LOVE, CREATION, CHANGE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*

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Abstract

Is the meaning of life to be found in the real world or in the imagined one? Trying to answer the question, Woolf offers the reader the story of this young nobleman of the Elizabethan Age who undergoes changes whenever life proves not to be the reality (s)he needs, the aspiring poet transgressing time, space and the body. Woolf's *Orlando* is not only about the search for the meaning of life, about love and the changes it triggers, if only at the level of the written wor(l)d. It is also a novel about the condition of the artist/writer, about life and love perceived as an incentive to create.

Keywords: protean self, (pseudo)love, creation, mobility, (sexual and social) indeterminacy

> "[…] having asked them all and grown no wiser, but only older and colder (for did we not pray once in a way to wrap up in a book something so hard, so rare, one could swear it was life's meaning?) back we must go and say straight out to the reader who waits a-tiptoe to hear what life is – alas, we don't know."
>
> (Woolf, *Orlando*: 258)

It has been stated that the structure of *Orlando*, with its six chapters, preface with acknowledgements, illustrations and an index of names, reinforces the impression of a new form of biography - a mock biography - in which the real and the fictional are brought together and not kept separate (as conventionally agreed on). It is a process which might be regarded as a mirroring of the individual's inability to sometimes clearly distinguish between what is real and what is not, or, at other times, of the need to go beyond these (often frustrating) limitations.

Indeed, the boundaries between these two worlds are not clear-cut ones, thus bringing to the reader's attention the connection between circumstance and self, reemphasizing the very idea of an always changing subjectivity – the self (the inner world) - shaped by the always changing circumstances. In his introduction to Virginia Woolf, Goldman asserts that *Orlando* may be seen as "a satirical Künstlerroman, exploring the gender politics of poetics and artistic subjectivity across the ages" (65) and points out the fact that the modern understanding of subjectivity as "something multiple and in process"(68) shaped by different contexts (space and time included) is explored in the novel, the central character being described in "the process of self-fashioning, of mustering the right self for the occasion" (68). A protean novel revealing a protean self …

Orlando's life is, to a certain extent, a mirroring of Vita Sackville-West's life, the realities/identities the character experiences are anchored in the reality Woolf decides to

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use in this novel which Bowlby labels as both "a love letter *and* a serious work of criticism, not one at the expense of the other, or the second superior to the first" (in Woolf, 1992: xlvii). Gruber (77) goes even further and claims that the novel portrays not only Sackville-West and England but Woolf's literary growth as well, offering "a humorous though profound self-analysis" through which the writer herself achieves stability: "… she has absolved herself from struggles. She has achieved that psychic stability which subdues restlessness and eliminates revolt"(83). Sackville-West and Woolf, the lover and the artist, are brought together in this protean character that defies the limitations of time, space and body. "…the relative nature of time and space […] also extends to gender and the life of the body", says Briggs, "[…] *Orlando* treats time rather as it treats sex – as if both were convenient fictions" (199).

In *The Modern Androgyne Imagination: A Failed Sublime*, Lisa Rado (161) deems *Orlando* "a novel about identity crisis, gender trouble, and cultural change that ultimately presents not 'Orlando' or 'Virginia Woolf' but rather the struggle behind both artists' attempt at 'being'" , " a portrait of the artist that is ultimately unfinished and unresolved – sexually, artistically, and historically".

The biographer-narrator the novelist makes use of creates the illusion of reality, being in charge of, if we might say so, offering (at least narrative) certainties: he reconstructs Orlando's life with the help of some fragments from letters, diaries, evidence the text sends to as proofs of the character's existence, which again is a narrative strategy of reinforcing the impression of a biography, of preserving a record. The writer uses reality and, at the same time, plays the game of creating (for the reader) a path to follow to a reality she retraces as well as invents.

Although the novel is said to be rooted in the writer's anxieties and perspective on time, aging, death, memory, love, gender, being betrayed and abandoned, the main character - Orlando (unlike other characters in Woolf's novels) is not felt as a burdened individual in a hopeless, futile search of a solution for the alienated, struggling self, and this is due to the fact that Woolf adds a somehow playful, comical approach, that "healthy humour" Gruber (82) refers to and which results in the character's/ novelist's sense of stability conditioned by the act of writing perceived as a means of self-expression.. Orlando is a character that adapts his/her identity to the reality imposed by the power of the external influences, and this adaptation is reflected in his/her mobility (temporal and sexual), in the changes he/she undergoes: a young nobleman in the 16th century that becomes a woman in the 17th century, acknowledges the spirit of the 19th century and gets married, gives birth to a child, and, as an aspiring poet, comes to win a prize for a poem that took more than three hundred years to write. Whenever the 'reality' the character lives in becomes too strong, too frustrating, too much for the self, he/she shifts between roles, changes identities and realities as well; the only way for the self to carry on, to cope with the inner and outside world is to change an identity/a reality with a new one. A proliferation of the self, a multiplicity of literary selves that would add to the writer's own self.

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We frame the question of identity differently, at different times; the self is not a given concept, but a myriad-faceted/answered one, an elusive one. Then where should the reader look for in trying to explain or understand the character's changes of identity? Is the answer given by some 'strong' concepts of identity, such as love or fear? Strong as their impact on the self is: they make us cross boundaries, open or shut identity doors, redefining our concept of identity. Is it love, then, the one that causes the transgression of boundaries, the one that makes this sexual and temporal mobility possible?

On meeting the Princess, Orlando questions the depth of his feelings in the past, of what he thought to be love, yet now seems "but sawdust and cinders", tasting "insipid to the extreme" (*O* 39). It is on meeting her that Orlando feels that "the thickness of his blood melted; the ice turned to wine in his veins; […] his manhood woke". Words bring them together, a language that, on the one hand, is unknown to the others (the "two young Lords" the Princess was placed between), thus preventing the princess from communicating, from sharing; on the other hand it is this language that Orlando masters, thus making it possible for the two to share, to communicate, to come closer to the meaning of love.

> Very little was known of the Muscovites. […] None spoke English, and French with which some at least were familiar was then little spoken at the English Court.
> It was through this accident that Orlando and the Princess became acquainted. (37)

> For, heaven be praised, he spoke the tongue as his own; his mother's maid had taught him. Yet perhaps it would have been better for him had he never learnt that tongue; never answered that voice; never followed the light of those eyes … (39)

What Orlando now felt to be love turns into abandonment, causing a seven-day trance/sleep (a time of healing and transition) that triggers some change "in the chambers of his brain, for though he was perfectly rational and seemed graver and more sedate in his ways than before, he appeared to have an imperfect recollection of his past life" (64). He is now affected by this "disease", as the biographer calls it, that would substitute "a phantom for reality" (71) – the disease of reading (words that now make it possible for their reader, i.e. Orlando, to cross the boundary between reality and imaginary worlds, a door to another world - one that is imagined, yet believed in and wanted real). Reading turns to writing, which the biographer labels "pitiable in the extreme" (72) and "an inexpiable disgrace" (74) for a nobleman (and another 'disease' to follow in chapter 4 "a love of Nature"). Still, writing brings about happiness, making Orlando feel that he was one of the sacred, that he "belonged to the sacred race rather than to the noble", being "by birth a writer, rather than an aristocrat" (80).

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The act of writing/creating parallels the character's changes; the novel shows the encounter between the poet and the critic, "the desperate struggle of poetic versus critical realism, of rhapsody versus restraint" (Gruber 80), being rooted in Woolf's own encounter with criticism, which she manages to balance by means of satire, "mocking not only critics but poets as well" (79), satirizing not only the critic and his impeding influence, but also Orlando and his doubts (doubts that she herself has experienced).

Happiness is followed by disillusionment: Orlando's encounter with Nick Greene – the "symbol of the critic of all ages" (79), setting new standards on Orlando's writing - deprives this self-proclaimed writer of his illusions, making him doubt the very essence of truth, of poetic realism, of writing itself, triggering the loss of self-confidence and making him doubt the truthfulness of his perspective on life. "I'll write, from this day forward, to please myself" (*O* 99), says Orlando, in an attempt to fight the imposed critical standards, an attempt to rebuild stability by means of self-expression. The richness of life disappears, and the character feels that existence itself "had shrunk", as he puts it, "to dogs and nature", while he is left "naked", or, by extension, exposed (to a life without illusions). Vanity is "rebuked" and his claim for self-esteem and identity as a man of art proves an illusion. The self needs to change and the perspective on the world changes accordingly: "he opened his eyes, which had been wide open all the time, but had seen only thoughts, and saw, lying in the hollow beneath him, his house" (*O* 101).

The act of creation is thus reiterated in this novel. Life itself is rooted in creation. Therefore, writing about life does not only send to the act of creating, but, at the same time, it needs to deal with it as a narrative element, a vital 'ingredient' in building one's identity. And it could not have been overlooked in Woolf's novels in which the self is either mirrored or (re)created. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, it is reflected in the party-giving and also in the creation of the hat, while in *To the Lighthouse*, we can find it in Lily's Briscoe's endeavor to complete the painting. In *Orlando*, creation is mirrored in the poem the character wants and needs to write (inner growth and change being reflected here as well), in the search for love – a feeling which Ortega y Gasset sees as the symbol of fecundity (10), in the act of giving birth to a child, in the progressive "birth" of Orlando the woman, as well as in the process of bringing back to life, of recreating/'repopulating' the house - bringing it into the present by giving power to the past, gathering in the house all those objects that evoke worlds/realities that are distant in time and/or space.

What follows is a need for other people, the need to have life in this comforting space that gives the individual a sense of belonging, offering him vital identity roots: "… but even this home, this symbolic place of comfort, changes size and décor with each era and becomes emblematic of Orlando's capacity for change even at a basic level, at the level of what 'home' means, of what psychological comfort and security mean" (Little 226). Being deprived of the richness of life as he felt it, Orlando now needs to bring richness (if only illusions) into the house he inhabits (the world he now decides to live in). And writing is still there for "when the door was shut, and he was certain of privacy, he

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would have out an old writing book, stitched together with silk stolen from his mother's workbox, and labeled in a round schoolboy hand, 'The Oak Tree, A Poem' " (*O* 108).

A very interesting perspective on love (on pseudo-love, in fact) is revealed in the episode recounting the meeting between Orlando and the Archduchess Harriet Griselda, who "resembled nothing so much as a hare" (109). What seems to be love is now foretold by a shadow (which turns out to be a figure), darkness being hinted at from the very beginning; it is lust ("the vulture") not love ("the Bird of Paradise") that Orlando feels approaching. His inner world changes again, his reality is framed by 'dark' words, such as: "horror", "a creaking sound", "crows", "the air seemed dark", "voices croaked", "the heaviest and foulest of birds", "black, hairy, brutish" etc. This time, the two-faceted love causes fear and triggers the need to leave (another change the character has to undergo).

> For Love, to which we may now return, has two faces: one white, the other black: two bodies; one smooth, the other hairy. It has two hands, two feet, two nails, two, indeed, of every member and each one is the exact opposite of the other. Yet, so strictly are they joined together that you cannot separate them. (*O* 112-113)

Why does Woolf's character fear lust and reject it? Should the reader see here the writer's need to emphasize the search for real love and not for substitutes that should frame not only Orlando's life but also her own relationship with Vita Sackville-West? If we follow Ortega y Gasset's (11) approach to the issue of love versus desire (which we extend to lust), then "to desire" is defined as the tendency to possess something (which would consequently be integrated into our system); once the need is satisfied, desire disappears. Desire is passive, Gasset further asserts, and the one who desires becomes a center of gravity waiting for the desired object to gravitate towards him. On the other hand, love is forever unsatisfied, it is much deeper than desire, it is dynamic as the one who loves gravitates towards the loved one. Love is fecund to such an extent that it becomes the symbol of any fecundity (10). It is this eventually 'dry river' of sexual desire that the character rejects, a basic emotional short-term 'motivator' that cannot fulfill Orlando's (or the artist's) need to transgress time (and preserve youth and mobility seen as characteristics of love) and complete his search for the meaning of life.

In the third chapter of the novel, love/lust causes again Orlando to sink "in profound slumber" (*O* 127), his sleep preparing the reader for the character's change. The truth is revealed on Orlando's awakening: he has undergone bodily changes that differentiate men and women and has now become a woman, a change of sex that leaves identity and memory unaltered, the indeterminacy being reflected, at a linguistic level, in the use of the possessive adjective "their": "Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered **their** future, did nothing whatever to alter **their** identity" (133, emphasis added).

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Bowlby brings forth a certain "basic arbitrariness about any assignment of one or the other sex to someone" (xxxvi), also stating that Orlando's switch of sex is but one of the many cases in the novel of sexual indeterminacy (the Archduke/Archduchess, Orlando's and her husband's cross-sexual identification).

It is not only sexual indeterminacy the reader comes across, but a kind of social indeterminacy as well (triggered by the former). Orlando's newly revealed identity as a woman changes his/her rapport with the society of her time (personal, sexual and social identities are thus brought together). She needs to be a socially, lawfully accepted individual, she needs to be given this agreed on self/identity that would allow her to use the reality of the former self and to function within the society of his/her time, a society that accepted Orlando as they knew, that is Orlando the man. Orlando the woman has to go through a lawsuit that would eventually grant this change the status of (narrative) reality and give her the right to inherit the estate of Orlando the man, on her return to England. Meanwhile, her status is of social indeterminacy, of "incognito or incognita", dead or alive, man or woman, "Duke or nonentity":

> Thus it was in a highly ambiguous condition, uncertain whether she was alive, or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity, that she posted down to her country seat, where, pending the legal judgment, she had the Law's permission to reside in a state of incognito or incognita, as the case might turn out to be. (*O* 161)

(Sexual) Identity change does not trigger limitation or frustration for Orlando, it does not imply shutting oneself off from life but opening up to it. "Femininity for Orlando", states Bowlby, "is the point of opening up – she gains something and loses nothing – from which places and identities come to be more mobile, […] the change of sex […] is the start of a wider life in which she will enjoy the best of both worlds, both or multiple kinds of identity" (xlv).

It is pseudo-love again that the reader finds in the fourth chapter of the book, the illusion of love being reiterated in the relationship between Orlando and the now Archduke Harry. "If this is love, […] there is something highly ridiculous about it" (172), says Orlando, who then hears "life and a lover" fading away, when she makes the Archduke leave - one of the many lovers she had, and life that escapes her again. (S)he feels the urge for a wedding ring which she wears overcome with shame - a ring of identity, in fact, an extension of the individual's identity reflecting the spirit of the age, a stage (s)he needs to go through, but which turns out not to be enough. "Life! A Lover!" and not "Life! A Husband!"(233) is her cry now; contemplating life does not suffice any more, she yearns for its pulse, she needs to feel herself part of it. Change follows: Orlando's marriage with Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. Is it enough then? Is this the bond she both needed and wanted? The self hesitates between pursuing life as it is ("was it marriage?"), and returning to writing or rather fainting (seen as a time of

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undergoing changes): "What should she do then? Faint, if possible. But she had never felt better in her life" (252). It is writing that Orlando turns to; she no longer needs to either fight the spirit of the nineteenth century or to capitulate to it, and, as the biographer notes, she is still herself: "she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote" (254).

The character exists in the realm of complementarity, opposites coexisting and framing his existence. "Her sexual versatility", says Little (225), "is an expression of a liminal androgyny, the symbolic sexual ambiguity characteristic of those undergoing ritual initiations and often typifying those who belong to revolutionary or counter-cultural movements". Orlando experiences not only love, but also lust (triggering fear seen as the opposite of love), not only happiness but also sadness/sufferance, not only male body but also female one. The center of opposite conditions provides a state of equilibrium the self longs for; Orlando cannot fully be a man or a woman, but always going beyond these bodily and mental states which could be perceived as limitations for an artist. He is either a man or a woman (if the focus is on the body), but at all times he/she is a man and a woman inhabiting that particular body (the androgynous state perceived as completeness), "one being uppermost and then the other" (*O* 181). The very discrepancy, one might assume, between the world outside and the world inside.

The journey of the self culminates in the sixth chapter, where we witness a proliferation of selves that would underline the never-ending change one is subject to, the multiplicity of selves ("some say two thousand and fifty-two" 294) we foster. It is a particular self that Orlando seeks, one that would not reveal itself when needed. "[…] Orlando? still the Orlando she needs may not come; these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own"(294). Orlando calls her own name, and the biographer, while going back to the character's past, lists all these selves he has managed "to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand" (295). Yet, they do not suffice. It is "the true self" that eludes her, "compact of all the selves we have it in us to be" (296); when it eventually reveals itself, Orlando becomes a whole real self to be seen in the change that occurs: she is now "darkened", "stilled", "silent" (299) (all the selves having fallen silent once communication between them is established, once the boundaries between them disappear).

Orlando's mobility originates in the search for the meaning of life and epitomizes the artist's/the writer's power of entering new worlds at will and redefining reality in the attempt to answer the question of life. Writing becomes Woolf's means of mobilty, of transgressing the boundaries that frame Life, while playing with the conventional perception of time, space, body: time and space as felt, not as given, body as felt, not as seen.

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Nevertheless, observing life and writing about it is not enough. Life needs to be lived as well, whereas love needs to be felt in order to grasp their meaning. This perspective on writing has been brought out (and satirized) in the novel through the agency of the biographer/narrator whose role is two-fold: on the one hand, he offers the reader the narrative certainties needed in orther to substitute reality with the reality offered by the written word, by the writer (the question of trust arising), on the other hand, he is the means by which Woolf adds that "healthy humour" Gruber referred to, that comical approach that would help Orlando, the writer/artist (and by extension the individual) cope with reality, with life.

> Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatsoever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking. (*O* 254-255)

> And when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman's whole existence. And if we look for a moment at Orlando writing at her table, we must admit that never was there a woman more fitted for the calling. (256)

Orlando understands life in terms of love and lives it accordingly. It is the reason why Orlando's cry "Life and a lover" (177), later to become "Life! A Lover!" (233), needs to be answered in terms of action, which takes the form of either turning to the world inside, hence writing (although ridiculed by the biographer, and eventually felt insufficient) or turning to the world outside – Orlando opening his/her eyes ("which have been wide open all the time") and trying to find the longed for love(r).

Change is what characterizes this novel, be that of the character that mirrors Vita Sackville-West and Woolf as well, or, the much broader one, of the self itself. We live these lifelong incredible journeys of unfolding or adding layer after layer of identity, losing and/or building (sometimes false) claims to selfhood, "growing up", just as Orlando says, losing one's illusions "perhaps to acquire new ones" (167)... It is then change that characterizes each of us, our selves being molded by sometimes unexpected changes, sometimes bewildering ones, longed for and essential ones, or even feared ones.

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