

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FORM AND CONTENT IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S NOVELS

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How far do the author's main concerns and beliefs dictate the narrative techniques she (he) adopts in her (his) novels? This is an intriguing question which, depending on the author, will probably require different answers. Relationally, and "a priori", one would think that there should be a strong relationship between form and content in a novel so as to make it an aesthetic, coherent whole. In what concerns Virginia Woolf's novels one notices, after a close analysis, that there is such a relationship between some of the ideas conveyed by her characters, in a significative number, and some of the narrative techniques she adopted. And this is what we shall be examining next.

Concerning point of view, for example, and adopting Friedman's categories¹, we notice a predominance in Mrs. Woolf's fiction of the multiple selective omniscience, in which there is a composite of viewing angles, no narrator or a neutral one, and the story comes directly through the minds of the characters. This is the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*² in which the reader forgets about the existence of a narrator, except for one or two slight interferences only acknowledged in a second reading. The multiple selective omniscience comes combined with neutral omniscience in *The Voyage Out*³, *Night and Day*⁴, *To the Lighthouse*⁵ and *The Years*⁶, and combined with the dramatic mode in *The Waves*.⁷ Well, the neutrality or absence of the narrator configures an author who did not wish to be didactic and moved him or herself into anonymity, but it also fits Virginia Woolf's characters' rejection of tyranny and the writer's attack on man's wish of command. Thus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa hates religious and idealist people because they do not respect people's privacy, "the

privacy of the soul", as she calls it, and cover their wish of command with idealism and/or religion. And she seems to summarize her point:

Had she ever tried to convert anyone herself?

Did she not wish everybody merely to be themselves?(p.191)

In *To the Lighthouse* it is a character, Mr. Ramsay, who personifies man's inclination to authoritarianism. His aloofness and tyranny turn him into an unsympathetic character in contrast with his wife, tolerant and beloved by her family and friends.

In *The Years*, Nicholas reaffirms man's impossibility of judging anyone when he asks, 'If we do not know ourselves, how can we know other people?' (p.236). And a similar idea is conveyed by Ralph, in *Night and Day*: "I doubt that one human being ever understands another', he had said..." (p.226) and by Isa in *Between the Acts*: "Well, was it wrong if he was that word? Why judge each other? Do we know each other? Not here, not now."⁸ In *The Voyage Out* characters discuss different topics and it is up to the reader to side with any of them.

Indeed, this impossibility of judging anyone is based on the assumption that man is composed of several selves and is therefore unknown to himself and even more acutely to the others. Such ideas are conveyed by several characters in Mrs. Woolf's novels. By Mrs. Ramsay, for example: "Who knows what we are, what we feel? Who knows even at the moment of intimacy, this is knowledge?" (*To the Lighthouse*, p.159-60) Also by Rachel, in *The Voyage Out*: "So too, although she was going to marry him and to live with him for thirty, forty, of fifty years, and to quarrel, and to be so close to him, she was independent of him; she was independent of everything else" (p.322). The narrator in *Orlando* reinforces a similar idea: "... these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, ... so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room with green curtains, another when Mrs. Jones is not there"⁹

This impossibility of knowing each other leads inevitably to solitude, as it is put in *Jacob's Room*: "... it was not that he himself happened to be lonely, but that all people are,"¹⁰ and also to the idea that love may bridge the natural gap between human beings, as Eleanor seems to say: "Anyhow, she thought, they are aware of each other, they live in each other; what else is love, she asked, listening to their laughter" (*The Years*, p.282).

Thus one notices that there is a chain of ideas connected in Virginia Woolf's fiction based on the individuality of human beings, and the awareness of such an individuality seems to be reinforced by

the several points of view – the multiple selective omniscience – she adopted in most of her novels. Plainly speaking, she seems to say: "People are different and they think differently!"

The lack of didacticism is also evident in her preference for open plots, plots that convey no theses. This is the case of *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, *The Years*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, in fact, of all the novels she wrote after *Jacob's Room*.

The multiple selective omniscience by itself or combined with a neutral narrator seems also to fit an idea concerning art conveyed by Miss La Trobe, the playwright in *Between the Acts*: the necessity of art to create illusion, the illusion of reality: "This is death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails" (p.131). She seems to echo Ford Madox Ford's words: "The object of the novelist is to keep the reader entirely oblivious of the fact that the author exists – even of the fact that he is reading a book."¹¹

Another technique we find in Virginia Woolf's fiction is time-montage. As we know, it is the superimposition of images or ideas from one time on those of another, and in this case the subject can remain fixed in space and his consciousness can move in time.¹² Flashbacks and flashforwards are the two types of time-montage, and we find innumerable examples of the first type in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *The years* and *Between the Acts*, and fewer examples of flashforwards. The opening page of *Mrs. Dalloway* is a good example of time-montage, with flashbacks and flashforwards, for Clarissa remembers her youth in Bourton and foresees Peter Walsh's visit on his coming back from India, as she opens the window of her house in London.

This going back and forth in time so that chronological time seems unimportant and with little connection with psychological time finds echo in some ideas conveyed by her characters. Thus, in *Between the Acts*, Isa reinforces the discrepancy between clock-time and internal time: "It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer" (p.11).

In *Orlando* the author really plays with time, since Orlando grows during 342 years from an Elizabethan boy of sixteen to a twentieth-century woman of thirty-six, without forgetting any of the events of his/her life and without changing inwardly.

The frequent use of flashbacks is also in accordance with the character's acknowledgement of the importance of the past. Thus, in *Night and Day* Mrs. Hilbery says: "After all, what is the present? Half of it's the past, and the better half too, I should say", she added ..." (p.7). In the same book, her daughter feels suffocated by it: "The depth of her own pride and love were not more apparent to her than the

sense that the dead asked neither flowers nor regrets, but a share in the life which they had given her, the life which they had lived" (p.338). The same kind of feeling is shared by Isa, in *Between the Acts*, and by Bernard, in *The Waves*: "It is strange how the dead leap out on us at street corners or in dreams" (*The Waves*, p.185) Eleanor, in *The Years*, is also keenly aware of the actuality of her past: "Her past seemed to be rising above her present" (p.129).

Louis, in *The Waves*, and Mrs. Swithin, in *Between the Acts*, are not only aware of their past but seem to carry with them the burden of an historical past, of the history of mankind:

... I force myself to state, if only in one line of unwritten poetry, this moment; to mark this inch in the long, long history that began in Egypt, in the time of the Pharaohs, when women carried red pitchers to the Nile. I seem already to have lived many thousand years (*The Waves*, p. 45)

In *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Ramsay, although dead, lives in the memory of those who loved her.

Thus, the superimposition of the past upon the present seems to convey the importance of the past in people's lives, providing people with identity and experience. Even the unity of time in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts* (roughly one day) seems to corroborate the author's belief in the importance of psychological time. So much happens in the minds of the characters in less than twenty-four hours that the day as a compound of those hours ceases to exist.

Another feature of Virginia Woolf's novels is "epiphany" or "moment of vision", that sudden revelation of truth that occurs generally once in a lifetime and to very special people. A quite explained epiphany occurs in the *The Voyage Out* and *Between the Acts*. The epiphany as Joyce's first conception of it¹³, without development or explanation, appears in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *The Years*. This sudden moment of illumination seems to fit some characters' unsuccessful attempt to find a meaning for life. Instead, they find moments of meaning, as Lily Briscoe explains in *To the Lighthouse*:

What is the meaning of life? That was all a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other.... (p.150)

Interestingly, when she finishes her picture and says: "I have had my vision", it is already past.

The small amount of dialogues in Mrs. Woolf's fiction as compared to the amount of interior monologues – *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Years* – or soliloquies – *The Waves* – seems to emphasize her characters' idea that words are inefficient for communication. Thus, in *To the Lighthouse* Lily thinks: "... one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low" (p.165). And Eleanor, in *The Years*, reflects: "She was sorry she had spoken; and the words were not the ones she had meant to use" (p.219).

Instead of words, gestures, the senses, silence or music can achieve communication. Thus, in *Mrs. Dalloway* Richard holds Clarissa's hand and she understands that he is making her a love declaration; in *Night and Day* Katharine and Ralph finally communicate through his drawings and her calculi; in *The Years* and in *Between the Acts* characters communicate through their eyes, in silent dialogues. Rachel, in *The Voyage Out* can only communicate through the music she plays on the piano.

The concern with man's individuality and unattainableness, human solitude and the difficulty of communication, configures a writer worried with human relationships. The question seems to be: how to establish relationships without sacrificing one's privacy? This question is discussed indirectly in all Mrs. Woolf's novels through different situations of which love, marriage and family life seem to be central ones. And this question, which embodies a basic concern, may explain the large number of characters one finds in her novels and the well-peopled world they inhabit. Even *The Voyage Out* and *To the Lighthouse*, which are set on islands, present a great number of characters in contact with each other so that there is an ironic contrast between the heroines' urge for privacy and their environment.

London is the setting of *Night and Day*, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Years*, what made Bernard Blackstone remark that Virginia Woolf belongs to the great tradition of London novelists.¹⁴ Clearly an urban novelist, Virginia Woolf's characters' paradoxical urge for both communication and solitude seems more poignant exactly because they inhabit a well-peopled world. Such a dichotomy would not be so evident if they were physically alone, and clearly transmits what the author herself once wrote: "Incessant company is as bad as solitary confinement."¹⁵

Thus we see that in what concerns Virginia Woolf's novels there is a strong connection between form and content, as if the ideas

conveyed by her characters dictated the narrative techniques she adopted, such as the multiple selective omniscient point of view, epiphany, time-montage, open plots, well-peopled setting, interior monologues. Or perhaps the techniques dictated the ideas? Anyway, such a connection, responsible for the organicity of her best novels may explain the unique aesthetic and intellectual pleasure one experiences in reading her fiction.

NOTES

- 1 Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction. The Development of a Critical Concept". *PMLA*, LXX (1955): 108-37
- 2 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., n.d.); subsequent references to this edition.
- 3 Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1981); subsequent references to this edition.
- 4 Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1950); subsequent references to this edition.
- 5 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Great Britain, Triad/Panther Books, 1977); subsequent references to this edition.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1979); subsequent references to this edition.
- 7 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1982); subsequent references to this edition.
- 8 Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1982), p.49; subsequent references to this edition.
- 9 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Great Britain, Penguin Books, 1963)
- 10 Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1981), p.130
- 11 Quoted by Miriam Allot, *Novelists on the Novel* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p.273
- 12 Carlos Alberto Rabaça & Gustavo Barbosa, *Dicionário de Comunicação* (Rio, Editora Codecri, 1978).
- 13 For a thorough analysis of epiphany as used by Joyce see Olga de Sá, *A Escritura de Clarice Lispector* (Petrópolis/Lorena, Ed. Vozes Ltda., Faculdades Integradas Teresa d'Ávila, 1979), p.130-60
- 14 Bernard Blackstone, *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1949), p.62
- 15 Leonard Woolf (editor), *A Writer's Diary* (Great Britain, Triad/Granada, 1981), p.324