THE LYRICAL NOVEL: A NARRATOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to show why a narratological approach would be useful in understanding the lyrical novel, with references to the novels written by Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift. The narratological approaches that are presented as relevant to an in-depth analysis of the lyrical novel are based on theories of action, theories of story and narration, and theories of reception. The conclusion of the article is that lyricism lies at the level of the story.

Keywords: fabula, story, plot, flashback, flashforward

In order to define the lyrical novel, an analysis of its structure is necessary. A narratological approach explains how poetry and prose mix, what happens in this case with the incidents, how the story is told, what happens to chronology, what sort of narrators are present, and how all these aspects affect the readers' perception.

David Herman, in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* (1999), draws a distinction between classical and postclassical narratologies. According to Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, in *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses* (2010: 1-2), classical narratology is defined as including French structuralists such as Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond, Tzvetan Todorov, A. J. Greimas, Gérard Genette, and German structuralists such as Eberhard Lämmert and Franz Karl Stanzel. According to Herman, postclassical narratologies include classical narratology but combine this with new methodologies and perspectives on narrative. Postclassical narratology is interdisciplinary and here we can include Hogan's theory of affective narratology, which is important in order to understand the lyrical novel.

The following theories of narratology are necessary for the study of the lyrical novel: theories of action, theories of story and narration, and theories of reception.

Theories of action, or *fabula*, "focus on the study of events, action sequences and schemes, functions, actants, characters, settings and the internal laws of narrated worlds." (Onega 1996: 27). The level of the *fabula* is significant since it determines what Mieke Bal calls the "logic of events". "'Logic of events' may be defined as a course of events that is experienced by the reader as natural and in accordance with some form of understanding of the world." (Bal 1997: 177). Since Woolf's intention seems to have been to surprise the reader by showing her a different understanding of the world, this level is quite different from the way it is seen at the level of the story. The theories of reception should go deeper into this as they deal with the different forms of the reader's understanding of the world as they are influenced by Modernism and Postmodernism. How much is the *fabula* developed in the lyrical novel in comparison with traditional novels? At this level Bal discusses incidents and the way they influence the fabula's further development. Events express a condition or a change (Bal 1997: 183). So long as an incident is used to describe a condition, the reader will feel that the story is static, but when an incident is used to express a change, the reader will feel that the story is dynamic. However, this does not seem sufficient to explain the way the lyrical novel works. Since readers have the

feeling that 'nothing happens' in Woolf, and critics say that Woolf's focus is on the inner world, then further analysis is needed regarding time. This should be done at the level of the story's presentation since it is there that readers begin their reading process.

Theories of story and narration "devise modes of analysis of the time structure of the story (order of events, temporal distortions such as flashbacks or flashforwards, duration and selection of scenes, narrative rhythm, etc.)." (Onega 1996: 29). In order to understand the so-called distortions of time with the help of narratological theory, theories about narrating, narrated time and the time of life belonging to Genette, Ricoeur or Müller will be taken into account. How much of the reader's time do descriptions, reflections and incidents take in the lyrical novel in comparison to the traditional novel? According to Meir Sternberg, in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (1978: 307-309), if an element such as a description or a reflection, is given a large amount of time, it means it is truly aesthetically relevant. Thus, if certain thoughts, scenes, or descriptions in Woolf or Swift occupy some time, this says something about their aesthetic relevance. If more of the readers' time is dedicated to descriptions or reflections, then the incidents seem to develop at a slow pace, and thus the rhythm of the action is sometimes perceived as quite slow.

Theories of reception focus on "a communicative speech act, a message transacted between a sender and a receiver." (Onega 1996: 29). Woolf and Swift seem to have the intention of surprising the reader and of replacing an old understanding of the world with something new. To what extent does the lyrical mode capture more of the reader's attention than the narrative mode otherwise might?

Joanna Russ defines the lyrical mode by contrasting it with the narrative mode. According to her, lack of chronology is one of the lyrical mode's distinctive features. There is also no causation, as the lyrical mode relies on associations for its "principle of connection". Russ also claims that Woolf is a "lyric novelist" (Russ 1995: 87). Readers have the feeling that 'nothing happens' in Woolf's novels because of her way of writing. Whether her novels are written in an almost traditional way (such as *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, *Orlando*, *The Years*, *Flush*) or whether she uses the stream-of-consciousness technique (*To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves*, *Jacob's Room*, *Between the Acts*), she resorts to more than just plot or incidents. However, any narrative text contains more than just incidents. There are also opinions and descriptions (Bal 1997: 8). The lyrical novel focuses on characters' perceptions and inner world, on their opinions, their thoughts, and their descriptions of external aspects as they perceive them. Tomashevski sees descriptions as static motifs. According to him, what is significant is dynamic, whereas what is unimportant is static (Onega 1996: 27). Woolf's and Swift's novels contain more static than dynamic aspects. However, in their novels the so-called static aspects are more important than the dynamic aspects. Due to the focus on characters' reflections and on descriptions, the action lacks dynamism. The opinions and descriptions in Woolf's novels contain poetic language. Woolf's and Swift's narrators may be considered to belong to Onega's category of narrators who comment (Onega 1996: 149-150). In both Woolf and Swift, characters use their memories to reconstruct past happenings by making them more beautiful, by idealizing the past, or by regretting certain past choices. By reflecting, characters may offer a lyrical perception of everyday life.

It would be impossible to say that there is literally nothing happening in Woolf's novels, despite some readers' impressions. This is because action "exists prior to any narrative presentation" (Culler 1980: 27-37). What gives some readers such an impression is that the action in Woolf's novels occurs slowly. The action in Woolf's and Swift's novels is not dynamic

because the narrative rhythm often slows or pauses. Another reason for this impression is that the story is told by flashbacks or by characters' impressions: "In the novel nothing happens actually; all the events take place in the character's mind," as Agsous Amina claims, in *The Novel as Autobiography and Therapy: Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse* (2010: xl). It is no longer action that retains the focus of the reader, but an act of perception (Bal 1997: 108).

Humphrey wonders about the nature of the plot in novels where inner thoughts replace external action (1954: 84). He notices the possibility of mind as a setting, of viewing the character's memories and thoughts as the time it takes for the novel's action to start and end, as the places where a character's mind goes, which includes what characters remember, perceive or imagine as action.

Russ and Humphrey go too far. The reader can always construct a plot similar to the traditional one. By traditional plot, this thesis refers to a plot with very logical connections between incidents and with incidents organized in chronological order. In fact, the reader's role is more active in non-traditional novels. Connections and causations can always be reconstructed and implied. Moreover, even if remembering is not regarded as an action in a traditional sense, as Amina suggested, there is always a setting, a place and a time when certain incidents occurred. These are all reconstructed by characters' memories and placed in a chronological order by the readers. Remembering may be an action, yet it seems static in comparison to incidents which occur during the present time of the main story. This sort of narrative is a way of challenging the readers' expectations.

Bal claims that sometimes anachronies take place in the consciousness of a character, when he remembers doing something which is different from the actual doing. This is the case of the movement in time in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The story is formed of associations which lead the characters to move backwards in time, to remember and reflect on their past choices. This is also the case with the majority of Swift's characters: Tom Crick in *Waterland*, Paula in *Tomorrow*, William Chapman in *The Sweetshop Owner*, Sophie and her father in *Out of this World*, the characters in *Last Orders*, etc. With respect to consciousness, time is not linear. According to Daiches, consciousness may move in time while the subject and spatial elements do not. The reader will try to understand the whole story from what he is told about the characters in the present and from their memories of the past. What is more, the characters themselves go through a similar process. Deviations in sequential ordering are a common aspect of the majority of Woolf's and Swift's novels. These deviations are defined as "the relations […] which hold between the order of events in the story and their chronological sequence in the fabula" (Bal 1997: 80). The non-linear chronology presented by the authors is rearranged by the reader in order to make sense of the story.

Most of Woolf's and Swift's novels begin in *medias res*. Woolf's novels *Flush* and *Orlando*, which she calls biographies, start with the beginning. Yet, what do we regard as the beginning of a story? In the case of novels, the beginning may be regarded as the first incident that can be identified at the level of the fabula, in a chronological order. What is more, the beginning incident is regarded as the first incident presented, not with the help of flashbacks, but in the present time of the main story. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the story does not proceed according to a linear chronology. Characters go back in time in order to remember and the reader must try to put the incidents in a chronological order. Graham Swift's novels begin in *medias res*, and their chronology is similar to what we find in *Mrs. Dalloway*. According to Meir Sternberg, lack of chronological order "[...] is an indication of artistic purpose." (Onega 1996: 103) Sternberg's

claim about the artistic role of a lack of chronological order may account for the purpose of the lack of linear chronology so often present in the lyrical novel.

It is thus only at first that the reader has the feeling that there is not much action in Woolf's novels. The difference between story and fabula can further clarify what goes on in the process of the reader's first impressions and her later reconstruction of incidents. The term *fabula* was coined by the Russian Formalists. The Russian Formalists used the word "fabula" to refer to the story, while sjuzhet was the plot. To them, sjuzhet had the function of ordering incidents chronologically while referring to the techniques of presentation. For Onega, the story is the way that incidents are presented in a novel; at this level, flashbacks are visible. The plot refers to the operations which shape the story as well as to the connectedness of the incidents. Bal's and Onega's definitions are more detailed than those of the Formalists. Onega adds the term "story" as distinct from the fabula of the Formalists. Story refers to the presentation of incidents in a novel, while fabula remains the same as the term defined by the Formalists. The definition of the plot is also preserved. There may be little action in a novel, yet when the readers think of what happened and try to find connections between the events, there is in fact an action-scheme (a *fabula*). The reader recomposes the story after reading it as a fabula, as a scheme of incidents, leaving flashbacks and foci on characters' perception aside. However, in her attempt to have a better understanding of the story, the reader not only orders the events but also forms an image of the characters based on their inner world. The reader must find all necessary connections between incidents and characters' motivations. Both readers and writers will try to offer a presentation of the story in a novel by shaping incidents into a plot (Culler).

Focalization is defined as "[…] the relation between 'who perceives' and what is perceived, 'colours' the story with subjectivity." (Bal 1997: 8) According to Bal, incidents are always presented from a subjective perspective, even in the case of third person narrators. She sees perspective as a means of manipulation; the reader is influenced by certain ways of presenting incidents or characters in a narrative. Point of view means a manipulation of vision; sympathy for certain characters does not come from moral judgment (Currie 2007: 18). Novels focusing on inner experience bring about the reader's sympathy for characters, due to the amount of information the reader is given and how this information is presented (Lodge 1992: 42).

Swift, like Woolf, favours subjective reality and non-linear chronology. His novels structurally resemble *Mrs. Dalloway*. Since we have to consider multiple subjective perspectives on reality of various characters in Woolf's and Swift's novels, the views expressed by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin are relevant. He defines the novel as expressing multiple perspectives on reality: "The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes the novel as fundamentally polyphonic (multi-voiced) or dialogic rather than monological (single-voiced): the essence of the novel is its staging of different voices or discourses and, thus, of the clash of social perspectives and points of view." (Culler)

According to Ronald Walker, Modernist novels show a different representation of time, character, and causation. With Modernism, the novels move away from linear chronology and a unitary plot towards a new vision of reality as fragmentary (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991: 393). According to Van Brunt (2004), Postmodernist narratives are also against linear, progressive time and against relationships of cause and effect. Postmodernism, like Modernism, attempts to move away from linear chronology and from causality and coherence of plot (Burgass 2000: 177). This break with tradition was common in all arts.

Neither Modernism nor Postmodernism is a unitary movement. Warren Hedges (2003) sees Postmodernism as an aesthetic, not as a movement. With Modernism, the traditional novel

did not disappear (Stevenson 1993: 26): "conservative influences survived strongly until 1930 and beyond. Though Woolf was right to see the greatest successes of Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy as belonging to the Edwardian period, around 1910, these novelists by no means disappeared after the war." Not all novels written during this epoch respected the features of Modernism. Some of Woolf's novels are very close to traditional ones. Postmodernism does not have a fixed set of common concepts to be respected by all authors: "Its literary expression tends to the experimental (a leftover from Modernism) but its exponents have certainly not signed up en masse to any unifying concepts like iconoclasm, groundlessness, formlessness and populism." (Holcombe 2007). The fact that Modernism and Postmodernism are not regarded as unitary movements explains why Woolf and Swift seem not to be typical of the cultural context of their epoch.

Lyricism lies at the level of the presentation of the story. At the level of the fabula, which readers can understand and compose later, there are no such details. The readers perceive lyricism but they can also reconsider the presentation of the story after they read the novel, reconstructing all the logical links and coherence of the story in a way that is almost traditional. Woolf's and Swift's novels contain certain aspects of traditional narrative, but mostly their novels belong to the lyrical mode, as this is what retains most of the readers' attention. The "alternation between narration and non-narrative comments" (Bal 1997: 31) may be regarded as support for the claim that the modern novel is a mixture of poetry and prose (Bradbury, Freedman).

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