"SELVES INTO RELATION": VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE CONVERSATIONAL ESSAY

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Penelope Otway, one of the characters in Virginia Woolf's "Mr Conrad: A Conversation" (1923), claims to admire Joseph Conrad's fiction for being a composite of "selves into relation" (1988: 377). Such an assertion may serve as a summary of Woolf's politics for the critical practice which underpins her conversational essays. Woolf started her professional life as a woman critic: as a woman, she strove to overcome initial suspicions that her sex, youth and inexperience could arouse in the editing and publishing worlds; as a critic she encountered the opposition of her male contemporaries for subverting established critical values. The present paper aims to explore Woolf's reformulation of the conversational essay which implies a rethinking of criticism and its theoretical foundations.

In December 1904 Virginia Woolf submitted her first two articles to the *Guardian* for publication, an event which she recorded with extraordinary excitement for it marked the beginning of her professional life. To be published meant for Woolf much more than a wage to supplement her private income; looking for a public response to her writing —"someone to tell me whether it is well, very well, or indifferently done" (1990: 226)— was the fruitful answer to her sterile fears of loss and failure.

Yet stepping into a world of professionals was, at the turn of the twentieth-century, a hard job for a woman. She ran the risk of being silenced by a hostile men's world

—like Joan Martyn in "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" (1906) or Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own* (1929)— or, at best, misunderstood: "The critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference in view, but a view which is weak, trivial or sentimental, because it differs from his own" (1966: 146). Woolf adopted a position of defiant resistance against masculine standards of measuring experience —"women having found their voices have something to say which is naturally of supreme interest and meaning to women" (1986: 16)— and was determined to give a voice to "those many women who cluster in the shade" (1985: 17).

Virginia Woolf's criticism —the discipline in which she initiated herself as a writer and which she never ceased to practise— is marked by the "attempt to alter the scale of values" of her contemporary male critics, whose theoretical foundations Woolf did not wish to perpetuate. As she posed in "Hours in a Library" (1916): "Did we ever in our youngest days feel such amazement at [the classics'] achievement as that which fills us now that we have shifted myriads of words and gone along uncharted ways in search of new forms for our new sensations?" (1987: 60). The long tradition of essay-writing which Woolf shared as part of her inheritance from the classics should, according to her, be subject to reformulation, which necessarily implied a revision of "form" in order to match new concerns, "our new sensations".[1]

As Leila Brosnan has argued, the modern essay that Woolf envisaged had a "touch of the utopian about it" (1997: 119). In "The Modern Essay" Woolf advocates a genre which must bring the self into literature, which is "primarily the expression of personal opinion" (1994a: 216) but that must not nauseate with the "sight of trivial personalities decomposing into the eternity of print" (1994a: 219).[2] The balance is achieved only by "knowing how to write... that self which, while it is essential to literature, it is also its most dangerous antagonist. Never to be yourself and yet always —that is the problem" (1994a: 219).

Such an apparent contradiction is solved by means of what Woolf calls "the triumph of style" (1994a: 219). Traditionally, the essay had been regarded as the proper place for expository and scientific prose, polemical argument or explicit statement, while "creative writing" must be separated from them.[3] Woolf's "triumph of style" implies the modification of the essay in the direction of narrative, where the writer is always and never him/herself:

> [In the essay] we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world (1994a: 216).

Yet —as Rosenberg and Dubino have suggested (1997: 5)— the notion of Woolf as a critic and essayist, and not just as a feminist critic, has been overlooked by many academic critics, an omission which may respond to Woolf's repeated attacks on the institution. Woolf had illustrated this point in many different ways throughout her work as an essay-writer, her most obvious and renowned examples being *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1937). Yet Woolf also wished to subvert the textual literary terrain of her male contemporaries in order to draw her own conclusions about the male literary canon. As a result, Woolf was most often playful, ironic, innovative, challenging and at all times amusing in her essays, though critics have tended to adduce these qualities as a reason to exclude Woolf from consideration as a serious critic and essayist. Woolf's advocacy of the essay as an artistic form, fictitious rather than scientific in nature, is not to be seen as her inability to write essays according to the rules of prescriptive criticism but rather as a position of defiant resistance against it.

As with all forms of literature, Woolf (1994a: 216) argues in "The Modern Essay" (1925), the guiding principle in the essay genre is that "it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure".[4] And pleasure, as a principle which controls the essay, is primarily present in spoken —and not written— criticism, practised by friends discussing books over a meal: "The only criticism worth having at present is that which is spoken, not written —spoken over wine glasses and coffee cups late at night, flashed out on the spur of the moment by people passing who have not time to finish their sentences" (1994a: 260).

Written criticism becomes stiff and loses spontaneity; spoken language is "what we need, primitive, subtle, sensual, obscene" (1994a: 319), new and fresh like "the prattle of children, the lore of the nursery or schoolroom, [which] did not find its way into elaborate communication" (1994a: 23). Preserving the inconsistencies and spontaneity of oral discourse in written language was a major concern of Woolf's. And in fact, many of her most renowned essays were first conceived to be read —and discussed— in front of an audience, for example "Character in Fiction" (1924) —to be published as "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"— *A Room of One's Own* (1929), "Professions for Women" (1931) or "Craftsmanship" (1937).

The formal frame of the "talk" and the "conversation" which Woolf used for some of her essays —"A Talk about Memoirs" (1920), "Mr Conrad: A Conversation" (1923) and "Walter Sickert: A Conversation" (1934)— combines written and spoken criticism, while reformulating the concepts of authorship, readership and criticism itself. As Woolf argues in "George Moore" (1925), the conversational manner allows the existence of a multiplicity of critical views, recording "violent disagreement", which is the true "worth of criticism" (1994a: 260-261). What

such a statement implicitly conveys is a rejection of the position of authority which positivist criticism assumed, as summarised by T. S. Eliot (1932: 24-25): "Criticism must always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste". Woolf adopts a position of resistance to such view, which she ultimately sees as a threat to literature, as she (1994a: 397) put it in "How Should One Read a Book?" (1926): "To admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of those sanctuaries [libraries]".

The achievement of what Eliot (1932: 32) called "true judgement" is not to be found, for Woolf, in monologic discourse but in the existence of "a voice, speaking; another answering; two colliding; from which the truth bursts; like fire from a struck match; answer and question and answer".[5] In the context of dialogue, this interrogative rhetoric becomes revealing, part of what Gadamer (1975: 326) has called "the development of all knowledge":

> The structure of the question is implicit in all experience. We cannot have experiences without asking questions... Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that a thing be opened up by the question. For this reason, the way in which dialectic proceeds is by way of the question and answer or, rather, by way of the development of all knowledge through the question.

Indeed, it is only through dialogue that a literary character is able to represent, within himself or herself, the external "other" for, as Bakhtin (1984: 74) stated, only "dialogue allows him [the character] to substitute his own voice for the voice of another person". What this dialogic effect implies is a move from insularity, encompassing not only "an analysis of consciousness in the form of a sole and single I, but precisely an analysis of the interactions of many consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 1984: 287). And it is precisely "the birth of a sense of fellowship with other human beings" (Woolf 1987: 57) —as stated in the above cited "Hours in a Library"— that characterises Woolf's dialogue essays and, ultimately, the whole of her critical practice. Woolf establishes a kinship between the critic and the "common reader"; her vision of literature as a "common ground" becomes the expression of the writer's intellectual freedom: "To share the emotions of their kind, no longer to be isolated and exalted in solitary state upon their tower, but to be down to the ground with the mass of humankind" ("The Leaning Tower" 1992: 173).[6] Such sense of communality is the more evident in oral speech, whose intertextual nature defines it as a continuum that cuts across chronological boundaries, as Bakhtin (1986: 91) has argued: "Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient. Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication".

In a radio broadcast given on the BBC in 1937 —later to become an essay entitled "Craftsmanship" (1937)— Woolf also draws attention to the contextual overtones of the word: "This power of suggestion is one of the most mysterious properties of words. Everyone who has ever written a sentence must be conscious or half-conscious of it. Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations —naturally" (Woolf 1992: 140). "Neutral" words do no exist, for they always carry the burden of the intentions of others who used them first. Language, as Bakhtin would put it, is always placed in the threshold between the "I" and the "Other"; as a result, any utterance would always be oriented towards an answer, and will not escape from its hypothetical influence: "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (Bakhtin 1981: 280). Within this process the interlocutor —or the reader— plays an active role since s/he participates in the formation of the utterance's meaning. In one of her most famous essays on the act of reading —"How Should One Read a Book?" (1926), also first written to be read— Woolf proposes a fluid and mutually influencing relationship between readers and writers:

> Words are more impalpable than bricks; reading is a longer and more complicated process than seeing. Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read, but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words (1992: 60).

What Woolf aims at is reformulating the whole interpretative process, which will necessarily be enriched by its own dialogic nature. As Bakhtin (1981: 282) has argued, "the speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, apperceptive background". Similarly, Woolf utilises the image of a treasure in order to refer to the multiplicity of interpretation, for example in "Reading" (1919): "It is, indeed, an atmosphere, not only soft and fine, but rich, too, with more than one can grasp at a single reading. So that, if I at last shut the book, it was only that my mind was sated, not the treasure exhausted" (1988: 149).

The literary form of the conversation emphasises such dialogic plurality, both in its form and in its ideological assumptions. Woolf's choice of the "conversation" as a form for the essay reached back through a long established tradition: Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" (1888) and "The Critic as Artist" (1890) —whose title Woolf echoed in "The Decay of Essay-Writing" (1905)— William Hazlitt's *Table Talk* and Plato's *Dialogues*. Above all, Woolf turned to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which had witnessed the blossoming of the essay and its conversational form. As Foucault (1970: 79) has suggested, it was in the sixteenth century that language had a role of "perpetual commentary", although such

commentary may only exist if there is a language that pre-exists "within the discourse by which one tries to make that language speak". More significantly, when discourse becomes an object of language, commentary gives way to criticism. As an example Foucault cites precisely one of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, which suggests that "the function proper of knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating; it is interpreting" (Foucault 1970: 40).

Moreover, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represented for Woolf a key aspect of her revolt against the nineteenth century. As Juliet Dusinberre (1997: 3) has pointed out, the transition from manuscript to print culture, from oral utterance to the written word, and from the public theatre to private reading, embodied for Virginia Woolf her need to reach behind the traditional models of masculine education which dominated the cultural world into which she had been born. Her many essays concerning the Renaissance wish to trace a line of women writers and readers as far back as possible, consciously manipulating the facts available in the service of a larger 'truth' about women (Greene 1999: 2). Thus Woolf imagines the inner lives of women from Anne Clifford —one of John Donne's patrons— to Mercy Harvey, Dorothy Osborne and Madame de Sévigné.

At her death in 1941, Virginia Woolf was working on a third volume of *The Common Reader*, a work which would trace women's relation to an oral tradition in the vernacular superseded by the written word once the press was established. As Juliet Dusinberre (1997: 45-46) has stated, this is what explains Woolf's sense of affinity with Michel de Montaigne and his critical practice: he wrote against the grain of traditional male education and culture, seeing himself as one of *le vulgaire* and even, sometimes, as a child or a woman, guardians of a vernacular oral tradition of story-telling. Similarly, Woolf (1986: 60) argues for the comic and flexible spirit of women and children, "because their eyes are not clouded with learning nor are their brains choked with the theories of books, so that men and things still preserve their original sharp outlines".

Woolf's conversational essays aim to re-establish a balance by emphasising the sphere of human communication, lost in the supremacy of the written word and as a consequence of the printing press. The written word occupied a position of absolute privilege throughout the entire Renaissance, and this affected all the great events in Western culture. The spoken word was then "stripped of all its powers", as Michel Foucault (1970: 39) has posed, being reduced to the "female part of language", "just as its intellect is passive". By opposition, the written word represented "the active intellect, the 'male principle' of language", a situation which Woolf graphically described in "Anon", the essay on which she was working when she committed suicide. For Woolf (1979: 384-385), the figure of Anon embodies that female part of language previous to the written word and superseded by it:

> It was the printing press that finally was to kill Anon. But it was the press also that preserved him ... The printing press brought the past into existence. It brought into existence the man who is conscious of the past, the man who sees his time, against the background of the past; the man who first sees himself and shows himself to us. The first blow has been aimed at Anon when the author's name is attached to the book. The individual emerges.

However, Foucault explains, in the late Renaissance period, language lost its power to represent the world: the profound kinship of language with the world was dissolved and "the primacy of the written word went into abeyance" (Foucault 1970: 43). Such a reformulation brought about a reorganisation of culture and of the Classical age, and the Platonic dialogue —with its implicit recreation of the spoken word— as a literary genre was recovered.

As Vian Herrero (1988: 173) has remarked, the Renaissance dialogue is conceived as a hybrid which encompasses discursive thought and its rhetorical form, a conversation between two characters. It is presented as a transcription of a real conversation, which is in itself a metaphor for, or a reduced model of every literary communication. The devices which are most often used in order to create the conversational mimesis are immediacy, intimacy, familiarity and spontaneity (Vian Herrero 1988: 178), all of them intrinsic to oral communication and from which Woolf successfully draws in order to make up her conversations.

Woolf's first step towards using the dialogue as a format for the essay came in "A Talk about Memoirs" (1920), which is in fact a review of *Recollections of Lady Georgiana Peel* and *John Porter of Kingsclere: An Autobiography*, written in collaboration with Edward Moorhouse. "A Talk about Memoirs" consciously subverts the conventions of classical dialogues by suppressing the male voice and representing an all female conversation, as can be seen in its opening lines: "*Ann*: There is no gentleman present? *Judith*: None, unless you count the oil portrait of Uncle John. *Ann*: Oh, then, we can talk about the Greeks!" (1988: 180). Significantly enough, Woolf sketches here what was to be her method for reviewing and criticism: a combination of imagined scenes which evoke the writer's private background with comments on his/her work.

Woolf consistently used this method in her writings, and it was exemplified by means of a fictional embodiment as early as 1906, in an unpublished short story entitled "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn". One of its female protagonists, Rosamond Merridew, represents the essence of the New Woman and Woolf significantly makes her a historian, concerned with finding a female tradition consisting of those many women who had been excluded from history on account of their sex. Rosamond's historiographical method is found unorthodox by her male companions and she is heavily criticised for it: "They [the critics] complain

that I have no materials at my side to stiffen these words into any semblance of the truth [...] like any other story-teller [...]. Let me draw a line here and so ____ and put the whole of this question of right and wrong, truth and fiction behind me" (Woolf, 1985: 35).

Thus, adumbrating her later career, Woolf (1986: 370) introduces a concern with what she called "ordinary history" that was to be her focus when she explored the social contexts of literature, the reviewing of contemporary fiction and her personal response to recognised historical and literary figures, offering "pictures" and "scenes" in the manner of the "story-teller": "There is nothing so delightful in the world as telling stories. It is far pleasanter than writing reviews about famous people" (1992: 104). And in fact, the ease and self-sufficiency of women speaking without men found in "A Talk about Memoirs" is echoed by the female discussion group presented in "A Society", a short story written six months after.[7]

This sisterhood —which consciously parodies the exclusive male brotherhoods from ancient universities— refuse to fulfil their assigned role as wives and mothers, roles which would imply perpetuating the very patriarchal structure that oppressed them: "We have populated the world. They have civilised it. But now that we can read, what prevents us from judging the results? Before we bring another child into the world we must swear that we will find out what the world is like" (1985: 125). "A Society" is poised between the art of story-telling and the ideological apparatus which an essay often conveys: thus the names given to its protagonists have symbolic dimension (Dick 1983: 60) and work as signs of the critical view to be held.

The critical method of "A Society" anticipates that of Woolf's "Mr Conrad: A Conversation", an essay in which two characters, Penelope Otway and David Lowe, discuss Joseph Conrad's latest novel. The conversation opens up by introducing Penelope Otway —a character who derives from Woolf's second novel *Night and Day* (1919)— as the prototypical female "common reader": she had always "since the age of seven, been engaged in reading the classics" (1988: 376), her very name being reminiscent of the classical tradition inherited from her father. Woolf establishes a privileged relationship of sympathy with this particular character by introducing Penelope as the first to speak in the dialogue (Vian Herrero 1988: 183), and projects on the character some of her own circumstances of background and education. Penelope too is the uneducated daughter of an educated man who, like Woolf, had no access to formal education on account of her sex:

> Her father's library, though strong chiefly in the literature of the East, had its Popes, its Drydens, its Shakespeares, in various stages of splendour and decay; and if his daughters chose to amuse themselves by reading what they liked, certainly it was a method of education which, since it spared his purse, deserved his benediction. That education it could be called, no one nowadays would admit (1988: 376).

Largely self-educated, Penelope is a practitioner of "spoken criticism", of which "Mr Conrad: A Conversation" is a sample: "She was content to read and to talk, reading in the intervals of household business, and talking when she could find a company [...] and sat on hot summer days, under the splendid yew tree on the lawn" (1988: 376).[8]

The conversational frame for an essay on Conrad proves particularly suitable for Woolf, since it allows her to air the ambivalence and reservations she feels towards Conrad's fiction, split in a two-fold argument. For David Lowe, Penelope's male companion, Conrad is an "elderly and disillusioned nightingale singing over and over, but hopelessly out of tune, the one song he had learnt in his youth" (1988: 376). For Penelope, "Conrad is not one and simple; no, he is many and complex", his fiction being a composite of opposite "selves into relation", which accounts for its "sudden silences, awkward collisions, the immense lethargy which threatens at every moment to descent" (1988: 377).

"Mr Conrad: A Conversation" fell flat among the critics, as Woolf (1978: 265) herself disappointedly records in her diary: "I'm slightly dashed by the reception of my Conrad conversation, which has been purely negative —No one has mentioned it". However, the dialogue on Conrad proved to be the inspiration of Woolf's initial version of *The Common Reader*, for it had the "effect of making me more definite and outspoken in my style" (1978: 265). Woolf's plans for *The Common Reader* included the dialogic method: "I shall investigate literature with a view to answering questions about ourselves —Characters are to me merely views: personality must be avoided to all costs" (1978: 265).

In spite of her plans, only "Walter Sickert: A Conversation" reached the public as a published essay in dialogue form and, as happened with "Mr Conrad: A Conversation", the conversational essay was ignored by the critics ("Sickert I rather gather a failure: silence descends on that little furry", 1988: 257), although it seemed a success to Walter Sickert himself, who considered it as "the only criticism worth having in all his life" (1994b: 282). A distinctive feature of "Walter Sickert: A Conversation", not present in "Mr Conrad: A Conversation", is the device of nameless speakers who are "hybrids" (1950: 184), "outsiders, condemned forever to haunt the borders and margins of this great art" (1950: 176), similar to the persona in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) who exhorts the audience to call her "Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please —it is a matter of no importance" (1929: 6), a figure designed to break and describe in dialogic form the silence of women literary artists.

Dialogue enables the representation of the external "other" —the female voice in Woolf's conversational essays— silenced as it had been for centuries of male monologic discourse, as Lily Everitt —the young essay-writer in Woolf's short story "The Introduction"— explains:

> One divided life (she felt sure of it) into fact, this essay, and into fiction, this going out, into rock and into wave, she thought, driving along and seeing things with such intensity that forever she would see the truth and herself, a white reflection in the driver's dark back inextricably mixed: the moment of vision (1985: 184).

Woolf's use of the dialogue implies not Platonic closure but ongoing inquiry, as their open endings suggest: the need for discourse that leads to a revelation of some sort, that is designed to open up experience. As Gadamer (1975: 330) put it, "precisely this is what characterises a dialogue [...]: that here language, in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other's point, performs that communication of meaning which [...] is the task of hermeneutics".

The potential of the dialogue as a revelatory experience for its potential to encompass multiple and varied voices haunted Woolf, from her early plans about conversations —"What do we talk about? I wish I could write conversations" (1978: 326)— to her last essays. In "Reviewing" (1939), Woolf praises the "value of dialogue" as a satisfactory way of discarding once and for all dogmatic, crippling criticism, written in "an attempt to refer to eternal standards by a man who is in a hurry; who is pressed for space; who is expected to cater in that little space for many different interests" (1992: 160).

Woolf (1985: 184) proposed the conversational essay as a countercanon for what she defined as "this massive masculine achievement", embodied in established structures of exclusion which had prevented female voices from being heard. By doing this, Woolf is also proposing an alternative —and more open— mode of approach to the act of reading, implicitly rejecting the monologic critical discourse which was predominantly practised by her male contemporaries. As Michel Foucault (1970: xiv) has established, scientific discourse becomes a means of power and exclusion, and subjects responsible for it are most often "determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them". In her essays —and especially in her conversations— Woolf showed an implicit rejection of such scientific discourse and of its identification with knowledge. This rejection became, as a result, a refusal to perpetuate authority and dogma, establishing instead a dialogic kinship with the reader.

The conversation —itself a hybrid poised between written and oral discourse, fact and fiction, discursive thought and rhetorical form— allows the voices of hybrids, outsiders and raiders to emerge. It is by means of this process of exchange and collision that truth bursts, knowledge is developed, and exclusion and insularity finally overcome.

Notes

[1]. Virginia Woolf had inherited from her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, his passion for essay-writing. "Hours in a Library" purposely echoes Stephen's title for his collection of critical essays published in 1874 and 1876 Hours in a Library. Yet Woolf was also careful to state the main point of departure from her father's positivist tradition —shared to some extent by Woolf's contemporary male critics— in an effort to emphasise what she saw as the astonishing shifts in the writing of this genre. For a development of the Woolf-Stephen connection, see Fisher (1990: 31-40) and Hyman (1983: 197-216).

[2]. For an insight into Woolf and the personal essay, see Fernald (1991: 165-189).

[3]. Two landmark theoretical approaches to the essay —Georg Lukács's "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" (1974) and Theodor Adorno's "The Essay as Form" (1984)— argue that the genre is an artistic form which is neither scientific nor pragmatic in nature: "Science affects us by its contents, art by its forms", Lukács writes. While science offers us "facts and the relationships between facts", art and, therefore, the essay, "offers us souls and destinies" (1974: 3). Similarly, Adorno states that the essay lacks prestige as an aesthetic form because it identifies "knowledge with organised science", a view which excludes as "impure anything that does not fir this antithesis" (1984: 151). For Woolf, there is no room for "the impurities of literature in an essay"; the essay should be purged from "dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter" (1994a: 217-218).

[4]. For an analysis of the pleasure principle in Woolf's essays, see Fernald, "Pleasure and Belief in 'Phases of Fiction'" in Rosenberg and Dubino eds. (1997: 193-215).

[5]. Monks House Papers; quoted in Brosnan (1997: 120).

[6]. For an extensive view of this topic, see Beer (1996).

[7]. For an analysis of "A Society" see Dick (1983: 51-66); Hungerford (1983: 3) and Gillespie (1988: 109-113).

[8]. Conversational fiction often relies on the presentation of the locus amoenus setting in order to create the illusion of ease and intimacy. See Le Guern (1981: 141-148).

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