

Approach to the style of the literary essay through the rhetorical argumentation model

Margarita Esther Sánchez Cuervo

University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain)

1. Introduction

The literary essay has been traditionally considered a hybrid genre, containing different types of writing such as the expository, the narrative, the descriptive and the argumentative. Due to its slippery, inconclusive nature, it has often lacked a rigorous methodology of study, and thus the stylistic analysis of an essay is often imprecise, based on an author's particular views or focusing on specific aspects. From a strictly textual perspective the essay contains a predominant argumentative tone and, when this is present, the essay can 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. This model offers a suitable method for reading the practice of the essay based on the use of some principles related to the invention of arguments, their order in the text and expressive manifestation (Albadalejo 1989; Arenas 1997: 133-134). In this respect, we can identify some rhetorical operations or *partes artis: inventio, dispositio* and *elocutio*. The inventive and dispositive levels are represented linguistically by means of the elocutionary or verbal expression of the text. Through *inventio* the author selects those elements that comprise the referent of discourse. In argumentative texts like the essay, the referent contains a dialectic component that allows the selection and construction of different types of arguments. The inventive selection of the referent determines the topic developed in the text. Through *dispositio*, the syntactic and semantic conceptual elements deriving from

inventio are structured. Texts belonging to an argumentative genre like the essay, with a view to discussing a thesis, are organised into four *partes orationis* or parts of the text (Barthes 1982: 66). These parts are located in the *dispositio* level, which vertebrates the rhetorical organisation of the text and its referent. The *partes orationis* are *exordium*, *narratio/expositio*, *argumentatio* and *conclusio*. In the essay, the second and third categories especially contribute to the syntactic organisation of the text. 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 this study, I seek to apply this model to Virginia Woolf's short essay 'The Enchanted Organ', a review of *Letters of Anne Thackeray Ritchie* that she wrote in 1924. I identify the *partes orationis* and analyse each part briefly. I then relate these findings with the study of presence as a general rhetorical strategy that forms patterns whose effects can be both argumentative and artistic.

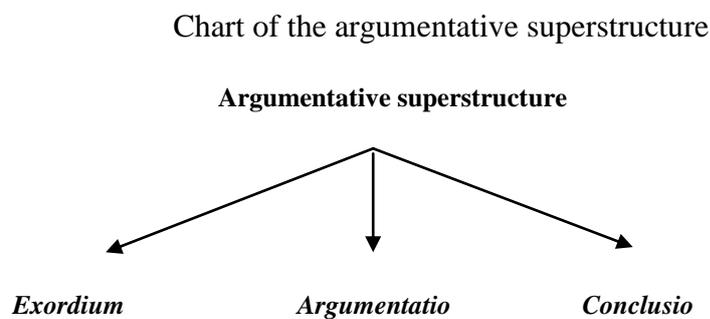
2. Woolf's essay form

In her exercise of the essay genre, which she mostly practised as a paid profession, Woolf was a literary critic, showing her predilection for delving into the works and circumstances of both renowned and little known women writers. She also initiates a new tradition of women's writing, introducing into her essays a change of perspective

that affects to both the content and the form of the genre. 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 formalise critical practice as an objective science. In this line, the essay represents for Woolf the expression of personal opinion, an aesthetic end in itself that should possess a flexible form capable of holding every aspect of human experience (Lojo 2001: 78). In her review of women and their artistic endeavours, Woolf prefers to portrait the ‘histories’ of different human constructions that embody the past at certain moments and for specific purposes (Cuddy-Keane 1997: 62). 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 an ideal vehicle to explore new ways in which women’s unspoken voices could be expressed (Dusinberre 1997: 54-55).

Despite Woolf’s admiration and emulation of Montaigne’s style as regards aspects like the incorporation of the reader to the construction of meaning and the introduction of subjectivity, her essays possess a careful rhetorical organisation (Lojo 2004). Both the selection of topics and their distribution in the text are simultaneous processes that depend on a superstructure. This is articulated by means of an abstract diagram that regulates the organisation of the parts of the text and its content. In Woolf’s essays the four categories of the superstructure, the *partes orationis*, can be identified: *exordium*, *narratio* or *expositio*, *argumentatio* and *conclusio*. The superstructure contains the rules that govern the logical and temporal order in which these categories appear in *dispositio*. These categories also restrict the semantic

elements derived from *inventio*. In her non-fiction texts, the *partes orationis* do not follow the natural order (*ordo naturalis*); they are usually transformed into an artificial order (*ordo artificialis*) by which argumentation and narration get fused.



3. Analysis of ‘The Enchanted Organ’

In ‘The Enchanted Organ’, Woolf performs this artificial order whereby narrative and argument create a unique discursive thread. She uses the phrase ‘the enchanted organ’ to refer to the prose style of her aunt (Marcus 1980: 103), Lady Ritchie, starting from a review of her letters that were selected and edited by her daughter, Hester Ritchie. But the word ‘enchanted’ also expresses a double meaning that may refer both to the supernatural effect of Anne’s literature after her death, and the charming personality that she showed during her life.

In *exordium*, which covers the first paragraph of the text, Woolf introduces an evocative passage that presents 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' would try to live outside her Victorian constraints and, thanks to music, she could enjoy a happier existence, as reflected by this rhetorical figure that repeats symmetrical phrases: '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.

As it is usual in the exercise of Woolf's reviews, the main reasoning of the *argumentatio* section revolves around the act/person interaction, which portrays a person through the essayist's distinctive account of her deeds (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This argument revises the reaction of the act upon the person. In the essay, the act has to do not only with the author's production, but also with her 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 the person's experiences. She is also able to create fictional settings with which she fills the gaps in the historical documentation. The creation of these scenes is part of her wish to explore the possibilities of the essay genre as regards 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 2000: 357). Through a personal 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'.

One of the excerpts seems to include Woolf herself as one of the characters that witnesses all the famous guests that visit her aunt's house, and whose social calls Anne reflects both in her diary and her letters, until '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?' Indeed, Woolf refers more than once to 'poor Miss Stephen' when she seems to represent 'the Puritanical conscience of the nineteenth century when confronted by a group of people who were obviously happy but not obviously bad'. The essayist uses a metaphor to describe the historical period that Lady Ritchie is facing:

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.

Anne Thackeray is described as a happy person with a charming nature, but 'it was a charm extremely difficult to analyse'. We thus read about brief sketches about Anne's life that lead us to think that she was not a very careful person: 'She said things that no human being could possibly mean; yet she meant them. She lost trains, mixed names, confused numbers (...)'. Woolf states her contradictory 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?’ She confirms that ‘her most typical, and, indeed, inimitable sentences rope together a handful of swiftly gathered opposites’. She also stresses her happy temperament 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’.

The *conclusio* section unfolds an imaginary evocation, a closing argument typical of the essay as regards the engagement of readers’ emotions. In consonance with the kind tone of her text, Woolf tries to bestow some final words of praise that suggest that Anne’s cheerful disposition 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.

4. Presence in the essay

‘The Enchanted Organ’ represents a tribute to the figure of Anne Thackeray. Woolf praises the musical faculty of her writing, mentioning this quality both in the introduction and the conclusion of the text. Expressiveness in the essay is related to the group of inventive, dispositive and elocutive phenomena by which Woolf tries to attract her readers. In this context, the notion of presence arises after the accumulative

interaction of these different levels of analysis. Presence then surfaces as a ‘superordinate concept that relies on a synergy of first-order effects – those achieved, one by one, at the level of invention, arrangement, and style’ (Gross and Dearin 2003: 135).

In relation to these first-order effects, invention generates the argument by the person/act interaction. Woolf’s enterprise as a paid critic focuses on the review of Anne Thackeray’s letters so that her works can draw conclusions about her person. Arrangement or *dispositio* is evident in the text by the order of arguments and rhetorical figures. In the essay there is natural 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; 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 diversity of things. These quotes are the pretext for Woolf’s commentaries about the character under revision in her development of the act/person argument. She includes religion and family matters, as well as personality traits that describe her 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 literature and people. Arrangement is, in this respect, persuasive when it fulfils several requirements: the natural order of the arguments and the author’s own choice of figures and reasonings that alters or reinforces the perspectives on the audience; another aspect is linked to the notion of self-reference because readers expect to find a particular order of ideas that they associate with the reading, in this case, of the Woolfian essay. When this occurs, arrangement is persuasive because it is perceived (Gross and Dearin 2003: 100-112).

The stylistic features that are manifest in the *elocutio* level are subordinate to the grammatical representation of the essay. In ‘The Enchanted Organ’, I mention the act/person interaction as a main argumentative 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 scattered 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* there appears an expressive figure that repeats symmetrical structures creating a rhythmical pattern; in *argumentatio* I also encounter a metaphor, a trope that tries to reflect Thackeray’s chronological period, and a rhetorical question as a figure of communion between the author and her audience, when Woolf wonders about her aunt’s changeable behaviour. Finally, the *conclusio* offers another metaphorical definition as she affirms that ‘her happiness was a domestic flame’ and the antithesis present to express the essence of her work as ‘frail and fantastic, but true and distinct’. 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, and there is one occurrence of the noun ‘gaiety’.

The isolated presentation of first-order presence combines to create a second-order effect, a superordinate presence (Gross and Dearin 2003: 142) by which Woolf creates a generous 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 gentle being that was content with simple things and that enjoyed literature and life above all.

5. Conclusion

This study has applied a rhetorical model of analysis to one short essay written by Virginia Woolf. I have analysed the different parts of the text into *exordium*, argumentation and conclusion. So as to specify the possible expressive elements contained in the text, I have identified the inventive, dispositive and elocutive elements of analysis that represent first-order effects. The synergy of these effects is able to produce a superordinate presence that the reader can perceive and that can become a simultaneous source of artistic and intellectual pleasure.

Further investigations can be carried out in order to represent presence in the Woolfian essay as regards her visions of both the men and women that she reviewed in the hundreds of literary essays published for the press.

References

- Albadalejo, T. (1989) *Retórica*. Madrid: Editorial Síntesis.
- Arenas-Cruz, M.E. (1997) *Hacia una teoría general del ensayo. Construcción del texto ensayístico*. Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.
- Barthes, R. (1982) *Investigaciones retóricas I. La antigua retórica*, trans. Beatriz Dorriots. Barcelona: Ediciones Buenos Aires.
- Cuddy-Keane, M. (1997) 'Virginia Woolf and the Varieties of Historicist Experience', in B. C. Rosenberg and J. Dubino (eds) *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, pp. 59-67. London: Macmillan.
- Dusinberre, J. (1997) *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?* IA: IA University Press.
- Gross, A. G. and Dearin, R. D. (2003) *Chaim Perelman*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Gualtieri, E. (2000) 'The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography', *The Cambridge Quarterly* 29 (4): 349-61.
- Lojo-Rodríguez, M. L. (2001) "'A New Tradition.'" Virginia Woolf and the Personal Essay', *Atlantis* 23: 75–90.
- Lojo-Rodríguez, M. L. (2004) 'Virginia Woolf and Michel de Montaigne: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Literary Essay', *Bells: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* 13: 1-8.
- Marcus, J. (1980) 'Enchanted Organs, Magic Bells: *Night and Day* as Comic Opera', in Freedman, R. (ed) *Virginia Woolf. Revaluation and Continuity. A Collection of Essays*, pp. 97-122. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Perelman, Ch. and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1969) *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Woolf, V. (1947) *The Moment and Other Essays*. London: The Hogarth Press.