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VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "BLUE & GREEN" REVISITED: DIMENSIONS OF THE RESEARCH SPACE¹

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Abstract

This paper gives a survey of approaches to the analysis of Virginia Woolf's "Blue & Green" (1921), a meditative sketch, a prose poem that belongs to experimental modernist prose, integrating various mimetic and diegetic techniques highlighting the issue of colour perception from its symbolic, eidetic, and intermedial perspectives tightly linked to the specificity of human imagination. The paper brings these research perspectives together, elaborating them to further introduce, in the forthcoming paper, a new vista of Woolf's "Blue & Green" interpretation via the phenomenon of focus dissipation as a ludic narrative and/or mimetic technique based on text-driven attentional shifts.

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's "Blue & Green" (Woolf 1989: 142), first published in her collection of short stories *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), is habitually categorized as a sketch, rather a meditative sketch (Baldwin 1989: 24), or a prose-poem (Martin 2009; Almaha-meed 2016). In spite of its small size (two paragraphs entitled "Green" and "Blue", the total of 24 lines) the story as a multifaceted experimental oeuvre has attracted attention of quite a few scholars, who addressed Virginia Woolf's short fiction in

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the context of experimental prose proper (Baldwin 1989; Harry 2015; Skrbic 2004; Martin 2009; Harry 2015; Almahameed 2016) or of intermediality as the interrelation of literature and art, here the visual arts (Humm 2010; cf. also Hussey 1995/2011; Skrbic 2004; Almahameed 2016).

The sketch (Woolf 1989: 142) is built upon the associations linked first to colour green, that of a glass lustre (“the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble”) as well as the green-coloured varia (“The feathers of parakeets [...] – sharp blades of palm trees [...]; green needles”) punctuating the imaginary mental journey through the desert. Then it turns to colour blue, that of a fountain of water spouting through the sea-monster’s nostrils (“a fringe of blue beads”) as well as the colours of the old boat on the ocean beach (“Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat”) and the bells of the cathedral (“beneath the blue bells”).

Generally, one can roughly single out six main approaches to the interpretation of this piece of fiction: (i) perceptual, (ii) symbolic, (iii) intermediality-based, (iv) cross-genre, (v) eidetic (imagistic), and (vi) imagination-oriented, which seem to be interconnected and complementary.

2. Perceptual approach to the interpretation of Woolf’s “Blue & Green”

The perceptual bias, linked to Virginia Woolf’s interest in perception and perspective as well as their relationship to imagination, related, presumably, to her mental condition and idiosyncratic creativity, dominates in many stories, including “Blue & Green” (VWSFA). The correlative approach zeroes in on the phenomenon of colours (here blue and green, or rather green and blue) in their tangible (“the appearance of animals, such as green feathers or blue skin”) and intangible (“the heat mirages above desert sand, as well as the image of light refracted through the stained glass of a chandelier”) forms, according to R.S. Martin’s differentiation. The interplay of colours highlights instability and relativity of human perception, showing “how color takes diverse forms” (Martin 2009). The short story’s sensual fabric is a most persuasive illustration of Semir Zeki’s assumption that “Art does not duplicate the natural percept; it cancels the natural percept and replaces it with another” (cited after Massey 2009: 43). The latter might be exemplified by (1) and (2), where light/lack of light and colour are perceived as a liquid, or rather drops of liquid, coloured green and blue, and by (3), where hard substances, like glass, are also viewed as melting into liquids, thus, idiosyncratically of Woolf,² tending to “destabilize bounded identities”, in Ian Ettinger’s (2012: 4) parlance:

² It reminds the reader of the world-known passage from one of the writer’s interludes in *The Waves*, when under the influence of light “Everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid” (Woolf 2000: 15), as well as of her less known image of liquid thoughts and fancies from “The Fascination of the Pool” (Woolf 1989: 236–237).

- (1) The pointed fingers of glass hang downwards. The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green. All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (2) It's night; the needles drip blots of blue. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (3) But the hard glass drips on to the marble; (Woolf 1989: 142)

According to Irving Massey, such aberrations happen because seeing, to which "about a third of our brain is devoted [...] is a mediated sense, taking place at a distance, is uncertain, liable to all sorts of distortion", playing on "a contradiction between the effects of luminance and color" (Massey 2009: 29). The early twentieth century, following the nineteenth-century psychological theories of vision, when, in Massey's (2009: 29) view, "Cézanne and Gestalt have a common origin in Helmholtz", was revolutionary in its "rise of inherently strange representations of reality that are antithetical to common sense" (Ettinger 2012: 1). Virginia Woolf, both in her novels and short fiction, often "pushes the notion that reality is not as it appears" (Ettinger 2012: 1). This is definitely traced in "Blue & Green", where colours "are also depicted as relative to themselves: the light refracted through the glass can be either blue or green depending on the time of day" (Martin 2009).

3. Symbolic dimension of "Blue & Green" analysis

The symbolic slant in the interpretation of "Blue & Green" is less frequent among scholars and critics, being also related to colours as catalysts "for the conscious mind to perceive reality in different imaginative ways" (Harry 2015) and to their power of symbolism (Harry 2015; VWSFA). Given the specificity of most substances that serve in this short story as material (glass, the lustre, pools of water, ocean water, waves) or immaterial (shadow, desert air, sky) anchors for the two dominant colours, green and blue, the symbolism of colour evokes the mind link with the idea of transparency and its variable facets. The latter presuppose "a distinction between transparent media (air, water) and transparent objects (a glass, a crystal)" (Morozova 2017: 57). While in Owen Harry's (2015) view "The lustre's transparency gives it a sort of neutrality that allows it to be modified by colour, almost as a blank canvas" – cf. (1) and (4), the transparency of the ocean water tends to affect its structural and kinesthetic forms (5), along with the transparency of hot desert air that seems to reverse the order of being in a mirage-like way (6), cf.:

- (4) It's night; the needles drip blots of blue. The green's out. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (5) The snub-nosed monster rises to the surface and spouts through his blunt nostrils two columns of water, which, fiery-white in the centre, spray off into a fringe of blue beads. [...] Slushing the water through mouth and nostrils he sinks, heavy with water, and the blue closes over him dowsing the polished pebbles of his eyes. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (6) [...] the pools hover above the desert sand; the camels lurch through them; the pools settle on the marble. (Woolf 1989: 142)

The symbolic role of transparency as a notion proceeds from the fact that, following Olena Morozova's (2017: 49) line of reasoning, "transparency can be regarded as perceived visually, enacted cognitively, re-enacted symbolically and instantiated discursively to generate particular effects". In this respect transparency, in its imaginary manifestations, brings us closer to aesthetic experiences of bridging the realms of literature and the visual arts in terms of the intermediality-based approach.

4. Intermediality facet of Woolf's "Blue & Green"

Much has been said about Virginia Woolf's short fiction as "pushing against the boundaries of written language toward something like painting or music" (Baldwin 1989: 26; cf. also Benzel 2004; Skrbic 2004: xii; Almahameed 2016). Others, including Woolf herself (cited after Skrbic 2004: xvi), added to the analogy of her short stories' texture with painterly and musical experience, a cinematic perspective (VWSFA).

Interestingly, Woolf's "Blue & Green", which has been mostly interpreted through the prism of the visual dimension of prose, can be viewed, as Nusaiba Almahameed (2016: 26) claims, from a double intermedial perspective, that of correlating with Impressionist (Guignet 1965; Baldwin 1989) and Post-Impressionist (Hussey 1995/2011; Skrbic 2004) painting. Those scholars who approach Woolf's sketch as impressionistic primarily zero in on the effect of light, similarly to Impressionists who studied "the influence of light variation on single object at different times of the day" (Almahameed 2016: 26). Other researchers, who viewed this short story as a verbal equivalent of Post-Impressionism (Hussey 1995/2011: 96), emphasized the use of Fry's "significant form", "where art is viewed as using the "language of form and color" [...], a language in which form and content are bound together to create a visual language through visual metaphors and the arrangement of syntactic elements" (Almahameed 2016: 26). It works so that the understanding of "Blue & Green" should depend "on the reader's imagination to transform the words into a pictorial image" (Almahameed 2016: 26).

The latter comes very close to the cinematic technique of montage, when scattering fragmentary impressions either represent "the mind's journey" (Harry 2015) through time and space (7) or visualize the scene of the monster-fish dying on the ocean beach as if in a set of film shots (8), cf.:

- (7) The feathers of parakeets – their harsh cries – sharp blades of palm trees – green, too; green needles glittering in the sun. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (8) Thrown upon the beach he lies, blunt, obtuse, shedding dry blue scales. Their metallic blue stains the rusty iron on the beach. Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat. (Woolf 1989: 142)



5. Cross-genre specificity of "Blue & Green"

The prevailing view of quite a few Virginia Woolf's short stories is that "they are perhaps best regarded as experiments in the lyric possibilities of prose" (Baldwin 1989: 24), where lyricism, as well as that in her novels, might be regarded "as a technique to explore the representation of consciousness" (Benzel 2004: 157). In Baldwin's mind as well as in many other interpreters' view of her short fiction, "Blue & Green", often referred to as a sketch, might be called one of the most poetic of Woolf's prose writings (Baldwin 1989: 24), the intersection, fusion, or cross-fertilization between prose and poetry, a prose poem (Almahameed 2016: 26–27), symmetrically arranged (Almahameed 2016: 28), that "features Virginia Woolf in her prose-poem mold" (Martin 2009).

It is worth mentioning that Almahameed's (2016) paper that addresses prose and poetry convergence in "Blue & Green", examining it in great detail, suggests the results of linguistic experiment that evidently prove a truly poetic nature of this short story. The scholar rewrites the text line by line, syntagm by syntagm (Almahameed 2016: 28) to make it look like a poem, which it definitely becomes – see below the first four sentences of the short story transformed into five poetic lines, capitalized and with line breaks added (9, cf. 1 and 7 earlier):

- (9) **GREEN.**
 THE POINTED³ fingers of glass hang downwards.
 The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green.
 All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble.
 The feathers of parakeets – their harsh cries – sharp blades of palm trees – green, too;
 Green needles glittering in the sun. (Woolf 1989: 142)

What else makes the story's texture close to that of a poem is the abundance of various tropes and figures of speech, the latter being characteristic of poetic syntax, which brings us closer to another approach in the interpretation of "Blue & Green", eidetic, or imagistic.

6. Eidetic (imagistic) dimension of Woolf's "Blue & Green"

The wide range of imagery employed by Virginia Woolf in "Blue & Green" encompasses two main groups of powerful images — sensory (visual, audial, tactile, and kinesthetic), moving from objective to subjective perceptions (Martin 2009), on the one hand, and verbal, with their strong evocative effects, on the other. The first group of fleeting images, which Baldwin (1989: 26) refers to as "metaphysical" imagery, "portrays a conscious mind grappling with the myriad images that a ray of green

³ In all probability, Almahameed's (2016: 28, 29, 30) paper contains a recurring literal error, a spelling mistake in the word *pointed* written as *ported*, which we have corrected according to *The complete shorter fiction of Virginia Woolf* [2nd edition, edited by Susan Dick] (Woolf 1989: 142).

light evokes” (Harry 2015), punctuated with shocking and alarming auidial imagery of squawking birds (Martin 2009) and tactile images of sharp objects (*sharp blades, green needles*) as well as a chain of kinesthetic images describing various ways of motion through space, cf. (10) and (11):

- (10) The feathers of parakeets – their harsh cries – sharp blades of palm trees – green too; green needles glittering in the sun. [...] here and there a white blossom; [...] at night the stars are set there unbroken. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (11) But the hard glass drips on to the marble; the pools hover above the desert sand; the camels lurch through them; [...] rushes edge them; weeds clog them; [...] the frog flops over; (Woolf 1989: 142)

This group also includes a set of more tangible and realistic images (visual, auidial, tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic) mostly concentrated in the second part of the short story, entitled “Blue”, which concern the life and death of the monster-fish (Martin 2009), showing its metamorphosis through the opposition of dynamics and statics against the background of the moving ocean, slushing water, and almost deadly beach, along with stillness of the cathedral, filled up with the smell of incense, cf. (12), (13), (14):

- (12) The snub-nosed monster rises to the surface [...] he sinks, heavy with water, and the blue closes over him [...]. Thrown upon the beach he lies, blunt, obtuse, shedding dry blue scales. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (13) [...] the ruffled surface of ocean. [...] spouts through his blunt nostrils two columns of water [...]. Slushing the water through his mouth and nostrils [...]. A wave rolls beneath the blue bells. (Woolf 1989: 142)
- (14) Their [dry blue fish scales – OV] metallic blue stains the rusty iron on the beach. Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat. [...] But the cathedral’s different, cold, incense laden, faint blue with the veils of madonnas. (Woolf 1989: 142)

The other group of images in “Blue & Green”, i.e. verbal imagery proper, generates a convergence of traditional tropological and syntactical stylistic means that jointly generate the readers’ emotional involvement in experiencing “a visionary moment” (Benzel 2004: 157), a sort of haiku-provoked satori,⁴ or inscape. The latter “is the word that the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins [...] uses to describe the moment when we catch the essence of what we are perceiving” (Massey 2009: 4). What seems to be beyond conventionality is the poetic density of such imagery that varies compositionally. The “Green” part of the short story abounds in personifications⁵ of light,

⁴ Associations with Zen-Buddhist satori as a sensation of insight, of momentary grasping the truth, coming suddenly as an emotional moment that equals the time of one breath (Shersh-njova 2015: 55), are brought into play by the allusion (*the frog flops over*) to the famous Bashō’s haiku about a frog jumping into the lake:

old pond —
a frog jumps in,
water’s sound (transl. by Barnhill 2004).

⁵ As Massey remarks, taking the neuroaesthetic perspective, “forms are inherently anthropomorphic”, there is always “self-projection into abstract forms, or of animation of abstract forms” as “we are constantly anthropomorphosizing our surroundings” (Massey 2009: 35, 36–37).

twilight, and waves ("the light slides down; the shadow sweeps the green over the mantelpiece; the aimless waves sway beneath the empty sky"), with the key conceptual metaphor being LIGHT IS A LIQUID ("The light slides down the glass, and drops a pool of green; the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble") (Massey 2009: 142) behind them. The fluidity of momentary impressions and the flight of imagination are embodied syntactically, through parallelism of nominative and just short sentences or clauses, the chains of which are punctuated in a staccato way first by dashes (cf. (7), (10)) and then by semicolons (cf. 11), thus creating the effect of broken rhythm.

The "Blue" part, as Almahameed (2016: 31) remarks, "is syntactically smoother" with the emphasis upon inversions ("Thrown upon the beach he lies; Blue are the ribs of the wrecked rowing boat"), which is enhanced by excessive alliteration that gives the texture "a structural integrity [...] and also, as all sound patterns do, lends it a sort of musicality" (Almahameed 2016: 142). Here, as well as in the first part of the short story, verbal and metaphysical imagery is accompanied by spatial images, those of VERTICALITY and HORIZONTALITY.⁶

The story (Almahameed 2016) starts with a top-down verticality vector ("The pointed fingers of glass hang downwards"), further shifting on to the horizontal one ("The feathers of parakeets – their harsh cries – sharp blades of palm trees – green too; the camels lurch through them; rushes edge them; weeds clog them; the ruffled surface of the ocean"), once or twice interrupted by verticality inculcations ("But the hard glass drips on to the marble; the pools hover above the desert sand; the needles drip blots of blue"). The "Blue" half of the story proceeds with intermittent oscillations of the bottom-up and top-down vertical ("the snub-nosed monster rises; two columns of water; he sinks") and horizontal ("Thrown upon the beach he lies; on the beach") vectors, concluding with the evident, unemotional and distracted, verticality of the cathedral ("the cathedral's different, cold, incense laden").

7. Imagination-oriented approach to the analysis of "Blue & Green"

There are at least four points the interpreters of "Blue & Green" make, referring to the flight of imagination embodied in the short story's texture. First, it is "the play of imagination on the phenomenon of light" (Baldwin 1989: 26). Second, it is the play of artistic imagination turning a conventional description and narrative into "a visual and painting-like structure" (Benzel 2004: 157), "a visual painting using the language of form and colour", in Almahameed (2016: 26) parlance (see also Skrbic 2004: 50). The third point, as it has been mentioned earlier (see section 2.3) concerns the role of the reader's imagination in transforming "the words into a pictorial image" (Almahameed 2016: 31). The fourth one, addressing the readers' emotional response, according to Massey, entails from several postulates:

⁶ It seems to be accounted for neurobiologically as, according to Massey (2009: 44), "verticals and horizontals are easier for us to see".

1) the belief that basic geometrical forms are the essential constituents of the visual arts, and 2) [...] we respond to these basic forms because we experience them as symbolic of our own bodily attitudes and needs, as well as of the feelings associated with those attitudes and needs (Massey 2009: 34),

all this being enhanced by the Modernists' "overwhelming preoccupation with the nature of space" and Bergson's "idea of continuity and uninterrupted flow" (Massey 2009: 32–33). Due to the combination of these four factors "the reader enters a fluctuating field of matter and consciousness midstream" (Ettinger 2012: 5).

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Given Irving Massey's (2009: 27) romantic comment on literary text interpretation, in which he claims that "The artistic text is a potentially inexhaustible source of insight; one can go on describing its details forever, as if it were a dream", this paper prepares the ground for a further journey through the research space of Virginia Woolf's experiments with literary texture. Integrating the above approaches (perceptual, symbolic, intermediality-based, cross-genre, eidetic (imagistic), and imagination-oriented) to the analysis and interpretation of "Blue & Green", the paper to follow will suggest a new perspective of interpreting Woolf's short story, the one based on revealing the mechanisms of focusing/defocusing/refocusing traced in the story's protean literary texture as well as other manipulations with its narrative and mimetic foci.

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