UCD*scholarcast*

Series 13 (Spring 2015)

Dublin: One City, One Book Lectures 2015

(in association with Dublin City Public Libraries)

Series Editor: Derek Hand

General Editor: P.J. Mathews

Everybody Speaks: Utopia and Polyphony in Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments*

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The plot of Roddy Doyle's first novel, *The Commitments*, seems almost too familiar to need retelling. It's about a group of working-class young people from the fictional North Dublin suburb of Barrytown who form a band to perform covers of American soul standards. They rehearse, they bicker, they practise their instruments until they begin to get better. They perform their first gig in the hall of a community centre (Doyle, 1986:86-113), cheered on by their mammies and friends. They collect a loyal following and begin to perform in professional venues in the city centre. They almost get a record contract – but just as Jimmy Rabbitte, the band's ringleader and manager, is negotiating a deal with the label, the band breaks up in a hail of recriminations. Jimmy, undeterred, sets about forming a new band: this one, he declares, will be "country-punk" (Doyle, 1986:163).

In Doyle's telling, this bittersweet story has some of the simplicity and resonance of a fairy tale. But like all fairy tales, *The Commitments* has repeatedly been mined for deeper meanings. As many critics have observed, it is inescapably a novel about class – and hence about politics. It is also inescapably a novel about the vexed questions of Irish identity in the late twentieth century. In forming a band to perform "Dublin soul," the members of The Commitments are fashioning their own idiosyncratic brand of Irishness. They are also, as the text repeatedly makes clear, fashioning an identity as members of a working-class that they conceive of, once again, in their own idiosyncratic terms. The great Marxist critic Fredric Jameson maintains that all works of art are "political fantasies" (Roberts, 2000:47) - that is, there can be no art without an attendant politics, and all works of art address political questions in overt or covert ways. *The Commitments* may, at first glance, seem to wear its politics lightly – it is, formally speaking, a comedy, complete with

pratfalls, catchphrases, romantic misunderstandings, and a great soundtrack. But it is also unmistakably a political novel - not in any simplistic or overt sense, but rather in the sense that the text embodies certain radical ideas about community and possibility – that it formally embodies what I will call, borrowing from Jameson, a "utopian" politics.

In an analysis of utopian ideas formulated in a 2004 essay entitled "The Politics of Utopia," Jameson proposes that a "utopia" is a political idea that hopes to transcend, or exist outside, politics, but that must, inevitably, begin *inside* politics. This holds true for the utopian imagined community proposed and tested in *The Commitments*. In fact, the very first thing that happens in the novel is a conversation about politics. When Outspan and Derek approach Jimmy with the idea that he will manage their new band, Jimmy responds with what has become a famous analysis of the Irish class system, in which he explicitly identifies the Dublin working class with an African-American political identity: "Say it loud, I'm black an' I'm proud" (Doyle, 1986:9).

Jimmy situates himself and the novel's other characters in a position of maximum social and political disadvantage. Appearing as it does in the opening pages of the novel, Jimmy's analysis lays the groundwork for the text's playful engagement with the possibility of transcending these social and political disadvantages, through the bringing into being of what Fredric Jameson calls an "imaginary collective": the band itself. Forming a band is, for Jimmy and the other members of The Commitments, a utopian project: that is, a space that will exist outside politics. In "The Politics of Utopia," Jameson argues that a utopia is always a project of the imagination – but that its imaginative aspect is always grounded in an encounter with the shaping forces of contemporary capitalist reality. In other words, in the utopian attempt to escape politics, we find that the political inevitably returns in some new form. He writes:

> Wishes cannot always be successfully fantasized: such is the operation of

> the constraints of narrative as well as of the Real. Constructions cannot always be built: such are the constraints of raw materials and the historical situation, which stand as the statics and dynamics, the elementary laws of gravity and locomotion, of the building of imaginary collectives. (Jameson, 2004:41)

The "historical situation" in which The Commitments find themselves has been articulated by Jimmy Rabbitte. To occupy a position of maximum disadvantage as a member of Dublin's north side working class is, for these characters, the "Real" that constrains their efforts to "build an imaginary collective." And the narrative arc of the novel would seem to confirm Jameson's pessimism: the band, after all, does not succeed, the "imaginary collective" they have created falls apart. But we might say that to "succeed," for The Commitments, would be to succeed in terms of the capitalist system that has done so much to marginalise them. Their mission as a band is never conceived in terms of commercial achievement. It is conceived in terms of "soul."

It is, of course, Jimmy Rabitte who articulates the utopian possibilities of forming a band:

> -Why are yis doin' it, buyin' the gear, rehearsin'? Why did yis form the group?
>
> […]
>
> -It's hard to say, said Outspan.
>
> That's what Jimmy had wanted to hear. He jumped in.
>
> -Yis want to be different,isn't tha' it?
>
> -Sort of, said Outspan.
>
> -Yis don't want to end up like (he nodded his head back) – these tossers here. Amn't I righ'? (Doyle, 1986:6)

The utopia of soul, for the novel's characters, suggests the possibility of transcending Irish identity politics altogether – of establishing an identity that is wholly other, wholly separate from the disadvantages Jimmy has just outlined. It is significant that this possibility is not articulated in political terms. As Jameson writes in "The Politics of Utopia":

> [U]topia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political […] political institutions seem both unchangeable and infinitely modifiable: no agency has appeared on the horizon that offers the slightest chance or hope of modifying the status quo, and yet in the mind—and perhaps for that very reason—all kinds of institutional variations and re-combinations seem thinkable. (Jameson, 2004:43-4)

In *The Commitments*, it is American soul music – rather than any aspect of Irish culture or history – that offers Jameson's "moment of the suspension of the political." That soul offers the possibility of a non-Irish utopian space is explicitly figured during one of Jimmy Rabbitte's motivational "workshops" in Joey The Lips Fagan's garage, in which he explains to the rest of The Commitments the transcendent, utopian politics of soul:

> -Soul is dynamic. (-So are you.) -It can't be caught. It can't be chained. They could chain the nigger slaves but they couldn't chain their soul.
>
> -Their souls didn't pick the fuckin' cotton though. Did they now?
>
> -Good thinkin'.
>
> -Fuck off a minute. – Soul is the rhythm of the people, Jimmy said again. –The Labour Party doesn't have soul. Fianna fuckin' Fail doesn't have soul. The Workers' Party ain't got soul. The Irish people – no. – The Dublin people – fuck the rest o' them. – The People of Dublin, our people, remember need soul. We've got soul. (Doyle, 1986:40)

Jimmy dismisses the standard political institutions of Irish working-class identity: the Labour Party, Fianna Fail, the Workers' Party. He explicitly rejects a formalised socialist praxis in favour of the utopian possibilities of soul. He also rejects the concept of "the Irish people" in favour of "Dublin people" – proposing a very specific, Dublin-based, identity as the locus of his emerging utopian conception of political possibility – thus, "the moment of the suspension of the political" is also the moment of the *return* of the political, in a new guise – in the formation of a new utopian identity that is inescapably polarising and politicised. Here Jimmy builds on his original analysis of northside working-class Dubliners as uniquely disadvantaged. He reclaims or rewrites this sense of maximum disadvantage as the basis of a utopian imaginary collective. In this sense, *The Commitments* repeatedly figures the opening out of utopian possibility – the escape from politics – as the formation of another politics – but a politics no longer tied to the "constraints of raw materials and the historical situation," as Jameson puts it. The search for an imagined community of utopian possibility, in this novel, necessarily involves a newly politicised opposition to other communities – a reconstruction of identity within the utopian project of the band's imagined community. Thus the political returns to the putatively non-political utopian space. However, Doyle's novel does not simply foreclose utopian possibility by showing it to be inevitably haunted by the return of the basely political. Instead, the text itself embodies a utopian possibility: which is that, in utopia, everybody speaks, all voices are legitimate, and no one voice predominates.

What is especially significant is that Jimmy's elaboration of the utopian possibilities of soul is not allowed to congeal into a monologue. When he begins to speak, Jimmy is immediately interrupted by an unidentified member of the band: "-Soul is dynamic. (-So are you.)" These interruptions occur throughout the novel. No character is ever allowed to deliver a speech without interruption. *The Commitments*, as befits a story

about music, is very much a novel of voices. It is, in the term coined by the Russian Formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin, a polyphonic novel - a term Bakhtin himself adapted from musical terminology. In *The Commitments*, the voice is an instrument: of persuasion, seduction, satire, and instruction. There is no central voice - we might expect Jimmy Rabitte's voice to dominate the text, but in fact Jimmy's speech remains a part of the choral interchange of voices that makes up most of the text of the novel. *The Commitments* is emphatically an ensemble piece - it dramatises and embodies a communal ethic, in which no one voice is positioned as the privileged arbiter of meaning. The anti-individualist ethic of soul is explicitly figured in the novel as the music of the working class – and the novel repeatedly reinforces a polyphonic ethic in which no one voice, not even that of the third-person narrator, is granted final authority. In the utopia of soul, there are no authority figures, no privileged utterances, no last word. There is only what Bakhtin refers to as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin,1984:6).

Bakhtin outlined his theory of the polyphonic novel in his classic book *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1927). He writes that in a polyphonic novel:

> A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters. (Bakhtin, 1984:7)

Bakhtin finds in Dostoyevsky's work "not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of

consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world," which "combine but do not merge in the unity of the event" (Bakhtin, 1984:7-8). The idea of a "Dublin soul band" becomes the novel's image of the imagined or imaginary community, in which "voices combine but do not merge," in which consciousness is plural and no single voice dominates. In *The Commitments*, the act of speaking is the locus of utopian possibility – but crucially, to speak, in this novel, is always to be answered – to have one's say is immediately to be reminded that everyone else will have his or her say, too.

In the early years of the 21st century, another novelist of Roddy Doyle's generation, the great (and greatly anxious) postmodernist John Banville, would begin his 2004 novel *Shroud* by asking, "Who speaks?", expressing, in two words, a profound postmodern anxiety about the validity and cohesion of the narrative voice. Roddy Doyle, writing a quarter of a century earlier, expresses no such radical doubts; for him the answer is simple. Who speaks? Everybody speaks. Whereas Banville articulates the postmodern identity crisis of the white male bourgeois subject - re-privileging that subject in the process - Doyle makes the more quietly radical gesture of refusing to privilege any one subject - any one voice - above any other. To speak, in *The Commitments*, is to be heard - but it is also immediately to be challenged, shouted down, made fun of, contested. As Bakhtin writes in *Speech Genres*: "Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive... Any utterance is a link in the chain of communication" (Bakhtin, 2004:68, 84). *The Commitments* embodies this chain of communication in a polyphonic communality, a many-voiced chorus of characters who may be economically disenfranchised, but who locate the possibility of a new kind of enfranchisement through their engagement with a chain of communication in which no one voice predominates. The novel's subtle interrogation of traditional power structures can be seen in its ceaseless chorality; this is a novel in which every opinion meets its opposite, every statement meets

its contradiction. The Commitments may not succeed in any capitalist or commercial sense; they may not create a powerful new politics of identity for the northside Dublin working classes. But they do embody a utopian ethic, in which every participant – not only every member of the band, but also every member of the audience – is granted the right to speak, the right to be heard, and the right to be argued with. The responsive voice, in this text, is just as important – just as authoritative – as the voice that is being answered.

This ethic finds expression in the textual form of the novel itself. *The Commitments* eschews many of the traditional trappings of the novel. (Several critics have remarked on the novel's superficial similarity to a playscript or a screenplay, which testifies to the text's commitment to the voice as its central locus of expression and possibility.) The novel, historically, has been an art form of, for, and by the bourgeoisie, and as such it has generally aspired to present an "objective" discourse, centred on a trustworthy narrative figure or voice who offers "final" interpretations of the events depicted. Doyle rejects almost all of the trappings of the bourgeois novel: the scrupulous analysis of psychological processes, the lengthy descriptions of domestic interiors, the carefully constructed dramatic reversals. For example, the most dramatic event in *The Commitments* happens offstage: the break-up of the band occurs while Jimmy Rabbitte is securing a record deal. And then there is the question of the narrative voice itself. Here Doyle offers his most quietly radical challenge to the traditional bourgeois novel. Nominally speaking, *The Commitments* is narrated in the third person. But this third person narrative voice bears very little resemblance to the scrupulously distant, determining narrative voice of classically Jamesian fiction. In *The Commitments,* the voice of the third person narrator is scarcely distinguished from the voice of the characters. Dermot McCarthy, in his 2003 study of Roddy Doyle's fiction, argues that Doyle's novels have followed a trajectory from "the conventional, focalised third-person narrator" of the Barrytown Trilogy to a "self-

conscious and unreliable first-person narrator-protagonist" (McCarthy, 2003:3) of later novels like *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* (1996) and *A Star Called Henry* (1999). However, the third-person narrative voice of *The Commitments* is less "conventional" than it may first appear. Rather than being "focalised," in McCarthy's sense – that is, focused upon one or several characters whose viewpoints are given privileged representation – the narrative voice of *The Commitments* insistently refuses to privilege any single point of view. Who's the central character of *The Commitments*? There isn't one. We must return to Bakhtin's polyphonic novel, in which he finds "not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world." What is remarkable about *The Commitments* is the manner in which Doyle suppresses or elides the "single authorial consciousness" in the interests of the voices of the characters themselves. Here, again, Doyle dispenses with the bourgeois mechanics of the novel, in favour of a polyphonic text that refuses to accord final authority even to its own third-person narrator. As McCarthy notes, in the novels of the Barrytown Trilogy, "Dublin dialect is the norm and does not contrast significantly with the narrative voice because Doyle consciously set out to use a narrative voice as close to the characters' voices as possible" (McCarthy, 2003:27). We see Doyle's third person narrative voice in action on the novel's first page:

> Jimmy Rabbitte knew his music. He knew his stuff alright. You'd never see Jimmy coming home from town without a new album or a 12-inch or at least a 7-inch single. Jimmy ate Melody Maker and the NMN every week and Hot Press every two weeks. He listened to Dave Fanning and John Peel. He even read his sister's Jackie when there was no one looking. So Jimmy knew his stuff. (Doyle, 1986:1)

This is the third person narrative voice speaking – but there is nothing that overtly

distinguishes its mannerisms and tonality from the mannerisms and tonality of the characters in the novel. In Doyle's most radical gesture, the third person narrative voice – or "single authorial consciousness," in Bakhtin's phrase – is subsumed in the chorality of the "chain of communication" that makes up the novel. The utopian possibility of a world in which everybody speaks – and is answered – extends even to the formal aspects of the text. In refusing to privilege any single central character – in refusing even to privilege his own surrogate voice as author of the text – Doyle celebrates a heterogeneity of discourses that gives rise to an imagined community of vocal exchange. In this way, Doyle avoids directly posing the profound questions raised by his text. Instead he suggests that such profound questions should themselves be seen as less important that the utopian possibility of a community in which everybody speaks. As Lorraine Piroux writes in an article on Irishness in *The Commitments*:

> Irishness in *The Commitments* is no longer a matter of definition or semantics since Doyle does not ask what it means to be Irish. Rather, identity manifests itself in the sheer intensity of the dialogues, the slang, and the lyrics of blues and soul music. (Piroux, 1998:46).

Roddy Doyle's commitment – if you'll excuse the pun – to the principle of chorality is what enables him to address troubling and profound questions (about class, identity, and political possibility) in rich and suggestive ways. The Commitments may not achieve their aim of creating a new politics of Dublin soul; but the novel in which they appear is nonetheless a celebration of their central discovery: that in speaking for, with, and against one another and the world, they can begin to open up new spaces in which that new politics might at last be imagined.

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