Representations of Virginia Woolf[1]

Mihaela-Alina IFRIM[*]

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1. Virginia Woolf Symbol, Virginia Woolf Icon

In the modern chapter of English literature, Virginia Woolf is not only a skillful writer, a master of the English word, but also a symbol of a modern generation of writers on their way of changing the patterns of writing imposed by the realist novelists. Furthermore, she is equally the symbol of an entire generation of women eager to detach themselves from the image of the housewife completely anchored in domestic work. The words of T.S. Elliot in a note he wrote for "Horizon" magazine shortly after the death of Virginia Woolf represent a precious statement made by a contemporary on her significance:

> Virginia Woolf was the centre […] of the literary life of London. Her position was due to a concurrence of qualities and circumstances which never happened before, and which I do not think will ever happen again […]. With the death of Virginia Woolf, a whole pattern of culture is broken: she may be, from one point of view, only the symbol of it; but she would not be the symbol if she had not been, more than anyone in her time, the maintainer of it (Rosenbaum 1977: 203).

At the beginning of the Second World War, E.M. Forster, the person she admired the most and whose professional judgement she respected the most, delivered a lecture on Virginia Woolf, which represents the best introduction to her work and personality. He describes Woolf as being curious about life, sensitive and, tough at the same time, engaged in receiving sensations, sights, sounds, tastes which through her mind found their way to theories and memories evoked on paper; in the end, her successful writings are nothing but analogous readings of such sensations. She never considered improving the world simply because she saw it as being man-made, and therefore, she, as a woman, was free from any responsibility for the mess. Described as a person who respected and acquired knowledge, she believed in wisdom and cared for abstractions such as order, justice and truth and as a social creature her interest in society was best expressed through her feminism.

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[*] "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania.

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A revolutionist in nature, Virginia Woolf was resentful of being raised in a completely Victorian setting which, among others, implied achieving education by means of home schooling and self-taught knowledge. This exclusion from the academic world is very much dramatized in *A Room of One's Own* in some memorable scenes. In Oxbridge, the narrator preparing her lecture is walking across the grass of one of the colleges, absorbed in thought, when she finds herself interrupted by a man gesticulating in her face in complete "horror and indignation". Why? She explains:

> He was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me (Woolf 1977: 10).

Another incident inserted in the text to strengthen the exclusion on grounds of being a woman takes place in a library when she wants to look at a manuscript and a "kindly gentleman" informs her that "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction" (*Ibidem*: 13).

Aware of the love Woolf had for Cambridge and of the regret that she could not have been part of the academic world, Forster notes:

> …when you conferred the Rede Lectureship on me – the greatest honour I have ever received – I wondered whether I could not transmit some honour to her from the university she so admired, and from the central building of that university. She would receive the homage a little mockingly, for she was somewhat astringent over the academic position of women. "What? I in the Senate House?" she might say; "Are you sure that is quite proper? And why, if you want to discuss my books, need you first disguise yourselves in caps and gowns?" […] I cherish a private fancy that she once took her degree here. […] she could surely have hoaxed our innocent praelectors, and, kneeling in this very spot, have presented to the Vice-Chancellor the exquisite but dubious head of Orlando (Rosenbaum, 1977: 205).

Although, she is always depicted as a serious, experimentalist writer with feminist preoccupations, it cannot be omitted that she also had a good sense of humor. In mediating her conflict with Arnold Bennett regarding writing and how characters should be built, Woolf declared that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (Woolf 1924: 4). Her words are a recollection of some of the events that took place that year:

- E.M. Forster wrote *Howards End*;
- Virginia Woolf, at that time Stephen, was doing volunteer work for women's suffrage;
- Roger Fry, with Desmond McCarthy as secretary, organized the Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries.

Nevertheless, surrounded by these serious events, the Dreadnought hoax found somehow its way to happen. Indeed, the human character changed, for even their hoaxes had a purpose beyond that of simply having fun, as Adrian Stephen declared:

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> It had seemed to me ever since I was very young […] that anyone who took up an attitude of authority over anyone else was necessarily also someone who offered a leg for everyone else to pull… (Rosenbaum 1977: 33).

The tightening up of the regulations concerning official visitors as a result of their hoax determined Virginia Woolf to note "I am glad to think that I too have been of help to my country" (*Ibidem*).

Another aspect of Woolf's persona, which exerts a powerful magnetism, is her illness, a factor considered to have had both positive and negative consequences in the sense that it left traces in her writing but it also determined her to commit suicide. Perhaps the modern social context on its way of liberation from previous societal and cultural norms is equally responsible for her genius and for her unbalanced mind. In the end, one fact is certain: Virginia Woolf stands for the mentally ill writer consumed by the force of creation as the same E.M. Forster best summarizes it:

> She liked writing with an intensity which few writers have attained, or even desired. […] She would not look elsewhere, and her circumstances combined with her temperament to focus her. […] She had a singleness of purpose which will not recur in this country for many years, and writers who have liked writing as she liked it have not indeed been common in any age (*Ibidem*: 206).

Consequently, the brief glimpses on the textuality engulfing Woolf's image inserted so far in this study represent a summary of a symbol, of a story behind the stories she so masterfully told and they also formulate the premises which led to her being perceived as an icon in contemporaneity.

In her book *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999), Brenda R. Silver establishes the star status of Virginia Woolf as being acquired in 1937 when, after *The Years* became a best-seller in America, the prestigious "Time" magazine featured on its cover a photograph of the author. This iconization process was, and still is, sustained by the American context if we are to take into consideration that yet another American element led to the flourishing fame of Virginia Woolf: "[t]o some extent we have *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to thank for this visibility" (Silver 1999: 9). Silver argues that this celebrity made her notorious to a wide range of people who might never have read her works let alone be aware that a real person named Virginia Woolf had lived. She also identifies this moment as being the point when Woolf acquired a type of iconicity which is independent of her academic standing or literary reputation, that is, it can be separated of her value as a writer and of the value of her works. Hermione Lee reinforces this view as she states:

> It began to seem that everyone who reads books has an opinion of some kind about Virginia Woolf, even if derived only from the title of Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Lee 1999: 2).

In one of the special features of the film *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997), Vanessa Redgrave, the actress distributed in the role of mature Clarissa, declares that in the American space everybody is very educated in Virginia Woolf and there it can be noticed a real and passionate adoration of her as opposed to England where, of course, there is provided an education in Virginia Woolf's writing, but there is a lack of passion and interest in who she was. Vanessa Redgrave's observation comes to

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reinforce the importance of the American factor in the promotion of Virginia Woolf to such extent as to transform her into an icon throughout the world. Therefore, when it comes to Virginia Woolf everybody assumes a position in relation with her for myths have already emerged.

2. Virginia Woolf Enactors – Eileen Atkins and Nicole Kidman

The biographical reconstructions of Virginia Woolf lead towards the formulation of myths assimilated and represented on stage or on screen and hinting only to some elements which usually detach from a large number of features constructing the complex personality of the modernist writer. These elements make reference to the idea of androgyny, which marks the writing and the thinking of Virginia Woolf, to her sexual uncertainty and therefore to issues of lesbianism, to feminism and political arguments, and, last but not least, to insanity, contemplation of death, and, of course, suicide.

Yet, to represent Virginia Woolf only in these terms does nothing but to reinforce Roland Barthes' assertion that "myth hides nothing" as "its function is to distort" (Barthes 1991: 120). Nevertheless, these myths have a value of their own in the sense that they are attached and derived from a history which implies a collective knowledge gained through comparative facts. In other words, the myths created around Virginia Woolf are "chosen by history" (*Ibidem*: 108) as they are those specific elements perpetuated through and by the common knowledge of people. The occurrence of Virginia Woolf enactors trying to portray one or more of the multiple instances attributed to the modernist writer represent a natural response to the propagation of these versions, reflecting another feature attributed to myth "[w]hat is characteristic of myth? To transform a meaning into form" (*Ibidem*: 131).

Be they stage or screen adaptations of the Woolfian text, the new texts emerging from this transformation process represent more than a simple exercise of literary criticism in order to put the original in a whole new perspective; they become originals in their turn and their performance makes room for assertions about Virginia Woolf. Eileen Atkins and Nicole Kidman are two major figures both in theatre and cinematography, who have assumed the difficult task of playing the role of Virginia Woolf: Eileen Atkins in the stage adaptation of the feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* (1989), directed by Patrick Garland, and Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* (2002), the film adaptation of Michael Cunningham's novel directed by Stephen Daldry.

The adaptation of *A Room of One's Own* edits and rearranges the initial text as to fit its original purpose: that of being a lecture. Atkins delivers the text in the first person adopting the role of Virginia Woolf, as opposed to how the essay is written in the persona of Mary Seton, Beton or Carmichael. If Woolf chooses to hide herself behind the names of the three women, perhaps to convince the readers of her time that her words apply to all women and not just herself, the adaptation addresses to viewers educated in who Virginia Woolf is and what she represents, therefore, she needs not to be disguised anymore. Furthermore, this act of delivering the lecture in the first person might be read as a statement of the powerful and meaningful image attributed to her in the contemporary setting. Throughout the adaptation, Atkins

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mimics nervous tension, generosity, anger, calm and, of course, mocking superiority. Yet, her performance does not remain unquestioned as Woolf "probably dropped and murmured more" and that "her body language may have been languid rather than incisive" (Rosemary Dinnage cited in Whitworth 2005: 222). In the documentary *Ten Great Writers of the Modern World: Virginia Woolf's* Mrs. Dalloway (1988), Hermione Lee describes the public voice in which Woolf might have delivered the lecture to women audiences as "elegant, reasonably ironic and carefully in control of its indignation" [00:28:51].

If the words of Hermione Lee are to be taken into consideration, then, a gesticulating Virginia Woolf pointing fingers here and there, emphasizing words and sentences by pronouncing them strongly would be hard to imagine recounting the scene of the horrified Beadle (*A Room of One's Own*, 1991: [00:04:00 – 00:04:55]). Of course, one might be tempted to read this performance as real in the view of the feminist attitude characteristic to Woolf, but most likely she would have related the episode with a hint of irony and the typical mocking superiority.

Perhaps the vivacity with which Atkins delivers the discourse, marking with anger and strong voice parts of it, or with nervous tension constantly frowning others, or with an eyebrow raised and an ironical tone as she does when asking "Why did men drink wine and women drink water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect had poverty on fiction?" [00:13:58 – 00:14:06], represents the somehow political version of Virginia Woolf perceived as a feminist therefore a revolutionist and a militant.

Garland's adaptation of *A Room of One's Own* emphasizes androgyny and omits many of the historical allusions Woolf makes in her extended essay, perhaps to produce and present a more accessible text. Nevertheless, the stress on the androgynous nature of the writer is an intended one, reinforced by the way in which Eileen Atkins is dressed. In her role as Virginia Woolf delivering the lecture, she wears a jacket, a white shirt with a tie like tied scarf and a skirt, combining therefore male and female pieces of clothing.

Nicole Kidman, on the other hand, portrays a whole different version of Virginia Woolf, perpetuating her image as a restless, tortured and mad artist who lives her life in some kind of exile from real life, an exile which ultimately determines her act of suicide. Therefore, it can be asserted that Kidman's performance underlines the common one-dimensional nature of Woolf's popular perception, unfortunately detaching completely her suicide from the Second World War context, exposing her to the public once more as a fragile, victimized woman tormented by her writing and determined to live by the people around her.

Woolf is depicted as a person constantly needing surveillance from her husband, Leonard being presented as her keeper as, among others, the scene at Richmond railway station seems to suggest (*The Hours*, 2002: [01:14:43 – 01:22:10]). Perhaps this image of Leonard as Virginia's keeper has its origin also in the way he decided that they were not to have children:

> Leonard talked to Dr. (Sir George) Savage, and Sir George, in his breezy way, had exclaimed that it would do her a world of good; but Leonard mistrusted Sir George; he consulted other people: Maurice Craig, Vanessa's specialist, T.B. Hyslop and Jean Thomas, who kept a nursing home and knew Virginia well; their views

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> differed, but in the end Leonard decided and persuaded Virginia to agree that, although they both wanted children, it would be too dangerous for her to have them. In this I imagine Leonard was right. It is hard to imagine Virginia as a mother. But it was to be a permanent source of grief to her and, in later years, she could never think of Vanessa's fruitful state without misery and envy (Quentin Bell cited in Showalter 2003: 273).

These feelings of envy and of desire to have a part of Vanessa's life, children and a life in London, is best described in the scene of the kiss the two sisters share. Virginia casts herself over Vanessa as if she wants to be "infected" with life [01:06:45] keeping in mind that, throughout the episode of her sister's visit, she is constantly thinking about death, honouring it through the funeral of the dead bird [00:44:44 – 00:46:44]. Lying down next to the dead bird identifying completely with its frailty and inanition presents Virginia consumed by an intense suffering and a strong wish to die.

Nicole Kidman excels in performing the writing of Woolf's last words addressed to Leonard before committing suicide. Hermione Lee speaks about Woolf's suicidal note in an article in "The Guardian" (2003), saying that it was written in "short, jagged half-lines, as if she could hardly get to the end of the sentences" an element which Michael Cunningham preserved by reprinting the letter in his novel in the same manner. At the beginning of the film, Kidman speaks the words as she writes them, hesitating exactly on those line breaks, therefore understanding and resonating with the immense pain Woolf might have felt.

3. Final Remarks

The postmodern culture represents a fertile soil for Virginia Woolf's re-contextualization as numerous films, plays and texts have emerged, rewriting the Woolfian text. Therefore, the two representations of Woolf come to meet the expectation of a popular culture haunted by her image as the famous 1902 Beresford photograph keeps appearing in unexpected places reflecting new meanings or just pinpointing to already established ones such as: highbrow modernism, bohemian London, aestheticism, madness, and suicide. There are definitely two sides of her persona which exert the most magnetism: Woolf the feminist and Woolf the tormented and they are both exploited intensively. Eileen Atkins assumes the feminist version, while Nicole Kidman assumes the tormented, suicidal one. However, to have a real glimpse of the many facets of such a complex personality and resourceful mind would mean at the very least to combine the two performances.

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Representations of Virginia Woolf

Lately, the postmodern culture has been exploiting the multifaceted Woolfian text extensively and intensively. Numerous films, plays and written texts have emerged, having as source of inspiration Woolf's work, as well as the academic metatext produced around her writings. Although acknowledged while alive, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* contributed prodigiously to her fame. It is not an exaggeration to say that now, literally, Virginia Woolf is everywhere. The internet abounds in Virginia Woolf societies, blogs and forums debating her works and life, in pictures and documentaries and, just as any respectable celebrity, she even has a Facebook account made on her name. The motivation for this noticeable presence on the World Wide Web and on the postmodern stage is unquestionably the magnetism exerted by her experimental writing and tumultuous life. Therefore, in the context thus formulated, the name Virginia Woolf does not only denominate the writer, but develops a certain textuality indicating her various and multiple instances. The present paper sets out to investigate how impersonators of Virginia Woolf, such as Eileen Atkins (*A Room of One's Own*) and Nicole Kidman (*The Hours*), make use of this textuality in their attempt to portray different facets of a troubled yet very resourceful mind.

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