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Impeded communication in Frances Burney's *Evelina*: distortion, manipulation and distance

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Frances Burney's obsession with language pervades all her novels, with the reflection on the loss of the original meanings of words and the importance lent to the use of the right language. She was fascinated by the various accents and idiolects of specific groups and specific persons, always ready to record conversations to comment on them in her diaries and letters. As Christina Davidson writes, this "acute interest in spoken interaction" is evidenced by the tireless corrections of her works to fit "prescribed linguistic forms" and the "tireless recording of real conversations, which she then analyzed and judged."[1] Not only was she interested in specific standard and non-standard linguistic forms but she was also fascinated by social interaction. This is particularly striking in *Evelina*, which constantly stages situations of impeded communication. As Martha Koehler points out, "the events of *Evelina* are driven by failures of communication. Nearly every character in the novel is subject to one or more instances of deception, misinformation, and error".[2] What remains to be explored is how the words of the various characters are constantly mediated, with an overwhelming presence of parasitic interferences and what it reveals about Burney's approach to language.

Mediated narratives

There is in *Evelina* an accumulation of intermediaries. From the beginning, communication is mediated as Mme Duval and Reverend Villars interact through Lady

[1] Christina Davidson, "Conversations as Signifiers: Characters on the Margins of Morality in the First Three Novels of Frances Burney", *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 8.2 (June 2010): 277.
[2] Martha J. Koehler, "'Faultless Monsters' and Monstrous Egos: The Disruption of Model Selves in Frances Burney's *Evelina*", *Eighteenth Century* 43.1 (2002): 19.

Howard. Lady Howard reports Mme Duval's words and Mr. Villars then dictates the answer she should copy in her own letter to Mme Duval (15). Similarly, Miss and Mrs. Mirvan's questions concerning the story of Evelina's mother is relayed by Lady Howard and Reverend Villars answers through her in his turn. This kind of communication becomes imprecise when it is turned into mere hearsay, as when Madame Duval's grief over her daughter's death is reported (17).

Another glaring instance of mediated information is the allusion to Mr. Lovel's visit to Lord Orville after the ball. The story is told by Lord Orville, who controls and limits the information, refusing to share the particulars. It is then communicated to Evelina by Mrs. Mirvan, and finally reported in the heroine's letter (102). Those intermediaries are part of the epistolary genre: the limited number of letter writers and the lack of an omniscient narrator make such indirect communication necessary, as when the account of the quarrel between Captain Mirvan and Mme Duval, after Evelina has left, is told by Mrs. Mirvan (104) or when the conversation among men about Evelina at the first ball is reported by Miss Mirvan and reproduced in Evelina's narrative (36).

And yet, the text underlines the subjectivity it implies. Evelina writes about her recording of Captain Mirvan's speeches:

> Indeed, notwithstanding the attempts I so frequently make of writing some of the Captain's conversation, I can only give you a faint idea of his language; for almost every other word he utters, is accompanied by an oath, which, I am sure, would be as unpleasant for you to read, as for me to write. And, besides, he makes use of a thousand sea-terms, which are to me quite unintelligible. (141)

Here, the attention is drawn to the fact that Evelina is the prism used, since there is no letter from Captain Mirvan in the novel, and the filter of her perspective implies distortions and omissions: some words are not reported because of her disgust, or her lack of knowledge of nautical terms, and there may be mistakes since she is liable to misunderstand him.

In *Evelina*, the way conversations are reported looks problematic: the emphasis on the presence of intermediaries seems to underline how the original meaning might be lost in the process. The use of French already implies transformations and possible distortions, as when Evelina reports M. Du Bois's words in indirect speech, translating them into English. This translation is already a step away from the original. There is also a certain blurring of the various voices. When Evelina reproduces the dialogue between Lord Orville, Sir Clement and Mr. Lovel, as Maria heard it after the first ball, Maria's narration is interlarded with Evelina's comments, with expressions like "as well he might", for instance (36).

Evelina's recording of conversations might appear objective but her narrative is full of implicit hints at her own subjective perspective, introducing a certain distance towards the other characters' choice of words. She constantly uses italics to mark the boundary between her narrating voice and reported speech but the use of those italics, instead of quotation marks, both underlines the linguistic peculiarities of the characters in a stronger manner and tends to undermine the phrases used. When she reports the Branghtons' use of expressions like "*making themselves comfortable*" (70), "*abating*" (91) or "*crinkum-crankum*" (93), the use of italics signals that those phrases are class-related idiolects. She is also highlighting their misuse of language, another recurrent aspect in the novel. Here, making oneself comfortable can hardly be a fit description of what they are doing, readjusting their disordered and dirtied clothes.

She similarly uses the italics to mark her disapproval when Mme Duval bewails the effects of Evelina's education in the country, thinking that it gives her a "*bumpkinish air*" (68). Ironically, it shows that though she calls herself a simple rustic, accepting Mr. Villars's judgment of her, the heroine still rejects that view, coming from her grandmother. Evelina repeatedly asserts her distance, showing that she does not subscribe to the words she is reporting. She writes: "the Captain has declared that the French hag, as he is pleased to call

her, shall fare never the better for it" (55). The addition of the comment "as he is pleased to call her" expresses her disapproval and undermines the insult, all the more so as it is extremely ironical. What it implies is that though he might take pleasure in insulting others, no one shares his view, his behaviour is extremely unpleasant.

Words can then be subjectively commented on, transformed or misquoted, as is also made clear in Reverend Villars's letter enjoining Evelina to stop seeing Lord Orville. He takes up her words to show her how her letter revealed her budding love for the hero, putting them in italics to show that it is a quotation. He slightly misquotes her, writing "*the most amiable of men*" (308), while she described the hero as "the most amiable man in the world" (39). But most importantly, he then also writes in italics "*he had every virtue under Heaven*" (308), suggesting that this is also a quotation, while it is only his own analysis of her letter. This example also shows how differences in the language used affect the way words are reported. Where a character like Captain Mirvan says, about the Cox Museum: "I like no such *jem cracks*. It is only fit, in my mind, for monkeys" (111, italics in the text), Lord Orville will express the very same idea in another style: "The mechanism […] is wonderfully ingenious: I am sorry it is turned to no better account; […] its purpose is so frivolous" (111).

Casting doubts

The novel alerts the reader to the possible distortions and erasures inherent in the accumulation of intermediaries. Hearsay might even be utterly wrong or might prove to be an excuse to impose one's own stories, as Sir Clement does when he wants Mme Duval to believe that M. Du Bois is about to be hanged (139). The reader is then led to wonder to what extent fictions might be imposed by Evelina the narrator, to what extent Evelina's subjectivity contaminates the text. Is she really the "simple rustic" she shows herself to be or is this just a way to fit Reverend Villars's image of her? The signature at the end of her first letter from

London is very telling in that respect. She signs: “Your dutiful and affectionate, though unpolished, Evelina” (29). She is showing that she is still his, though she left for London. Though pretending to use the adjective “unpolished” in a derogatory manner, she uses it to insist that she still corresponds to the image Villars has of her, being indeed a “simple rustic”.

Martha Koehler has similarly underlined how a doubt can be cast concerning Lord Orville’s true nature. Evelina describes him as a paragon of virtue but this is mere fiction:

> For Evelina, Orville is a construct, an imaginary projection; that he functions in this capacity is suggested early in the novel, when Evelina ‘invents’ Orville as a dance partner in order to forestall Sir Clement’s encroachments. She confirms her idealization of Orville (Koehler 27).

The doubt cast on the true nature of the characters and of the events is part of the epistolary genre with its first person narratives and competing stories. Sir Clement tries to impose another view of Lord Orville when he impersonates him, writing to Evelina in his name. The doubt thus cast in the reader’s mind, since the forgery is not immediately exposed, alerts the reader to the possibility that Lord Orville might be too good to be true, that Evelina might be idealizing him in her letters.

Martha Koehler writes:

> Burney discredits the idea of the moral paragon, that figure of example and paradigm whose function is to be imitated. Through a complex unraveling of gendered and classed mediations, she suggests that paragons of virtue are created by the irrational, flawed desires of those who need to imagine such ‘monsters’, as she labels them in her Preface. (21)

The “monsters” are mentioned in Burney’s Preface as part of the Marvellous, of Romance, which the author rejects in favour of more verisimilar narratives, firmly anchoring herself in the tradition of the novel. Yet it is true that one can also understand it as an allusion to the paragons of virtue that Richardson created and which Fielding reproached him with. There is a hint at the possibility that Evelina’s perspective might be flawed and that her narrative might be slightly unreliable when she writes about her time in London with the Mirvans, comparing

her memories of it to “a dream, or some visionary fancy”, “a romantic illusion” (174). She even adds:

> […] that elegant politeness, that flattering attention, that high-bred delicacy, which so much distinguished him above all other men, and which struck us with such admiration, I now re-trace the remembrance of, rather as belonging to an object of ideal perfection, formed by my own imagination, than to a being of the same race and nature as those with whom I at present converse. (174)

The hyperbolical style, which characterizes all her descriptions of Lord Orville, is here related with her deluded idealization, presenting her as disconnected from reality. The heroine then implicitly casts doubts on her own perspective.

Parasites and competing stories

Evelina the narrator appears to a certain extent to be interfering in the rendering of conversations and events, but this is nothing compared to the way the heroine’s communication with other characters is hampered by third parties. Not only does Sir Clement forge a letter in Lord Orville’s name but he constantly prevents conversations between Evelina and the hero, stealing his thunder and speaking to her when she is about to talk to Lord Orville. He also puts a stop to private explanations through his letter but also through his parasitic presence: “I never once had the shadow of an opportunity of speaking unheard by Sir Clement” (107). This intrusion of a third party in the relation between Lord Orville and Evelina is also bewailed when Young Branghton pays the hero a visit in order to apologize for the damage to his coach, claiming to be speaking in Evelina’s behalf. This unauthorized use of Evelina’s name is particularly damaging, offering a low and rude version of the apology the heroine would like to make, putting words in her mouth, in a way, and imposing a prejudicial image of her. It is that completely unauthorized invention that leads her to write

the letter to which Sir Clement answers in Lord Orville's stead, in another parasitic intervention. Evelina's own words of apology never reach the hero.

In *Evelina*, the emphasis is laid on the need for women to use their own voice and expression as a way to impose self-representation. This is underlined in a comic way when Miss Polly Branghton insists on correcting the distorted view her sister has given of her, "contriv[ing] to tell *her* story (171). But the accumulation of parasitic interferences shows how difficult it is to get one's own story straight. The main point of the novel seems to be to give voice to the wounded victim, Caroline Evelyn, and the text underlines how difficult it is to impose her letter and Evelina's claim, with the competing story of Dame Green, another parasite preventing communication.

Language as a barrier in communication

As it turns out, communication is better achieved through other means than language. The limits of language are constantly suggested by the fact that it is not the means the characters resort to, to express true feelings. Language can be hackneyed or insincere, while looks cannot lie. Non-verbal communication is more efficient: the characters convey their feelings through their eyes and facial expressions. When Evelina cannot openly explain her situation with the prostitutes in Marylebone Gardens, she manages to change Lord Orville's wrong impression through her face: "I said not a word; but my face, if it had any connection with my heart, must have looked melancholy indeed" (238). They recurrently communicate in that manner, as when the heroine cannot openly voice her disgust at the conversation during dinner at Mrs. Beaumont's: "[Lord Orville] not only read my sentiments, but, by his countenance, communicated to me his own" (288). The body appears as a surer medium, visually revealing the truth: "I could make no other answer than staring at him with unfeigned

astonishment" (310), "my cheeks glowed with indignation, and I felt too proud to make any answer" (358).

The novel then seems to underline the problematic use of language, focusing on the misuses and creations of words. The specificity of the use each character makes of it hinders communication, increasing possible misunderstandings and on top of that, others are always ready to interfere, distorting the original meaning or the original style in the process. The novel then seems to emphasize the necessity to standardize practices in speech, vividly depicting the varieties of existing idiolects to better reveal how they are bound to lead to misunderstandings. That is why Christina Davidson states: "Burney's anxiety about getting her language "right" can be located in contemporary discourses promoting a centralized standard dialect whilst marginalizing others."[3] Though a particularly wide range of accents and idiolects are represented in *Evelina*, yet those uses of the language appear as distortions from the original meanings of words, distortions that make communication difficult, pointing to the need to standardize the English language.

This was a topical issue, as Samuel Johnson's work on his *Dictionary*, first published in 1755, demonstrates. In his preface to the second edition, he wrote that language

> has itself been hitherto neglected, suffered to spread, under the direction of chance, into wild exuberance, resigned to the tyranny of time and fashion, and exposed to the corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation.[4]

This is what Frances Burney seems to point out with her focus on distortions of meanings or creations of words, underlining the contrast between specific languages, like the language of sailors, with Captain Mirvan's incomprehensible nautical terms, or like the language of

[3] Christina Davidson, "Conversations as Signifiers: Characters on the Margins of Morality in the First Three Novels of Frances Burney". Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas 8.2 (June 2010): 278.
[4] Samuel Johnson, Preface in *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d edition (London: Strahan, 1755-56) 2.

fashion with words like “frizzled” (29), “a shopping” (28), “londonize” (27) or “private ball” (30).

The need to come back to the original meaning of words and to preserve the purity of the language was what motivated Samuel Johnson, who claimed that his aim was to compile “a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained and its duration lengthened”[5]. He also asserted the need to impose rules, to fix language, a need which had already been expressed by Swift in his *Proposal for Improving and Ascertaining the English Language*: “nothing would be of greater use towards the improvement of knowledge and politeness than some effectual method for correcting, enlarging and ascertaining our language”[6]. The link with the improvement of politeness is interesting here, since it can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, ascertaining the language might be a way to suppress vulgar forms but on the other hand, the implication might also be that true politeness would be promoted, if people made a better choice of words, if they actually knew what the words they are using meant. Sharing the concern of her contemporaries, Frances Burney seems to be enjoining her readers not to use language so lightly, even in polite formulas, but to think about the true meaning and implications of the words they choose.

Jane Austen continued this reflection in her novels, as appears in the impossible communication between Elizabeth and Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, which is due to the emptiness of Mr. Collins’s language, combined with a typically male assertion of his view of women on Elizabeth. This is what is at stake in Burney’s and Austen’s novels: women need to suppress all parasitic interferences to finally be able to assert their own view of themselves.

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[5] Samuel Johnson, *The Plan of an English Dictionary*, 1747, in Arthur Murphy, ed., *Works*, Vol 2 (London: Nicols, 1801) 28.
[6] Jonathan Swift, *Proposal for Improving and Ascertaining the English Language*, 2d edition (London: Benj. Tooke, Fleet Street, 1712) 6.

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