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SOUS-CONVERSATION AND POLYPHONY IN *THREE*

Reading Ann Quin through the lenses of Sarraute and Bakhtin

ABSTRACT: Starting from some preliminary considerations on the future of the novel advanced by Nathalie Sarraute in "Conversation et sous-conversation", and recurring also to Bakhtin's observations on the polyphonic word in Dostoevsky, this article intends to analyse the peculiar approach to dialogue adopted by British neo-Modernist author Ann Quin (1933-1973) in her second novel, *Three* (1966). Influenced by both Sarraute and Dostoevsky, with *Three* Quin has created a work in which the characters' acts of communications, apparently banal and meaningless on the surface, let in fact perceive the looming presence of an entire area of unexpressed darkness which pushes beneath words and gestures, shaping and leaving its indelible mark on them. By reading some pivotal passages of *Three* through the lenses of Sarraute's discussions around *tropismes* and *sous-conversation*, as well as through Bakhtin's observations on Dostoevsky's polyphony, the aim of this analysis will be that of assessing any similarities and/or original divergencies between Sarraute's and Dostoevsky's approaches to dialogue and Quin's own re-elaboration of them in her writing.

KEYWORDS: Ann Quin; *Three*; British neo-Modernism; Experimental fiction; Sarraute; Bakhtin; Dostoevsky; Polyphony.

I. Introduction

a. Some premises on Bakhtin and Sarraute's possible similarities

In her collection of essays entitled *L'ère du soupçon* (1956), the French author Nathalie Sarraute – one of the major theorists and practitioners of the so-called *nouveau roman* – urges contemporary novelists to work out entirely new techniques for their writing. In particular, what she calls for is a wiser and more effective exploitation of all those unique characteristics which, in her view, still differentiate the novel from other media of more recent appearance – the cinema, for instance, which had taken over the descriptive role which had once been the excellence of prose.

More specifically, Sarraute's major concern regards the way dialogue should be treated in the fiction of the future: novelists should, for instance, renounce the anachronistic employment of too obtrusive and omniscient narrators and thus let their characters speak for themselves, apart from better exploiting the power and potential of the spoken word. For this reason, dialogues should be constructed in such a way as to allow the reader to glimpse, behind the words exchanged by the characters, that subterranean world of concealed emotions from which those words originate, and which are by them always partly hidden and simultaneously partly revealed. As she formulates in her essay, "Conversation et sous-conversation":

> It is thus desirable to dream […] of a technique which would allow the reader to immerse himself in that stream of subterranean dramas […]: a technique which would give him the illusion to repeat those actions himself with a more vivid conscience, with more order, clarity and force than he would be able to do in his real life, maintaining simultaneously that feeling of indeterminacy, opaqueness and mystery that these actions always possess for those who experience them. Dialogue, which would become in this way the mere outcome or one of the stages of these dramas, would free itself most naturally from those conventions and constrictions made indispensable by the methods of the traditional novel. Thus, owing to a change of rhythm or of form, and in accordance with his own sensations and in fact augmenting them, the reader would imperceptibly recognise that the action has moved from the within to the without. (1956, 139-140)[1]

The concept of what Sarraute defines as *sous-conversation* – a sort of submerged subconscious amalgam of feelings, sensations and images which quiescently lie beneath the words we utter, as well as the thoughts we form conscientiously inside our mind – is linked to another idea pervasively present in her writing, a phenomenon she refers to as *tropismes*.[2] These tropisms – a scientific term indicating the automatic reactions of certain organisms in response to external stimuli – are intended as all those uncontrolled motions in our words and gestures which are caused by the interaction between the external world and the unconscious sphere of our interiority: "[t]hey are undefinable movements which drift away most rapidly to the limits of our consciousness. They lie at the origin of our gestures, of our words and feelings, the feelings that we manifest and

[1] "Il est donc permis du rêver […] d'une technique qui parviendrait à plonger le lecteur dans le flot de ces drames souterrains […] : une technique qui donnerait au lecteur l'illusion de refaire lui-même ces actions avec un conscience plus lucide, avec plus d'ordre, de netteté et de force qu'il ne peut le faire dans la vie, sans qu'elles perdent cette part d'indétermination, cette opacité et ce mystère qu'ont toujours ses actions pour celui qui les vit. Le dialogue, qui ne serait pas autre chose que l'aboutissement ou parfois une des phases de ces drames, se délivrerait alors tout naturellement des conventions et des contraintes que rendaient indispensables les méthodes du roman traditionnel. C'est insensiblement, par un changement de rythme ou de forme, qui épouserait en l'accentuant sa propre sensation, que le lecteur reconnaîtrait que l'action est passée du dedans au-dehors" (my translation).

[2] *Tropismes* is also the title of her debut collection of short stories, published in 1939.

that we believe we feel, those that it is possible to define." (Sarraute 1956, 8)[3]. In other words, they represent little moments of revelation, in which an uncontrolled gesture or reaction allows one to glimpse the presence of an unexpressed and inexpressible underworld region which lies beneath the sphere of our exterior expressions, be them of a verbal or corporeal nature.

Given these preliminary considerations, it is curious to note that the concepts of *sous-conversation* and *tropismes* find interesting parallelisms and similarities in the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, especially if one takes into consideration Mikhail Bakhtin's observations round the polyphonic nature of his writing. In Dostoevsky, too – Bakhtin instructs us –, the word is subjected to and bears the trace of the pressure of external forces which tend to mould it and inform its final trajectory: "each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person." (1999, 197). In other words, the utterances of a given individual are always inscribed within a projected dialogue with other consciences, and articulated in response to the imagined reply of the other:

> In Dostoevsky, consciousness never gravitates toward itself but is always found in intense relationship with another consciousness. Every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle, or is on the contrary open to inspiration from outside itself – but it is not in any case concentrated simply on its own object; it is accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person. (Bakhtin 1999, 32)

Elsewhere, Bakhtin expands on this "sideward glance", this constant awareness of the word of the other, suggesting how the subtle power of this external influence is not only capable of deviating or informing a character's speech, but of moulding, as well, the very consciousness and sense of identity one may have of him/herself:

> The hero's attitude toward himself is inseparably bound up with his attitude toward another, and with the attitude of another toward him. His consciousness of self is constantly perceived against the background of the other's consciousness of him- 'I for myself' against the background of 'I for another.' Thus the hero's words about himself are structured under the continuous influence of someone else's words about him. (1999, 207)

Comparing these general definitions, one could conclude that *sous-conversation*, *tropismes* and polyphony, after all, are phenomena that seem to refer to a group of similar basic dynamics that affect dialogue, communication and expression, and which indicate how the word is never completely neutral, self-sufficient and autonomous in itself, but

[3] "Ce sont des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu'il est possible de définir" (my translation).

always somehow connected to and modelled by other forces, referring to something other than itself. The major difference between Sarraute and Bakhtin seems rather to lie in the focus or perspective from which their respective observations are made: on the one hand, Bakhtin considers the issue as an eminently vocal phenomenon, inscribing it within a broader system based on his idea of polyphony, in which all voices stand on the same level and interact or clash with one another; Sarraute's explorations, on the other, regard the relationship between the speech or the actions of a given character and the unexpressed universe of his/her interiority. Thus, the trajectory traced by Bakhtin turns out to be an 'altruistic' one, that is, originating from the self but orientated towards the other; that of Sarraute, instead, is more 'egocentric', originating from an interaction with the other and subsequently developing within the interiority of the self.[4]

Regardless of their differences, in any case, Bakhtin and Sarraute's observations are certainly equally valuable in any analysis which might be made of the construction of dialogue in fiction, especially when considering novelists who are deeply aware of the influence of interrelations and of the subconscious on a given character's speech.

One such writer, one who can certainly be said to have followed Sarraute's advice, and whose peculiar treatment of dialogue and multivocality places her at a curious junction between the latter and Dostoevsky, is undoubtedly the British neo-Modernist author Ann Quin (1933-1973). Having absorbed the influence of both, and, especially, having reworked it in an extremely original and personal fashion, Quin provides us with a perfect case-study, a perfect opportunity to consider Sarraute's and Bakhtin's theories in an interesting new light, as well as to assess what kind of outcome this peculiar convergence of influences has produced in a totally different spatial, linguistic and temporal context.

b. Quin between nouveau roman *and Dostoevsky*

As regards the impact of Sarraute, and more generally of the nouveau roman, on Quin's writing, it is necessary to point out that this aspect has to be correlated with a broader and more articulated system of relationships and dynamics, for whose detailed discussion there is insufficient room here. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that Quin was part of a group of experimental writers who appeared on the English literary scene of the Sixties and which, apart from herself, comprised in its ranks also Bryan Stanley Johnson,

[4] This difference is especially detectable in some passages of her essay "De Dostoïevski à Kafka", in which the behaviour of Zosima (a character from *The Brothers Karamazov*) is analysed (see 1956, 32-39). There is no room, here, for a thorough and exhaustive comparison, but suffice to say that Sarraute seems keen to interpret Zosima's contortions 'monologically', as exteriorisations of his interior world, while Bachtin would rather ascribe his bizarre contention and the strange convolutions of his speech to the influence that the invisible word of the other exerts on him, on the principle that "[t]he very distribution of voices and their interaction is what matters to Dostoevsky" (Bachtin 1999, 265).

Eva Figes and Alan Burns. The authors of this group had deep implications with the French movement, and at least those of them who were directly published by the avant-garde publisher Calder & Boyars – that is, Burns and Quin – had been promoted since their very first appearances in juxtaposition with the English translations of the novels and theories of the *nouveaux romanciers* – whose publishing rights were detained for the great majority by Calder as well.

It was indeed Calder's ambition and firm intention to bring together this "new school of British fiction, which needed to be promoted as a school." (Calder 2001, 186). As he himself relates in his memoir:

> I arranged lectures, readings and debates for my little stable of London-based authors, and involved their friends who were published by others. The last school of British writing that had successfully established itself was the Bloomsbury Group […] After the war there had been an attempt by Wain, Amis, Larkin and their friends to launch 'The Movement' […] [I]t was a very English and inward-looking group, disliking especially Europe and America, very Oxbridge and middle-class. My group came from the newly-educated upward-thrusting working-class or lower middle. (2001, 276-7)

Within the framework of a broader commercial project, Calder then foregrounded the possible affinity these authors had with the *nouveaux romanciers*, presenting them as a British response to the French movement, and using the prestige and status acquired by the nouveau roman to legitimise them more effectively in the eyes of his readership. This, as Guy contends, had been made possible by Calder's own painstaking efforts during the Fifties and early Sixties, which had contributed to render the nouveau roman "a focal point for discussions of the numerous significations and modalities of the 'new'", also "facilitat[ing] a rich and extensive discourse about the legacies of modernism and the avant-garde, about forms of newness (aesthetic and otherwise), and about the definition of literary culture beyond a national frame". (2020, 25).

To this general scenario, it should be added that at least some of the authors of B. S. Johnson's circle – notably, Johnson himself (1966)[5] and Figes (2009; 2010)[6] – have explicitly acknowledged, if not a direct influence, at least a profound awareness of the nouveau roman. Direct contacts between the French and the British authors can also be assessed in a number of entries of Rayner Heppenstall's journals. A sort of spiritual mentor to the circle of B. S. Johnson – he defined himself as a "*chef de file*" in this respect

[5] He affirms in an article entitled "Experimental British Fiction": "[Rayner] Heppenstall is a kind of father-figure to the rest of us: and he it was who first championed the French 'new novel' in England, introduced us to Robbe-Grillet and Roussel and Nathalie Sarraute: though their influence has been mainly through their theories rather than their practice, which often tends to seem arid to English minds." (1966).

[6] She admits, for instance, that the Sixties group had been "influenced by what was happening in France" (Figes 2010), and that they "were all aware of the nouveau roman. I certainly was" (2009).

(1966, 67)[7] –, Heppenstall notoriously exploited his status and influence to attract the attention of the British novelists of the younger generation towards the nouveau roman, which he regarded as a phenomenon "more stimulating than anything going on at present in our own literature." (1961, 271). Notably, in a 1973 entry, he reminisces of one occasion in which he propitiated the encounter of B. S. Johnson and Ann Quin, also introducing them to Nathalie Sarraute: "[Ann] first met B.S. Johnson at our flat, over a light, early dinner, after which Bryan [Johnson] drove us all to the shop called Better Books in Charing Cross Road, where Nathalie Sarraute was lecturing, with me as her chairman." (1961, 120).

To return however to Quin's specific case, it is worth noting that the *nouveaux romanciers* with whom she entertains the strongest affinity are in fact Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Sarraute. It is indeed Quin herself who indicates them as key influences on her writing, including both their works of fiction and criticism – that is, those available to her in Calder's English translations – in the list of books which most contributed to her writerly formation.[8] Duras's method, which has been described in terms of her intention "to suggest the unspoken depths through an obsessive insistence on the trivial, both in physical presence and dialogue" (Brooke-Rose 1961) is indeed clearly recognisable as a distinctive feature of Quin's poetics as well. The affinity with Sarraute, instead, whose main features can be evinced in the latter's formulations on the nature of *sous-conversation* and *tropismes* reported above, is obviously detectable in Quin's peculiar attention to the psychological side of her characters, especially in the way she lets their interiority to be glimpsed behind the surface of apparently banal gestures and words (as will be further discussed in the following sections).

Apart from this, another trait Quin possibly borrowed from Sarraute – though the influence of Beckett, here, could also be of pivotal importance[9] – regards the graphic

[7] "I was somewhat regarded as the senior *avant-garde* British novelist, also representing the French *nouveau roman*. It was therefore as to a *chef de file* that B.S. Johnson first sent me a proof copy of his first novel, then telephoned me to ask if he could see me." (Heppenstall 1986, 67).

[8] This list, which she referred to as the "Quinology", is in fact a document enumerating the author's favourite readings, which she once recommended to a poet friend, the American Larry Goodell. More precisely, the texts related to the nouveau roman which feature here are Duras's *The Square* and Sarraute's *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, together with her joint collection of short stories and essays *Tropisms & The Age of Suspicion*. This should not come as a surprise, since these were also the most acclaimed and publicised titles in John Calder's catalogue, who was also Ann Quin's publisher. One rather striking aspect of such list, if anything, is the absence of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the other major theoretician of the *nouveau roman*, whom Quin certainty knew, but whom she did not probably appreciate as much as Sarraute or Duras (see "Quinology", Larry Goodell Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut, USA).

[9] Quin was indeed a great admirer of Beckett, as can be evinced, among countless other considerations, by the inclusion in the "Quinology" of his entire corpus of works, both dramatic and prose.

treatment of dialogue. Quin's method of reporting dialogue and narrative passages as part of the same fluid and homogeneous continuum, without markers and indicators of any kind, is indeed reminiscent of Sarraute's own method, as exposed in her theories:

> But this dialogue, which in the modern novel tends more and more to take the place left vacant by action, ill adapts to the forms imposed on it by tradition, since dialogue is above all an exterior continuation of subterranean movements [...] Consequently, nothing is less justified than these pompous indentations, these dashes with which it is customary to brutally separate the dialogue from what precedes it. Even the colon and quotation marks are still too evident, and it is perfectly comprehensible that some authors [...] are trying to amalgamate as much as possible the dialogue with its context, restricting themselves to signaling the separation with a simple comma followed by an upper-case letter. (1956, 123-5)[10]

The issue of Dostoevsky's influence on Quin, instead, requires more elaborated analyses and considerations of a less direct nature, having left but very few subtle traces to work on. It is a fact, in any case, that it is again the author herself who, in the short autobiographical story *Leaving School,* reveals that reading *Crime and Punishment* at the age of fourteen had "made [her] aware of the possibilities in writing." (2018, 16). Speaking of the peculiar mark left on the young Quin by Dostoevsky, however, it is curious to note how his influence is perhaps best detectable in an indirect way, looking at the former's writings through the filter of Bakhtin's theories on polyphony.

Quin's novels can indeed be said to be of a quintessentially polyphonic nature, as much of Dostoevsky's work. From Berg's inner confrontations with his mother's voice in the eponymous debut novel, to the juxtaposition of different points of view in *Three* and *Passages*, or, again, the penetration into the individual's speech of the omnipresent voice of advertisement in the capitalistic inferno of *Tripticks*:[11] practically all her novels present thin plots and situations whose development owes more to a clash between equally valid versions of reality rather than to a clear and logical concatenation of narrative events. By no chance, her work has been discussed in terms of ventriloquism (Butler 2013; Zambreno 2016), of a "fiction of voice" (Stevick 1989, 238), or – which brings her closer to the polyphonic Dostoevsky – as a "claustrophobic, hothouse world, largely cut off

[10] "Mais ce dialogue qui tend de plus en plus à prendre dans le roman moderne la place que l'action abandonne, s'accommode mal des formes que lui impose le roman traditionnel. Car il est surtout la continuation au-dehors des mouvements souterrains [...] Dès lors, rien n'est moins justifié que ces grands alinéas, ces tirets par lesquels on a costume de séparer brutalement le dialogue de ce qui le précède. Même les deux points et les guillemets sont encore trop apparents, et l'on comprend que certains romanciers [...] s'efforcent de fondre, dans la mesure du possible, le dialogue avec son contexte en marquant simplement la séparation par une virgule suivie d'une majuscule" (my translation).

[11] Quite aptly, the novel ends with the protagonist's realisation that his voice is the product of the colonisation of alien voices: "I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems" (2009, 192).

from history and larger patterns of social action, in which the slow dance of a very small group of egos is as important as it is because it is all there is" (Stevick 1989, 237).

Of all her works, that which most relies on a polyphonic structure, and in which the word is treated most effectively as a site of convergence of different voices and distorting forces, is undoubtedly her second novel, *Three* (1966). This work deals with an unhappily married couple, Ruth and Leonard, who confronts their guilt about the death – a suicide, apparently – of S, a mysterious girl and former colleague of Leonard's, whom they had offered to host after some traumatic operation she had undergone – probably an abortion. The novel opens with the couple's remarks about S's death, the impossibility to determine whether it has been an accident or a suicide, and their attempts at understanding the possible reasons which could have brought her to take her own life. From that moment on, they will make efforts to delve deeper and deeper into S's character by reading her posthumous journals or listening to the tapes she has recorded, bringing up in the process ever more unsettling truths about their past and about their relationship with each other and with the girl, the consequences of which they seek to evade at all costs.

In line with Sarraute's preachings, *Three* presents a narration in which the external author is almost totally absent and invisible, so that the protagonists are perfectly free to express themselves – or better, to conceal themselves to one another – without external manipulations of any kind. The most interesting aspect here is that readers have to form their own knowledge of the situation mostly indirectly, by piecing up what little information crops up fragmentarily in the dialogues with the much more revealing confessions that the characters entrust to journals, diaries, or tape recorders.

Much of the novel, in fact, is composed of banal everyday exchanges and routinary empty action, though a huge gap can be perceived at all times separating the words the characters address to each other and the genuine truths they conceal within themselves. This truth, needless to say, inevitably surfaces in many little sudden reactions they have in response to specific situations, as well as in the numerous frustrated outbursts they sometimes abandon themselves to; it may be glimpsed or appreciated behind some gestures made unthinkingly in apparent solitude, not to speak of the more intimate spaces offered by the confessional moments to which they choose to consign their truest selves in the moments of uttermost desperation.

Given these premises, it is evident that *Three*, with its multimedia, polyphonic structure and its peculiar attention to the subtle nature of its characters' verbal exchanges, may constitute a most prolific terrain in which both Sarraute's and Bakhtin's observations might be fruitfully put to test. The intention of the upcoming analysis, thus, will be to read Ann Quin's *Three* by focusing on a brief selection of pivotal passages, in order to try and assess any possible similarities or divergencies between her and Sarraute's method.

Bakhtin's theories on polyphony, whenever they can be effectively and meaningfully applied, will also be called into consideration to enrich and deepen the discussion.

II. Polyphony and *sous-conversation* in *Three*

a. Acts of communication

One first important consideration to be made with regard to the interactions performed by the characters of *Three* is that they are carried out through different channels and modes of communication, forming a diversified set of both verbal and non-verbal exchanges and actions. Speaking of the first category, for instance, we are presented with both written and oral forms, ranging from Ruth and Leonard's dialogues and S's recorded voice to the graphic nature of the three characters' respective journals and diaries. As to the sphere of actions, bodily gestures and other non-verbal exteriorisations, one can distinguish between the routinary actions performed by Ruth and Leonard and other more circumstantial and unique acts, which express more or less directly and clearly what the characters really feel.

At a closer look, these various acts reflect different degrees of adherence between what is actually conveyed through an act of communication and the impalpable psychological world which stands at the origin of that act – i.e., what Sarraute calls *sous-conversation*. On many occasions, the characters appear to exert an almost total control on their words and behaviours; at the slightest change of circumstances, however, the impossible grip they try to maintain at all costs on their troubled interiority is loosened just enough to reveal a wealth of repressed emotions, frustrations, desires, secrets, regrets and anxieties.

It might be useful, at this point, to draw a hypothetical scheme to illustrate the relation between the various acts of communication and the interior world of the characters who perform them. In such scheme, these acts could be ideally placed on an imaginary line, each of them occupying a different position according to the distance between the superficial façade of the act itself and the truth of the character's concealed motives:

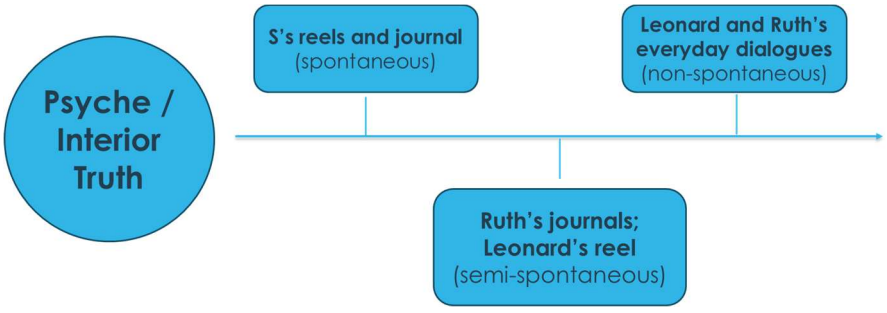

Figure 1– Acts of communication in Three

Considering thus the verbal communications which feature in the novel – as exemplified by *Fig.1* –, the acts which display the greatest distance from the performer's interior truth can certainly be said to coincide with Leonard and Ruth's everyday dialogues; those which most clearly and transparently reflect a character's interior world, instead, can be individuated especially in S's reels – a proverbial "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 2013, 98) and images – and, secondly, in Leonard's reels or Ruth's journal, which provide slightly more affectated and narcissistic forms of confessions. A similar scheme might also be drawn, then, with regard to the sphere of action: here, Leonard and Ruth's routinary gestures, such as listening to the radio, reading a newspaper, putting clothes on and off, would correspond to the most distant positions. The acts which truly reveal a character's interior world can be attributed instead to Leonard, especially in relation to his violation of Ruth or his desperation after watching the old video featuring S, as will be discussed shortly.

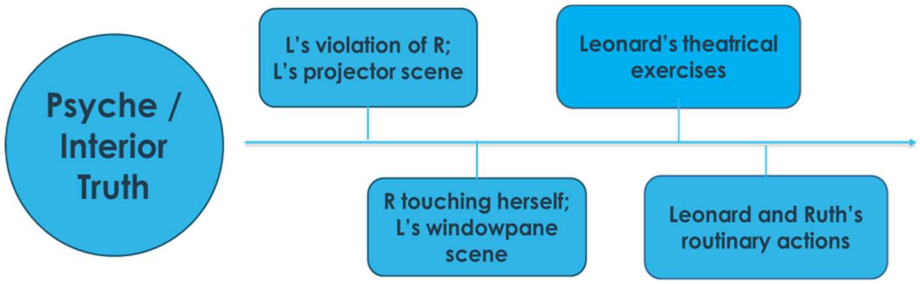

Figure 2 – Action in Three[12]

b. Counterfeit and evasion

If readers were to base their interpretation solely on the dialogues occurring between Leonard and Ruth, it is thus evident that they would not be able to go much far beneath the surface of the purely anecdotical. From the very first exchanges in the novel, indeed, it is clear that the couple has constructed a complex set of mechanisms designed to maintain their artificial domestic peace as much as possible intact, keeping at bay any possible threat which might cause this peace to collapse. This is detectable since the very opening passages, in which their discussions about S's probable suicide always inevitably fall into trivialities, and their sense of guilt for what has happened is stifled as soon as it arises:

[12] There is no room, here, to analyse all these aspects in detail. For the present discussion, only the most pivotal dynamics regarding action in *Three* which are also functional to our discourse will be taken in consideration – i.e., those corresponding to Leonard's violation of Ruth and the projector scene.

> I mean we can't really be sure could so easily have been an accident the note just a melodramatic touch. No one can be blamed Ruth we must understand that least of all ourselves. Yes yes I know and one could say it was predictable her sort of temperament. […] She should never have gone. How – how will we ever be certain Leon how? We're not to blame remember that no one is responsible for another's action – any tea left by the way? A little left I've cut you a slice of lemon. I'll have it without. Just as you like. (2001, 1)

It is interesting to note, in exchanges such as the above one, that Leonard and Ruth's speech is characterised by a phenomenon that Bakhtin would define as "word with a sideward glance", that is, a kind of speech which displays an inclination towards the imagined word of the other, designed as if in response to an invisible interlocutor:

> Internally polemical discourse – the word with a sideward glance at someone else's hostile word – is extremely widespread in practical everyday speech as well as in literary speech, and has enormous styleshaping significance. Here belong, in everyday speech, all words that 'make digs at others' and all 'barbed' words. But here also belongs all self-deprecating overblown speech that repudiates itself in advance, speech with a thousand reservations, concessions, loopholes and the like. Such speech literally cringes in the presence or the anticipation of someone else's word, reply, objection. The individual manner in which a person structures his own speech is determined to a significant degree by his peculiar awareness of another's words, and by his means for reacting to them. (1999, 196)

In Leonard and Ruth's case, of course, no third interlocutor is there to accuse them of having caused or propitiated S's suicide, and yet their whole discourse is articulated and designed as though it were addressed to such an invisible accuser, as if in reply to such unuttered accusations as "do not lie to yourselves: you know perfectly well that the responsibility of S's death is entirely yours", which is only formulated within their own conscience.

The invisible word of the third interlocutor recurs in fact again and again in ever subtler ways, most often as the judging voice of society which Ruth and Leonard must constantly confront, compelled as they are to meet the requirements of decency and sobriety their social circle always demands of them. It is important to note, however, that this voice is never an explicit one, for it is rather imagined by Leonard and Ruth, almost as a Freudian super-ego whose uncomfortable presence is always perceived as looming over them, silently judging their every move, word, and behaviour.

These dynamics are observed to reach their climax whenever Ruth and Leonard are involved in some sort of social gathering, as in the evening described by S in her diaries. Through S's piercing and more objective point of view – which is allowed to her in virtue of her being an outsider with respect to the stifling social circle of Ruth and Leonard's acquaintances –, we are offered an attentive and insightful analysis of every minutest dynamic at force on such social occasions. Through S's account, it is possible to denote how the behaviour of each participant, as well as their conversations, are all perfectly

controlled and driven by tacit conventions, as if responding to a theatrical script to which everybody must necessarily adhere:

> A few friends invited for dinner. […] Before the guests arrived L reached a near hysterical pitch. Nothing seemed right, everything had to be changed, reversed, rearranged. […] R changed dress several times. […] She tried on all her jewellery, wept at her hair until she listened to my reassurances. […] Then they came. Two by two. Incriminating each other's appearance by a point by point investigation. Only when the last guest hadn't turned up did L succumb to the evening's entertainment. Performed with R a defiant, unapproachable, unity. Everyone immediately concerned in being, doing what is expected of them. […] L dedicated himself to the moment, person, subject. R smiles only when he pauses, touches her necklace, bracelets, rings. Glances at women, estimating. If L should stray in any one direction for too long she asks for a cigarette, refuses all offers except his. (2001, 56-57)

The nature and trajectory of every single act of communication, here, is moulded and distorted by the consideration of how words and behaviours will be observed and judged by other people; tested, that is, against the system of guidelines and rules shared by all performers taking place in the pantomime. Thus, we have a situation in which what people say and do does not in the least correspond to what each individual wishes to express or to convey to others. As a consequence of this, a whole area of unexpressed thoughts can be perceived to push beneath the surface of what looks like a huge theatrical performance, complete with specially-designed setting and costumes, in which every participant has been assigned a precise role.

To return, however, to the issue of Leonard and Ruth's evasion of responsibility, it is evident that such behaviour is at force whenever they attempt to penetrate the mystery of S's interiority by delving into her writings or listening to her recorded voice. The puzzled expressions they exchange after listening to S's reels, for instance, the improbable admissions of incomprehension they share when reading her journals, point either to a fundamental failure of communication or, more probably, to an obstinate refusal to recognise even the most evident truth; to a preference, that is, to barricade themselves behind an edifice of comfortable lies.

When they listen to the reels, it appears clear that they are simply pretending not to understand, delaying the final confrontation *ad libitum*. Here, apart from registering S's involvement in some intense clandestine love affair, they have occasion to witness the girl's desperate conclusions, which rather clearly denote a definitive loss of all hope, possibly foreshadowing an imminent suicide: "Then the change came. In the change. The knowledge of what had to be done / what there is / to do. […] The possibility of what might have been sinks away. Into what is left" (2001, 115). Their joint reaction at the end of the session, however, is one of suspicious and improbable incomprehension, which quite evidently masks a stubborn refusal to deal with the miserable truth of their situation:

> Leonard pressed the switch down, and looked across at Ruth. No more then? That's the lot only two reels. And not a word not a clue. Why did you expect something love? I wondered who … She bit her lip as he banged down the lid. Who what Ruth? Oh nothing except perhaps I thought she might have talked about suicide given us something definite but there's nothing absolutely nothing there maybe the journals yes perhaps there … (2001, 116)

Leonard and Ruth's incapability to address their sense of guilt caused by S's death is also reflected in their incapability to address the issue of their unsatisfactory and disintegrating marriage. Ruth, for instance, is observed to yield all too often to an attitude of total passiveness which makes her unable to ever confront her husband on any such sensible issue, let alone to express her own frustrations or acknowledge in front of him that there exists some serious problem between them. In the only episode in the novel in which Leonard timidly and unconvincingly tries to raise the issue, she demonstrates once again that the most important thing for her is to keep up appearances, prolonging the illusion that her life is just good as it is, that everything is after all just fine:

> Ruth are you happy I mean … Happy darling what made you … Oh I don't know you seem somehow – well I don't quite know how to put it perhaps a little withdrawn lately are you worried about anything? No – nothing except possibly – oh it doesn't matter yes I'm happy of course I'm happy we're happy aren't we Leon I mean … (2001, 126)

The above exchange represents one of those episodes in which an intense campaign of self-persuasion is under way. Ruth, on the one hand, is clearly trying to convince herself of an inexistent state of happiness, as is made evident by the juxtaposition of this passage with the confession contained in her journal, which will be examined shortly. Leonard, on the other, having read his wife's confession and knowing her emotional situation perfectly well at this stage, is only very unconvincingly attempting a reconciliation with her: his behaviour betrays the fact that, for him, to safeguard whatever toxic equilibrium he has built in this relationship is far more important than facing the truth about his failed marriage. As Bakhtin would affirm of both:

> Accents of the most profound conviction in the speech […] are, in the huge majority of cases, solely the result of the fact that these words are actually one side of an internal dialogue and meant to convince the speaker himself. The intensification of a convincing tone indicates an internal resistance on the part of the hero's other voice. (1999, 261)

It is quite telling, then, that slightly after the above passage, in his clumsy prolonged attempt at reconciliation with Ruth, Leonard eventually ends up violating her, giving free rein to the sexual frustration he has never been able to deal with or exteriorise in any other more innocuous way. In Ruth's journal, where she is alone with herself and free to express her interiority more genuinely, the truth about her relationship with Leonard finally

comes to the fore in all its terrible authenticity, with a lucidity and determination which never otherwise surface in her day-to-day dealings with him:

> I can feel nothing. Only think and wonder. […] Am I perhaps afraid of even confronting myself with the issue? If only we had a child. […] Would it make me feel any different basically? […] He is concerned only with achieving his own orgasm and I refuse absolutely to be exploited in that way. Has it ever been different when we first married? […] That I was too passive I realise he made me so. And in all that the wish to please satisfy what I thought he most wanted yet wanting myself something other something else. But exactly what? […] When we met he was a God, a brother I never had, perhaps a father too. His faults were endearing. I felt I understood. In awe of his idealism, intelligence, and above all secure in his respect for me. When did all that falter, what day, night did I feel this appalling separation, a certain loss of identity? […] And we remain. I watch as a guest might. Waiting for his next move. An element of restraint is necessary, knowing there is at least a sense of power in such passiveness. And perhaps tomorrow. (2001, 124-125)

Leonard's almost absentminded routinary gestures after raping his wife, and Ruth's final self-abandonment to the same sheets which symbolise the unescapable prison of her marriage, are all elements that seal, once and for all, the unbridgeable distance between the two characters' true desires and the harsh reality of the life of false serenity they have locked themselves into. With so much to say to each other, so many prurient issues to confront, the couple's only responses are an obstinate entrenchment in the reassuring halo of their habits, and of course, in silence.

c. Confessions and revelations

If the conversations exchanged by Ruth and Leonard are flat, cold, trivial and inexpressive of any inner fracture or conflict which might afflict them, their respective confessions are much more revealing of the *sous-conversation* which is constantly to be read, albeit retrospectively, under each word or gesture they exchange.

For as much as a need to repress, to camouflage or to conceal one's interior truth, the characters of *Three* demonstrates also a simultaneous, profound need to express, to let out that very truth. It is quite revealing, in this respect, that both Leonard and Ruth, and even the mysterious S, may have all felt the compulsion to exteriorise their interiority in the form of written or oral confessions: not only that, for they have decided to consign these confessions, and so their most genuine inner truths, to the tangible though unsafe materiality of a diary, a journal or a tape recorder – all objects, that is, which are liable to be appropriated and violated by others. The incapability to treasure the burning truths about oneself in the inviolable chamber of one's interiority, and the consequent need to exteriorise them in the form of tangible objects, appear in fact to betray an unacknowledged desire to be found out, or to favour the very possibility that others might autonomously discover the secrets one does not feel capable to reveal in any direct or explicit form.

There is, moreover, one further aspect. On a number of different occasions, Leonard and Ruth also show a distinct suspicion, if not a downright awareness, of some concealed truth buried in the most intimate recesses of the other. This awareness, in turn, instils in them a constant, desperate desire to lay their hands on this supposed truth, and so to violate the secrecy of each other's interiority as soon as occasion arises. At one point, for instance, Leonard finds Ruth's diary under a cushion by sheer chance, wasting no opportunity, however, to spy on her writing[13] (he even gets infuriated, later on, as he finds out that she has been likewise rummaging through his own private stuff).[14] Ruth, instead, stealthily retrieves Leonard's tape recorder while he is out for a walk, selecting and putting on the most suspicious reel, the one standing separately from the others.[15] S, in her turn, feels equally compelled to delve into Ruth's and Leonard's private affairs, by intruding for example into the latter's study and peering into his diary,[16] or rummaging through Ruth's possessions[17] (it is by no chance, after all, that the sections containing the three characters' respective confessions are never presented in real-time by the direct interested, but are rather clandestinely appropriated by another character).

The mutual revelations that Ruth and Leonard achieve by reading each other's journal, however, do not appear to bring any substantial modification in their mutual behaviour. On the contrary, passages such as the above one demonstrate that they continue to evade the most burning issues which lie at the basis of all the problems of their deteriorated relationship. This attitude of evasion, of course, prevents any possible improvement to their desperate situation. Even when they do come to know the truth – which must evidently generate some form of inner turmoil in them –, any accent of distress is carefully kept down, domesticated, so to say, in order to preserve the appearance of a decent and respectable marriage. This unspoken interior suffering, though, is often perceived to come to the surface, and to cast its shadow on their acts of communication, their mutual gestures and behaviours.

Thus, Ruth and Leonard both perfectly know that no secret will ever be revealed, no confession will ever be made publicly. If one confesses, this can only be made privately, in order only to relieve oneself from the unbearable burden of a lie: as an act of recognition of one's genuine inner voice, yet never as an act of communication addressed

[13] "He picked up a cushion. […] Looking down he saw the open journal. He leaned over and began reading Ruth's large widely-spaced writing." (2001, 123).

[14] "Have you been tidying my desk Ruth? […] Were you looking in this file? […] Were you looking for something?" (2001, 85).

[15] "She went into the other room. The tape recorder, reels, she pulled out, one by one. One separate from the rest, she put on. Leonard's voice, sharp, slowly came over. She turned the volume up, leaned over, eyes closed." (2001, 119-120).

[16] See 2001, 65.

[17] See 2001, 65 and 70.

to the other. No true confrontation between them is ever possible, no genuine communication either, because there is a tacit awareness that hearing the confession of the other would create an imbalance between them which could only be rectified by letting out one's own confession – which thing neither of them really wishes. By accepting the existence of secrets on the other's part, instead, each of them is able to keep this sense of guilt at bay, as well as to avoid the necessity to confess in his/her turn. This, however, only generates an endless prolongation of their mutual lying, which is the major cause of their unhappiness and unsatisfaction, as a couple as well as individual human beings.[18]

One further issue representing another huge area of untackled darkness between Ruth and Leonard, to conclude, regards the suspicion, clearly perceivable throughout the whole narration, that the man with whom S has had a serious physical and emotional involvement is in all probability Leonard himself.

By simply considering many apparently superficial dialogues between Leonard and Ruth, one can easily notice that whenever S is mentioned, Ruth very often addresses expressions of criticism towards the girl, which clearly betrays some sort of jealousy or even envy on her part. Ruth clearly thinks that Leonard might have been attracted by S, and this prompts her to always discredit S in her husband's eyes. Leonard, in his turn, either does not express himself at all, or says something in favour of S which indicates admiration or affection. His cautious remarks and, especially, his silences, do create a tension and accrue the mystery of his possible past involvement with S.

One such occurrence, for instance, is given when Ruth, having listened to S's stories on the tape recorder, is overcome once again by the most obscure doubts, though gathering enough courage, this time, to question her husband in a much more explicit way than her usual:

> What did she want of us Leon what was she after I really don't understand unless … Yes? She was a little in love with you in a strange way and who – who … In love with love I think Ruth plus a father complex. […] I had a feeling though she was involved at one time with someone married but … Oh probably had several. Yet she talks writes as if only the one … I suppose she was rather sensual did you find her sexy Leon? Certainly had a way of moving well. You were never attracted by her ever Leon? What's this an interrogation she was a child Ruth besides I – I … Yes? She leaned over, towards him, away. Well were you saying? Let's face it neither of us understood her […]. I always felt you understood her Leon more than I ever could. Perhaps – perhaps and yet … (2001, 116-117)

[18] To remain within the framework of Dostoevsky's echoes in Quin's work, one could certainly say that the situation of Ruth and Leonard appears to be a perfect exemplification of Zosima's words concerning the intrinsic incompatibility of loving and lying, as expressed in this passage of *The brothers Karamazov*: "Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to such a pass that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love". (2009, 48).

In this circumstance, we witness a progression of dialogue in which Ruth's mounting doubts are materialised more and more explicitly, with Leonard failing to give her any form or reassurance or justification – the very fact, indeed, that he feels the need to justify himself and assume a defensive attitude casts further doubts on his innocence. Leonard's final attempt to shift the focus of the discussion on S's psychological profile, also advancing some far-fetched interpretations of her behaviour, is even more revealing of the guilt and tension he must be feeling during this "interrogation"; this tension probably derives from some untold secret he has never formulated in front of his wife. Ruth, on the other hand, is evidently struggling with the urgent issue which is eroding her from within, each of her tentative questions being attempts at keeping at bay the only question she is actually burning to ask his husband: "did you, by any chance, have an affair with S?"

In Ruth's final confession, eventually, one can bridge all the missing pieces of the puzzle of her interiority and fill in the pregnant gaps of her speech by apprehending the depths over which her words have been merely floating all the time:

> Have I a responsibility to myself in as much as confronting him with my suspicions? […] I see him as from a cage. Then I think of them together. Yet there is nothing definite to go by. No substantial evidence as it were. […] A home we have built up together. But lately I have felt almost an intruder. […] [Y]es perhaps the realisation that here was someone who shared something with him I failed to find. Didn't I then immediately feel a kind of relief when she was dead, hadn't I almost wished this to happen? The time when we were on the bed together, her white neck, hadn't my fingers felt a strange tingling sensation, as though they were someone else's hands, a murderer's hands gifted? […] Her eyes at times as though she knew what I felt, was in fact the spinner of my dreams. (2001, 124-125)

Suddenly, after such confession, a new light is retrospectively cast on many of the hesitancies, doubts, suspicions, criticisms and allusions which could at all times be detected in Ruth's speech up to that moment, realising how much she has been holding down in the unexpressed regions of her psyche, and how much, especially, her gestures and the actual words she has been addressing to Leonard did in fact differ from what she was really feeling.

The most telling reaction involving Leonard, instead, is not to be found in any of his dialogues with Ruth, nor in his confessional reel, but rather in one single intense moment in which he performs a most revealing gesture. After watching an old video showing S by the seaside followed clandestinely by a camera, he is finally seen to abandon himself on a couch, covering his face with his hands. With this final act of refusal and concealment, he thus expresses and conveys, in fact quite transparently, the enormity of what he has always kept inside, pretending nothing of all that has ever really happened:

> He tapped on Ruth's door, opened a little, then closed. Quietly he set the projector up, and put a film on. A girl, naked, emerged from the sea, hair over her face, she approached, then turned away. Picked up a towel, held out to the wind. […] In slow motion gulls circled as she approached again, towel clutched round half her body, a mask covered her face. She danced away to the edge of the sea, where

> she flung towel and mask down, dived into a huge wave, bobbed up, hair and seaweed caught in a spray. The film slowed down. He stared at the square piece of light on the wall, in the middle flecks of black like hair. He switched off. In the dark he sat, hands over his face. (2001, 90)

This passage is a perfect summary of the major dynamics which characterise the mutual dealings of the characters of *Three*. Leonard's gesture of checking on Ruth to be sure she is not awake before putting on the film betrays the existence of a secret dimension he is not disposed to reveal to his wife. The mask worn by S equally signals an act of camouflage of one's true identity and feelings in front of the other, while her final gesture of throwing off the mask and walking into the sea naked represents the much-needed act of liberation which none of the characters appear ever able to perform (it is worth noting, here, that not even the characters' fleeting private moments of confessions, strictly speaking, are intended as proper acts of communications addressed to other subjects, for they rather sound as mere egoistic ruminations in which the individual reflects solely upon him/herself). Leonard's final desperation, his instinctive act of covering his face, represent the only possible outcome to the daily repression of truth performed by all characters, which variously leads to unbreakable stasis or even to a literal self-annihilation.

Leonard and Ruth are thus both internally fractured, each of them inhabited by two different versions of themselves – two voices, Bakhtin would say: the public façade they show to each other and to society, and the true image, the inner voice, with its deepest motives, its genuine feelings and concealed secrets which must not leak to the outside under any circumstances. Each act of communication participates in this precarious equilibrium of identities and is thus carefully pondered in advance, subjected to innumerable a priori considerations and inner confrontations with the projected voice of the other before being delivered to the outside. On a number of occasions, however, the repressed true voice of the self inevitably comes to the surface, glimpsing for a fleeting moment behind some sudden reaction to an accidental event, looming ominously over an apparently insignificant gap or hesitation in the speech, casting its shadow on some passing remark whose real intent appears to be entirely different from its literal meaning. In any case, this true voice subtends any act of communication, making every conversation in *Three* essentially polyphonic, resonating with other hidden and unexpressed voices, bearing the mark of the *sous-conversation* from which this communication stems.

III. Conclusions

In light of the above analysis, carried out on some of the most salient aspects of *Three*, one could certainly affirm that Quin can be considered as one of those contemporary

authors who have acknowledged the obsolescence of the old writerly conventions regulating the use of dialogue; consequently, she has worked out new methods by which the potentiality of the dialogic word could be explored more deeply, and therefore exploited more effectively.

In accordance with Sarraute's precepts, Quin has chosen to give her characters license to act autonomously and speak through their own voices, renouncing to employ an excessively obtrusive narrator and reducing it in fact to little more than a rhetoric function, a mere cold and depersonalised vehicle of events, actions and words with no possibility of comment. This has put her in the condition to explore the subtle nature of words and gestures much more effectively: not simply as tools for the direct expression of a character's interiority, but rather as tokens of an uncharted territory of unconscious forces which push beneath the surface and inform any act of communication, bodily or verbal as they might be. In particular, she has explored the varying distance which separates these intangible forces and the measurable materiality of her characters' words and gestures, as well the relationship which these entertain with the unconscious motives from which they originate.

The fact that, in Quin's writing, spoken utterances are explored as pregnant sites of convergence of a number of distorting influences brings her close in many respects to the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky's word. This, in turn, makes it possible to approach Quin's writing by the interesting angle of Bakhtin's theories on polyphony, whose observations can open up new fascinating possibilities of interpretation of her novels, a hint of which has been given in the course of the present analysis.

What most distances Quin from both Sarraute and Bakhtin, however, is the crucial attention she likewise reserves to her character's actions, gestures, behaviours, and any other form of non-verbal communication. Whereas Sarraute considers even the minutest actions to be too "clumsy and violent"[19] (1956, 120), favouring the pregnant subtlety of words, Quin seizes the opportunity to explore the hidden meanings of more corporeal forms of expressions too, understanding their potential in conveying the same abysses of unexpressed emotions and all the other psychic movements which stand at the origin of her characters' speech. By avoiding obtrusive authorial comments that might present those actions in a peculiar light and enforce precise interpretations on the reader, Quin manages to make them as subtle as words. In so doing, she simultaneously avoids the paradox exposed by Sarraute, owing to whom "behaviourists […] dangerously push the novel in the territory of the theatre, where it inevitably finds itself in a position of

[19] "Les actes, en effet, se déploient en terrain découvert et dans la lumière crue du grand jour. Les plus infimes d'entre eux, comparés à ces délicats et minuscules mouvements intérieurs, paraissent grossiers et violents." (My translation).

inferiority" (1956, 134)[20]. Quin manages in fact to avoid this trap by juxtaposing the stage-like passages, presented in an impersonal third-person narration, with the confessional sections, in which the characters express themselves freely in the first person. In this way, dialogues and monologues are equally kept free of any external intervention, securing at the same time, at a global level, the degree of psychological depth which characterises the novel with respect to the dramatic medium.

Thus, in many respects, Quin can well be considered as the prototype of author of the future which Sarraute has envisaged in "Conversation et sous-conversation". Not only that, for in analysing her practice, and considering the way she manages to present acts and words in an objective and tangible way, allowing at the same time the abysmal psychological depth which sustains those words and acts to be perceived at all times, she would in fact appear to be an even more effective *nouveau romancier* than Sarraute herself. In any case, if it is true that Ann Quin certainly looked to Sarraute as a source of great inspiration, there are no doubts that the latter, in turn, would have saluted her as a most valuable writer, to be kept in great consideration for the future.

[20] "Les romanciers behavioristes […] poussent dangereusement le roman sur le domaine du théâtre, où il ne peut que se retrouver en état d'infériorité." (My translation).

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