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Theatricality in the Short Story in English

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The dramaturgy of voice in five modernist short fictions: Katherine Mansfield's "The Canary", "The Lady's Maid" and "Late at Night", Elizabeth Bowen's "Oh! Madam..." and Virginia Woolf's "The Evening Party"

Anne Besnault-Levita

- ¹ Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen have a history, a heritage and a poetics of their own which render any comparative study of their work stimulating, yet, to a certain extent, disputable. Mansfield was born in New-Zealand and her art may be partly considered as a response to and a dialogue with her origins (New 114-137); Elizabeth Bowen, whose origins are Anglo-Irish, outlived World War II unlike Mansfield and Woolf, which might partly explain why the psychological is always fused with the social and the historical in her fiction². Katherine Mansfield was one of the first writers of her generation to gain her reputation solely on the short story; she never completed a novel, while Bowen and Woolf excelled in this genre. As a result, I would argue that Woolf's and Bowen's short fictions have been given less attention and credit than their novels, while Mansfield's achievement has long been, and is maybe still, overshadowed by Woolf's. Besides, if Mansfield, Woolf and Bowen are now considered to be part of the modernist canon, Mansfield's "unusual modernism" (Pichardie, 122) has long been considered as second-rate, and Bowen's "modernism" as less experimental and innovatory than Woolf's.
- ² However, those obvious differences have to be counterbalanced by the three writers' shared commitment to the possibilities of literary and generic experimentation, as

Mansfield's diary and letters, Woolf's critical essays and Bowen's critical prefaces testify. Aware of what some historians of modernism have called a crisis in language as well as of certain formal and ideological limits of the novel, they felt an urgent need to explore "the lovely medium of prose" and devise a "new word", to quote Katherine Mansfield's famous 1916 letter, that would encapsulate their experience of the modern world and of the modern self³. For this reason, and although short fiction was perhaps "not [Woolf's] ideal form"⁴, they also shared what Bowen called, in her preface to *Encounters*, "a constructive critical interest in the short-story's inherent powers and problems" (Bowen 1986, 119-120). Bowen's point that "the short story is at an advantage over the novel, and can claim its nearer kinship to poetry, because it must be more concentrated, can be more visionary, and is not weighed down (as the novel is bound to be) by facts, explanation or analysis" (Bowen 1959, 128) was obviously shared, if only at times, by Woolf who found it "easier to do a short thing, all in one flight than a novel", was never sure that what she wrote were "stories" but felt "free" when she wrote them and "grazing" as near as she could to her "own ideas"⁵.

- 3 As short-story writers, Mansfield, Woolf and Bowen belonged to this period which saw the emergence of short fiction or "lyric short story" as opposed to the "tale" or "mimetic story" to take up Clare Hanson's words⁶, a form which, according this time to Charles E. May, concentrates on "internal changes, moods and feelings, utilizing a variety of structural patterns depending on the shape of emotion itself, relies for the most part on the open ending, and is expressed in the condensed, evocative, often figured language of the poem" (May 202). Since Poe's review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842, this kinship of the short story genre with poetry has been mainly explained in terms of brevity, and reception conditions. A cursory look at short fictions like "Three Pictures", "The String Quartet", "Monday or Tuesday", "Blue and Green" by Woolf, or "Spring Pictures" by Mansfield, to quote the most obvious cases of "genre trouble", shows how the primacy of subjective experience seized at one "spiritual moment" through a poetics of the apprehended aesthetic whole has indeed been exploited by those authors.
- 4 Interestingly enough, the acknowledgement of the genre's polysynthetism, with the insistence on such literary ingredients as unity of effect, compression of time or "the sense of a crisis"⁷, has not given much room to a debate on the short's story kinship with drama. In the case of modernist short fiction, this might be explained by what Martin Puchner, in his book untitled *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*, calls an "anti-theatrical dynamic within modernism". Explaining what he sees as a high-modernist reaction to the "unprecedented celebration of the theatre" in 19th century literature, he writes:

The theatre has always been the most public art form, and it continued to depend on collaboration and collectivity even at a time when modernism celebrated the figure of the individual artist who withdraws from the public sphere and the allegedly undifferentiated masses. (Puchner 6)
- 5 Reading the stories I chose today is obviously an experience which challenges this view but never totally invalidates its presuppositions on the poetics and politics of form. Their theatricality is indeed based on what I have chosen to call a dramaturgy of voice which, since it involves the displaying of female subjectivity as performance while requiring active participation on the reader's part, raises questions of genre, gender and of the short story as an art of participation. As I have chosen a comparative approach, my answers to these questions will not be accompanied by the close textual

analysis which each short story would have required; and because this is still a new field of research for me, I would like you to accept part of what follows as provisional and debatable hypotheses.

Question of genre

- 6 The three short fictions by Katherine Mansfield which I am briefly going to introduce now suggest that if their author always felt “trembling on the brink of poetry”, according to her own confession (Mansfield 1985, 66), she was also often playfully or painfully writing on the brink of theatricality. They remind us that Mansfield was, according to her friend Ida Baker, “a born actress and mimic” (Baker 233) who liked to alter her appearance, disguise herself, was aware both of her multiple selves and of her power of impersonation, as the following extract from one of her letters shows: “A darkened stage — a great — high backed oak chair — flowers — shaded lights — a low table filled with curious books — and to wear a simple, beautifully coloured dress ... *Tone* should be my secret ... this is in my power because I know I possess the power of holding people” (Mansfield 1984, 84). They also remind us that Mansfield had two “kick-off[s] in the writing game”: one being “joy”, the other an “*extremely* deep sense of hopelessness, of everything doomed to disaster [...] — *a cry against corruption* —” (Mansfield 1985, 97-98). Indeed, among the many characters who stage themselves and others in her short fiction — a process which might involve “unconscious mimicry, display, pretense, affectation, posturing, role playing, dramatisation and manipulation” (Besnault 81) the Maid in the “The Lady’s Maid”, Virginia in “Late at Night”, and the anonymous speaker in “the Canary” have in common their sex, their deep loneliness, and above all their urge for company and self-expression. In that sense, those stories “challenge the conventional notion of romantic heroine by focusing on an ageing and socially disregarded figure” as Pamela Dunbar argues (Dunbar 71); but they should also be contrasted with “Je Ne Parle Pas Français” in which the immediacy of Raoul Duquette’s discourse and voice is counterbalanced by a pervasive sense of irony and imposture. If social satire and gentle irony are not completely absent from those stories, the disappearance of any narratorial stance — they all have the form of a dramatic script — renders the perception of such undertones more complex than if free indirect speech had been used.
- 7 “The Lady’s Maid” is a dramatic dialogue in which Ellen tells her life story and the details of her relationship with her mistress to an unnamed listener — certainly a female guest in the house — whose “cues” are systematically replaced by ellipses at the beginning of each paragraph but can easily be reconstructed most of the time:
- ... I hope I haven’t disturbed you, madam. You weren’t asleep were you? But I’ve just given my lady her tea, and there was such a ice cup over, I thought, perhaps ...
- ... Not at all, madam. I always make a cup of tea last thing. She drinks it in bed after her prayers to warm her up. I put the kettle on when she kneels down and I say to it, “Now you needn’t be in too much hurry to say *your* prayers.” (375)⁸
- 8 Introduced by a stage direction elliptically indicating time, space and entrance through free direct discourse — “ELEVEN o’clock. A knock at the door” —, the story stages the spectacle of the domestic, social and patriarchal ideology in which the servant is unconsciously trapped and that the reader gradually discovers as she tells her listener how she sacrificed her chance at marriage to her tie to her “lady”. At the end of the story, the maid’s conditioned responses of self-denial, which, ironically yet

pathetically, echo the Lady's fake claims of altruism — "I asked her if she'd rather I ... didn't get married. 'No, Ellen,' she said — that was her voice, madam, like I'm giving you—'NO, Ellen, not for the *wide world!*'" (379) — give way to confusion and the need for oblivion, while the suspension marks no longer figure the suppressed listener's answers but the unspeakable:

... Oh dear, I sometimes think ... whatever should I do if anything were to ... But, there, thinking's no god to anyone—is it, madam? Thinking won't help. Not that I do it often. And if ever I do I pull myself up sharp, "Now then, Ellen. At it again—you silly girl! If you can't find anything better to do than to start thinking...!" (380)

- 9 In "Late at Night", a short story written in monologue form which could easily be taken for a one-act play, Virginia, "seated by the fire", "her outdoor things [being] thrown on a chair," reads part of the letter she has just received from her lover and complains about his vanity and shallowness:

VIRGINIA (laying the letter down): I don't like this letter at all — not at all. I wonder if he means it to be so snubbing — or if it's just his way. (Reads.) "Many thanks for the socks. As I have five pairs sent me lately, I am sure you will be pleased to hear I gave yours to a friend in my company." No; it can't be my fancy. He must have meant it; it is a dreadful snub. (637)

- 10 She then expresses her desperate longing for love in a speech riddled with hesitations, interrogations and moments of lucidity, the pathos of which contrasts deeply with the bathetic allusion to the lover's "rejection" of the socks she sent him:

I wonder why it is that after a certain point I always seem to repel people. Funny isn't it! They like me at first. [...] Perhaps they know that I've got so much to give. Perhaps it's that that frightens them. Oh, I feel I've got such boundless, boundless love to give to somebody — I would care for somebody so utterly and so completely — watch over them— keep everything horrible away — and make them feel that if ever they wanted anything done I lived to do it. [...] Yes; that is the secret of life for me— to feel loved, to feel wanted, to know that somebody leaned on me for everything absolutely — for ever. (638)

- 11 But as the fire is going out and the doubts accumulate — "I wonder", "I keep wondering", "I suppose", "Funny, isn't it?" — too numerous to be coped with for the lonely character, forgetfulness and escapism soon replace the nascent self-revelation:

Oh, well, don't sentimentalise over it; burn it! ... No, I can't now—the fire's gone out. I'll go to bed. I wonder if he really meant to be snubbing. Oh, I'm tired. Often when I go to bed now I want to pull the clothes over my head— and just cry. Funny, isn't it! (639)

- 12 "The Canary", probably one of Mansfield's most famous stories, recalls the "Lady's Maid" and "Late at Night" in its thematic impulse. The female speaker, a boarding-house keeper who lacks human companionship and is sometimes mocked by her lodgers, values her now-dead canary not only as a friend and companion but also as a symbolic lover who made her forget even "the evening star" when he "came into [her life]" (419).

...You see that big nail to the right of the front door? [...](418)

... You cannot imagine how wonderfully he sang. It was not like the singing of other canaries. [...]

... I loved him. How I loved him! Perhaps it does not matter so very much what it is one loves in this world. But love something one must. [...] (419)

- 13 In this monologic story set in the form of a dialogue with an absent listener referred to as "you", emotion, immediacy and pathos prevail and are accompanied, I would argue, by a sense of decency related to the character's fight against despair. Mansfield's

expurgated narrative technique is based on a thematic contrast between presence and absence, and on a dramaturgy of speech resorting to an accumulation of ellipses that echo the void surrounding the protagonist while inscribing in the text her pleas for a response. As the “story” unfolds, speech becomes a form of memorialization which momentarily compensates for loss:

... It surprises me even now to remember how he and I shared each other's lives. [...] I spread a newspaper over a corner of the table, and when I put the cage on it he used to beat with his wings despairingly, as if he didn't know what was coming. “You're a regular little actor,” I used to scold him. I scraped the tray, dusted it with fresh sand, filled his seed and water tins, tucked a piece of chickweed and half a chilli between the bars. And I'm perfectly certain he understood and appreciated every item of the performance. (420)

- 14 In the end though, the suspension marks become the typographical and metaphorical traces of a disturbing absence of interlocutor, or audience, which puts the stress on a process of impossible mourning that the reader is required to assess and even to absorb:

One can never know. But isn't it extraordinary that under his sweet, joyful little singing it was just this — sadness? — Ah, what is it — that I heard. (422)

- 15 The technique is similar in Elizabeth Bowen's “Oh Madam, ...”, which is obviously a re-writing of Katherine Mansfield's “The Lady's Maid”, twenty years after⁹. Although the context, which can easily be reconstructed indirectly, is here that of war-time England, the story being, according to Bowen's own words in her preface to *The Demon Lover*, a study of the “strange growths” “provoked by war and the ‘dessication’ of everyone's life”, “Oh Madam ...” stages “the personal cry” of one “individual” (Bowen 1986, 96), another lady's maid, who bears the burden of responsibility for keeping the recently bombed house — a metonymy for England — intact while “Madam” finally decides to flee to more comfortable quarters: “Oh, madam ...Oh, *madam*, here you are! I don't know what you'll say. Look, sit down for just a minute, madam; I dusted this chair for you. Yes, the hall's all right really; you don't see so much at first — only, our beautiful fanlight gone.” (578)

- 16 In non-stop talk that turns out to be an obsequious monologue, the lady's “cues” being here again systematically replaced by suspension marks, the unnamed maid tries to reassure “Madam”, denying her own fear while revealing it, and displaying, as Katherine Mansfield's maid did, a painful yet unconscious internalization of imposed roles, whether social or cultural. As the “conversation” unfolds, the illusion inscribed in the pronoun “our” of my first quotation dissolves: the house, “a monument to lack and loss” (Ellmann 8), will be once more deserted by its owner who is finally revealed as being completely impervious to the speaker's emotions, as her suppressed retorts eventually metaphorize:

No such great hurry? — I don't understand — I — you — why, madam? *Wouldn't* you wish —?

Why no, I suppose not, madam ... I hadn't thought.

You feel you don't really ... Not after all this.

But you couldn't ever, not this beautiful house! You couldn't ever ...I know many ladies feel it for the best. You can't but notice all those good houses shut. But, madam, this seemed so much your home — (581)

Excuse me, madam — Madam, it's nothing, really. I — I — I — I'm really not taking on. I daresay I — got a bit of dust in my eye ... You're too kind — you make me ashamed, really ... Yes, I daresay it's the lack of sleep ... The sun out there ... If you'll excuse me, madam — I'll give my nose a good — that clears a thing off ...

... And I couldn't leave this house empty, the whole night ... I know, madam; I know that must come in time ... Lonely? No; no, I don't feel lonely. And this never did feel to me a lonely house. (582)

- 17 The theatricality of the stories I have briefly introduced relies mainly on the absence of any narratorial mediation (a mediation replaced by minimal stage directions in some cases), and on the immediacy of free direct discourse which encodes an individual voice through vernacular language. As in drama, exposition and context are narrativized by the speaker, a structure of dialogue between speaker and audience (here, reader) is implied, and this discursive structure invites active participation of receptor to fill in the gaps, complete characterization and assess values. In terms of dramatic tension, "The Lady's Maid", "Oh Madam ..." and "Late at Night" revolve around a latent conflict between the I-speakers and their present or absent interlocutors, the turning point of this conflict being situated at the end of the text (as expected in a short story) and resulting in the diminishing resistance of the main protagonist to his or her plight (the issue is the same in "The Canary"). In Bowen's fiction, the entrance and exit of the Lady indirectly referred to in the maid's speech illustrates the imbalance of power on which the satiric impulse of the three stories is partly grounded. But as in drama, this satiric impulse, which notably relies on the underlying plot of social, patriarchal and symbolical domination, is not ascribable to a point of view external to the scene. The absence of any form of disappropriation of speech through narratorial control, which, in other short stories, maintains the characters' voices at a distance, does not render irony inevitable but makes it dependent on the reader's higher awareness of the protagonists' inner conflicts and of the aesthetic or cultural contrasts built up by the texts. In her analysis of "The Canary", for example, Pamela Dunbar suggests that "by making a bird the object of her heroine's emotions, the author allows the pathos of her portrait to dip over into the grotesque" as the speaker is de facto "disqualified by her sex and lack of social status from the exalted status of the Romantic poet" (Dunbar 72). But another interpretation of the story could choose to emphasize the emotional and theatrical performance of the caretaker whose voice is able to change tones, to call for other voices and to finally defy silence while rendering it painfully palpable.
- 18 In pragmatic terms, I would argue that in the fictions I have presented, Mansfield and Bowen use the brevity of the genre to "explore the implications of the short story for speech" by enabling their readers to focus on the "verbatim contents" of the texts (Skrbic 43)¹⁰. The lexico-grammatical features (questions, exclamations, suggestions), and the phonological features of the linguistic code (repetitions, interruptions, hesitations, pauses, variations in tone indicated by italics) are here foregrounded, illustrating one of Michael Stephens' points in *The Dramaturgy of Style*: "When tension enters into the equation of speech and voice, dramaturgical moments occur" (Stephens 4). To be more specific, the tension aroused in the given examples is linked to the illocutionary force of individual speech acts—a force that is mainly expressive—; but it is also linked to the illocutionary force of the texts themselves, which, taken as wholes, restore expressive efficiency to non-canonical speakers who do not use a dominant language but strive at authenticity.
- 19 Of course, if drama is a performance genre and not a narrative one, it is because the transmutation of the written lines into spoken speech is crucial and depends on the bodily presence of an actor on a stage and on his voice. In the theatre, dialogism also depends on the physical presence of a collective audience, and the illocutionary acts imply perlocutionary acts involving both other characters and audience. Besides,

drama is a global experience, intellectual, emotional and sensorial, implying visual, auditory and olfactive dimensions, and the building up of meaning through paralinguistic codes (gestures, props, clothing, kinesis, ...). We obviously lose those dimensions in the short stories. But we gain here in terms of simplification of plot, universality (notably linked to the absence of contextual markers and names) and emotional impact. We see beyond the pathos of silent lives towards future losses; we may even experience a sense of guilt in our absorption of the silent listener's role.

- 20 However, the question of the expressive efficiency of these lonely or excluded speakers remains, as neither cooperation nor mutual support between interlocutors are suggested, which challenges the very idea of communicative competence on the speaker's part and questions the reader's own listening competence. For here lies, it seems to me, one of the main achievements of those short stories, but also one of their paradoxes: on a first level of analysis, the dialogic impulse of fiction in general, and of modernist fiction in particular — so often centred on a polyphonic play of sometimes unidentified voices which de-privilege the absolute, authoritarian discourses — seems here to be replaced by a monologic impulse that conveys an urge for authentic self-expression, prevents the reader from dividing his adhesion but could also appear to share what Bakhtin called the “monolithic” aspect of “verbal expression” in drama (Bakhtin 17). However, a closer analysis of the dramaturgy of voice in Mansfield's and Bowen's stories suggests that this monologism is a mere illusory surface masking first what I would call a form of dialogism in absentia, then, the polyphony implied by the different speeches reported by the lonely protagonists themselves. Nonetheless, the generic and discursive hybridity of those theatrical fictions creates a conflict in participation and reception. On the one hand, the necessity of our response is triggered by the ellipses of the text; it is conditioned by the widening gap between the speakers' assessment of their addressees and ours, and by the necessity to re-vocalize speech to seize its expressive intensity (which is another form of participation). On the other hand, we are free to assess, or not, the perlocutionary force of the speech act, to respond, or not, to the impossibility of a cathartic experience, to be less sensitive to pathos than to the possibility of bathos. In the end, how are we to listen to the speaking voices that accept the silence yet fight against it in order not to sink into nothingness, and is there a collective answer to that question?

Genre, voice, gender

- 21 It is now time to briefly turn to “The Evening Party”, which raises similar questions to those raised by the more “theatrical” short fictions I have been commenting upon, but aims at and reaches different effects. Like other short fictions by Woolf, it revolves around a party used as “a social microcosm of social types and attitudes”, and has “affinities with the drama, as much of it is directly reported dialogue”, most of the speakers being unidentified. “The first-person narrator appears as one of these speakers, and the reader is her guest at the party, overhearing conversations and sharing impressions” (Baldwin 18):

‘Come into the corner and let us talk.’

‘Wonderful! Wonderful human beings! Spiritual and wonderful!’

‘*But they don't exist.* Don't you see the pond through the Professor's head? Don't you see the swan swimming through Mary's shirt?’

‘I can fancy little burning roses dotted about them.’ (97)

'The professor looms upon us.'

'Tell us, Professor—'

'Madam?'

'Is it in your opinion necessary to write grammar? And punctuation. The question of Shelley's commas interests me profoundly.'

'Let us be seated. To tell the truth open windows after sunset — standing with my back — agreeable though conversation— You asked of Shelley's commas. A matter of some importance. [...] (97)

22 As Dominic Head explains, the short story stages three dialogues: "the dialogue of the narrator with her companion, an ideal listener receptive to the rise and fall of his companion's impressions, the dialogue with the Professor which focuses on the ideological limitations of an authoritative voice, and a dialogue composed of the interactions of the narrator's voice and the discourses of the party which produces the main conflict of the story [...] in the sense that this dialogue generates the main satirical event: a counterpoint of poetic flight and bathetic descent." (Head, 95).

23 There are a few common themes between "The Evening Party", and Bowen's and Mansfield's stories: the urge to go beyond the politeness and banalities of social interaction, the search for self-expression and communication inducing a dialectic between exclusion and inclusion, togetherness or separation, the question of the other approached through one's role in a community, the undermining of dominant discourse. There are also some theatrical similarities like the foregrounding of speech in its semantic, pragmatic and phonological dimension, the exploration of the way conversation, dialogue or monologue might tell a story, the existence of "non-cooperative and non supportive exchange structures" posing "difficulties that impact reading", the use of unidentified speakers to problematize self, utterance and reception (Skrbic, 44-45), a typically modernist feature. However, in Woolf's "story", free direct discourse coexists with free indirect discourse, the text is explicitly polyphonic and the dialogue between the two main protagonists shows how aware they are of the limits of mundane conversation and of language itself — "Speech is an old torn net, through which the fish escape as one casts it over them", one says (99) — even if the two of them keep on looking for the possibility of what Austin called the "felicitous conditions of utterance":

'The roses nodding —'

'The waves breaking —'

'Over the fields coming those strange airs of dawn that tries the doors of the house and fall flat —'

'Then, lying down to sleep, the bed's —'

'A boat! A boat! Over the sea all night long —'

'And sitting upright, the stars —' (100)

24 If the preceding dialogue is indeed written as a kind of musical score for two voices, those felicitous conditions of utterance will be undermined at the end of the story by the speakers' attempted retreat into silence and the impossibility to integrate their voice to the other voices of the party.

25 I would therefore argue that while Mansfield and Bowen devise a dramaturgy of the solitary self, Woolf explores a dramaturgy of polyphony where voices are both individualized, dis-originated and set against the complex community of a "we". In each case, though, the dramaturgy of voice addresses our own sense of individuality, solitariness and dissociation, our sensitivity to empathy or distance while raising

questions about communication and community, collective reception and individual receptivity:

... So do we all begin by acting and the nearer we are to what we would be the more perfect our *disguise*. Finally there comes the moment when *we are no longer acting*; it may even catch us by surprise. We may look in amazement at our no longer borrowed plumage. The two have merged; that which we put on has joined that which was; acting has become action. The soul has accepted this livery for its own after a time of trying on and approving.

To act ... to see ourselves in the part — to make a larger gesture than would be ours in life — to declaim, to pronounce, to even exaggerate. To persuade ourselves? Or others? To put ourselves in heart? To do more than is necessary in order that we may accomplish *ce qu'il faut*.

End then Hamlet is lonely. The solitary person always acts. (Mansfield 1985, 243)¹¹

- 26 Obviously, the fact that in “The Lady’s Maid”, “Oh, Madam ...”, “Late at Night” and “The Canary” the solitary characters are all women invites us to explore the generic hybridity and discursive complexities of those short fictions in yet another direction. With their “all-female cast”, these four “stories” explore women’s individuality, and their “victimization by a sexual ideology that offers them self-defeating options” (Lassner 36). In so doing they give voice to the voiceless, turning the notion of “voice”, more or less overtly, into the synecdochic and metaphoric expression of women’s struggle with patriarchy:

We are firmly held with the self-fashioned chains of slavery. Yes, now I see that they *are* self-fashioned, and must be self-removed [...] The knowledge that genius is dormant in every soul — that that very individuality which is at the root of our being is what matters so poignantly. (Mansfield 1985, 35)

- 27 In this respect, the female subject that Mansfield’s and Bowen’s stories represent and discursively construct is meaningfully contradictory. On the one hand, it manifests an impulse towards the discovery of an immutable, unified self; on the other hand, it bears the traces of the modernist impulse towards the representation of a self-divided subject. In between pathos and pathology, self-assertion and self-infantilization, “unconsciously parodying patriarchal expectations of the feminine, internalizing masculine imperatives so completely that it persists without men’s presence,” (Parkin Gounelas, 506) Virginia and the other female characters obviously “make a spectacle of themselves”, as the saying goes. Simultaneously, though, the exacerbation of their feelings, the insistence on the expressive function of language rather than on its representative and communicative functions, the resort to affect more than to cognition all contribute to the foundations of a female selfhood, shaky, yet capable of resisting the threats of solitude and victimization. Robin Lakoff’s work on sex-differentiated language in *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975), which, unfortunately, I won’t have the time here to explore in detail, could help us support the view that voice presentation opens here towards political representation through a series of linguistic features regarded by Lakoff as indices of women’s style or register: the vocabulary related to women’s domestic domain, the propensity for euphemistic and polite phrases, the partiality for the expression of emotions, the avoidance of anger-ridden terms, the mitigating use of tag questions which reduces the force of the assertion, the use of modals to signal uncertainty, etc ... (Lakoff, 77-81)
- 28 “Drama so often is what is *not* said” Michael Stephens explains. “That is the quality which short fiction shares with the drama. There are ellipses, pauses, and silences, between which often the very substance of voice, if not language and words, is

manifested.” (Stephens 4). But voice, I would suggest in an echo to Katherine Mansfield’s famous words on prose, “is a hidden country still.”¹² In the modernist short fictions I have been examining, the notion of “voice” refers to the referential voices of impersonated speech, to the unattributed voices de-authorizing the narrative voice, to the thematized voices metaphorizing the self and its vulnerable presence, but also to the voices encoded by the texts and asking for a re-vocalization by their readers. The dramaturgy of voice in “The Canary”, “The Lady’s Maid”, “Late at Night”, “Oh! Madam ...” and “The Evening Party” implies theatricality, but without any masks, or, at least, with the possibility that at some epiphanic moments the characters’ voices (as articulated discourse and wordless affect) could display the self to itself and to others. “—Ah, what is it?— that I heard.” wonders the speaker in “The Canary” suggesting the hope that whatever she may have heard, we may temporarily have shared with her.

NOTES

1. M. Stephens, *The Dramaturgy of Style: Voice in Short Fiction*, Carbondale / Edwardsville : Southern Illinois University Press, 1986, p. 7.
2. “I am, and am bound to be, a writer closely involved with place and time; for me these are more than elements they are actors.” (Bowen 1986, 123)
3. “I do believe that the time has come for a “new word” but I imagine the new word will not be spoken easily. People have never explored the lovely medium of prose. It is a hidden country still.” (Mansfield 1985, 136).
4. Elizabeth Bowen, “Review of Virginia Woolf”, *Collected Impressions* (Bowen 1950, 80).
5. The quotation referred to here — “And then I shall be free. Free at last to write out one or two more stories which have accumulated. I am less and less sure that they are stories, or what they are. Only I do feel fairly sure that I am grazing as near as I can to my own ideas and getting a tolerable shape for them” — is extracted from a 1924 entry of *A Writer’s Diary* (Woolf 1978, 97); it echoes a 1917 letter written by Mansfield to Dorothy Brett in which she refers to her story “Prelude” in the following terms: “What form is it? you ask. Ah, Brett, it’s so difficult to say. As far as I know, it’s more or less my own invention.” (Mansfield 1985, 85)
6. As Hanson puts it, “[Modernist short fiction writers] argued that the pleasing shape and coherence of the traditional short story represented a falsification of the discrete and heterogeneous nature of experience. [...] And the achieved and finality of the “tale” was distrusted for ‘story’ in this sense seemed to convey the misleading notion of something finished, absolute, and wholly understood.” (Hanson, 55)
7. “Without [the sense of a crisis] how are we to appreciate the importance of ‘one spiritual event’ rather than another?” (Mansfield 1930, 32)
8. All references to the texts of the short stories are to the editions mentioned in the bibliography.
9. In her preface to the collection *Encounters*, Bowen wrote: “I first read “Bliss” after I had completed my own set of stories, to be *Encounters* — then, exaltation and envy were shot through, instantly, by foreboding. ‘If I ever *am* published, they’ll say I copied her.’ I was right.” (Bowen 1986, 120)

10. Interestingly enough, Bowen wrote in an essay entitled “Notes on Writing a Novel: “Speech is what the characters do to each other. [...] It should short-circuit description of mental traits. Every sentence in dialogue should be descriptive of the character who is speaking. Idiom, tempo, and shape of each spoken sentence should be calculated by the novelist, towards this descriptive end.”(Bowen 1950, 255-256)

11. Not far from there, Woolf’s experiments with conversation and voice would lead the “dramatic soliloquies” of her “playpoem” novel — *The Waves* — (Woolf 1978, 174) and to her realizing in 1933 that *The Pargiters*, which would soon become *Between the Acts*, “tend[ed] more and more [...] to drama” (Woolf 1978, 257).

12. “I do believe that the time has come for a “new word” but I imagine the new word will not be spoken easily. People have never explored the lovely medium of prose. It is a hidden country still — I feel that so profoundly.” (Mansfield 1985, 136)

ABSTRACTS

Cet article propose d’explorer la mise en place d’une dramaturgie de la voix dans cinq nouvelles d’auteurs modernistes et de montrer comment l’utilisation presque exclusive du mode discursif de la conversation s’accompagne d’une exposition théâtrale du langage et d’une poétique de l’affect qui font écho à l’analyse de Michael Stephens dans *The Dramaturgy of Style*: “By making fiction voice-centered, the stress goes away from the representational toward the presentational. It becomes gestural, human voice-activated, and the body is the soul because what you see is what you get¹.” Il s’agira d’abord de s’interroger sur la façon dont cette dramaturgie de la voix renvoie au statut générique de ces cinq nouvelles, et plus généralement de la fiction brève moderniste. La question du lien possible, mais problématique, entre la notion de “genre” littéraire et celle de “gender” sera ensuite examinée dans le but de mettre en regard le drame de la voix et le drame du moi moderniste au féminin. La dimension orale, dramatique, pathétique ou ironique de la voix dans ces nouvelles nous conduira enfin à tenter de répondre à la question du locuteur féminin dans “The Canary” : “What is it — that I heard?”

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