

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S MODERN MICROCOSM OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WORK

Simona Lozovschi, PhD Student, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

*Abstract: The present article aims at revealing through Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* the backbone of Virginia Woolf's work. This American writer had the intuition of this organizing principle and brought it into contemporaneity. Still, Cunningham not only emphasized the elements of this structure, but also highlighted the strong connection between Woolf, her characters and her readers, each of them living the same life. Last but not least, Cunningham, willingly or not, succeeded in writing about Woolf in Woolf's uniquely feminine and sensitive style.*

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Woolf's Art is centrifugal. It moves continuously from centre to margins; it strives to expand its limits, to overcome its flaws, to surpass genre-boundaries. But also, Woolf's Art is permanently longing for order, for a system of small hierarchies. Throughout her literary activity, Woolf struggled to find the necessary tools by the means of which to express her own reality and vision, to express the centre of her creations. And from that centre derive and expand, like beams of light, the particularities of Woolf's fiction.

Hence, in the heart of Woolf's novels lies – despite the apparent fragmentariness and fracture – a solid shape, a well-structured backbone. Joan Bennett analysed this pattern common to all her novels:

“This does not mean that Virginia Woolf's art is incapable of communicating experience that is wide as well as deep. But to do so she had to invent conventions as rigid as or more rigid than the old ones that she discarded. This she does in her four most satisfying novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*. There are certain resemblances between them in structure and style. In each case a small group of people is selected, and through their closely interrelated experience the reader receives his total impression. In each case also certain images, phrases and symbols bind the whole together.”

However, we believe that the backbone of Woolf's novels does not end with the choice of characters and style, but goes beyond that. The elements that form the structure of her fiction are recurrent themes, ideas, predilections that had dominated Woolf's life and literary creations; elements from her life that contradicted and baffled her mind. She therefore transposed into her art all humanity, all emotions, desires and conflicts that constitute her world, since behind the layers of Woolf's novels lies her own life. In other words, all the feelings and ideas that transpire in her works are, most of the times, doubled by genuine moments of being.

On that account, in *The Hours*, Michael Cunningham had the intuition of the backbone behind Woolf's novels. He extracted the structure and emphasized its components so as to stress the way in which all her novels communicate, as well as to emphasize the caves built behind her fiction – caves, tunnels filled with meaning. From the outside, Woolf's art seems

serene and peaceful, but deep down in its chore, precisely like a volcano, rest smouldering emotions, raw feelings, instincts.

In just a few hours, Cunningham's novel tells the story of Virginia Woolf, Clarissa Vaughn and Laura Brown. A few hours that enclose the essence of their beings and encompass all their lives. Cunningham brings Woolf into his territory; or he moves his territory closer to her. He shares Woolf's literary creed of portraying life in art, life in all its facets and colours; life and death (time), life and ugliness (mental disorder), life and attraction (love), life and loneliness (alienation), life and the way in which it structures Woolf's fiction. In an interview for *BOMB Magazine*, Michael Cunningham pinpointed the core of Virginia Woolf's work: "It's difficult to imagine anyone more acutely aware of the simple wonder of being alive. That's what Mrs. Dalloway is, after all. It's a testament to the terrors and marvels of the everyday."

Life and time. The lives of the three female protagonists are intermingled and closely connected, though they occur in different temporal dimensions. They are so alike that the worlds of each protagonist are peopled by the same individuals; same voice, different names, different identities. Cunningham uses concrete, exact temporal limits, not to help us fix the events in a particular temporal dimension that separates the protagonists, but, on the contrary, to help us see the powerful connection between characters despite physical boundaries.

1921, 1949, 1999 ... three temporal dimensions constantly intermingled in Cunningham's novel. Three destinies that merge together into one pure and authentic dimension, namely life, since from both Cunningham's and Woolf's novels life transpires victoriously. All temporal boundaries are erased because what matters is the intimate connection between human beings and their emotions, feelings, impressions.

Life and mental disorder. Woolf's Septimus and Cunningham's Richard are victims of life's ugliness, even Woolf experienced life's ambivalent and contradictory character and transferred it to her protagonists.

This theme is closely connected to the one of alienation. Virginia, Septimus and Richard Brown represent the alien, the obscure. Their lives are permanently echoed by voices, headaches and disillusion. Still, in the midst of chaos, sufferance and despair, they feel a more accurate, keener sense of Life.

Virginia Woolf carefully constructed a web-like structure for her characters. She placed them on the edges of the web and they slowly move towards the centre until the structure becomes intricate and all the threads meet in the centre, be it Clarissa's party, Percival, Mrs Ramsay etc. Michael Cunningham placed in the centre of his novel the complex relationship between Clarissa – Virginia – Laura.

Septimus Warren Smith and Richard Brown are outsiders. They are not part of the web since they have, voluntarily or not, removed themselves from the physical world. Instead, they have their own internal worlds which offer death's safety.

As Virginia herself experienced, the farther one is from the centre, the closer he actually is from the meaning it encloses, from its powerful energies. Hence, Virginia, Septimus, Richard Brown and, indirectly, Clarissa Dalloway (when, at the party, she identifies herself with Septimus' choice) are closer to the centre of the web by being at a considerable distance from it. In this way, the distance offers them safety and allows them to have a multiple perspective on life: "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically,

evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death.”¹

They are more sensitive and sensible than other characters; their senses are more responsive to life’s amalgam of sheer impressions. As an example, in the first pages of Cunningham’s novel, Virginia Woolf, though she had already taken the decision to commit suicide, cannot stop to sense life:

“She walks purposefully toward the river, certain of what she’ll do, but even now she is almost distracted by the sight of the downs, the church, and a scattering of sheep, incandescent, tinged with a faint hint of sulphur, grazing under a darkening sky”²

Or Richard who, in the midst of chaos, in the heart of pain and misery, is much more aware of life’s cruelty than any other character:

“But there are still the hours, aren’t there? One and then another, and you get through that one and then, my god, there’s another. I’m so sick. [...] I’ve felt it for some time now, closing around me like the jaws of a gigantic flower. Isn’t that a peculiar analogy? It feels the way, though. [...] It’s a sort of juicy, green, thriving progress. Toward, well, you know. The green silence. Isn’t it funny that, even now, it’s difficult to say the word ‘death’?”³

Or Septimus who perceives a forceful feeling of life’s cruel ambivalence: “It was at that moment (Rezia had gone shopping) that the great revelation took place. A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him. [...] Communication is health; communication is happiness. Communication, he muttered”⁴

Jeremy Hawthorn observes the fact that Septimus is “a sort of hero manqué, who willingly accepts death in order to preserve his own existential unity”⁵ It can thus be said that they all chose death’s freedom over life. Like the fools from the classical dramatic writings, they utter absurd words; words that seem meaningless to the outside world; from the powerful vortex of life, they articulate sounds that cannot be understood by others. Still, as absurd as they may seem, they are, in fact, close to life.

Life and love. In all the three dimensions from Cunningham’s novel, the women experience lesbianism or feel attracted towards female sensibility, voluptuousness and intimacy. These elements appear in Woolf’s novels too, be it Neville’s attraction to Percival, or Clarissa’s love for Sally, but in Cunningham’s book they are emphasized (for example, the complex relationships Louise – Richard – Clarissa – Sally) so as to express Woolf’s endeavour to stop all conventionalism and shyness in art since they are all part of life:

“Kitty nods against Laura’s breasts. The question has been silently asked and silently answered, it seems. They are both afflicted and blessed, full of shared secrets, striving every moment. They are each impersonating someone. They are weary and beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work.

Kitty lifts her face, and their lips touch. They both know what they are doing. They rest their mouths, each on the other. They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss”⁶

Still, life and love do not imply only sexuality, but motherhood as well, and her characters seem to be endowed with negative feelings towards motherhood, perhaps because Woolf herself could not have children on account of her precarious condition: “One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 202

² Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*, p. 3

³ Michael Cunningham, op. cit., p. 198

⁴ Virginia Woolf, op. cit., p.104

⁵ Jeremy Hawthorn, *Divided Selves* apud Bloom’s *Literary Themes: Alienation*

⁶ Michael Cunningham, op. cit., p. 110

these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that”⁷ In the same manner, Laura Brown feels that: “Here, then, is daily transition. With her husband present, she is more nervous but less afraid. She knows how to act. Alone with Richie, she sometimes feel unmoored. [...] she loses direction. She can’t always remember how a mother would act.”⁸ Therefore, for them being a mother is another mask they have to wear; a mask that separates them from their souls; that divides their selves.

Last but not least, one of the elements that constitute the backbone of Woolf’s fiction is the characters’ incapacity to express their love. For example, Richard Dalloway finds it difficult to utter his feelings:

“The time comes when it can’t be said; one’s too shy to say it, he thought, [...] to say straight out in so many words (whatever she might think of him), holding out his flowers, ‘I love you’. [...] But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words. [...] She understood, she understood without speaking; his Clarissa.”⁹

Furthermore, apart from highlighting the pattern of her fiction, Michael Cunningham illustrates in *The Hours* Virginia Woolf’s complex personality: “a woman of such brilliance, such strangeness, such immeasurable sorrow; a woman who had genius but still filled her pocket with a stone and waded out into a river.”¹⁰

The ending of the novel is remarkable since it encloses Woolf’s literary creed. Laura Brown is, in fact, Richard’s mother. Richie becomes Richard, and Laura becomes part of Clarissa’s dimension; the reader enters the world of the protagonist. One notices, once more, the strong, complex and yet beautiful caves behind the characters; the intimate connections established between Woolf and her readers, Woolf and her protagonists, her readers and her protagonists.

“‘Come in, Mrs. Brown,’ she says. ‘Everything’s ready’.”¹¹ Laura Brown. The same Mrs. Brown that patiently waits for ‘everything to be ready’; for the evolution of British literature; for the Georgian writers to rescue her. The same Mrs. Brown of which Virginia Woolf wrote in an essay entitled “Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown”: “There she sits in the corner of the carriage – that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out.”

Woolf invites us into her art and, implicitly, into her life. She lays it down before us, leaving to our appreciation whether to embark on this journey or not. Michael Cunningham engaged in this quest without hesitation and his great revelation, his epiphany is:

“Yes, Clarissa thinks, it's time for the day to be over. We throw our parties; we abandon our families to live alone in Canada; we struggle to write books that do not change the world, despite our gifts and our unstinting efforts, our most extravagant hopes. We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep – it's as simple and ordinary as that. A few jump out of the windows or drown themselves or take pills; more die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease or, if we're very fortunate, by time itself. There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed

⁷ Virginia Woolf, op. cit., p. 99

⁸ Michael Cunningham, op. cit., p. 47

⁹ Virginia Woolf, op. cit., p. 127

¹⁰ Michael Cunningham, op. cit., p. 42

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 226

by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more.

Heaven only knows why we love it so.”¹²

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¹² *Ibidem*, p. 225