

The modes of polyphony in George Eliot's novels

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0. Introduction

In this paper, I discuss how George Eliot embodies polyphony in her novels. I have two aims in mind. One is to clarify to what extent polyphony can be defined stylistically and what extra-textual elements should be taken into account for the discussion of polyphony. The other goal is to demonstrate what modes of polyphony are embodied in George Eliot's novels, specifically *Adam Bede*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

1. What is 'Polyphony'

First of all, polyphony is the Russian Linguistic-philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's term. Originally he argued that it is only in Dostoevsky's novels that polyphony is realized. The following quotation is from an American Jewish writer Saul Bellow's essay. It seems to me that Bellow points out what Bakhtin considers as prototypically polyphonic aspects of Dostoevsky's writings.

It becomes art when the views most opposite to the author's own are allowed to exist in full strength. Without this a novel of ideas is mere self-indulgence, and didacticism is simply axe-grinding. The opposites must be free to range themselves against each other, and they must be passionately expressed on both sides. (Bellow 1965: 220)

What Bellow argues here is similar to Bakhtin's view of Dostoevsky's novels, because they both emphasize that in his novels a character's viewpoint is allowed to exist as opposed to the author's own.

Later Bakhtin made a minor change to his theory and began to argue that the language of novels is characterized by 'polyphony', in contrast to poetry as 'monologic' language. Bakhtin's distinction between novel and poetry sounds convincing to me, but you might wonder why drama, which consists of dialogues, is not included in the category of polyphony. The following quotation is from Dentith (1995).

(Bakhtin's own expressed antipathy to drama) is at first sight surprising; it might be felt that the philosopher of dialogism would be especially sympathetic to that form in which dialogue most naturally appears. But this is not the case, and for two main reasons. The first concerns what Bakhtin claims is the thinness of dramatic language, which makes all its characters speak in the same voice. A more substantial objection... is the organization of the languages in drama; in particular, drama does not allow for the dialogic interpenetration of one language by another which is enabled in the novel by the simultaneous presence of the narrator's overarching language along with the language of the characters.

(Dentith 1995: 86)

Here we can see Bakhtin's partiality towards the novel. What is significant for Bakhtin is the coexistence of narrator, who holds the closest position to author, and character(s).

Bakhtin also emphasizes the significance of distance between narrator (or author) and a character.

In the development of the ethical import of the concept of polyphony, 'distance' is the hinge upon which everything phenomenologically observable reveal an intersubjective plane of interaction upon which the author's characters appear to have a consciousness distinct from the author himself: they lie at a distance, have a position of their own. Distance allows them to speak in their own 'voice', to utter their own 'word'. (Poole 2001: 118)

Narrator and a character must keep a distance, that is, they must not merge into the single voice.

It is instructive to point out here that Bakhtin's theory is influenced by a German philosopher Max Scheler's theory of sympathy and empathy. The following words, both of which are quoted from Bakhtin, are significant in this sense.

I empathize actively into an individuality and, consequently, I do not lose myself completely, nor my unique place outside it, even for a moment. (Bakhtin 1993: 15)

But pure empathizing as such is impossible. If I actually lost myself in the other (instead of two participants there would be one – an impoverishment of

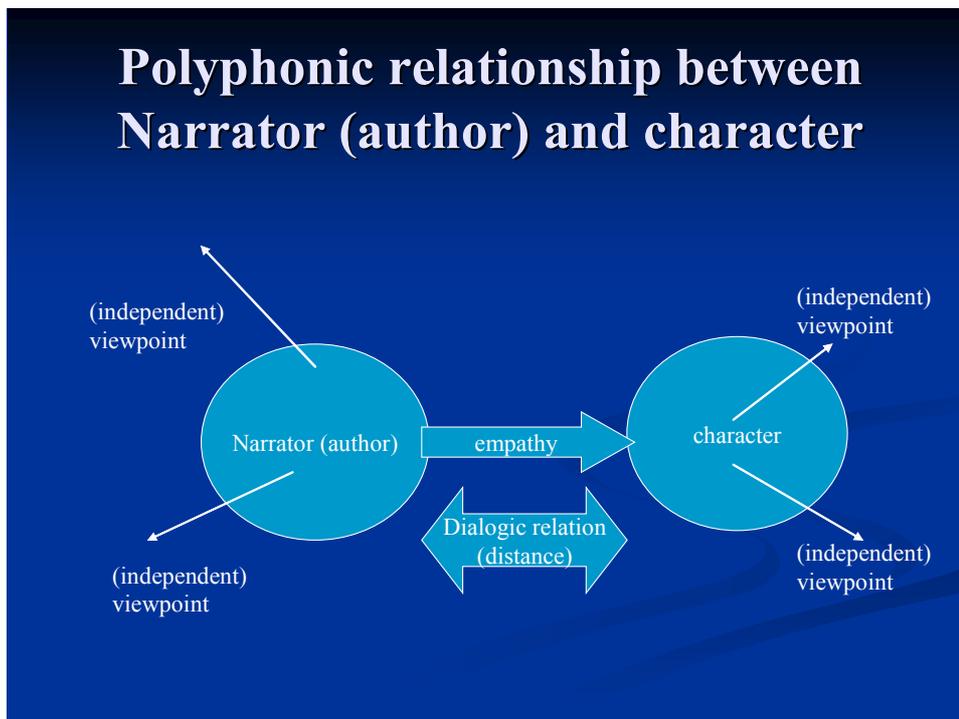
Being), i.e., if I ceased to be unique, then this moment of my not-being cannot become a moment in the being of consciousness – it would simply not exist for me, i.e., being would not be accomplished through me at that moment. Passive empathizing, being-possessed, losing oneself – these have nothing in common with the *answerable* act/deed of self-abstracting or self-renunciation.

(Bakhtin 1993: 16)

Here Bakhtin clearly deals with the problem of ‘empathy’ or ‘sympathy’. The distinction between these related terms is rather controversial but I would like to focus upon what he defines as ‘pure empathizing’ and ‘passive empathizing’.

Although narrator must empathize with or even sympathize towards a character to embody polyphony, they must also be different from each other. Bakhtin seems to argue that both narrator and character must keep their unique respective self or sense of identities. So the following figure illustrates essential conditions for polyphony:

[Figure 1]



Narrator shows empathy towards character but at the same time they keep a dialogic relation and there must be the distance between them. Narrator and character are independent from each other and both of them keep their own identity. My concern is

how these issues are embodied in novels: specifically for this paper, in Eliot's novels.

As I shall demonstrate later, linguistic and stylistic approach to the issue of polyphony is effective. However, I shall admit that it is not perfect. In the next section I would like to show you the reason for it.

Another well-known notion of Bakhtin's is 'carnival'. As the following quotation from Dentith suggests, 'polyphony' and 'carnival' are closely related.

Bakhtin uses two powerful synthetic notions, 'carnival' and 'novel', which at a certain level of abstraction are clearly related, since both are characterized by the inversion and undoing of hierarchical or centripetal discourses. (Dentith 1995: 85)

The notion of 'carnival' is characterized by the inversion of hierarchical order, which should be an important aspect of Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. In the analysis, I shall discuss how this "mode" of polyphony is embodied in a passage from *Adam Bede*.

When discussing polyphony, we cannot ignore the term's social and historical background, for information about which we must once more turn to other fields of study. We can guess that polyphony, the presence of plural voices and the inversion of hierarchical order, has something to do with Bakhtin's anti-Stalinism: he was arrested during Stalin's terror and this experience may influence his notion of polyphony.

So what Bakhtin argues via the concept of polyphony is not limited to literature. It is also true of politics or worldviews. Here I temporarily divide the types of worldview into 'monologic' and 'polyphonic'. It will be instructive here to look at the passage from Francis Fukuyama's famous book, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

[...] liberal democracy [constitutes] the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and the "final form of human government," and as such [constitutes] the "end of history." (Fukuyama 2002[1992]: xi)

Another significant quotation is from Huntington's famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

[...] the collapse of Soviet communism meant the end of history and the universal victory of liberal democracy throughout the world. This argument suffers from the single alternative fallacy. It is rooted in the Cold War perspective that the only alternative to communism is liberal democracy and that the demise of the first produces the universality of the second. Obviously, however, there are many

forms of authoritarianism, nationalism, corporatism, and market communism (as in China) that are alive and well in today's world. More significantly, there are all the religious alternatives that lie outside the world of secular ideologies. (Huntington 2003: 66)

His view of the current world is contrastive to Fukuyama's. We may call this "polyphonic worldview". Both Fukuyama and Huntington discuss the issue of globalization. I shall discuss later how those world views are related to the issue of polyphony in novels.

Summary

My discussion on polyphony can be summarized as follows. Firstly, polyphony in novels is concerned with the relation between narrator (author) and characters. Secondly, a character must be independent from author. That means that author and character must not merge into the one and that they must keep distance from each other. Next, considering Bakhtin's another influential concept, 'carnival', the rise of subordinate voices should also be regarded as one aspect of polyphony. Finally, what I want to argue by using Fukuyama's and Huntington's passages is that polyphony needs the presence of plural views, or alternatives, and that they must hold equal strength. What is meant by 'equal strength' is controversial but let me temporarily define it as 'persuasiveness' and 'self-awareness'.

2. Polyphony in George Eliot's novels

Now let me examine several passages from George Eliot's novels. I choose Eliot for this paper because the narrator in her novels are often defined as "intrusive" or "obtrusive" and her novels are sometimes regarded as prototypically monologic. I hope to clarify how polyphonic atmosphere is produced and how different modes of polyphony are embodied in her novels.

2.1. Speech and thought presentation and polyphony

First, I will refer to *Adam Bede* to analyze Hetty's (speech and) thought presentation. Eliot's novels are often criticized for the predominance of the author's voice, view or perspective. But as far as the following passage is concerned, it is not the case. This passage is from the chapter, "The Journey in Despair", in which knowing the shocking fact that Arthur has left for Ireland, Hetty has lost hope:

At last she was among the fields she had been dreaming of, on a long narrow pathway leading towards a wood. If there should be a pool in that wood! It would be better hidden than one in the fields. No, it was not a wood, only a wild brake, where there had once been gravel-pits, leaving mounds and hollows studded with brushwood and small trees. She roamed up and down, thinking there was perhaps a pool in every hollow before she came to it, till her limbs were weary, and she sat down to rest. The afternoon was far advanced, and the leaden sky was darkening, as if the sun were setting behind it. (Eliot 1996: 384 - 385)

The narrator tells this passage. However, Hetty's consciousness is found to be foregrounded by the use of expressive elements such as exclamation and negatives. It is clear from this passage that what is told by the narrator is not always monologic; because as in this passage character's consciousness can be represented while the narrator's voice is retained.

In particular, for thought representation, this kind of Free Indirect Discourse(FID) or *coloured narrative* is a compromised method against the following restrictions: (1) it is impossible to know other person's consciousness, and (2) it is impossible to presuppose the original version of thought. These two restrictions suggest that the presence of omniscient narrator is essential to represent thought. Another restriction is that the dominance of narrative voice leads to "monology". So-called Modernist novels are praised for avoiding this "monology" and the stream of consciousness technique is an extreme attempt to remove the narrative control.

As shown in my analysis, Eliot also seems to be cautious not to make herself obtrusive or intrusive, but she also had a good reason for retaining the narratorial control; she seems to regard her role as a story-teller as no less important than character's independence or the dialogic relationship between narrator and character. For example, although FID is frequently used for Hetty's thought presentation, she is never described as thinking about her pregnancy. This is because the narrator as a story-teller must keep the suspense. So while representing Hetty's consciousness intermittently from her inner perspective, the narrator also has control of her thought presentation.

As I have shown, the thought presentation in this passage prevents the narrator's dominance and produces some polyphonic atmosphere. I would say, however, that polyphony cannot prove full-fledged enough just by the analysis of speech and thought presentation mode. So next I would like to pursue the issue of polyphony in other directions.

2.2. *Sympathy and polyphony: inversion of hierarchical order*

In this section, I would like to discuss polyphony and carnival. Here sympathy will be a key word. It will be instructive to compare two different definitions of ‘sympathy’.

Sympathy: The feeling of being sorry for someone who is in a bad situation (Longman); feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortune (Oxford Dictionary of English)

Cf. Sympathy: Often distinguished from empathy, sympathy means a narrator’s identification with a character based upon the narrator’s true feelings. (Teranishi 2008: 300)

Here I do not use ‘sympathy’ as a technical word but simply use it as ‘feelings for an unhappy person’. Here again I examine *Adam Bede*.

The following quotation is from introduction to *Adam Bede* (1996 Oxford edition). It suggests why *Adam Bede* is important here.

This novel (*Adam Bede*) is all about granting dumb creatures, silenced people, classes and regions, the right to speak, to be identified as authentically vocal, named and self-naming, with selves, voices, idiolects to be heeded.

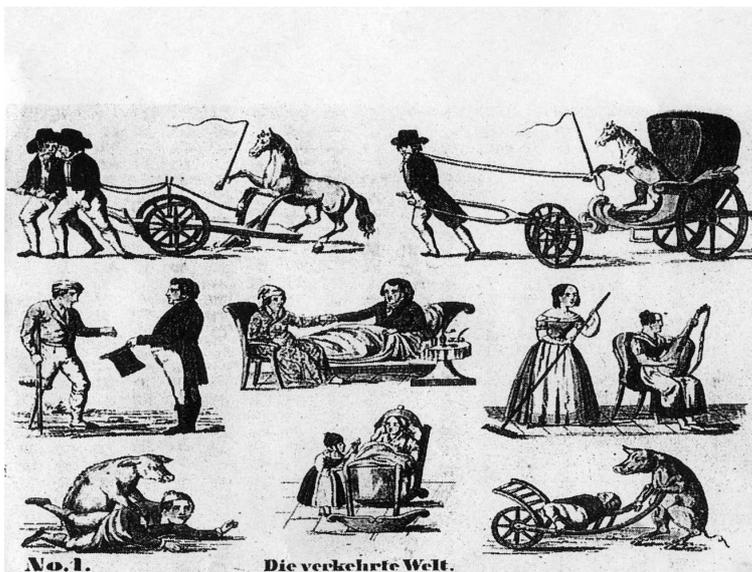
(Cunningham 1996: xviii)

Let me here analyze the following passage, extracted from the chapter, “Mrs Poyser ‘has her say out’”. This passage is prototypically characterized by sympathy for the weak and the centering of marginal voice. Here Mrs Poyser retorts against Squire Donnithorne.

‘You may run away from my words, sir, and you may go spinnin’ underhand ways o’ doing us a mischief, for you’ve got old Harry to your friend, though nobody else is, but I tell you for once as we’re not dumb creatures to be abused and made money on by them as ha’ got the lash i’ their hands, for want o’ knowing how t’ undo the tackle. An’ if I’m th’ only one as speaks my mind, there’s plenty o’ the same way o’ thinking i’ this parish and the next to ‘t, for your name’s no better than a brimstone match in everybody’s nose [...]’

(Eliot 1996: 348; underlining is mine)

Of course, the contents of what Mrs Poyser says are significant. Moreover, it is also important that Mrs Poyser's retort is presented in her idiolect. This is the moment when the inversion of hierarchical order takes place between Mrs Poyser and Squire Donnithorne.



This picture is from *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) by Peter Strallybrass & Allon White. The inverted relationship between Mrs Poyser and Donnithorne can be described in the same way.

2.3. From surface to thorough: “independence” and “persuasiveness” in a character’s perspective

Finally, I would like to discuss other significant conditions for Bakhtinian polyphony, independence and persuasiveness. In the first section, I referred to Huntington, who presents what I defined as “polyphonic” world view. Keishi Saeki, professor in international politics and economics, offers the similar worldview. I thought it instructive to refer to his insightful view for the further expansion of discussion of polyphony and here I have translated his original Japanese into English.

The time of globalism is not the one when the universal market standardises the economical structure of all the societies. [...] It is in the age of globalism that diversity and characteristics in each nation and society must be appreciated. To say the opposite, the members of each society should be conscious of such characteristics of society, or their own identities.[...]“Independent individuals” are

only those who can be conscious of “silent norm” (consensus?), or “identities” in their mind. (Saeki 1999: 192, translated into English by Teranishi)

Saeki admits the influence of globalization on Japanese society. However, he also argues that such a monologic world as described by Fukuyama is unacceptable or, from the very beginning, it is impossible to establish it. He also emphasizes that to establish “full-fledged” polyphonic world, it is essential for each member of society and world to be conscious of their own identities. This view sounds reasonable and also seems to coincide with what Bakhtin emphasizes through the discussion of polyphony.

So I would add two keywords to polyphony; ‘identity’ and ‘self-awareness’. Keeping these two keywords in mind, I would like to analyze thought presentation in *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch*.

First, look at Gwendolen’s thought presentation in *Daniel Deronda*.

(1) But her thoughts never dwelt on marriage as the fulfilment of her ambition; (2) the dramas in which she imagined herself a heroine were not wrought up to that close. (3) To be very much sued or hopelessly sighed for as a bride was indeed an indispensable and agreeable guarantee of womanly power; (4) but to become a wife and wear all the domestic fetters of that condition, was on the whole a vexatious necessity. (5) Her observation of matrimony had inclined her to think it rather a dreary state, in which a woman could not do what she liked, had more children than were desirable, was consequently dull, and became irrevocably immersed in humdrum. (6) Of course marriage was social promotion;

(Eliot 1995: 39)

In this passage, Gwendolen’s thoughts are sometimes foregrounded, as in (3) or (6). But narratorial control is strong when her consciousness becomes the narrator’s target of description as in (1) or (5). More significantly, what is represented as her thought in (3) and (6) are social ideologies or community voice. It seems that Gwendolen’s thoughts are passively contaminated by such ideologies. Therefore, we should doubt that Gwendolen is self-aware or conscious of her own identity.

On the other hand, we may have a glimpse of Dorothea’s self-awareness in the following passage from *Middlemarch*. The narrator represents the consciousness of Dorothea, who has just returned from the post-nuptial trip. Disenchanted with her husband, Casaubon, she realized that even the sight of the boudoir in Lowick Manor, which used to evoke the image of felicitous marriage, now disheartens her.

Dorothea could fancy that it (the miniature of Mr Casaubon's aunt Julia) was alive now – the delicate woman's face which yet had a headstrong look, a peculiarity difficult to interpret. Was it only her friends who thought her marriage unfortunate? or did she herself find it out to be a mistake, and taste the salt bitterness of her tears in the merciful silence of the night? What breadths of experience Dorothea seemed to have passed over since she first looked at this miniature! (Eliot 1977: 190)

'[I]t' in the first sentence refers to 'the miniature of Mr Casaubon's aunt Julia, who had made the unfortunate marriage' (p. 190). In this passage Dorothea's expressive elements are present and Dorothea's emotion is foregrounded as shown in these expressive elements. On the other hand, narrator's evaluative function weakens here. Another significant point is that, compared to the previous passage (*Daniel Deronda*), the character's self-awareness and identity are more evident, specifically from a contextual point of view. Of course I have no intention to say that *Daniel Deronda* is a monologic novel and *Middlemarch* is a polyphonic novel, but I would like to emphasize that there is a significant difference between these passages from the viewpoint of polyphony.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed polyphony and George Eliot's novels. First of all, by analyzing speech and thought presentation mode in her novels I have pointed out that a character's voice or perspective is frequently foregrounded from a linguistic and stylistic point of view and polyphony is recognizable to a certain extent. Secondly, how marginal, suppressed voice is embodied in a novel can also be a key aspect of polyphony and I have argued that in this sense *Adam Bede* contains polyphonic elements. Finally, I have stressed that 'self-awareness' and 'identity' are essential for 'thorough-level' polyphony, and this level of polyphony is glimpsed in *Middlemarch*. These arguments suggest a controversial issue of to what extent stylistic can cover the issue of polyphony and, therefore, further studies are needed to reexamine the points set forth in this paper.

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