The Theme of Otherness and the Role of Dialogue in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

The role of dialogue is frequently emphasized in Jane Eyre *(1847), being related to the problem of knowledge and its influence on the quality of mutual relationship. In this respect, the absence of the dialogue results in increasing estrangement and alienation. In* Wide Sargasso Sea *(1966), the theme is further developed to intensify the tension between the search for the meaning and for the expression of the emotional intensity. In my paper, the concept of the dialogue in both novels is considered against the background of the ideas of Bakhtin, Gadamer, Deleuze and Lévinas.*

Some Aspects of Dialogue in the Novel Genre

The possibility of discussing the links between Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1947) and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) with respect to the role of dialogue does not arise only from the fact that both novels enter a distinct dialogic relationship. As M.M. Bakhtin points out in his analysis of the novel, literary language itself is characterised by its dialogic nature: the novel as a whole is "multiform in style" and "variform in speech and voice" (Bakhtin, 261). "Heteroglossia," i.e., the "multiplicity of social voices" and the "variety of their links and interrelationships" becomes, according to Bakhtin, an essential feature of novel discourse (263). The diversity of both speech and language results in a "dialogue of languages" (294): e.g. the languages of prayer, song, authority, labour, everyday life; the voice of conscience, etc.

A special emphasis is put on the role of the speaking person, his "independent, responsible and active discourse" (Bakhtin, 349) that distinguishes him as an individual human being with a specific social, cultural and moral identity. In this respect, voices within a man and an "internal dialogism" (350) are considered; together with a dialogic nature of any mental activity (including monologue), which is observed also by Mukařovský. In Mukařovský, moreover, three types of dialogue are discussed: personal (drawing on the relation between the interlocutors),

situational (focusing on the particular situation) and conversation (focusing on the talk itself) (208-29).

Bakhtin's concern with the variety of languages, voices, points of view and kinds of experience anticipates, in fact, the analysis of the dialogical character of language as developed by H.G. Gadamer. According to Gadamer, the dialogical experience consists in the effort to "engage oneself in something" or to "become involved with someone." It allows us to transcend a "mere reification of intended meaning" and the "sphere of argument" as beyond every possibility of agreement about what is common there is a "potentiality for being other" (26). In the centre of Gadamer's attention is the importance of the other person, whose presence itself helps break up the narrowness of the individual perception even before the dialogue begins to develop. A similar idea is discussed in Lévinas's study *Totality and Infinity* (1969): any true relationship to the other is, in fact, a dialogical relationship; or, in other words, the relationship to the other is a transcendental experience, an exteriority marked out by speech (Lévinas, 54). It is language that distinguishes between "the same" and "the other" and it is through a dialogue that truth (and justice) may be revealed (55). At the same time, a true dialogue (i.e., an absolute experience of the other person's being) must keep the distance between the partners, a separation that allows for transcendence and evokes the idea of infinity (25).

The idea of dialogic nature of art and, in particular, Gadamer's departure from the meaning-oriented attitude is developed and modified in Deleuze's discussion of the search for "the truth of signs": On the one hand, there is an "objectivist temptation" (the meaning of the sign is searched for in the object), on the other hand, the search passes through a "subjective compensation" (the meaning is linked to the subjective association of ideas). The true nature of the signs, however, transcends both ways and can be revealed only in the work of art (Deleuze, 11).

In Deleuze's analysis, art is defined in terms of the levels of intensity and signs are considered as intensive products of differential relations. According to Deleuze, the work of art does not function as a totalizing or unifying principle of its disconnected parts but rather as the "effect" of their multiplicity (48). Distinguishing between modern and traditional art, Deleuze uses the term "experience" rather than "representation" to characterize the crucial concern of modern art and philosophy.

The traditional aim to "represent the world" is replaced with the effort to "present a sensation" as a composition of the non-visible intensive forces acting behind the visible forms (Deleuze, 40-41). Deleuze further describes three particular varieties of this composition: vibration (a simple

sensation defined by a difference in intensity), resonance (two simple sensations, or figures, coupled together, confronting each other and producing "something new") and a forced movement (a distension of sensations, united by the distance that separates them, as in a triptych). Thus the question aroused by the work of art is not "'What does it mean?' but rather 'How does it work?'" (45-7)

With respect to this theoretical background, it is possible to say that the tension between the two questions corresponds with the essential difference between *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), between Charlotte Brontë's and Jean Rhys's attitudes to the same theme: the encounter of Rochester and his first wife, or, in other words, the encounter with the other. Transmitting the original motifs and images into new contexts of ideas and levels of emotional intensity, *Wide Sargasso Sea* questions Brontë's answers and suggests possible answers to the questions emerging from *Jane Eyre*. The following chapters attempt to discuss the different employment of the same motifs in both novels as a reflection of differences in the concepts of literary expression, and in the notions of dialogue.

Jane Eyre: Dialogue as a Way to Knowledge

When Brontë's Jane Eyre characterizes her relationship to Rochester, she seems to make a parallel between the quality of the relationship and the ability to communicate through dialogue: "To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long" (Brontë, 399). With respect to Mukařovský's three types of dialogue, it can be said that the relationships between particular protagonists in the novel develop especially through their involvement in conversation.

The failure of the love affair between Rochester and Céline Varens, for example, is initiated rather by the hero's dislike of her talk ("frivolous, mercenary, heartless, and senseless") than by her act of unfaithfulness. A description of individual language, corresponding with the heroes' behaviour, turns into the main device of characterisation and supports understanding. Rochester's forming his opinion of the others according to their speech is associated with Jane Eyre's care about the way she expresses her ideas and feelings: "I have no wish to talk nonsense" (Brontë, 121); "You have been very correct - very careful, very sensible" (178).

A special emphasis is laid on the choice of answers, which represent, in the words of Gadamer, a basic element of dialogue (21-51). In *Jane Eyre*,

moreover, particular answers become objects of evaluation. Rochester's respect for Jane arises from his appraisal of her responses ("promptly spoken," "a profound remark," "well said"), which, at the same time, establishes his superiority, bringing him into the position of an observer rather than a partner. (This notion is intensified in the scene where the hero disguises himself as an old Gypsy prophetess.) For mutual understanding, the knowledge of the other's nature and experience is necessary and this knowledge cannot be achieved but through a dialogue: "It would please me [...] to learn more of you – therefore speak" (Brontë, 116).

Though (regarding Bakhtin's point of view) the encounter of Jane and Rochester offers a significant opportunity to confront different social and moral voices (a poor and innocent orphan, a rich and experienced nobleman and various kinds of cultural surroundings), the need of dialogue itself is supported rather by the feeling of similarity.

> "I feel akin to him – I understand the language of his countenance and movements [...] I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him." (Brontë, 153)

Nevertheless, this mutual identification, drawing on the twin-soul motif of the Romantic poetry, paradoxically suppresses the dialogic nature of both characters' relationship. Rochester's wish to "learn more" of the heroine reflects, in fact, his effort to learn more about himself, or, as he (like Byron's Manfred) puts it, about his "better self." Such motivation completely clashes with Lévinas's idea of a dialogue as a recognition (and acceptance) of the other as someone "absolutely different" (Lévinas, 24), someone who cannot be reached by knowledge and defies ultimate understanding.

In this respect, a better opportunity for a real dialogic relationship is hidden in the story of Rochester's first wife, an exotic Creole from the West Indies, who represents a true and unattainable otherness for the hero. This opportunity, however, is never really developed in *Jane Eyre*: from the very beginning, the relationship is hindered by the feeling of repulsion and a fear of the unknown. The existence of someone truly other is felt as a violation of the space for the individual expression and no dialogue is possible:

> "a kindly conversation could not be sustained between us, because whatever topic I started, immediately received from her a turn at once coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile."
>
> (Brontë, 270)

As it is with Rochester's recollections of Céline, the unflattering references to Bertha's language correspond explicitly with the way the hero sees her character. The truth of the other, however, is never revealed. To use Deleuze's terms, the search for the meaning is limited to the "incomplete, prejudiced, and partial perception of subjectivity" (Rochester's apologetic monologue) and to the "properties of the object" (21): the language (or its absence) and also the physical portrait of the first wife: "Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask – this form with that bulk; then judge me" (Brontë, 259).

Thus the search results in the schematic image of a madwoman, who is finally deprived of human attributes, being referred to only as a "monster," a "fiend," a "maniac," a "clothed hyena," a "lunatic". The absence of language is related to the absence of ideas as well as emotions. They, however, repeatedly reappear in the spectral form of mysterious apparitions and fierce attacks; in the disturbing development of the Gothic imagery.

In the words of Lévinas, the acceptance of difference and, accordingly, the fulfilment of dialogue are necessarily connected with the freedom of the other (Lévinas, 24). In *Jane Eyre*, the other must be kept under control, either through the official proclamation of madness or through the violence of imprisonment. Against the background of the prison image, Jane Eyre's decision to leave Thornfield becomes, in fact, the only possible confirmation of the individual identity. At the same time, it mirrors Jane's fear of the 'other' side of her own nature, which once dominated her childhood and which must not emerge into either words or particular acts: "I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane [...] Laws and principles are [...] for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny" (Brontë, 280). Accordingly, this subversive part of the human nature, which makes the other person really 'other,' is excluded from the knowledge expected to be acquired through dialogue.

In conclusion, Brontë's story of Bertha employs a convention which constrains both feeling and thinking (e.g., Jane Eyre's willingness to believe Rochester's explanation) and represents rather the "dogmatic or rationalist image" of thought than a search for truth through the work of art (Deleuze, 32). Nevertheless, the disquieting presence of this 'other' story in Charlotte Brontë's novel is brought into the centre of attention in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which compels the search to continue.

Wide Sargasso Sea: Dialogue as Desire

Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read as a dramatisation of the difficulty to discern the truth of the "other side" (Rhys, 106). In a way, this difficulty is mirrored in the structure of the text, which is divided into separated parts with different narrators. It is further intensified by the mutual relations between particular figures, which correspond with Deleuze's image of the "forced movement" (a triptych) (Deleuze, 46-7): Antoinette (Bertha); the hero; people of Coulibri, Granbois and Thornfield. The plurality of the triptych supports the tension brought about by different versions of the story: the heroine's version (referring to the cultural, social and racial circumstances), the other people's version (echoing Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and pointing out the idea of hereditary madness) and Rochester's confusion, reflecting the conflict between his individual (British) identity and the disquieting effect of the Carribean surroundings: "The man not a bad man [...] but he hear so many stories he don't know what to believe" (Rhys, 95).

The incongruity between particular versions including ambiguous hints and rumours reflects a gap between particular objects, words and meanings: any meaning can be denied, doubted, changed or, on the other hand, enforced and misused; any word can mean everything as well as nothing (especially the words referring to particular values; "justice," for example). This relativity springs from the emphasis on the role of the subject in search for meaning: "It (the place) meant nothing to me. Nor did she" (Rhys, 64). It is the impossibility to fathom the meaning that turns the object into a spectral, Gothic image in Jean Rhys's novel.

The attempts to renew harmony are connected with the importance of dialogue: "And did you ever tell anyone this?" (Rhys, 76); "Speak to your husband calm and cool [...] speak nice and make him understand" (96). The dialogue, however, is complicated by the discussed limitations of the individual perception, which "comprehends the whole confusedly" and expresses clearly only "certain elements and relations depending on the threshold of consciousness" (Deleuze, 39). Thus the point of view of former black slaves, for example, collides with the self-confidence of white colonists and a completely different experience permeates the views of the Creole inhabitants. As Rhys's Rochester admits at the very beginning of his narrative, the description of his Carribean stay remains incomplete due to his "confused impressions" and "blanks" in his mind. In this respect, the theme of madness becomes closely connected with this fragmentary notion of the reality. As Deleuze puts it, "every perception is hallucinatory because perception has no object," being linked to the "differential relations among unconscious perceptions" (38).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, these relations can be felt in a number of intertextual allusions. For example, the feeling of pity is associated with the image of a "naked new-born babe striding the blast" (Rhys, 135). On the one hand, it is a reference to Jane Eyre's dream in Brontë's novel, reflecting the heroine's pity for Rochester and foreshadowing the image of the ruined Thornfield. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the motif of a helpless baby preceding the Thornfield story turns into a quotation from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and introduces new meanings and interpretations (ambition, struggle for power, betrayal, crime and conscience).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, dialogue cannot satisfy the thirst for meaning as no meaning is definite. Understanding cannot be related to knowledge of the other person and characterising somebody according to his way of speaking is misleading: "'I can't say I like her language.' 'It doesn't mean anything,' said Antoinette" (Rhys, 71-2).

Leaving the area of conveying the meaning, the purpose of dialogue in Jean Rhys's novel turns into expression of emotional intensity. Particular elements and relations are "actualised in an intensive magnitude" (Deleuze, 36) and it is this magnitude and multiplicity that remains the main source of anxiety for Brontë's as well as Rhys's Rochester. It is possible to use an example of the attitude toward the Carribean nature: "The air was like sulphur-steams - I could find no refreshment anywhere" (Brontë, 271). "What an extreme green [...] Everything is too much [...] Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (Rhys, 58-9). A similar anxiety, in fact, is reflected in his relationship to Antoinette and her version of the story: "I have said all I want to say. [...] But nothing has changed (Rhys, 25).

The magnitude of the relations inherent in the heroine's story reaches its climax in the final passages of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The recollections of people, places, events and emotions mingle with the reality of Thornfield as it was described by Charlotte Brontë and the point of culmination is expressed by the motif of a scream. This moment, moreover, is associated with the feeling of epiphany and a rediscovery of the heroine's identity: "Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did* I *scream*?" [...] Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (Rhys, 155-6). These words (connected with an image of a candle) conclude the novel, while Brontë's motifs of fire and the ruins are related to the fragments of memory (the destruction of Coulibri).

Against the background of Deleuze's theory, the difference between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* may remind us of the difference between the traditional and modern painting. The "violence of a horrible spectacle," i.e., the Gothic imagery in *Jane Eyre*, is replaced by the "violence of the

sensation" (Deleuze, 42), by an intense notion of the "invisible forces," energies and the hidden origins of the particular characters' experience.

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