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MAPPING MULTIPLE VOICES IN B. S. JOHNSON'S *HOUSE MOTHER NORMAL*

Abstract

The present article is an attempt to analyse *House Mother Normal* – a little-researched novel by the British experimental novelist B. S. Johnson. Starting with a general discussion of the author's literary tenets, the analysis then focuses on the novel at hand, special emphasis being given to the ways in which it maintains continuity with Johnson's previous works, as well as to the areas in which divergence from the author's *oeuvre* is visible. Following these remarks, a question is posed concerning the somewhat complex relationship between the characters and the narrator in the novel, the main problem in this respect being the extent to which the narrator, if indeed present at all, is visible in the text. Finally, the focus of the article shifts to the novel's multivoicedness, which is then discussed in terms of Bakhtinian notions of polyphony and dialogism. The subsequent analysis of selected excerpts from the novel demonstrates that *House Mother Normal* for the most part eludes any easy classification and thus subsuming it under Bakhtin's categories is as seemingly easy as it is problematic and disputable.

The aim of the present article is to discuss the issues of multiple narration, polyphony and dialogism with regard to *House Mother Normal*, a rather unusual piece of fiction penned by B. S. Johnson and published in 1971 as his fifth novel and – as it soon turned out – the penultimate one to find its way into bookshops before his tragic suicide two years later. Following such original literary achievements as *Travelling People* (1963), *Albert Angelo* (1964), *Trawl* (1966), and *The Unfortunates* (1969), *House Mother Normal* was

yet another step in B. S. Johnson's consistently realised innovative literary project which, though short-lived and suddenly terminated, was unique and variegated enough for the author to be subsequently assessed by Jonathan Coe as "Britain's one-man literary avant-garde of the 1960s" (2004: 3)[1]. It needs to be admitted, however, that for all its experimental and imaginative quality, his literary *oeuvre* has failed to attract a wide readership or to draw much critical interest, the neglect being even more acutely visible abroad than in the United Kingdom (Ryf 1977: 58) Therefore, it might be all the more useful to briefly introduce the figure of B. S. Johnson himself and the main tenets of his literary project before his 1971 novel *House Mother Normal* becomes the primary object of attention and analysis.

1. B.S. Johnson

Bearing in mind B. S. Johnson's resolution to "write truth in the form of a novel" (Johnson 1973) and his contention that "[l]ife does not tell stories. [...] [t]elling stories really is telling lies" (Johnson 1973), it is not surprising that his *oeuvre* should so often have been discussed through the prism of, or at least with reference to, his own life. Born into a working-class family and put at an additional educational disadvantage by the unrest ensuing from the Second World War, B. S. Johnson harboured a long-term grudge against the British class structure, a sentiment which was quite clearly reflected in his literary works and, in fact, might somewhat explain the relative lack of appreciation of his *oeuvre* on the part of middle and elite classes or academic researchers (Tew 2002: 8, 10). Indeed, the novelist seems to have held a grim view of the surrounding world, both socio-political and literary. In matters of politics, he was deeply antithetical to the social *status quo*; with regard to literature, he similarly refused to succumb to the traditional, conservative tendencies celebrated in Britain "at a time when, abroad, writers like Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Grass, and Borges were doing their best work" (Figes 1985: 70–71)[2]. In the "Introduction" to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* Johnson himself expressed his resentment about the general lack of impulse on the British literary scene to follow the daring artistic exploits of Joyce, a novelist whom he unhesitatingly praised for the truly innovative quality of *Ulysses* (Johnson 1973). Flying in the face of the British literary establishment, B. S. Johnson thus devoted his decade-long writing career to exploring new possibilities for literature, though – as Jonathan Coe notes – the novelist would probably have had reservations about the very word 'experimental' being used with reference to his *oeuvre* (2004: 13).

One of the basic tenets of B. S. Johnson's literary project was his preoccupation with the boundary between the factual and the fictional as well

as his consequent belief that the writer's sole interest must be in truth rather than in fiction, the latter being tantamount to lies. Indeed, the novelist drew a clear distinction between the otherwise closely connected terms 'fiction' and 'novel'. He placed the former in stark opposition to the term 'truth' and conceived of the latter as capable of accommodating either a true or a fictional account (Johnson 1973). As mentioned above, for Johnson the novelistic form served solely as a means of conveying the truth, but it is also worth noting that this was a rather special kind of truth, i.e. one based on solipsism, "the truth as he sees it" (D'Eath 1985: 79). This, in effect, meant that for the greatest part of his career the writer's express aim in his novels was to explore the intricacies of what went on in his own head. Such chief preoccupation with himself might of course explain the numerous auto-biographical themes so willingly traced in his writings by critics and researchers, but it also quite clearly accounts for Johnson's frequent choice of the interior monologue as a suitable narrative technique (Ryf 1977: 62). As a corollary to that, the novelist's primary concern was not so much with staple narratological considerations such as plot or dialogue, all the more so because in Johnsonian vision none of them was able to contain life in its entirety and to reflect the whole truth about it (Coe 2004: 4–5).

Indeed, the complexities of translating life onto a page did not escape Johnson's attention. Most of his *oeuvre* seems to have been influenced by the ostensibly Beckett-inspired notion that life is governed by indescribable chaos, disorder and fragmentation, an issue he expounded in the "Introduction" to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* Faced with the task of capturing such chaotic life in writing, a novelist must therefore be aware that any attempt at imposing a pattern on something so complex and ungraspable is essentially unfeasible and "[w]riters can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification" (Johnson 1973). If organising the diversity of life into a neat plot equals lying, Johnson frequently engaged in the opposite task of *exposing* narrative conventions, rather than making them work towards fancy and fictional illusion. In her detailed study of Johnson's novels, Krystyna Stamirowska discusses the different ways in which the author's paradigm of truth together with his conviction about the chaotic nature of existence translate into the structural layer of his writing. She emphasises the nature of language itself as an important source of difficulty, and proceeds to point to the novelist's insistence on reflecting life's chaos and randomness in the very process of writing as well as to his imaginative use of typography as his two ways of dealing with the impossibility of registering truth about life (Stamirowska 2006: 36–40).

In fact, typographical experiments constitute an integral part of Johnson's *oeuvre* and their significance for the overall effect of his writings

cannot be overestimated. Starting from the Sterne-inspired coloured pages of *Travelling People*, through the cut-out pages and columns of simultaneous speech and thought in *Albert Angelo*, to the blank spaces indicating silence or loss of consciousness in *House Mother Normal*, Johnson consistently explored the technical possibilities offered by the page itself, asserting that typography and the physical dimension of a book were as capable of bringing out meaning as words themselves were. This emphasis on making extensive use of the material quality of a page, together with the novelist's insistence on solipsistic truth, his preoccupation with arbitrariness, chaos and randomness, as well as the autobiographical overtones of his novels seem to be at the core of Johnson's literary project. Thus, somewhat rebellious and angry, but also faithful to his literary tenets and aspirations, B. S. Johnson authored a number of original and unique novels, poems, short stories and theatre pieces, leaving behind an *oeuvre* which certainly enriched the all too conservative British fiction of his lifetime.

2. *House Mother Normal*

Originally intended by the author as an exploration of the normal-abnormal dichotomy, *House Mother Normal* is curiously structured to comprise eight 21-page monologues, each spoken by a senile charge of an old people's house, as well as two sections by the younger and seemingly more normal House Mother, who is allowed to speak twice: first, in an introductory comment at the beginning of the novel and then in a 22-page monologue at its close. The order in which the characters are allowed to talk is decided on the basis of the state of their mental and physical health, starting from those with the highest level of awareness and on to those with the lowest CQ count. Governed by this structural principle, the book thus invites readers to follow the same events nine times over, each time from a different point of view, which encourages both linear and simultaneous reading. The latter is, in fact, facilitated by a double pagination system as well as by the careful ordering of each monologue on the same timescale so that for all the nine perspectives every single moment of the described evening is allotted the very same page number and even a corresponding place in the layout of the text.[3]

As mentioned above, *House Mother Normal* maintains continuity with B. S. Johnson's literary project and provides yet another step forward in his development as a writer. Like his previous works, for example, the novel does not offer too much in the way of the plot as such, the main events encompassing only "dining, first, and later singing, working, playing, travelling, competing, discussing, and finally being entertained" (6).[4] Similarly, the pensioners' continual engagement in acts of remembering

the past is reminiscent of the way in which memories constantly flood the minds of Albert Angelo and the main characters of *Trawl* and *The Unfortunates*. No less important is the fact that much of the interpretative potential of *House Mother Normal* still lies in typography and the layout of the text itself, a very Johnsonian feature indeed. Thus, whenever a character falls asleep, or otherwise stops talking, the ensuing silence is emphasised by lacunae, their size relative to the length of time when speech is absent. Likewise, italicized font, which marks scattered fragments of characters' dialogue with others, also has an illustrative function since the more it appears in a monologue, the more dominating and extrovert a given character seems to be and the greater the respect he or she commands among the others. This technical verisimilitude brings to mind Johnsonian insistence on artifice and on the material aspect of the novel as capable of bringing out a very special kind of authenticity, i.e. one based on the imitation of narrative situations.

There is, however, one crucial difference between the novel at hand and the preceding four books. If Johnson's *oeuvre* up to that moment was clearly governed by, or at least aimed at realising, his principle that "I, always with I · · · · one always starts with I · · · · [a]nd ends with I" (183)[5], in *House Mother Normal* he seemingly abandons his antagonistic stance towards fiction, allowing *other* voices to talk about themselves in monologues delivered in the first-person mode (Stamirowska 2006: 121). The novel thus marks the writer's move away from his previously professed loyalty to truth, yet it also needs to be said that this departure is far from complete. It is only enough to mention the mimetic function of typography and the page layout to see that what Johnson really retreats from in *House Mother Normal* is not his concept of truth as such but rather the autobiographical correspondence between life and its literary representation. Besides, the ontological status of what may at first sight seem to be fiction is further shattered by the very end of the novel when House Mother leaves the fictional frame to announce that she is simply a "puppet or concoction of a writer" (204), an admission which denounces the invented world and emphasises the existence of the author behind the novel. As Jonathan Coe rightly notes, there is a contradiction to be traced at the heart of this announcement since it appears to be both necessary and at the same time somewhat redundant given the House Mother's subsequent acknowledgement of the readers' ability to distinguish truth from fiction anyway (2004: 25). This vague boundary between fact and fiction, Johnson's long-term artistic concern, might in itself constitute a separate topic for discussion, as might such issues as the curiously structured temporal planes of *House Mother Normal* or the inventive use of the page to convey further meanings. The focus of this article, however, will be primarily on the novel as a unique example of multiple narration, with

different voices permeating and influencing one another to finally form an original, if a patchy, story.

3. Multiple characters – multiple narrators

It is only enough to leaf through the pages of *House Mother Normal* to immediately notice that classical narratologists would not find it particularly easy to classify the text into their neat categories of time, voice or mood. Indeed, with a text like Johnson's it would be rather difficult to unambiguously identify the frequency of the events as either singulative or repetitive, and the answers to Genette's questions about *who sees?* and *who speaks?* would similarly be far from unequivocal. What seems to render all of these issues problematic with regard to *House Mother Normal* is the rather ambiguous relationship between its characters and narrator(s), a confusion which, in turn, seems to stem from the pretty bizarre structural composition of Johnson's novel.

As mentioned above, *House Mother Normal* is divided into individually paginated sections, each (except for the House Mother's two-page introduction) starting with a standardised record of a character's age, health condition and marital status. The header in each section, bar the introductory one, reveals the name of the character speaking, while a blank page following each of the parts seems to have the effect of further separating them from one another. Additionally, typography within each section seems to assume a life of its own: the roman type marks the characters' monologues, italics are used for dialogue, whereas lacunae and blank pages are nothing other than indication of silence. This inventive use of the technical possibilities of print largely reduces the role of a narrator, in so far as it seems to make reporting verbs practically redundant. Indeed, what might render *House Mother Normal* particularly striking for a reader accustomed to the smug comforts of realistic novels is exactly this apparent absence of any narratorial comment or conventional reporting expressions with which characters' utterances and thoughts are typically introduced in fiction. Instead, in every single section the reader is from the very start confronted solely with the words of the characters, a mode frequently referred to as an 'interior monologue' and in Genette's terminology renamed as 'immediate speech' (Genette 1980: 173).

In his seminal study entitled *Narrative Discourse* Genette famously differentiates between 'narrative of events' and 'narrative of speech'. Unlike the former, which can at best ensure an *illusion* of mimesis, the latter is, in fact, capable of an imitative effect in so far as it can provide a mimesis of speech. This mimetic effect can – so the theorist claims – be achieved on condition that characters' words find their way into the text by means of

direct speech, i.e. in exactly the same form in which they were uttered (1980: 162–173). If they are additionally unaccompanied by any reporting verbs or narrative commentary, mimesis of speech is enhanced to the utmost[6], resulting in the afore-mentioned 'immediate discourse' whereby "the narrator is obliterated and the character *substitutes* for him" (1980: 174, emphasis original). The individual sections of *House Mother Normal* might indeed be considered as instances of exactly such immediate discourse, in which the narrator's presence is reduced to the point of invisibility[7], and the characters are allowed to talk instead. Yet, in view of the fact that Johnson's novel seems to consist mostly of such interior monologues, a question arises: is the narrator still visible anywhere in the text, or has he or she already been completely effaced and substituted by the characters?

On the one hand, given the apparent lack of a single sentence of comment or explanation outside of the character-assigned monologues, there is reason to believe that the narrator in *House Mother Normal* has practically disappeared from view, giving way to a myriad of peripheral first-person character-narrators, each recounting a story of his or her past life interwoven into an account of a shared, if a differently-perceived, present. Even the very task of introducing the novel's structure and inviting the reader to "follow our Social Evening through nine different minds" (5) is entrusted to one of the characters, thereby emphasising the narrator's transparency. Thus considerably reduced, the role of the narrator in Johnson's novel is even further diminished inasmuch as the bulk of his or her duties is taken over by typography itself, which – as has already been mentioned – minimises the need for reporting expressions and, by extension, for a narrating entity.

And yet, even though the narrator in *House Mother Normal* seems to aim at – and to a large extent manages to achieve – maximum transparency for himself or herself, it is equally reasonable to argue that on closer inspection the presence of a narrating entity *can*, in fact, be detected on the pages of Johnson's novel. It is perhaps only enough to scrutinise the quasi-medical data on the first pages of the individual sections to realise that there must have been some outside figure responsible for the evaluation of the senile charges' and House Mother's health condition. Indeed, that the medical reports do not lie within the characters' ambit is quite clear given that the elderly inmates, especially the considerably more infirm ones with a CQ count of 2 or less, would have been incapable of the accuracy and the specialist terminology with which each patient's condition is assessed. Even House Mother herself, younger and apparently healthier though she may be, turns out to be merely yet another object of someone else's medical investigation, which is quite a logical conclusion given that she seems to remain ignorant of the dormant brain tumour revealed in her health record.

The narrator's presence can similarly be detected in the structural layer

of *House Mother Normal*. Indeed, neither the standardised form that the medical data takes throughout the novel nor the strict regularity of the individual sections can be expected to have been created by the characters themselves, all the more so as their increasingly weaker mental faculties render them incapable of coherently recounting even the simplest story, let alone conforming to any more elaborate structural patterns. The narrating entity is likewise made visible by the double pagination system, whereby the page numbers in the upper right corner are used individually for every single section, while those at the bottom of each page appear in an uninterrupted sequential order throughout the whole book and thus seem to be already *outside* the purview of the infirm inmates. Similarly, the speaker's name announced in each header seems to bear yet another trace of some outside presence, most probably that of a narrating entity, while the header in the introductory section, which reads "House Mother Introduces" (5–6), even appears to take the form of a reporting expression proper to conventional narrators.

Therefore, even though for the most part hidden behind the characters' interior monologues, the narrating entity still seems to be waiting in the wings of the novel, somehow supervising the whole and ready to put up an unassuming appearance whenever needed. One way or the other, i.e. irrespective of whether the narrator has already become completely invisible behind a myriad of character-narrators, or whether he or she is still present in the text as a coordinator of the various points of view, there is no denying that *House Mother Normal* is a text which resounds with a variety of voices and perspectives. If so, yet another question arises: to what extent does Johnson's novel represent an example of a truly dialogic, polyphonic work?

4. Dialogism and polyphony

If the preceding section dealt mainly with the complex distinction between the characters and the narrator(s) in *House Mother Normal*, it is now worth focusing on the characters and the author with a view to examining whether the relationship between them conforms to Bakhtinian understanding of dialogism and polyphony. These two interconnected concepts constitute an essential part of Mikhail Bakhtin's contribution to the study of literature, as well as occupying a rather special place in the canon of literary theory. As Bakhtin argues in his seminal study titled *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*[8], a polyphonic novel is one in which the relationship between various elements is that of genuine and thorough dialogism, the latter term denoting "a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue" (1984: 40). Analysing a selection of Dostoevsky's novels, the Russian scholar goes on to

provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for the concepts of polyphony and dialogism, examining such crucial aspects as the respective roles and positions of the author and the hero(es), the significance of the idea in Dostoevsky's world, as well as the types and characteristics of double-voiced discourses. For the purposes of the present article, however, it seems quite sufficient to focus primarily on the first of these issues, i.e. the relationship between the characters and the author in novels of the polyphonic type.

One of the basic tenets of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and polyphony is the independence and autonomy of fictional characters, who are no longer at the author's service, but are instead rightfully situated alongside the author, together with him forming "*a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices* [...] *with equal rights and each with its own world*" (1984: 6, emphasis original). Each character is thus given a voice, but this voice is by no means that of a passive puppet used by the author to communicate his or her authorial vision. In fact, for a novel to be truly polyphonic neither the author's consciousness nor the consciousnesses of individual characters can become objects subordinate to someone else's discourse; rather, a polyphonic world is "a world of autonomous subjects, not objects" (1984: 7). Importantly, as Bakhtin points out, the increased autonomy of a hero in a polyphonic novel does not in any way interfere with the author's scheme; on the contrary, it even constitutes its integral part (1984: 13, 64–65). For it is worth noting that the authorial design for a polyphonic novel seems to consist in exactly such coexistence of various voices which unfailingly enter into interaction with one another, but at the same time do not allow themselves to merge, to be swallowed up by another discourse (1984: 26, 28). Thus juxtaposed, the various consciousnesses of a Dostoevskian type of novel find themselves in a world whose elements acquire a truly dialogic quality when perceived as existing simultaneously in a given space, rather than as evolving along any temporal axis (1984: 28).

In point of fact, consciousness seems to emerge as one of the key issues in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and polyphony. With regard to characters the theorist acknowledges the primary importance of how the hero construes the reality around him rather than how he himself is perceived by the surrounding world. As a corollary to that, he goes on to emphasise the centrality of each character's consciousness and self-consciousness, through which they are able to communicate their personal worlds as *they* see them, thereby avoiding any "firm and finalizing authorial definition" (1984: 47–49)[9]. Therefore, what in a monologic novel used to be objective, external features of a hero are no longer so in a polyphonic world, in which they effectively fall out of the author's domain and are mostly presented through the hero's own field of vision (1984: 48). This being so, the author loses the

unifying function off the pages of monologic novels; instead, when confronted with a polyphonic world, "*to the all-devouring consciousness of the hero the author can juxtapose only a single objective world – a world of other consciousnesses with rights equal to those of the hero*" (1984: 49–50, emphasis original). It is essential to note, however, that later on in his study Bakhtin does not fail to notice the danger of possible misinterpretations of this increased importance of the heroes' fields of vision. As he argues, the polyphony of characters' voices does not in any way exclude the author's consciousness from a dialogic novel. On the contrary, it even *invites* the author to engage in an endless, active dialogue with the heroes, only that now the author has to acknowledge the characters' autonomy as subjects with whom to talk, rather than as objects whom to describe and define (1984: 67–68).

With its simultaneous multiple perspectives on the same event *House Mother Normal* might at first sight seem to conjure up the Bakhtinian definition of a polyphonic work; in fact, Jonathan Coe even refers to the novel as an instance of polyphony in the original, musical sense of the word (2004: 24–25). However, on closer inspection it appears that assigning the status of a polyphonic, dialogic work to Johnson's novel might also be rather problematic. Therefore, it is now worth discussing the extent to which *House Mother Normal* might actually render itself to analysis in terms of the two Bakhtinian concepts.

5. A cross-section of (un)equal voices

It does not probably come as much of a surprise that the multiperspectival structure of *House Mother Normal* should quite naturally bring to mind the Bakhtinian notion of the polyphonic novel. Even a cursory look at Johnson's novel immediately reveals a variety of clearly delineated voices inhabiting a shared world of fiction and partaking in roughly the same set of events. The polyphonic quality of *House Mother Normal* is further emphasised by the fact that the novel is structured in such a way so as to accentuate not only the simultaneity of these voices but also the primacy of the spatial dimension of the plot over the temporal one. Indeed, the length of merely one evening covered by Johnson's novel can hardly be enough time for any of the characters to undergo any major transformation or dramatic development. Rather, in a very Dostoevskian vain, the focus is on *juxtaposing* the various characters at any one moment, and not really on situating any of them on a temporal axis of development.

Likewise, it is important to note that the clear separation of particular sections and the dispersion of characters' responses to a given moment over

separate pages marked with the same number seem to comply with Bakhtin's principle of "an eternal harmony of *unmerged* voices" (1984: 30, emphasis mine). For example, when on the sixth page of her monologue one of the inmates – Ivy Nicholls – asks another pensioner: "*What were you doing yesterday, Mrs Ridge?*" (56), the reader does not know the reply until over 40 pages later when Gloria Ridge, the addressee of the question, gets to the sixth page of her monologue and provides the answer: "*Nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing!*" (100). Thus, in a sense, the various voices in Johnson's novel remain unmerged since in every single monologue the voices of others are present only in so far as their behaviour or reactions – yet to become known to the reader – influence the speaker of a given monologue into a particular set of responses, which is a phenomenon strikingly similar to Bakhtin's hidden dialogicality (1984: 197). By way of illustration, the aforementioned question posed by Ivy is closely followed by another sentence, which might seem slightly out of context until the above-cited answer of Gloria Ridge, provided later on in the novel and in Ivy's monologue substituted with a blank space, appears to have clearly influenced it:

> *What were*
> *you doing yesterday, Mrs Ridge?*
> *Yes, this must be yours then.* (56)

Thus, largely as a result of its unusual layout, Johnson's novel seems to offer a rather extraordinary example of polyphony: the fact that the different voices are not allowed to directly enter each others' monologues is quite a literal illustration of their unmerged status, while the fact that the characters influence one another's discourse might at the same time be evidence of a sort of dialogic relationship between them.

And yet, for all the aforementioned polyphonic features of *House Mother Normal*, it needs to be admitted that, in fact, there are also many elements in the novel which seem to be at odds with dialogicality as defined by Bakhtin. For while it is reasonable to argue that *House Mother Normal* by and large complies with the Bakhtinian principle of a "*polyphony of fully valid voices* [...] *each with its own world*," it would be rather more problematic to agree that all the voices resounding in Johnson's novel really enjoy "*equal rights*" (1984: 6, emphasis original). It is only enough to glance at the medical records provided for each character to see that some of them are physically as well as mentally stronger and healthier than the others, which is of course likely to influence their argumentative abilities as well as the clarity and comprehensibility of their thoughts and rejoinders. And so, being the youngest and the most vigorous of the lot, House Mother appears to be the most domineering one and she never omits to take advantage of the fact that

she is the one who is in charge. "I am monarch of all I survey", she says, and she goes on to add:

> This is my Empire.
> I do not exaggerate, friend. They are dependent
> upon me and upon such minions as I have from time
> to time. Nothing is more sure that I am
> in control of them. And they know it. (190)

Likewise, Ivy Nicholls – an old pensioner, but still quite a lively person – seems to derive pleasure from exerting control over others and giving them orders, a situation for which she claims to be sorry but, as she goes on to add, "*someone has to do the organising, don't they?*" (58). In contrast, Rosetta Stanton, one of the most infirm patients, seems not to even be interested in taking part in the novel's dialogue, her section being made up of mostly blank pages, only sometimes filled with scattered, incomprehensible words followed by a rather meaningful phrase "Let me out, or I shall die" (176), shortly after which she most probably dies[10]. It is hardly surprising, then, that the more imperious characters do not treat the feeble ones as equals in a dialogue, forcing upon them tasks which the latter should, and, in fact, in most cases do, unquestioningly follow.

Similarly, and most importantly perhaps, the relationship between the characters and the author himself in Johnson's novel can hardly be identified as that of equality. For while it may be true to say that the author in *House Mother Normal* is much like Dostoevsky's authors in that he "seeks words and plot situations that provoke, tease, extort, dialogize" (Bakhtin 1984: 39), he also quite considerably differs from the type of author that Bakhtin would be glad to see in a polyphonic novel, the divergence being especially visible with regard to his relation to the characters. For one thing, it would be rather difficult to unambiguously agree that the characters in Johnson's novel are really "*free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him" (Bakhtin 1984: 39, emphasis original). Indeed, Johnson's characters seem to be nothing like Dostoevsky's heroes. The latter are rather forceful personalities; they are holders of great, fully-fledged ideas which they constantly dialogise, but to which they strive to remain faithful (Bakhtin 1984: 87–88). They never allow any outside force – be it another character or the author himself – to impose any absolute definition on themselves and to thus destroy their unfinalizability; rather, "they all do furious battle with such definitions of their personality in the mouths of other people" (Bakhtin 1984: 59). By contrast, no such rebelliousness seems to be evident in the hearts and souls of the life-weary characters in *House Mother Normal*. Surely, they may not be

particularly pleased with House Mother's evening arrangements, but it seems that none of them is willing or brave enough to openly voice their discontent. Ivy Nicholls is perhaps fully aware of this when she argues that "[l]ike a prison, this is" (65), while Charlie Edwards, another pensioner, even admits:

> But I keep my feelings
> to myself. It would not do to be seen to
> revolt, I am in some ways revolting in myself. (32)

And if the characters for the most part do not even bother to communicate their feelings to one another, it is hardly surprising that they also fail to stand up to the author. Even House Mother herself – the character whose attitude could rather unambiguously be classified as authoritarian and controlling – finally comes to admit: "I too am the puppet or concoction of a writer" (204), thereby conclusively negating the existence of any equality between the characters and their author. Thus, in Johnson's novel it is the author who turns out to be privileged to pull the strings of the story, leaving the characters at his mere service as objects through which "certain aspects of the inside of his own skull" (204) are communicated. Likewise, the author--character relationship in *House Mother Normal* seems to even further diverge from the Bakhtinian definition in so far as *not* "all the stable and objective qualities of a hero" (1984: 48) are presented here as part of the heroes' self-consciousness; instead, some of them, such as age or consciousness level, are first to be found in the medical records which – as was argued above – are apparently outside the characters' own fields of vision. More to that, the assessment of each pensioner's health condition also creates a certain hierarchy of characters in that it determines the order in which they are allowed to speak, a fact which again points to some manipulative efforts on the part of the author. If the structural principle of 21 pages per character is additionally taken into consideration, it might be further argued that the author's design here is far from truly polyphonic, but is really closer to a monologic novel, in which "the hero is closed and his semantic boundaries strictly defined [...] he cannot cease to be himself, that is, he cannot exceed the limits of his own character, typicality or temperament without violating the author's monologic design concerning him" (Bakhtin 1984: 52). Indeed, House Mother, who is the only one to exceed the fixed limit of pages, does so only to announce that she is in fact governed from above by the author who "still expects me to be his words without embarrassment or personal comfort" (204). And if the position of the author in *House Mother Normal* appears to be so strong, another Bakhtinian question then arises: does the novel feature an authentic dialogue or is it rather a mere image of a dialogue? And, as

a corollary to that, to what extent does Johnson's novel feature a dialogue proper to a truly polyphonic novel?

6. An abating dialogue

As has already been argued, whatever dialogue ensues on the pages of *House Mother Normal*, it seems to bear the traces of outright inequality and a hierarchy of disproportionately privileged voices, which is not what Bakhtin would have imagined it to be. Naturally, this is by no means to imply that *House Mother Normal* contains no dialogic activity, for dialogue *does* constitute a vital part of the novel. Indeed, practically all the characters, bar the hardly conscious ones, *do* engage at one point or another in some sort of dialogue over the various aspects of what they are faced with during the particular Social Evening.

One such shared experience to which they refer is the two-stanza song which they are forced to sing as part of the evening's schedule. That the song is quite likely to become the object of dialogic activity is pretty clear given the stark contrast between its content and the situation of those who are expected to intone it:

> The joys of life continue strong
> Throughout old age, however long:
> If only we can cheerful stay
> And brightly welcome every day.
> [...]
> Oh, lucky us, that we are here!
> The most important thing to do
> Is stay alive and see it through! (11)

Indeed, the accumulation of words such as *joys*, *cheerful*, *strong*, *lucky*, or *alive* in a song to be performed by people who are anything but happy and vigorous is not only paradoxical in itself but also disagreeable and thus all the more likely to become an object of protest or dialogue of sorts. As a consequence, while some of the pensioners are trying, if unwillingly, to keep to the lyrics, others, such as Ivy Nicholls or Gloria Ridge, appear eager to take the first opportunity to either abandon singing or to replace individual words or whole lines of the song with lexical items of their own invention or liking.

Similarly, dialogic activity seems to intensify whenever the House Mother takes centre-stage or appears in view. As the person in charge of the House, and a controversial figure at that, she repeatedly makes her presence felt in the pensioners' fields of vision before her own version of the story is finally

presented. Each successive monologue follows the inmates' reactions to House Mother's plans for the evening's entertainment, which infamously culminates in her outrageous sexual intercourse with her dog. The responses to these exploits vary from utter disgust, to indifference or resignation, to excitement or enjoyment, thereby constituting all manner of diverse points of view on the same person and the same events. More to that, the voice of House Mother is also reflected in the pensioners' consciousnesses in so far as the commands which she most probably uses to assign various tasks are in fact incorporated, even if only indirectly, in the inmates' monologues, taking the form of imperative statements such as "Clear up, clear up" (10) or "Soak the labels off, I bet" (13). Therefore, when Sarah Lamson at one point says: "Get on with it, help Ivy, get on" (10), these are not her words; rather, she is most probably using her own voice to simply repeat what House Mother has just told her to do. Thus, House Mother's words quite frequently make their way into the pensioners' consciousnesses, which seems to bring to mind a crucial feature of Bakhtinian dialogism.

And yet, in spite of all the above-mentioned instances of dialogic activity, it seems that to categorise *House Mother Normal* as a novel thoroughly pervaded by a truly Bakhtinian dialogue might once again prove quite problematic. Indeed, on closer inspection it actually turns out that not only are the inhabitants of Johnson's fictional world unequal in the dialogue, but they are not in the first place very much interested in incessantly engaging in any active dialogue with each other. For even if it might be agreed that the various perspectives on House Mother's behaviour and commands *do* constitute an example of dialogic activity, it also needs to be admitted that at the same time the inmates are rather unwilling to directly confront or to enter into any interaction with the all too domineering and controversial character herself. Indeed, when repeatedly faced with the tasks and activities assigned by House Mother, the pensioners quietly react with a wide range of mostly negative feelings, but they never dare to speak their mind and engage in a genuine dialogue over the philosophy behind the functioning of the institution. They may not particularly like what has been planned for them in the Evening's schedule, but they never openly query the efficacy or the necessity of these activities. Thus, clearly unwilling to sing the hymn, Sarah Lamson asks herself: "What good does it do?" (11), but before any reflection ensues she resignedly resolves: "Better sing, though, don't want to cross her again, no" (11). Likewise, even though Charlie Edwards is secretly critical of the Pass the Parcel game, he does not spend much time thinking about "Who wants to play silly games?" (42); instead, he immediately passes on to admit: "But we all do. We all do as she says. Always" (42). And if the inmates' only reactions to House Mother's ideas are those of resignation or passive agreement, then the consequence is that they make a genuine dialogue

impossible because they never put their own perspectives into the woman's field of vision.

Neither do they take much interest in what House Mother herself is trying to communicate to them. A crucial scene in this context comes by the end of the Social Evening when House Mother encourages the inmates to counteract the effects of physical effort with a discussion session on the usual topics of death and funeral. Given that she never receives a single response to her questions and reflections, she should not be surprised that this time the debate ends on exactly the same note. Indeed, what ensues instead of a lively dialogue is merely a set of various secretly or quietly expressed emotional reactions to being forced to talk again. Charlie Edwards and Gloria Ridge thus angrily resolve not "to listen to all that rubbish again" (46), while Ivy Nicholls and Sarah Lamson react more calmly, treating this part of the evening as an opportunity to read a book and to rest respectively. The most infirm pensioners, in turn, do not even bother to express their attitude in any words, George Hedbury being silent or asleep, and Rosetta Stanton being most probably dead by then. Similarly, the jokes that House Mother tells as part of the Evening's entertainment mostly seem to fall on deaf ears, the pensioners' reaction being for the most part that of forced laughter; indeed, a laughter at something they did not even bother to listen to. It seems all the more paradoxical then that House Mother should impart to the reader the feeling of pride at the fact that "[t]hey vie with each other for my attention" (190). And taking into consideration all the inmates' accounts of the woman's dismissive and domineering attitude, it is even more unbelievable that she should subsequently claim "I listen very carefully to their complaints. And then do nothing. There is nothing for them really to complain about here" (190).

More to that, not only is House Mother mostly unconcerned about the pensioners' problems, but also seems to care little about imparting her ideas and philosophy to her charges. Indeed, even though it is possible to prove that House Mother's *words* are reflected in the inmates' monologues, it might be more difficult to agree that her *truth* "is introduced without fail into the *dialogic field of vision* of all the other major heroes of the novel" (Bakhtin 1984: 73, emphasis original). For it is important to note that what really makes way into the consciousnesses of the elderly charges is nothing more than commands and orders to be carried out, rather than any philosophy or great idea to be quarrelled or agreed with. It seems that nowhere in the pensioners' monologues could one come across a trace of House Mother's reasons and motivations behind her way of running the institution, and so it is not until House Mother's account of the evening is presented that the reader is finally able to glean her ideas. Apparently then, the elderly inmates depart from the Bakhtinian ideal in that, unlike Dostoevsky's characters, they do not really *understand* House Mother's (as well as each other's) truth, primarily

because this truth was most probably never placed in their fields of vision in the first place. Or, even if it indeed *was* imparted to them, they never seem to refer to it or engage in a dialogue over it, the reasons for which may vary from the feeling of senile resignation to the acute awareness that with House Mother's domineering attitude any discussion would take them nowhere anyway. Thus, they may often react with anger or forced politeness to the various tasks assigned to them in the course of the evening, but they never argue with, or for that matter even mention, House Mother's underlying intention to provide them with such treatment as "they would have received in the workhouse of the past" (185). Neither do they seem to display any knowledge or understanding of her somewhat perverse idea that presenting the charges with despicable sights is for their benefit because – as she argues – "I disgust them in order that they may not be disgusted with themselves" (197). As a corollary to that, it seems that what the pensioners really respond to is not House Mother's idea as such, but the manifestations of this idea in the form of everyday activities, duties and diversions which are invariably forced upon them.

As the above considerations apparently demonstrate, it is quite evident that each of Johnson's characters prefers to stay in his or her self-contained world rather than enter into contact with others. Indeed, it does not take much for one to notice that acts of remembering the past are much more significant and absorbing for the pensioners than their present lives in a shared space. For the most part, they thus treat the present as a regrettable necessity which is constantly intruding on their thoughts and deliberations about times long gone. By way of illustration, when Sarah Lamson notices that she is expected to be laughing at House Mother's joke, she abandons her memories for a short while only to quickly return to them after perfunctory laughter:

> We had a good feed at a chip place, before he went off to his football. I went round the shops, all excited inside all the afternoon. Perhaps it was expecting what – Laugh? *Ha ha ha, ho ho ho*.
> I wish I'd been kind to old people then, now I know how it is. It's always the same, you can never know until you actually are. (25, emphasis original)

This insistent return to the past clearly hampers any dialogic activity between the characters since it deprives them of any shared experiences to discuss. Unlike Dostoevsky's heroes, who "remember nothing, ... have no biography in the sense of something past and fully experienced" (Bakhtin 1984: 29),

Johnson's characters seem to remember more from the past than understand of the present. And if there are still any attempts at a dialogue of the Bakhtinian type, then what really ensues is an abating dialogue – a dialogue to which they are for the most part constrained and a dialogue to which Rosetta Stanton finally ominously reacts: "Let me out, or I shall die" (176).

7. Conclusion

The multiplicity of various points of view and voices resounding in *House Mother Normal* is certainly an issue which is worth a detailed investigation, all the more so as it seems that the novel does not render itself easily to any straightforward categorisation, and thus with each new research perspective it is possible to uncover more and more intriguing aspects of the text's vast interpretative potential. As the above analysis hopefully shows, with its rather unclear and confusing boundary between the characters and the narrator(s), the novel's narrative structure is rather involved and therefore perhaps already beyond the analytical categories proper to classical narratology. Similarly, to apply the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony and dialogism to the multivoicedness of *House Mother Normal* might on closer inspection prove problematic, the novel being filled with numerous contradictions as well as complex meanings and interrelations. Thus, whatever aspect or element seems at first sight to add to the novel's polyphonic quality it turns out to simultaneously bear the traces of a completely opposite interpretation, i.e. one which in Bakhtinian vision would not qualify the text as dialogic. Apparently, it is these contradictions and incongruities inherent in *House Mother Normal* that make it so difficult for the novel to be easily subsumed under the categories of polyphony and dialogism. And yet, if the text is filled with so many contradictory elements, maybe this is exactly what makes it somehow dialogic in itself?

NOTES

[1] Jonathan Coe goes on to admit that obviously B. S. Johnson was not the sole figure on the British literary avant-garde scene, other writers including Christine Brooke-Rose, Ann Quin or Alan Burns. However, as Coe further claims, "they were not as famous as he was, they were not as good at putting their names about, they did not appear on television as often as he did, they did not argue their case as passionately or fight their corner as toughly as he did, and there is not ... the same stubborn residue of public interest in their lives and work ... some thirty of forty years after the event" (2004: 3).

[2] As regards Robbe-Grillet and other *nouveau roman* writers, their fiction has not escaped frequent comparisons with Johnson's writings. In her comprehensive study of the latter's novels,

Krystyna Stamirowska notes that "the affinity between Johnson's views and the theory of the *nouveau roman*, and especially, the ideas of Robbe-Grillet, has been noticed by many critics, including Linda Hutcheon, Philip Tew, Nicolas Tredell and Judith Mackrell" (2006: 18). She then goes on to provide a detailed analysis of the similarities between the novelist and the *nouveaux romanciers* (2006: 18–26), simultaneously emphasizing that they should be regarded in terms of "a correspondence rather than direct influence; apparently; many elements of description of the *status quo*, and of suggestions and conclusions, can be seen as similar, since they derive from similar assumptions generated in France by a climate favourable to experiment, and in England – by opposition to the absence of such a climate, a fact which Johnson deplored" (2006: 24).

[3] A number of critics (see: Stamirowska 2006: 121; Coe 2004: 24–25, 296–298) have noticed structural similarities between *House Mother Normal* and Philip Toynbee's *Tea with Mrs Goodman*, published 24 years prior to Johnson's novel. As Coe argues: "Toynbee's short, almost plotless novel is set during a tea party in which the events are narrated by seven different characters – including a dog – who enter the room at different times. The action is divided into twelve 'time-units', each one lasting about a page and a half, with the same descriptive details and the same fragments of dialogue occurring at roughly (not exactly, as in Johnson's book) the same point on each page. The methodology, in other words, is strikingly similar to *House Mother Normal*, as is the way each section is introduced with the narrator's name..." (2004: 296).

[4] B. S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal*. Published as part of: *B. S. Johnson Omnibus*. London: Picador, 2004 (All quotations from the novel are taken from this edition).

[5] B. S. Johnson, *Trawl*. Published as part of: *B.S. Johnson Omnibus*. London: Picador, 2004.

[6] Genette argues that Aristotle's preference for mimesis correlated with the subsequent development of narrative genres, which was especially energised by the increasingly appreciated dramatic forms. The theorist is somewhat surprised to realise that "one of the main paths of emancipation of the modern novel has consisted of pushing this mimesis of speech to its extreme, or rather to its limit, obliterating the last traces of the narrating instance and giving the floor to the character right away" (Genette 1980: 173).

[7] As Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck note in *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, for a number of theorists the term "invisibility", when used with reference to a narrator, is not synonymous with the term "absence". Thus, it is their contention that: "there is definitely still a narrator in these cases, although he is not directly visible. We agree with Rimmon-Kenan who contends that there is always a narrating agent, even in the representation of dialogues or written fragments. The agent who presents these elements to the reader may be invisible, but he cannot be absent" (Herman – Vervaeck 2005: 19–20).

[8] *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is in fact a revised version of one of Bakhtin's earlier books titled *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*.

[9] At the same time, it is worth noting that Bakhtin proceeds to qualify his statement about the importance of self-consciousness, stating that "Self-consciousness, as the artistic dominant in the construction of the hero's image, is by itself sufficient to break down the monologic unity of an artistic world – but only on condition that the hero, as self-consciousness, is really represented and not merely expressed, that is, does not fuse with the author, does not become the mouthpiece for his voice; only on condition, consequently, that accents of the hero's self-consciousness are really objectified and that the work itself observes a distance between the hero and the author. If the umbilical cord uniting the hero to his creator is not cut, then what we have is not a work of art but a personal document" (1984: 51).

[10] As Bakhtin argues, death as such would not be likely to feature frequently in a Dostoevskian, polyphonic type of novel since it would then finalise the heroes, a consequence which is undesirable in a "world, where self-consciousness is the dominant of a person's image

and where the interaction of full and autonomous consciousnesses is the fundamental event" (1984: 73).

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