VIRGINIA WOOLF'S AND GRAHAM SWIFT: THEORIES ON NOVELS IN THEIR DIARY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WRITINGS

Irina-Ana Drobot

Lecturer, PhD, Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to compare the perceptions of novels and writing by Virginia Wool and Graham Swift. Their novels are similar and could be considered to belong to the category of lyrical novels. The way they view writing style, novels, plots is in direct connection with the writing style they practiced.

Keywords: lyrical novel, Romanticism, poetic, dramatic.

Introduction

A comparison of the novels written by Woolf and Swift is prompted, first of all, by common themes, such as: isolation of the hero, travelling, moments of vision, concern with nature, with personal and public history, with self-expression, and with the use of imagination to understand the world. All these are, in turn, associated with common tropes in Romantic lyric poetry. The use of previously known texts, from Romantic lyric poetry and others, from other poems and drama, works to create a different kind of novel, the lyrical novel. This is, after all, Woolf's own theory of this kind of novel that we can find in her diaries. According to Barbara Lounsberry, "Woolf's diary is a writer's diary. Leonard Woolf was right about that, but it is much more. Few diaries capture the creative process as fully as Woolf's. In her early diaries we see her psychological tricks to induce prose." (2015: 9). Swift's novels work in a similar way. He also has a collection of autobiographical writings where he expresses his opinions on the way stories, and, implicitly, his novels, work.

The novel allows freedom for the mixture of various literary genres. Yet readers still expect to find the narrative mode in a novel. Here comes the lyrical novel to challenge this perception, by using the lyrical mode in a predominant way. We can say that there is a certain belief that has dwelt for ages in the minds of readers as to what mode should predominate a novel, and that is the narrative mode more than the lyrical or dramatic modes. Despite innovations and experiments with the novel throughout time, readers seem to always start from this assumption when they read, experience and judge a novel. The two authors, Woolf and Swift, share opinions on novel writing that have lots of points in common, and the main common issue has to do with the poetic aspect of any story.

Virginia Woolf: the novel as mixture of genres

Virginia Woolf's theory about the lyrical novel makes a good starting point. In her diary, Woolf comments on the mixture of genres, of poetry and prose, as well as on the difference between the presentation of story in her novel, as compared to traditional novels. She also lets us understand that her novel will be, in fact, a mixture of narrative, as well as poetic and

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dramatic modes or genres. In her diary, in an entry from 1927, she records her intention to use prose poetically. In her view, this new type of novel should contain features of both prose and of poetry. Such prose should also be dramatic, not only poetic, in the sense that the writer will use the influence of music, for instance, to create a dramatic feel. Contradictory and powerful emotions will also be used in the lyrical novel, according to Woolf. Woolf also suggests that readers should compare various genres and various arts in order to intensify the lyrical atmosphere as well as the dynamic feel of the story. The reader intensely experiences the characters' emotional states, which in fact make up most of the story's presentation. Woolf also refers to a new way of representing emotions and time in her novels. Her story does not represent external incidents in a traditional way. Woolf's novels represent reality in a different way, focusing on contradictory and intense emotional states, on reflections concerning imagination, and nature, and on her characters' relation to it.

According to Virginia Woolf, in *A Writer's Diary*, in an entry from August 6, 1937, the novel is "to be dialogue; and poetry; and prose; all quite distinct" (Woolf 1953: 285). The inner world is dramatic in the sense that what happens there may be regarded as interesting external, dynamic action. Consciousness is defined as private and dynamic (Humphrey 1954: 42). Multiple selective omniscience, with multiple perspectives, and a neutral narrator (who in fact manipulates the reader) offers the reader the impression of inner monologues. According to Ihab Hassan, in *Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective* (1986), "postmodern art calls itself performance." By performance this thesis refers to Ihab Hassan's definition: "Indeterminacy elicits participation; gaps must be filled. The postmodern text, verbal or nonverbal, invites performance: it wants to be written, revised, answered, acted out. Indeed, so much of postmodern art calls itself performance, as it transgresses genres." By transgressing genres, we understand that Swift's novel, *Ever After*, has features which cause it to be perceived as a dramatic text. By identifying himself with Hamlet, Unwin rewrites the play with himself and others around him as characters. He tries to find answers to his dilemmas. In doing this, he makes use of various pieces of literature. Unwin may be seen as what Richard Poirier called "the performing self", who, in its "self-discovering, self-watching" finds "response to... pressures and difficulties." (Hassan 1987: 171-172) Swift uses the play *Hamlet* in his prose, by means of Unwin's monologue (references or short quotations are found throughout the novel). Swift's writing is very close to Woolf's description in her diary of the new kind of novel she wished to write, namely a novel which was written in prose, yet had both dramatic and lyrical features.

Graham Swift: Fiction is made up of magical moments

It has been said about Graham Swift that he rewrites the Modernist stream-of-consciousness novel, as practiced by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (Draga 1999: 242). According to Catherine Pesso-Miquel (2007: 135), Swift's novels include "Not narration therefore, but a fictitious flow of thoughts sometimes close to the modernist 'stream of consciousness'". Malcolm mentions aspects of "fugitive lyricism" (2003: 189) in Swift's novels, claiming that Swift's language is "full of subtle linguistic effects". Stef Craps (2005: 177) states that Swift's language is "characterized by its attempts to improvise a fugitive lyricism out of the patterns of 'ordinary' speech". Both critics focus on lyricism but also on other features that are found in his novels, especially Swift's language. Everyday speech is, of course, connected to everyday life.

Swift explains the way he views novel-writing in *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, a collection of non-fiction writing and interviews. Swift remembers the moment of an inoculation in childhood, and he compares it to fiction. Swift claims that "Fiction is also a kind of inoculation, a vaccine, preserving us from such plagues as reality can breed." (Swift 2009:

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11). Swift believes that "fiction – storytelling – is a magical thing." (Swift 2009: 11). Swift makes us recall the idea of "being under a story's 'spell'" (Swift 2009: 12), claiming that "the power of a good story is a primitive, irreducible mystery that answers to some need deep in human nature" (Swift 2009: 12). Like Woolf, Swift suggests that there are special moments in fiction which appeal to readers. Readers may experience certain stories as "magic" or as special. What Woolf calls "moments of being" are experienced intensely. For Swift, stories can express a hidden truth, a revelation:

> The real magic (if that expression is legitimate) of fiction goes much deeper than a few sprinklings of hocus-pocus, but we know when it's there and we feel its tingle in the spine. There can even be something magical about the perfectly judged and timed revelation on the page of an unanswerable truth we already inwardly acknowledge. In good fiction, without any trickery, truth and magic aren't incompatible at all. (Swift 2009:13)

The Romantic poets show their influence on Woolf's novels. Similarities between Woolf and the Romantics are discussed by critics such as Ali Güneş[1], Alexandra Harris in *Romantic Moderns* (2010), Michael John Ustick, in *Virginia Woolf: The Unfathomable Deep and Romantic Tradition* (1974), and Irma Rantavaara in *On Romantic Imagery in Virginia Woolf's The Waves, with a Special Reference to Antithesis* (1959). Ustick draws attention to the visionaries in Woolf and their similarity to the visionaries in the Romantic tradition. Woolf acknowledges this similarity in her diary in the entry from June 22 (1953: 238). Ustick (1974: 28) claims that the "visionary giants" in Woolf are inspired by "Carlyle's paradisiac, unconscious 'wholeness', Coleridge's One Life, Shelley's One Mind, and Blake's Human Form Divine". Orlando is a giant visionary since he lies on the oak tree root where he "is riding the back of the world" (1974: 228), while Bernard is also a giant visionary since he "becomes omniscient (like Orlando) and representative of all men". Ustick (1974: 29) interprets the concept of the self in *The Waves* as Romantic, since the voice of the six characters may be interpreted as one, and thus it is a "poetic" voice, "the voice of the Self which has been 'enlarged and set free' (CE, II. 108)". Jean Guiguet, in *Virginia Woolf and Her Works* (1976) looks at the Romantic representation of the artist in Woolf's novels. According to him, Woolf's task as an artist includes "the apprehension of that reality" (of the depths, according to Ustick 1974: 34-35) and "the expression of it". According to Guiguet (1976: 72), form, or the expressive function, includes "all the elements, all the forces which, applied to emotion – the material of the novel -- transform it, achieve a kind of transmutation of reality." Ustick (1974: 35) compares this with the definition given by Coleridge of secondary imagination: the artist will recreate a new reality, a new world through a different kind of perception. Ustick (1974: 4) supports this with the example of Miss LaTrobe, "one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a recreated world!" (BA, p. 108). The contrast between past and present is, according to the Romantics, part of the tragedy of a corrupt, fragmented present and the yearning for a "pseudo-legendary time and place, analogous to the garden-state of Eden in Christian myth, in which man was 'whole' and at one with himself and nature". According to Alexandra Harris (2010: 64), "Woolf was leading the way towards a new kind of art which involved the passionate recuperation of the personal and of the past". It is thus understood that Woolf turned to the experiences of the past in her works. Indeed, the past plays a significant part in influencing the present of various characters such as Septimus. The Romantic influence is shown in the past influence over the present, but also in the perception of reality and in the way imagination or emotion shapes reality. Moreover, Rantavaara refers to the concern with two realities of Woolf, taken from the Romantics: Rantavaara "feels that the tendency to 'see everything arranged in antithetical patterns' is the

[1] He discusses the double awareness of memory from Wordsworth.

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mark of a 'true romantic' (Ustick 1974: 17). Ustick (1974: 17) refers to the "key Romantic distinction between two orders of experience - (se1f-)consciousness and un(se1f)-consciousness". Other contradictions can be established between fact and vision, everyday life vs. a larger pattern, just like in the case or ordinary vs. heightened perception of reality, the latter is found in "moments of being".

According to Swift, therefore, stories draw our attention to moments of vision. Readers experience moments of vision while reading a novel. Moreover, moments of vision, which are experienced intensely as revelations or shocks, are found in Swift's novels, too, and remind one of the Romantic poets. Similar settings trigger them (nature or the city). Swift favours first-person narration: "As an author who's favoured the intimacy of the first person over the 'authorial' third person, I'd regard it as a mark of achievement if in my work the author seems to vanish" (Swift 2009: 1). When Swift discusses the way he writes in *Making an Elephant*, he explains the representation of time in his novels:

> The framework is broadly chronological, but (as in my novels) some liberties are taken with time. The book starts, as it were, when I was six and ends with a man who lived in the sixteenth century. In between, there is more modest hopping forward or back. (Swift 2009: 3)

Moments of vision are just one of the features taken over from the Romantic poets by Swift. The narrators see themselves as artists when they have these moments of vision. The lyrical novel is structured into lyrical monologues, which are the result of the hero's isolation: in Romantic poetry, this causes the need for confession. The first-person narrator who favours Romantic self-expression is also borrowed from Romantic poetry. Powerful and spontaneous emotions are of import. The characters use imagination in a way similar to that of Romantic poetry, in the way they reshape reality.

Traditional Story vs Lyrical Story

McLaurin speaks about the difference between Forster's story and plot: story is 'what happens next", while plot shows us why it happens. "Story simply changes, whereas plot needs some constant element, some underlying pattern" (McLaurin 2010: 159). McLaurin analyzes how Woolf's novels are distinctive, judging by the way she conceives of story, plot, repetition and situations:

> For plot some underlying principle is required, but Virginia Woolf is obsessed with the principle which underlies these principles, with repetition itself, and she wishes to dispense with both story and plot. In her diary she admits that 'I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots'. […] *The Years* consists simply in a series of incidents which are repeated with slight variations throughout the novel. It is the history, the saga, of the Pargiter family, but these repetitions make it quite different from the traditional family saga. Her explicit concern with these repetitions can be seen in her diary, where she speaks of the composition of *The Years* in the following way: 'I must still condense and point: give pauses their effect, and repetitions, and the run-on'. (McLaurin 2010: 160)

McLaurin thus speaks of situations in Woolf's case, situations which replace the traditional kind of plot which indicates why something happens. The situations are also likened to the idea of the moment on which Woolf focuses. McLaurin notices in *The Waves* this idea expressed by Neville: "They want a plot, don't they? They want a reason? It is not enough for them, this ordinary scene". McLaurin then states that "Bernard recognizes that the moment is itself made up of other moments, or repetitions which come together" (2010: 161). In Swift, the same idea of circular time brings about a comparison with Woolf's conception of history as repetitive, an

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idea which is represented in the novel. This idea will be expressed not in the narrative mode but in the lyrical mode, by employing a technique specific to lyric poetry, namely that of images which will hold a certain significance for the characters' mood. The history that repeats itself is not always the history of public events, but most often that of personal life, or the public history that also has an impact on the characters' private lives.

Conclusions

The diary and autobiographical writings of these two novelists help sustain critical theories regarding their novels and draw certain conclusions. What can these conclusions be regarding the lyrical novel?

It is problematic to say what exactly constitutes a traditional plot and what exactly the readers understand by a traditional story. Woolf shocked her readers by her experimental technique. Yet why did this happen? Are her novels really that different from traditional ones? In fact, she did shape the readers' perceptions of what she called the traditional novel in her essays. She defined her new type of novel in opposition to the traditional novel. Thus, she created expectations about previous novels and then challenged them. The same has happened with Swift. He tells us that he is concerned with stories in an old-fashioned sense. This means that our expectations are for the fiction of his time to be different. He will thus stand out with his style. Critics such as Malcolm underline his lyricism and present him in opposition to other writers who are his contemporaries. Lea (2005: 6) tells us that Swift's concern with ethics makes him an old-fashioned story-teller. Readers form expectations because of their conceptions of Modernism and Postmodernism.

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