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# THE POETICS OF REFLECTION IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S SHORT FICTION: IN SEARCH OF MULTIPLE SENSE

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Science is crude, life is subtle, and it is for  
the correction of this disparity that literature  
matters to us.

-Roland Barthes

## **1. Introduction: Poetics vs. poetics**

The question where sense comes from is tightly linked to the issue of heuristics, to those ways and mechanisms by which knowledge is inferred (or grasped) and produced. It is no secret that literary text, due to its ultimate anthropocentricity, may give access to the very depths of its author's consciousness and subconsciousness, thus enabling the researcher, at least in the first approximation, to reconstruct the workings of the writer's mind as the initial source of multiple sense generation. All this is the competence of cognitive poetics that regards literary texts as

the products of cognizing minds and their interpretation the products of other cognizing minds in the context of the physical and socio-cultural worlds in which they have been created and are read (Freeman 2000, 253).

Drawing a line between poetics as an area of literary studies, poetics as a synthesis of idiosyncratic properties pertinent to the writer's idiosyncratic style, and poetics as a unity of text-embodied fragments of artistic model of the world, associated with a certain idea, concept or conceptual domain, with a certain literary detail or motif, one may assume that poetics as an idiosyncratic style to a great extent depends upon the way the writer's particular poetics interact in his literary work or works. The

analysis of Virginia Woolf's short fiction proves that the core of her idiosyncrasy is constituted by the fusion of two poetics, that of imagination (Vorobyova 2005) and that of reflection, in its literal and metaphorical sense. Converging in Woolf's syncretic worldview accentuated by her manic-depression that provoked most of her edge-cutting analogies (Rochette-Crawley 2003, 49-50), these poetics give rise to what might be called poetics of insight as "the sudden recognition of relationships, based on unconscious associations" (Boeree 1998), always involving a new way of looking at the problem (Simon 1995, 943; Insight). It is within these three poetics that the synthesis of scientific reflection and literary fancy, so typical of Woolf's creative thought as well as of literary modernism, stands out most vividly.

## **2. Multiple sense: Where science and literature meet**

Virginia Woolf believed that

the creative mind of the poet or novelist should be androgynous; that if there are two sexes of the body, there are also two sexes of the mind, but frequently inhabiting the same body, whether male or female; and the best writing is produced when the man (or the woman) allows these two sexes to collaborate (Lehman 1975, 68).

One can hypothesize that such collaboration (or conflict) of the two opposites might contribute a lot to the machinery of multiple sense generation. Drawing the parallel, one can also assume that multiple senses are crystallized in literary text due to collaboration (or conflict) of scientific knowledge and artistic cognition of the world as seemingly opposing poles.

An ever growing understanding that the links between science and art, science and literature are more integral and natural than they have conventionally seemed to be, determines at least three possible approaches to the interpretation of such links. One of them focuses on the emergence of the so-called "third culture", in C.P.Snows' terms, viewed as a dialogue, on some common ground, between natural and social scientists and humanists (Freeman 2005, 32). Another approach highlights the impact of the two cultures, scientific and humanitarian, on each other, achieved through humanization of hard and natural sciences as well as objectification of humanities. Still another one is grounded in the assumption that both science and art are products of human imagination, being thus rooted in similar intellectual processes (Rochette-Crawley 2003, 44; Freeman 2005, 33). So, reading and analyzing fiction does not only enable us to discover the hidden agenda of artistic creativity as another source of multiple sense generation, but also

reveals some new facets in the workings of mind, in the nature of scientific reasoning and imagination as a source of insights, both artistic and scholarly.

This latter approach to the interpretation of vital links between science and literature echoes with Roland Barthes' view of that force of literature which he called *Mathesis* (from Greek *mathesis* "science") as compared to its two other forces, *Mimesis* and *Semiosis* (Barthes 2000, 462-463). Claiming that "literature accommodates many kinds of knowledge", which makes it truly encyclopedic, Barthes emphasized that it "displaces the various kinds of knowledge, does not fix or fertilize any of them; it gives them an indirect place, and this indirection is precious" (Ibid., 463). Because of such indirection

literature allows for the designation of possible areas of knowledge—unsuspected, unfulfilled. Literature works in the interstices of science. It is always behind or ahead of science, like the Bologne stone which gives off by night what it has stored up by day, and by this indirect glow illuminates the new day which dawns (Ibid.).

It is difficult to say better and clearer about artistic enactment of the scientific quest and the search for knowledge than it was done by Barthes who maintained that

Literature feeds knowledge into the machinery of infinite reflexivity. Through writing, knowledge ceaselessly reflects on knowledge, in terms of a discourse which is no longer epistemological, but dramatic (Ibid., 463-464).

A particular role in imparting literariness to our view of science belongs to English modernism, and specifically to Virginia Woolf's prose with her passionate interest in the world of ideas and fleeting impressions. Artistic enactment in Woolf's imagery and narrative techniques of the phenomena usually interpreted in terms of Newtonian and Einsteinian physics has already been examined by literary scholars (Narey 1992; Rochette-Crawley 2003, et al.). However, much is yet to be said about the prognosticating force of Woolf's artistic interpretations of the newest scientific discoveries concerning the fine matter energies, emotional resonance and empathy as entailments of mirror neurons firings, mathematical topology in the context of sacred geometry, etc.

### **3. Multiple sense and Woolf's poetics of reflection**

One of the ways to explore Virginia Woolf's thought-emotion space is the research orientation towards interdisciplinary studies, including the data of physics, neurobiology, and cognitive science. Such exploration can be successful when both traditional and cognitive techniques of analysis are employed, making the

interpretation multi-perspectival (Johansen 2005, 245) while scanning several perspectives simultaneously (Ibid., 259).

Virginia Woolf's short fiction that abounds in rich idiosyncratic imagery can be viewed as a coherent tropological space (see Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 2004, 69) with quite a few peaks (light, book, water, looking-glass, garden, fin, etc.) formed by metaconcepts or metatropes, i.e. global intertextual images that transcend the boundaries of each individual text, accumulating, via accretion, elaboration or fusion, new multiple senses which are not infrequently ambiguous, e.g.,

Flaunted, leaf-light, drifting at corners, blown across the wheels, silver-splashed, home or not home, gathered, scattered, squandered in separate scales, swept up, down, torn, sunk, assembled—and truth? (Woolf 1972, 6),

paradoxical, e.g., "turning the earth above a buried memory" (Woolf 1972, 23), or even prophetic, thus contributing to the poetics of insight as a milieu for multiple sense generation.

#### **4. REFLECTION in Woolf's short fiction: A physical dimension**

Viewing poetics of insight through the lenses of poetics of reflection shows that the phenomenon of reflection is conceptualized in Woolf's short fiction in its three dimensions—physical, mental, and communicative.

In its physical dimension reflection in Woolf's stories is associated with diverse natural and artificial surfaces or substances (e.g., a looking-glass/mirror, window pane, water or water basins, a raindrop, eyes, a leaf, a flower, etc.) that reflect and/or refract light, giving as a source of energy an impulse to thought, evoking recollections, or causing metamorphoses. As it happens, for instance, in *The New Dress* where the character's inner discomfort, her deficiency complexes are literally and metaphorically reflected in the mirror through the juxtaposition of "noble" and "low" insects, e.g.,

and she strained and strained (standing **in front of the looking-glass** <...>) to make herself see Rose Shaw and all the other people there as flies <...>. She saw herself like that—she was a fly, but the others were dragonflies, butterflies, beautiful insects, dancing, fluttering, skimming. While she alone dragged herself up out of the saucer. (Woolf 1972, 49)

The specificity of literal reflection in Woolf's short fiction is that it always acquires a certain axiological bias. Interestingly, the vector of evaluation depends on the source of reflection or refraction. It is positive, if the return of light is given

back by water as a reflecting surface or a refracting substance, as, for example, in *The Mark on the Wall* or *The Fascination of the Pool*, cf.,

How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey **waters**, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections <...>! (Woolf 1972, 44)

But if one sat down among the rushes and watched **the pool—pools** have some curious fascination, one knows not what <...> That perhaps is why one loves to sit and look into pools. (Woolf 1972, 220, 221)

Evaluation appears to be always negative, if an image is produced by a looking glass or mirror that are believed to give access to hidden human complexes and deficiencies, as in *The New Dress* or *The Lady in the Looking Glass*, where one can come across quite definite, sometimes even mystical, premonitions and warnings as to the role of mirrors in human life, cf.,

**The looking-glass—no, you avoid the looking-glass**. (Woolf 1972, 12)

People should not leave **looking-glasses** hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime. (Woolf 1972, 87)

The reflection in a window pane that refract all shades of colours of today, while keeping memory of deaths, losses and sins buried in the past, in Woolf's short fiction can be either positively or negatively charged, sometimes even within one and the same story, as for instance, in *The Haunted House*, e.g.,

**The window panes** reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves were green **in the glass**. <...> But the trees spun darkness for a wandering beam of sun. So fine, so rare, coolly sunk beneath the surface the beam I sought always burnt **behind the glass**. Death was the glass; death was between us. (Woolf 1972, 3, 4)

The above axiological disparity can be accounted for by several reasons. First, by the laws of optics reflections in mirrors as catoptrical surfaces, in water and in glass are somewhat different. And judging by the biographical testimony this difference was well-known to Virginia Woolf who not infrequently displayed her interest in and knowledge of light and relativity theories (see Rochette-Crawley 2003, 44-45).

From the phenomenological perspective mirror reflection is an image, which is straight, inverted (or symmetrical), and virtual because "the observer perceives it as if it were inside the mirror, while the mirror has no 'inside'" (Eco 1986, 204, 205). The inverted symmetry of mirror images is not ontological; it is a result of the

observer's self-identification with the man inside (*Ibid.*). That is why mirrors are often interpreted as self-identification tools, as symbols of anomaly or disorganization, all of which might account for the negative associations mirror images are charged with for Woolf.

Due to the mechanism of double refraction, reflections in water have a richer potential. Though a water mirror is easily disturbed, it can as easily renew its reflection capacities. Thanks to its natural qualities, in particular its horizontality, a water mirror, according to Levin,

reverses its top and bottom, its height and depth, as if neutralizing the respective opposition through displacing and bringing together its poles,—which precisely corresponds to the pattern of soul in mystic tradition, the depths of which are privy to the 'Godly origin' that has its external manifestation in the sky, stars and other things above reflected in water (Levin 1988, 12).

In all probability, it accounts, at least in part, for the appeasement associated with water in Woolf's short fiction.

While passing through glass, a light beam practically does not undergo any reflection; it is just refracted on the air-glass and glass-air border. Depending on how thick the glass is, the particles of light (photons, or quanta) lose their velocity in glass as if delayed there, which causes associations with a "memory" of a window pane.

Second, positive or negative evaluation of reflected images in Woolf's short fiction is also supported by the symbolics of mirror and water. Symbolic overtones of mirror do not only depend on the source of catoptrical reflection but also on what an observer wants to see in the mirror—one's self, truth, ideal, or illusion (Ferber 1999, 124). From the time immemorial a mirror is interpreted as something controversial and mystical; creating images, it somehow keeps them in and preserves (Kerlot 1994, 209). As a symbol of redoubling, as a borderline between this world and the other world, mirror is an object one should not look at oneself in for a long time as it is believed to steal an observer's soul by parts. As a symbol of imagination and, wider, mind, mirror becomes a part of "reflecting surfaces" paradigm, which makes it similar to the human eye and water (*Ibid.*). Though water is an ambivalent symbol because it is not only bound up with creation, rebirth and renewal of the macrocosm and microcosm, it symbolizes the life beginnings (*Ibid.*, 119), being identified with the collective unconscious, with intuitive wisdom, the universal convergence of potentialities (*Ibid.*, 116). Most remarkable against the background of water as a salutary medium is a symbolic interpretation of one's plunging into water as "a return to preformal state, which, on the one hand, has a meaning of death and annihilation, while, on the other hand, possesses that of resurrection and restoration, because such immersion strengthens one's vitality" (*Ibid.*).

Last but not least, for Virginia Woolf herself the value of these artifacts and substances was also different. She found her eternal peace down the bottom of a river, having been concerned a lot during her lifetime over her appearance, especially while reflected in a mirror and thus as if put up for show. Indicative of the writer's phobias may be *The New Dress* as the most autobiographical of her stories about parties (Baldwin 1989, 36).

## 5. REFLECTION in Woolf's short fiction: A mental perspective

As regarded from its mental perspective oriented towards cognizing one's self, others or life as such through their reflections in the individual mind, in the eyes and faces of other people, as well as in mirrors used as a magnifying, truth-revealing device, Woolfian poetics of reflection integrates four main motifs: (i) the idea of one's ego's fragility; (ii) controversy between revealing and concealing truth; (iii) multiplicity of alternative worlds; and (iv) heuristic power of reflection that can either lie or suggest an ultimate truth.

The first motif is associated with the reflective power of *one's mind* that produces a make-belief image of one's ego, very fragile, evasive and often vague, similar to that which emerges in the looking-glass that can be easily smashed, e.g.,

Suppose **the looking-glass** smashes, the image [of oneself.—O.V.] disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forests depths all about it is no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people. (Woolf 1972, 40-41)

Two other motifs are linked to reflections in *people's eyes and faces* that either reveal and conceal the knowledge sought, e.g.,

Have I read you right? But **the human face** <...> holds more, withholds more. <...> and **in the human eye**—how d'you define it?—there's a break—a division—so that when you've grasped the stem the butterfly's off <...> **The eyes of others** our prisons; their thoughts our cages. (Woolf 1972, 15),

or act as mirrors which do not only reflect one's self, the world and others, but also create the worlds of fancy that, according to Woolf, would become the only real ones for novelists of her tomorrow, e.g.,

As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking **into the mirror**; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, **in our eyes**. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number.

(Woolf 1972, 41)

The last motif concerns such *mirror* reflections that provide a mode of perception (often a more adequate one) direct observation cannot, e.g.,

At once the **looking-glass** began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and leave only the truth. <...> Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody. As for her letters, they were all bills. <...>

People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms. (Woolf 1972, 93).

## 6. REFLECTION in Woolf's short fiction: A communicative facet

The communicative dimension of Woolfian poetics of reflection appears particularly salient in *An Unwritten Novel* which focuses on the description of an empathetic, almost telepathic, nonverbal communication of two passengers on a train, where the narrator, non-voluntarily imitating her vis-à-vis' erratic gestures, seems to read her mind, e.g.,

<...> and while she spoke she fidgeted as though the skin on her back were as a plucked fowl's in a poulterer's shop-window.

<...> Then she shuddered, and then she made the awkward angular movement that I had seen before, as if, after the spasm, some spot between the shoulders burnt or itched.

<...> All she did was to take her glove and rub hard at a spot on the window-pane. <...> Something impelled me to take my glove and rub my window. There, too, was a little speck on the glass. <...> And then the spasm went through me; I crooked my arm and plucked at the middle of my back. My skin, too, felt like the damp chicken's skin in the poulterer's shop-window; one spot between the shoulders itched and irritated, felt clammy, felt raw. <...> **she had communicated, shared her secret, passed her poison; <...> I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading beneath her gaze.** (Woolf 1972, 10–11)

The description of such mental simulation as a source of empathy, socialization and emotional resonance factually corresponds to what we now know about mirror neurons, the discovery of which is considered to be equal in its importance to the discovery of DHA (Ramachandran 2000). Thanks to mirror neurons that regulate the processes of involuntary imitation, anyone can actually become a telepath, acquiring the ability to mentally reproduce not only other people's actions, but also

their sensations, feeling, and emotions. Significantly, the taciturn dialogue of two passengers also involves the memory of glass, of the window pane which seems to preserve a painful remembrance of a sin being, unsuccessfully, rubbed of by both the heroine and the narrator.

## **7. REFLECTION in Woolf's short fiction: An integrated view**

Quite unexpectedly, all three facets of Woolfian poetics of reflection—physical, mental, and communicative—converge in *The Fascination of the Pool* (Woolf 1985, 220-221) where the pool acts not only as a water basin that reflects and refracts light but also as a memory depository as well as a generator of individual and collective recollections and remembrances. According to Baldwin (1989, 57), it is almost an essay rather than a story, whose central theme is revealing the interplay of light, water, past and future in the would-be reality of the world around and an imaginary reality of the literary mind. The story is built in such a way that it can be regarded as an artistic enactment of light theory and as a literary embodiment of relativity theory, when "the past is alive in the present and the present is given life by means of the past" (Rochette-Crawley 2003, 48).

The very first line of the story, "It may have been very deep" (Woolf 1985, 220), due to its modality, in Rochette-Crawley's opinion (with which we agree), reveals the optic uncertainty of the depth of the pool in full conformity with the law of refraction (Rochette-Crawley 2003, 48)—"refracted light plays tricks on the eyes: shallow waters may appear deep and deep waters may have less than actual depth" (Woolf 1985, 220), which is elaborated further in the text, e.g.,

Round the edge was so thick a fringe of rushes that their **reflections** made a darkness like the darkness of very deep water. (Woolf 1985, 220)

There is another instance of the water play with light in the story—the reflection and refraction of "something white" in the middle of the pool which then turns out to be the "For sale" white placard that some zealous person had stuck on a tree stump by the side of the pool, e.g.,

However in the middle was something white. <...> The centre of the water **reflected the white placard** and when the wind blew the centre of the pool seemed to flow and ripple like a piece of washing. One could trace the big red letters in which Romford Mill was printed in the water. A tinge of red was in the green that rippled from bank to bank.

But if one sat down among the rushes and watched the pool <...> the red and black letters and the white paper seemed to lie very thinly on the surface. (Woolf 1985, 220)

It is difficult though to accept Rochette-Crawley's interpretation of "something white in the middle of the pool" as lying at the bottom of the water (Rochette-Crawley 2003, 48), not just reflected in it, and thus undergoing a kind of refraction that seems to be different from what we have in the case of rushes. Nevertheless, deciphering the "something white" riddle switches on the narrator's ruminations on the under-water life which reminds her of the workings of the mind, e.g., "while beneath went on some profound under-water life like the brooding, the ruminating of a mind" (Woolf 1985, 220). And the pool itself undergoes a triple metaphorization: (i) as a container where people's thoughts are accumulated, e.g., "Many people must have come there <...>, dropping their thoughts into water" (Ibid.); (ii) as an addressee, someone who can give advice, e.g., "asking it some question" (Ibid.); and (iii) as a depository where all these thoughts, fancies, etc. are being preserved in a liquid state, e.g.,

it held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but **in a liquid state**, floating one on top of another, almost disembodied. (Ibid.)

Thus, water becomes a kind of collective mind where the thoughts of those who had passed away communicate in a friendly manner, which gives the pool a special charm, e.g.,

The charm of the pool was that thoughts had been left thereby people who had gone away and without their bodies their thoughts wandered in and out freely, friendly and communicative, in the common pool. (Ibid.)

Here, a seemingly erratic image of "liquid thoughts/ fancies" becomes less erratic if regarded in terms of autopoiesis conception according to which cognition is a phenomenon that is not just fixed in one's brain, it embraces the whole human organism with its white blood cells being "bits of the brain floating around in the body" (Pert 1989: cit. by Capra 1997, 305). Thus, the image of liquid thoughts acquires in the context of modern science its biochemical and physiological reality. Even more significant and prophetic is that Virginia Woolf chose water as *liquidum sapiens*, a liquid whose information structure, shaped by specific molecular clusters, according to the latest experimental data really has memory. Water responds to human emotions and thoughts, either positive or negative, preserving in itself since olden days the programme of life here on Earth.

## 8. Conclusion

Syncretic representation in Virginia Woolf's short fiction of scientific reflection

and literary fancy, of all that Susanne Rochette-Crawley calls "science and sentience" (Rochette-Crawley 2003, 43), tends to blur the barriers between science, culture, and art, thus giving rise to multiple sense which provokes multiple interpretations. And though "a physicist's scientific mind and the mind of a common person mutually regard 'their own' worlds as well-structured while the worlds of 'others' as chaotic [...], a semiotician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would describe them as variants of one single model" (Barsukov et al. 1988, 4). Cognitive scientists and cognitive scholars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would probably do the same. Correcting the disparity between crudeness of science and subtlety of life, literature displays a unique potential to turn what once seemed strange, and even nonsensical, into that which is full of sense and significance.

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