

"DELIRIOUS MONOLOGUES": CHRISTINA STEAD'S "EGOTISTICAL MONSTERS"

Maria Sloggett - University of Adelaide

There were coarse, hasty blandishments, and arguments whose strong, greedy intention immediately crudely appeared: a verbosity approaching surely morbid conditions, a repetition, excitements false and real, frenzy, and almost delirious monologues as if the words came out without any censorship (*I'm Dying Laughing* 103).

Stead constructs polyphonic narratives in which many characters speak and interact, yet some of her novels present characters whose voices dominate. These "egotistical monsters", as David Malouf calls them (36), talk in long and exhausting monologues. Yet these characters do not attain a position of authority in these novels; their views are not presented as "truth" and the narrator is distant from them. The texts themselves and the structural presentation of the characters are by no means "monologic" but Stead portrays characters with monologic world-views, that is, characters who cannot or will not engage in dialogic relations with others as equal subjects. This monologism is undermined through the polyphonic narrative structure in which the "egotistical monsters" exist. The excessive loquaciousness of these characters is also explained by the author's attempt to portray their monologic natures. This paper deals primarily with one of Stead's most domineering and tiresome characters, Robbie Grant of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, a character whom Laurie Clancy has called "the most odious character in all of Stead's fiction" (12).

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism rests on its distinction from its opposite term "monologism". He perceives monologism in strains of contemporary Western ideology where there is a reification and systemisation of ideas as truth (1984, 80). A monologic position is one where there is a unitary and finalised view of the world. Bakhtin defines the monologic viewpoint in this way:

Everything capable of meaning can be gathered together in one consciousness and subordinated to a unified accent; whatever does not submit to such a reduction is accidental and unessential. The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres and ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism, with its cult of a unified and exclusive reason... (1984, 82).

Monologism can be manifested in literature in various ways. For instance, the author may be the dominant and controlling consciousness in the novel, and the characters are subordinated to this controlling discourse. Bakhtin argues that in this form of the novel there is only "*one cognitive subject*, all else being merely *objects* of its cognition" (1984, 71). Thus the characters have no independence; ideas are placed in their mouths and are not interpellated into a character's personality and world-view. These ideas are abstract and gravitate "toward the

systemically monologic world-view of the author himself [sic]" (1984, 79).

The compositional form, the monologue, has its genesis in monologic ideology as the voice is contained in a structure which is closed, and distinct from more inter-subjective structures or dialogues (Bakhtin 1984, 88). Yet in a text as a *whole* the ideas, or the character's voice, presented in a monologue may interact dialogically with others in the narrative structure (1984, 88). That is, the use of monologue in itself does not mean that the work is correspondingly monologic because this depends on the overall design and outlook of the text. In the case of Stead's egotistical monsters the prolonged monologues are indicative of their monologic dispositions. Their incessant talk suggests their inability to listen to, or recognise the validity of, the voices of others. But these monologues do not delimit the texts themselves as monologic.

The prevalence of talk in Stead's narratives in general can be explained through her polyphonic project. In his analysis of Dostoevsky's polyphonic narratives Bakhtin argues that the characters are not objects controlled by an over-riding authorial consciousness but are allowed to express their own subjectivities. This independence leads to a great deal of direct dialogue in which the characters voice their ideological beliefs and their personalities. In Bakhtin's view, the author's goal is to present characters with as much objectivity as possible and in this way the characters' talk underscores the distance of the author who has given up monologic control. In a polyphonic novel, if the hero, or a main protagonist, dominates the text this voice is a consciousness which is not the author's own; it is a free and independent voice. In this way Bakhtin argues that "the hero's self-consciousness, once it becomes the dominant, breaks down the monologic unity of the work..." (1984, 51). Stead's characters, similarly, are given free reign to express their subjectivities "without any censorship" (*IDL* 103).

Because the characters are left to speak for themselves they present all aspects of their personalities through their talk — all detail, important and trivial, is described by them. The simulation of independence, Bakhtin argues, can lead to "endless repetitions, reservations, and long-windedness" (1984, 212). Part of the loquaciousness of characters such as Robbie Grant can therefore be explained by the polyphonic approach with its dedication to the independence of the character's voice. Yet Stead's garrulous characters seem to exceed the basic requirements of polyphony in their excessiveness and domination: they ramble, shout, babble, and repeat themselves endlessly. The circularities and repetitions in the speech patterns of these characters prone to monologue are indicative of their egotism and monologic world-views.

While the word "ego" is used here in its association with personality, it is, more precisely, used as a term which is useful in its indication of monologism — a finalised and unitary viewpoint which dismisses the possibility of others — rather than an exclusively individual or psychological sense.

* * * * *

As has already been indicated, the voice of Robbie Grant dominates *ALT*. The title of the novel comes from one of his many pick-up lines: he constantly entices women to his apartment by inviting them up for "a little tea, a little chat" (eg. 15). Grant is an incessant talker and he is forever repeating himself, droning on at his cronies on the same topics. As an example of Grant's speech take this monologue in which he hounds Edda Flack to write a play about his own life for him:

You see, you got to give the man some constructive traits, he's a no-good, a jerk, Kincaid, you can buy him for five cents in some respects, but in other respects, he has a streak of gold. You can have the woman make him over if you like. You're the artist. And the girl's got to have character. I say to the blonde, 'You're beautiful, but I don't love you, you can't hold me: you gave me too much pain, and it's character that counts.' And the other is famous, but she is real Egyptian saki and she prefers to come home and make breakfast for me. I have character too — a renunciation scene, very good — 'No, no, no,' I say — 'no for you, and no for me — I mightn't love you if you weren't famous.' 'No, no,' she says, 'fame means nothing to me, I want to come home, make breakfast for you, I prefer that as a career. Besides, I owe it to you. You paid for me at the start. Now I love you. That's your profit.' 'All right,' I say, 'then we'll both do something glorious, we'll go and rebuild Europe, Poland, Italy, somewhere, I'll show them how to grow or distribute cotton. I'll show them cotton machinery. Even the Soviet Union would do-' I go and find out about the *saboteurs* — and you sing, or dance, or act - you are famous, you take your fame with you" (45).

Despite the heteroglossia in this passage — the many voices and discourses which Grant calls upon — all other voices are consumed by his own and are made to serve his egomania. His talk is representative of his power; his wealth and influence, in mercantile circles at least, make him the kind of man that must be listened to for fear of his disfavour. Very few of his listeners tell him to stop, so he talks without any regulation, and goes on and on. Even if he is asked to halt his monologues he ignores the interjector and continues. Indeed Edda's harried response to the monologue above is, "Let me think, don't talk any more, Robbie, let me think" (45), yet, after pausing briefly to fix her a drink (which she is in need of by this stage), he proceeds with his monomania. These monologues are often too much for his listeners who either pity him, laugh at him, or burst into tears in despair. In this case Edda literally cries, and exclaims, "Like a drum, your one crazy idea. Like a bad headache" (46).

Grant is monologic by nature because of his infuriating inability to listen to others. He does not recognise the subjectivity of the others, or their equal importance. For example, when David Flack asks Robbie to consider his and his daughter's troubles Grant halts his narrative briefly to consider them but then reverts quickly to talk of his own concerns (168-9). While the world in this novel is certainly not a representation of Grant's solipsism it is clear that Grant perceives the world only through his eyes and sees others only in relation to his own needs. In Bakhtin's terms this is a monologic approach to the world:

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another / with equal rights (*thou*). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) *another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness... Monologue is finalised and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge it in any *decisive* force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materialises all reality. Monologue pretends to be the *ultimate word* (1984, 292-3).

* * * * *

Unlike Stead's other novels in which opposition to the overbearing character is more prevalent, Robbie's voice is so dominant that very few voices are heard speaking out against him. Edda Flack draws a carnivalesque caricature of Grant in which she emphasises his large nose and "sniffing belly" (103), but she is one of the few to criticise Grant directly. There is a structural difference between *ALT* and *The Man Who Loved Children*, for instance, because Sam Pollit's voice is tempered by Henny and Louie who combat his domination. Robbie's financial influence means that he is not countered by much opposition at all. Gilbert does not take up the role of Louie Pollit who challenges her father, for, despite his unflattering analysis of his father, Gilbert wants to learn Grant's business in order to fulfil his position as the inheritor of patriarchal wealth. Thus the opposition from other characters is relatively understated in the case of *ALT*; Grant's position of power denies a dialogic environment in which his opinions would be challenged. The subversion of Grant's monologic voice is largely contained, then, in the narrative structure of the novel itself.

Characters such as Grant, Nellie Cotter or Sam Pollit do not engage in dialogue with others which is, in a sense, a sign of an absence of depth, or an indication of immaturity. These are child-like personalities in accordance with Lev Vygotsky's¹ and is largely oblivious to this description of the child subject in his book, *Thought and Language*. Vygotsky judged that the egocentric speech of a child is not representative of the externalisation of internal thoughts but that such internal speech has yet to develop (228).

Vygotsky's model can be applied to Stead's egocentric characters because they do not learn by engaging in dialogue, they do not change, but use external speech incessantly as if they are incapable of inner speech and thought. The absence of the depiction of an inner life *per se* does not mean that these are characters with monologic personalities because a polyphonic structure allows characters to express their inner selves aloud. Yet in the case of Stead's egotistical characters the proliferation of surface talk indicates an absence of self-criticism and inner life. Grant cannot keep secrets and talks so that the whole town knows of his affairs. Gilbert tells us that his father "has never quite emerged from that cloud of infantile personality. He is obsessed by his own impulses. He sees the world as driven by the same, and he attributes these impulses to others" (125).

While the characters can be seen as child-like and egocentric personalities, they must also be appraised as figures of authority in the sense that they seek to control and dominate others. By constructing them as immature personalities Stead undermines these figures of power. Inherent in this characterisation is the implicit, ethical criticism of monologism as infantile.

The narrative, while enabling Grant to express himself freely, nonetheless mocks his utterances or voice. Through his very inability to regulate his language Grant is constructed as a figure of mockery. The *profusion* of monologue serves to undermine the authority of Grant's speech by consciously mimicking that logic and demonstrating its absurdities. His "lines" are repeated so often and to so many different women that they become farcical and meaningless. His words, the signifiers in his speech, are rendered numb and valueless, detached from their signifieds. Indeed the character Livy Wright employs mimicry to demonstrate her frustration at Grant when she regurgitates all his one-liners to his face (220).² This mockery and mimicry serve to disrupt Grant's sinister control of language.

Grant's monologues represent more than just his desire for power or his position of power. It is uncontrolled verbosity, often mad and ridiculous; at times Grant's speech extends from the repetitive and garrulous to the nonsensical. In a scene with Gilbert the narrator tells us that "Grant looked curiously up into the young face, and began to gabble, beset by a sudden need... He chuckled suddenly in a senile way..." (225). Grant's need to control the lives of others is great, and his desire for women and wealth greater, so that Grant's speech indicates the forces which drive him:

The talk of love had become a daily hunger with him, he was starving, never satisfied; and he needed the lavish affection and hopes of women; thus, he was obliged ever to talk bigger (195).

Barbara Kent tantalisingly frustrates his desire and when she keeps eluding him his language becomes correspondingly befuddled and anxious. He must speak about her over and over again to each of his cronies. Grant's mad talk is not an eruption of the speech of the disempowered, of the hysteric or madman whose speech challenges and mimics the dominant order. Instead his speech is overloaded with the desires and ideologies of the dominant order. This saturation speaks the order's irrationality, its fundamental uncertainty.

In its spinning velocity Grant's speech loses its controlling centre and becomes "centripetal" speech switched into over-drive so that it is in danger of imminent collapse. According to Bakhtin the dominant order seeks to enforce a unified language which suppresses heteroglossia, the voices which speak against that order's authority. Yet the centrifugal languages which cannot be encompassed by the centre of authority are always and inevitably extant, even if they are denied. As Bakhtin says, "Alongside the centripetal forces the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work" (1981, 272). If we accept Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, monologic viewpoints are illusory because they necessarily suppress those positions which they do not claim for themselves. In

ALT Stead has the character whose speech seeks to be centripetal spin out of control: because Grant's all-consuming ego is not regulated it threatens to expand into oblivion, to consume itself.

* * * * *

While the narrative mocks and undermines the voice and character of Robbie Grant there is, simultaneously, an immense enjoyment in and fascination for that character perceptible in the narration. The author revels in the depiction of the voice allowing the character to run away with the text. There is a certain enthusiasm in the portrayal of Robbie as a criminal and rogue. The text seems to relish a certain "gaiety in vice" (*ALT* 97) which can be distinguished from a moral binary vision of evil versus good.

Therefore, *ALT* is not an unequivocal and scathing satire of the figure of Robbie Grant. As well as the fondness on the author's part evident in the portrayal of him, there are also indications that Grant cannot or should not be seen as an inhuman monster. As Robbie Grant says, laughing, "I haven't done good, but I haven't done any evil either" (44). The text on some levels asks us to suspend a moral or satiric reading of Grant through its incorporation of ambivalence in the portrait of him. Arguably, moral condemnation cannot be a driving force in the plot of a polyphonic narrative because such a novel seeks to be objective in the creation of its independent characters.

Yet, this is not to dismiss the fact that Stead's "egotistical monsters" *can* be read as monstrous. They are monstrous to some extent but it is clear that Stead's purpose in the depiction of these characters is not just satirical or founded in moral condemnation. Coupled with the image of the hideous monster is monstrosity as carnivalesque, or Gargantuan. If we are to think of these characters as monsters, it is not as manifestations of alienation (Hall 106). Rather these "monsters" are representations of monologism itself; they are abominations of power.

It has been argued that inherent in polyphony is the goal of objectivity, and the disavowal of moral judgement in the portrayal of the protagonist. Yet it is clear here that implicit in Stead's mockery and polyphonic subversion of these monologic characters is a critique of monologism in its many forms. It is impossible to deny the transcendent control, or political purpose, of the author, but, it should be emphasised, Stead allows her characters to speak independently within her political framework. Thus there is an ambivalence between an objective and enthusiastic portrayal of the character and the subversion of that character's voice and domination.

* * * * *

It is relevant to consider what Stead is doing when she writes a novel in which a character who drives his listeners to despair dominates, for Grant's monologues have the same effect upon many of her readers. Grant's dominance of the text

makes us wish that there could be more emphasis on other voices to temper his own; we seek a character like Louie Pollit to respond to Grant by telling him to "Shut up, shut up...I can't stand your gassing..." (TMW 372). Robbie consumes the narrative and we want to censor him; indeed Robbie's voice is uncensored to the extent that our tolerance is tested — we wish not to have to hear his despicable talk. By allowing Grant's voice control of the novel Stead could be said to create a mono-tonous text, a one-voiced text. The way Grant engulfs the text creates the appearance of a dangerous closeness between the narrator and character (Sheridan 45).

Yet, as is already clear, the characterisation of Grant is a result of Stead's polyphonic project: she allows his voice to express itself freely and without any censorship. The author is in no way close to the character in the sense that they might be mistaken for each other. It has also been demonstrated that Grant's domination is intended to be indicative of his monologic disposition. This conscious device on the part of the author dismisses any suggestion that the difficulties of the text: its repetitiveness, tediousness and odiousness, are representative of the author's style. While one voice may dominate, it is not the author's, a fact which underscores the author's distance and the goal of objectivity in the portrayal of Grant. Therefore Stead's text is not monologic because behind Grant's voice is laughter and polyphony which create an underlying multi-voicedness. It is paradoxical that the novel risks being perceived as monologic in its portrayal of the predominance of one consciousness, but as has already been noted, this monologism is found merely in the surface talk, in the one voice — beneath this there is the dialogic structure of the novel which undermines the monologic utterance.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. UK: Manchester UP, 1984.
- _____. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas, 1981.
- Clancy, Laurie. "Arabesques and Banknotes." *Australian Book Review* 42 (1982): 10-14.
- Hall, Jonathan. "Unachievable Monologism and the Production of the Monster." *Bakhtin Carnival and Other Subjects*. David Shepherd Ed. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993.
- Malouf, David. "Stead is Best at Egotistical Monsters." *Sydney Morning Herald* 17 July (1982): 36.
- Morson, Gary Saul and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. California: Stanford UP, 1990.
- Sheridan, Susan. "Re-Reading Christina Stead." *Southerly* 53.4 (1993): 42-46.
- Stead, Christina. *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*. London: Virago, 1981.
- _____. *I'm Dying Laughing*. London: Virago, 1986.
- _____. *The Man Who Loved Children*. Introduction by Randall Jarrell. England: Penguin, 1970.
- Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and Language*. Trans. Alex Kozulin. Massachusetts

Institute of Technology, 1986.

Endnotes

1. Vygotsky's ideas on language and subject development are thought to have influenced Bakhtin (see Emerson and Morson 205).
2. Grant is largely oblivious to this affront but his one, typically carnivalesque, response is to say, "I declare no one who doesn't ask to be taken in and sold for tripe" (221).