Alcestis*" can be dated between 1869 and 1871 (the period in which Browning composed *Balaustion's Adventure*). It was exhibited at the 1871 Royal Academy Exhibition. According to Woolford (2012: 566), Leighton's interpretation is far-fetched and quite different from Euripides' *Alcestis*.

leptically and anachronistically<sup>37</sup> crosses the temporal boundaries and infringes the narrative fiction: “I know the poetess” (l. 2668), “I know, too, a great Kaunian painter” (l. 2672), affirms Balaustion, and by doing so she puts the accent not on the connection between the past and the present, but on the continuity between the present and the future. The last eight lines provide the reader with a recapitulation of all the values of *Alcestis*.

And all came, – glory of the golden verse,  
 And passion of the picture, and that fine  
 Frank outgush of the human gratitude  
 Which saved our ship and me, in Syracuse, –  
 Ay, and the tear or two which slipt perhaps  
 Away from you, friends, while I told my tale,  
 – It all came of this play that gained no prize!  
 Why crown whom Zeus has crowned in soul before.  
 (ll. 2698-705)

The salvific value consists in the fact that *Alcestis* has allowed Balaustion to land with her fellow-citizens at Syracuse, while the emotional value is revealed by her friends’ soul-stirring reaction to the story.

The concluding lines finally close the frame into a circular structure: in fact, both the beginning and the end foreground Balaustion’s focus upon her own narration, by first mentioning its providential function, and then her own action of story-telling alongside the nature of the tale (“saved my life”, l. 3; “to tell you the adventure”, l. 4; “saved our ship and me”, l. 2701; “while I told my tale”, l. 2703).

All the effects produced by poetry find their overall meaning in Balaustion’s conclusive assessment which blends together the various sequences of the frame.

## 12.

In conclusion the frame of *Balaustion’s Adventure* highlights a continuous hybridization between mimesis and diegesis. In narrating her adventure, even before her recital of Euripides’ *Alcestis*, Balaustion already seems to distance herself from the merely diegetic or strictly mimetic narration and to adopt a mixed mode.

As the three speeches delivered by Balaustion show, the mimetic interventions are more suitable for carrying out a persuasive action: the exalta-

<sup>37</sup> See DeVane 1935: 311: “In *Balaustion’s Adventure* Browning puts two delightful anachronisms into the mouth of his heroine”; see also de Loach Ryals 1975: 40; Woolford 2012: 565.

tion of Athens generates, without any hesitation, the departure from Rhodes; thanks to the quotation from Aeschylus' *Persians*, the Rhodians manage to escape from the pirates; and, finally, the proposal to recite *Alcestis* allows Balaustion and her fellow citizens to land at Syracuse.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the frame also conveys Browning's interest in aesthetic reception and artistic interpretation: the criticism directed at Euripides is countered with a deep admiration for the tragic poet and an exaltation of his poetry, which is able to bring together and reconcile Rhodians and Syracusans.

In other words, the alternation between the diegetic and the mimetic mode, as well as all the tools of persuasion and hermeneutics, are designed to demonstrate the salvific power of poetry.

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