



The Literary Essay as Encomium in Virginia Woolf's "The Enchanted Organ"

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Abstract

This article proposes a rhetorical analysis of "The Enchanted Organ", a short essay by Virginia Woolf that reviews Anne Thackeray's collection of letters that was published after her death. In this review, Woolf portrays Anne Thackeray's character starting from extracts from the diary and letters that she wrote as part of her literary production. The argumentative nature of this essay can be studied by means of a rhetorical analysis that examines the operations of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*. The account of arguments and rhetorical figures that appears after the analysis of these operations results in an interpretation of presence that draws Anne Thackeray as a gentle figure that was content with simple things and that "was dancing to the music" of her writing. As a result, "The Enchanted Organ" can be read as an encomium that praises Thackeray's cheerful personality rather than her literary merits.

Keywords: literary essay, rhetorical analysis, *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, rhetorical presence, Virginia Woolf

1. Introduction

In her study of Virginia Woolf's journalist career, Leila Brosnan (1997, p. 95) explores the process experienced by the writer's press reviews when they turned into 'essays', after they were revised, collected and published in book format. As Woolf shows in her diary, she perceives the latter as literature rather than degraded journalistic writings. She compares the prestige bestowed on the essay throughout tradition with the task of reviewing, which is limited to contemporary authors and obeys to editorial constrictions. Only upon the publication of the two *Common Readers* by the Hogarth Press does Woolf consider herself an essayist, even if she continued writing for the press throughout all her life. Brosnan (1997, p. 101) uses the transition from bug to butterfly as an analogy that illustrates the changes suffered by Woolf's non-fiction. She explains that pieces that had been specially written for different journals and newspapers metamorphosed into 'essays' when they were included in a book. This author argues that this variation entails a different approach to the choice of essay or journalism as one same body of writing. Indeed, the expressive resources that characterise the style of her essays are already present in those humble reviews that she wrote for different journals and newspapers.

This is the case of "The Enchanted Organ", a short essay by Virginia Woolf that reviews *Letters of Anne Thackeray Ritchie* with the aim of praising the figure of her aunt, Anne Thackeray¹. The reference to the title appears in the first lines of the text when "one fine morning" is broken "by the sound of an organ and by the sight of a little girl who had escaped from her nurse and was dancing to the music". This musical quality, as I will show below, runs parallel to an enchanting personality that the reader will be able to perceive through the identification of arguments and rhetorical figures, and that will result in an interpretation of presence. Presence is a general rhetorical strategy that forms patterns whose effects can be both argumentative and artistic, and can help to define the expressive resources of this essay. Furthermore, the study of presence in this text can reveal the admiring tone that Woolf uses in this and other essays that are aimed at reviewing the life and works of an author. As a result, this essay can be also read as an encomium to Anne Thackeray. The encomium is founded upon the consensus of values and is part of the epideictic oratory, which is concerned with praise and blame, in contrast to deliberative oratory, which deals with advice on the best cause, and forensic oratory, which determines the facts that are in dispute (Aristotle, 1909, I.9); Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, pp. 47-51). As I seek to demonstrate below, Woolf tries to gain the good favour of her readers by depicting a generous portrait of the writer regardless of the literary value of the work reviewed.

In her reviewing practice, Woolf showed predilection for exploring the works and circumstances of both famous and little known women writers. She reformulates the traditional definition of the essay as 'expository', and rejects her contemporaries' conception of the critic as a privileged reader that tries to judge critical practice as an objective science. In this line, the essay represents for Woolf "the expression of personal opinion" (Woolf, 1992, p. 6), an aesthetic end in itself that should possess a flexible form capable of holding every aspect of human experience (Lojo, 2001, p. 78). In her assessment of women and their artistic endeavours, Woolf also prefers to portrait the 'histories' of different human constructions that embody the past at certain moments and for specific purposes (Cuddy-Keane, 1997, p. 62). In doing so, she can create imaginary scenarios in her reconstruction of a literary work or a person's historical background. The

creation of these scenes is part of her wish to explore the possibilities of the essay genre as regards to the continuity between memory and invention, and the contrast between objective and subjective truths. It is a practice that also disapproves of the conventional limits of historiography in its account and records of past events (Gualtieri, 2000b, p. 357; Saloman, 2012, p. 49). For example, in her portrait of "Lives of the Obscure", Woolf makes the following description of one of these obscure characters, Eleanor Ormerod, as if taken from one of her fiction works:

The youngest child, Eleanor, a little girl with a pale face, rather elongated features, and black hair, was left by herself in the drawing-room, a large sallow apartment with pillars, two chandeliers for some reason enclosed in holland bags, and several octagonal tables, some of inlaid wood and others of greenish malachite (Woolf, 1984, p. 123).

Following Montaigne, Woolf uses evocative passages and digressions as part of her argument. The French essayist did not follow the logical divisions of an argument into premises and conclusions, typical of a male education. He practised a circular method more associated with an oral tradition that Woolf recognised as a feminine form of writing, and as a vehicle that explored new ways in which women's unspoken voices could be expressed (Dusinberre, 1997, pp. 54-55). The dialogic nature so much present in Woolf's essay writing has connected her work, apart from Montaigne's tradition, with Bakhtin's dialogic (Gualtieri, 2000a, p. 16). Woolf has used his idea of the dialogic nature of writing to give a subjective and conversational character to her essayistic prose. In this extract, she agrees with the French essayist that:

Communication is health; communication is truth; communication is happiness. To share is our duty; to go down boldly and bring to light those hidden thoughts which are the most diseased; to conceal nothing; to pretend nothing; if we are ignorant to say so; if we love our friends to let them know it (1984, pp. 64-65).

Scholars have traditionally studied Woolf's non-fiction in relation to the major issues that I have just mentioned, like her preoccupation about women's professional and social condition, her interest in the essay as a genre or the subjective and conversational character of her texts. However, her essays can be also considered from a strictly rhetorical point of view as far as Woolf introduces appeals to her audience through a series of schemes and figures (Sánchez-Cuervo, 2004, 2010). In the rhetorical model of analysis, some principles that relate to the invention of arguments (*inventio*), their arrangement (*dispositio*) and expressive manifestation (*elocutio*) are useful in the construction of the modern essay, and can be applied to Woolf's non-fiction (Albadalejo, 1989; Arenas, 1997, p. 134). In this paper, I will first discuss the argumentative nature of the literary essay and justify the rhetorical approach. Then I will analyse "The Enchanted Organ" and focus on the levels of *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*, and examine the notion of presence so as to support the interpretation of this essay as encomium.

2. The argumentative nature of the literary essay

The literary essay is a paradigm of argumentative discourse even if it comprises other types of writing like the narrative, the descriptive and the expository. This discourse does not just offer the author's thoughts but it includes the participants in the communicative exchange. The subjective nature of the essay is shown through the topic personalisation which "may deal with the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder (Woolf, 1992, p. 6)", and whereby the writer establishes a dialogical relationship with the reader who takes into consideration his/her opinion. In this connection with the addressee, the justification of the essayist's thesis is carried out by means of arguments and affective proofs, not demonstrations. These features comprise a type of communicative action with which the essay writer can generate varied issues to concur with "a common reader" for whom "it may be worth while to write down a few [...] ideas and opinions [...]" (Woolf, 1984, pp. 1-2). This passage from "The Modern Essay" reveals Woolf's importance granted to the collective "we" in contrast to other more egocentric practices of the essay writing:

We have no longer the 'I' of Max and of Lamb, but the 'we' of public bodies and other sublime personages. It is 'we' who go to hear the *Magic Flute*; 'we' who ought to profit by it; 'we', in some mysterious way, who, in our corporate capacity, once upon a time actually wrote it. For music and literature and art must submit to the same generalisation or they will not carry to the farthest recesses of the Albert Hall [...] (1984, p. 220).

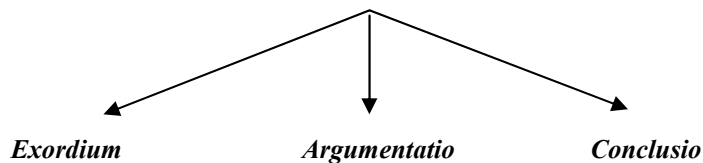
Although the essay has often lacked a rigorous method of study due to its imprecise nature, which has turned the stylistic analysis of this genre into something indefinite, based on an author's particular views or focused on specific aspects (see Keskinen, 1966; Fleischauer, 1975; Rygiel, 1984; Woolridge, 2012), its prevalent argumentative character is apt to be studied following a rhetorical model of analysis.

As a basic theoretical framework, Rhetoric can be seen as a general model of text production and as an instrument of textual analysis. In this respect, some rhetorical operations or *partes artis* can be identified: *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*. The inventive and dispositive levels are represented linguistically by means of the elocutive or verbal expression of the text. Through *inventio*, the author selects those elements that comprise the referent of discourse (Crosswhite, 2011, pp. 200-201). In argumentative discourses like the essay, the referent contains a dialectic component that allows the selection and construction of different types of arguments. In the essay under study, the main argument is the act/person interaction, which deals with the positive appraisal of Thackeray's life and works through a review of her letters. Through *dispositio*, the syntactic and semantic conceptual elements deriving from *inventio* are structured. The *partes orationis* or parts of the text are found in the *dispositio* level. In texts belonging to the argumentative genre

like the essay, four *partes orationis* are usually identified (Barthes, 1982, p. 66): *exordium*, *narratio/expositio*, *argumentatio* and *conclusio*.ⁱⁱ In the essay, the second and third parts especially contribute to the syntactic organisation of the text. Finally, by means of *elocutio*, the reader recognises the possible expressive devices used by the author. The essayist, when building this *elocutio* level, activates the aesthetic function with the *ornatus* device. He/she makes use of the expressive potential of language, but without abandoning the reader's persuasive intent and the communicability of the conceptual content. The component of implicit pleasure in the concept of elocutive *ornatus* has been responsible for the reader's aesthetic experience, and it is an important criterion for specifying the literariness of a text.

In Woolf's non-fiction texts, the *partes orationis* do not follow the natural order (*ordo naturalis*); they are usually transformed into an artificial order (*ordo artificialis*) that merges argumentation and narration.

Chart of the *partes orationis* in Woolf's essay



"The Enchanted Organ" follows this rhetorical pattern where *exordium*, *argumentatio* and *conclusio* can be recognised. These categories contain the rules that govern the logical and temporal order in which they appear in *dispositio*. Said categories also restrict the semantic elements derived from *inventio*.

3. Rhetorical Analysis of "The Enchanted Organ"

Woolf uses the phrase "the enchanted organ" to talk about the prose style of her aunt (Marcus, 1980, p.103), Lady Ritchie, starting from a review of her letters that were selected and edited by her daughter, Hester Ritchie. But the word "enchanted" can also express a double meaning that refers both to the charming personality that she showed during her life and the supernatural effect of Anne's trace after her death. The representation of this personality as reflected by her letters and diaries determines the act/person interaction as the main argument generated by *inventio*. Woolf also makes use of several rhetorical figures to emphasise the characterisation of Thackeray's personality in the *elocutio* level. I will make reference to these figures in the analysis of *dispositio*, where the following *partes orationis* can be found:

1.1 Exordium

It covers the first paragraph of the text. Woolf introduces an evocative passage as an introductory argument that introduces the character that she is reviewing: "The enormous respectability of Bloomsbury was broken one fine morning about 1840 by the sound of an organ and by the sight of a little girl who had escaped from her nurse and was dancing to the music. The child was Thackeray's elder daughter, Anne."

This is a first reference to the metaphor present in the title, "the enchanted organ", regarding the musicality of her literature. The essayist explains that "Miss Thackeray, or Mrs. Richmond Ritchie, or Lady Ritchie", detailing all the mentions that her name has borne, would try to live outside her Victorian constraints and, thanks to music, she could enjoy a happier existence, as reflected by *isocolon*, a rhetorical figure that repeats phrases of similar length and corresponding structure (Lanham, 1991, p. 93): "the music, at one so queer and so sweet, so merry and so plaintive, so dignified and so fantastical", is very present in the letters that Miss Thackeray wrote." The description of this music also reveals an *antithesis*, a rhetorical figure that contrasts ideas (Lanham, 1991, p. 16) and that advances the conflicting features of Thackeray's works, as reflected by the pairs of adjectives "so queer and so sweet, so merry and so plaintive, so dignified and so fantastical".

1.2 Argumentatio

"The Enchanted Organ" reflects an *ordo artificialis* in which *narratio* and *argumentatio* create a single discursive thread. As it happens with other Woolf's reviews, the main argument of this section is concerned with the act/person interaction, which portrays a person through the essayist's distinctive account of his/her works (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This scheme revises the reaction of the act upon the person. In the essay, the act has to do not only with the author's literary production, but also with that person's manners, speech, judgement and appearance, and how the combination of these aspects may affect our conception of that individual. All of the things known about such a person can be reflected in the essay, and allow Woolf to become absorbed by the tale of Anne's experiences, interpreting her actions against the newly established character (Fahnestock, 2005, pp. 219-20). Through a particular perusal of Thackeray's letters, Woolf offers passages that let the reader know certain aspects of the lady under examination. For example:

The guns are firing from Cremorne for the taking of Sebastopol, and there she sits scribbling brilliant nonsense in her diary about 'matches and fairy tales'. 'Brother Tomkins at the Oratory is starving and thrashing himself because he thinks it is a right', and Miss Thackeray is reading novels on Sunday morning 'because I do not think it is wrong'.

Woolf uses attributed quotations from the letters to point out specific moments of Thackeray's life, and how her way of life could influence her writing. The use of quotations on which she further comments can be interpreted as figures of communion that conjure Thackeray's presence throughout the text. Figures of communion are rhetorical devices that try to increase communion with the audience (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Graff and Winn, 2011). In the case of Thackeray's quotes from her letters, readers may feel identified with the simple things that she speaks about.

The essayist employs a metaphor to describe Lady Thackeray's historical period:

Seen through this temperament, at once so buoyant and so keen, the gloom of that famous age dissolves in an iridescent mist which lifts entirely to display radiant prospects of glittering spring, or clings to the monstrous shoulders of its prophets in many-tinted shreds.

This trope reflects again Thackeray's contradictory disposition that fluctuates between optimism when the "iridescent mist" "lifts entirely to display radiant prospects of glittering spring" or "clings to the monstrous shoulder of its prophets in many-tinted shreds". On religion, Woolf affirms that "all she knows is that it is her business to love her father and grandmother" and adds Anne's guileless, positive notion "that everybody is right and nobody knows anything". Another excerpt includes Anne as a witness to all the famous guests that visit her house, and whose social calls she transcribes both in her diary and her letters:

There are Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Spedding coming to dinner "as kind and queer and melancholy as men could be"; and Mrs. Norton "looking like a beautiful slow sphinx"; and Arthur Prinsep riding in Rotten Row with violets in his buttonhole [...] and Carlyle vociferating that a cheesemite might as well understand a cow as we human mites our marker's secrets; and George Eliot, with her steady little eyes, enunciating a prodigious sentence about building one's cottage in a valley, and the power of influence, and respecting one's work, which breaks off in the middle; and Herbert Spencer stopping a Beethoven sonata with "Thank you, I'm getting flushed"; and Ruskin asserting that "if you can draw a strawberry you can draw anything" [...].

The profusion of visitors is emphasised by the use of *polysyndeton*, a rhetorical figure of repetition that separates each phrase, in the example, by the "and" conjunction. In the record of this flow of guests, Woolf herself seems to appear as another character that Thackeray gathers in her writing, and whom she describes as:

[...] 'poor Miss Stephen', who has been transplanted to an island where 'everybody is either a genius, or a poet, or a painter, or peculiar in some way', ejaculates in despair, 'Is there nobody commonplace?'ⁱⁱⁱ

As a matter of fact, Woolf refers more than once to 'poor Miss Stephen' when she appears to embody 'the Puritanical conscience of the nineteenth century when confronted by a group of people who were obviously happy but not obviously bad'.

In the essay, Anne Thackeray is described as a happy person with a charming nature, but "it was a charm extremely difficult to analyse". We thus read brief sketches about Anne's life that lead us to think that she was not a very cautious person: "She said things that no human being could possibly mean; yet she meant them [...]". The repetition of "mean" and "meant" can be interpreted as *polyptoton*, a rhetorical figure in which a change of form and a form of meaning occur at the same time (Lanham, 1991, pp. 117; Fahnestock, 1999, pp. 168-177). The lexeme "mean" appears first as an infinitive following the modal verb "could" that conveys a tentative meaning, and then in the past tense to express certainty, stressing the fact that she truly stood for her words.

Woolf states once more Anne's seemingly inconsistent behaviour with a rhetorical question: "But if her random ways were charming, who, on the other hand, could be more practical, or see things, when she liked, precisely as they were?" The rhetorical question is another figure of communion that tries to increase the loyalty of the audience. In the example, Woolf attempts to make the reader aware that Thackeray's apparently unpredictable manners that she reproduces in her writings do not oppose a more rational attitude towards life. She thus confirms that "her most typical, and, indeed, inimitable sentences rope together a handful of swiftly gathered opposites". She also comments on her happy nature not only in her writings but also in her life when "with its deaths and its wars, her profound instinct for happiness had to exert itself to gild those grim faces golden, but it succeeded". In this fragment Woolf inserts another *polyptoton* that highlights Thackeray's predisposition to cheering the people that surrounded her. The verbal form "gild" and the adjective "golden" combine to offer a positive contrast to "those grim faces".

1.3 Conclusio

The *conclusio* section of the essay holds an imaginary evocation, a closing argument typical of the essay as regards to the engagement of readers' emotions. In consonance with the kind tone of her text, Woolf bestows some final words of admiration that suggest that Anne's cheerful temperament is worthier of being remembered and honoured than her literary effects:

For she was no visionary. Her happiness was a domestic flame, tried by many sorrows. And the music to which she dances, frail and fantastic, but true and distinct, will sound on outside our formidable residences when all the brass bands of literature have (let us hope) blared themselves to perdition.

In this last extract, Woolf offers a metaphor that identifies her happy character with "a domestic flame" that did not try to excel at any artistic venture. What is more, the final prediction about how she will be remembered refers not so much to her literary merits but to the melody that is present in her conception of life and literature. The importance granted to music is reinforced once more by *antithesis*, pointing out as in *exordium* the opposites that are part of Anne's existence. Music is thus defined as "frail and fantastic, but true and distinct", and has the power of surviving Thackeray's works.

4. Representation of presence

After the analysis of the inventive, dispositive and elocutive levels that can be recognised in “The Enchanted Organ”, I will demonstrate how the interactions of these different levels can produce a feeling of presence in Woolf’s readers that reinforces the reading of the essay as encomium. Presence surfaces as a “superordinate concept that relies on a synergy of first-order effects” (Gross and Dearin, 2003, p. 135) that are achieved at the level of invention, disposition and elocution.

In the text, the recognition of arguments and figures exemplify isolated first-order effects that get intertwined in the three levels of analysis that I have examined. First, *inventio* generates the argument by the person/act interaction. Woolf’s endeavour as a critic has made her focus her attention on the review of Anne Thackeray’s letters so that her epistolary work can draw gentle conclusions about her person. Secondly, arrangement or *dispositio* is evident in the text by the order of arguments and rhetorical figures. In this essay there is an expected order that begins with *exordium* and its initial scene that shows Anne Thackeray as a musical creature. *Exordium* thus fulfils the purpose of keeping its audience receptive and well-disposed before continuing the reading; the *argumentatio* section focuses on extracts of Anne’s letters and diaries that illustrate, in the present tense, the character’s thoughts and impressions about a variety of things. An excerpt like “‘I have just ordered’, she writes, «two shillings» worth of poetry for my fisherman ... we take little walks together, and he carries his shrimps and talks quite enchantingly”, unveils Thackeray’s habits. Quotes like this are the pretext for Woolf’s commentaries about the lady under revision in her development of the argument by the act/person interaction with which she includes personality traits that describe the letter writer’s lifestyle and way of thinking. The *conclusio* of the text presents an envisioning recreation as a final argument aimed at reminding the reader of a happy person that tried to live amid people and literature.

Dispositio can become persuasive when it fulfils several requirements (Gross and Dearin, 2003, pp. 99-113): (1) the likely order of the arguments that begins with *exordium* and is followed by *argumentatio* and *conclusio*. (2) The psychological progression of arguments and figures that derives from a selection of data in the present tense that brings Thackeray to life and offers a benevolent side of her personality. As a result, Woolf attracts her readers’ good favour. (3) The notion of self-reference that is related with a particular order of ideas that readers may associate with the reading of the Woolfian essay.

Thirdly, the stylistic features that are manifest in the *elocutio* level are subordinate to the grammatical representation of the essay. In “The Enchanted Organ”, I have mentioned the act/person interaction as the main scheme through which the exposition of Anne Thackeray’s quotes and further observations of the essayist contribute to characterising her figure. The aesthetic pleasure that could be derived from this reading is enhanced by the occurrence of several rhetorical figures encountered through the different levels of analysis. The title, for example, is a metaphor, a trope that defines Thackeray’s writing in a novel way. In *exordium* two rhetorical figures appear: *isocolon*, which repeats symmetrical structures creating a rhythmical pattern, and *antithesis*, which underlines the contrasts found in her writing; in *argumentatio* I encounter a second metaphor that portrays Thackeray’s view of her chronological period. The quotations from her letters and her diary and the inclusion of a rhetorical question when Woolf wonders about her aunt’s changeable behaviour are interpreted as figures of communion between the essayist and her audience. The occurrence of *polyptoton* as a rhetorical figure of repetition underscores, firstly, two different meanings attached to verb “mean” that suggest her aunt’s contradictory posture. Secondly, this rhetorical device reinforces the character’s liveliness that is able to “gild those grim faces golden”. The insistence on the idea of cheerfulness is pervasive through the text: the forms ‘happy’ and ‘happiness’ are repeated twice, ‘charm’ is found three times, and ‘charming’ twice; ‘merry’ and ‘merriment’ appear once. Other positive terms like “buoyant”, “iridescent”, “radiant”, “glittering”, “laughing”, “gaiety”, “glow”, and “twinkle” are scattered through the essay, emphasising Thackeray’s sense of contentment. Finally, the *conclusio* offers another metaphorical definition as she affirms that ‘her happiness was a domestic flame’ and the *antithesis* that is present to express the essence of her work as ‘frail and fantastic, but true and distinct’.

The isolated presentation of first-order presence combines to create a second-order effect, a superordinate presence (Gross and Dearin, 2003, p. 142) that reflects a gentle portrait of Anne Thackeray. The conjunction of all these elements serves the purpose of an argument that is intent on amplifying the figure of a compassionate being that was content with simple things and that above all enjoyed life and literature.

5. Conclusion

This study has applied a rhetorical model of analysis to “The Enchanted Organ”, one short essay written by Virginia Woolf that praises Anne Thackeray’s figure. I have considered the argumentative nature of the essay and have distinguished the rhetorical operations that can be recognised in the text: *inventio*, where I have identified the act-person interaction as the main argument; *dispositio*, where I have studied the *partes orationis*: *exordium*, *argumentatio* and *conclusio*; and *elocutio*, where I have pointed out the occurrence of different arguments and rhetorical figures in the linguistic representation of the text.

The recognition of arguments and figures in each level of analysis so as to specify the possible expressive elements represents first-order effects. The accumulative interaction of these effects is able to produce a superordinate presence by which the reader can be aware of the praise of the figure of Anne Thackeray. Woolf compliments the musical faculty of her writing, mentioning this value both in the introduction and the conclusion of the text. In addition, Anne’s writing is the pretext for showing a happy personality that yet possesses differing sides like those “merry and plaintive”, or

“frail and fantastic” qualities used to describe her work. As a result, “The Enchanted Organ” can be read as an encomium that highlights Anne Thackeray’s hopeful attitude towards life to the detriment of her literary output.

Further investigations can be carried out in order to represent presence in Woolf’s non-fiction as regards to the essayist’s portrayals of both the men and women that she reviewed in the hundreds of literary essays that she published for the press. Likewise, it would be interesting to find out whether the interpretation of presence always results in the praise of the character under study.

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Appendix

“The Enchanted Organ”

The enormous respectability of Bloomsbury was broken one fine morning about 1840 by the sound of an organ and by the sight of a little girl who had escaped from her nurse and was dancing to the music. The child was Thackeray's elder daughter, Anne. For the rest of her long life, through war and peace, calamity and prosperity, Miss Thackeray, or Mrs. Richmond Ritchie, or Lady Ritchie, was always escaping from the Victorian gloom and dancing to the strains of her own enchanted organ. The music, at one so queer and so sweet, so merry and so plaintive, so dignified and so fantastical, is to be heard very distinctly on every page of the present volume.

For Lady Ritchie was incapable at any stage of her career of striking an attitude or hiding a feeling. The guns are firing from Cremorne for the taking of Sebastopol, and there she sits scribbling brilliant nonsense in her diary about “matches and fairy tales”. “Brother Tomkins at the Oratory is starving and thrashing himself because he thinks it is a right”, and Miss Thackeray is reading novels on Sunday morning “because I do not think it is wrong”. As for religion and her grandmother's miseries and the clergyman's exhortations to follow “the one true way”, all she knows is that it is her business to love her father and grandmother, and for the rest she supposes characteristically “that everybody is right and nobody knows anything”.

Seen through this temperament, at once so buoyant and so keen, the gloom of that famous age dissolves in an iridescent mist which lifts entirely to display radiant prospects of glittering spring, or clings to the monstrous shoulders of its prophets in many-tinted shreds. There are Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Spedding coming to dinner “as kind and queer and melancholy as men could be”; and Mrs. Norton “looking like a beautiful slow sphinx”; and Arthur Prinsep riding in Rotten Row with violets in his buttonhole – “I like your violets very much,” said I, and of course they were instantly presented to me” – and Carlyle vociferating that a cheesemite might as well understand a cow as we human mites our marker's secrets; and George Eliot, with her steady little eyes, enunciating a prodigious sentence about building one's cottage in a valley, and the power of influence, and respecting one's work, which breaks off in the middle; and Herbert Spencer stopping a Beethoven sonata with “Thank you, I'm getting flushed”; and Ruskin asserting that “if you can draw a strawberry you can draw anything”; and Mrs. Cameron paddling about in cold water till two in the morning; and Jowett's four young men looking at photographs and sipping tumblers of brandy and water until at last “poor Miss Stephen”, who has been transplanted to an island where “everybody is either a genius, or a poet, or a painter, or peculiar in some way”, ejaculates in despair, “Is there *nobody* commonplace?”

“Poor Miss Stephens”, bored and bewildered, staying with several cousins at the hotel, represented presumably the Puritanical conscience of the nineteenth century when confronted by a group of people who were obviously happy but not obviously bad. On the next page, however, Miss Stephen is significantly “strolling about in the moonlight”; on the next she has deserted her cousins, left the hotel, and is staying with the Thackerays in the centre of infection. The most ingrained Philistine could not remain bored, though bewildered she might be, by Miss Thackeray's charm. For it was a charm extremely difficult to analyse. She said things that no human being could possibly mean; yet she meant them. She lost trains, mixed names, confused numbers, driving up to Town, for example, precisely a week before she was expected, and making Charles Darwin laugh – “I can't for the life of me help laughing,” he apologized. But then, if she had gone on the right day, poor Mr. Darwin would have been dying. So with her writing, too. Her novel *Angelica* “went off suddenly to Australia with her feet foremost, and the proofs all wrong and end first!!!” But somehow nobody in Australia found out. Fortune rewarded the generous trust she put in it. But if her random ways were charming, who, on the other hand, could be more practical, or see things, when she liked, precisely as they were? Old Carlyle was a god on one side of his face but a “cross-grained, ungrateful, self-absorbed old nutcracker” on the other. Her most typical, and, indeed, inimitable sentences rope together a handful of swiftly gathered opposites. To embrace oddities and produce a charming, laughing harmony from incongruities was her genius in life and in letters. “I have just ordered”, she writes, “two shillings' worth of poetry for my fisherman... we take little walks together, and he carries his shrimps and talks quite enchantingly.” She pays the old drowsical woman's fare in the omnibus, and in return the “nice jolly nun hung with crucifixes” escorts her across the road. Nun and fisherman and drowsical old woman had never till that moment, one feels sure, realized their own charm or the gaiety of existence. She was a mistress of phrases which exalt and define and set people in the midst of a comedy. With Nature, too, her gift was equally happy. She would glance out of the window of a Brighton lodging-house and say: “The sky was like a divine parrot's breast, just now, with a deep, deep, flopping sea”. As life drew on, with its deaths and its wars, her profound instinct for happiness had to exert itself to gild those grim faces golden, but it succeeded. Even Lord Kitchener and Lord Roberts and the South African War shine transmuted. As for homelier objects which she preferred, the birds and the downs and the old charwoman “who has been an old angel, without wings, alas! and only a bad leg” and the smut-black chimney-sweeps, who were “probably gods in disguise”, they never cease to the very end to glow and twinkle with merriment in her pages. For she was no visionary. Her happiness was a domestic flame, tried by many sorrows. And the music to which she dances, frail and fantastic, but true and distinct, will sound on outside our formidable residences when all the brass bands of literature have (let us hope) blared themselves to perdition.

Notes

ⁱ A preliminary version of this study was read at the Annual Conference of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (*PALA*), held at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, in 2013.

ⁱⁱ In *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the following *partes orationis* appear: *exordium* or introduction, *narratio* or statement of facts, *divisio* or division, *confirmatio* or proof, *confutatio* or refutation, and *conclusio* or conclusion ([Cicero] 1981: I.3). Quintilian (1920: III.8) distinguishes five main *partes orationis*: *proemium* or introduction, statement of facts, proof, refutation and peroration.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen was Virginia's maiden name before she got married with Leonard Woolf.