

A Spectre of Virginia Woolf's Utopias: the Theatre



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Any social Utopia is always a response to the particular conditions of the place and the time when it is written; it intends to suggest new ways of governing and directing the people to attain a perfect state of blissful living. Where there is a war, Utopia seeks peace; where there is tyranny, Utopia points to individual freedom; where there is poverty, Utopia depicts a life of plenty.

When the evils of the existing society are so many and so profoundly rooted that a peaceful path to a better state becomes impossible, William Morris and other utopians think that any improvement of society may only happen after a revolution takes place, so that everything may be started anew. This has proven disastrous. Likewise, all attempts to create small secluded “islands” as Earthly Paradises are destined to fail when their egotistical basis becomes inhuman or when their original ideal is spread and contaminated.

In an age when utopias have lost all credibility following the collapse of ideal totalitarian projects and old equalitarian communities' experiments, the only pure utopian schemes become confined to the thinker's mind and aspirations. Virginia Woolf had, “avant la lettre”, such a creative capacity.

One cannot properly say that Virginia Woolf was a utopian writer. However, her whole work is infused with utopian dreams, subtly conveyed under different aspects, forms and targets at each new writing. This leaves her readers with a patchwork of differently coloured utopian visions which seem to complete one another, showing a diversity of perspectives of old problems, whilst opening original views of how to attain better possibilities of a good life for all.

A spectre is a ghostly idea that haunts us. The spectre of Woolf's dearest longings, which accompanied her throughout her writing career, is better understood in a dramatized fashion, as it is undeniable that Woolf acted out her emotions in her fiction and lent a theatrical touch to all her writings, from her childhood to the moment of putting to execution the reluctant decision of her self-inflicted death.

Woolf's diffused idea of Utopia has the important particularity that it is not confined to a special place, time or community, but rather it is prevalent in all her writing sceneries, times and characters, presenting thus different glimpses of a whole which is never specified because it can never be reached.

The last sentence of *Between the Acts* is paradigmatic of the conclusion Virginia Woolf reached after more than a quarter-of-a-century of writing efforts: her characters spoke – but only when they were leaving the acting stage.

In her Letters and Diaries, Virginia Woolf mentioned more than once her prospects of active life for the future, hoping to reach at least her 70th anniversary. Among these statements, in April 1925 she explicitly wrote: "How awful it would be to retire at 60!" (*Diary III: 23*), little knowing, at the time, that she herself would take the necessary steps to definitively 'retire' from life's performing stage just before that appointed limit.

Widening the perspective opened by this wishful thinking and its unfortunate failure, one can wonder about the quantity of unborn paradises that take shape in people's imaginations throughout their lifetime. Pandora's fault, perhaps, but at the same time Pandora's gift, because life would become far more unendurable if one had not the capacity to paint one's future with the colour of one's preference. Sometimes, when we are lucky, we can go as far as climbing up some steps of the high mountain of our dreams and, if we are wise, we make the most of what we have, on that attainable top according to the inexorable Peter's principle, and we keep on looking at the stars with our feet

well stuck to the motherly, reliable Earth. But, the more imaginative we are, the more difficult it is to be wise, and unhappiness may follow both for ourselves and for those whom we love and who love us.

Woolf's imagination was unquenchable, but unfortunately her health did not always accompany its pace. It is true that sometimes she took advantage of forced moments of rest to let her fantasy fly freely to those 'real life' acting stages of her creation. She made her characters utter opinions and raise questions she put in their mouths to attain some definite purpose of her preference. Yes, she had that possibility when her physical strength was at her lowest, and that was because she felt secure, she knew she could count on the friendly care of those surrounding her. That was mostly Leonard's task for several decades, until circumstances made it more difficult for both of them to go on.

One of Woolf's unfulfilled dreams was her attraction to the theatre and to playwriting. This yearning pursued her since her youth: she entertained and actually worked on a project of writing a play with her brother-in-law Jack, Stella's widower. As far back as 1902 she confided to Violet Dickinson: "I'm going to write a great play [...] That is a plan of mine and Jacks – we are going to write it together" (*Congenial Spirits*: 9). The performance that allows each person to live several lives under different disguises, the display of emotions – be they our own or those guessed in others -, the possibility of using masks, adapted to each occasion and each public or each listener, fascinated her. She felt that personalities were not of one piece or, as she herself put it, "people have any number of states of consciousness (second selves is what I mean)" (*Diary III*: 12). Throughout her life, she used one or other of such devices in her fiction, as well as in her own life and in her epistolary or assumedly confessional writings. In her words "the only exciting life is the imaginary one" (*Diary III*: 181), and this she

put to practice. As she said, “[o]nce I get the wheels spinning in my head” (*Diary III*: 181), “that is what I am ripe for – to go adventuring on the streams of other peoples [sic] lives – speculating adrift” (*Diary III*: 187). She always wanted to “defeat the shrinkage of age. Always take on new things” (*Diary V*: 248).

To try and understand Virginia Woolf's rich personality and her innovative work, one cannot forget that, special as she was, some portion of her achievements may be ascribed to the characteristics of her family and the kind of education she received.

Born from a mother who had worshipped a mortal husband as if he were a god, and from a father who had quitted a feebly worshipped, unseen, and unrelenting God for freethinking liberty's sake, Adeline Virginia Stephen (the future Virginia Woolf) was naturally prone to trespass the boundaries of the normal.

The 7th child (the magic number) in a household where three families had become one, her very position in the children's hierarchy made her special and fragile. Being a late speaker and a love fighter, torn between two brotherly loves and jealousies, turning her weaknesses into strength to secure privileges in her parents' attention and favours, her most efficient weapon consisted in her histrionic capacity to bewitch those she wanted to conquer, bestowing on them all her feminine and infantile attractions. She was a born actress, and she might well have become a renowned one if the passion for reading and writing had not overcome – or somehow left in the shade – her acting talents, which, however, she used profusely throughout her life and which had an enriching distinctive repercussion in her writing. In her personal everyday life her histrionic skills were quite naturally used for her own personal benefit and pleasure. For instance, little Ginia – as her father tenderly called her – could be a temptress at three

years of age, as if she had learnt her feminine devices from the most efficient of Salomés.

When grown up, she acted likewise: frigid as some labelled her, she was never short of paramours and devotees, her charms being as strong as to lead her friend Lytton Strachey to forget for a moment his homosexuality and propose to her. Iconic and snob as others saw her, she could converse with servants and make herself understood when addressing working class uneducated women. Shy and low-profile as she usually was, she did not hesitate to perform, with her brother and friends, the outrageous national prank of the Dreadnought hoax (for which purpose she dressed up as a male Abyssinian dignitary and had her face darkened, showing her predisposition for acting and masquerading). Moreover: a typical highbrow as she admitted she was, she had the skill to reach the heart and mind of the “common reader”, in whom she marvelled as much as Ben Jonson.

Probably helped by all these conflicting qualities and idiosyncrasies, Virginia Woolf could not escape the attraction to the theatre, and she well grasped the potentialities of using masks and disguises: she did use them, both in her life and in her writing.

Take, for instance, *Orlando*, considered a burlesque by some and an “exercise in mimicry” by Helena Gualtieri (Gualtieri 113). This is the most theatrically organised of her narratives: written as a respite from her more serious work, she idealised it as a provocation, when she thought: “I want to kick up my heels and be off” (*Diary III*: 131). And off did she let her imagination fly to utopian fields where all transgressions of normality were permitted, including the erasure of time and gender limitations. Ironically called ‘*A Biography*’ by her author, the work can easily be read as the Utopia of mind’s liberty of creation, opening unparalleled possibilities to the fugitive fantasies each human being is sure to experience one time or other in the course of his/her life. But, in Woolf’s

usual manner, the ensuing negative consequences of the desired change are shown forthwith and the end of Utopia is made apparent, the dream vanishes and Dame Reality takes possession of the stage, covered only by the veils and masks lent her by each person's vintage point of view. Woolf's artistry leaves each reader free to select his/her own preferential share of the many utopian trends opened by the narrative. One crucial moment is when the text specifies: "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" (67). Here, Utopia is triumphant: it has brought about what was lacking in society: the equality of the sexes, the true capacities of androgyny. However, when Orlando, in the role of a woman, has to face the twentieth-century England's bureaucracies and traditions, she is confronted with reality: utopian fantasies cannot last long. The author submerges Utopia in the unsound waters of Reality:

No sooner had she [Orlando/a] returned to her home in Blackfriars than she was made aware by a succession of Bow Street runners and other grave emissaries from the Law Courts that she was a party to three major suits which had been preferred against her during her absence [...]. The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing [...] (82). [After much ado] she appended her own signature beneath Lord Palmerston's and entered from that moment into the undisturbed possession of her titles, her house and her estate – which was now so much shrunk, for the cost of the lawsuits had been prodigious, that, though she was infinitely noble again, she was also excessively poor (126).

Indeed, utopian ideas can never accompany the swift flight of mind's Imagination and Dreams, particularly when one combines them with dramatized scraps of real life. However, as Hertzler remarks, "[i]deas are our most precious

heritage, for they guard us from more evils and lead us to more goals than all other devices and powers" (271n.5).

Woolf's dramatizing capacity dwelt in her lucid mind: she could foresee the inevitable failure of her highest dreams but, in spite of her physical and mental frailty, she was strong enough to keep on dreaming and imagining solutions and by-passes for the innumerable situations she created.

Orlando is fantastic and different from all the other Woolf's writings but, nevertheless, the writer managed to imprint in this narrative her usual characteristic of having the sentences imply more than the bare words would do. Against the usual saying, Virginia Woolf's so carefully chosen words have sometimes the power to convey more meaning than a thousand images. This particularity gives to the text a sense of true realism, as complete as possible, going much further down the human psyche than the mere description which the external aspects of life would afford. The readers think with the characters and adopt or ostracise them according to their own sentiments and emotions of the moment, same as they would react to the actions and speeches of good actors on the stage. All is dramatized in Woolf, ready for the public to grasp and judge and sometimes wonder whether they are fully grasping the author's intentions, exactly in the way it eventually happens about the words or actions of people we think we know, or plays we boast of being familiar with.

Other novel, other method: the most ostensive recourse to theatre devices in Woolf's novels happens, naturally, in *Between the Acts*, and not only because of Miss La Trobe's display of England's History on the improvised stage in the country, together with her unorthodox questioning of the audience's perception of themselves and their inner feelings. Throughout the whole writing, with its medley of disparate characters with more or less disguised sentiments and idiosyncrasies, everybody seems to be acting a part as written on the script;

the atmosphere of a theatrical performance persists. *Between the Acts* can be understood as a Utopia “in instalments”: “the last of England” as Julia Briggs labelled it; or perhaps a “carnavalesque comedy” according to Christopher Ames, or something similar in the opinion of many others. But it is undoubtedly something much more serious. The text leaves us the assurance that the world has not and will not change ever since the time when dinosaurs walked in Hyde Park, whilst the human nature is also the same throughout the ages. This confirmation is the more pathetic since the book was written just before the Second World War, and published only in 1941, after its author’s death. It is possible that Woolf’s suicide compulsion might have been taken to the final paroxysm precisely because of her clairvoyance about the un-improvable condition of humankind, made so obvious to her in this last book which, symptomatically, she expressed the wish to be withdrawn from publication.

From the remainder of Woolf’s work, *The Waves* may be pointed out as particularly theatrical and utopian. A.D.Moody had long ago the perception that major attention should be given to this book. He says that it “is an attempt to comprehend human life in more ultimate terms [...] there is for the first time in Virginia Woolf’s work an adequately convincing sense of the energies which constitute life beneath the mind’s abstraction of it into ‘society’ or ‘art’ or ‘the soul’; a response to it in its wholeness and fullness” (Moody: 45). The book can be divided into acts separated by soliloquies, and the six actors’ quest remind us of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, with the difference that the quest is not for an author but for a ghostly friend whom they would like to bring back to life. This utopia of everlasting life has been known to be destined to failure since the times of Gilgamesh and Enkidu: permanence does not exist in this world and never will. This is a Utopia of Identity and Nostalgia, with its roots in the past but maintaining a resounding semi-prophetic quality that keeps it

independent from the gnawing effects of time. The final words of Bernard, the last survivor of the friends, show the inevitable disenchantment of those who pursue a utopian desire, greater than life:

I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand paving this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. [...] I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself; unvanquished and unyielding, O Death! (167).

The rider who controls the horse can be seen as Woolf herself controlling her fiction: sometimes pulling it back to her Victorian reminiscences, nostalgically dramatized, and soon thereafter galloping at full speed to follow her imagination, swallowing the Present to give her characters a utopian or perhaps even prophetic voice in her innovative ways of conveying special significances to her words.

To be noted that both *The Waves* and *Orlando* have been adapted to the cinema, as it has regularly been happening to one or other of Woolf's writings, adapted to the screen or the stage with more or less care, honesty and imagination. This has been made so much easy as all of them, as said above, have traces of a commanding utopian thought and a "penchant" for play writing characteristics in phraseology and structure.

Jacob's Room, seen as the first of Woolf's experimental novels, may also be mentioned here. It had been idealized by her with "no scaffolding" (*Diary II*: 13), as a mere structure, similar to a theatre performance without an actor. The novel is developed as a dramatic judgement of a deceased protagonist escaping oblivion by being brought back to life in the readers' minds through the power of mere fortuitous or eventually more important words which, little by little, draw his physical and human portrait better than any painter could have done.

The most decisive and formal evidence of Woolf's exquisite skills as a caricaturist and a playwright was merely intended for family entertainment: *Freshwater, a Comedy* was initially written in 1923 as a caricature of Woolf's great-aunt Julia Margaret Cameron, the renowned photographer, whom she actually loved dearly and to whom we owe some of the writer's best pictures. Cameron's house in the Isle of Wight served as scenery for the mock play, which took its title from the near-by Freshwater Bay. This first attempt was left practically forgotten until 1935 when Woolf decided to enrich it with an extra act in honour of the celebrated young actress Ellen Terry (married to a much older artist, George F. Watts) and have it performed in the family circle to celebrate her niece Angelica's birthday. This performance was included in a theatrical series organized, written and presented at regular sessions by the members of the Bloomsbury Group, by turns, in their own houses.

Nearly forgotten or ostracised for decades, this unique and very special fruit of Woolf's talents of dramatist was brought to the public attention after Lucio Ruotolo edited and commented on it in 1976. In his preface to the work published, he tells us of the difficulty to find, assemble and date the different original drafts, some of them merely the notes for each participant's intervention. As he informs:

As early as 1919, Virginia states her intention to write a comedy about Julia Cameron. In her diary entry for 8 July 1923, she describes herself working vigorously on "Freshwater, A Comedy," a welcome diversion in her struggle with "The Hours" (*Mrs. Dalloway*). She expects to complete the play on the next day. Six weeks later in a letter to Vanessa, Virginia expresses concern that the play is not yet finished and invites her sister and Duncan Grant to hear it read 'as soon as possible'. The urgency suggests a deadline and is clarified by her letter to Desmond MacCarthy, probably written in October of that same year, asking if he would consider stage-managing the play for a Christmas production. He agreed to direct *Freshwater*; Virginia, however, deeply

involved in the writing of her novel, disappointed a number of people by deciding to abandon the production. 'I could write something much better,' she informs Vanessa in the late fall of 1923, "if I gave up a little more time to it: and I foresee that the whole affair will be much more of an undertaking than I thought'. She was to find time to improve her play a decade later (viii).

The circumstances of this long and shaky writing process are in accordance with Woolf's usual perfectionism and over-revising discipline. But, on the other hand, they confirm her profound affection for the possibilities of stage performance and her wish to have a say in that field too. She intended to present, in a caricatured way, the idiosyncrasies, everyday habits, and particular features of revered people she knew well, perhaps influenced by the disturbing directness of phraseology and merciless realism of her friend Lytton Strachey's biographies of notable figures of the preceding century.

The text itself lets us know how earnestly and deeply she documented herself, considering the reference to phrases actually said and situations actually lived by the real personalities depicted. But we may well guess that she might be reluctant to expose to the ridicule of caricature – and performed caricature – those friends and acquaintances she actually loved. Her delay could only mean hesitation. And when she finally decided to bring her project to conclusion, she did it in the understanding that it was merely meant for a restricted performance for family and friends, in the same context of the open-mind confessions of the Midnight Club meetings.

Apparently, Woolf's utopian wish to enter the play writing world did not satisfy her. However, were she interested in following this path, perhaps choosing more neutral characters which she could treat with the same perfunctory or caustic verve she used in her novels, this unique example of comic situations supported by a deep insight of the characters involved, leads us to bet

that she would also fully succeed in this field. Further, we might perhaps expect some surprising original masterpieces, probably as innovative as the bulk of her fiction.

As matters stood at the time, she had too many projects in her head to embark in a new adventure, in a field she did not master and which she revered too much to risk a deficient or even second rate experience. Were she to live as long as she had predicted and wished for in her youth, there might be a possibility that England should gain a new talented playwright; but the short time she disposed of left this utopian dramatic dream as one more spectre in the enchanted forest of unborn creations of her inexhaustible imagination.

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