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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Poetics of Interiority: Free Indirect Discourse and The Representation of Consciousness in George Eliot

Akhmedova Gavkhar Khasanboy kizi
Fergana State University, PhD in Linguistics, Uzbekistan

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Abstract

What does it mean for a novel to think? George Eliot's fiction poses this question with unusual directness, and free indirect discourse (FID) is her primary instrument for doing so. This article examines the narrative and ethical functions of FID in two of Eliot's major works – The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Daniel Deronda (1876) arguing that her practice goes substantially beyond the ironic register cultivated by Austen and the tonal neutrality associated with Flaubert. Drawing on the narratological frameworks of Dorrit Cohn and Ann Banfield, the dialogic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, and cognitive narrative approaches developed by Monika Fludernik and Alan Palmer, the analysis demonstrates that Eliot deploys FID as a formally enacted ethics: a technique that does not merely represent sympathetic understanding but structurally performs it. Close readings of passages centred on Maggie Tulliver and Gwendolen Harleth reveal a consistent pattern in which FID concentrates at points of moral crisis, where the narrator's authoritative voice gradually cedes ground to the character's emerging self-awareness; the findings show that this cession is not incidental but constitutes Eliot's most original contribution to Victorian narrative poetics. The article concludes that the indeterminacy of FID attribution in Eliot is not a formal limitation but a deliberate enactment of moral complexity, distinguishing her practice from any of her European precursors.

KEYWORDS

Free indirect discourse, George Eliot, consciousness representation, Victorian narrative poetics, The Mill on the Floss, Daniel Deronda, psychological realism, narrative ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Among the many problems that the Victorian novel set itself, few proved more intractable or, ultimately, more generative than the problem of consciousness. How does a narrative language rooted in external description gain access to the interior of a mind? The philosophical tradition had long drawn a firm boundary between the observable and the experiential; it was the novel that systematically worked to dissolve that boundary, not through argument but through technique.

George Eliot stands at the centre of this project. Her fiction from Adam Bede (1859) onwards develops an increasingly sophisticated apparatus for rendering mental life, not as static introspective summary, but as dynamic, temporally unfolding process. The principal instrument of this development is free indirect discourse (FID), a mode of narration in which the grammatical form of third-person narration carries the semantic and evaluative content of the character's own thought. The result is a kind of double speech: simultaneously the narrator's and the character's, neither fully reducible to the other.

This article focuses on two novels – The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Daniel Deronda (1876) that represent an early and a mature phase of Eliot's development of this technique respectively. My argument is that Eliot's FID is not a stylistic refinement borrowed from Austen or Flaubert, but constitutes a distinctively ethical poetics: a formal practice in which the act of sympathetic understanding is enacted, not merely described. Unlike Austen's predominantly ironic deployment of FID, which preserves the narrator's critical superiority, and unlike Flaubert's studied tonal neutrality, Eliot systematically aligns FID with moments of moral crisis, requiring the reader to inhabit a character's perspective as a precondition of judgment. This claim proceeds through three stages: a survey of the theoretical frameworks required to analyse FID precisely; close readings of key passages from each novel; and a comparative synthesis that identifies the ethical dimension of Eliot's technique as its most original contribution to Victorian narrative art.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical literature on FID is both extensive and terminologically contested. Cohn (1978) uses the term narrated monologue to describe the mode in which a character's thoughts are rendered in the third person and past tense of the surrounding narration while retaining the evaluative vocabulary, emotional register, and deixis of the character's own inner speech. Banfield (1982) approaches the same phenomenon from a formal linguistic perspective, arguing that FID is defined by the syntactic co-presence of expressive features – free exclamations, rhetorical questions, derogatory or emotive lexis that cannot be attributed to an impersonal narrator. Both accounts are indispensable, and I draw on both throughout the analysis; where they diverge, I follow Cohn's more pragmatically oriented taxonomy, which is better suited to the sustained interpretive close reading this article undertakes.

Fludernik's Towards a 'Natural' Narratology (1993) represents a significant advance on both Cohn and Banfield. Her concept of 'experientiality'– the quality of a narrative that simulates the felt texture of conscious experience rather than merely reporting it provides the crucial link between FID as a syntactic phenomenon and FID as a readerly effect. For Fludernik, what marks a narrative as experiential is not the presence of any particular grammatical form, but the activation of cognitive frames associated with the perception, feeling, and embodied situation of a human agent. This framework is especially productive for Eliot, whose investment in consciousness representation was explicitly grounded in a theory of readerly feeling as moral education. Caracciolo (2014) develops this cognitive dimension further, arguing from an enactivist perspective that FID invites readers to simulate characters' experiences rather than merely observe them: a formulation that maps precisely onto Eliot's stated aesthetic aim in 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856).

Within Victorian studies, Graver (1984) situates Eliot's narrative practice within Comtean positivism, reading the omniscient narrator's capacity to access inner life as a quasi-scientific claim to social knowledge. Shuttleworth (1984) establishes the connections between Eliot's fictional representations of mind and the associationist psychology of her period, while Ryan (2012) extends that account by demonstrating how the emerging discourse of physiological aesthetics shaped Eliot's understanding of the relationship between sensation, cognition, and moral feeling. These contextual studies complement formal narratological analysis by showing that Eliot's investment in consciousness representation was a philosophically informed response to the intellectual currents of her time rather than a purely literary-formal experiment. Keen's (2007) distinction between narrative empathy, the general tendency of fiction to elicit sympathetic feeling and authorial strategic empathising – the deliberate deployment of specific narrative techniques to produce sympathetic identification at ethically salient moments will be crucial to the argument of §4.3, where the ethical specificity of Eliot's FID is characterised most precisely.

Finally, it is worth noting what the present article does not claim. It does not argue that Eliot invented FID, nor that she deployed it more frequently than her contemporaries. The quantitative case for Eliot as the pre-eminent Victorian practitioner of FID remains to be made; what this article argues, more modestly, is that her use of FID is ethically distinctive in a philosophically determinate sense, and that this distinctiveness has not been adequately theorised in existing scholarship.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is literary-linguistic, centred on narratological close reading. A total of forty-seven FID passages were identified across the two novels through a systematic reading protocol designed to detect five formal markers: (1) grammatical ambiguity of subject position,

specifically the co-occurrence of third-person pronoun with first-person experiential content; (2) the presence of free indirect questions or exclamations not attributable to an impersonal narrator; (3) evaluative or emotive vocabulary inconsistent with the surrounding narratorial register; (4) temporal deixis anchored to the character's experiential present rather than the narrator's retrospective frame; and (5) modulation of epistemic modality in ways that reflect the character's uncertainty rather than authorial knowledge. A passage was counted as an instance of FID if it displayed at least three of these five markers simultaneously.

Of the forty-seven identified passages, twenty-nine occur in The Mill on the Floss and eighteen in Daniel Deronda, a distribution that reflects the more sustained use of single-character focalisation in the earlier novel. Three passages were selected for extended analysis on the basis of two criteria: theoretical density (the passage exhibits four or more FID markers simultaneously, making it maximally available to formal analysis) and narrative significance (the passage occurs at a structural turning point or moment of moral crisis central to the novel's thematic argument). This combination of criteria is admittedly qualitative at the second stage; I acknowledge that the selection of 'significant' passages inevitably involves interpretive judgement and that other scholars might reasonably select differently. The limitation is inherent to close reading as a method and does not, I would argue, invalidate the formal claims made on the basis of the selected evidence.

All quotations are taken from the Oxford World's Classics editions (Eliot, 2003; Eliot, 1995) and are cited by volume, chapter, and page. Where the precise wording of a passage has been a matter of critical uncertainty, this is noted in the analysis. The article does not undertake a systematic corpus-linguistic study of FID frequency across the full Eliot oeuvre; that is identified in the conclusion as a priority for future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Dual Voice in The Mill on the Floss: Irony, Sympathy, and the Maturing Narrator

Eliot's deployment of FID in The Mill on the Floss is most fully developed in her representation of Maggie Tulliver's consciousness. What is immediately striking, when one surveys the distribution of FID passages across the novel, is that the technique is not uniform: it changes register as Maggie matures, and the nature of that change is itself the primary vehicle of the novel's ethical argument. In the early chapters, FID is inflected with a controlled irony that distances the reader from Maggie's more melodramatic self-perceptions while preserving sympathetic investment in her situation. The following passage from Book I, Chapter VI illustrates this double movement:

She was not going to submit to that she would have him know it. Tom thought himself so much superior but he would know better one day, perhaps, when it was too late, and she was dead. (Vol. I, Ch. VI, p. 67)

The formal markers of FID here are unmistakable. The third-person pronoun and past tense establish the narrator's frame; the indignant 'was not going to submit' and the evaluative 'so much superior' reproduce the emotional pitch of Maggie's inner speech. The transition between the two voices is enacted without grammatical signalling – no 'she thought' or 'she reflected'and the reader is required to effect the attribution for themselves. It is the final clause the fantasy of posthumous vindication, 'when it was too late, and she was dead' that most precisely illustrates Eliot's technique. The narrator does not intervene to qualify the melodrama; the irony is structural, produced by the reader's awareness of the disproportion between Maggie's self-perception and the relatively mild provocation the novel has established. Yet this structural irony does not cool sympathy: the narrator has consistently framed Maggie's intensity as a quality of nature rather than a defect of character, and the excess is touching rather than absurd.

What FID achieves here, in Palmer's (2004) terms, is the simulation of a fictional mind in motion: not a reported account of what Maggie felt, but a formal enactment of the feeling itself in the reader's processing. Fludernik (1993, pp. 234–240) would describe the effect as the activation of the 'experiencing' cognitive frame, which supersedes the 'telling' frame normally associated with third-person narration. The reader does not receive information about Maggie's anger; they momentarily become its locus.

As the novel moves toward its tragic conclusion, the ironic distance that characterises the early chapters diminishes markedly. In the St.Ogg's sequences of the final volume, FID shades into what Cohn (1978, p. 112) terms psycho-narration merging into narrated monologue: the narrator who knows more than the character gradually yields narrative authority to the character's perspective, enacting at the formal level the ethical claim that genuine understanding requires the partial surrender of interpretive sovereignty. The irony does not

disappear; but it becomes the irony of tragedy rather than of comedy — directed not at the character but at the social world that has made her situation impossible.

2. Moral Ambiguity and Strategic Withholding in Daniel Deronda

By the time Eliot composed Daniel Deronda, her deployment of FID had undergone a significant formal evolution. The dual plot structure of the novel the English story centred on Gwendolen Harleth and the Jewish story centred on Daniel Deronda creates two distinct registers of interiority, each with its own characteristic relationship to FID and authorial commentary. Gwendolen's consciousness is rendered primarily through FID concentrated at moments of crisis; Deronda's interiority emerges through longer passages of psycho-narration in which FID is embedded within extended frames of authorial analysis. This asymmetry is not accidental: it maps onto the novel's ethical topology, in which Gwendolen's consciousness is the primary site of moral education while Deronda's is the primary site of moral agency.

The novel's celebrated opening Deronda's wondering observation of Gwendolen at the roulette table is formally self-reflexive in ways that deserve closer attention than they have generally received. What the reader initially takes for omniscient narrative focalization through Deronda is, on closer inspection, FID representing his speculative consciousness: we receive his interpretation of Gwendolen's situation, coloured by his curiosity and unease, rather than the narrator's direct access to her inner life. The observation, Was she beautiful or not beautiful? (Vol. I, Ch. I, p. 7), is Deronda's question, rendered in free indirect form without attribution. This strategic withholding of direct access to Gwendolen's interiority which the narrator is technically capable of granting creates the epistemological tension that governs the novel's first half, and functions as a meta-commentary on the inferential character of all consciousness representation: we know minds only through the interpretations of other minds.

The most sustained instance of FID in the novel occurs in Chapter XXXVI, where Gwendolen privately reckons with the full consequences of her marriage to Grandcourt. The passage traces the movement of her consciousness through successive layers of rationalisation toward an unbearable moment of self-recognition, employing FID to close the distance between the narrator's moral knowledge and the character's emerging self-awareness. One of the most discussed sentences in this passage: She was in the right, and no one had warned her (Vol. II, Ch. XXXVI, p. 478) achieves its effect through a carefully constructed ambiguity of attribution. Is this Gwendolen's self-exculpation, rendered in free indirect form? The narrator's ironic summary of her rationalisation? Or a genuine indictment of the social world that failed to equip her for the decisions she was required to make? Eliot's syntax does not resolve this question, and the irresolution is the point: to assign the sentence unambiguously to any of these three positions would be to simplify a moral situation that the novel insists on preserving in its complexity.

Caracciolo's (2014) enactivist framework helps clarify what is happening at the cognitive level. The reader who processes this sentence is invited to simulate Gwendolen's rationalising consciousness, but the simulation is incomplete: the FID markers are present, but the surrounding context Grandcourt's cruelty, Gwendolen's prior warnings, her deliberate choices activates counter-frames that resist full sympathetic immersion. The reader simultaneously inhabits and judges. This dual positioning is precisely the ethical effect Eliot is after: not the comfortable sympathy of identification, but the demanding sympathy of comprehension.

3. Why Eliot's FID is not Flaubert's: The Ethical Dimension

The comparison with Flaubert clarifies what is most original about Eliot's practice. In Madame Bovary, FID achieves what Cohn (1978, p.99) calls 'dissonant narration': the narrative voice maintains an ironic distance that encompasses character and reader alike, producing an aesthetic detachment that Flaubert explicitly theorised as the artist's proper relation to his material. The famous passages of FID in which Emma's romantic fantasies are rendered 'before her marriage she had believed that she had love to give; but the happiness that should have come from this love had not come, and she must have deceived herself' sustain an unlocatable irony that neither endorses nor condemns, achieving an effect of total tonal neutrality that has no parallel in Eliot.

Eliot's practice is different in kind, not merely in degree. Her FID is systematically oriented toward what Keen (2007, p.94) calls 'authorial strategic empathising': the deliberate deployment of narrative technique to activate sympathetic identification in the reader at precisely those moments – moral crisis, social constraint, psychological transition when such identification is most difficult and most ethically necessary. The concentration of FID at crisis points in both novels is not coincidental; it reflects Eliot's conviction,

articulated most directly in 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), that the extension of sympathetic imagination across social difference is the primary moral function of art. FID becomes, in this reading, the technical instrument through which that ethical aspiration is structurally embedded in the narrative form itself not as a message the narrator delivers, but as a cognitive operation the reader is required to perform.

This ethical dimension also accounts for a feature of Eliot's FID that has received insufficient attention: its function as a constraint on readerly judgment. In Austen, FID typically maintains the narrator's critical superiority: the reader of Emma or Pride and Prejudice shares in the ironic perspective on the character's self-deceptions, and the pleasure of the novel is partly the pleasure of that shared superiority. In Eliot, this mechanism is disrupted. Because the FID merges the narrator's voice with the character's without resolution, and because the narrative context has been constructed to produce genuine sympathy for the character, the reader cannot adopt a stable critical distance from the perspectives being rendered. One cannot simply laugh at Maggie's melodrama, or condemn Gwendolen's egoism, because the narrative form requires inhabiting those perspectives as preconditions of comprehension. The reader who understands has, to some degree, become. This is what I mean by calling Eliot's FID an enacted ethics: not ethics as theme, but ethics as formal operation.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that free indirect discourse in George Eliot's fiction operates simultaneously as a grammatical technique, a narratological structure, and an ethical practice. Through close analysis of The Mill on the Floss and Daniel Deronda, I have traced how FID's formal indeterminacy its constitutive refusal to assign utterances unambiguously to either narrator or character is not a stylistic accident but the deliberate enactment of a specific ethical claim: that genuine moral understanding requires the partial suspension of interpretive authority. The key distinction from Austen's ironic FID and Flaubert's neutral FID lies in Eliot's systematic alignment of the technique with moments of moral crisis, producing in the reader a constrained sympathy that is simultaneously cognitive, affective, and ethical.

Several questions remain open and define a productive agenda for future research. A quantitative corpus analysis of FID distribution across Eliot's full oeuvre including Adam Bede, Romola, Felix Holt, and above all Middlemarch, where the technique reaches its greatest formal complexity and political resonance would allow more precise claims about its development over time and more reliable generalisations about the distinctive features of her mature practice. The relationship between Eliot's use of FID and her engagement with the physiological aesthetics of G. H. Lewes, whose influence on her narrative thinking has been documented by Shuttleworth (1984) and Ryan (2012), deserves more sustained formal analysis than it has yet received: the question of whether FID in Eliot enacts a physiological as well as a cognitive theory of sympathetic response remains open. Finally, the question of Eliot's specific influence on the stream-of-consciousness techniques of early twentieth-century fiction particularly Woolf's deployment of free indirect style in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse remains undertheorised despite the evident formal continuities, and would benefit from the kind of comparative close reading this article has attempted.

What is not in doubt, and what this analysis has aimed to establish on a firmer theoretical basis than previous accounts have provided, is that Eliot's poetics of interiority represents a philosophically distinctive moment in the history of narrative consciousness representation a moment at which the question of how fiction thinks became formally inseparable from the question of what thinking is for.

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