Building on the Woolfian Text: Intertextuality, Instrument or Philosophy?

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Abstract
For a quite extended period of time now, the theoretical pool targeting literature and the forces involved in the emergence of texts have been characterized by an excessive and obsessive use of theories revolving mainly around notions which inevitably bring under the scope issues of postmodernism and intertextuality. This phenomenon represents a natural response in the globalized and technologized world of the present day, where the socio-political discourses are articulated in a constant process of cultural recycling. Therefore, most studies operate under the assertion that postmodernism, understood as being governed by a philosophy of repetition, symbolizes a context in which intertextuality, the instrument, is at work; however, the very metaphysics of repetition enables, within theoretical frames, a certain synonymy between the two notions. Reflecting on these ideas, when meaningful texts (illustrated in this particular case by the Woolfian text) enter the process of repetition, the question pops: is intertextuality an instrument, or a philosophy, or both? Consequently, the present paper is oriented towards providing possible answers for the question formulated.

Keywords: *postmodernism, intertextuality, Woolfian text*

Theorizing intertextuality

Despite its extensive use for the indication of various types of contamination of texts/ discourses, intertextuality is, in reality, the outcome or, better yet, the inevitable product of the metaphysics of repetition operating at the very core of postmodernism. Drawing its force from the modernist phase strongly influenced by the Nietzschean theory of irrationality and chaos, which mostly proclaimed the death of God, and by extension, of authority of any kind, postmodernism is characterized by a massive and chaotic production of discourses. Therefore, being perceived as a continuation of the modernist practices and, in its turn, being nourished by and relying on powerful philosophies emitted by acknowledged thinkers such as Nietzsche, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger, postmodernism operates under the assumption that abstract notions such as truth, God, nature and future do not provide a clear cut objective or neutral vision of what constitutes the unicity of the world. The two notions added into the equation by postmodernism are nature and future. Nature is here seen more as 'human nature', which is productive of culture and of history, an assertion supported by the words of Linda Hutcheon, who states that:

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> […] the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees (2001: 2).

Being preceded by the notion of nature, which implies culture and history, future is the next logical choice to complete the list of the abstract concepts upon which the postmodern discourse is constructed since, paradoxically, it is subjected to historical repetition. In other words, postmodernists are convinced that the life of a micro-system, represented by an individual, or of a macro-system, represented by a state and, by extension, by a culture, depend on the way they are able to attain and repeat experiences, i.e. to repeat that which is 'new' in all ages. As a result, the future can be read as a constant demand for repetition. Therefore, in this context, history is accessed and revived/ revised based on the idea that it is mainly represented by discourse, that it exists only as text or that the postmodern text rewrites the textual past.

To put it differently, within postmodern frames, history as literature or literature as history and, in the end, discourses of any kind, fall under the incidence of repetition with the intention of entering the chain of perpetual production of meanings. As a result, "the past arrives in the form of texts and textualized remainders" (Dominick LaCapra, quoted in Hutcheon 2004: 129) and this entire phenomenon may be read as the justification of the existence of (inter)texts charged with meaning and value within systems of culture. Through this type of accumulation:

> […] one shows how different texts with which one is dealing refer to one another, organize themselves into a single figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may be common to a whole period. Each element considered is taken as the expression of the totality to which it belongs and whose limits it exceeds. And in this way one substitutes for the diversity of things said a sort of great, uniform text, which has never before been articulated and which reveals for the first time what men 'really meant' not only in their words and texts, their discourses and their writings, but also in the institutions, practices, techniques, and objects that they produced (Foucault 2004: 133).

Therefore, the meaning thus absorbed and transformed is under the incidence of the plurality of meanings (a characteristic of language and, by extension, of discourse) further highlighted by the constant process of reflections and repetitions triggered by the value of statements. To sum up would be to say that postmodernism is, or was, set in motion by the metaphysics of repetition which triggers the very process of re-writing and it is precisely the highlighting of this philosophical background which enables the partial synonymy between postmodernism and intertextuality.

The identification of intertextuality as instrument employed in the production of new texts/ discourses is the result of the structuralist and poststructuralist eruption of theories following a shift in the mentalities of humankind best reflected by the events registered in France in May 1968. The rebellious attitude of the 60s had visible effects on the theoretical space being encapsulated by the *Tel Quel* moment also known as 'the time of theory' (see Ffrench 1996). Being in fact a school, *Tel Quel* advances the opinions of some great names associated with the group (Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Phillippe Sollers, Michel Foucault etc.) whose work embodies the endeavour to elaborate new concepts, to produce plural theories with reference to various types of writing and the specific time and space they pertain to and to create a 'politics' resulting from an abstract view and understanding of writing (see Moi 1986).

In this fashion, Julia Kristeva proposes the concept of intertextuality as a result of an effort mainly based on the work of the Russian formalists and on Mikhail Bakhtin's workings of dialogism, heteroglossia and carnivalesque. As a result, in the investigation of the status of the word (extrapolated to text/ discourse) she identifies three coordinates of dialogue, as follows: writing subject, addressee and exterior texts as well as horizontal (subject-addressee) and vertical (text-context) definitions/ axes of it. The intersection of the two axes is explained as: "each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (Kristeva in Moi 1986: 37). Through the clear delineation of the two axes she manages to demonstrate Bakhtin's insightful view on texts as mosaic of quotations caught in a process of absorption and transformation and to advance the notion of intertextuality. Kristeva explains, noting on the political context within which his theories were formulated, that Bakhtin was preoccupied with social problems which determined him to see dialogue "as *writing* where one reads the *other*"; as a result, "Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality" (39).

Further developing on the concept of intertextuality, Roland Barthes, influenced by Kristeva's work on Bakhtin and operating under the assumption that every structure has a centre, proclaims the death of the author and sees the text as a tissue of quotations. Despite Barthes's view of the text as the product of déjà written/ read texts, the identification of the intertexts of a text does not guarantee their view as signified of the text's signifiers.

From this perspective, the Derridean philosophy fighting the theory of the stable meaning proves to be a sensible one. Stable meaning/ stable signification is associated with the main way in which ideology maintains its power. The structuralist and poststructuralist approaches to literature attempt to dissolute the idea of stable meaning which translates into Derrida's theory of the transcendental signifier, which in reality does not exist, as a result, "[t]he absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (quoted in Allen 2004: 70). Therefore, in terms of the search for meaning, Derrida's view on the non-existence of the transcendental signifier is once again sustained since intertextuality presupposes a continuum of other

utterances which are in their turn intertextual constructs unable to provide signifiers (see Allen 2000: 73-74).

Bearing in mind Foucault's view that only the statements with value are preserved and reiterated in a perpetual production of meaning, Barthes's view of myth as a peculiar system can be applied to the intertext since "it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (1991: 113) – emphasis contained by the excerpt. In other words, myth is a metalanguage which possesses its own value in reference to a certain history and knowledge.

Building on the Woolfian text: Susan Sellers's *Vanessa & Virginia*

Vanessa & Virginia is a novel that reveals the world of the two famous sisters, Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, as a multitude of first hand experiences lived by Vanessa which ultimately function as raw material for her more famous sister's writing. Susan Sellers, a highly regarded academic, often referred to as a "Virginia Woolf expert"[1] due to the research she conducted in this direction, chose to begin her career as writer of fiction with this fictional biography of the renowned rivalry but also of the close relation shared by the two sisters. Susan Sellers's novel *Vanessa & Virginia* has been selected here as sample analysis in the investigation of which the theory of myth is used as main formula. Therefore, the intertext following the characteristics of myth must contain its tripartite structure: the form (signifier) – which refers to the distancing from the meaning in which, nevertheless, it must be able to be rooted in a persistent mode; the concept (the signified) – which absorbs the history which "drains out of the form", i.e., it accesses a series of "causes and effects, motives and intentions" (Barthes 1991: 117); and, signification (the sign) – which represents the association of form and concept which is designated to distort the meaning.

Consequently, being considered a metalanguage or a second-order system of the intertexts it refers to, namely the Woolfian text gathered as diaries, letters and novels [2], the novel alters and manipulates meaning in order to provide an alternative universe where Virginia is presented in a stable environment. This is a quite different version of Virginia Woolf, which is considerably distanced from the collective, perpetuated for too many years now, image of the writer as a mad person unable to be in control of her mind. Therefore, the stable environment in which Sellers portrays Virginia Woolf is constructed in such a manner as to reinforce the 'fresh' image of the writer as a person able to invest her energy into writing by employing and recycling all of her and her sister's personal experiences into fictional worlds. By contrast, Sellers chooses to portray Vanessa as a person struggling to maintain control and to produce self-satisfactory art but whose, at times, chaotic life seems to be a continuous spring of inspiration for her sister's creative acts. Therefore, an intriguing stance engaged in the construction of the fictional lives of the two sisters is the subtle indication of Vanessa, the older sister,

always functioning as the role-model which in the end is responsible for influencing her younger sister both in a positive and in a negative manner.

As a result, the novel displays some scenarios intended to lead the reader to understand the powerful influence the sisters exerted on each other, especially the great influence Vanessa had on her sister. Such an example is obvious in one of the dialogues imagined between the Bell spouses, which provides the reader with the knowledge that the name of one of Virginia Woolf's most famous characters, Clarissa Dalloway was inspired by a personal event in the life of her sister, Vanessa: ""Did I tell you she was certain Quentin would be a girl? I said I'd call her Clarissa if she were. She seemed to like that." […] To my surprise, Clive grins. "She showed me a story she had written a few weeks ago that had a woman called Clarissa in it."" (Sellers 2009: 80). On the same note, the inception of *The Waves* is also seen as being triggered by an event experienced during a family reunion which made Virginia contemplate on life and death. Once again, the fictional environment advances the hypothesis that Vanessa was the muse for the story of "the life of a woman against the background of flying moths" (Lee 1977: 158):

> "No, Ness. You hold the light. Then there are lonely moths like me circling the lamp, searching for a way in. […]
> "So what about all the other people sitting at the table tonight? How do they feature in your sketch?"
> "They personify the different voices – emblematized by the moth."
> "Sounds like the start for one of your novels." (Sellers 2009: 166).

Besides the positive, i.e. creative outcomes already noted, the novel attempts to formulate the idea that the very same close relationship shared by the two sisters, and the constant positioning of Vanessa as role-model due to her being the eldest, are also responsible for a major destructive effect. Thus, one of the most spectacular and unexpected stances of the novel is the account of an attempt of suicide Vanessa has as a result of being driven mad by Duncan's rejection. She tries to take her life by choosing to enter the icy cold water of a river:

> I cannot stop the pictures from forming in my mind. I push my stick into the river and watch the water eddy round it in fast-moving circles. […] I step into the water and feel the icy cold seep into my shoes. The river is shallow near bank and brown with mud. I walk forward, noting the rise in the level of water. […] I feel calmer now that I am in the water, as if the cold is slowly numbing my pain. This is what I desire. Not to feel anymore. Not to long for what I cannot have (171).

Vanessa abandons her plans of suicide thinking of her children, but she returns, hurt and soaking wet, to her sister's house. The scene of the two sisters evokes a sincere love and a very protective spirit coming from Virginia. She undresses and wraps her sister into a warm blanket, she stokes up a fire and takes care of her sister's wounds, understanding the real reason of her sister's state, in a sombre irony forces Vanessa to make a promise: ""I want you to swear that no matter

what happens – no matter how terrible life is – you will never try anything like this again." I nod. There is nothing in your tone to signal the import of the pact we are making" (173).

Although *Vanessa & Virginia* is a novel constructed from references to an impressive amount of works, the presence and the impact of *To the Lighthouse* is felt like a guiding thread throughout the novel. This is, perhaps, owed to the fact that Woolf's novel tells the story of a family which was to a great extent hers. Virginia is depicted as borrowing from the personality of her father when, through the words of the character Vanessa, Sellers calls for the remembrance of *To the Lighthouse*; thus, in the sequence quoted below from *Vanessa & Virginia* the intention is for the two sisters to be outlined as opposites so as to mirror the dichotomy between Mr and Mrs Ramsay in the corresponding Woolfian novel:

That year, we went to Cornwall on our own. The weather was glorious, I remember, and Thoby, Adrian and I roamed the coastal paths for miles. You refused to come walking with us. […] We returned from our walk to find you cloistered in the sitting room, poring over one of Father's books. You had pulled the curtains half-shut. Thoby and Adrian fell silent as we entered the gloomy interior.
"What's that you're reading, Ginny?" You lift the book high enough for me to see that it is Hardy's elegies.
"The waves were heavenly. You should have come with us."
It is Thoby now who takes up the fray. He settles himself on the sofa, his skin radiant from the sun.
"Yes, we thought we might get a boat and go to the Godrevy lighthouse tomorrow." […] I linger for a moment, consumed with guilt. It is only when I get to the door that I hear your voice.
"There'll be no going to the lighthouse tomorrow. It's forecast rain." (Sellers 2009: 45).

'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow, 'said Mrs Ramsay. 'But you'll have to be up with the lark,' she added. […]
'But,' said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, 'it won't be fine.'
Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it. Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr Ramsay excited in his children's breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgement. What he said was true. It was always true (Woolf 2007: 259).

The image of the two sisters assuming the dichotomy defining *To the Lighthouse* is present right from the beginning in Sellers's novel and very suggestive in this direction is the episode from their childhood where Virginia asks Vanessa who she likes best when it comes to their parents; the answers are predictable, Virginia identifies herself with their father while Vanessa identifies herself with their mother:

> ""Who do you like best, Mother or Father?" Your question comes like a bolt out of the blue. […] I am dazzled by the audacity of your question. […]
> "Mother." I lean back into the warmth. […]
> "I prefer Father."
> "Father?" I sit up quickly. "How can you possibly like Father best? He's always so difficult to please."
> "At least he's not vague." You spin round and look at me directly. I sense that you are enjoying this discussion.
> "But Mother is …" I search for my word.
> "Is what?" Your eyes are daring me now.
> "Beautiful." I say the word quietly.
> "What does that count for?" You do nothing to hide your contempt. "Mother doesn't know as much as Father, she doesn't read as much. At least when Father settles on something you know he isn't going to be called away." (2009: 5).

The division present in the fragment alludes also to Virginia Woolf's interests towards her inheritance. In the third chapter of the first part of her biography of Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee best explains this stance in the life of the writer, indicating some of her works as being symptomatic of this aspect. Thus, she nominates: *Night and Day* as the fictional space where Katharine Hilbery displays a strong attachment to her famous grandfather, at times identifying herself with him; Orlando's story as the outcome of a merger between the exceptional individual and the historical inheritance; and *To the Lighthouse* as bringing to the fore the conflict of the modern, post-war artist in search of a way to come to terms with her Victorian inheritance (see 1997: 50). Although the fragment is indicative of Virginia's association with her paternal inheritance in terms of knowledge and education, it is also indicative of an early rebellious nature against the constantly "called away" by the household chores maternal figure. In Sellers's novel Virginia openly exposes an emancipated way of thinking about her mother teaching them history:

> "Please, I have a question." […] "Is it true Elizabeth the First was the greatest queen England has ever known? Was she truly – a superlative monarch?" […] "Do you suppose it was because she was a woman that she achieved so much? I mean, it's true, isn't it, that she never married? I suppose there wasn't a king who was good enough for her. If she had married she would have been busy having children and so wouldn't have had time for her affairs of the state. The people called her 'Gloriana' and she had her own motto." (Sellers 2009: 7).

Even if the question is entirely addressed to her mother, it is again the father who intervenes as the best person to guide such an inquisitive mind and, being extremely delighted by his daughter's "performance", he takes Virginia to his library to find supplementary reading for her. The episode is followed by the image of Vanessa and her mother trying to resume their history lesson with an effort on the part of Vanessa not to hear her mother's sigh. The fragment

reinforces once more the idea of Virginia's paternal inheritance and of Vanessa, much like Lily Briscoe, living with the memory of her mother and with an unconscious fear and denial of her father (see Praisler, 2000: 163).

On the same note, that of following *To the Lighthouse* functioning as a guiding thread throughout Sellers's novel, chapter three in *Vanessa & Virginia* opens with the expression of some violent feelings Vanessa has towards their father, in the same fashion the Woolfian work expresses the intense feelings Mr Ramsay determines his son James to have: "[s]ometimes I stab father, sometimes I smother him with his pillow, sometimes it is the lethal mix of medicines I pour from the vials on his bedside table that kills him. Though there are variations in my method, the dream always takes the same form. […] I kill him quickly, effortlessly" (43). From the stances indicated so far it may be concluded that Sellers's version of Vanessa and her feelings towards her parents combine the attitudes of both Lily Briscoe and James. Therefore, Sellers constructs her character either by constantly remembering and evoking the image of the mother or by expressing feelings of anger and violence towards the father and, at times, towards her sister - evoked as assuming part of their father's authority. Last but not least, *Vanessa & Virginia* reminds of the creative act in *To the Lighthouse*:

> I paint on a wooden panel […]. I stand back and look at what I have done. The area above the figure is still too empty. I look at my colors. I decide to ignore verisimilitude altogether. My brush itches for red. I squeeze crimson onto my palette and blend it with my knife. This time, I paint spheres. I turn the arcs into poppies, vast wide-open blooms. Their black stamens are fresh rings against the red. There is still something missing. I have black left on my brush from the stamens and I draw a line between the poppies, lacing them together. I stand back and observe. Yes, the thread ties the whole. My picture is complete (Sellers, 2009: 54-5).

> Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps: they were empty; she looked at her canvas: it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision (Woolf, 2007: 390-1).

That single black line is seen as the acme of creation, that single piece which holds the entire work together. If used or not as inspiration by her sister Virginia, one thing is certain: Susan Sellers manages to identify and to masterfully describe the hypothesised process of making one of Vanessa Bell's paintings, the one entitled *Nude with Poppies* (1916), which contains a similar centre line.

Final remarks

From a strictly theoretical point of view, intertextuality is both an instrument and a philosophy. Therefore, as a phenomenon, it is triggered by a context governed

by a philosophy of repetition where, almost aggressively, everything is reiterated, recycled and, last but not least, repeated in an attempt to borrow from the value of the meanings selected. This may be translated into the statement that the intertext cannot be completely separated from the intentionality of the author. Thus, the death of the author, as Barthes announced it, does not necessarily mean the complete removal of the author from the equation. It does also refer to the death of the reader as perceived within structuralist frames, that is, a reader "operating at an objective and exhaustive level" endowed with the scientific basis of language and by extension of literary texts (Allen 2004: 84). In what regards the sample text selected for analysis, the intentionality of its author is quite transparent as Susan Sellers explained that, in order to avoid producing a "poor pastiche", she decided to narrate the events from the perspective of Vanessa Bell. However, the text abounds in references to Virginia Woolf's works and to events from her life, the most daring attempt on Sellers's part being the effort to change through her writing the gloomy mythical and deeply rooted perception of the writer.

Notes

[1] See *Interview with novelist and Virginia Woolf expert, Susan Sellers* available at https://vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/2009/02/17/interview-with-novelist-and-virginia-woolf-expert-susan-sellers-giveaway/

[2] Since the focus of the paper is restricted to the Woolfian text functioning as intertext, references are strictly made in this direction; however it must be mentioned that Sellers's text relies heavily on other intertexts such as letters and paintings signed by Vanessa Bell, as well as thoroughly documented biographies of her life.

[3] An image of the painting is available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/nude-with-poppies-64519.

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