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**LINGUISTIC STUDY
OF THE NARRATOR'S VOICE IN
GEORGE ELIOT'S WRITINGS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a linguistic study of the narrator's voice in George Eliot's writings of the Victorian period in Britain. George Eliot thought of herself as a teacher. She was moralistic and philosophical. In recent years there has been a shift of emphasis in criticism of Eliot's work to a greater appreciation and study of the importance of the philosophical ideas and concepts of the day on her writings, primarily the novels.

Four aspects of her narrator's voice are identified--empiricism, idealism, determinism and the religion of humanity--each of which forms a chapter. The discussion of the construction of her speaking subject forms the fifth chapter. The topic of each chapter is defined and aspects of linguistic analysis employed to establish specific linguistic features that correlate with these philosophical stances in her writings. All the genre of her work are included in this study. I have chosen examples from her letters, journal articles, essays and two novels, Adam Bede her first full-length novel and Daniel Deronda her last.

My hope is that in some small way this thesis will contribute to an understanding of George Eliot's speaking subject or narrator's voice.

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INTRODUCTION

Marian Evans (1819-1880), later to become George Eliot the novelist, began her writing career with the dissemination of other's ideas as translator and journalist whilst all the time working on the process of forming a view of reality or a vision of life. Strauss's Das Leben Jesu (The Life of Jesus), Feuerbach's Das Wesen des Christenthums (The Essence of Christianity) and Spinoza's Ethics came under her careful translator's eye and she wrote prolifically for such journals as Westminster Review, The Leader and the Saturday Review, magazines with a progressive tradition. Contact with Continental radicalism intensified her liberal philosophical stance. All the while her letters and journals reflect the kind of metamorphoses which her mind was undergoing consequent to imbibing the philosophical and scientific ideas of a world in a state of flux. She began novel-writing at the age of thirty-six. Eight novels followed over the ensuing twenty years.

Leavis notes that George Eliot was "a great novelist", "an innovator in 'form' and method."¹ She is known for her omniscient intrusive narrative style. Interpersonal features orient the discourse towards a speaker-reader relationship. The I-figure is the speaker who claims to be the real author. In Eliot's case the speaking or narrating voice is moralistic and philosophical assuming a stance of superiority towards the objects of her observation.

In the course of this study, I will analyse passages from selected letters, journal accounts and essays spanning the years 1839 to 1872, and from an early and later novel, Adam Bede (1859)² and Daniel Deronda (1876)³ to illustrate how her moralistic and philosophical ideas are reflected in her style. By looking at her non-fiction as well as her fiction we have a broader view of her various styles. The examples, representative of her writings as a whole, are discussed in chronological order.

The aspects of her narrator's voice that I have singled out are empiricism, idealism, displaced religion (the religion of humanity) and determinism. A discussion of the construction of her speaking subject forms the final chapter. The philosophical belief system positivism with its inherent reliance on empirical notions and the religion

of humanity formed an important basis to Eliot's emerging belief system during her public writing years. Idealism and determinism, with their roots in romanticism and her early Christian experience respectively, are also noted philosophical stances that she takes. The concept of the speaking subject is important too in any discussion of Eliot's "mind-style"--the term used "to refer to any distinctive linguistic presentation of an individual mental self."⁴

My aim has been to define the concepts of empiricism, idealism, determinism, the religion of humanity and Eliot's speaking subject and then to display the specific features of style which correlate with each of these philosophical ideas in her writings. Aspects of linguistic analysis can lead us to understand this voice or speaking subject more fully and this thesis is offered as a modest step to that end.

I am all the while aware that none of these philosophical ideas and concepts is isolated from other discourses. "A discourse takes effect indirectly or directly through its relation to, its address to, another discourse."⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian literary theorist and critic, proposed the theory of dialogism to account for this interactive nature of language. Briefly, the theory suggests that all utterances--spoken or written--are oriented simultaneously towards their past contexts and their present context while anticipating future attempts at imbuing them with meaning. The meaning of reality thus becomes a process of struggle at the site of language. As Kloepfer notes, "Narrative is to be defined as the dialogic interpenetration of external and personal speech which is aimed at the mutual discovery of reality."⁶ The narrator's voice is constructed through language.

NOTES

¹ F.R.Leavis, The Great Tradition (London: Penguin, 1948) 25,28.

² George Eliot, Adam Bede (New York: Holt, 1966). All subsequent quotations from this novel are from this edition.

³ George Eliot, Daniel Deronda (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967). All subsequent quotations from this novel are from this edition.

⁴ R.Fowler, Linguistics and the Novel (London: Methuen, 1983) 103.

⁵ D.Macdonell, Theories of Discourse: An Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 3.

⁶ R.Kloepfer, "Dynamic Structures in Narrative Literature: The Dialogic Principle," Poetics Today 1 (1980): 125.