VERSIONS AND DIVERSIONS OF THE SELF WITH VIRGINIA WOOLF

Paula PÎRVU[*]

Abstract*: The article intends to investigate some of the hypostases that Virginia Woolf's narrative self takes in two of her novels but mainly in her "Diary". We will dwell upon them from the perspective of their con/textual relations (with her life) in order to identify some of the fictional strategies the writer makes use of in the above-mentioned works.*

Keywords**:** *self, narrative, narration, introspection, personification, metamorphosis.*

1. Preliminary Remarks

It is a very well known thing that Virginia Woolf's works and life have aroused the interest not only of many specialists - scholars and critics, but also of the reading public, given the extreme sensitivity of her characters, the poetic language and the numerous symbols encountered in her prose. Nevertheless, one may also say that her works and personality still keep a halo of mystery around them, therefore every new reader – specialist or non-specialist- has the occasion to discover original meanings in her fiction. A starting point in their unravelling is to consider Virginia Woolf's belonging to that generation of writers at the crossing of two centuries (born in the 19 and passed away in the 20th) who rejected the Victorian traditions and values influencing life and writing, embracing a new type of literature, more inclined to psychological introspection and lyricism.

In accordance with the Victorian tradition, a girl belonging to a bourgeois family had to take classes on music, dancing, painting, good manners or on having a conversation. Virginia detested the soirées of the social upper class because of their superficiality, conventionality and formalism by contrast to her valuing personal opinions, feelings and aspirations.

Woolf's psychological state was usually affected by each and every event of her life, especially by the period immediately before and after the publishing of her works (be it short stories, essays or novels). The World War I caused the worsening of her state of health which led to medical intervention. This intense suffering and extreme sensitivity also represented a catalyst for the writer's process of creation. Everything she experienced was rendered in the *Diary* she began to write in 1915, kept until 1941, the very year of her death, in which she expressed all her feelings and impressions stirred by everyday life with frequent interruptions because of medical reasons.

On the other hand, Woolf's states of depression and melancholy were a source of imagination in the act of creating. When referring to the novel *The Waves*, surprisingly, the author herself stated in her *Diary* that her suffering was in part mystic and, sometimes, she even longed for one or two more weeks of falling ill in order to cover the whole novel, considering her suffering a better source of inspiration.

At the end of the 19th century, William James, a psychologist and Henry James's brother, introduced the concept of *"stream of thought, of consciousness, or of*

[*] University of Pitești, gratiela_pirvu@yahoo.com

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subjective life" [1]. Consciousness was described as flowing, just like a *«river» or «stream»*[2]. James opposed his theory of experience, reality seen as a *"continuum"*[3] to *"psychological atomism, inherent in associationist ideas"* according to which consciousness appeared *"chopped up in bits"* [4] and *"jointed*[5]*"* in a succession of thoughts. As a consequence, in the first decades of the 20th century, writers such as James Joyce, Woolf or Dorothy Richardson applied James's theory to their narrative style in an attempt to keep the two aspects of a human being - intelligence, intellect and *"the ever present flow of feeling"*[6], emotions – fusioned against the background of *"an ever changing being and world"*[7].

2. Woolf's Art of Writing

The starting point for analyzing Virginia Woolf's art of writing may be an excerpt taken from her essay entitled *Modern Fiction* published in *The Common Reader*, volume I, dwelling upon, on the one hand, what an ordinary and everyday life stands for and, on the other hand, the representation of life by a writer: *"Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there (…); life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?"*[8]

As a consequence, for Virginia Woolf, reality is perceived intuitively and subjectively. This *"new way of considering life"*[9] leads to *"a new mode of artistic creation whose aesthetic basis is not objective but highly subjective and fragmentary representation"*[10]. At the same time, the writer has no longer *"the vantage position of the writer as an outsider who can take in life as a whole, but the precarious position of a mind placed in the midst of events and whose possibilities are only relative and subjective"*[11].

Virginia Woolf has been said to have had an *"attitude (…) of the innovator, experimenting, conscious of infinite possibilities"*[12], as a proof of the fact that she despised tradition, convention or pattern in literature: there is not *"the proper stuff of*

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[1] James, William apud Bantock , H.,G. in Ford, Boris (ed.), *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, volume 7, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 52.
[2] Ibidem, p. 52.
[3] Ibidem, p. 52.
[4] Ibidem, p. 52.
[5] Ibidem, p. 52.
[6] James, William apud Bantock , H.,G. in Ford, Boris (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 53.
[7] Ibidem, p.53.
[8] Woolf , Virginia apud Kereaski, Rodica, *Lectures in 20th English Literature*, Universitatea din Bucureşti, 1977, p. 149.
[9] Kereaski, Rodica, op. cit., p. 149.
[10] Ibidem, p. 149.
[11] Kereaski, Rodica, *op.cit.*, p.149-150.
[12]Ibidem, p.149-150.

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fiction"[1], *"everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought (…) no perception comes amiss"*[2].

Generally regarded as Virginia Woolf's masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927, enjoying a much significant success than any of her previous works. Both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* are considered "*novels of pattern rather than plot (…) in which the high sensibilities of the central characters consort and co-operate with the consciousness of the author to produce form"*[3] or *"masterpieces of atmosphere, of airy gracefulness and melancholy poetry"*[4].

The novel is founded on aspects of Virginia Woolf's autobiography, namely her father's austere and intransigent character, her mother's beauty, sensitivity, intelligence, sociability, wit, in spite of her life apparently monotonous and of self-sacrifice, and on her memories of the summer holidays spent in Cornwall, in contrast to the novel whose setting is represented by the Hebrides on the coast of Scotland.

Woolf's art of writing is characterized as impressionistic, poetic and psychological due to her profound and extreme subjectivity, affectivity and sensitivity. In literature, impressionism points out the description of character's inner life made up of impressions, emotions, sensations, thoughts, memories, reveries with the help of interior monologues rendered in free indirect style and it emphasizes the moment, its ephemerality and subjective perceiving by individual. At the same time, Woolf's characters and landscapes have been referred to as an expression of another technique used in visual art, namely, watercolour painting, given their blurred outlines, vagueness or transparency. Besides, Virginia Woolf herself referred to her work of fiction as an elegy[5] rather than a conventional novel.

The novel is made up of three parts: *The Window*, *Time Passes* and *The Lighthouse*. Each part stands for the integration, disintegration and reunion of the Ramsay family. In spite of its psychological, philosophical and lyrical substance, the novel keeps the appearance and form of a narrative because it tells a story and renders a sequence of events involving characters. However, the events of the narrative stand for the surface level of the novel, and at the same time they all acquire symbolical significance representing the deep level of the writing.

Thus, one may say that the theme of the novel is more profound than the simple act of fulfilling James's wish or dream of landing at the lighthouse. Therefore, readers might take into consideration the theme of the relation between individual and life in general, the theme of individual's outlook on life or the theme of man's searching for the real meaning of life, all of them being closely related to the theme of the passing of time as opposed to the persistence of art. The novel might be also approached by means of the principle of post-Impressionism[6], according to which beyond the visible clearly-defined structure or shapes, there lies the essence or reality of life.

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[1] Woolf ,Virginia, apud Bradbrook, W., Frank, in Ford, Boris, (ed.) *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, volume 7, *From James to Eliot*, p. 343.
[2] Ibidem, p. 343.
[3]Fletcher, John, Bradbury, Malcolm, in Bradbury, Malcolm, Mc Farlane, James, (ed.) *Modernism 1890-1930*, Penguin Books, 1978, p. 408
[4]Cazamian, Luis, Las Vergnas, Raymond, Legouis, Emile, *A History of English Literature. Vol. II Modern Times (1660-1967)*, 1967 p. 1363
[5]Miroiu, Mihai, *Virginia Woolf*, ed. Univers, Bucureşti, 1977, p. 169
[6] See Miroiu, Mihai, *Virginia Woolf*, ed. Univers, Bucureşti, 1977, p. 172-173

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The plot line of the narrative is simple and it overlaps with the story of the novel, for the events that take place are generally presented in a chronological narrative order: the unsuccessful discussion about an intended landing at the lighthouse the following day; Lily Briscoe begins working on her painting; the dinner in the evening of the same day, a meal which is attended by the Ramsays and their guests, followed by a period of ten years summarized in the section *Time Passes*, when the summer cottage decays, the reader learns that the war broke out, Mrs. Ramsay died; afterwards, in the third part of the novel, the Ramsays and some of their friends return in the Hebrides; the landing at the lighthouse takes place and Lily Briscoe completes her painting.

The conflict of the plot seems to be interpersonal, picturing James against his father, and at the same time, Mrs. Ramsay against Mr. Ramsay, on the account of her permanent protection and support offered to all her children. Moreover, one may add the conflict between two different outlooks on life and on human relations: on the one hand, Mrs. Ramsay who is sensitive, generous and caring and on the other hand, her husband who is rational, intransigent and self-centred. Likewise, Mrs. Ramsay stands for the capacity of intuition, while Mr. Ramsay stands for human intellect.

In a similar way to the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, the ending of the story is open, so that readers can shape their own conclusions, inducing the idea that the characters' life experience is enriched and will go further on better new bases. The ending proper coincides with the Ramsays' reaching the lighthouse, while Lily Briscoe draws a final line on her canvas as a consequence of a revelation.

The setting of the novel is represented by the Ramsays' cottage on the Isle of Skye in the Hebrides. Some reference points of the landscape are encountered in the following excerpt taken from the beginning of the first part: *"For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men"*.

Time, as a level of the narrative, is very important in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* for, alongside the objective or clock time, there is the subjective time which is the result of each individual's way of perceiving its passing according to his/her inner state. In contrast to the traditional novel and in a similar way to *Mrs. Dalloway*, the author uses the technique of **deceleration**, expanding the time of the narration which is longer than the narrated time or the time of the story. In this respect, it is to be noted that the events in the first and third part of the story take place during two different days separated by a ten-year period which is referred to in the second part of the novel where the author uses a device opposite to deceleration, that is **acceleration**, meaning that the time of the narration is shorter than the narrated time. Moreover, important events such as the death of Mrs. Ramsay, of her son Andrew, of her daughter Prue are reported between brackets as if they were details or devoid of significance, because for Virginia Woolf, as a modernist writer, it is not the events that count, but only the individual's way of becoming aware of them and his/her perspective on them[1].

In contrast to *Mrs. Dalloway*, in *To the Lighthouse* characters do not return frequently to their past. However, Mr. Ramsay remembers some aspects of his childhood: *"When he was Andrew's age he used to walk about the country all day long, with nothing but a biscuit in his pocket and nobody bothered about him, or thought that*

[1] Fokkema, Douwe, Ibsch, Elrud, *Modernist Conjectures. A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940*, C. Hurst & Company, London , 1987, p. 28-29.

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he had fallen over a cliff." or of his youth: *"Years ago, before he had married, he thought, looking across the bay, (…) he had walked all day. He had made a meal off bread and cheese in a public house. He had worked ten hours at a stretch; an old woman just popped her head in now and again and saw to the fire."*

3. Stream-of-consciousness novels

In the context of the relativism of Modern literature, Woolf uses the multiple points of view as a result of the multiple consciousness and perspectives belonging to the characters and to the narrator. In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, during the dinner at the Ramsays, real communication takes place in the characters' mind and consciousness by means of and between their internal monologues, rather than at the level of their external social existence and in spite of their social intercourse. However, the stream of consciousness of Woolf's characters is not rendered directly, but through the author's **voice**, sometimes being signaled by the verb *"to think"*. In addition, by contrast to the classical internal monologue, Woolf's *"internal monologues are patterned, ordered, logical and coherent, similar to the style of the writer herself, always hidden among her characters"*[1].

Characters' stream of consciousness is the result of innumerable impressions that come upon their mind from the outside world and that are part of a flux of life experience writer must communicate to the reader, expressing at the same time characters' inner life and imagination. The central consciousness of the novel is Mrs. Ramsay, from whose perspective the events of the first part are presented and who lives on in the consciousness of those who have known her or in Lily Briscoe's visions, in a sort of a metaphysical existence.

She is also the figure to whom all the other characters are related to. In this respect Lily Briscoe's interior monologue determined by Mr. Bankes's gazing at Mrs. Ramsay is suggestive because it reveals the guest's real attitude, although unuttered, towards his host: *"For him [William Bankes] to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men(…). It was love, she thought, pretending to move her canvas, distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain. So it was indeed. The world by all means should have shared it, could Mr. Bankes have said why that woman pleased him so (…)."*

In her search of the meaning of life, Mrs. Ramsay senses that what it is essential about man's life is not only ideal or immaterial, but it can be also visualized or shaped: *"All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. […] and this **self** having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. [...] Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless. There were all the places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome. […] They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of*

[1] Kereaski, Rodica, *Lectures in 20th English Literature*, Universitatea din Bucureşti, 1977, p. 155; see supra Chapter II, p.

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stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, […] but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity […]"

Characterization[1] is a dimension of narrative which deals with the way in which a character is presented in the narrative that is directly or indirectly. The major part of the characters in the novel are presented indirectly by means of their actions, discourse or thoughts concerning themselves or others. Mrs. Ramsay created the home and the family, offering warmth and protection to her children and shelter to her guests. Everyone admires her for beauty (from William Bankes's impressions the reader learns that she has Greek profile, she is blue-eyed and straight-nosed), generosity, self-sacrifice, caring and protective nature to every person around her. The general attitude of those who know Mrs. Ramsay about her is sometimes reported through the narrator' voice: *"But was it nothing but looks, people said? What was there behind it — her beauty and splendour? (…)She knew then — she knew without having learnt. Her simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified. Her singleness of mind made her drop plumb like a stone, alight exact as a bird, gave her, naturally, this swoop and fall of the spirit upon truth which delighted, eased, sustained — falsely perhaps."*

In the following fragment Lily Briscoe is characterized indirectly from Mr. Bankes point of view: *"Lodging in the same house with her [Lily Briscoe], he had noticed too, how orderly she was, up before breakfast and off to paint, he believed, alone: poor, presumably, and without the complexion or the allurement of Miss Doyle certainly, but with a good sense which made her in his eyes superior to that young lady."*

Some other time, Mr. Ramsay is characterized implicitly by effect on other characters towards him, as it is revealed in Lily Briscoe's interior monologue: *"You [William Bankes] have greatness, she continued, but Mr. Ramsay has none of it. He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is a tyrant; he wears Mrs. Ramsay to death; but he has what you (she addressed Mr. Bankes) have not; a fiery unworldliness; he knows nothing about trifles; he loves dogs and his children. He has eight. Mr. Bankes has none. (…) All of this danced up and down (…) in Lily's mind."*

Norman Friedman points out that *Mrs. Dalloway* is an example of "multiple selective omniscience"[2] meaning that events and characters' inner states in the novel are seen and rendered through its heroes' sensitivity and consciousness and from their perspective or point of view. Therefore, one may say that the narrator's presence is perceptible in a lesser degree for the narrating voice is associated with some of other characters in the story.

Thus, the major part of the narrative is rendered in free indirect style by an almost absent or covert narrator, presenting characters' thoughts, feelings, memories concerning people, events or intimate beliefs as it is the case of the following interior monologue of the raisonneur Peter Walsh: *"For this is the truth about our soul, he thought, our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities threading her way between the boles of giant weeds, over sun-flickered spaces and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable; suddenly she shoots to the surface and*

[1] See supra Chapter II

[2]Friedman, Norman apud Lintvelt, Jaap, *Încercare de tipologie narativă. Punctul de vedere. Teorie şi analiză*, (trad. Angela Martin), Ed. Univers, Bucureşti, 1994 p.141-142.

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sports on the wind-wrinkled waves; that is, has a positive need to brush, scrape, kindle herself, gossiping."

There are also passages in which the reader perceives the narrator's presence or overtness as it is the case at the beginning of the novel where the narrator identifies the character who will become the subject of the story: *"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."*; or the episode in which the narrator focuses on Septimus Warren Smith, presenting his outward appearance, his life experience – childhood, youth, war, his mental suffering and engagement to Lucrezia: *"To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so, too, his profile — his angular, big-nosed, intelligent, sensitive profile; but not his lips altogether, for they were loose; and his eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely; hazel, large (…)*; *"(…)had left home, a mere boy, because of his mother"(…)*; *"(…)had gone to London(…)"*; *"Septimus was one of the first to volunteer."*; *"When peace came he was in Milan."*

Focalization [1] stands for the perspective from which events are narrated. Focalization presupposes a focalizer and a focalized, that is someone who perceives something or something and someone that is perceived. In *Mrs. Dalloway* one may speak about the use of internal focalization when the events are presented from some characters' point of view. In the following excerpt Clarissa Dalloway stands for the character-focalizer: *"It is probably the Queen, thought Mrs. Dalloway, coming out of Mulberry's with her flowers; the Queen. And for a second she wore a look of extreme dignity standing by the flower shop in the sunlight while the car passed at a foot's pace, with its blinds drawn. The Queen going to some hospital; the Queen opening some bazaar, thought Clarissa."*

As mentioned above, narration also concerns linguistic aspects such as word choice, sentence length, symbols and imagery. The language used by the author in the novel is specific to people belonging to the English middle class or upper middle class, who have lived in elevated and educated circles, but who have also known the context of war (Septimus's case) or the lower social classes (Peter Walsh's living for a while in India). Actually the characters' language tallies Virginia Woolf's own language and mastery of using it.

Imagery is strictly connected with the use of words, with the stream – of – consciousness technique given the author's poetic and impressionistic literary style. In this respect, Septimus's metaphorical interior monologue, while sitting on a seat in Regent's Park, is suggestive: *"His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock. (…)But he himself remained high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still; he begged (he was talking to himself again — it was awful, awful!); and as, before waking, the voices of birds and the sound of wheels chime and chatter in a queer harmony, grow louder and louder and the sleeper feels himself drawing to the shores of life, so he felt himself drawing towards life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen."*

To conclude with, one can say that the different narrative techniques are manifestations of Woolf's constant negotiations between public and private voices, as well as one of the stylistic ways in which her resistance to stasis and definition manifests itself, allowing her movement between public and private realms, between

[1]See supra Chapter II.

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varying points of view. Rather than vague and abstract declarations about Woolf's multivalency, it is important to acknowledge that these traits can and should be anchored in readings of the specifics of her texts and their techniques.

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