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TOTAL REPORT IN ALAN BENNETT'S “A CREAM CRACKER UNDER THE SETTEE”

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Résumé : L'objet de cet article est d'analyser comment Alan Bennett parvient à provoquer l'empathie du spectateur dans la série *Talking Heads*. En effet, dans ces monologues, la structure narrative peut être perçue comme un frein à l'implication émotionnelle et les thèmes abordés, s'ils sont universaux, ne sont guère remarquables. Or, ces monologues – qui sont devenus des classiques de la littérature contemporaine – fonctionnent et emportent l'adhésion des spectateurs / lecteurs. Le monologue de Doris dans « A Cream Cracker Under the Settee » est pris comme exemple du tour de force dramatique accompli par l'auteur.

Mots-clés : empathie – double allocutaire – mémoire – narration orale

Introduction

The title of this presentation could apply to any of the *Talking Heads* monologues. Indeed, each speaker reports one or several episodes of his / her life. In “A Cream Cracker Under the Settee”, (henceforth CC) however, things are more strained as the speaker, Doris, looks back upon her life before preferring death to being sent to an old people's home. The monologue starts *in medias res* with Doris lying on her sofa with her hip probably broken after falling off a buffet while dusting.

The major episodes of Doris's life pass through her mind as if this monologue was the extended dramatized version of the split second that precedes death, during which our whole life is said to unfold before our eyes. This undoubtedly adds to the dramatic effect of the piece and gives the

impression that time is both suspended and running out. This total report then will also be a final report. Furthermore, “reporting” is also a major ingredient of the plot as Zulema, the home help, threatens Doris: “I have to **report** on you” (140) and Doris, when she finds a cream cracker left by Zumela under her settee exclaims: “She wants **reporting**”, assuming that this discovery will be enough to save her from Stafford House by blackmailing Zumela.

The obvious problem with such narratives is that they may come across as technically contrived and thematically anecdotal. The puzzle is that such unlikely literary constructs work and the *Talking Heads* monologues actually boosted Alan Bennett’s career.

Paradoxically perhaps, CC is a very lively monologue, somewhat full of humour almost until the end. The report of previous conversations partly accounts for this impression and I shall analyse how reported direct speech (DS) actually structures the narrative and appears as a counterpoint to the few actual verbal interactions. Nevertheless, at first glance, these monologues appear deceptively superficial and trivial but Doris’s verbal and physical divagations – the word being taken both literally and figuratively – manage to take viewers by surprise and make them empathise with an old English Northern lady they may have nothing in common with.

1. Talking to oneself ... and others

A complex discourse structure

As Mick Short (1996, 173) suggests in *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*, “Alan Bennett’s *Talking Heads* series of TV dramatic monologues (which have one actor producing a monologue throughout) have non-prototypical structures”. By this, the author suggests that there are more than two discourse levels, which is the typical case in dramatic pieces. Although the discourse situation is not as complex as that exhibited in *The Lady in the Van* for instance (see McIntyre 2006), it deserves to be made explicit. It is often believed that the prototypical monologue belongs in the theatre. However, its origins can be traced to the medieval period when it was used in narratives to make thoughts explicit. As the novel developed, narrators found more efficient ways of providing this type of information. The monologue appeared somewhat unnatural. In the theatre, the monologue is still a useful convention and the audience have learnt to play along with it. Alan Bennett (2001, 40) claims that:

[...] to watch a monologue on the screen is closer to reading a short story than watching a play.

Bennett's point is that because there is a single point of view expressed, the onus is on the viewer's imagination to make sense of the monologue, making it more like reading a short story than watching a play. Although this statement could be debated or should at least be qualified, the fact of having a single vantage point is comparable to certain narrative constructs with homodiegetic narrators. A monologue, from the Greek *mono*, "one" and *logos*, "discourse", implies a single viewpoint and seems to negate any plurality of voices or any type of interaction. But even homodiegetic narrators sometimes adopt another character's point of view. At this stage, Benveniste's (1974, 82) comments may be useful:

[...] dès qu'il se déclare locuteur et assume la langue, il implante l'*autre* en face de lui, quel que soit le degré de présence qu'il attribue à cet autre. Toute énonciation est, explicite ou implicite, une allocution, elle postule un allocutaire.

To paraphrase Benveniste, the moment someone starts speaking, the image of an addressee is necessarily formed. Burton (1980, 177-8) in *Dialogue and Discourse*, applies this linguistic principle to the concrete reality of the theatre:

When it comes to play-talk, clearly we have, somehow, to map on another dimension to cope with the fact that, when a character is speaking to his fellow characters, he is also in some sense, and possibly indirectly, speaking to the audience as well. Thus the addresser has two different categories of addressees – one in the **microcosm of the play**, one in the **macrocosm of the theatre**.

This "dual audience principle" is here complicated by the fact that within the microcosm, the speaker is also addressing herself and we therefore have a "triple audience". Finally, several devices are at work to make the audience believe they belong in the microcosm, thus creating a merger between two categories of addressees and blurring the lines between actors and viewers. It is useful to keep this complex communication situation in mind to account for Bennett's narrative pieces.

By definition, a monologue is produced in direct style. Whether it is to be analysed as direct speech or direct thought is, in the present case, of minor interest. The Discourse World such as it is defined in Text World Theory, is based on a certain amount of contextual parameters. In CC, the speaker is called Doris, she is 75 and is alone in her living-room. She has a northern accent and lives in the Leeds area. The discourse participants, in addition to Doris, are the viewers and four other characters who, *de facto*, seem to be on the same plane as the viewers, enhancing viewerly involvement in the story. From the start, viewers are under the impression that Doris is speaking to

herself as elderly people are wont to do and the viewers are in the somewhat uncomfortable position of eavesdroppers. This narrative strategy would be difficult to maintain if it was not for the fact that even in every day conversational interaction elderly people are prone to ramble on, impervious, as it were, to the linguistic activity around them. In other words, we shift from a formal stage convention to a one-sided conversation viewers may very well be familiar with in the extra-linguistic reality. This makes the cumbersome and sometimes awkward presence of the addressees in the macrocosm less of an oddity. This device enables them to “willingly suspend their disbelief” and makes them feel they belong to the microcosm. The odd direct addresses to the viewers (“You feel” (141) and “You see” (142)), although their pragmatic status remains a matter of debate, possibly add to this feeling of belonging.

Linguistic interaction in the microcosm

In CC, there are four attempts at communication with other characters. Each one signposts Doris’s psychological evolution. Although these attempts interrupt the smooth unfolding of the monologue, they are closely related to it. The first one is with the cracked picture of her husband and is uttered in a jocular tone:

Cracked the photo. We’re cracked Wilfred. (141)

This utterance is in keeping with the viewer’s “old-widow-talking-to-her-late-husband” schema (see Jeffries & McIntyre 2010, 127-132) and reinforces the “speaking alone” motif of the sequence. In terms of characterisation, Doris appears as a humorous woman full of resources who relishes playful language. In the second instance, Doris realises that her injury might be a serious one. She is determined to get some help as the stage directions indicate: “She cranes towards the window”; “She begins to wave” and remains optimistic as the exclamation “salvation” (145) shows. Her fighting spirit is intact and when she realises the boy is actually “spending a penny” in her garden, she chases him away, verbally abusing him, thereby letting slip her chance of being rescued. In the third instance, Doris appears tired and less determined when she realises that the person who has dropped some ads through the letter box has gone away while she was nodding off. She produces token “Hellos” and her exclamation “Oh stink” (147) underscores her resignation.

These three failed attempts at communication are crucial as they clearly signal the psychological evolution of the character from playfulness to resignation. They are all ordinary and plausible but the anecdotal component of each of them should not distract viewers from their essentially functional role as they clearly anticipate the end of the monologue. The final verbal interaction

with a bobby on the beat is made up of four adjacency pairs (see Levinson 1983). This interaction is crucial in the sense that before Doris was trying to get some help whereas now she deliberately refuses it, thereby accepting death as the only possible outcome of her dusting accident. The first adjacency pair is particularly telling:

Policeman: Hello, Hello. Are you all right?
Doris: No, I'm all right. (151)

In conversation analysis, this exchange is regarded as neutral although the preferred answer would be "Yes, I'm all right". Doris uses a "short cut" here and construes the policeman's question as a pre-request of the type "Is there a problem?" and answers the unstated request rather than the actual one. Such forms are thus interpreted as positive answers (Yule 1996, 67-8). However, Doris's answer seems to encapsulate the dilemma she has been fighting with so far. Being rescued implies admitting she was dusting and then running the risk of being sent to a home. Not being rescued implies accepting death in *her* home. Similarly, when the policeman takes his leave, the exchange goes as follows:

Policeman: Sorry. Take care.
He goes.
Doris: Thank you.
She calls again.
Doris: Thank you.

The first "Thank you" is the preferred answer to the policeman's first part. The second one, however, seems to carry more interpretative ambivalence. It is tempting to assign different pragmatic values to these two second parts. The second "thank you" can be interpreted as Doris's final attempt at communication altogether as if she was giving life a last shot. Conversely, and although this may be stretching interpretation, her last "thank you" could suggest that Doris is grateful that the policeman should – unwittingly – let her have her own way and decide it is time for her to go.

Embedded Direct Speech

Parallel to these verbal exchanges, the content of Doris's monologue is packed with various reports of conversation, mainly with Zumela, her home help, and Wilfred her husband. Embedded DS is thus foregrounded. There are only four instances of indirect speech. All the other reported interactions are in DS, which is in stark contrast with Doris's other conversations in which she is fairly laconic. In terms of characterisation, this device is also a splendid way of

presenting Doris as a brilliant storyteller. In the monologue, DS is exclusively introduced by the verb *say*. As Alan Bennett (2001, 40) explains:

‘Said’ or ‘says’ is generally all that is required to introduce reported speech, because whereas a novelist or short story writer has a battery of expressions to choose from (‘exclaimed’, ‘retorted’, ‘groaned’, ‘lisped’), in live narration such terms seem literary and self-conscious. Adverbs too (‘she remarked tersely’) seem to over-egg the pudding or else acquire undue weight in the mouth of supposedly artless narrators.

What Alan Bennett fails to mention is the fact that all the paralinguistic notations (see Brown 1990) he mentions (phonetic markers indicating emotions) are in fact taken care of by the speakers of his monologues and directly reach viewers as most of the illocutionary force is conveyed through the speakers’ “tone of voice”. These chunks of reported speech represent world-switches that actually report past conversations. In the following example, Doris plays both parts extremely well:

[...] When she’s going **she says**, ‘Doris. I don’t want to hear that you’ve been touching the Ewbank. The Ewbank is out of bounds’. **I said**, ‘I could just run round with it now and again?’ **She said**, ‘You can’t run anywhere. You’re on trial here.’ **I said**, ‘What for?’ **She said**, ‘For being on your own. For not behaving sensibly. For not acting like a woman of seventy-five who has a pacemaker and dizzy spells and doesn’t have the sense she was born with.’ **I said** ‘Yes, Zumela’ [...] (104)

In other cases Doris rehearses what she intends to say to Zumela to “get her own back”, that is to win the Stafford House battle:

I’m going to save this cream cracker and show it her next time she starts going on about Stafford House. **I’ll say**, ‘Don’t Stafford House me, lady. This cream cracker was under the settee. I’ve only got to send this cream cracker to the Director of Social Services and you’ll be on the carpet. Same as the cream cracker. I’ll be in Stafford House, Zumela, but you’ll be in the Unemployment Exchange.’ (144)

These two conversations dramatize the discrepancy between reality (the first conversation) where Doris is forced into a submissive position (as the speech acts used by Zulema make clear). Prosodically, Doris beautifully renders Zumela’s condescension when addressing her as a child and forcing her to surrender. In her imagined verbal counterattack, Zulema is forced into silence by Doris’s crescendo salvo. In other cases, Doris’s reports don’t involve any precise characters and although Doris remains witty and articulate, her hope for a positive ending seems to be waning.

‘What’s your name? Doris? Right. Pack your case. You belong in Stafford House’. (150)

These world-switches, although they are not on the same plane as the actual interactions between Doris and other characters, play a functionally similar role. They are more lively and entertaining but the same evolution is

perceived. However, there is a major contrast between the scarcity of the words exchanged in the microcosm and the vividness and eventfulness of the reported dialogues. Past, future and even hypothetical conversations instantly appear as counterpoints to the situation at hand. Nevertheless, these three reports, presented here in chronological order, clearly signal that the trap is closing on Doris and that she is acutely aware of this. As Alan Bennett (2001, 40) points out:

Only Doris, the old lady who has fallen and broken her hip in *A Cream Cracker Under the Settee*, knows the score and that she is done for, but though she can see it's her determination to dust that's brought about her downfall, what she doesn't see is that it's the same obsession that tidied her husband into the grave.

Doris is indeed trapped in the material world surrounding her both literally and figuratively. Her final re-evaluation of her life is based on objects and people rather than on feelings and ideas. Falling off the buffet and finding a cream cracker can be easily handled. Facing death and coming to terms with the past is a more difficult venture. Doris's train of thoughts is dictated by her immediate environment. According to Norrick (2003) in *Conversational Narrative*, this is characteristic of such narratives. In CC, the consequence is the juxtaposition of trivial and existential notions, humour and desperation, something which also happens to be Alan Bennett's trademark.

2. Talking trivia?

"A Woman of No Importance"

The first and the final lines of CC give the impression that the whole monologue is about trivial events and that it is too late to do anything. The use of the present perfect gives the viewers an impression of a *fait accompli*; the adjective "silly" underscores the mundane nature of the situation; the self-addressed "never mind" seems to close the case:

It's such a **silly** thing to **have done**. (140)

Never mind. It's done with now, anyway. (152)

The whole monologue is punctuated by such statements, putting an end to Doris's various anecdotes. When she reports her husband never fixed the garden gate for lack of time, she concludes: "Well, he's got a minute now, bless him" (142). When she complains that the neighbourhood keeps changing and that she doesn't know anybody anymore, she explains (144):

Then she went and folks started to come and go. You lose track. I don't think they're married half of them. You see all sorts.

Doris's discourse actually welds matter-of-fact comments as well as strings of prejudices that may be expected from an ageing lady. This apparent trivia is presented in a familiar, colloquial and sometimes dialectal language. The use of dialect is notoriously difficult to render and Bennett is quite frugal in his use of it. With Leech & Short (2007, 136) we can say that authors "are more interested in the illusion, the living flavour, of dialect, rather than with exact reproduction". On top of the odd lexical items, "sneck" (142) or "lasses" (150), Bennett remains quite circumspect and only a few syntactical constructions are suggestive of a Northern or of a non-standard dialect: "Them's her leaves" (143) or again "Don't let's jump the gun, Wilfred" (146). The rest of the Northern flavour is taken care of by Thora Hird. Lexical repetition is a typical feature of Bennett's monologues which instantly makes them sound authentic, natural and fluent:

Zumela doesn't **dust**. She **half dusts**. (140)
She's not **half done** this place, **Zumela**. (144)

The dog would be his **province**.
I said, 'Yes, and whose **province** would all the little hairs be?' (145)

"The dusting is **my department**" (140)
"We can be self-sufficient in the vegetable **department**" (145)

'Lock it and put it on the chain Doris. You never know who comes. It may not be a **bona fide caller**.' It never is a **bona fide caller**'. (146)

This device increases the cohesion of the piece, setting up a system of repetitions and echoes. Linguistic creativity is another important feature of this monologue. About the dog Doris and her husband wanted to have, she says:

I didn't want one of them great lolloping, lamppost-smelling articles. (145)

In the introduction to *Talking Heads*, Bennett attributes this sentence to his own father. When used in conjunction, all these features have a massive impact on the viewers:

Mix. I don't want to **mix**. Comes to the finish and they suddenly want you to **mix**. I don't want to be stuck with a lot of **old lasses**. And they all **smell of pee**. And **daft** half of them, banging tambourines. You go **daft** there, there's **nowhere else for you to go** but **daft**. Wearing somebody else's frock. They even mix up your teeth. [...] And Zumela says, 'You don't understand, Doris. You're not up to date. They have lockers, now. Flowerbeds. They have their hair done. They go on trips to Wharfedale.' I said, 'Yes. **Smelling of pee**.' She said, 'You're prejudiced, you.' I said, 'I am, where hygiene is concerned.' (150)

Involuntary memories

What, at first glance, appears to be a disconnected set of random recollections / reflexions is in fact a highly organised construct. During the entire monologue, Doris slowly crawls in her house in order to get some help. She goes from the place she has fallen to the fireplace and the window before finally reaching the front-door. The different parts of the house actually chart Doris's life and trigger memories in a pattern akin to Proustian memory, i.e. with ordinary objects conjuring up involuntary recollections.

In each case, everyday objects are foregrounded: Wilfred's cracked photo, the sneck, the bush etc. enable Doris to remember the past and to project herself into a time and into a place where things were different. In this sense, the viewer's experience is similar to visiting an old lady who goes through her photo album and knick-knacks in order to re-live happy memories. Doris's account is very much embodied in as much as all her senses are alert: she watches Wilfred's photo and sees the leaves coming down, she hears people outside, she feels her "numby leg" and even tastes the cream cracker she has discovered. Viewers are literally invited to feel with her, to empathise with her. However, the most poignant recollection is brought about by the very absence of an object:

This is where we had the pram. **You couldn't get past for it.** Proper pram then, springs and hoods. Big wheels. More like cars than prams. Not these fold-up jobs. You were proud of your pram. (146)

The deictic and spatial references as well as the precision of the description make it ever so real despite its absence. The subject of the pram is then dropped and followed by a satirical interlude involving Jehovah Witnesses. A crucial stage direction reintroduces the pram as main topic:

She looks at the place where the pram was.

I wanted him called John. **The midwife said he wasn't fit to be called anything and had we any newspaper?** Wilfred said. 'Oh yes. She saves newspaper. She saves shoeboxes as well.' (147)

It is striking that the midwife's words should be reported in free indirect speech, one of the few instances in the monologue. The conjunction introduced ("and") in the reported speech adds a sense of urgency and violence to the episode. Similarly, Wilfred's practical sense verging on enthusiasm couldn't be presented in a more negative light. Doris's evaluation, indirect as it may be, encapsulates the emptiness of her married life:

I don't think Wilfred minded? A Kiddy. It was the same as the allotment and the fretwork. Just a craze. He said, 'We're better off, Doris. Just the two of us'. (148)

This apparent lack of feeling on Wilfred's part is reminiscent of what Alan Bennett describes in *Untold Stories* about his own father whom he only kissed once, just before his death and about men in his family who were not very good at showing emotions.

“In my end is my beginning”

The lost baby and the threat of being sent to Stafford House are clearly the two major themes upon which the monologue pivots. The evocation of the lack of hygiene in Stafford House where old ladies are believed to be “smelling of pee” triggers – by contrast – another memory of the time when Doris was pregnant. This evocation, resulting from two opposite notions (pregnancy and old age), is the opportunity for Alan Bennett to show his dexterity in evoking a by-gone age:

When people were clean and the streets were clean and it was all clean and you could walk down the street and folks smiled and passed the time of day, I'd leave the door on the latch and go on to the end for some toffee, and when I came back Dad was home and the cloth was on and plates out and we'd have our tea. Then we'd side the pots and I'd wash up while he read the paper and we'd eat toffees and listen to the wireless all them years ago when we were first married and I was having the baby. (150)

Although the house remains the central element of Doris's life in her recollection, it is no longer a place of entrapment and pain but the symbol of the security of a home. Something quite different from the Home she is to be sent to. This analepsis is totally detached from the rest of the monologue. On the contrary, the final analepsis is anchored in the present. Doris has just refused the policeman's help and she concludes:

You've done it now, Doris. Done it now, Wilfred. (151)

This parallel structure clearly indicates that they are both to be blamed for the present situation. Her final recollection turns back the clock even further:

I wish I was ready for bed. All washed and in a clean nightie and the bottle in, all sweet and crisp and clean like when I was little on Baking Night, sat in front of the fire with my long hair still. (152)

This final evocation of the young girl Doris was, which couldn't be more different from the old woman the viewers have come to know during the monologue, can only incite them to reflect on their own mortality with the necessary gravity and the amused distance Alan Bennett manages to combine in his writing.

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