

LYRICISM AND OPPOSING FEELINGS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS DALLOWAY* AND IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *THE LIGHT OF DAY*

Irina-Ana DROBOT¹

ABSTRACT:

THE PAPER SHOWS HOW WOOLF AND SWIFT WROTE SIMILAR NOVELS IN TWO DIFFERENT CONTEXTS: THAT OF MODERNISM AND THAT OF POSTMODERNISM. THE PAPER TRIES TO FIND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THEIR NOVELS AS FAR AS LYRICISM IS CONCERNED. OPPOSING FEELINGS ARE USED TO CREATE LYRICISM. MOMENTS OF BEING AND PERCEPTION ARE ASPECTS WHICH ARE ANALYSED WITH RESPECT TO THEIR ABILITY TO EVINCE LYRICISM IN THE NOVELS BY WOOLF AND SWIFT. THE PAPER DRAWS PARALLELS BETWEEN WOOLF'S AND SWIFT'S USE OF LYRICISM IN THEIR NOVELS.

KEY WORDS: MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM, PERCEPTION.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to show defining characteristics of lyricism in opposing feelings of characters in Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift. It has been said about Graham Swift that he rewrites the modernist stream-of-consciousness novel, as practiced by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce². Starting from here, other common aspects may be found in these novels: the one-day duration of the novel's plot, the same movement backwards and forwards in time, poetic moments. The paper will mostly focus on features of the lyrical novel as defined by Karen Kaivola and Ralph Freedman. The lyrical novel focuses on subjective perception and "registers ambivalence through antithetical impulses"³ (Kaivola). The reconciliation of antithetical impulses is also seen by Ralph Freedman as one defining feature of the lyrical novel.

¹ Junior teaching assistant at the Technical University of Civil Engineering, PhD candidate at the University of Bucharest, Literary and Cultural Studies, anadrobot@yahoo.com

² Sabina Draga, Preface to Graham Swift, *Ultima comandă* (București: Editura Univers, 1999), 242.

³ Karen Kaivola, *All Contraries Confounded: The Lyrical Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes and Marguerite Duras* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 17-18.

2. POETIC ASPECTS

Freedman⁴ mentions David Daiches' definition of the lyrical novel (referring to Virginia Woolf): "her method [...] is to '...distill a significance out of the data discovered by the personal sensibility and, by projecting that significance through the minds of others, to maintain an unstable equilibrium between lyrical and narrative art'".

Woolf according to Miroiu⁵ in her diary, in 1927, writes down her intention to use prose poetically. In her view, this new type of novel should contain both features of prose and of poetry. Contradictory and powerful emotions, generalization and dissociations will be used in her novels. In *Modern Fiction* she writes of a new novel, free from the old conventions, revealing "life as we know it", as well as "a new mode of perception"⁶. She gives her definition of the stream of consciousness: "her comparison to life as a 'luminous halo', a 'semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end'"⁷.

Ralph Freedman points out to features of the lyrical novel in Woolf such as the focus on inner life, the "conversion of character and scene into symbolic imagery"⁸, the "attempt to translate the traditional forms of the novel into organized explorations of consciousness"⁹, the process of depersonalization of the self, "the impact of the external world upon the inner life" which is the process of awareness¹⁰. The self is seen as a very important concept in Woolf's novels, together with its relation to the world.

Karen Kaivola¹¹ focuses on the ambivalences, on the contradictions in Virginia Woolf. Kaivola points out that Woolf's lyrical novels shape experience yet protect the self from a "hostile world" and that there is even a "dissolution of boundaries between the perceiver and the external world"¹² which leads to ambivalence.

Woolf is associated with Modernism. She wrote what McNichol calls a "Modernist manifesto," referring to Woolf's essay *Modern Fiction*¹³. McNichol highlights the preoccupation with "inward-looking fiction"¹⁴ and with a new structure to offer new "insight into life."¹⁵ There may be some Postmodernist features in Swift's novels, yet he is atypical: emotion plays an important part in Swift's fiction. As Jakob Winnberg¹⁶ states, this is opposed to 'the waning of affect' which was seen to characterize postmodernism¹⁷. Winnberg's claim is that Swift's work reflects a move from modernism to limited modernism to postmodernism. Modernism and Postmodernism may be seen not as opposite trends but as exhibiting features that are continued from one trend to the next.

Woolf's connections with sensibility are found to originate in the "aesthetic upheaval

⁴ Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 202.

⁵ Mihai Miroiu, *Virginia Woolf* (București: Editura Univers, 1977), 328-329.

⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities. Essays on the State of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 126.

⁷ Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*, 190.

⁸ Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*, 187.

⁹ Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*, 187-188.

¹⁰ Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*, 191.

¹¹ Karen Kaivola, *All Contraries Confounded: The Lyrical Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes and Marguerite Duras*, 17-18.

¹² Karen Kaivola, *All Contraries Confounded: The Lyrical Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes and Marguerite Duras*, 30.

¹³ Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the poetry of fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), xii.

¹⁴ McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the poetry of fiction*, xii.

¹⁵ McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the poetry of fiction*, xii.

¹⁶ Jakob Winnberg, *An Aesthetic of Vulnerability: The Sentimentum and the Novels of Graham Swift* (Goteborg: Goteborg University Department of English, 2003), 4.

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

that took place in Bloomsbury after the exhibition of Post-Impressionist paintings organized by Roger Fry in 1910” as well as in “a well-developed tribal body of assumptions about creative personal relationships and emotional states”¹⁸.

Bradbury points out to the “new novel” (the modern novel) which appeared with writers such as Woolf, a novel which was justified “by analogy with the poem, to stress fiction’s poem-like as opposed to its narrative character.”¹⁹ Freedman²⁰ sees Modern lyrical fiction as a blending of poetry and prose.

According to Miroiu²¹, art, during Woolf’s time, shows a predilection towards psychology and lyricism. Impressionism is the main style in arts and literature. In the novel, chronological narration is abandoned. Narration is reduced to a series of situations, the plot is a succession of lyrical scenes which is more or less ordered, character description is replaced by the depiction of inner states. The influence of Impressionism appears in Woolf’s creating an Impressionist picture of emotions in her stream of consciousness²². Transposing emotions or even characters into images has been noticed by Ralph Freedman too as a feature of the lyrical novel.

Swift is concerned with stories in an old-fashioned sense although time is not chronological in his novels and there are also some language games and playing with readers expectations, which are Postmodernist features.

Dilshan Boange²³ claims, in relation to Freedman and Snyder’s theories about the lyrical novel, that non-linear chronology is a Modernist feature. The modernist novel did not disregard “the components of plot advancement, character development etc.” present in the Victorian novel. Snyder supports this idea: “But where as some or all of these elements may be found in a lyrical novel or ornamental prose, they are subordinated to a discernible formal design, in which men and events are “refashioned as a pattern of images.”

According to Pesso-Miquel²⁴, Swift’s novels include “Not narration therefore, but a fictitious flow of thoughts sometimes close to the modernist ‘stream of consciousness’”. A “fugitive lyricism” was noticed in his writings by David Malcolm²⁵ (“[...] language full of subtle linguistic effects, and even a ‘fugitive lyricism’ [...]”) and Stef Craps²⁶ (“[...] characterized by its attempts to improvise a fugitive lyricism out of the patterns of ‘ordinary’ speech [...]”). Both critics place lyricism next to other features that are found in his novels, namely the language games usually associated with Postmodernism and everyday life speech. Joanna Russ²⁷ calls Woolf a lyrical novelist, referring to the meaning of the lyric mode: “I wish to call lyric consists of the organization of discrete elements (images, events, scenes, passages, words, what-have-you) around an unspoken thematic or emotional center. The lyric mode exists without chronology or causation; its principle of connection is associative. Of course, no

¹⁸ Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities. Essays on the State of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 125.

¹⁹ Bradbury, *Possibilities. Essays on the State of the Novel*, 5.

²⁰ Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*, 185.

²¹ Miroiu, *Virginia Woolf*, 7.

²² Sue Roe and Susan Sellers, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²³ Dilshan Boange, “Lyricism and Lyrically Crafted Fiction”. Last modified 2010. <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2010/11/21/mon10.asp>

²⁴ Catherine Pesso-Miquel, “The Changing Contours of Graham Swift’s novels, From historiographic metafiction to bedtime stories: The changing contours of Graham Swift’s novels.”, *Etudes anglaises. Revue du monde anglophone. The Contemporary British Novel 1996-2007* 2 vol. 60 (2007): 145-147.

²⁵ David Malcolm, *Understanding Graham Swift* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 189.

²⁶ Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift* (Brighton/ Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 117.

²⁷ Joanna Russ, *How to Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 87.

piece of writing can exist purely in any one mode, but we can certainly talk of the predominance of one element, perhaps two.)” This definition fits in with the one given to the stream of consciousness by Norman Rose: “The stream-of-consciousness is a mixture of all the levels of awareness, an unending flow of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations, and reflections.”²⁸

Ali Güneş²⁹ mentions that critics such as Daiches, Freedman, Troy, Beja, Edel, Forster, Bradbury, Philipson have claimed that representations of intense or visionary emotional states are, in Woolf, similar to lyric poetry. This view is claimed by Woolf herself: in *Modern Fiction*, artistic consciousness or creativity are intuitive, poetic.

2.1. MOMENTS OF BEING VS. MOMENTS OF NON-BEING

In both Woolf and Swift there is a movement from everyday life aspects towards a deeper level. Liesl M. Olson notices, in her article *Virginia Woolf's 'cotton wool of daily life'*, that the work of Woolf illustrates both ordinary as well as the ‘extraordinary’ aspects of daily experience. Woolf’s modernism is concerned with the mind, the moment of being but also with the ordinary. Aside from rendering the inner workings of the mind, Woolf believed that ‘the modern novel could not flee from the external world of things’³⁰, from ‘the common objects of daily prose’³¹. Woolf’s characters are not only concerned with their inner lives, they are also concerned with London streets or public parks. Liesl M. Olson notices the same idea in *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Chapter 2, *Virginia Woolf's 'cotton wool of daily life'*)³², Woolf’s distinction between moments of being and non-being shows her awareness that ‘the modern novel cannot represent only heightened moments of self-consciousness, but must be made up of more mundane moments that make up one’s life.’

In Swift’s novels, one notices an anachronic structure that engages the reader in the suspense of the reconstruction of a puzzle and a hesitant, traumatized narrator. The attempts of Swift’s narrators to analyse and explain their own histories are linked with experiences of crisis, of loss, or of change. Throughout these there lie opportunities for ‘moments of being’. All of Graham Swift’s novels deal with the extraordinary in the ordinary³³. His novels are about ordinary events in the lives of ordinary men. However, in their voices Swift ponders some of the bigger issues of life - death, birth, marriage and sex - as well as the everyday politics of relationships and friendships.

In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf notices that usually, people spend their lives wrapped in a ‘cotton wool’, which limits their perceptions. Because of the ‘cotton wool’, people are kept away from experiencing strong sensations. For Woolf, a moment of being is a moment when an individual is fully conscious of his experience, a moment when he is not only aware of himself but he also catches a glimpse of his connection to a larger pattern hidden behind the opaque surface of daily life. Unlike moments of non-being, when the individual lives and acts without awareness, the moment of being gives access to a hidden reality. Moments of being, which are like flashes of awareness, reveal a pattern hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life. We, “I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art.”

²⁸ R. Norman, “Virginia Woolf Seminar”, University of Alabama in Huntsville. Last modified 1997. <http://www.uah.edu/woolf/index.html>.

²⁹ Ali Güneş, “William Wordsworth’s ‘Double Awareness’ of Memory in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Mrs Dalloway’”, *Doğuş Üniversitesi Dergisi* 4 (2) 2003: 183-196.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Letter to a Young Poet*, in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 57.

³¹ Woolf, *A Letter to a Young Poet*, in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, 214.

³² Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64.

³³ Cora Lindsay, “Graham Swift”. Accessed May 6, 2011. Last modified 2002. www.contemporarywriters.com.

Moments of transcendent understanding in Swift are a mixture of a everyday life language of characters speaking East-London vernacular and instances of poetical language. A similar mixture of everyday life language and poetical language is found in moments of heightened perception in Swift's novels *Shuttlecock*, *The Light of Day*, *Waterland* or *Tomorrow*. In some novels language is between lyrical and ironic, witty or just realistic, belonging to everyday life. Such mixture is reminiscent of Woolf's contrast between moments of being and moments of non-being, between ordinary life and moments of heightened perception. Language expresses such contrasts.

2.2. PERCEPTION

For Woolf, the story is filtered through the different characters' perception. Characters form their own thoughts and feelings in an effort to create a unified understanding of the world from the chaos around them. This feature becomes noticeable, for instance, in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* in Septimus' way of perceiving what surrounds him. However, the visionary capacity is not restricted to the 'madman'. Peter Walsh has two very vivid hallucinations, and Clarissa Dalloway's narration often implies some characteristics of a vision, for instance, when she thinks about Sally and Peter: "All this she saw as one sees a landscape in a flash of lightning"³⁴. In Woolf's novels, fact and vision are not separated. They permeate into the world of uncertainties, of confusion, where her characters struggle for a gradually better understanding of their own selves and the meaning of their existence. Such features may also be found in Graham Swift's novels. Characters who otherwise live an ordinary existence reach moments of transcendent understanding. The inner life of characters is very important in Swift as well.

Emily Dalgarno³⁵ points out that Woolf's characters "are often differentiated from each other by their ways of seeing", which may even lead to "a sense of conflict." In Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus feels isolated due to his perception of the world which is different from the others' as well as from his wife's. He experiences moments of being and he feels that he is not isolated and is only understood by his dead friend Evans. Septimus and his wife Lucrezia are both isolated from each other. They cannot communicate; each of them feels not understood by the other or even by the rest of the world.

In Swift's novel *The Light of Day*, George Webb thinks about Rita's saying that his love for Sarah will fade. George contrasts Rita's belief with his own realization that their love lasts. For George Webb's daughter, Helen, a change occurs in the perception of her father. She grows attached to him after her rebellious teenage years when she used to give him a hard time. She visits him frequently and spends time with him after his wife leaves him.

Clarissa's "irreconcilable feelings" consist of the following: "She felt very young" and "at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on" (11; 10)³⁶. Another contradictory feeling in Clarissa is in the "connection [...] between Septimus' fatal plunge and Clarissa's fear of and simultaneous urge toward death."³⁷ Clarissa's "duality" may be noticed: "The splintering effects of a tacitly possessive father, the frustration of a genuine love, the need to refuse a man who would force her to share everything – all this we may speculate has weakened Clarissa's emotional axis and split her in two. One part of her lives in helpless, enforced isolation; while the other lives in an armory of protective self-glorification; and both parts are at once contradictory and mutually intensifying." Her inner life is affected by fragmentation.³⁸

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 41.

³⁵ Emily Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

³⁶ Mitchell A. Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf from Beginning to End* (The City University of New York: The John Jay Press, 1977), 88.

³⁷ Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf from Beginning to End*, 89.

³⁸ Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf from Beginning to End*, 95.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Several contradictory, ambivalent aspects are present in Woolf and Swift. First, the contrast between poetry and prose, then the contrast between moments of being and moments of non-being, which is reflected in the language used. Poetic language is present in moments of being. Ordinary life is associated with ordinary, everyday language. Characters show different, even contradictory views on the world around them or on other characters: Septimus sees the world in its hidden reality, unlike other people and even unlike his wife Rezia. Rita sees George and Sarah's love as going to fade, while George Webb feels differently. There are changes in characters depicted in the novels, for instance George Webb's daughter change in attitude towards him. Clarissa is seen as contradictory in many ways and Leaska offers a psychological explanation for this. Ambivalence, contradictory aspects, characters depicted during their evolution are part of lyrical identity. These aspects are underlined by the use of poetic language.

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