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

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Shakespeare’s Sisters Go Back to the Future:  
Conclusion

In the closing remarks of her influential “Women and Fiction” (1929), Woolf itemises strategies for improving novels authored by women (Barrett 1979: 43-52). She predicts a time when literature by women can do more than come just from the “heart,” but also serve the needs of “art” (51). Woolf looks forward to the novel being more than a “dumping-ground for the personal emotions” (51). To remedy the risk of the novel becoming that, Woolf encourages women writers to practice what she terms the “sophisticated arts;” these involve the “writing of essays and criticism, of history and biography” (52). On the same page she includes within this list “poetry” (52). Woolf invokes the woman writer to become multi-disciplinary. This practice may now be taken for granted by some men and women of letters, though even now, novelists who produce scholarly studies and essays in cultural analysis are in the minority.

In line with Woolf’s recommendation, my study has emphasised the power of fictions to act as critical discourses which can elaborate the theoretical problems of psychoanalysis and cultural studies. Symmetrically, I have studied the fictional dimension of theories, and how this is a vital element in making those theories open to friendships with other works of criticism. The symmetrical leaking of theories and fictions into one another, was my primary point of method. Without narrative potential, a theory may be incapable of intimacy. Intimacies between novels can generate a current which binds together fictions and theories in new combinations.

*The Waves* and *Mrs. Dalloway* I have examined as prose poems exploring maternal spaces which are then traversed to produce a heroic and signifying response to the experience of trauma. In *The Waves*, the lady writing offers an imago to be shattered and re-invented as Bernard makes and remakes “himself.” The cameo narrative of the lady writing is a miniature essay in female authorship as a subjective negotiation between the imago of female identity and the relinquishing of her. By possessing her then letting her go, the repeated cycle of projection and working-through which constitutes traversal, produces literary meanings too long eclipsed. *Mrs. Dalloway* poetically invents mythical
spaces within the clock-work capitalism of modernity and produces a lyrical essay on trauma. *Orlando* is a biographical essay and a poetical analysis of gender and writing.

Winterson's novels have done more than paid homage to those of Woolf. The inheritor texts have continued literary experiments begun but not completed. The web-footed Villanelle, somewhere between woman and man, footnotes Orlando but takes him/her into a postmodern terrain where the historical is cross-fertilised with the fairy-tale. *The Passion*’s mythical and magical spaces combine the sorcery of *Orlando* with the prehistorical ambitions of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The goal of re-telling myths has its precedent in *Middlemarch*, a commodious essay in the myths of fiction and the fictionality of myths, predicting ahead of its time, Freud’s famous Oedipal model. 1 *Daniel Deronda* not only predicts but takes up the torch of modernism. Woolf’s novels seize this torch and run with it. Like *Gut Symmetries* and *The Passion*, *Sexing the Cherry* is intimate with the myth-making and scientific intelligence of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, as well as the theoretical exuberance of *Orlando* and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The quest for the achievement of originality in each of the novels which have driven this study, has not been produced through a determination simply to “do something new.” Without a revisionary homage to the fictional, theoretical and paradigmatic heritages of a literary tradition, no fresh literary works can come into the world. Winterson emphasises how important it is that writers attend to their medium rather than just use language as a vehicle for story-telling (1995: 175-177). She asserts that “if prose-fiction is to survive it will have to do more than tell a story” (175). Yet this easy distinction between the “story” and the “do more,” whatever that may involve, sets up a distinction which falls short of the point put forward in my study.

The intimacy of influence has been elaborated as working by means of traversal. This term indicates an interaction between two texts in which affects are transformed into meaning. To take up Woolf’s comments from “Women and Fiction,” I would suggest that fiction-writers have greater opportunities for traversing their tradition if they do more than tell a story and do more than experiment with language. This matter I have responded to throughout this study by setting up two terms - narrative and theoretical fictions, and by consid-
ering their potential as intimates. I have trodden the unstable zone between and through this binary opposition and uncovered the interactions between the two “oppositions.” Both terms are intimate with one another and take turns to do the work of the other. As Deronda explains to his mother, he has endeavoured to develop an “understanding of those who differ from myself” (Book VII, Chapter 51, 692). Thinking in someone else’s paradigm, taking on modern physics as a way of understanding the world if you are not familiar with the domain, requires sympathising with an intellectual framework which is challengingly different. Narrative fiction can draw readers into identifying with characters and ideas whom they might otherwise never encounter. It is not just characters and stories, or any mode of “ism” with which narrative/theoretical fictions can make us intimate.

Winterson may claim that telling “stories” is not enough. But perhaps her comments underestimate the degree to which an experiment with language and thinking changes narrative design. Indeed, if an encounter with stories and characters affords only an emoting experience but does not shift the reading subject’s shaping of a paradigm, then traversal does not take place. Yet equally well, if a narrative pursues only the theoretical and engages no sympathy, nor addresses emotion, then likewise, no traversal has taken place, for no affects have been re-woven through an ever-shifting web.

This web need not overwhelm the up-coming generation of creators who take account of fathers and think back through their mothers. Bloom would disagree with me.

The precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded (1973: 154).

I would concur that ancestors can be intimidating. If intimacy not anxiety is the dominant process, it will still be an activity involving degrees of conflict. However, if the upcoming generation of texts can turn their precursors’ influences into friends who are sparring partners, the “texts” being neither objects of excessive idealisation nor envy, but companions with whom to debate and disagree, then anxiety can give way to intimacy. The history of artistic forms may indeed, to recall Bal’s term, be “preposterous.” Shakespeare’s sister never existed to
anyone’s knowledge, except as Woolf’s hypothetical model for the woman writer to come.

After a twentieth century in which knowledges and artistic practices have become so specialised, where it is uncommon for scientists and the technically minded to write prose poetry or for academics to be practising artists, a new epoch may be dawning. Narrative forms appeal to wide audiences through film, television and the exploding and expanding presence of interactive media. Novels are a fertile ground for film-makers. Not only has Winterson written two screenplays of her own, but poets such as Maya Angelou have turned to film-making. The various media, including literary forms, discover all sorts of connecting routes with each other. As these forms take part in the spirit of postmodern hybridisation, the web becomes an incandescent tissue of inter-disciplinarities. The literary tradition and the intimacies which it offers, have many pathways for survival.

In a modest millennial prophecy of my own, I suggest that there will be no single Shakespeare’s sister. There will be many of them. They will be truly Renaissance women because they will practice in more than one genre. The postmodern novel or film might be accompanied by another “version” of the story on the Internet, that most global of webs. After all, Freud’s term the “theoretical fiction” refers to a technical, optical apparatus which offers a metaphor for the psyche. The term comes from the Interpretation of Dreams which, this year, is one hundred years old. Shakespeare’s sisters may narrate and theorise in increasingly technological forms. This need not spell the death of a literary tradition but an intimacy between genres and disciplines which can ensure the survival of the intimacies of influence.

Those who practice in more than one field may produce new and composite domains. As they do, they will explore untested boundaries of intimacy between fictions theoretical and narrative, continuing the work of traversal. As these practitioners do so, they will be producing a new literary mode. Turning, turning in the widening web of postmodernism is its successor for the next century. For this inheritor, I leave you with a newly coined term: “Renaissance modernism.”
Notes

1. The date of publication for Eliot's *Middlemarch* is 1871-72. The publication date of Freud's first major work, *A Project Towards a Scientific Psychology* is 1895.

2. Winterson wrote a screenplay *Oranges Aren't the Only Fruit* (Beeban Kidron: 1990) as a three-part television drama and an original screenplay entitled *Great Moments in Aviation* (1994). Maya Angelou directed her first feature *Down in Delta* (1998); she is also an actress and screenwriter.