

Parody and metafiction: Virginia Woolf's 'An Unwritten Novel'

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Abstract

The present paper aims at vindicating the dimension where Virginia Woolf was more overtly «metafictional»: the practice of some of her short fiction. According to her, this was a new genre freed from the realist conventions that had modelled the novel from its inception as a literary form. Such an attitude is openly at work in «An Unwritten Novel» (1920), a short piece which parodies realism by laying bare the functioning of its conventions while opening the way to new fictional modes of understanding literature. «An Unwritten Novel» draws attention to itself and to its process of construction, laying bare its self-reflecting mechanisms which so ostensibly oppose realism.

Key words: Metafiction, Virginia Woolf, short fiction.

Although the cluster of features which are supposedly inherent to metafictional narratives have tended to be associated to what has come to be labelled as 'postmodernism' – as Patricia Waugh has noted (1984: 5) – metafiction and its practice are as old as the novel itself: it is a tendency inherent to all novels due to the 'dialogic' potential of the genre. To use Mikhail Bakhtin's words, the novel allows the «word to become the arena of conflict between two voices» (1984: 106). In more generalising terms, the language of fiction is invariably self-conscious, and often – if not overtly – shows a tendency to approach reality as a construct.

Robert Scholes was one of the first critics to analyse the phenomenon of self-conscious fiction, which he named «fabulation» (1979: 3). The word obviously brings to mind the fable, which in turn suggests didactic and edifying literature. Yet the fable also inevitably recalls Aesop's narratives, with their apparent detachment from direct and superficial reality in order to present the ethics of a controlled fantasy which in spite of this – or maybe because of it – stands very close to real human experience.

The language of the allegory and the fable, which was once superseded by realism and by ideological implications such as 'objectivity' and 'distance' paradoxically arises in the twentieth century as a reaction to the very movement which provoked its withdrawal. Curiously enough, realism, which has often been considered as the classic fictional mode, functions, as Patricia Waugh notes (1984: 6), by suppressing the dialogic nature of discourse and as a result its closeness to everyday forms of communication. The conflict of

the dialogic is resolved by the introduction of monologic discourse issued by an omniscient narrator that controls the narrative in all its levels. In turn, the language of the allegory and fable would be more adequately expressed in a narrative tradition which some critics have regarded as close or even coincident with it, namely, the short story (Shaw, 1983: vii).

Although Virginia Woolf is primarily known as a novelist, her vocation as such is but a late one: her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), was published when she was well over thirty, yet recognition and prestige would only arrive in the 1930s, after the publication of some of her most well-known works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928) or *The Waves* (1931). Woolf's first publications appeared as early as 1904, and they were basically reviews and essays where she already showed a critical eye and a growingly strong opposition to realism and its major form of expression, namely the bourgeois novel that Woolf mainly associated with male modes of writing. The present paper aims to vindicate the aspect in which Virginia Woolf was more overtly 'metafictional': the practice of writing some of her short fiction. This was, according to her, a new genre freed from the realist conventions that had modelled the novel from its inception as a literary form. Such an attitude is openly at work in «An Unwritten Novel» (1920), a short piece which parodies realism by laying bare the functioning of its conventions while opening the way to new fictional modes of understanding literature.

In 1905 Woolf published a review of W.L. Courtney's *The feminine note in fiction* (1904), who implied that the novel as a genre was bound to disappear due to the «insidious» influence of women entering the literary sphere which had been formerly and primarily dominated by men. Woolf agrees with Courtney's assertion that «the novel as a work of art is disappearing», but for reasons which differ from Courtney's own. According to Woolf, the realist novel had, at the turn of the twentieth century, exhausted its possibilities as a genre, and it became necessary to «invent» a new genre where «women having found their voices have something to say which is naturally of supreme interest and meaning to women» (1986: 16). Some years later, Woolf explained to David Garnett the satisfactory experience of having published her first short story – «The Mark on the Wall» (1917) – and how the genre had fulfilled, to some extent, her aesthetic expectations: «Novels are frightfully clumsy ... I daresay one ought to invent a completely new form.» (1994a: 167)

Indeed, and as Dominic Head (1992: 1) has suggested, the rise of the modern short story chronologically coincides with the emergence of the aesthetic movement which came to be known as Modernism. Many writers who were to be later primarily known as novelists opened their path to experimentation and literary innovation by means of their short fiction, thus reacting against the historicism and positivism that had permeated the Victorian novel and which eventually reflect profound dissatisfaction with traditional values.¹ The

1. For a development of this point, see Lukács (1971), Ferguson (1989), Baldwin (1993) and Harris (1994).

materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction was premised no longer existed, and the aesthetic form which had incarnated such bourgeois ideology – namely the novel – needed reformulation.

Along with other writers, Woolf rejected the literary forms that corresponded to this ordered reality, such as the emphasis on plot, causal relationships and authoritative omniscience, as she poses in one of her most renowned essays, «Modern Fiction» (1925): «Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide» (1994b: 160). Throughout the essay Woolf shows a sense that reality is provisional, fluid and changing, which resists eternal verities and structures: «Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end» (1994b: 160). «The novel», Woolf argues, «is done to a turn.» It becomes necessary to find a form which would suit new aesthetic concerns for a new world-view which necessarily implies the rejection of the «two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life» (1994b: 160).

Significantly enough, the year of publication of Woolf's first short story coincides with her first reviews of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, whose collections of short fiction had just reached England in Constance Garnett's translations. For Woolf, those very short stories reflected the provisionality and indeterminacy of life, where «nothing is finished; nothing is tidied up; life merely goes on» (1987: 77). The English literary tradition has nothing similar to these stories; its novels resemble «the immature work of children compared with the work of grown men» (1987: 77). Such a view Woolf never changed throughout her lifetime; in her 1940 essay «The Leaning Tower» she reiterated the instability, movement and fluidity of life which, unlike for other artists, the writer inevitably takes as a model: «A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words cover all that a writer looks at – they are, human life» (1992: 159).

Deeply connected with the view of reality as inherently provisional, metafiction implies attention to language itself as an artefact (Waugh 1984: 2), possibly as a result of the development of semantics, structural linguistics or the philosophy of language. If a solid vision of reality collapses, so does the medium which constructs it and a profound distrust and dissatisfaction with language to create «meanings», to construct a «coherent» world follows suit: «[Words] combine unconsciously together. The moment we single out and emphasise the suggestions they become unreal; and we, too, become unreal» (Woolf, 1993: 140). All throughout her writing (the above quoted passage being just a sample) Virginia Woolf expressed her concern with the capacity of language to either signify 'itself' or with its inability to adequate itself to thought. In her 1937 BBC broadcast series significantly entitled

Words Fail Me – later to become the essay «Craftsmanship» – Woolf discussed «the craft of words – the craftsmanship of the writer» and immediately drew attention to the original meaning of the word *craft*, «cajolery, cunning, deceit» (1993: 137).

Aesthetic and communicative needs do not coexist in language, and that is precisely the writer's greatest dilemma: «How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they can tell the truth? That is the question» (1993: 141).² And that is so because language is never individual, but communal experience; language has been worn out by centuries of use and myriads of speakers; «whenever we see a new sight or feel a new sensation we cannot use [words] because language is old.» (1993: 141) Words, according to Woolf, inevitably carry along associated thoughts, feelings, sensations and scenes:

This power of suggestion is the one of the most mysterious properties of words. Everyone who has ever written a sentence must be conscious or half-conscious of it. Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today – that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. (1993: 140-141)

This explains, as Linda Hutcheon has put it (1980: 90), the emergence of a world created through the fictive referents of language, what is referred to as «heterocosmos» and is intrinsic to any narrative process. Yet in metafiction this fact or process is made explicit, and the reader «lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional» (Hutcheon, 1980: 7); readers necessarily become «specialists, word mongers, phrase finders», as Woolf herself had suggested (1993: 140).

Such a kind of narrative inevitably draws attention to itself and to its process of construction, which is openly made visible and self-reflecting and which, for that reason, Hutcheon has defined as «narcissistic narrative» (1980: 6). As a result, concepts such as fictionality, narrative structures or language stop being instruments to become the content's core. Those mechanisms which intervene in the construction of fiction and which realism so ostensibly tried to cover are now laid bare; the aim is to construct a fictional illusion and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. In other words, metafictional narrative explores a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction (Waugh, 1980: 2). Art and life mingle and interact; they interweave in patterns that focus on linguistic and narrative structures, on the reader, on the nature and intricacies of the text itself. The imaginative process of sto-

2. For an extensive overview of the issue, see Caughie (1991), Moore (1984), Méndez (1979) and Laurence (1991).

rytelling becomes the core of the narrative, instead of the very product or consequence of it, namely the story.

Coming back to Virginia Woolf's «Modern Fiction» (1925), a substantially revised version of an earlier essay entitled «Modern Novels» (1919), the writer analyses her particular way of conceiving the art of fiction. Woolf moves away from realist conventions – «the immense skill and immense industry [spent] making the transitory and trivial appear the true and the enduring» (1994b: 159) – in order to advocate for a new genre which should reflex the complex processes of mental life:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the *life of Monday or Tuesday*, the accent falls different from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there. (1994b: 160; emphasis added)

The «modern fiction» which Woolf proposes does away with lineal progression, coherence, causality and order while it aims at depicting reality «as it is»: ambivalent, incoherent, contradictory. Significantly enough, such processes of mental life which should be the core of fiction Woolf calls «the life of Monday or Tuesday». *Monday or Tuesday* (1921) is by no coincidence the title of Woolf's first collection of short stories published by her own publishing house – the Hogarth Press – where she explored for the first time this new conception of fiction-making which opened the path to forthcoming works written in the 1920s.

As the title of the collection suggests, Woolf explores there a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction, yet the most obvious metafictional story compiled in the collection is the short piece entitled «An Unwritten Novel», first published as an independent story in the *London Mercury* in 1920. Of «An Unwritten Novel» Woolf wrote that it had been her «great discovery», and that the story was definitely a sample – extremely critical as she was with her own writing – of «a woman writing well» (1981: 30).

«An Unwritten Novel», as its title indicates, suggests the process of story-telling rather than emphasising the story itself which, in this case, is never finished. A first person unnamed narrator travels by train from London to Eastbourne – or from one age of fiction to the next, as will be seen – and the journey invites him or her to construct the fictional life of an elderly woman sitting opposite, whom s/he names Minnie Marsh. Ironically all the situations and background which make up Minnie's life draw from worn out realist conventions and constitute a parody of them, a fact which stands in opposition with the narrative mode that the narrator uses – the so-called stream-of-consciousness – as well as with the process of alluding to the complexities of creating fiction within fiction and, above all, character in fiction.³

3. See, for instance, Engler (1987) and Fox (1973).

On the other hand, «An Unwritten Novel» draws on the language of fable and metaphor which, as earlier stated, supplants the conventions of realism. There is a long connection in Virginia Woolf's writing between fiction-making and train-journeying, which invariably becomes an image of it.⁴ In her essays it was developed in «Byron and Mr. Briggs» (1922), «Character in fiction» (1923) and *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924) which, as the chronological progression indicates, reached a peak in Woolf's concern for the creation of character in fiction that she had begun in «An Unwritten Novel.» In the first of these essays, Woolf suggests that the process of creating a character is a somehow familiar, ordinary game that we all play: «There is someone in the corner of the railway carriage, let us suppose, who has occupied himself reading the newspaper, looking out of the window, and guessing from the scraps of talk at the lives of his fellow passengers» (1988: 489). However, what makes the writer different from any individual familiar with this game is his or her anxiety to give order to the severed parts, scraps of personality in order to create a work of art:

The writer (for we are trying now to imagine the process in the writer's mind) receives a shock; he sees that this is complete and somehow significant; and this completeness and significance can be most properly expressed in words. For the rest of the journey he does not listen to the talk. First he must get the impression more and more; then he must consider how to express in words exactly what there is in his mind. (1988: 489)

In *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924) – largely a revision of «Character in fiction» and published as a pamphlet by the Hogarth Press – Woolf raises three basic questions which, for her, lay at the core of fiction and which are a response to Arnold Bennett's argument of her having failed to create a «convincing» character in *Jacob's Room* (1922): «to make out what we mean when we talk about 'character' in fiction», to say something «about the question of reality» and to suggest «some reasons why the younger novelists fail to create characters, if, as Mr Bennett asserts, it is true that fail they do» (1988: 421).

As for the first issue raised, Woolf poses her famous assertion that «on or about December 1910 human character changed» (1988: 421).⁵ In spite of the irony implicit in such a phrase, it is obvious that Woolf makes clear that the conception of character in fiction has changed dramatically from, say, Arnold Bennett's view – which she considers as the epitome of that kind of

4. For further analysis of this image see Bowlby (1997) and Lewis (1975).

5. December 1910 is the date of the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition, organised, among others, by Roger Fry, Clive and Vanessa Bell and Leonard Woolf. The Grafton Galleries showed the first examples in England of non-representational art, introducing the work of painters such as Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh or Picasso. For an analysis of the dramatic changes which took place in Britain in the 1910s, see Stansky (1996) and Butler (1994).

obsolete realism which still prevailed at the turn of the century – and the conception of younger writers, more in tune with the running times: «When human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature» (1988: 422).

In order to illustrate her view, Woolf chooses the language of metaphor – «instead of analysing and abstracting, I will tell you a simple story which, however pointless, has the merit of being true» (1988: 422) – and introduces the famous parable of Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown which is in substance quite similar to the situation she had depicted in «An Unwritten Novel.» Success in creating a character, Woolf concludes, does not reside in his or her being «lifelike», but in having «the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through his eyes – of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life ... the immortality of the soul» (1988: 426).

As a result, the train journey from Richmond to Waterloo in this case, exemplifies the shift which fiction has undergone from «one age of literature to the next.» Character, the most essential of the fictional qualities, has been equally the subject of reformulation: «I believe that all novels ... deal with character, and that it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved» (1988: 425). This is Woolf's ideal type of fiction, which always and invariably begins «with an old lady sitting in the corner opposite» in a train carriage (1988: 425).

Virginia Woolf's «An Unwritten Novel» anticipates this theory of fiction through the very practice of writing fiction and, as it could not be otherwise, it begins with an old lady sitting opposite: «Such an expression of unhappiness was enough by itself to make one's eyes slide above the paper's edge to the poor woman's face – insignificant without that look, almost a symbol of human destiny with it. Life's what you see in people's eyes» (1985: 112). One by one the five passengers abandon the train carriage, and it is only the narrator and the old lady that remain or, in other words, the writer and his or her creation, on whose process of construction s/he begins to work: «I read her message», the narrator argues, «deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze.» (1985: 114) The narrator constructs the old lady as a solitary spinster, abused by the matronly sister-in-law – whom s/he names Hilda Marsh – whose roof and whose children this lady, Minnie, shares: «Hilda? Hilda? Hilda Marsh – Hilda the blooming, the full bosomed, the matronly ... Poor Minnie, more of a grasshopper than ever.» (1985: 114).⁶ In the construction of the old lady as a character for a novel, there are also things that the narrator must necessarily discard or pay less attention to (the brackets in

6. Hilda is, ironically enough, the name of one of Arnold Bennett's most famous heroines in the homonymous novel *Hilda Lessways* (1911). Similarly, the character of James Moggridge to appear later on bears some resemblance to the Gerard Scales of Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*.

the passage below are Woolf's, which is a further sign of intentional authorial intervention):

Slowly the knives and forks sink from the upright. Down they get (Bob and Barbara), hold out hands stiffly; back again to their chairs, staring between the resumed mouthfuls. [But this we'll skip; ornaments, curtains, trefoil china plate, yellow oblongs of cheese, white squares of biscuit – skip – oh, but wait ...]. (1985: 114)

In the narrator's «deciphering» of the lady's personality s/he interprets her rubbing the window pane of the train carriage as «a stain of sin. Oh, she committed some crime!» The narrator has «a choice of crimes», all of them exciting though not equally satisfactory to endow Minnie with: «A parting, was it, twenty years ago? Vows broken? Not Minnie's ... She was faithful» or a «suppressed secret – her sex, they'd say – the scientific people. But what flummery to saddle *her* with sex! No – more like this.» (1985: 115) Details, for the narrator, are not important, but out of the «many crimes which aren't *your* crime», Minnie's should be «cheap» enough to match her own vulgar appearance: having scalded a baby brother with a hot kettle is enough for a «solemn retribution ... All her sins fall, fall, for ever fall.» (1985: 116)

Revealingly, all the characters, personalities and situations which surround the construction of the narrator's character and of his or her «unwritten novel» are commonplace topics, recurrent situations, sensationalist scenes and worn out characters that may have well sprung – as some of them actually do – from one of Arnold Bennett's novels, for Woolf an example of cheap entertainment literature: the abusing sister-in-law Hilda, the passive brother John, the surrogate children Bob and Barbara, the commercial traveller Moggridge, even the picture of Minnie's indifferent God, as the narrator imagines her praying in her attic over the roofs of Eastbourne.

Parody is itself, as Linda Hutcheon has suggested (1980: 25) one of the essential qualities of metafictional narrative which implies an exploration of difference and similarity. «An Unwritten Novel» overtly plays with naïve realist conventions – all those elements which intervene in the construction of Minnie's character and her story – by means of the ironic use of certain literary codes that no doubt the reader will recognise. Yet the story goes beyond mere ridicule, mockery and destruction: «An Unwritten Novel» is an example of how metafiction parodies and imitates as a way to a new form. It is not what the story tells that is important, but the way in which it is told, which becomes the core of this kind of narrative as the narrator implies with his or her comments on her role, such as: «Have I read you right? ... Hang still, then, quiver, life, soul, spirit, whatever you are of Minnie Marsh – I, too, on my flower – the hawk over the down – alone, or what were the worth of life? ... *Alone, unseen; seeing all so still down there, all so lovely. None seeing, none caring.*» (1985: 117; emphasis added)

On another level, it is obvious that parody develops out of the realization of the literary inadequacies of a certain convention. Ironically, the narrator of «An Unwritten Novel» has not read Minnie right, as s/he learns towards the end of the narrative; the solitary spinster turns out to be a happy elderly woman who is expected by her son at the railway station: «Well, but I'm confounded ... Surely Minnie, you know better! A strange young man ... Stop! I'll tell him – Minnie! – Miss Marsh! – I don't know though. There's something queer in her cloak as it blows. Oh, but it's untrue, it's indecent.» As the narrator poses, such a discovery is «indecent» and discouraging – especially if fiction-making aims at map-making reality – and questions the validity of this narrator as well as his or her narrative: «Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That's not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life's bare as bone» (1985: 121).

Yet the story closes in a very different mood: as earlier suggested, parody is not only the means of unmasking the literary inadequacies of a certain convention, but the necessary step within the creative process which enables new forms to appear and opens new possibilities for the artist: «And yet the last look of them – he stepping from the kerb and she following him round the edge of the big building brims me with wonder – *floods me anew*» (1985: 121; emphasis added). As Waugh puts it (1984: 18), metafiction lays bare the realist conventions in order to re-examine them and to offer a fictional form that is culturally relevant. Parody, as a literary strategy, deliberately sets itself up to break the norms that have become conventionalised while fusing, on the other hand, creation and critique.

At that stage of her literary development, Virginia Woolf felt the need to surpass realist conventions – as well as its major fictional embodiment, namely the novel – precisely by laying them bare while inventing what she saw as a «new form» drawing from the language of parable and metaphor. As a result, «An Unwritten Novel» closes with the narrator's awareness that contemporary reality is continually being appraised and reformulated, appearing as a complex web of interrelating, multiple realities which is precisely what makes both life and fiction so fascinating: «If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me – adorable world» (1985: 121).

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