The Intimacy of Influence. Narrative and Theoretical fictions in the works of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson

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First Encounters:
An Introduction

One evening, many years ago, I turned on the television to find Jeanette Winterson (1959) in London’s Highgate cemetery. She stood amidst the grave stones which framed the shot. Behind her stood a tree. Before it she declared herself to be the fulfilment of a prophecy. Winterson quoted *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and Virginia Woolf’s (1882-1941) prediction that within one hundred years “we” would witness the incarnation of Shakespeare’s sister. On the screen before me, Winterson announced herself to be this prefigured sister. At first I was shocked. Then I became intrigued. I speculated that she had deployed a cunning strategy. Her self-advertisement may have camouflaged an act of genealogy-making.

In her collection of essays *Art Objects* (1995), Woolf’s heritage is applauded by Winterson as “my spirit, waterfall and wine” (65). Here is the lexis of succour and transmission. The closing page of *A Room of One’s Own* suggests how “we” can contribute to the incarnation of Shakespeare’s sister. Throughout the narrative essay Woolf sets up a flexible canon of women writers numbering amongst them George Eliot (1819-1880). Yet within the rubric of “we,” Woolf includes those who work in obscurity (107). They contribute to the creative flow which will be channelled by the Bard’s incarnated sibling. Woolf claims that this special “she” would be “drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners” (108). Reading this passage that same evening, I watched shadows and light condense and displace. In my state of semiotic drift, I figured illuminations and shadows not as authors but literary forms. I wondered at how narrative fictions, as the riches they figure or keep hidden, become re-shaped in the theories and narratives of texts to come.

This study is not “about” but rather “with” the intimate processes by which literary texts, as narrative and theoretical agents, are re-written from precursor to inheritor, and sometimes back again. *The Intimacy of Influence* follows lines of influence as they flow in two directions. Jeanette Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries* (1997) probes a love triangle between a physicist (Jove), a scientist-alchemist (Alice) and
their significant Other, Stella. The novel narrates the history of ideas from the Greeks to the Grand Unified Theories (GUTs) of modern physics. The novel’s postmodern experiments in creating parallel universes between which characters travel, and its adoption of the modernist tradition in interior monologue, might be deemed an odd inter-locutor to George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda (1876). Eliot’s titular protagonist is a man in quest of his Jewish identity and parentage. The novel’s co-star, Gwendolen Harleth, undergoes a long journey towards a maturity fraught by dangerous parenting. As it happens, Gut Symmetries is also a study in parents, in fathers lost and found. Its postmodern experiment in making a hybrid between stream-of-consciousness technique and the discourses of modern science highlights the potential forms of Eliot’s opus - a modernist novel in the making which breaks away from realism through its own discourses hybridised with science. Hence, the inheritor novel can be used as an intimate to influence the precursor work, so that it divulges secrets which its historical context would have found alien. Between predecessor and successor, intimacies take place when what has been striving for signification in one work but could not achieve it, reaches this crystallisation in the other.3

According to the OED, “intimacy” has five distinct meanings: the closeness between friends; a euphemism for sexual intercourse; “closeness of observation or knowledge;” a “close connexion or union” involving symbiosis: the example given is of a father and son who make not “two Gods, but One God;” and the “inner or inmost nature” or “quality” of a human character.4 Thus intimacy connotes the inextricable relations between knowledge as a passion and rapture as an epistemological adventure. Intimacy may also risk deification and symbiosis. When Winterson eulogises Woolf’s work as “spirit,” “wine” and “waterfall,” I infer a transmission associated with apotheosis and transmogrification.

Virginia Woolf is more reserved in the respects she pays to George Eliot, though the inheritor has her moments of intensity. In a review entitled “George Eliot” (1919), Woolf rallies her readers with the “we” who have the “power” to bestow on Eliot’s grave, the “laurel and the rose” (quoted in Barrett 1979: 160). Woolf pronounces Middle-march “magnificent” though not without “imperfections;” yet it is “one of the few English novels written for grown-up people.”5 Winterson’s remarks about Eliot are sparse to non-existent. In her essays, Winter-
son reminds her readers that there is as little point in seeking out a new George Eliot as there is to installing a substitute Woolf (1995: 177). Literary experimentation is not about reproducing but pioneering.

Reading the authors as essay-narrators may offer clues to tracking the patterns of intimacy between legacies; in this light, Winterson’s bond with Woolf can be read as hovering between passionate connection and a determination to supersede her dead friend. Woolf’s acknowledgement of Eliot is profound, respectful but capable of admonition. In a letter to Frances Hooper, Woolf explains that she is involved in the demanding project of reading all of Eliot’s novels. Writing to Katherine Arnold-Foster she speaks of Eliot’s work with adulation, suggesting that despite their drawbacks, the Victorian novelists had if not “twice” the brains of Woolf’s generation, at least twice their heart. Winterson offers little evidence that she reads Eliot with the commitment she would otherwise render Woolf. Hence it may surprise the reader that in my chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, I dedicate each to exploring intimacies idiosyncratic to the three chosen novels, comprising one each from the oeuvres of Eliot, Woolf and Winterson, respectively. Chapter 5 is the exception. It brings together four works from the three authors. My emphasis is on the study of triangular patterns of intimacy between novels, not authors.

For to study the lines of influence between specific novels primarily on the basis of how the authors themselves positioned themselves in line or chose instead to argue back at their heritage, would be to commit an intentional fallacy. Or to coin my own term, it would be to commit a citational fallacy. An author may issue many statements about whom they consider to have influenced their work or not. Yet to presume that the author can consciously account for all the narrative or theoretical texts which inform her work is to commit a citational fallacy in much the same way that some would consider authors’ statements about their novels to be of primary significance. There is a reasonable degree of consensus that urges readers to trust the texts rather than authors’ statements about their own work. Even in that genre termed the “essay” or “literary criticism,” the implied author can take on the role of an external narrator and focalizor.

These are terms developed by Mieke Bal, whose contribution to the evolving narratological paradigm is crucial for this study. Her approach to reading the various layers and agencies in a text, be it
narrative or theoretical and her notion of the "embedded fabula," to name but a few of her categories, may prove of great import for the following reason. Her approach allows texts to intimate themselves not as a synecdoche for authors living or dead, but as a complex ensemble of multitudinous elements, historically and culturally in *frisson* with contemporary culture. She argues for a concept of "narrativity, not narrative; not a genre or object but a cultural mode of expression" (1997: 222). Her terms I will not treat as formulae but as fluid concepts which this study’s literary works re-shape and complement.

Despite my following the tradition of trusting tales and not the authorial teller, it would be equally narrow to ignore all that an author might say of her experience of literary tradition. Yet to take an extract from an essay by any novelist and to apply it as a tool of mastery to whatever it may refer, is to commit what I term a citational fallacy. This does not mean misquoting the precursor, but rather, using citations from their work too literally. Woolf declares in an essay that *Daniel Deronda* lacks "vigour and directness." She considers the novel the product of a novelist whose powers were waning. Woolf’s statement of disappointment may hide the recognition that an experiment was being attempted, even if it failed. In other words, what an author claims about a particular work may belie the literary intentions behind the critical statement.

Speech act theory has drawn attention to utterances as being both "constative" and "performative:" the manner in which something is said is at odds with the apparent content. The innovator of the theory, J.L Austin, defined "constatives" as utterances which make statements of fact. In contrast, "performatives" are not concerned with the expressions which describe or inform; instead, they carry out a "performance" as they are enunciated. Examples consist of the act of promising, denying and making a contract. In chapter 1, I will examine some of the different contracts which can be established not just between different novels, but also between theories and narrative fictions. Statements made by an essay, theoretical text or fiction about another work may be odds to their apparent intention. In my chapter 4 and 5, the allegedly "weak" in *Daniel Deronda* will be explored as that which is carried, healed and nourished in *The Waves* (1931). Between the novels, an unwitting contract has been established. Eliot’s last novel is her most daring experiment; indeed, it can be analysed as
containing the seeds of modernism. *The Waves* takes modernism to its most cutting edge. Both novels are made of “waves,” scientifically, poetically and as adventures in identities which cease to function as such. “Waves” figure and disfigure the egos of the characters, who are beings ceaselessly becoming. My hypothesis is that *Gut Symmetries* is profoundly connected to Eliot’s novel through, in part, the intervention of *The Waves*. If two literary works are to become conversant and intimate with one another, then a third text may do more than negotiate. It may forge between two texts which have never “met,” a new friendship.

In chapter 2, I explore a preoccupation common to *Middlemarch* (1871-2), *Orlando* (1928) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). All feature narrative subjects who fall in love with myths, academic treatises, plays, poems and beloved characters too. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke’s marriage to Casaubon, the scholar who never completes his life-work, is but one fabula in a huge and complex study in provincial life, scientific discourse, vocation and ambition renounced. In *Middlemarch* the town, characters bear intolerable burdens. *Orlando*’s protagonist also bears the brunt of vocation. Beginning life as a man then undergoing an inexplicable and unexplained sex-change in the eighteenth century, Orlando is still potentially immortal after nearly four hundred years. She still writes his/her narrative poem “The Oak Tree.” Woolf’s novel tracks the journey of a protagonist who comes to lift the burden of vocation and the intimidation of literary influences. That sense of weight is even further lightened in *Sexing the Cherry*, a novel suspending within it many mise-en-scenes buoyed by zero gravity. The boy voyager Jordan, as well as his adopted mother Dog Woman, is a giant of Rabelaisian proportions. In Winterson’s novel, the magical daring of *Orlando* is taken to further extremes. *Sexing the Cherry*, however structurally distant from *Middlemarch*, shares with its grandparent work, a passion for myth and for actors who would quest after incommensurables. What comprises the stuff of dangerous dreaming in Eliot’s work is made into productive experimentation in that of Winterson. And thus the two novels make unlikely bedfellows. Together, all three novels can be studied as exercises in confronting literary heritages and lifting their burdens.

Each of the novels in my chapters encounter each other through the intervention of psychoanalytic and narrative theories, and
yet more literary works. Winterson remarks in her essays that “a writer’s style has in it many voices, many connections” (1995: 180). Her insight would testify to the importance of Shakespeare, Greek myths and drama, the discourses of science and importantly, the several voices of the psychoanalytic paradigm producing a fertility of connections between parties.

Here I want to emphasise that a paradigm will not be made synonymous with the concept of theoretical model. In his important book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962; 1970), Thomas S. Kuhn defines a paradigm as that which results from a major turn in thinking. Kuhn gives examples of opposing paradigms. The Ptolemaic system which regarded the earth as the centre of the universe gave way to Copernicus’ model that the earth moves around the sun (10-12). Aristotle’s mechanics was challenged by Newtonian optics. To this list I would add the movement from Paracelsus’ mysticism to that of empirical science. The opening section of Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries* (1997) introduces Paracelsus’ astrological notion that “As above, so below” (2). The novel explores not only these pre-Enlightenment paradigms, but brings them into dialogue with late twentieth century theories of modern physics. The colliding paradigms of mysticism and science function in aiding intimacies of influence which will be a crucial topic in my last chapter. Though Kuhn does not mention Freud or Darwin, the invention and discovery of the “unconscious” and theories of evolution would constitute examples of paradigms, as they over-turned the current world-views of their times. Kuhn’s notion of paradigm stipulates that it comprise a considerable achievement which attracts great social and cultural participation in its further development. Paradigms remain open-ended. As my chapter 1 explains, the *Intimacy of Influence* engages its narrative fictions with the paradigm of psychoanalysis, maintaining between the two an open and dynamic relationship which produces new knowledges.

The adjective “intimate” nuances the noun relevant to the terms of friendship. In “intimate” friendship, each party develops a profound knowledge of the other, even if this should lead to disagreement, or require a compromise of positions in the tradition of the Platonic dialogues. One forerunner example of this process is Plato’s *Phaedrus* in which both members of the dialogue shift position; each enables the
interlocutor the opportunity to re-produce the ideas and opinions of the other in a re-invented form.12

In a study challenging the philosophical notions that knowledge requires objectivity and autonomy, Lorraine Code develops the concept of "second personhood" to argue that knowledge evolves through friendships. From amongst an array of philosophers and theorists, she follows the work of Annette Baier and Sarah Ruddick (Code, 1991: chapter 3). According to Code's paraphrase of both, Baier's "second person" is one who is incomplete without another (1991: 82-87). Knowledge comes less through individual strides than dialogues between different "persons" whose relations to each other may be far from equal.

The first experience of second personhood comes from the relationship between parents and children. Structurally, these are not based on equality. Ruddick, for instance, regards "maternal thinking" as a potential for subjective development of "identification and distinction" (Code, 1991: 88). Code is less enthusiastic about this maternal model. It may, as she argues, fail to problematise the inequalities between mother as person and child as other. Code employs Aristotle for the use of a more feminist argument, to pose a model which is based on neither "maternal" nor "paternal" models but on friendship (98-101).

What Code admires in Aristotle's view, is the emphasis that friendship requires each party to have an intimate knowledge of the other and that this is based on "respect for the other's separateness and independence - his appropriately understood self-sufficiency" (Code, 1991: 99). Friendship as knowledge can involve both closeness and distance, growing from the dialectic between the two. Whereas, claims Code, a "family relationship persists, through manifold distortions and abuses" a "second person" way of knowing another relies on what is "careful, reciprocal, nonimperialistic" (105). Here, the intimacy of friendship may approach an ideal. Such ideality, however, finds concrete counterparts in and between the works of Eliot, Woolf and Winterson.

While I find Code's model valuable for assessing genealogies through which the texts endeavour to treat each other in a "careful" and "reciprocal" manner, I should like to qualify it with a tougher, less idealised version of second personhood. Strong friendships are not
squeamish. Disagreement, conflict, a damned good fight even, can modify the positions of the participants. Compromises can be equanimous. They can be uneasy. They might be all these yet also affectionate. Or rapturous. When the latter occurs, one text may break new pathways into another or considerably re-write a theoretical model.

One such theoretical model which is up for rewriting is psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic theories which are vital to the *Intimacy of Influence* have been inspired by Freud’s papers on transference, on the key processes of remembering, repeating and working-through, as well as his model of the Oedipus complex. A further and important inspiration has been the work of two feminist successors in the field. Judith Butler and Kaja Silverman have moved Freud’s ideas into other terrains, making them dynamic with the emerging intellectual practices of the nineties.

Of the concepts so inflected, a key notion which informs every chapter in my study is “traversal.” In the *OED*, this word defines the act of cutting “across” or “going through” or “crossing between” lines already established, thereby producing ones which have long lain in wait. Traversal, a topological metaphor, suggests that alternations, shifts and movements take place between already existing points, thereby forging new pathways. In psychoanalytic terms, traversal broadly describes a topographical and temporal interchange between texts; one party (or both) “remembers” the elements of the other, repeating the counterpart’s structures then re-shaping them. Psychoanalysis has stressed the importance of divulging the “contents” of the unconscious, of giving what has remained in darkness, the light of representation and signification. Thus traversal will become a crucial and dynamic model for studying how a literary text or theory can help its intimate to signify what it may have long repressed.

The *Intimacy of Influence* does not argue for already existing lines of transition between works; my aim is not to “prove” that inherent genealogies have been there all along. I am not here to extricate and mark out a tell-tale line of bones from that archaeological dig called English literature. Each chapter proposes a different thesis for what constitutes a dialogue between literary texts and their theoretical intimates. The discovery of the interconnections is heuristic.
novels invited into encounter may forge close ties, disagree, formulate distant friendships or may bond together with a profound passion.

Notes


2. Virginia Woolf (1983: 102) insists Shakespeare’s sister will the result of a team effort: “As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible.”

3. The approach to history I have just articulated finds a quite different exploration in Mieke Bal’s Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History (1999) where she structures the term “preposterous history.”

4. OED Vol. IV. All further references will be to this 1989 edition.

5. Cited in “George Eliot” (Barrett 1979: 156). Woolf traces a development from Eliot’s earlier work, exemplified by Mill on the Floss (1860) to the more “mature” Middlemarch (1871-2). Woolf notes that the “world of fields and farms no longer contents” Eliot in the writing of her fiction. The implication tucked between the prose is that Eliot graduated from confessional type reminiscences in the making of her fiction to a fictional study reaching beyond those concerns dealing with the “mist of recollection” (156).


7. Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (1997) sets out a rigorous definition of the term “focalizor” and “focalization” (144-159) in order to eradicate the various confusions produced by terms such as “point of view.” Bal states that “focalization is the relationship between the ‘vision,’ the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (146). Bal makes a distinction between the act of focalizing and the events which take place in the fabula, that is, the points of plot which make the narrative regardless of who is cognisant of them. Bal uses the example of memory as means of describing a “special case of focalization” (147). The ‘story’ a person remembers does not necessarily have to be the one experienced. This predicament becomes particularly marked in the case of trauma victims. I will deal with this aspect more closely in my chapters 2 and 5. But following Bal, it is important to emphasise here that memory’s “present” time strategy
of reconstructing a past event (fabula) relies on focalization. Bal notes that "memory is an act of ‘vision’ of the past but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory" (147).

8 Woolf’s short article on George Eliot appeared in the Daily Herald, March 9, 1921. Entitled “George Eliot,” it can be found in McNeillie 1988: 293-294.


10 In The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages (1983), Felman makes an analysis of promises, amongst the many speech acts with which Don Juan peddles his erotic wares. See also Mary Louis Pratt, Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse (1977) for a study of how speech act theory can be applied to poetics.

11 Thomas S. Kuhn, “The Route to Normal Science” (1970: 23-34) gives a definition of what constitutes a paradigm and how a shift from one dominant paradigm to another causes what Kuhn terms a “scientific revolution” (12). According to him, the knowledge revealed by Newtonian Optics was key in causing such a revolution, producing as it did, theories of matter, particularly the theory of “corpuscles.”

12 See Plato, Phaedrus and Letter VII and VIII (1973) for an example of dialogues. Two parties begin with opposed arguments which they then modulate to achieve a degree of agreement or an agreement to disagree.