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NARRATIVE MULTIVOCALITY AND ICONICITY IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION IN ENGLISH

As Mikhail Bakhtin and other literary theorists demonstrate, multivocality can take a great number of forms in a literary text. The present paper focuses on what is called in its title "narrative multivocality," that is multivocality resulting from the presence of more than one narrator in the communicative structure of a given text. My analysis of this narrative form will adduce examples from contemporary fiction in English. Multiplication of perspectives from which a given story is narrated seems to be one of its characteristic features, though obviously there do exist earlier examples of multivocal narrative structures, suffice it to mention William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. It will also be limited only to texts in which narrators appear to occupy the same diegetic level; the analysis of Chinese-box-like embedded structures would require a separate in-depth study.

Polyphonic narrative structures can be analysed from a number of perspectives; the present paper is an attempt to answer the question whether their basic properties and functions can be discussed in terms of iconicity, understood as "an analogy between the form of a sign ('the signifier', be it a letter or sound, a word, a structure of words, or even the absence of a sign) and the object or concept ('the signified') it refers to."[1] In his essay "Iconicity in Literature" Jorgen Dines Johansen distinguishes two basic aspects of iconicity in literary texts. First degree iconicity stems from the fact that literature is "the imitation of other discourses, […] a sign of our ways of

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[1] "Iconicity," *Iconicity in Language and Literature*. University of Amsterdam and University of Zurich, http://home.hum.uva.nl/iconicity (1st November 2006).

talking about the world." Second degree iconicity relies for its effect on "the ways in which [literature] arranges its parts on different level of the text, whether it be the metrical structuring of stressed or unstressed syllables, some symmetrical organisation of plot, or binary or ternary thematic structures and their transformations in the text."[2] In the case of polyphonic narratives it is this element of the peculiar organisation of a literary text that deserves close scrutiny. By introducing a variety of voices, the novels under consideration create complex structures, which seem to call for interpretation in terms of their iconicity. If we take into account the communicative configuration resulting from the employment of a polyphonic narrative structure, three basic types of such structures can be distinguished; namely, we can talk about externally-, internally- or self- oriented communicative dispositions of a given text.

In the first, externally-oriented, type of narrative multivocality, a number of narrators talk, as it were, BESIDE each other and direct their narratives to the "you" of the narratee, with whom the reader is expected to identify, Andrea Levy's *The Small Island* and Julian Barnes's *Talking It Over* being examples of this narrative structure. Its primary storyline set in 1948, *The Small Island* consists of four interwoven monologues of the main protagonists: Queenie, a white landlady; her husband Bernard, who cannot find his place in the world after he is demobilised; Gilbert, a newly arrived Afro-Caribbean immigrant renting a room from Queenie, and Hortense, a Jamaican wife who has just joined him in London. As Mike Phillips observes, Levy "creates a style which reproduces the rhythm and content of her characters' speech," each narrator-character presenting his/her perspective on the events in his/her own idiosyncratic manner. This property of Levy's novel can be best illustrated by the striking contrast in register between Hortense's and Gilbert's monologues. Hortense, coming from the Afro-Caribbean elite and educated in best Jamaican schools, speaks highly unnatural, formal English, which is frequently the source of comical misunderstandings, as when she asks a simple porter about the taxi rank putting on her best accent: "Could you be so kind as to point out for me the place where I might find one of these vehicles."[3] As might be expected, Gilbert, a simple worker, speaks a highly idiomatic, Jamaican variety of English: "Now, the man that answer the door was not Winston. True, him look like Winston, him talk like

[2] J.D. JOHANSEN, "Iconicity in Literature," *Semiotica* 110.1/2 (1996): 53.
[3] A. LEVY, *Small Island* (London: Headline, 2004), 16.

Winston and him dress like Winston. But Winston was half of a twin."[4] By the same token, Queenie's English matches her working-class background, while her husband's manner of speaking bespeaks his middle-class origin.

As regards *Talking It Over*, the very title itself introduces the main formal aspect of the novel. A story of a stereotypical love triangle, it dramatises an attempt to talk over the problem of love's vicissitudes: it consists of interwoven dramatic monologues by three major characters – Stuart, Oliver and Gillian – plus some additional short testimonies of minor characters. Just as in the case of *The Small Island*, the structure of *Talking It Over* is a fairly obvious embodiment of Bakhtin's classic concept of polyphony, with each narrator speaking in his/her own peculiar manner, reflecting his/her social status or character. Consider the following set of quotations:

> It was a beautiful day. The sort of day everyone should have their wedding on. A soft June morning with a blue sky and a gentle breeze. […] The registrar was a dignified man who behaved with the correct degree of formality. The ring I'd bought was placed on a plum-coloured cushion made of velvet and winked at us until it was time to put it on Gillian's finger. I said my vows a bit too loud and they seemed to echo round the light oak panelling of the room …[5]

> I remember the sky that day: swirling clouds like marbled end-papers. A little too much wind, and everyone patting his hair back into place inside the door of the register office. […] Then we went in to face this perfectly oleaginous and crepuscular little registrar. A flour-bomb of dandruff on his shoulders. The show went off as well as these things do. The ring glittered on its damson *pouffe* like some intra-uterine device. Stuart bellowed his words as if answering a court-martial and failure to enunciate perfectly would earn him a few more years in the glasshouse.[6]

The first passage comes from Stuart, who embodies fact and mundane reality in the novel: his self-presentation and the others' words create a stereotypical picture of a bank clerk. As might be expected, his version of events is a down-to-earth account in a simple language deprived of any stylistic embellishments or exaggerations. The second passage comes from Oliver, who is the complete opposite of Stuart: he represents fictionality and artificiality in *Talking It Over* and is a caricature of a handsome, witty, self-

[4] A. LEVY, 23.
[5] J. BARNES, *Talking It Over* (London: Picador, 1992), 6.
[6] *Ibid.*, 11.

centred bohemian. As a narrator Oliver incessantly tries to impress the narratee with his verbosity, elaborate style, sophisticated vocabulary and cultural competence; he dramatises and exaggerates even the simplest events.

The paradoxical epigraph of *Talking It Over* – "He lies like an eyewitness" – aptly introduces the main functions of the multivocal narrative structure in Levy's and Barnes' novels. As the passages quoted above illustrate, the protagonists often narrate the same events but their accounts are obviously subjective and coloured by their personalities or value-schemes. The reader is thus unable to reconstruct one "true" version of events, multiperspectival presentation being – as Ansgar Nünning points out[7] – a very strong signal of unreliability. The polyphonic structure of a given novel precludes an easy interpretation in terms of "guilty" or "innocent" and becomes an iconic reflection of the web of interwoven relations in which the protagonists find themselves. Furthermore, both Levy and Barnes appear to resign from the privilege of speaking in an authoritative voice of omniscient narration and confront the reader with a multiplicity of voices competing for his/her sympathy and understanding, the external orientation of the monologues reminding the reader that he/she is (unable) to decide whom to trust. Naturally, the author's "abdication" is illusory: the polyphonic narrative structure is an iconic device employed by Levy and Barnes to represent the co-existence of a number of truths.

As might be expected, the polyphonic construction can affect significantly the dynamics of story development, which is especially visible in *Talking It Over*. By regulating the length of "entries" of respective narrators, Barnes can increase or decrease the pace at which the plot unfolds or simply achieve a dramatic effect. The best example of the latter is the manner in which Oliver's realisation that he is in love with Gillian is rendered. After Stuart and Gillian's respectively candid and reserved short descriptions of how they feel about getting married comes a series of Oliver's dramatic (and somewhat drastic, though at the same time unintentionally comical) exclamations: "Oh, shit … I'm in love with Gillie, I've just realised it. I am in love with Gillie. I'm amazed, I'm overawed, I'm poo-scared, I'm megafuckstruck."[8] This quotation illustrates one more effect produced by polyphonic narrative construction as employed in *Talking It Over*: immediacy of

[7] A. NÜNNING, "'But why will you say that I am mad?' On the Theory, History, and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction," *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 22 (1997): 97.

[8] BARNES, 47.

narration. At times the narrators seem to narrate the events as they befall them and the traditional temporal gap between the act of narration and the story itself seems to disappear. Consequently, the reader may feel as if he/she were in the middle of the events the future course of which is not even known to people relating them.

Thus, it seems that the primary function of externally-oriented multivocality is to reflect the multiplicity of equally valid points of view. The range of issues that this narrative device can iconically represent extends from the problem of interpersonal relations between three people, as happens in the case of *Talking It Over*, to the multicultural character of the British experience of the Second World War, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* being a case in point.

While in the externally-oriented type of narrative multivocality the reader may feel directly addressed, in the second type, which can be labelled 'internally-oriented,' he/she is put in the position of an observer, as narrators appear to talk TO each other or some other characters existing within the presented world. This is the case with such novels as Gabriel Josipovici's *Contre-jour: A Triptych after Pierre Bonnard* and Nicholas Mosley's *Hopeful Monsters*.

The main part of Gabriel Josipovici's *Contre-jour* consists of two dramatic monologues. In the first chapter the unnamed daughter addresses her mother, whereas in the second one this communicative situation is reversed – the mother "talks" to the daughter. Both narrators seem to be talking about a past they apparently share; however, their perspectives on the events they are talking about are completely different. Both monologues are long inventories of the failings of the person addressed: the mother and the daughter accuse each other of lack of love, egoism and an utter lack of willingness to listen. Consider the following set of quotations:

> Do you [mother] understand? Look at me [daughter]. Don't turn away. Look at me just this once.
>
> It doesn't matter. I can talk even if you don't want to listen.[9]

> I [mother] want to talk to you [daughter] seriously now. The jokes are finished and done with. I want to talk to you as honestly as I can and I want you to listen with good will.
>
> Not harden your heart.

[9] G. JOSIPOVICI, *Contre-jour: A Triptych after Pierre Bonnard* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 24.

Is that possible?
Will you do that for me?
No. You will do nothing for me.[10]

Significantly, each narrator delivers her harangue in a separate chapter. Furthermore, it is gradually revealed in both monologues that no act of communication takes place on the level of the presented world: both the daughter and the mother direct their monologues to projected addressees.

Just as in the case of *Small Island* and *Talking It Over*, the multivocal structure casts doubt on the reliability of the daughter's and the mother's accounts; they undermine each other, with the mother going so far as to suggest the daughter's non-existence. However, as Monika Fludernik argues, *Contre-jour* focuses not so much on the unattainability of a single version of events as on the relationship between the two protagonists.[11] Seen in this context, the narrative structure of the novel, involving separation of the two monologues into two individual chapters in which the narrators imagine that they are talking to their interlocutors, can be interpreted as an iconic sign of the relationship between the two of them. It is a dramatisation of the lack of mutual understanding, or even of communication itself, resulting from an inability to love.

The iconic dimension of the narrative structure of *Contre-jour* becomes even more visible when the novel is juxtaposed with the other example of internally-oriented multivocality, *Hopeful Monsters* by Nicholas Mosley. In the latter the internally-oriented dialogic set-up involving two narrators addressing each other is employed to dramatise the opposite situation, namely mutual understanding resulting from deeply felt love. The contrast between *Contre-jour* and *Hopeful Monsters* is most conspicuous in the manner in which the monologues of the respective narrators are arranged. Whereas in Josipovici's novel the daughter's monologue forms one part of the novel, which is followed by the mother's monologue, in Mosley's novel the narratives of the two narrators are interwoven and presented in an alternate fashion.

What Max and Eleanor, the two primary narrators of *Hopeful Monsters*, narrate are the tumultuous events which led to their becoming a happily married couple. Presenting the events from the past, Max and Eleanor seem to rely on the personal code they have evolved while living together. They

[10] JOSIPOVICI, 74.

[11] M. FLUDERNIK, "Second-Person Narrative As a Test Case for Narratology: The Limits of Realism," *Style* 28.3 (1994): 466.

constantly refer to the phenomena and ideas they both are familiar with. Consider the following set of quotations:

> You know those experiences we have always been interested in – you [Eleanor] and I [Max] – those moments when what one is talking about seems to coincide with what is happening.[12]

> I [Eleanor] tried to imagine what you [Max] might be doing. We had not yet got the image, had we, of those particles that if you do this to this one here then that happens to that one there –[13]

Commentaries of this type suggest that each narrator assumes that the other person will know what he/she is talking about, as they both share the same interests and convictions.

Furthermore, there is communication between Max and Eleanor: they seem to be aware of what each of them has said. For instance, describing the political beliefs of her mother, Eleanor adds in parentheses: "it is impossible to write of left-wing politics without the jargon!"[14] A number of pages later when Max describes his father's biological experiments, he refers to Eleanor's comment: "it is impossible in such areas, as you say, to avoid the jargon."[15] The effect of mutual understanding is reinforced by their recurrent use of expressions of endearment: Max constantly evokes "[his] beautiful German girl;" Eleanor's monologue includes numerous references to "[her] English boy."

Just as in the case of Josipovici's *Contre-jour*, the narrative structure of *Hopeful Monsters* can be interpreted as an iconic sign, enabling the reader to grasp the essence of the relationship between the two protagonists. By making them alternately address each other Mosley emphasises the love and complementarity of the two protagonists. Furthermore, the narrative alternation between their twin perspectives is a reflection of the parallels in their lives and researches, emphasised in the fictional postscript following the main part of the novel. The internally-oriented narrative multivocality exemplified by *Contre-jour* and *Hopeful Monsters* thus functions primarily as an iconic device commenting upon the relationship between the narrators.

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[12] N. MOSLEY, *Hopeful Monsters* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990), 55.
[13] *Ibid.*, 132.
[14] *Ibid.*, 5.
[15] *Ibid.*, 45.

While in the first two types of narrative polyphony the multiplicity of voices reflects the multiplicity of protagonists, in the third type the focus is on one central character, who functions simultaneously as a narrator and as a narratee; hence my use of the label 'self-oriented.' Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* is a case in point: it consists of alternately arranged sections narrated by three "voices," which refer to the protagonist by means of the pronouns *I*, *you* and *he*. This multipersoned narrative is a peculiar example of *Bildungsroman*: it tells the story of childhood and adolescence of a Somali boy born in Ogaden, a borderland situated between Ethiopia and Somalia, his life being largely shaped by these two countries' conflicts over this region and its changing status. On the more personal level *Maps* charts the relationship between Askar and Misra, a woman who fostered him, his biological mother having died soon after giving birth to him. A Somali proud of his nationality, Askar is ambivalent, to say the least, towards Misra. On the one hand, she comes from Ethiopia, the arch-enemy of Somalia. On the other, she has lived in the Somalian community for years and has provided him with motherly loving care.

The final passage of the novel implies that Askar is not only the narrator of the "I" passages and the narratee of the second-person passages; he occupies these positions in relation to all three types of narration:

> And that was how it began – the story of (Misra/Misrat/Masarat and) Askar. First, he told it plainly and without embellishment, answering the police officer's questions; then he told it to men in gowns, men resembling ravens with white skulls. And time grew on Askar's face, as he told the story yet again, time grew like a tree, with more branches and far more falling leaves than the tree which is on the face of the moon. In the process, he became the defendant. He was, at the same time, the plaintiff and the juror. Finally, allowing for his different personae to act as judge, as audience and as witness, Askar told it to himself.[16]

As Rhonda Cobham observes in her interpretation of the novel, the passages in the second-person can be related to the perspective of a judge, the ones in the first person to the perspective of a witness and finally those in the third person to the perspective of the audience, though one must bear in mind that there is also some overlapping between them.[17] Each of these three narrative strands is characterised by its peculiar tone and creates a particular, partial

[16] N. FARAH, *Maps* (London: Picador, 1986), 246.

[17] R. COBHAM, "Misgendering the Nation: African Nationalist Fictions and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*," *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. A. Parker et al. (London: Routledge, 1992), 49-51.

picture of Askar. Consequently, *Maps* can be interpreted as an instance of a self-addressed structure in which different narrative perspectives reflect different aspects of the protagonist's split personality. By juxtaposing three narrative voices, Farah creates an iconic counterpart of a divided self, conflicting impulses within one character being presented from different pronominal perspectives. The interweaving of the three voices whereby Askar's story is developed reflects his unstable identity, emphatically revealed in the opening paragraphs:

> You sit, in contemplative posture, your features agonised and your expressions pained; you sit for hours and hours and hours, sleepless, looking into darkness, hearing a small snore coming from the room next to yours. ... And you question, you challenge every thought which crosses your mind. Yes. You are a question to yourself. It is true. You've become a question to all those who meet you, those who know you, those who have any dealings with you. You doubt, at times, if you exist outside your own thoughts, outside your own head.[18]

The novel seems to be a record of this process of self-examination, a record which does not provide any ultimate answers.

It might seem that the complete picture of Askar emerges when the three perspectives are combined from the vantage point of the reader. However, Farah avoids such an easy solution by introducing a number of unresolved mysteries on the thematic level. The key problem which the mature Askar, who aspires to become a member of Somali Western Liberation Front, faces is the question whether Misra became a traitor after Ogaden was re-conquered by the Ethiopians. Her neighbour reports that she did, she denies it. The novel ends with the discovery of Misra's body and a suggestion that Askar might have been involved in the murder; none of the narrative voices proving or disproving his involvement. The novel thus forces the reader to accept the state of doubt and indeterminacy.[19] He/she will never know whether Askar accepted the cultural hybridisation and impossibility of clear-cut divisions embodied in Misra or whether he rejected her in the name of Somalian nationalism.

The multivocal narratives discussed above constitute morphologically complex structures and the correlation between their narrative organisation

[18] FARAH, 3.

[19] Cf. D. WRIGHT, "Fabling the Feminine in Nuruddin Farah's Novels," *Essays on African Writing. 1. A Re-evaluation*, ed. A. Gurnah (London: Heinemann, 1993), 81.

and their thematic concerns can be considered an instance of one of two basic types of iconicity identified in general studies of this semiotic phenolmenon. As Olga Fischer and Max Nänny note, "in theories of iconicity, quite generally a distinction is made between two basic types of iconicity, i.e. 'imagic iconicity' and 'diagrammatic iconicity.'" [20] The former is based on more or less direct correspondence between the form of the sign and its meaning, while the latter involves "an iconic link connecting the relation between the elements on the level of the sign and the relation between the elements on the level of the signified."[21] The novels discussed in the present article can be treated as examples of diagrammatic iconicity: in all of them the narrative organisation of the text reflects relationships between characters or between conflicting aspects of a single personality. They thus reveal the iconic potential of narrative multivocality. However, it would be too sweeping a statement to claim that each and every polyphonic narrative structure is iconic in nature, not least because theorists of iconicity always remind us that "the perception of iconic features in language and literature always depends on an interpreter who is capable of connecting meaning with its formal expression. What is true of all signs is also true of an iconic sign: it is not self-explanatory."[22]

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[20] O. FISCHER and M. NÄNNY, "Introduction: Iconicity and Nature," *European Journal of English Studies* 5.1 (2001): 6.

[21] *Ibid.*, 7.

[22] "Iconicity."

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WIELOGŁOSOWOŚĆ NARRACYJNA I IKONICZNOŚĆ WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ PROZIE ANGLOJĘZYCZNEJ

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że wielogłosowe struktury narracyjne występujące we współczesnej prozie anglojęzycznej wykazują cechy struktur ikonicznych, tzn. takich, w których forma znaku odzwierciedla jego znaczenie. W zależności do tego, kto jest adresatem narracji, wyróżnić można trzy podstawowe formy konstrukcji tekstu polifonicznego, w którym na tym samym poziomie diegetycznym występuje więcej niż jeden narrator. W powieściach takich jak *Talking It Over* Juliana Barnesa czy *Small Island* Andrei Levy grupa narratorów mówi „obok siebie" i każdy z nich kieruje swą wypowiedź za pośrednictwem przywołanego w tekście adresata narracji do czytelnika. Z kolei w *Contre-jour* Gabriela Jospipovici i *Hopeful Monsters* Nicholasa Mosleya pojawiają się pary narratorów zwracających się do siebie nawzajem. Ostatnia z omawianych powieści, *Maps* Nuruddina Farah, jest przykładem tekstu, w którym wszystkie pozornie różne głosy, używające narracji pierwszo- , drugo-, i trzecioosobowej, należą do tej samej postaci, która jest jednocześnie nadawcą i odbiorcą w akcie komunikacji przedstawionym w tekście. W każdym z omawianych tekstów struktura narracyjna okazuje się być ikonicznym odzwierciedleniem jego głównych motywów, takich jak np. współistnienie wielu wersji tych samych wydarzeń i wynikających z tego skomplikowanych relacji międzyludzkich (*Talking It Over*), brak komunikacji między matką i córką (*Contre-jour*) czy też problem rozszczepienia jaźni (*Maps*).

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Key words: narrative multivocality, iconicity, narration, contemporary fiction in English.

Słowa kluczowe: wielogłosowość narracyjna, ikoniczność, narracja, współczesna proza anglojęzyczna.