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Fictional Dialogue as Poiesis

Elizabeth Alsop's *Making Conversation in Modernist Fiction*

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The title of Elizabeth Alsop's recent book *Making Conversation in Modernist Fiction* uses a pun and is thus doubly programmatic: the book investigates how characters in Modernist fiction talk or 'make conversation,' but also how fictional dialogue in Modernist fiction is truly 'made,' i.e., designed and crafted by authors in the sense of ancient *poiesis* (p. 3). Indeed, as Alsop emphasizes, dialogue is used for a variety of purposes other than merely characterizing speakers or propelling the plot. She wants to consider dialogue "as an authorially as well as characterologically driven phenomenon" (p. 4) and she aims to show that "dialogue—long considered one of the most prosaic of literary conventions—became in the hands of certain British and American modernist writers one of the most intensely poetic" (p. 3).

More specifically, Alsop's main contention is that Modernist dialogue, rather than foregrounding its propensity for individuation, displays "more collaborative, consensual, and deliberately symmetrical forms of narrative and discursive arrangement" (p. 36) than have hitherto been accounted for. She elaborates this argument in a preliminary introductory chapter, which is followed by a theoretical chapter (ch. 1) that offers an overview of research on dialogue. The main points she makes here is that a) dialogue has been mostly neglected by literary scholars and that b) where it has been treated theoretically, scholars have focused on comparing dialogue to real-life conversation and have seen its main function in characterization. Alsop's counterargument is that dialogue cannot be said to unequivocally fulfil this function in modernist fiction but instead puts "the poetic dimension of character speech conspicuously on display" (p. 23). She continues to argue:

If direct discourse has historically been deemed too unmediated, or transparent, to merit theorization, the opacity and idiosyncrasy of the dialogue considered in the subsequent chapters serves as something of a corrective—not only by making talk newly visible but by making it appear, in its oddness or excesses, to be a curiosity or even a *problem* in the text. In this way, modernist dialogue has the potential to interrupt readerly business as usual and to reinscribe the presence of an organizing authorial intelligence (p. 23).

Alsop's case studies include Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, James Joyce's "The Dead," William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Virginia

Woolf's *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, and Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" from her *Three Lives*. Alsop groups these texts together in four analytical chapters (ch. 2-5) by assigning them to categories or types of dialogue which she dubs the "consensual voice," the "exceptional voice," the "paradoxical voice" and the "choral voice" respectively.

"Consensual speaking" is marked by repetition and by the fact that each character "integrates the words of the other [...] into their own responses, resulting in an everlengthening, if only ambiguously referential, locutionary chain" (p. 40). Alsop identifies this type of speech in James's fiction, where, she argues, it only seemingly signals consensus and instead actually suggests "that codified language may have less a unifying effect—serving to galvanize community—than an enervating one" (p. 54). In Hemingway's fiction, this "highly mannered discourse [...] conveys a set of ideas at once omnipresent yet never explicit in the rest of the novel [i.e., *The Sun Also Rises*]" (p. 58). It is only by reading dialogue in these texts cumulatively and across the entire novel that readers become aware of the authors' implicit language criticism.

The "exceptional voice" that Alsop identifies in Faulkner and Joyce "emphasizes its socially divisive properties over its consensus-building ones" (p. 70). Comparing Faulkner's character Quentin Compson and Joyce's Gabriel Conroy, Alsop finds that both "favor monologic over dialogic modes of discourse" (p. 71), and she sees here a shift in literary aesthetics towards "vocal exceptionalism" that corresponds to a "shift in thematic concerns: away from issues of community and consensus toward the more familiar modernist problematics of subjectivity and selfhood" (p. 71). Moreover, in Alsop's view, the monological speech in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* represents a "largely authorial order of subjectivity" (p. 96) because it absolves itself from "any particular character psychology," thus reflecting "a fantasy of literary autonomy of the sort Faulkner claims to have achieved during the composition of the novel" (p. 96). Once again, the 'made-ness' of dialogue as deliberate poetic achievement is foregrounded by Alsop here.

In chapter 4, Alsop assigns Faulkner's dialogue, alongside Virginia Woolf's, to another category: the "paradoxical voice." This is defined by a blurring of verbalized and non-verbalized speech and a collapsing of distinctions among character idioms. In Alsop's summary, these novels "dramatize *two* paradoxes: by presenting as speech what is manifestly not spoken and by assigning to distinct speakers a voice that gives every sign of belonging to all" (p. 101). This, to Alsop, indicates yet another "shift in novelistic aesthetics": "If discourse can no longer be understood as the product of a single author—or, in turn, if speech can no longer be seen as originating with a single speaker—then quotation as conventionally practiced in the novel is rendered moot" (p. 113). A novel like *Absalom* in that sense "narrates the obsolescence of its own narrative procedure" (p. 113).

The last category is the "choral voice," by which Alsop expressly does not mean *we*-narration or characters speaking in unison; rather, she writes: "I use the

term more figuratively, to describe the largely sequential and unusually symmetrical distribution of speech among a company of speakers” (p. 130). Into this category fall texts by Woolf and Gertrude Stein, which, according to Alsop, contribute “to the larger project of rethinking assumptions about modernism as primarily concerned with the private individual” (p. 159). Alsop acknowledges the fact that other scholars already discussed chorality as a modernist strategy especially in female authors. By contrast, she posits that such discursive collectivity can be seen as a strategy in other traditions as well, “including queer and African American modernisms” (p. 139). The only example she discusses in this connection is Toomer’s *Cane*.

Alsop intermittently refers to other works by the authors she discusses or to works by other Modernist writers, albeit only cursorily. In the end, she moves beyond her topic by drawing a line to filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard and Michelangelo Antonioni. As she argues, these examples “could serve as useful heuristics, provocations in one medium that might spur thinking about more easily overlooked forms of experimentation in another” (pp. 167-168).

Research on Dialogue: A Corrective to the Proposed “Corrective”

Indeed, a study of dialogue in Modernist fiction would benefit from considering it in the context of larger media-technological developments that impacted on the ways in which authors perceived speech and language. One case in point is radio. However, unlike Bronwen Thomas, who undertakes this contextualization in her seminal study *Fictional Dialogue* (2012), in which she already covers the modern and postmodern novel, Alsop is hardly interested in speech technologies at all, even though she references Sam Halliday’s (2013) book *Sonic Modernity* (p. 17). Instead, she focuses on the poetic qualities of the dialogues she analyzes, on their constructedness not just within single scenes but across the narrative texts at large, and she tries to identify the purposes that these dialogues fulfil when thus considered on a bigger scale. Her main results are, as outlined above, that Modernist fictional dialogue thwarts readerly expectations of dialogue as a mimetic rendition of ‘real’ conversation and that authors deliberately disrupt historical novelistic traditions by using dialogue in such unprecedented and innovative ways. This finding is hardly surprising given the fact that Modernist authors generally overhauled literary traditions.

A similar point was already made by Thomas (2012), who writes in the conclusion to her book that her main aim was to “provoke a discussion of fictional dialogue that goes beyond describing the extent to which it is or is not realistic or that simply views the dialogue as a transparent portal into the minds of the characters and the worlds they inhabit” (p. 170). Alsop goes even further by suggesting that her approach is new because it “treats dialogue as a rhetorical mode as flexible and nuanced as narration proper” (p. 8). She overlooks the fact that

Käte Hamburger (1968, 144) already placed dialogue as a representational mode (“Gestaltungsfunktion”) on a par with telling, monologue and free indirect discourse and recognized its centrality in fiction. Early theorists of the novel such as Henry Home, Lord Kames (1785) or Friedrich von Blanckenburg (1774) also had something to say about fictional dialogue, especially concerning its dramatic effects and how it engages readers (see Mildorf 2020).

None of these early theorists is mentioned in Alsop’s book. Her repeated claim that fictional dialogue is under-researched and that there “does not yet exist in literary studies the kind of account that Sarah Kozloff has composed for film studies—a taxonomy of dialogic tropes and patterns, across various genres” (p. 25) attests to the author’s patchy research more than to the actual fact that dialogue is neglected—although dialogue research undoubtedly still has much to offer. Book-length studies of fictional dialogue and collections of essays on the subject have, for example, been published in France (Berthelot 2001; Boblet 2003; Durrer 1994, 1999; Lane-Mercier 1989; Lavédrine 1980; Mylne 1994) and in Germany (Bauer 1969; Keil 1999; Kinzel / Mildorf 2012, 2014; Oesterreicher 1964). One can find research on fictional dialogue in several national literatures, including Portuguese and Spanish literatures (Blayer 2003; Navajas 1985), Russian literature (Sobchuk 2016), Nigerian literature (Akindele 1991; Berrian 1995; Constanty 1991; Okoye 2004) and Japanese literature (Auestad 2001), to name only those few. And some volumes in recent years have helped broaden horizons onto dialogue across media and genres (Betten / Dannerer 2005; Bischoff et al. 2017; Mildorf / Thomas 2017). So, there is clearly an Anglo-American bias in Alsop’s research, although she even ignores such important introductory works as Nikulin (2006) and Womack (2011). This oversight would perhaps not matter too much if she merely focused on close readings of the narrowly circumscribed corpus of texts she had selected for her analyses; however, it does become problematic in view of some of the sweeping (and evidently wrong) claims she makes about the status of dialogue research to date.

Stylistic Approaches and the ‘Realism’ of Fictional Dialogue

In contrast to Thomas (2012), Alsop denigrates linguistic-stylistic approaches to fictional dialogue. Thus, she claims that “such an approach perpetuates a false parallelism between fictional and natural conversation: the notion that talk in fiction is (or should be) at least vestigially linked to the real” (p. 19). To buttress her claim that linguistic approaches do not go far enough she refers to Michael Toolan’s (1987) discussion of the Christmas dinner in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and she concludes by saying, somewhat derisively:

But do we really need such analysis to tell us that, in Thomas’s paraphrase of Toolan’s argument, there is “growing tension among those present” or that “‘topic suppression’ is an important structuring element in the talk”? (p. 20)

Alsop seems to imply that linguistic analyses are unnecessary because they only reveal the obvious, that readers will arrive at this kind of conclusion about a

given dialogue anyway. What she fails to realize is that readers, once they recognize what is going on in a dialogue (and one can doubt whether all readers will equally arrive at the same understanding) have tacitly and unselfconsciously already analyzed the dialogue against the background of the conversational rules and assumptions they have internalized. What linguistic-stylistic approaches therefore show is not that fictional dialogue and real-life conversation are the same; they rather lay bare the tacit mechanisms that we draw upon to make sense of the dialogues we read. It stands to reason that this knowledge must at some level be linked to our real-life experiences of conversation. If fictional dialogue were fundamentally different from conversation as we know it, we would have a hard time understanding it at all.

As I want to emphasize once again, this does not mean that fictional dialogue is the same as conversation. And to my knowledge, no-one who seriously studies dialogue makes this claim. Even Norman Page, whom Alsop sets up as one of the bogeymen who are responsible for the ‘realism’ approach that foregrounds characterization as a key function of fictional dialogue (p. 10), in fact distinguishes much more assiduously among various types of dialogue and their respective functions: [1] *speech as identification*: that is, dialogue in which a limited range of easily recognized characteristics are found; [2] *speech as parody*: the use of dialogue in which certain features of speech well known outside the work of fiction are exaggerated for purposes of comedy and or satire; [3] *realistic speech*: in which an attempt is made to suggest with some precision certain features of speech encountered in real life and appropriate to the character in question; [4] *conventional speech*: non-realistic dialogue in which qualities of speech are to be understood as representing, symbolically or metonymically as it were, qualities of character; [5] *token-speech*: the use in dialogue of accepted ‘equivalents’ to represent features which for some reason cannot be represented realistically; [6] *neutral speech*: stylistically undifferentiated, non-idiosyncratic dialogue which serves some other purpose than contributing to characterization (Page 1988: 98-99). When Alsop argues about “Melanctha” that “what is most interesting about the dialogue is not the degree to which it is mimetic but the degree to which it is *not*” and that the characters’ “syntax is more suggestive of an invented dialect than any naturally occurring one” (p. 154), she in fact invokes Page’s categories of *conventional speech* and *token-speech*. When she points out that “Faulkner underscores the capacity for speech in the novel to index not just individual characters but the groups, regions, or cultures to which they belong” (p. 94), Alsop shows, despite her claims to the contrary, that dialogue in Modernist fiction still retains at some level the function of characterization. Her argument that such “indexing” is then used to call into question “whether it *matters* who is speaking” (p. 94) does not annul this basic function.

A third example, Alsop’s discussion of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, further illustrates the potential usefulness, rather than insufficiency, of applying linguistic concepts to fictional dialogue. Alsop argues that “it seems especially significant that characters favor quoting the speech of others rather than paraphrasing it. The irony, of course, is that in most cases the speakers did not witness—

and thus, have no knowledge of—the conversations they claim to recap” (p. 111). She explains these “verbal tics” as having “an aesthetic, more than primarily ‘psychological,’ significance within the novel, revealing the presence *within* Faulkner’s novel of narrative designs inimical to his own” (pp. 111-112). Linguists have long argued that seemingly verbatim renditions of previous speech situations in conversational storytelling are in fact largely constructed (Tannen 1989, 110). If one considers that the kind of verbal behavior Alsop describes in Faulkner’s characters corresponds to such “constructed dialogue” the dialogue no longer strikes one as just as strange as Alsop makes it out to be. The aesthetic function of the dialogue seems to be to portray, and perhaps to exaggerate, such conversational storytelling practices. It is obvious that these *conversational* practices must be at odds with Faulkner’s narrative practice of producing a *written* novel. That is precisely fictional dialogue’s versatility: it can introduce to a narrative text, and juxtapose with it, various modes of talking, speech styles and registers. There is hardly anything “inimical” about this. Furthermore, the psychological function of dialogue is not necessarily lost. One could still argue that the characters’ use of constructed dialogue shows their attempt to create involvement in their interlocutors and to speak from a position of knowledge and authority.

Dialogue, Meta-Reflection, and Genre

Generally speaking, Alsop assigns to dialogue in Modernist fiction the function of inviting readers to reflect at a meta-level on conventional uses of dialogue in fiction. Conversely, she argues that the authors she investigates deliberately employ dialogue in poetic or otherwise non-conventional ways to implicitly criticize and undermine these very conventions and received ways of reading dialogue (and, by extension, fiction). Time and again, Alsop stresses the role authors play in devising their dialogues for such specific (critical or meta-theoretical) ends. I think she is right in pointing to this meta-reflexive dimension of dialogue. Unlike Alsop, I would argue that this dimension is in fact intrinsic to dialogue per se, and that it not only emerges in Modernist fiction.

In this connection it is useful to take a side glance at dialogue in other fields, for example, philosophy and drama. Vittorio Hösle (2006, 28), for example, discusses how philosophical dialogue not only entails the verbal interaction between the dialogue participants but a level of communication at which the author engages with his own dialogue and imagined interlocutors. Drama theory has long operated on the premise that there is a double communicative system: the internal dialogue between characters, and the external ‘dialogue’ between author (or authors, since every stage production involves an entire production team) and audience (Pfister 1982, 149). Alsop refers to the stage cursorily when she mentions Henry James’s “foray into theater” (p. 49) and how this subsequently impacted on his novelistic dialogue. However, a more thorough engagement

with drama *theory* would have been helpful for her to see that what she perceives as innovative in Modernist fictional dialogue has in fact already been theorized for dramatic dialogue, e.g., its “poetic function” (Pfister 1982, 157), i.e., its propensity to draw attention to its ‘made-ness.’

And, indeed, drama and other literature in dialogue form provides plenty of examples of the dialogical structures Alsop identifies in her selected novels and short stories. For instance, James’s “reiterative habit” (p. 40) to distribute the same or similar phrases across characters in his dialogue or the “chorality” or echoic and symmetric structures she discerns in Woolf and Stein can already be found in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* or Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, for example. More generally, an extreme stylization of speech patterns has traditionally been used in drama (and fiction) to create humorous effects, for example, in Restoration comedies. Jonathan Swift’s *Polite Conversation* (1738) likewise satirizes the eponymous speech convention prevalent in aristocratic circles in the eighteenth century precisely by overdoing its speech patterns and thus foregrounding its meaninglessness and absurdity. This is also a good example for a text that employs dialogue not only to criticize an existing manner of speaking but one that had already become established as a *literary* convention by the time Swift wrote this piece. In other words, meta-reflection and -criticism in connection with dialogue is not something that only starts with Modernism, especially when one looks beyond narrative genres.

Furthermore, one must also distinguish among different subgenres of the novel. Thus, some of the features Alsop considers ‘special’ in the texts she describes, e.g., the similarity among speakers’ speech and the fact that they can therefore no longer be easily told apart, largely also applies to philosophical novels such as William H. Mallock’s *The New Republic* (1877), where different speakers are assigned different viewpoints or arguments but are barely distinguishable on stylistic grounds. In such texts, the dialogue may read like one monological treatise and usually does not serve to individuate characters because it is the ideas that matter. In sum, then, it can be doubted whether the historical claim Alsop makes about Modernist fiction’s unprecedented treatment of dialogue is actually correct. Clearly, a lot more research needs to be done to elucidate this point.

The most rewarding parts of the book are Alsop’s analyses, which do, by and large, hold something of interest for readers wanting to learn more about the texts under investigation. However, narratologists may be disappointed by the lack of precision that repeatedly surfaces because Alsop deliberately does not always distinguish among direct speech, free indirect discourse, character narration and stream of consciousness, as she explains in the beginning: “this study will occasionally appear to transgress established categories and theoretical boundaries” (p. 7). This approach seems to be justified if one considers that cognitive-linguistic approaches to fiction emphasize that it does not really matter for readers’ perception whether characters’ viewpoints were verbalized or expressed through thoughts (Dancygier 2012, 171-172). It may not matter from a cognitivist perspective, but to my mind it does matter for literary-textual analysis. It is therefore irritating when Alsop in her analyses conflates the intradiegetic

level, where characters are located, with the narratorial or even authorial levels, as can be seen in comments like: “Faulkner’s montage-like presentation of these voices suggests that Quentin doesn’t bother enclosing them in quotation marks” (p. 87).

Only time can tell whether Alsop’s new descriptive terms for Modernist fiction’s dialogues will prove useful heuristic tools for analyzing dialogue. What her study amply demonstrates, however, is that a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach than is presented by Alsop is needed to adequately capture fictional dialogue’s multifaceted aesthetics, functions, and historical dimensions.

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