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**“To write is always to rave a little”: the hallucinatory point of view
in Elizabeth Bowen’s and Virginia Woolf’s writing.**

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This paper aims to explore the narrative and epistemological implications of the concept of hallucination as presented in Woolf's and Bowen's writing, and to suggest both the similarities and the differences in the two authors' positions on this theme. In both authors, I will argue, the

subject's experience of an altered point of view proves to be connected to a process of metamorphosis in the act of perception which opens the way to a transformation in the subject's interpretation of reality. More poignantly to my argument, this process of metamorphosis in the subject's relation with reality proves to be closely related to both Woolf's and Bowen's conceptions of the act the writing.

In a 1960 essay, Elizabeth Bowen looks back at the impressions cast on her by her reading of Woolf's *Orlando* and her remarks focus on Woolf's rare ability to transform reality by means of her particular point of view:

There is a touch of hallucination about "reality"; creative Orlando was right, so was his-her creator. Virginia Woolf's vision conferred strangeness, momentarily, on all it fell on. [...] The bus, the lamp-post, the teacup – how formidable she found them, everyday things! (46)

Bowen's comments on *Orlando* shed light on one of the core issues of the 1928 novel, and connect it to Woolf's personality. Though presenting several more immediate features, such as the fantastic adventures and the change of sex of its main character, *Orlando* is

indeed a novel which subtly and ironically concentrates on the experience of perceptual alteration. The main character is portrayed as a figure who lives in a separate and personal dimension, and this is directly connected to his/her different way of looking at things, which makes the people around him/her perceive how Orlando “does not do the things for the sake of doing; nor looks for looking’s sake [...] but sees something else” (92). In several passages of the novel^[1], the character experiences moments of ecstatic revelation and loses consciousness in deep meditations which transform his/her linear act of thinking into an almost mystical state of contemplation. These transgressions of the limits of codified perception also alter the conventional modalities of visual apprehension, and leads the subject to experience the overlapping and interchange between dream and reality, phenomenal sight and abstract insight: “he opened his eyes, which had been wide opened all the time, but had seen only thoughts” (64). A further example of Woolf's exploration of the boundaries between reality and the imagination in this text is her employment of the term *phantasmagoria*, which appears in *Orlando* when the main character acknowledges the impossibility of coherently reconciling the contradictory fragments of her life: “What a phantasmagoria the mind is! And meeting-place of dissemblables!” (113). Woolf's use of this term is able here to open a range of allusions, not only for the etymology of the word, which refers to the meeting-place

("agorà") of both real and fantastic images ("phantasma"), but also for the subtle optical implications present in the pre-cinematic device known as "phantasmagoria". The effect of illusion, the alteration of real distances and proportions, the metamorphosis of figures, made the phantasmagoria a dream-like experience, a reproduction of the unexplained visual connections of the oneiric world.^[2] In the quotation from *Orlando*, the phantasmagoria serves thus not only as a metaphor suggesting the multitude of elements active in the mind, but also as an image alluding to the subject's position in optical experience. Similar to the modality of fruition which characterized the magic lanterns shows (and later cinema),^[3] the subject's exploration of his own consciousness is here optically portrayed by Woolf as an experience dominated by the incessant movement of the perceived elements and by the overlapping of reality and fantasy. Images are not perceived as static, but rather as perpetually moving, disappearing and transforming, and the subject's gaze is able to explore the borders between visible and invisible, reality and insight. Significantly, Woolf refers to the *phantasmagoria* when alluding to the subject's inward-directed gaze, thus emphasizing how human consciousness cannot be considered as an objective datum, and, consequently, it cannot be entirely understood nor represented.

As Bowen suggests, *Orlando*'s "touch of hallucination" is inextricably intertwined with the character's artistic activity (the writing and re-writing

of the poem "The Oak Tree") and, in this light, Bowen transforms her observations on *Orlando* into a meditation on Woolf's process of writing. Woolf's ability to transfigure material, everyday objects, and to bring, as we read in *To the Lighthouse*, ordinary and extraordinary experience on the same level^[4], thus indicates how perceptual alteration can be read as the starting point of a process of questioning and de-construction of reality which eventually culminates in the *different* reality of the work of art.^[5] As underlined by the twentieth Century readings of the Aristotelian principle of *mimesis*^[6], the artistic process can be conceived in terms of dynamic recreation of reality, rather than as a faithful and static act of replication. The distortion conveyed by moments of hallucination can thus be considered a crucial component of the artistic creation, when this is conceived as a process which primarily involves a questioning of reality and a consequent de-construction of the categories conventionally defining perception and knowledge.

In the *Preface* to her short story *Encounters*, Elizabeth Bowen recalls her moments of inspiration in terms which are similar to her description of Woolf's creative attitude:

The room, the position of the window, the convulsive and anxious grating of my chair on the board floor were hyper – significant for me: they

were sensuous witnesses to my crossing the margin
of a hallucinatory world (68).

Inspiration is understood by Bowen as an almost transcendental experience, in which cyclic and repetitive time, together with the visual and mental transfiguration of objects, keep the subject oscillating on the threshold between reality and a different world. In Bowen's words, this perceptual transformation leads the subject to endow the surrounding reality with a hyper-significance, thus making it lose its referential significance and be subjected to a process of de-construction and re-definition. In this sense, the hallucinatory point of view proves to act as the initial step for that process of transformation of reality which opens the way to the act of artistic creation.

In Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, this notion of the act of writing as implying an altering and distorting process emerges when the writer St Quentin states that "nothing arrives on paper as it started, and so much arrives that never started at all. To write is always to rave a little" (1962, 10). It is however essential to situate in its context the reported quotation in order better to understand Bowen's multi-levelled position on the *raving* quality of the act of writing. *The Death of the Heart* is centred on the process of loss of innocence faced by the young character of Portia, who experiences a strong contraposition between reality and

imagination. This contrast is part of the character's background, which has led her to a particularly sensitive perception. Portia lives in a separate dimension, as emphasized by her communicative attitude, which is characterized by her love for silence and solitude and by the "distorting" (10) (as the character of Anna perceives it) writing of her diary. Nonetheless, Bowen's representation of Portia's seclusion from reality seems to involve a set of double-faceted implications: on the one hand, Portia embodies the extraordinarily sensitive and creative modality of perception of the (potential) artist, but, on the other, this same attitude gives rise to her dramatic confrontation with the real world, and culminates, at the end of the novel, in her shocking awareness of her delusions. Portia seems to embody the point of view of a pure subject, who, as the character of St Quentin remarks, proves to have not yet been tainted by social and communicative conventions:

I swear that each of us keeps, battened down inside himself, a sort of lunatic giant – impossible socially but full-scale – and that it's the knocking and battering we sometimes hear in each other that keeps our intercourses from utter banality. Portia hears these the whole time; in fact she hears nothing else. (310)

The “lunatic giant” embodying the most sincere and idealistic part of the subject is said to be “impossible socially”, since it prevents the subject’s confrontation, and compromise, with the real world, and, in this sense, Bowen seems to insist on the necessity to balance the fertile hallucinatory moments with a more objective point of view, in order to preserve both the subject’s creative potentialities and his adherence to the real world. In another passage in the novel, the narrator’s voice insists on the potential dangers implicit in the exit from proportioned perception and states the unavoidable need of a compromise: “we defend ourselves from the rooms, the scenes, the objects that make for hallucination, that make the senses start up and fasten upon a ghost [...] we cannot afford to suffer; we must live how we can” (148). In Bowen, hallucination thus proves to hold a double significance and to indicate a double-directional process: as in Woolf, the altered point of view involves a perceptual transformation capable of stimulating the artistic process, but, at the same time, it also represents a dangerous experience, from which the subject must find his way back to the tangible world. In her essay on *Orlando*, Bowen remarks the “momentarily” strangeness conferred by the character to reality, and she equally insists, in *The Death of the Heart*, on the idea of a circumscribed act of raving in writing (“to write is always to rave a little”). This emphasis on the necessity for the

subject to limit his exposure to alteration thus seems to state the writer's simultaneous involvement with and distance from that distortion which implies both a creative re-construction of reality and a dangerous seclusion from it.

Bowen's insistence on the necessity of returning to proportion and to the tangible world is also mirrored in the writer's modality of organizing her narrative structures, whose solid and well-structured forms reveal Bowen's work on a type of writing which does not aim at leaving reality behind. This is particularly evident in Bowen's representations of consciousness, wherein the writer avoids, if not in limited passages, direct expression, and chooses instead to convey the characters' thoughts via the mediation of omniscient narrators. In *The Death of the Heart*, the only narrative device which expresses Portia's direct thought is the insertion of two sections reporting the character's diary. Though traditionally perceived as a spontaneous report of the subject's inner life, the diary represents in fact an effort of rationalization both on the linguistic and on the temporal level (Blanchot, 252): the temporal rules which shape the writing of the diary offer a frame to the subject's mental experience, thus making this form unapt to represent the a-temporal and pre-linguistic thoughts which find instead expression in the stream of consciousness techniques.^[7] By avoiding to re-create the most irrational forces active in consciousness, and by framing them instead into ordered and reticent

narrative structure, Bowen thus seems simultaneously to investigate and to attempt to restrain the potentially disruptive power of the subject's unconscious.

On the contrary, in her experimental employment of the stream of consciousness techniques, Woolf focuses on the pre-conscious and pre-linguistic aspects of the act of communication. The work in which Woolf more overtly confronts the theme of perceptual alteration is her 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which the character of Septimus Smith gives voice to a dramatic state of exit from the boundaries of reality. However, similar to the case of Bowen, Woolf's portrayal of a hallucinatory point of view does not lead to definitive and univocal interpretations, but rather underlines the ambiguous and contradictory aspects present in the experience of perceptual alteration. Septimus's distorted relation with external reality is indeed made more complex and ambiguous by the direct confrontation, present in the novel, between this character and that of Clarissa Dalloway. As Woolf stated in her diary while conceiving the novel, her intention was to: "adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side", (II, 207) and the parallel between the two characters is crucial for understanding Woolf's multi-layered position on the experience of *insanity*.^[8] Septimus and Clarissa seem to represent less two opposite experiences, but rather two different and complementary aspects of the mind, thus alluding to

the co-presence and interchange of hallucination and rationality both in the perceptual and in the creative process. The several elements linking the two characters throughout the novel suggest that the differences and the similarities between Clarissa and Septimus can be read as portraying an internal division which hints to the complex and contradictory elements composing each single mind. In this sense, *sanity* and *insanity* are conceived less as dichotomistically separated, but rather as interrelated, also fostering interpretation of the “hallucinatory” perception which do not simply and negatively categorize it in terms of madness and illness, but rather as deeply sensitive and meaningful approaches to reality. As Woolf will remark a few years later in the essay “On Being Ill”, any perceptual alteration, even the one caused by a light temperature, proves significant for the subject, insofar as it allows him to perceive reality as distant and unreal, and language as freed from its pre-defined usage and conventions: “in illness words seem to possess a mystical quality. We grasp what is behind their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause” (50).

Furthermore, in *Mrs. Dalloway* Septimus's distortion of reality embodies the dramatic experience of a subject irreversibly isolated and tormented, but the character of Clarissa Dalloway suffers on her turn the limitations imposed on her by her reasonable and restrained perception.

Both in *Mrs. Dalloway* and in *The Death of the Heart*, the presence of insanity (understood as detachment from and redefinition of reality) thus brings the subject to be confronted with processes of apprehension and communication which are freed from the habitual and conventional rules of thoughts and linguistic organization. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the chief example of the confrontation between the limits of both sane and insane perception, and of the interchange between the two, are Clarissa Dalloway's meditations on communication when informed of Septimus's death: "Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (202). Communication is in fact the main function altered in Septimus because of his hallucinatory state ("communication is health" (103-104) are the doctor's words echoing in his mind), as emphasised in the famous episode of the motorcar, in which his perceptual and communicative isolation dramatically emerges:

The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to

the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose? (17-18)

The petrifying feeling, the sense of an incumbent threat, the fluctuation of the surrounding reality all determine in the character the sense of an overwhelming loss of meaning which exponentially increases the gulf separating Septimus's subjective perception from the objective act of apprehension. Similar to this, in the third section of *To the Lighthouse* the painter Lily Briscoe experiences an intense sense of emptiness and unfamiliarity, raised in her by the painful loss of her friends. This leads the character to a process of self-questioning and to a temporary loss of meaning which are however able to activate in Lily those transgression of the usual patterns of perception which will later stimulate her to bring her creative process to completion. In Septimus instead, the feeling of meaninglessness seems to mark a more definitive process of seclusion from the real world. This is particularly evident in the scene in which the character looks at the advertisement traced in the sky by an aeroplane, and operates a process of linguistic de-construction which goes along with an amplification of both the visual and the acoustic perception:

“K...R...” said the nursemaid. And Septimus heard her say “Kay Arr” close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. (25-26)

The character has here entered a different signifying system, in which language loses its communicative function and operates exclusively at the supra-semantic and performative levels. As the character of Doctor Bradshaw remarks on Septimus’s illness, in a passage which underlines Woolf’s caustic portrayal of this figure in the book: “He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind. A very serious symptom to be noted on the card” (106). Septimus’s alteration thus implies the experience of an exit from the conventional rules of perception and communication and the access to a hyper-significant dimension, but this process of separation from reality is not transformed, as in *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*, into that act of re-creation inherent in the work of art, but instead determines the tragic destiny of the character.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the character of Septimus not only functions as the embodiment of the dramatic implications of an altered and hyper-

significant perception, but also acquires a crucial narrative role. The previous mentioned quotation from Woolf's diary offers an illuminating insight in the narrative intentions of the author, insofar as it reveals Woolf's shift to her innovative "tunnelling process" (*The Diary*, II, 272), there exemplified by the expression "the world seen by". The narrative point of view is positioned inside the characters' consciousnesses, and Septimus's presence in *Mrs. Dalloway* adds several meaningful implications to Woolf's narrative choice. The moments of hallucination experienced by this character in *Mrs. Dalloway* are able to make the boundaries between "reality" and "unreality" blur, thus establishing a void of reference which allows the act of writing to function as a pure performative act.^[9] This is achieved by means of Woolf's complex narrative representation of consciousness, which, by combining and alternating different techniques, succeeds in providing a flexible and ever-open image of the mental processes. Both the frequent and ambiguous overlapping of the characters' and the narrator's voice and the shift of the narrative focus from one consciousness to another,^[10] are able to question the nature itself of reality and to reduce, as previously argued, the distinction between "sane" and "insane" perception. Furthermore, the character of Septimus and his process of disarticulation and internal fragmentation of language allow Woolf to focus less on the rational aspects of language, but rather on the process which sees the transformation of sensations into

words. In this sense, Woolf's techniques of representation of consciousness portray the self less as a static and fixed datum, but rather as a dynamic and ever-moving process which shows how the subject, in Lacanian terms, acquires existence through language. The linguistic processes reproduced by Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* thus focus on an almost impersonal level of language in which, beyond the rules of communication, words are shown in their potentiality to connect the subject to the most pure, and also most frightening, aspects of human life:

these poetic words exclude men: there is no humanism of modern poetry. This erect discourse is full of terror, that is to say, it relates man not to other men, but to the most inhuman images in Nature: heaven, hell, holiness, childhood, madness, pure matter, etc. (Barthes, 50)

The hallucinatory experience thus proves, both in Bowen and in Woolf, to imply the re-discussion of the notion of reality itself and, consequently, to undermine and redefine the concept of representation. Though employing different techniques, both authors portray the experience of the exit from proportioned perception as an

essential part of the artistic process, and this powerful metaphor of creation also implies the idea that this alteration, if not partially recomposed in the work of art, can determine the subject's disintegration. Finally, in both Woolf and Bowen, the representation of a pure and altered subject serves as an allegory of the limits of communication and, consequently, of representation. In both authors the insertion of a hallucinatory point of view in narrative functions as a device able to suggest how blurred are, in the subject's mind, the boundaries between "sanity" and "insanity", reality and imagination. In this sense, Woolf's and Bowen's representations of consciousness seem both to challenge the limits of communication and, simultaneously, to show awareness of how consciousness evades complete "transparency"^[11] and representation. Woolf's "tunnelling process", as well as Bowen's subtle reticence in the direct representation of consciousness, despite being two apparently opposite narrative techniques, share a similar re-definition of the notion of reality, which implies both the attempt to portray consciousness and the awareness of the ever unsolved mystery at the core of it.

Notes:

[1] See for instance *Orlando*, 59-60.

[2] See Milner, *La fantasmagorie: essai sur l'optique fantastique*.

[3] See Woolf, "The Cinema", 54-59.

[4] "One wanted, she thought, dipping her brush deliberately, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy." (*To the Lighthouse*, 296).

[5] Maud Ellman sees a significant difference between Woolf's and Bowen's relation with objects: "In Woolf's novels, objects serve as springboards for flights of consciousness – a technique that emphasize the superiority of mind to matter [...] In Bowen, on the contrary, things behave like thoughts and thoughts like things, thus impugning the supremacy of consciousness." (5).

[6] See Hämburger, *The Logic of Literature*. Paul Ricoeur quotes Hämburger and proves to share a similar interpretation of the concept of mimesis: Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, I, 34. See also Cohn, *Transparent Minds–Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* and *The Distinction of Fiction*.

[7] I follow here Humphrey's definition of the category of the stream of consciousness as a form which, regardless the different techniques employed, is characterized by its concern "with those levels of

consciousness that are more inchoate than rational verbalization”,
(2).

[8] Woolf's position on the issue of insanity, as well as her skeptical portrayal of the figure of Doctor Bradshaw in this novel, was of course widely influenced by her own experience; see Lee, 175-203.

[9] “There are signs which refer to nothing, which stop referring, or rather which suddenly and ostentatiously start referring in the void. In a fictional text, there is a doubling of the void, but this doubling, this step too far towards the void, corrodes the whole system of referencing, and with it the system of enunciation constructed, symmetrically, upstream of the discourse. It is impossible to restore the situation by claiming that the hallucinations do not refer to an absence, but to a psychic event, for it is just such psychic events that *Mrs. Dalloway* is all about.” (Ferrer, 37).

[10] See Cohn's analysis of the different and interrelated techniques of representation of consciousness employed by Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*: 40-46.

[11] “Represented consciousness is not a “realistic reproduction” of the mind at work; it does not create “transparent minds”. The mind is never transparent, not even to “omniscient narrators”. Its contents are hypothetically reconstructed and represented in a language

sensitive to its various modes". Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences, Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, 211.

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