

Examining Authors, Discourse and Characters

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Abstract

*The contemporary debate on the Canon and on how writers, texts and readers are influenced by its alleged centrality and exclusiveness is enlarged with a discussion on intertextuality as processed at the level of three novels: **Wide Sargasso Sea** by Jean Rhys, **The Golden Notebook** by Doris Lessing and **Possession** by Antonia Susan Byatt. By studying the intertextual references within and outside these novels, the present paper aims at revealing the perspectives their authors share (or not) regarding canonical writings, concepts or techniques. The focus is placed on a comparative and contrastive analysis of the corpus in question with regard to Bakhtin's introductory terminology on intertextuality, which at some points overlaps the views of other critics on the same matter.*

Key words: dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia, intertextuality

The idea of intertextuality mainly derives from the concepts developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in two of his very influential works, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1982) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984). The former is basically a study of the novel with emphasis on novelistic discourse and its inner **dialogism**, while the latter studies Dostoevsky's literary creations from the viewpoint of the polyphonic novel.

The core of Bakhtin's ideology is the assumption that all utterances are dialogic, occurring in specific social situations as responses to previous utterances. With respect to the novel, the multiplicity of social voices, together with the links and relationships established between them, define the concept of **heteroglossia** which manifests itself through the authorial speech, the insertion of other genres, the speech of the narrators or of the characters, manifesting as an "encyclopaedia of all strata and forms of literary language" (Bakhtin 1982: 301). Additionally, heteroglossia is defined as "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of **double-voiced discourse**. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses

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simultaneously two different intentions" (Bakhtin 1982: 324). This aspect is one of the main characteristics of **the polyphonic novel** which is "constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses" (1984: 18). Though Bakhtin does not really concentrate on intertextuality, he provides, nonetheless, the internal scaffolding of the text onto which intertextual relationships may be built.

Dialogic utterances

So as to better understand the intertextuality underlining the three novels under discussion, the analysis will begin by uncovering the dialogic relationships between authors and their characters as outlined in Bakhtin's work. The critic argues that the language of each character does not only represent a point of view but it is an object of representation itself (1982: 49) so that one should not refer to language only but to images of language associated to each character and to particular social, historical and cultural contexts. The latter are linked to the concept of the chronotope defined by Bakhtin as "a mutual interaction between the world represented in the work and the world outside the work" (1982: 255).

A large variety of styles and typologies regarding the images of languages is to be found in the novelistic discourse of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is set in a nineteenth century British Colony (Jamaica). This specific chronotope leads to a mix of characters (consisting of English colonisers, Creoles and native population) and to an overall tense atmosphere, illustrated through the characters' particularities of language (but not only). For instance, Antoinette, though a Creole, speaks standard British English so that, at a linguistic level, there is no difference between her and the pure British characters. This is not true of the Jamaican Patois which characterises every native character in the novel: "Poison you? But look me trouble, the man crazy! She come to me and ask me for something to make you love her again and tell her no I don't meddle in that for béké. I tell her it's foolishness" (Rhys 2000: 99 [1]). The clash between the Creoles and the English is seemingly silent, while the conflict between the Creole and the African population is directly expressed in their speech. Filtering this situation through Bakhtin's inherent dialogism, one may say that the balance between the covert and the overt cultural clash reveals the author's intention of

foregrounding Antoinette's hybridity: she may look and speak English, but she behaves differently; she may live in Jamaica, but she does not share its inhabitants' culture and language.

Thus, from within both cultures, Antoinette fights back and fills the void created by her displacement with her own style and language. A woman and a Creole, she is the perfect embodiment of feminist and postcolonialist views since "women's lives within society, like the lives of colonial subjects, are inevitably fractured or divided. Seen as 'other', as mute, objectified and outside of discourse, the dominant male and dominant white culture, women subjects, along with colonial subjects, write within and yet against such an 'othering' process" (Allen 2000: 160). *Wide Sargasso Sea* calls attention to the dominating male and British society which, at a first glance, seems to empower Antoinette, forever silencing her through her being renamed Bertha and eventually driven mad. Since these events are presented in the second part, which is narrated by her husband, the overall impression remains that of Antoinette as the obedient 'other', wholly controlled by her spouse. However, one has to remark the fact that Antoinette resumes her narrative role in the third part so that her husband's account is framed by her words, which leads to a re-evaluation of power forces. What is more, at one point in Part Two, Antoinette intrudes in her husband's story, from within which she narrates two episodes: the one where she asks Christophine to help her win back her husband's love and the one describing the financial details of her arranged marriage. Though short, Antoinette's interference explains important events in the novel, which invalidate her husband's accusations of having been tricked into marriage and, later on, of having been poisoned by his wife. The fact that these essential moments are presented from Antoinette's perspective subverts the unnamed husband's domination, both as a narrator and as a man.

More importantly, this re-balancing of forces also occurs with regard to the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* which can be seen as an illustration of Edward Said's thesis with regard to culture and imperialism. The theorist looks upon the British novel as an innate extension of the concept of imperialism, as one of the means to convey and re-affirm the values and importance of British Empire:

[...] the novel, as a cultural artifact of bourgeois society, and imperialism are unthinkable without each other. Of all major literary

forms, the novel is the most recent, its emergence the most debatable, its occurrence the most Western, its normative pattern of social authority the most structured; imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible, I would argue, to read one without in some way dealing with the other. (Said 1993: 84)

While making a statement on the centrality and domination of British culture, Rhys is also undermining Brontë's novel for the same reasons; *Wide Sargasso Sea* becomes *Jane Eyre's* dialogic 'other', necessary to complete and re-organise the meaning of its forerunner. The paradox is that accepting the dialogic relationship between these two novels means that subversion works the other way too: if *Jane Eyre* is not complete without *Wide Sargasso Sea*, then neither is *Wide Sargasso Sea* without *Jane Eyre*. Moreover, accepting this idea implies that both novels are actually unfinished and open to further completions and further 'others'.

A similar pattern of language may be observed in *The Golden Notebook*, especially in the Black Notebook, where Anna recollects moments from Africa. The native characters speak English mixed with African words, so that the two worlds are instantaneously set apart: "You don't want to leave, baas?" (Lessing 1999: 140 [2]). This difference, however, is not as highlighted as in *Wide Sargasso Sea* because it serves not so much to enhance the cultural clash as to provide characters from a particular diegetic level with a specific identity. This becomes of interest the moment when different characters from different diegetic levels share these identities. The most obvious is Anna, recurrent in all the notebooks and in the framing novel "Free Women" as well: there is Anna writing the notebooks, Anna from Anna's memories, Anna from "Free Women", Ella (who is modelled on Anna's personality) and so on. Apart from behaviour, all these characters are connected by a certain word they all repeat, regardless of their name and diegetic level: "odd"; this appears more than fifty times in the novel, being typical of different characters. One could even state that what seem to be different stories are one and the same and what seem to be different characters are just as identical as the story they are acting in. This means that the form of the novel becomes more important than its content, while plot and characters are sent to the backstage as simple authorial strategies for an intricate and complicated mirror-game with different narrative patterns.

If the explicit content of the novel becomes a pretext for its experimental form, then the latter becomes in its turn a pretext for

discussing post-structuralist and psychoanalytic issues. Dialogism works, thus, more at the level of the narrative than at that of the characters. As such, the fragmented form is a means of illustrating the split self of the speaking subject, divided in as many narrative voices as narrative levels. Antoinette's attempt to unite and coordinate these multiple selves is rendered impossible in the final Golden Notebook, where chaos and the unconscious take over her universe. Accordingly, the narrative pattern is broken over and over again during Antoinette's lapse into the unconscious, leading to her finally understanding that the unconscious is limitless and cannot be subjected to logical organisation. The randomness of events in the golden notebook deconstructs any order that might have been induced by the previous organisation of the novel in different and seemingly separate notebooks.

As far as *Possession* is concerned, there are two diegetic levels, Victorian and contemporary, each with its own language particularities: metaphorically rich, sensuous, old-fashioned English on the one hand, and straightforward, abstract, sterile English on the other hand. What is striking in this case is the fact that each of these styles comes with a twist: certain topics and words chosen by the Victorian characters (in particular, Ash and LaMotte) betray a contemporary awareness of postmodernist theories while the academic concepts and terms contemporary characters use on a daily basis backfire in oblique authorial comments, either literary or social. As such, Ash's and LaMotte's letters, where they share ideas on the art of writing, on the power of imagination and on readers, become masked dissertations on contemporary literature in general; intertextuality is seen as "bringing to life, restoring in some sense to vitality, the whole vanished men of other times" (Byatt 1990: 158 [3]) or "like the restoration of old Frescoes with new colours" (169) and literary creations are described by: "Such Tales men tell and have told - they do not differ, save in emphasis, here and there" (160).

Moreover, Roland's and Maud's vocabularies feature words and phrases such as "simulacrum" (210), "postmodern quotation" (211), "polymorphous perversity" (253) or "postmodernist mirror-game" which should suggest that they are highly prepared academics, whose clear understanding of the theories and concepts they are studying has led them to frequently use them in their daily language. However, on a second level, the choice of these words could be seen as directions towards the interpretation of the novel, being a means for the author to

get involved in the text of the novel “with almost no direct language of his own” (Bakhtin 1982: 47). To this end, the concept of the simulacrum invokes Baudrillard’s questioning representation and reality, which goes hand in hand with the fact that the events Maud and Roland are investigating are based on fake evidence; the postmodern quotation is exemplified by all the poems, diary entries and historic journals embedded in the novel, not to mention the fact that this expression is a very short definition of the concept of intertextuality; the polymorphous perversity makes a statement on the various forms and styles the novel adopts, while the postmodernist mirror-game becomes obvious in the regressive form of the novel’s many diegetic levels. Nevertheless, the use of these words also comments on contemporary academics’ empty and sometimes futile life; despite their being so well informed, their academic research remains a faulty endeavour, idea expressed in authorial intrusions such as the following: “international conferences on Victorian poetry, all of which took place in identical seminar rooms reached by car from identical hotels” (107). Dialogism favours, then, a discussion on the subverting role of the many authorial interventions hidden in-between the lines of this novel.

Polyphonic overlapping

While analysing Dostoevsky’s novels, Bakhtin observed the “polyphony of fully valid voices” (1984: 6) which “from the viewpoint of a consistently monologic visualization and understanding of the represented world [...] may seem a chaos” (8).

This concept may be best illustrated in *The Golden Notebook*; even though Anna is desperately trying to organise her life material, fragmentariness and chaos remain the only features that can help one understand her manner of writing and of representing her inner and external world. The dialogism connecting Doris Lessing-the author to her characters underlines the polyphonic play at work within this novel, meaning that while the author’s intentions may be recognised underneath Anna’s words (the reference here is to Anna, the main narrator of the novel), Anna’s intentions and views may be traced in the rest of the narrators’ speech. Apart from this, however, polyphony, as outlined by Bakhtin, does not seem to work as such in this novel. Every narrative voice and perspective, though seemingly independent, is nothing more than one of Anna’s/ Lessing’s various and multiple facets. It follows that dialogism actually undermines Bakhtin’s view according

to which the main heroes are “not only objects of authorial discourse, but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (1984: 7). Therefore, *The Golden Notebook* is a polyphonic novel to the extent to which the interpenetration of various narrative voices still occurs: an internal homodiegetic narrator in the notebooks – Anna Wulf, and several heterodiegetic narrators in “Free Women”, in “The Shadow of the Third” and in the short stories that appear within the novel. As far as the independence of these voices is concerned, one cannot argue in its favour because, at a closer look, Anna is to be found behind all other narrators: “Free Women” and “The Shadow of the Third”, for instance, are spin-offs of Anna’s notebooks. Moreover, even Saul’s short story is not as independent as proclaimed, since Saul only features in the final Golden Notebook and may very well be a figment of Anna’s imagination as she plunges into the depths of craziness and her unconscious.

This perspective is also strengthened by the narrative structure, where the intradiegetic narrator engenders multiple metadiegetic narrations reflected in the three nested novels. The moment it becomes obvious that *Free Women* is in fact born out of the experiences narrated in the notebooks, there is a shift of interpretation: Anna from the notebooks becomes the writer, while Anna in *Free Women* the narrated character. Thus, the end of the novel means a return to its beginning, though with a new perspective on the narrative technique used. While the reader gets so entangled in deciphering who narrates whom, he/ she may easily forget the single consciousness that subsumes all these extra, intra and metadiegetic narrators: Doris Lessing. Though far from identifying the writer Doris Lessing with the character Anna Wulf, it should be remarked that what Lessing does is fictionalise and fragment her *self* with the aim of commenting on the subjectivity and fictionality of art.

The same may be true regarding the other two novels, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Possession*. Though Rhys’ novel has three homodiegetic internal narrators (Antoinette, her husband, Grace Poole), each of whom with his/ her autonomous voice, the overall perspective is not necessarily that of not privileging one point of view over another but actually of giving force to one in particular, namely, Antoinette’s. *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins and ends with Antoinette acting as narrator and, what is more, she even interferes in Part Two, which is narrated by her unnamed husband: “I did not look up though I saw him at the window but rode on without thinking till I came to the rocks” (67). Thus,

the many rumours Antoinette's husband hears about his wife's family (which lead to him hating her) are easy to be recognised as rumours only by readers, since they have been previously introduced to Antoinette's family and history in Part One. Even though she is driven to silence and oblivion towards the end of Part Two (being renamed Bertha and considered mad), Antoinette resumes her narrative role and power in the final part of the novel.

In *Possession*, polyphony is again used differently than its initial definition posits, because it combines two third-person narrators (the first one appears in the contemporary plot, reluctant to share all information to his readership, having Roland as focaliser; the second one, a traditional omniscient narrator, features in the flashbacks to the Victorian plot) with homodiegetic narrators in the letters and journal entries inserted within the novel. As a result, the story is built through the combination of all these voices, whose independence and autonomy is better established than in the previous two novels. Since neither narrative voice seems to be favoured in *Possession*, Bakhtin's concept of polyphony appears to echo Roland Barthes' questions at the beginning of his famous essay proclaiming the death of the author: "Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac, the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology?" (in Mathews, Sibisan 2003: 397). Barthes goes on and claims that neither of these is the case, that "as soon as a fact is narrated [...] the voice loses its origin, the author goes into his own death, writing begins" (2003: 397).

Nonetheless, this paper argues that meaning in a novel is to be found in the sum of all the voices identified by Barthes but in reversed order: the author as author and his literary beliefs, together with the author as individual and his life experiences are reflected in his/her choosing certain characters and certain contexts for these characters to act in. Accordingly, Byatt's own academic background is mirrored in her academic characters, while her admiration of Victorian poetry and suspicion towards some postmodernist exaggerations is illustrated by the double plot and specific literary commentaries which, more often than not, appear as masked authorial intrusions: "All *that* was the plot of Romance. He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously, a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him,

as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another" (425). The last part of this quote, which turns from a particular subject to a general one (implied by the use of the indefinite pronoun), cannot be still regarded as being Roland's since it obviously expands beyond the fictional borderlines of the novel. This is but one of the many instances where Roland is apparently the focaliser, but, in fact, the author steps in and takes advantage of this function to express personal views and perspectives.

Heteroglossic worlds

The dialogic structure of language and the polyphonic voices within these three novels represent the basis for the study of heteroglossia which illuminates the hybridization occurring at the level of discourse. This brings forward a discussion on authorial intentions refracted by the insertion of (non)artistic genres in the novels or by the parody issued through the dialogic nature of the narratological discourse or the characters' speech.

For instance, the letters introduced in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (mostly received by Antoinette's husband either from his father or from Antoinette's step brother, Daniel Cosway) enhance polyphony and uncertainty regarding the accuracy of the facts depicted in Part Two; the unnamed husband is turned into an unreliable narrator once he is flooded with different versions of the same story and he seems unable to choose or to realise which one is true (the reader has the same difficulty, which thus points to the author's intentions of making a statement on the subjective character of history making and representation). The controversial relationship between fiction and reality is further stressed by the Patois words and incantations and by the English poems inserted in the novel, which depict the care given to the construction of the fictional world: "The white cockroach she buy young man / The white cockroach she marry" (63). Fictionality is brought into question when one makes the connection to Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*; thus, real as it may seem, every event presented in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is converted into a well thought out authorial plan. The play with Antoinette's name does not only comment on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but on *Jane Eyre* as well, a word being enough to resume the author's perspective on both novels: "*Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*" (99, my emphasis). The dialogic nature of the word "marionette" may lead to various

interpretations: women in the nineteenth century were at the mercy of men, characters in a novel are puppets coordinated by a god-like author, readers are easy to manipulate if they only pay attention to the obvious meaning of a word or image.

Possession is similar to a mosaic as far as the styles and genres inserted in it are concerned. The most striking are the introductory poems of some chapters, poems which should add a touch of realism to the Victorian plot. However, they foreground the dialogic relationship between Randolph and LaMotte, on the one hand, and between Byatt-the author and the real Victorian poets, on the other hand. Each of these poems serves to anticipate, to emphasise several aspects in the novel and to give continuity to the overlapping of the Victorian and the contemporary plot, picturing the author's intrusions in the novel. One can observe the fact that heteroglossia is more developed at the level of the Victorian plot, reconstructed from all these narrative patterns, that, nevertheless, fail to give a thorough account of the events (these are rounded off by the two flashbacks where an omniscient narrator intervenes and completes the story). It is as if Byatt were trying to demonstrate the fact that regardless of the approach, history can never be fully accessed; one can only recreate it, but this does not guarantee truth or accuracy. The same goes for fiction: readers should always keep their options open because there can always be something more hidden in-between the lines. Though Byatt seems to argue against postmodernism by parodying critical overviews and academics, she uses metafiction and intertextuality to both acknowledge the merits of Victorian literature and to put into practice some of postmodernism's critical perspectives: returning to history, to narrative, questioning the relationship between fiction, history and representation, emphasising the textuality of history.

Finally, in *The Golden Notebook*, heteroglossia is found in the blending of two novels ("Free Women", "The Shadow of the Third"), reviews, summaries and film scripts of another novel ("Frontiers of War"), diary entries, letters, short stories and newspaper cuttings. The fictional world presented in *The Golden Notebook* is an eclectic one, all the events are inter-connected and, even at the end of the novel, the reader remains baffled and confused. Even so, the variety of styles and multitude of perspectives all combine to present a unified idea of the difficulties of writing, of its purpose and objectives. Though Anna has different roles within the novel, her main one is that of a writer, so that

her crises are the author's crises as well. Every regression in yet another diegetic level betrays the authorial tension behind that choice, the struggle to find a proper means to represent reality which is invoked by the attention to details, the minuteness with which the social atmosphere of War World II, communism and post-communism is recreated. Of course, the multi-layered plot and discourse foreground the fictionality of this very real universe and place the emphasis on the author's problematic task of blending fiction and reality.

Concluding lines

In setting out to analyse the functioning of intertextuality in these three novels, the present paper has brought forward the perspectives their authors have on other texts, whether classical or not. Resulting from the analysis carried out with emphasis on dialogism, polyphony and heteroglossia is that Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and Antonia Susan Byatt bring their contribution to the debate on the Canon both by experimenting and by obliquely commenting on the necessity to argue against or to reinforce the notion that the latter seems to be an exclusive and exclusivist literary Imposition.

Notes

[1] All future references to the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* are made to the 2000 edition; consequently, only the page numbers are indicated as in-text references.

[2] All future references to the novel *The Golden Notebook* are made to the 1999 edition; consequently, only the page numbers are indicated as in-text references.

[3] All future references from to novel *Possession* are made to the 1990 edition; consequently, only the page numbers are indicated as in-text references.

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