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The Twenty-Fifth George Eliot Memorial Lecture: The Larger Meaning of Your Voice: Varieties of Speech in George Eliot

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THE TWENTY-FIFTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE, 1996

Delivered by Professor Raymond Chapman

THE LARGER MEANING OF YOUR VOICE: VARIETIES OF SPEECH IN GEORGE ELIOT¹

When Ladislav has watched and listened to Dorothea in the Vatican Museum, he says to the painter Naumann that language is superior to painting and 'gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague.[...] This woman whom you have just seen, for example: how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her.'² The novelist does in a way paint the voice, using the visual signs of written language to convey an auditory experience.

Written dialogue may be naturalistic and idiomatic in its choice of words and syntax, well marked by punctuation, but it can never give a full impression of what we hear in life. One of the hardest tasks for the novelist is to convey the many individual qualities of voice, in terms of natural pitch, smoothness and harshness, and so on. Qualities may be affected by physical changes, as the slurred speech of intoxication or the huskiness of a cold; or situationally by whispering or shouting. In all these things the novelist must use the equivalent of stage-directions, indicating by verbal commentary how the character is to be 'heard' by the reader.

George Eliot's sensitivity to speech is outstanding among the great Victorian novelists. I do not propose to examine again the well-trodden ground of her use of dialect, or the idiolects of her characters. What has received less attention is her sensitivity to the nuances of conversation, and her unusual ability to recall the distinctive sounds of voices. She wrote to the French translator of *The Mill on the Floss*, whom she had met with his mother, that as she read his letter she was 'hearing the tone of the two voices. I have the happiness of being able to recall beloved faces and accents with great clearness'.³ This aural memory is evoked by Mirah in *Daniel Deronda* when she tries to recall her childhood. 'Is it not wonderful how I remember the voices better than anything else? I think they must go deeper into us than other things. I have often fancied heaven might be made of voices'.⁴

Eliot was not a trained linguistic scholar, and the subject itself was in its infancy, but she shows unexpected technical knowledge. In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen's uncle had changed his name from 'Gaskin' to 'Gascoigne', 'having taken clerical orders and a diphthong but shortly before his engagement'. I doubt whether many novelists of the time would have known about the phonetic change from short vowel to diphthong. In her 1856 essay, 'The Natural History of German Life', she describes the new social pretensions of farmers: 'though their daughters may still drop their *h*'s, their vowels are studiously narrow'. She possessed the 'nice ear' which 'might have detected a tremor in some of the words' when Mrs Garth speaks 'gravely and decisively' about finding money to pay the debt which Fred Vincy has brought upon the family (280). The opening of 'Janet's Repentance' is a foretaste of what she would

achieve later. Dempster is immediately characterized as he speaks 'in a loud, rasping, oratorical tone, struggling against chronic huskiness'. Eliot excels her contemporaries in describing the *phonation* or *voice quality* of her speakers. This has been defined as 'A term used in phonetics to refer to the permanently present, background, person-identifying features of speech'.⁵

Eliot's characters are often delineated partly by a description of voice quality, either on first appearance or after a period of acquaintance. Celia Brooke has a 'small and rather guttural voice' (71) which she uses well. 'In her quiet guttural' she exhorts Dorothea to take off her widow's cap (592) and when she speaks firmly to her about remarrying, uses 'rather a deeper guttural than usual' (792). When she is content and 'prettily free from humours', she speaks in a 'placid guttural' (878). Placidity is part of her character: 'Celia was not impulsive: what she had to say could wait, and came from her always with the same quiet, staccato utterance' (55). This quality is often mentioned; she comforts Dorothea 'in an amiable staccato' (60) and later 'in her essay staccato, which always seemed to contradict the suspicion of any malicious intent' (101-2).

Lydgate has a voice befitting a doctor, and one which also makes him attractive to women. 'One of Lydgate's gifts was a voice habitually deep and sonorous, yet capable of becoming very low and gentle at the right moment' (152). Rosamond, pretty and shallow, speaks to her husband 'in her silvery neutral way' (638). Esther Lyon, more reclaimable in her vanity, speaks 'in her usual light silvery tones'.⁶ Farebrother, noble and self-sacrificing, can show emotion 'in the tones of his fine voice' (727).

A characteristic voice can be developed consistently as the reader's acquaintance grows. Dickens certainly lived with his characters, saw their faces and heard their voices, but his ear was attuned more to their distinctive idiolects. Eliot could hear her characters with phonational precision. An example is her repeated references to Grandcourt's vocal drawl - an attested feature of aristocratic and quasi-aristocratic speech of the period.⁷ At his first meeting with Gwendolen we learn that 'He spoke with a fine accent, but with certain drawl, as of a distinguished personage with a distinguished cold on his chest' (146). He makes his early approach to her 'in his broken, refined drawl' (171) and responds to her indifference 'with a softened drawl' (172). When he returns from his vain pursuit of her abroad, it is with 'his usual broken drawl having just a shade of amorous languor in it' (344). He makes his proposal with 'little pauses and refined drawlings' which give Gwendolen time 'to go through the dream of life' (347). But when he rebukes Lush for inviting unwelcome guests, we learn more about his nature, and extend our auditory response to the written dialogue. His words are simply, 'What has my meeting them in Paris to do with it? I told you to give me a list'. Then follows the comment:

Grandcourt, like many others, had two remarkably different voices. Hitherto we have heard him speaking in a superficial interrupted drawl suggestive chiefly of languor and *ennui*. But this last brief speech was uttered in subdued, inward, yet distinct tones, which Lush had long been used to recognise as the expression of a peremptory will. (162)

These are informative but straightforward descriptions. Eliot shows her novelist's art of invention more fully by analogies. Voices are often described by musical counterparts, either of human singing or the sounds of instruments. Her love of music, both instrumental and vocal, is well attested. Characters are often musically talented, or deeply affected by music. Rosamond attracts Lydgate by her playing. In *Daniel Deronda*, the musician Klesmer is a magnetic figure, and Mirah achieves the success in singing which Gwendolen had hoped for in vain. The power of music, shared or individually rendered, is often implied through the speaking voice. It is a negative trait in Casaubon, accentuated when he is repressing anger at Ladislaw's being invited to stay with Brooke and speaks 'with more of dignified bending and sing-song than usual' (364). Again, when he anxiously talks with Lydgate about his health, his words are 'delivered with the usual sing-song and motion of the head' (460). When he talks with Ladislaw, the latter's voice is like 'a gay little chime after the great bell' (244).

When Ladislaw first meets Dorothea he thinks, 'But what a voice! It was like the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Æolian harp' (105). The analogy is more than a tribute to beautiful speaking: an Æolian harp is played by the movement of the wind through its strings and Dorothea shows herself too easily influenced by the prevailing call for sympathy, whether from Casaubon, Rosamond, Lydgate or Ladislaw. The point is subtly reinforced later when Ladislaw wonders why Dorothea accepted Casaubon: 'she was an angel beguiled.[...] The Æolian harp again came into his mind' (241).

When Dorothea is greatly moved, she speaks 'in her saddest recitative' (240) but when she confidently encourages her uncle in his candidature she does so 'in a voice as clear and unhesitating as that of a young chorister chanting a *credo*' (424). This is reminiscent of an earlier novel: the preaching of Dinah Morris is thus described:

Hitherto the traveller had been chained to the spot against his will by the charm of Dinah's mellow treble tones, which had a variety of modulation like that of a fine instrument touched with the unconscious skill of musical instinct. The simple things she said seemed like novelties, as a melody strikes us with a new feeling when we hear it sung by the pure voice of a boyish chorister.⁸

The register of Dinah's voice works also on individuals. She rejects Seth Bede's advances 'in her tender but calm treble notes' (79) and tells Mr Irwine of her call to preach 'with that sincere, articulate, thrilling treble by which she always mastered her audience' (136). The treble voice can be less soothing: when Camilla speaks of her religious visions 'in her excited treble', Romola responds 'in a deep tone of anger'.⁹ Bob Jakin, embarrassed when he meets Tom Tulliver again, 'spoke with a sharp and rather treble volubility'.¹⁰ In contrast to the beauty of musical phrasing, Grandcourt responds to Gwendolen's desire to get rid of Lush 'in an *adagio* of utter indifference' (350).

Quarrelling with Ladislaw, Rosamond speaks 'in flute-like tones of sarcasm' (835). Eliot seems not to have greatly esteemed the sound of the flute. When Gwendolen Harleth is being trivially flirtatious with Grandcourt, she answers him 'with the lightest flute-tone' (169).

However, Bardo does praise Romola for her voice 'as the lower notes of the flute, "dulcis, clara, pura, secans aëra et auribus sedens", according to the choices words of Quintilian' (101).

Mrs Garth's 'words which came forth like a procession were uttered in a fervid agreeable contralto' (275), and she exclaims 'Caleb', her husband's name, 'in a deep contralto, expressive of resigned astonishment' (609). Mary Garth, who shares many of her mother's admirable qualities, shares also her voice and speaks 'in a grave contralto' (558). When Farebrother changes from admonition to friendliness with Fred Vincy, 'there was a change in his tone like the encouraging transition to a major key' (728). Key signatures also cleverly represent Mrs Poyser's contraries of acerbity and kindness when Dinah tells her of the death of Thias Bede:

'Dear heart, dear heart! But you must have a cup o' tea first, child', said Mrs Poyser, falling at once from the key of B with five sharps to the frank and genial C. (139)

Voices combine in musical terms when 'Three voices made a fugue of friendly farewells to Nello, as he retreated with a bow to Romola and a beck to Tito' (109). Musical discord is expressed in a striking metaphor for the turmoil in Bulstrode when his dishonesty comes to light:

[He] had taken his selfish passions into discipline and clad them in severe robes, so that he had walked with them as a devout quire, till now that a terror had risen among them, and they could chant no longer, but threw out their common cries for safety. (758)

A more pleasant choral effect is given by the collective voices at the archery contest at which Gwendolen Harleth distinguishes herself:

Musical laughs in all the registers and a harmony of happy friendly speeches, now rising towards mild excitement, now sinking to an agreeable murmur. (133)

The cello seems to have been more to Eliot's taste than the flute. Joshua Rann, the parish clerk in *Adam Bede*, has 'a fine bass voice' which he uses to effect both in speaking and in singing. When he says a verse of a psalm it is 'in a resounding bass undertone, like the tuning of a violoncello' (64), and when he sings:

The way he rolled from a rich deep forte into a melancholy cadence, subsiding, at the end of the last word, into a sort of faint resonance, like the lingering vibrations of a fine violoncello, I can compare to nothing for its strong calm melancholy but the rush and cadence of the wind among the autumn boughs. (245)

Other analogies liken human speech to the sounds of birds and animals - by no means an inno-

vation but something that Eliot uses effectively. Celia speaks 'in her usual purring way' (58); her sister calls her 'Kitty' and she calls Dorothea 'Dodo'. Both familiar names are appropriate, the one to Celia's cosy domesticity, the other to Dorothea's old-fashioned ways and lack of self-protective instinct. Of course, her speech could hardly have been likened to the sound of that extinct bird! But when she is at ease with Ladislav she is said to be 'laughing out her words in a birdlike modulation' (256). The irritating potential of bird noises is found in Rigg's 'high chirping voice' (374). The vague little Miss Noble, always busy in good work, makes 'beaver-like notes' and 'beaver-like noises' (843, 864), a comparison which reflects the popular idea of the beaver's industry rather than the reality of that destructive and self-interested creature. It is unlikely that Eliot had ever heard a beaver.

The natural voice quality is modified in conversation by such factors as loudness, emotion and physical condition. Eliot makes good use of changes of tone to convey the pragmatic effect of dialogue in situation. Adam Bede confronts Arthur Donnithorne:

'Stop a bit, sir,' said Adam, in a hard peremptory voice, without turning round.
'I've got a word to say to you.'

Arthur paused in surprise. Susceptible persons are more affected by a change of tone than unexpected words, and Arthur had the susceptibility of a nature at once affectionate and vain. (343)

Stephen Guest takes his leave of Maggie 'in a tone that had the same beseeching discontent as his eyes' (521). When Adam Bede faces the reality of Hetty's trial, his 'voice had been gradually sinking into a hoarse undertone, as if he were only talking to himself' until he suddenly rallies and questions Irwine 'abruptly' (468). When Nancy in *Silas Marner* is struggling with her emotions towards Godfrey Cass, she speaks at first 'coldly',¹¹ and then 'with the slightest discernible difference of tone' (106). That is typical of Eliot's art: the reference to a minute sensory detail which seems trivial at the time but is indicative of significant changes to come. When eventually Godfrey comes to face the reality of his situation towards Silas and Eppie, he speaks 'with a keen decisiveness of tone, in contrast with his usually careless and unemphatic speech' (172). When he tries to claim Eppie, Silas regresses under pressure of emotion and answers 'with an accent of bitterness that had been silent in him since the memorable day when his youthful hope had perished' (167).

In *Middlemarch* there are several points of departure when what is said both communicates and shapes the course of a relationship. Thus when Dorothea and Ladislav first talk privately, she greets him 'in her clear full tone of assent' (398) but his mild criticism of Casaubon changes it to 'a tone of earnest remonstrance' (399). When they meet again after Casaubon's death the constraint of unspoken love comes between them. Dorothea's 'habit of speaking with perfect genuineness' makes her greet him cordially but later 'an inward silent sob' affects her speech as she talks of their parting 'with a pure voice just trembling in the last words as if only from its liquid flexibility'. Then she speaks formally again and, 'whatever the words might be, the tone sounded like a dismissal' until Ladislav's hint of his feelings gives her 'a tone of sad fellowship' (586-9).

Husbands and wives have some significant conversations. When Bulstrode's wife questions him about Raffles he answers at first 'in his usual subdued voice' but her solicitude leads to 'a tone which had something new in it to her ear', until he collects himself and speaks 'with an effort to throw as much sober unconcern into his tone as possible' (660-2). One of the finest pieces of dialogue in *Middlemarch* is that between Lydgate and Rosamond when he first reveals the extent of their financial difficulty. She greets him 'in her lightest accent' and he starts kindly, saying 'Dear', 'with the lingering utterance which affection gives to the word'. When Rosamond asks, 'What can I do?' 'she threw into the words as much neutrality as they could hold'. This changes Lydgate's mood and his next speech 'was more in the tone of a man who forces himself to fulfil a task'. Her suggestion of asking her father for money brings refusal 'with a more peremptory emphasis'. As Rosamond comes to realise that some of their possessions must be sold, her 'very lips seemed to set thinner with the thinness of her utterance'. When she insists on going home the following day, Lydgate asks when she will return 'with a bitter edge on his accent', and then 'a cold emotion in his tone' (637-43). The descriptions of voice quality in this scene have a strong pragmatic value, and heighten the tension which the words themselves are situationally creating.

Another feature of Eliot's fiction is reflected in her dialogue, generally in terms of lexis and pronunciation but also in voice quality. The social hierarchy in her novels is fraught with uncertainties and insecurities. In this as in much else, she creates a microcosm of Victorian society, in which people were keenly aware of social class and less certain than their ancestors of its parameters. Characters often reveal their social position by their speech. The use of dialect is the most obvious pointer, but Eliot has an equally acute ear for the form of speech which was coming to be regarded as the educated norm and would eventually be called Received Pronunciation. It owed much to the public schools for its dissemination and was increasingly sought by those with pretensions to gentility. Tom Tulliver is sent to a clergyman who confronts him 'not only with the Latin grammar but with a new standard of English pronunciation' (202) and who 'corrected his provincialisms and his deportment in a most playful manner' (204).

Rosamond Vincy is not content with a financially comfortable home but 'felt she might have been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer' and is worried that her mother's father had been an innkeeper (128). She naturally sets her mind on Lydgate who has 'an air of distinction congruous with a good family, and possessing connections which offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank' (145). His relative Captain Lydgate delights her for his 'stupidity was delicately scented, carried itself with style, talked with a good accent' (629). She is typical of the social anxieties of the rising Victorian, quick to assure her mother, 'you never heard me speak in an unladylike way' and censuring her for describing the best of the young men as 'the pick of them'.

The discussion which follows reveals not only more of Rosamond's character, but also Eliot's keen understanding of what would now be called sociolinguistics. Mrs Vincy's suggested emendation to 'superior young men' is countered by Fred's claim that 'superior is getting to be shopkeeper's slang'. Brother and sister then argue about 'correct English', which Fred calls

‘the slang of prigs who write history and essays’, for he sees that ‘All choice of words is slang. It marks a class.’ (125-6). That is a shrewd observation, which anticipated later non-prescriptive ideas, and again illustrates Eliot’s grasp of linguistic principles.

The older lawyer Standish has picked up the habits of the landed gentry, including mild oaths as ‘stamping the speech of a man of good position’ (115). The whole society is unstable; ‘some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth’ (122). The wealthy Featherstone seems to have no trouble with his aspirates, but he shows his origin with vulgar mispronunciations like ‘dockiments’ (*documents*) and ‘speckilation’ (*speculation*) (137-38). His second cousin has entered the phase of hypercorrection, being ‘a mercer of polite manners and superfluous aspirates’ (366). Conversely, Mrs Garth accepts her lowlier position, although ‘her grammar and accent were above the town standard’ (275). She is determined that her children shall ‘speak and write correctly’ and holds up old Job the servant as a warning. When the children are amused by Job’s saying ‘Yo goo’ for ‘you go’ and pronouncing *sheep* as ‘ship’, she shows herself to be one who cares more for formal correctness than fashionable speech. Being one who ‘in a general wreck of society would have tried to hold her “Lindley Murray” above the waves’, she gives her opinion that ‘these things belong only to pronunciation, which is the least part of grammar’ (276-7). It is a slight incident but, like many in the Victorian novel, an insight into changing perspectives. It will be recalled that the aristocratic but bucolic Sir Pitt Crawley speaks of ‘a ship that was to be killed’ (*Vanity Fair*, Ch.11).

What people say to each other may influence the course of their lives. After Ladislaw has gone away, Dorothea remembers her happiness when he was ‘within the vibrating bond of mutual speech’ (844). When she tells her sister of her engagement to him, there is no need for further questioning, since ‘the tone in which Dorothea said this was a note that Celia had long learned to recognize’ (880). Yet the silent recall of familiar speech can be hurtful as well as healing. After Dorothea has asked Casaubon to decide what portions of his research are worth preserving, he bitterly remembers her words, for her voice ‘gave loud emphatic iteration to those muffled suggestions of consciousness which it was possible to explain as mere fancy’. Eliot adds her comment on the power of speech to wound:

We are angered even by the full acceptance of our humiliating confessions - how much more by hearing in hard distinct syllables from the lips of a near observer, those confused murmurs which we try to call morbid, and strive against as if they were the oncoming of numbness! (232)

Sometimes what is not said is as important as what is said. Dorothea, tactfully trying to help Lydgate, ‘refrained from saying what was in her mind - how well she knew that there might be invisible barriers to speech between husband and wife’ (824). In his gratitude, Lydgate writes Dorothea a letter and when instead he meets her, explains ‘When one is grateful for something too good for common thanks, writing is less unsatisfactory than speech - one does not at least *hear* how unsatisfactory the words are’ (849). When Irwine says impatiently about his sister’s headache, ‘O she likes me to go and see her just the same; she’s never too ill to care

about that', there is sadness in the comment:

If you know how much of human speech is mere purposeless impulse or habit, you will not wonder when I tell you that this identical objection had been made, and had received the same kind of answer, many hundred times in the course of the fifteen years that Mr Irwine's sister Annie had been an invalid. (100)

Eliot knew that speech is fragile, and not always effective either for communication or for relief of feeling. As Don Silva says to Fedalma in Book I of *The Spanish Gipsy*:

Speech is but broken light upon the depth
Of the unspoken: even your loved words
Float in the larger meaning of your voice
As something dimmer.

The inadequacy of speech is more amusingly illustrated when Brooke gives his election address and every sentence is followed by 'a parrot-like, Punch-voiced echo of his words' which brings him into ridicule (547). Unlike Lydgate, he actually hears how unsatisfactory his words are.

George Eliot wrote before linguistic science had learned to analyze and describe speech accurately; but if she lacked the technical vocabulary, she anticipated the study of intonation and voice quality in relation to their pragmatic effect. In Rome, Casaubon replies to Dorothea's hope that he is satisfied with their stay by saying 'Yes' - 'with that peculiar pitch of voice which makes the word half a negative' (231). We understand that we are supposed to hear, as we do in *Felix Holt* when Esther begs to give evidence on behalf of Felix 'in that low tone of urgent beseeching which is equivalent to a cry' (572). Let us look again at the passage when Lydgate starts to tell Rosamond about their financial straits:

'Why, what can *I* do, Tertius?' said Rosamond, turning her eyes on him again. That little speech of four words, like so many others in all languages, is capable by varied vocal inflexions of expressing all states of mind from helpless dimness to exhaustive argumentative perception, from the completest self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. (640)

A modern linguist might be a little more technical, but we have still not lost a certain reliance on that more subjective interpretation which Eliot brilliantly developed.

Notes

1. Some of the material of this lecture first appeared in 'George Eliot's Nice Ear: the Voices of *Middlemarch*' in *English Far and Wide: a Festschrift for Inna Koskenniemi* (Turku: Turun Yliopisto, 1993), pp. 1-13.

2. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 222. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
3. *The George Eliot Letters* ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), IV, 82.
4. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 421. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
5. David Crystal, *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980), p. 379.
6. George Eliot, *Felix Holt*, ed. Peter Coveney (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 499. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
7. See Raymond Chapman, *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), p. 172 ff.
8. George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 71. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
9. George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Sanders (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 525. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
10. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A. S. Byatt (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 323. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.
11. George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, ed. Peter Mudford (Everyman Paperbacks, London, 1996), p. 105. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.