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Poetics of "Prophecy" in E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*

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As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy. — Plato, *Ion*.¹

Introduction

In 1927, E. M. Forster gave a series of lectures in Cambridge as part of the annual Clark Lectures sponsored by Trinity College from January to March. In that October, those lectures were published as *Aspects of the Novel*.² Forster lectured on each aspect in a novel: "story," "people," "plot," "fantasy," "prophecy," "pattern and rhythm." After he wrote *A Passage to India* (1924), Forster did not write a novel. His novels are, then, only six: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room With a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *Maurice* (1971), which was published posthumously, and *A Passage to India*. So, we can presume that all his art as a novelist is in those lectures.

Almost concurrently with Forster's lectures, in 1922 Mikhail Bakhtin wrote *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* (*Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*, Leningrad, 1929), the predecessor of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (*Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, Moscow, 1963). In this book, Bakhtin verified Dostoevsky's poetics in his novels, namely polyphony. Polyphony allows characters to be "not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse (Bakhtin 6-7)."

Hence a polyphonic novel is in striking contrast to realism in the usual sense, or monologic realism, where the only author's consciousness exists and the rest is his/her object. He thinks that the significance of Dostoevsky cannot be grasped with contemporary critical categories because they do not notice that dialogic principle.

It is noteworthy that Forster devotes the most space in order to illustrate Dostoevsky's style in the lecture of "prophecy," in that he also seems to glimpse "*the new thing* that Dostoevsky had glimpsed" (Bakhtin 42-43). Forster certainly thinks that "prophecy" is beyond the current critical categories. For the purpose of investigating "prophecy," he says, "we have indeed to lay aside the single vision which we bring to most of literature and life and have been trying to use thorough most our own enquiry and take up a different set of tools" (101). What Forster calls "prophecy" is not foretelling future, but an unique implication of style, a particular tone of voice, in other words, a song. He remarks, "I can only thinks of four writers to illustrate it [prophecy] — Dostoyevsky, Melville, D. H. Lawrence and Emily Brontë" (95). According to David Lodge, D. H. Lawrence is the closest novelist to Dostoevsky: "in *Women in Love*, Lawrence wrote what is probably the nearest thing to a Dostoevskian novel, in Bakhtin's terms, to be found in English literature" (Lodge 92). While Forster points out that Lawrence is not always a "prophet," he considers *Women in Love* as a prophetic novel. Interestingly, both of them pay attention to the same scene, where Birkin is throwing stones at the reflection of the moon.³ Therefore, Forster also seems to catch a glimpse of "*the new thing*" within the novels which he regards as prophetic, though he should not have known *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* until 1963 at least.

I will try to investigate whether Forster also pays attention to something polyphonic in terms of "prophecy." However, Forster

probably expresses "prophecy" as a novelist more easily than he explains it as a critic, for, as Lionel Trilling calls him an impressionistic critic, he is not so much a critic as a novelist.⁴ Accordingly, we also need to observe the nature of "prophecy" in Forster's own novel in order to guarantee his criticism. As a result, we will understand that "prophecy" means the process of a character's finding a true voice for him/her through dialogue with others in polyphonic structure.

I. Forster's Comparison between "Prophet" and "Preacher"

Forster's way to distinguish a prophet's work from a non-prophet's is marvelously close to Bakhtin's way of telling Dostoevsky's novels from monologic ones. Forster extracts a passage of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky and compares it with that of *Adam Bead* by Gorge Eliot. After that comparison, Forster states, "the difference between these passages is that the first writer [Gorge Eliot] is a preacher, and the second [Dostoevsky] a prophet" (91). What Forster calls a preacher is very similar to a monologic writer. Forster's impression of Hetty is that of a typical character in a monologic novel: "Hetty, taken by herself, is quite adequate. She is a poor girl, brought to confess her crime, and so to a better frame of mind" (91). This impression completely applies to what Bakhtin thinks about a character in a monologic novel:

In a monologic design, the hero is closed and his semantic boundaries strictly defined: he acts, experiences, thinks, and is conscious within the limits of what he is, that is within the limit of his image defined as reality. (Bakhtin 52)

On the other hand, Forster describes a prophet's character: "But Mitya, taken by himself, is not adequate. He only becomes real through what he implies, his mind is not in a frame at all.

Taken by himself he seems distorted out of drawing, intermittent" (91). In this remark, Forster has the same opinion as Bakhtin. He insists, "Dostoevsky always represents a person on the threshold of a final decision, at a moment of crisis, at an unfinalizable —unpredeterminable— turning point for his soul" (Bakhtin 61). Besides, Forster thinks that Mitya overcomes the authorial planning of plot in contrast to Hetty: "Dinah would say she was glad, Hetty would recount her dream, which, unlike Mitya's, would be logically connected with the crisis" (93). Bakhtin also has the same comment as Forster: "all logical links remain within the limits of individual consciousnesses [in Dostoevsky's novels], and do not govern the event-interrelationships among them" (Bakhtin 9).

Thus we understand that Forster is dissatisfied with "plot" because planning "plot" does not allow him to "represents a person on the threshold of a final decision" (Bakhtin 61). In the lecture of "plot," he shows his dissatisfaction: "Instead of standing above his work and controlling it [a novel], cannot the novelist throw himself into it and be carried along to some goal that he does not foresee?" (67). That is, the reason why Forster considers "plot" to be obstacle is that in planning plot an author objectifies characters and manipulates them at the expensive of unpredictable communication with them. "Plot" does not permit an author to communicate with his/her characters on equal terms.

The prophets like Dostoevsky or D. H. Lawrence can overcome the authorial planning of plot in terms of dialogue. In polyphony, an author tries to associate with his/her character on equal terms. The author does not have information about each character's own consciousness that the character does not know. That is, the author does not have "'[s]econdhand' discourse providing a final summary of personality" (Bakhtin 251). The information always stays within the character's consciousness:

The author retains for himself, that is, for his exclusive field of vision, not a single essential definition, not a single trait, not the smallest feature of the hero: he enters it all into the field of vision of the hero himself, he casts it all into the crucible of the hero's own self-consciousness. (Bakhtin 48)

That is to say, the author does not describe the world outside the character's consciousness but the world within his/her consciousnesses: "We see not who he is, but he is conscious of himself; our act of artistic visualization occurs not before the reality of the hero, but before a pure function of his awareness of that reality" (Bakhtin 49). As a result, the author does not have the definition of the character's whole personality, and the character can be "a person on the threshold of a final decision, at a moment of crisis, at an unfinalizable—unpredeterminable—turning point for his soul" (Bakhtin 61). At the same time, the character's consciousness or discourse essentially orients itself to others'. His/her consciousness of self cannot be separated from other's consciousness of him/her. In Dostoevsky's works, "to be means to communicate dialogically" (Bakhtin 252):

[T]he orientation of one person to another person's discourse and consciousness is, in essence, the basic theme of all Dostoevsky's works. The hero's attitude toward himself is inseparably bound up with his attitude toward another, and with the attitude of another toward him. His consciousness of self is constantly perceived against the background of other's consciousness of him—"I for myself" against the background of—"I for another." Thus the hero's words about himself are structured under the continuous influence of someone else's words about him. (Bakhtin 207)

This is how in Dostoevsky's works, "[o]nly in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the "man in man" be

revealed, for others as well as for oneself" (Bakhtin 252). That is to say, Dostoevsky's aim of "portraying all the depths of the human soul" (Bakhtin 61) can be realized only when he seriously addresses his characters on equal terms. Such characters are not merely authorial objects and beyond the authorial planning as "another and other autonomous 'I'" (Bakhtin 63). Thus "dialogue in Dostoevsky is [...] always external to the plot, that is, internally independent of the plot-related interrelationships of the speakers—although, of course, dialogue is prepared for by the plot" (Bakhtin 252).⁵ In that dialogue, then, the author certainly has a sense of freedom from "standing above his work and controlling it [a novel]" (67):

And this dialogue—the "great dialogue" of the novel as a whole—takes place not in the past, but right now, that is, in the *real present* of the creative process. This is no stenographer's report of a *finished* dialogue, from which the author has already withdrawn and over which he is now located as if in some higher decision-making position [...]. (Bakhtin 63)

Forster thinks, "[a] prophet does not reflect" (95). He also insists, "what matters is his [a prophet's] accent of his voice, his song" (93). Now we realize what he says. That is, we can say that, instead of objectifying a character and planning plot, a "prophet" listens to and describes other's voice through dialogue with him/her on equal terms. In an oracle, the speaker's accent of his/her voice and his/her speech does not belong to his/her attribution. A "prophet" does not similarly show his/her own accents and his/her own thought in his/her novel.

II. "Prophecy" in *The Brothers Karamazov*

I will practically, then, investigate the passage from *The*

Brothers Karamazov by Forster. Before considering it, I need to explain the typical pattern of a dialogical connection between unpredictable consciousnesses in Dostoevsky's great novels. Bakhtin contends that the characteristic of Dostoevsky's great novels is the dynamic connection between each character's interior dialogue and exterior one:

In Dostoevsky's dialogues, collision and quarrelling occurs not between two integral monologic voices, but between two divided voices (one of those voices, at least, divided). The open rejoinders of the one answer the hidden rejoinders of the other. (Bakhtin 256)

In polyphony, characters' minds are unstable and undeterminable because they are, unlike monologic characters, out of the final summaries of their own personalities. That is, they do not have their own monologic and integral voices. Many voices reverberate in their own minds. Then they try to find out true voices for them, namely, their own voices, from within these voices through those interior dialogues. However, they can hardly solve those interior dialogues by themselves. Only when they have exterior dialogues, collision and quarrelling, the characters can find out their own voices through other's penetrative words in those exterior controversies. Therefore, what is important in Dostoevsky's great novels is that characters find their own voices from within their interior dialogues through their exterior dialogues with others.

From the passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Forster, we can construe the song of "prophecy" on the basis of the characteristics of Dostoevsky's great novels. The following is the summary of the passage by Forster. Mitya is detained on suspicion of the murder of his father, though he actually did not commit it; however, "he [Mitya] is spiritually though not technically

guilty" (89). He falls asleep, having a dream of a dilapidated village, where he watches poor children crying, and feeling pity. When he wakes up, Mitya notices that someone was kind enough to place a pillow under his head, so that he is deeply moved. The above is the rough gist of the passage. From the passage by Forster, we can see a typical Dostoevsky dialogue "between two divided voices (one of those voices, at least, divided)" (Bakhtin 256). Watching poor children in his dream, Mitya persistently asks a peasant why those children are crying. From his persistent questions, we can see that Mitya's questions are directed not only toward the peasant but also toward someone else, for instance, his interior voices:

"Why are they crying? Why are they crying?" Mitya asked as they dashed gaily by.

"It's the babe," answered the driver, 'the babe weeping."

And Mitya was struck by his saying, in his peasant way, "the babe," and he liked the peasant's calling it a "babe." There seemed more pity in it.

"But why is it weeping?" Mitya persisted stupidly, "why are its little arms bare? Why don't they wrap in it up?" . . .

"Why, they're poor people, burnt out. They've no bread. They're beginning because they've been burnt out."

"No, no," Mitya, as it were, still did not understand. "Tell me why it is those poor mothers stand there? Why are people poor?" Why is the babe poor? Why is the steppe barren? Why don't they hug each other and kiss? Why don't they sing songs of joy? Why are they so dark from black misery? Why don't they feed the babe?

And he felt that, though his questions were unreasonable and senseless, yet he wanted to ask just that, and he had to ask it just in that way. (qtd. Forster 90-91)

From his persistent questions, we can see that Mitya's mind is divided into affirmative voices and negative voices over the idea that pity is important, and that the intense interior dialogue between these voices occurs in his mind. Forster says, "[Mitya] only becomes real through what he implies, his mind is not in a frame at all" (91), and here we can consider "what he implies" as his interior voices. In addition, I think that those voices have to be formed as a temporal continuum so that those mean "song." Through this interior dialogue, Mitya's feeling of pity springs out, and then we can see that Mitya is finding his own voice:

And he felt that passion of pity, such as he had never known before [...]. And his heart glowed, and he struggled forwards the light, and he longed to live, to live, go on and on, towards the new, beckoning light, and to hasten, hasten, now, at once! (qtd. Forster 91)

From the second sentence, we can see that Mitya is solving "the question 'Who am I' and 'With whom am I?'" (Bakhtin 239). That is, "[t]o find one's own voice and to orient it among other voices" (Bakhtin 239) are being accomplished. When Mitya wakes up, he notices that someone placed a pillow under his head. And he is deeply impressed with that pillow:

"Who put that pillow under my head? Who was so kind?" he cried, with a sort of ecstatic gratitude, and tears in his voice, as though some great kindness had been shown him [...].

"I've had a good dream, gentleman," he said in a strange voice, with a new light, as of joy, in his face. (qtd. Forster 91)

In this way, "the tremendous current suddenly flows — for me,"

Forster says, "in those closing words: 'I've had a good dream, gentlemen'" (92). The pillow is not words; however, Bakhtin remarks as follows: "dialogic relationships in the broad sense are also possible among different intelligent phenomena, provided that these phenomena are expressed in some *semiotic* material" (Bakhtin 184-85). His discovery of the pillow is, then, the very exterior dialogic encounter with another person. This kindness of him/her for Mitya penetrates his interior voice valuing pity. This is how Mitya finds his own voice among internal voices within him through another person's kind behavior towards him. From the last sentence: "he said in a strange voice," we can see that Mitya has completed his process of rearranging accents through the dynamic connection between interior dialogue and exterior one. Therefore, the implication of "prophecy" is Mitya's interior voices, and hence the song of "prophecy" means the very process of his rearranging accents through interrelationship between internal dialogue and exterior one. In summary, we can say that "prophecy" means the process of the character's finding his/her own voice through dialogue with others in polyphonic structure.

III. "Prophecy" in *A Passage to India*

Lastly, I will verify the nature of "prophecy" in *A Passage to India* in order to guarantee the dialogic aspect of "prophecy," for Forster is, as mentioned above, not so much a critic as a novelist. Before we clarify the nature of the song of "prophecy" in Forster's own novel, however, we have to inspect the former arguments that Forster has accomplished "prophecy." While James McConkey thinks "in the conscious separation between actual and ideal, that we find the basis of the prophetic voice in Forster" (McConkey 73), he also remarks, "[i]n Forster, extension [of prophecy] in the main comes from *without* the character"

(McConkey 70). However, a character is the essential ingredient of the song, that is, the song of "prophecy" cannot be separated from the character. This is why Forster excludes Thomas Hardy from prophets: "Hardy, a philosopher and a great poet, might seem to have claims, but Hardy's novels are surveys; they do not give out sounds. The writer sits back, it is true, but the characters do not reach back" (94). Hence, we cannot agree with McConkey.

In *A Passage to India: Nation and Narration*, Judith Scherer Herz's argument about "prophecy" is also something beyond characters. She thinks of "prophecy" as what Malcolm Bradbury calls the verbal or symbolist plot and what Lionel Trilling calls story in *A Passage to India*:

In Bradbury's account the verbal or symbolist plot is essentially what Trilling meant by story, on what Forster, a few years after the publication of *A Passage to India*, in the lectures that later became *Aspect of the Novel*, called "song." (Herz 68)

However, Trilling insists that the characters, in *A Passage to India*, are not enough for the story. The following is part of the quotation by her from Trilling's explanation about story:

The story is beneath and above the plot and continues beyond it in time [...]. It is greater than the plot and contains it [...]. The characters [in *A Passage to India*] are of sufficient size for the plot; they are not large enough for the story—and that indeed is the point of the story. (Trilling 147)

As far as "they are not large enough for the story," then, we cannot agree with Herz in the issue of "prophecy."

Wilfred Stone pays attention to voice in "prophecy." When the

song of "prophecy" is the process of a character's rearranging accents through the dialogue in polyphonic structure, paying attention to the tone or intonation of voice, of course, is very important. In order to listen to the interior polemic within a character, we have to "catch the smallest shift in intonation, the slight interruption of voices" (Bakhtin 201). Forster also insists, "Prophecy—in our sense—is a tone of voice" (86). The following is the quotation by Stone from *The Longest Journey*:

The words were kind, yet it was not for their sake that Ricky plunged into the impalpable cloud. In the voice he had found a surer guarantee. Habits and sex may change with the new generation, features may alter with the play of a private passion, but a voice is apart from these. It lies nearer to the racial essence and perhaps to the divine; it can, at all events, overleap one grave. (*LG* 257-58)

He regards this passage as prophetic and remarks, "[t]hus does the novel drift into prophecy, and literature into a music beyond words" (Stone 214). However, the center of his quotation is not the tone of voice itself but Rickie's reflection on voice. "Prophecy" is not consideration, but "a tone of voice" or "style."

The author takes on such a tone of voice in the dialogue between Fielding and Aziz in their last ride. After they effected a reconciliation with each other, the two heroes at last stand "on the threshold of a final decision" (Bakhtin 61). Through their dialogue, we can listen to the song. We can see the dialogue as in Dostoevsky's great novels. In this dialogue, "[t]he open rejoinders of the one answer the hidden rejoinders of the other" (Bakhtin 256). That is, Aziz's penetrative word appeals to one of the voices, namely, to the genuine voice, within Fielding. Hence, Fielding finds his own voice from within his interior polemic through his exterior dialogue with Aziz.

In their last ride in the Mau jungles, Forster does not confine Fielding within the second-hand discourse providing a final summary of his personality:

He [Fielding] too felt that this was their last free intercourse. All the stupid misunderstandings had been cleared up, but socially they had no meeting-place. He had thrown in his lot with Anglo-India by marrying a countrywoman, and he was acquiring some of its limitations, and already felt surprise at his own past heroism. Would he today defy all his own people for the sake of a stray Indian? Aziz was a memento, a trophy, they were proud of each other, yet they must inevitably part. (*PI* 309)

Here the author shares the information about the change of Fielding's own character with him in terms of free indirect discourse. Not only Forster, but also Fielding, feels him inclining toward imperialism. This is why Fielding expects an inevitable separation from Aziz. The narrator does not confine Fielding within a final summary of his personality. As a result, his mind is divided between the voice that affirms imperialism and the voice that denies that. Then, his consciousness of self certainly depends upon the last dialogue with Aziz. In that dialogue, they talk about whether India should be independent.

On the other hand, Aziz is also unsettled. After Fielding affirms imperialism and mocks Indian sexism, Aziz excites his combative spirit and shouts:

Aziz grew more excited. He rose in stirrups and pulled at his horse's head in the hope it would rear. Then he should feel in a battle [...]. "Clear out, clear out, I say. Why are we put to so much suffering? We used to blame you, now we blame ourselves, we grow wiser. Until England is in difficulties we keep silent, but in the next European war—aha

aha! Then is our time." (*PI* 311)

Aziz's sudden laughing, "aha aha!," seems to be an intentional act to urge his aggressive feeling. From his unnatural behavior, we can see Aziz has interior polemic, that is, his mind is divided between the voice that hopes to keep their friendship and the voice that is aggressive against imperialism, and then, the latter voice tries to convince the speaker himself as much as possible. His mind is also certainly divided into the two voices: "The intensification of a convincing tone indicates an internal resistance on the part of the hero's other voice" (Bakhtin 261).

Aziz's last statement becomes an answer to the hidden rejoinder of Fielding. Aziz's remark as penetrative words appeals to the voice that affirms their separation within Fielding. Aziz finally announces to Fielding the impossibility of their friendship in the status quo:

"Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then"——he rode against him furiously——"and then," he concluded, half kissing him [Fielding], "you and I shall be friends."

"Why can't we be friends now?" said the other [Fielding], holding him affectionately. "It's what I want. It's what you want." (*PI* 312)

Although he asks why they cannot be friends now, Fielding should know that reason better than anyone else. That is why, just before their dialogue starts, he asks himself, "[w]ould he today defy all his own people for the sake of a stray Indian?" (*PI* 309).

Thus we can construe many voices in the last scene as the genuine voice, which reverberates within the consciousness of Fielding, who has rearranged his accents from affirmative tone to negative one about imperialism:

But the horses didn't want it——they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they assured from the gap and say Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "No not yet," and sky said, "No not there." (*PI* 312)

The scene seems to unfold along with the two heroes' viewpoints. However, now we stand at the position of Fielding, for he asks Aziz and is waiting for his answer, though he really knows the answer. Hence, the viewpoint of the scene coincides with Fielding's in particular. Now that we stand at Fielding's position and we can guess his state of mind through their dialogue, we can feel the voices of that scene through Fielding's consciousness to be his own voice, whose accents have been rearranged from affirmative tone to negative one about their friendship.

Conclusion

Thus, we observe that "prophecy" is based on a polyphonic principle, which allows a character to find a true voice for him-/her through dialogue with other. We can, as a result, see that E. M. Forster not only debated but also overcame the issue about monologic nature of realism concurrently with Mikhail Bakhtin and D. H. Lawrence. Forster tends to be regarded as a traditional English novelist rather than a modernist such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence. 6 According to Randall

Stevenson, even Forster's use of "rhythm" in *A Passage to India* cannot be called a modernist component:

Malcolm Bradbury, or Peter Childs in *Modernism* (2000), for example, each consider [sic] Forster's use of symbol and rhythm central to the modernist status they claim for *A Passage to India*. Yet each device is regularly present in conventional narrative. Defined by Childs as "the repeated use of expressions, incidents, or characters" to "accumulate resonances and meanings," rhythm might be a fundamental component of all narratives, not only modernist ones. (Stevenson 217)

Now we can, however, understand that Forster also noticed something close to "*the new thing* that Dostoevsky had glimpsed" (Bakhtin 42-43), and tried to practice it in his own novel and expressed it as "prophecy."

Notes

- 1 Plato, *Ion*, *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. Paul Woodruff, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 942.
- 2 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass. (1927; London: Edward Arnold, 1974). All references to this book are given parenthetically. In addition, *A Passage to India*, *The Longest Journey* are shown as *PI*, *LJ* respectively.
- 3 See Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* 99, and Lodge 63.
- 4 Lionel Trilling says, "Forster [...] is a critic with no drive to consistency, no desire to find an architectonic for his impressions. We might say of him that he is a critic without any desire for *success*. In short, he is an impressionistic critic" (Trilling 141).
- 5 David Lodge thinks that these dialogues external to plot are also in the center of the most impressive scenes in *Women in Love*: "The most memorable events of this story [Women in love] are, precisely, contingent: the drowning of Diana Crich at the water party, for instance, Gerald's brutal control of his terrified horse at the level crossing, the release of the rabbit

Adolf from his hutch, or Birkin throwing stones at the reflection of the moon [, which event Forster refers to as "prophecy" in *Aspects of the Novel*] (emphasis added). These events do not seem to belong to any pattern of cause and effect—they simply happen, arbitrarily, randomly or spontaneously, and are invested with meaning by the reactions of those who are involved as actors or as spectators (Lodge 63).

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