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**Of Rainbow and Granite: Androgynous Narrative in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both***

**Abstract I:** L'articolo si propone di delineare un'analisi comparativa tra *Orlando* (1928) di Virginia Woolf e *How to Be Both* (2014) di Ali Smith. In particolare, si intende dimostrare come l'opera di Smith rielabori in modo creativo il romanzo di Woolf, andando così ad incarnare e ad esprimere con vividezza il concetto di 'mente androgina' teorizzato dalla stessa autrice. Ciò avviene attraverso la rimozione dei confini temporali tra passato e presente, l'ambiguità sessuale delle protagoniste e, soprattutto, attraverso un paradigma letterario capace di indagare la necessità di un'interazione reciproca tra autrici e lettori, e di un più ampio dialogo tra il testo letterario e le altre influenze artistiche e culturali con le quali instaura un imprescindibile rapporto dialettico.

**Abstract II:** This article attempts to conduct a comparative analysis between Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014). Specifically, this study posits Smith's novel as an appropriate successor to Woolf's work, as it successfully embraces and expresses the 'androgynous mind' theorised by Woolf. This is achieved through the removal of temporal boundaries between past and present, the ambivalence of the protagonists' sexual identity and, most importantly, through a literary paradigm that is able to explore the need for co-participation between authors and readers and the broader interplay between the literary text and other artistic and cultural sources with which it has a necessary dialogical relationship.

**Keywords:** androgyny, duplicity, mutual participation, reader's engagement, reciprocity, sexual identity, visuality.

Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so  
unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them  
into a case, often of the most incongruous [...]  
Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928: 21).

### 1. Reading between the Lines

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf formulates the androgynous mind as an essential literary ideal. Rejecting the notion that an author's sex should determine his or her

literary output, Woolf argues that “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (Woolf 2007: 627). In support of her argument, Woolf cites famous male writers such as Coleridge, Cowper, Keats, Lamb, Shakespeare and Sterne, arguing that they exhibited an androgynous writing style and intellectual disposition. In Woolf’s view, these writers were able to transcend gender stereotypes and create works that were simultaneously masculine and feminine. By arguing for an androgynous approach to literature, Woolf not only challenges readers to question and transcend traditional gender categories, but also promotes a fluid and inclusive literary culture. Since the publication of Woolf’s groundbreaking work, feminist and queer literary scholars have extensively explored the concept of androgyny and gender ambiguity in literature. For example, *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (1990) and *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kozofsky Sedgwick (2008) are both influential works in deconstructing binary, static notions of gender.

In this respect, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is an epitome of gender ambiguity in English literature. It is the story of Orlando, an English aristocrat who experiences both extraordinary longevity and a mysterious sex change. She is born a man, but at the age of 30 undergoes a significant transformation and becomes a woman. The character then lives for three centuries without showing any signs of ageing. Due to her unique mix of male and female characteristics, Orlando’s gender identity is complex and difficult to define. As González (2004) points out, Orlando is neither entirely male nor fully female, but an androgynous figure who challenges the rigidity of traditional gender roles. *Orlando* was not the first work of fiction to explore the theme of androgyny. The concept has a long history in literature. Among the best-known precursors are Henri de Latouche’s *Fragoletta* (1829), Balzac’s *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1835), Swinburne’s *Hermaphroditus* (1863) and Joséphin Péladan’s *The Androgyne* (1891). *Orlando*, however, stands out as a pioneering work in which the question of sexual androgyny is grafted onto narrative details. For example, the ambiguous use of personal pronouns in the novel is closely linked to a narrative in which the present and the past merge to critique conventional genre classifications and argue that traditional biographical forms cannot accurately reflect the nuances of personality and life experience. In Woolf’s words, “if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility, and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers, for the most part failed to solve it” (Woolf 2008: 95). Woolf also unsettles traditional notions of truth and gender by suggesting that they are not immutable concepts. Rather, Orlando’s personality and gender are constructed through a shared interaction between the reader and the narrator. Not coincidentally, readers are sometimes asked in the novel to use their imagination and actively participate in the creation of the character’s identity (Woolf 1928: 27, 91). In this sense, for Woolf, the concept of an androgynous mind in literature goes beyond the mere representation of the coexistence of seemingly different aspects of sexuality within a single subjectivity, as it involves the active participation and collaboration of the reader in the resolution of the story.

Ali Smith offers an ideal extension of Woolf’s argument when she asserts that style

plays an important role in engaging readers. According to the Scottish writer, style is not something that defines or adds to the content, but is itself the content. Style is what makes up the characters of a novel, and at the same time what stimulates, motivates and captivates readers, what arouses their interest in the story, what evokes emotions and reactions:

A style is its story, and stories – [...] like style – are layered, stratified constructs. Style is never not content. [...] It's an act at once individual and communal, to read a book, which is why the question of how much we're asked to engage is such a loaded and interesting one. [...] The last thing literary style is is a matter of indifference; that's why it's so powerful a stirrer of love and passion, anger and argument. That's why it can really trouble us. That's why a style you don't take to can feel so like a personal assault (Smith 2012a).

Marina Warner's (2013) critical analysis of Ali Smith's literary work highlights the author's distinctive literary innovation, which lies in her meticulous scrutiny of minor linguistic elements such as prepositions and definite articles. According to Warner, Smith's attention to even seemingly insignificant parts of speech enables her to convey profound meaning and carry substantial weight within her writing. In her opinion, this attention to detail is reminiscent of Woolf's painstaking craftsmanship in concealing deep meaning in even the smallest linguistic components:

But possibly Ali Smith's most particular innovation is the attention she pays to tiny parts of speech, how she presses prepositions and definite articles to reveal their depths: each one a life, each one a loaded gun. Since Virginia Woolf began *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with 'But ...' there has not been another writer who can make a little do so much (Warner 2013: X).

Warner's comparison of Smith and Woolf's writing styles underscores the power of language to engage. Just as Woolf's use of the word 'but' at the beginning of her essay challenges conventional narratives and paves the way for a critical exploration of gender and literature, Smith's focus on the nuances of language similarly subverts expectations and opens up new avenues of interpretation. Undoubtedly, this assertion holds considerable merit when applied to Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*, wherein the inclusion of 'both' in the novel's title becomes a manifest expression of its thematic and stylistic intentions, underscoring its programmatic significance.

## 2. Narration in *Trompe-L'œil*

In an article published in *The Guardian* (2014a), Smith explains the genesis of the framework for her novel, which was inspired by her discovery of sinopias – original drawings hidden beneath frescoes damaged by floods in Florence in the 1960s. The author was intrigued by the idea of creating a work characterised by an intimate or inherent duality, or rather, a texture composed of layered elements where each part interlocked with the other in such a way that they could exist simultaneously as one 'and' the other. The internal structure of *How to*

*Be Both* is apparently bipartite, consisting of two sections that focus on as many characters constantly shuttling back and forth between the present and their respective memories. The order of the two sections depends on the particular edition the reader purchases. In half of the published copies, the narrative begins with 'Eyes', the story of Francesco del Cossa, a Renaissance painter with a "habit of putting [...] 2 dots between clauses where a breath should come" (Smith 2014b: 153) who, born female, is persuaded by her father to assume a male identity in order to pursue her artistic vocation. In the other copies, however, Francesco's story comes at the end, preceded by 'Camera', the story of George, a young girl in late 20<sup>th</sup> century London who seeks solace in art while coping with the grief of her mother's death.

Francesco's narrative unfolds as her consciousness seems to transcend the boundaries of time and space<sup>1</sup>, transporting her from 15<sup>th</sup> century Ferrara to contemporary London. Her ontological status, whether she is deceased or merely displaced in time, remains ambiguous<sup>2</sup>, leaving the reader to puzzle over the nature of her existence. Upon her arrival, Francesco finds herself standing directly behind George, who appears to her like a "boy in front of a painting" (10)<sup>3</sup>. Francesco soon realises that George is staring at a portrait of Saint Vincent Ferreri, a work Francesco herself painted during her lifetime. It soon becomes clear, however, that Francesco cannot wander freely, for she remains tied to George and is forced to follow her wherever she goes. She is unable to interact with George or anyone else in the present, existing instead as a ghost from a bygone era. This gives the reader a unique perspective as the past is expressed through the ethereal figure of Francesco, commenting on the events of the present. It is George's actions and experiences that give shape to Francesco's descriptions and observations as she struggles with the limitations of her outdated vocabulary when trying to name objects and understand contemporary phenomena. This dilemma leads to a tender, vaguely quixotic comedy as Francesco struggles with the lack of appropriate words to capture the essence of the sights before her, and resorts to attributing to them the terms of her past lexicon.

George, on the other hand, is struggling to come to terms with the deep grief she has felt since losing her mother. In search of comfort, she turns to her close friend Helena Fisker, with whom she may be romantically involved. But the present is inextricably linked to George's memories of the previous May, when her mother had taken her and her younger brother, Henry, from their home in Cambridge, England, to Ferrara to see Francesco's works at the Schifanoia Palace<sup>4</sup>, as she was a great admirer of her art. Although she maintained a certain emotional distance from her mother during her lifetime, George has set out to reconstruct

<sup>1</sup> The depiction of her journey, visually rendered by a zigzag arrangement of the text, conveys the sense of being propelled beyond earthly limits and then returning.

<sup>2</sup> As Smith herself notes, very little is known about Francesco del Cossa's life and even less about the circumstances of his death: "he'd not just died in his early 40s in the plague in a year no internet site could be completely sure of, he'd also literally disappeared off the face of history" (Smith 2014a). The masculine form is used here because it refers to the historical figure who actually existed and not to the character in the novel.

<sup>3</sup> From here on, bibliographical references to *How to Be Both* will be given with page numbers only.

<sup>4</sup> Also referred to as the 'palace of not being bored' within the novel.

her mother's existence by exploring the passions that drove her when she was alive. This quest culminates in George lingering in front of the painting of Saint Vincent Ferreri in the National Gallery, a work that was particularly meaningful to her mother because it was painted by Francesco. In this particular setting, Francesco's art takes on a retrospective significance, bridging George's present and her mother's past. By activating George's feelings of connection with her deceased mother, the emotions emanating from the artwork conversely also unfold Francesco's introspective journey of memory and self-discovery. It is from this perspective that Francesco's phantasmal presence in George's mourning present can be understood. Francesco's ghost materialises in relation to George's future actions, emphasising the interdependence and influence between the two. In the style of Florentine frescoes, George appears as the visible surface of history, while Francesco occupies a hidden but integral role in George's life. Without this interplay, especially when George's section is encountered before Francesco's, the depth and complexity of Francesco's narrative would be diminished. As Francesco and George stumble upon fragments of each other's stories, the attempt to establish a definitive linear chronology becomes elusive even though the vast historical gulf of five centuries separating the protagonists might suggest otherwise. The novel resists a linear conception of time, allowing for a multi-layered arrangement in which one narrative may precede or anticipate the other, depending on how the reader happens to encounter or view each story. The lack of a clear chronological sequence challenges readers to find their way through the narratives without relying on a predetermined order, so that the beginning and end of each story intertwine and the boundaries between them become blurred.

### **3. Androgyny and the Challenge to the Visual Paradigm**

Through this intricate interplay, the novel's themes and characters gain depth and resonance, making for a rich and dynamic reading experience. At a pivotal point in the novel, George and her mother discuss whether there is a precedence or hierarchy between the visible and the hidden: "But which came first?" she asks. "The chicken or the egg? The picture beneath or the picture on the surface?" (284). The question serves as a metaphorical exploration of the nature of perception and the hierarchy of appearances. George claims that the image underneath was there first because it was created first, suggesting that there is a foundation or origin that precedes the immediately visible. However, her mother challenges this idea by pointing out that what we see first, the image on the surface, often dominates our perception and becomes the primary focus. This raises the question of whether the visible, even if it comes later in the sequence of creation, takes precedence in our understanding of reality, while the hidden or unknown is dismissed or ignored. Consequently, the reader's intellectual engagement with the novel should also consist of making connections, deciphering the interplay between past and present, visible and invisible in the lives of the protagonists, and taking up the notions of simultaneity, participation and mutual influence.

Although Francesco is trapped in her physical confinement, her ability to 'feel' is intimately intertwined with George's visual perceptions and physiological responses. For example, when George notices the presence of a beautiful blonde woman to whom she is

obviously attracted, Francesco is able to sense her presence through the physical sensation of the hair on the back of George's neck standing up as the woman enters the room. This unique interplay of their sensory experiences underlines the profound nature of their shared reality and highlights the commonality of a homosexual inclination in Francesco and George, which further strengthens their bond. This sense of mutual belonging and participation encompasses their position in the world and includes the characters' biological sexual orientation. In her childhood, Francesco abandoned her female identity and took on the guise of a man to overcome the social constraints imposed on women. As a result of this strategy, she gained access to the public and was able to pursue her artistic passion, which she otherwise would not have been able to do. Yet, somehow this transformation does not signify Francesco's rebirth under a male identity (for her original baptismal name remains secret, and the new one is in fact the only one under which the reader ever comes to know her), but a continuation in order to gain new possibilities of self-exploration.

The notion of gender indeterminacy and the concurrent manifestation of male and female attributes in a single character is a prominent theme in *Orlando*. In the narrative, the veracity of Orlando's transformation from male to female remains nebulous, leaving open the possibility that it serves as an allegorical illustration of the character's inherent fluidity. Drawing on Freudian theory, González (2004) argues that Orlando's transformation is not a true metamorphosis, as the character neither wrestles with the spectre of castration nor shows discomfort in the face of change. This assumption suggests that Orlando has always embodied an androgynous or even inherently feminine being. At the beginning of the novel, Woolf meticulously highlights the gender of the protagonist by asserting the undeniable nature of Orlando's masculinity: "He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (Woolf 1928: 1). Paradoxically, the narrator's explicit insistence on the absence of sexual ambiguity in a hitherto unknown character without additional contextual information serves as the first indication that Orlando's gender may not be as clear-cut as it is initially presented, or at least deserves closer scrutiny. The allusion to the fashion trends prevalent at the time, which disguise Orlando's masculinity, is based on the notion that they could be perceived as feminine features because of their flamboyant and ornate nature, which stands in stark contrast to modern associations of masculinity with austerity and minimalism. This subtle interplay between appearance and gender identity forms the basis for the exploration of androgyny and ambiguous gender relations throughout the novel.

Admittedly, one puzzling aspect of *How to Be Both* lies in the fact that it is never clear to what extent the characters who interact with Francesco are aware of her ambivalence. Mr de Prisciano<sup>5</sup> cryptically notes that Francesco's main rival at the Estense court, Cosmé Tura, addresses her as Francescha, using the Italian suffix 'a' to refer to her feminine form, perhaps in a derogatory manner. Mr de Prisciano's maid reveals with a subtle wink that she is attracted to Francesco, even though she is disguised as a man. At first, one might assume

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<sup>5</sup> Also known as The Falcon, the man who entrusts Francesco with the creation of a painting depicting an entire season – comprising March, April, and May – on the eastern wall of the Room of the Months within the Schifanoia Palace.

that the maid is attracted to Francesco's masculine appearance; however, the relationship develops into a full-blown physical connection, suggesting that the maid may have sensed Francesco's femininity from the beginning. Similarly, Orlando's inability to determine the gender of others mirrors the ambiguity of her own identity. The novel is replete with characters such as Archduchess Harriet, Sasha and Shelmerdine who have analogous, indeterminate gender identities. As a result, Orlando's romantic entanglements take on an androgynous character. Woolf emphasises that despite the apparent gender change, Orlando's identity remains fundamentally unaltered: "Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (Woolf 1928: 39). Interestingly, Woolf uses the plural pronoun 'their' in this passage, creating a sense of conflation between the masculine and feminine facets of Orlando's identity. Orlando subverts such conceptualisations by proclaiming the notion that "nothing is any longer one thing" (Woolf 1928: 89), thus undoing the restrictive parameters of traditional gender constructions.

Above all, it is the focus on the unseen aspects within Smith's novel that makes it a brilliant contemporary reinterpretation of *Orlando*. In Francesco's childhood, even before she is given a male designation, a deep-seated bond with her mother manifests itself in the form of an intense longing to merge their identities as Francesco finds comfort in her mother's clothes after her death. Francesco immerses herself in her mother's remaining essence to become "nothing but fabric that'd once been next to her skin" (31). This longing acts as a mechanism to maintain the semblance of her mother's enduring presence, and it proves successful as her father interprets Francesco's actions as manifestations of the mother's ghost. The maternal figure takes on a phantasmatic role in Francesco's life, a condition that Francesco will later mirror in George's existence.

In *Orlando*, Woolf also addresses the phantasm of the relationship between the present and the past to some extent, when she expresses gratitude to the great writers of the present and the past to whom she is directly indebted, acknowledging them as her own source of inspiration and greeting them as if she had met them in person:

Many friends have helped me in writing this book. Some are dead and so illustrious that I scarcely dare name them, yet no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Bronte, De Quincey, and Walter Pater – to name the first that come to mind (Woolf 1928: 1).

Woolf acknowledges the impact these writers have had on her personal and artistic life and the debt she owes them in her writing. Their legacy is still alive and present in her work. Reading the writings of Bronte, Defoe and Sterne was not only a source of personal enrichment but also an intimate experience. It allowed Woolf to enter into a productive, if imaginary, conversation with them. This passage reflects Woolf's belief in the power of literature to connect people across time and space. And yet, hidden among them is another name which, though invisible, has perhaps contributed most to the characterisation of

Orlando. Indeed, traces of Woolf's romantic liaison with the poet Vita Sackville-West emerge in the narrator's portrayal of Orlando. Although Sackville-West is not formally mentioned in the novel's prefatory remarks, Woolf subtly praises her in the text, as revealed in the exquisite physical portrayal of Orlando with "shapely legs, the handsome body and the well-set shoulders" (Woolf 1928: 2). These attributes are in fact indirect compliments that Woolf pays to Sackville-West. The narrator also expresses gratitude for having had the opportunity to record the life of such a person: "Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one!" (*ibid.*) Sackville-West's presence is well hidden beneath the visible layer of the novel; yet, though unacknowledged, Orlando's character owes as much and more to her influence than to those officially credited. Art is indebted to both recognisable figures and those who remain obscured, for together they contribute to the creation and vitality of artistic works and their characters. To detect the presence of these concealed layers or 'ghosts' in the narrative, the reader must pay close attention to details, such as the ambiguous use of pronouns or the omission of words that might otherwise resolve existing ambiguities.

A similar process of gender stratification takes place in *How to Be Both*. Francesco deliberately builds complementary layers into her fresco compositions, fostering a sense of sexual ambivalence in the subjects depicted, who can be perceived as "objectively present, or only subjectively present, or both" (Ranger 2019: 409). She also professes a preference for *trompe l'oeil*, a technique known for its ability to blur the distinctions between reality and illusion:

It is like everything is in layers. Things happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind, behind that, and again behind that, and again behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles. [...] The picture makes you look at both – the close-up happenings and the bigger picture (238).

This is due both to the layering of the fresco, which is composed of pigments, water and plaster, and to its allegorical content, which has multiple meanings at once: "what is apparent to the eye (as far as gender is concerned, but not only) is displaced on closer inspection" (Coppola 2015: 179). Coppola suggests that the fresco functions as an allegory for gender and androgyny at large. In order to fully grasp the complexity of George and Francesco's identities, one must examine both the intricate layering and the overarching narrative, indicating that gender is fundamentally a construct shaped by the viewer's perception. Weaver (2018) further asserts that Smith's writing confronts the visual paradigm by consistently embodying a multi-referential quality, such that any attempt to capture identity visually is doomed to inadequacy from the outset. As a result, the artist's approach requires a broader exploration of the interwoven layers that make up the human experience, transcending the boundaries of traditional representational techniques: "one moment a character is male, and the other female – depending on the particular angle from which he or she is viewed" (Weaver 2018: 539). Francesco's work is characterised by its ability to convey multiple narratives behind a seemingly singular plot, a skill gleaned from



a careful examination of Piero della Francesca's works: "from looking at [which] I learned [...] how to tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it" (55). This approach creates a milieu in which a range of interpretations can coexist, all of which retain their validity. Androgyny thus transcends Francesco's physical form and also permeates her artistic work, which, akin to her clothing, conceals an additional level that cannot be directly attributed to its appearance: "I made things look both close and distant" (121). This underlying quality is present before the viewer's eye, but remains elusive.

#### 4. Mutual Participation between Arts and Life: the Question of Engagement

Through Francesco, who describes herself as existing in an "intermediary place" (43) suspended between worlds, and for whom "pictures can be both life and death at once and cross the border between the two" (159), Smith suggests that paintings have the extraordinary capacity to dwell in an intermediate realm between life and death, transcending the boundaries that separate these discrete realities. Seen in this light, the author seems to be seeking to demonstrate a hidden connection between her own artistic endeavours as a writer and the teachings of Piero della Francesca and Leon Battista Alberti, to whom Francesco attributed an understanding of "the bareness and the pliability it takes [...] to be both" (53). Smith recognises in Alberti the birth of Renaissance perspective, the emergence of a concept of art as an amphibious entity capable of existing as more than one thing. Following the great masters of Renaissance painting, Smith also strives for her narratives to contain a subterranean, hidden or ghostly element. This approach allows for the coexistence of two or more narratives in what appears to be one. These narratives can run simultaneously, operate in temporal continuity or even converge. By indirectly acknowledging the vivid, living presence of these artists in her life, Smith's own existence and literary output seem to be retroactively projected, participating in their lives unbeknownst to them, much like Virginia Woolf had done in *Orlando*. This reactivation, as discussed earlier, is mirrored in the relationship between George and her mother in relation to Francesco.

Within this paradigm, a recurring theme emerges that Smith values and that permeates her writing: the concept of mutual influence and interaction between different art forms and between art and life itself. This theme serves as the basis for a particular narrative style in which a hidden narrative lies beneath another, more prominent story. Just as Francesco's narrative is hidden within George's, actively participating in and contributing to it without George's knowledge, a number of Smith's works use an overt plot as a means of concealing another story through subtle details in the text, or even through gaps and omissions in language and narrative. Storytelling can be seen as a container for imperceptible information that is only indirectly accessible. The intricate entwining of themes is for example discernible within one of Smith's earlier novels, *The Accidental* (2012), in which the character Amber can be said to assume a transworld identity that transgresses the boundaries of the text and has the ability to inhabit multiple worlds, exhibiting different qualities and characteristics in each. This condition is not openly acknowledged in the text; it can only be discerned by paying attention to the subtle allusions skilfully woven into the tapestry of language, particularly

through the allusions to *Teorema* (1968) by Pier Paolo Pasolini. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom argued that literature is based on the principle of reciprocity, in which the author and the precursor enter into a symbiotic relationship mediated by the influence of each other's work. This phenomenon is also evident in *The Accidental*, where the possible correspondence between Amber and Pasolini's enigmatic visitor is by no means explicit; it can only be restored if the reader chooses to 'collaborate' with the author, to investigate and understand the allusions scattered throughout the novel. For Smith, art takes on the role of a medium for exploring the world, allowing us to see it from different perspectives and to participate in discourses that cut across temporal and spatial boundaries.

There has long been critical debate about the extent to which literary texts are able to connect with other texts, mutually influencing them and their readers. Stanley Edgar Hyman (1947) was a pioneer in exploring the ways in which different literary works enter into a dialogue of mutual inspiration. This interaction, like the meeting of rivers in a fertile delta, enriches each individual work and also creates a broader literary landscape<sup>6</sup>. Northrop Frye (1970) also challenged the traditional notion of literature as an architecture of autonomous works by extending the idea of the mutual influence between texts, inherent in their social circulation. They create symbolic structures and patterns of archetypes that recur across different eras and works, like planets orbiting independently but influenced by other gravitational forces. Intertextuality ensures that the literary tradition is not simply a chronological sequence of texts, but rather a dense web of relationships in which each text is influenced by those that precede and follow it. Furthermore, Annabel Patterson (1993) illustrates how writers can use tradition as a cover or disguise to hide their messages and thus evade censorship. As a living organism, literature can be seen as a kind of 'anatomy': a dense body in which visible and hidden elements coexist in constant metamorphosis. Robert Stolorow (2004) elaborates on such experiential element, arguing that the reader's perception is crucial to decoding a text. He sees the text as a 'dynamic' or interactive channel that not only affects but is also shaped by the reader's emotions and experiences. As different readers bring different perspectives over time, adding a new fragment of colour and form, it is possible to ascribe constantly changing and sometimes even contradictory interpretations to the same text.

Within this succinct critical genealogy of intertextuality and reader engagement, Helen Vendler (2005) introduces the concept that authors can create enclaves in their works that allow them to speak to 'invisible listeners' who are intimately involved in the construction of meaning. Through direct or indirect apostrophes, self-isolation or openness, and the subtle use of pronouns, writers can create an intimate connection with an audience they have never met (in much the same way as both Woolf<sup>7</sup> and Smith, as I have tried to show). It is not just

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<sup>6</sup> Hyman distinguished between a 'vulgar' approach to Marxist criticism, which sees literary texts as mere reflections of the social and economic context of their time, and a 'humanist' approach, which grants art a sense of autonomy from such factors. Hyman believed that the best way to analyse literature in relation to socio-economic conditions was to integrate humanist and vulgar approaches into one conceptual fabric.

<sup>7</sup> In this respect, Nadia Fusini's lifelong contributions to the study of Virginia Woolf may prove valuable. The *Italian Virginia Woolf Society* was founded as a testimony to her commitment, and its activities can be viewed on its official website, as mentioned in the bibliography.

a matter of responding to predecessors and contemporaries, but also of anticipating future readers and interlocutors. The resulting dialogue transcends time and space, allowing for the exchange of ideas between different works. As an example, Vendler cites Herbert and Whitman as influences on Ashbery, whose work can be traced back to his two mentors. By taking up related themes, the newer poet succeeds in reinterpreting earlier works. In the process, he captures and expresses variations of feeling, some of which had remained unexpressed, awaiting revision and expansion by an unseen listener. The result is a play of contaminations that follow and overlap like waves in a lake, constantly changing its appearance.

While the critiques of these scholars differ in many ways, a common thread emerges: the recognition that the relationship between reader and text is one of reciprocity, with each party offering something in exchange. The reader must be willing to devote his or her attention and effort in order to realise the author's intentions. On the other hand, Smith herself recognised the book as a dynamic process, valuable for its transformative capacity: "great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives" (Smith 2012a). One of the possible aims of androgynous storytelling, from this point of view, can be summed up in the quest for freedom to explore oneself and one's full potential, to "unchain [...] the eyes and the lives of those who see it and give [...] them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both" (124). Maybe, Smith wants the reader to look at the story from an androgynous perspective in order to gain a deeper understanding of its depth, and to have an experience similar to Francesco's: with her eyes floating free from the chains that bound her during her lifetime. Only in this way can he or she experience that 'moment of freedom' that frees them from a linear and partially predictable historicity, from a configuration of identity based only on the performativity of the visible; and grasp, beyond the façade of apparent normality, that: "double knowledge [which] will reveal a world to you to which your mind's eye, your conscious eye, is often blind" (129).

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