

# VIRGINIA WOOLF – MOMENTS OF BEING

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Put before the labyrinth and proliferation of critical perspectives, studies and readings on Virginia Woolf, entangled in articulations of teleologies and epistemologies, the critic faces a question: from where should she/he start writing, on what and from which critical perspective? These were the circumstances that dictated my choice of writing on "A Sketch of the Past", published in *Moments of Being – A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, (1976, 1985) and of analysing the narrative strategies used by the author to tell herself, to construct her identity and power, giving voice and authority to herself as a discursive formation.

In 1929, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf explained the non-existence of authoritative female figures, metaphorically represented by Shakespeare's sister: when wondering about the reasons why women had not written as much as men, her conclusion was that historically women had been deprived of education, money, status and a room of their own in which to write. Were women given the intellectual and material conditions - "[if we] have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room [...] If we face the fact that there is no arm to cling to" (AROO 148-149) -, then Shakespeare's sister would be born.

The repression of the feminine discourse condemned it to silence and Shakespeare's neglected sister was only born when women were given the power of the word and of representation, when women projected in history an identity which does not fit into the androcentric paradigm of inflexible egos; she was born when women revealed their identity by acknowledging the presence of the other, an identity that is both unique and relational – a flexible ego in a world characterized by relationships.

While the masculine tradition of autobiographical writing has taken as a premise the capacity of the writer to create a mirror effect and has made use of a stable and fixed perspective to constitute the self as the unifying element

of time, space and identity, showing a stable and autonomous self as a hero, the self, created in a feminine text, is not a teleological entity, nor an isolated being, but rather a self constructed on the consciousness of the meaning of the cultural category - to be a woman.

The feminine autobiography writes another story, as it has helped women to be reborn in the act of writing and of reconstructing several discourses - of representation and of ideology - in which subjectivity has been formed. The autobiographical self is no longer a singular entity but a net of multiple and heterogeneous differences within which the self is inscribed (cf. Gilmore), changing the monocultural imperatives of the being,

In her *Diary* (18 Nov. 1940) Virginia Woolf writes that "male autobiographies are little boy's sand castles: I am the sea that demolishes those castles". Assuming her role as an agent of change, powerful enough to write a project of becoming (cf. Hall), Woolf takes for herself the cultural agency as the product of diagrams of mobility and placement which map the possibilities of where and how certain vectors of influence can stop and be replaced.

Writing and thinking within a male-oriented and male-defined tradition, Virginia Woolf refuses the formal paradigms, "to make an orderly and expressed work of art, where one thing follows another and all are swept into a whole" (MB 75). She shapes events into a story with an end, using a strategy which brings a closure on time, on knowledge and on the self (cf. Robbins).

Positioning myself in a critical agenda which reads autobiography not as life itself, but rather as a text of life, I consider that we can read "A Sketch of the Past" as a geography of the possible (cf. Probyn 1993), as a map of possibilities of the self, where Virginia Woolf (subject and object of the autobiography) and the reader move and acknowledge conditions of possibility or plausibility (cf. Sinfield) for an individual and social existence. To do this we have also to bear in mind some questions concerning representation and memory, as it is by means of these that experiences are reshaped and the self recreated in a new landscape.

In the process of rewriting the self we tell a story, by definition not a recounting of experience as it was, but a fiction of the self, a selective and imaginative construction of who we have been and who we are; an autobiography is a story we weave out of the tangled threads we believe to be responsible for the texture of our lives (cf. Freeman).

To understand the autobiographical writings of Virginia Woolf as a geography of the possible is to understand it as the consciousness of the author in choosing and in selecting the ways of what should be represented in

the autobiographical text and how to do it, leaving to the reader the task of knowing and discovering the identity who knows itself and who materializes itself through discourse; of discovering the identity who chooses strategies, practices and technologies to represent itself as a cultural construction of power, through discursive alliances and in a network of voices and positions.

Writing autobiographically is an act of interpretation, where the lived experience is shaped, constrained and transformed by representation, to which the self owes its existence, and in which it evolves and finds expression. This representation implies the positions from where one writes or speaks (cf. Hall), which, in turn, imply the enunciative positions that constitute the self as a new kind of subject. As Gilmore argues, the autobiographical identity and agency are not identical to the real identity and agency; the former are representations of the latter, or better their construction. Between the self-narrator and the self-narrated there is a temporal and spatial distance which determines the enunciative position. We write and we speak from a particular time and place, within a specific history and a culture: what we say is always contextualized and positioned.

The position we occupy in a social space, the practices and the identities are not separated categories in a deterministic or hierarchical relationship; they mutually inform each other, creating a dense and detailed texture of narratives, of relationships and of experiences. The self is a set of techniques and practices based on daily life (cf. Probyn 1993). But it is not only the writers who are influenced by the social world. The readers, by bringing their horizons of expectation to their reading, also construct a narrative, since the different horizons of expectation, the different readings and different interpretations of each reader are determined by already constituted social differences, which construct the experiential context in which the readers appropriate the text.

Either representing a public realm or a private, more intimate one, autobiography draws a terrain where both authors and readers move and where they recognize conditions of plausibility for the representation of their experiences. Representing the self in a filigree of ontological, epistemological and organizational principles of identity, "A Sketch of the Past" can be read as a geography of the possible where the self is represented by means of several technologies of power and several trajectories, establishing a dynamic relationship between author, text and reader.

As a form which invents, in its fictional representation, an identity which only exists in the common and shared space of the narrative, the "Sketch" is the product of Woolf's consciousness and capacity to invest in affective

elements which, in turn, allow the reader to feel that space as a knowable space of relations, drawing maps of meaning. By choosing and selecting the moments and the facts from where she creates, Virginia Woolf is not only representing her own experience, she is also bringing to the fictional space of communication what she wishes and wants to be known, revealing the past by the forms she chooses, stressing the fact that "these separate moments of being were however embedded in many moments of non-being" (MB 70), of which she doesn't speak.

The postulation of a meaning to a past event dictates the choice of the facts which she wants to retain and the details which she wants to preserve or forget, according to a preconceived intelligibility and leads her to know that

in certain favourable moods, memories - what one has forgotten - come to the top. Now if it is so, is it not possible - I often wonder - that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it - the past - as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions (MB 67).

This choice determines the type of story she wants to tell, in it the faults, the lapses and the deformations of memory take place. These faults, in spite of not being the product of a physical cause or of mere hazard, are the result of a conscious choice of the author who remembers and who wants to gain recognition of a revised and corrected version of the past. As a matter of fact, the author participates in that fictional space of communication before the reader, as what the former gives to the latter is her interpretation, as an active agent in the choices of what is fictionally created. Virginia Woolf, aware of this narrative technique, questions herself: "Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember?" (MB 70).

In "A Sketch", the obstacles to a full reconstruction of the past turn visible and inevitable that there is the creation of a new past, similar to it but also different from it. In spite of all the efforts at truthfulness, the truth the text produces is always necessarily revisited, corrected and revised in its telling, a mixture of past and present, a process of self-invention. In this reconstruction of the past, memory is a fundamental tool, a technology of power (cf. Foucault 1988), as it selects the images which the subject wants to transmit according to the place and the time of the enunciation. Fully aware of

this power Woolf, from the standpoint of the present, writes "some of my first memories. But of course as an account of my life they are misleading, because the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important" (MB 69). Past has no other existence besides the representation not of facts withdrawn from memory, but the representation by the words based on the residual images of memory, as they are the only appropriate means of communication - the verbal configuration of reminiscences that "leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being" (MB 65).

To tell a life is to represent what no longer exists, it is a means to deal with the irrecoverability of the past (cf. Eakin), it is a representation which extends itself in time, like a succession of signs. Memories and the different voices by which Woolf enunciates herself allow her to convince the reader of the existence of another level of abstraction, the one of her individual being. This ontological position is articulated with an epistemological project, to the extent that, while a dimension of the being is proposed, it is based on a historical context. Under the disguise of showing herself as she was, Woolf exerts the right to recover the possession of her existence then and now.

Autobiography is never the final and fixed image of a life, because "it is so difficult to give any account of the person to whom things happen. The person is evidently immensely complicated" (MB 69). The image of the self is always constructed, since memories look for an essence beyond existence, and, by doing it, create that essence. To represent a life only reveals an image of that same life, an image which is distant and incomplete, distorted by the fact that the subject who remembers is not the same who as a child, as an adolescent or even as a young adult lived the past, showing thus that change is the operative metaphor in the autobiographical discourse (cf. Barros).

The image of childhood and adolescence to which the reader has access in "A Sketch" is but the result of an act of imagination of those phases of life. Memory produces a narrative subjectivity, working upon consciousness, dissolving it and fragmenting it, diluting the frontiers between past and present.

The passage, in memory, of the effective experience to consciousness accomplishes a kind of repetition of that same experience and helps change its meaning. The remembered past loses "its flesh and bone" (Gusdorf), but gains a new and more intimate relation with individual life which, after having been dispersed, can be discovered and reorganized in a non temporal way. The inclusion of all the memories and meanings in the autobiographical text, with the aim of making sense of the structure of the past, is nothing else than the

construction of a fiction, an imaginative, selective and literary construction of who she has been and of who she is at the moment of writing.

Paradigmatically autobiographical writing implies a certain distance of the self in relation to her/his other self, in order to reconstitute it as a unity and as an identity throughout time. The process of self-comprehension is reminiscent, in the sense that it gathers together all the dimensions of the self, the dimensions which had been until the moment of writing, unarticulated, dispersed, scattered or lost. This reminiscence is, in "A Sketch" a critical and active process which combines emotions and moments of self-reflection and which gives access to omitted experiences, allowing memory to see the events of the past in a new way, in a new landscape. The order given to the events is not inherent in the events themselves, but rather an option of the author and a reflection upon herself.

Manipulating the act of writing and the act of remembering, in order to attain her main goal: to write about her first memory - her mother's lap - and about her obsession - her mother, "the whole thing" (MB .83), Virginia Woolf inverts the order of the events:

Perhaps we were going to St. Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to London. But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St. Ives, for that will lead to my other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories (MB 64).

"A Sketch of the Past" articulates a moment in Virginia Woolf's life and is inserted in a collection of memoirs, constituting each of them fragments of the author's life, written for different audiences, at different times, where Woolf expresses her view of the self in general and of herself in particular. These sketches work as a place of identification, a place that is alternative to the fiction; she has a formal consciousness of the act of writing, putting an emphasis in the self-reflexivity of the writing and of the narrated self. While writing about herself, Woolf creates a story informed by a dynamics of self-consciousness (cf. Anderson). This makes her write that "among the innumerable things left out in my sketch I have left out the most important - those instincts, affections, passions, attachments - there is no single word for them, for they changed month by month" (MB 79-80). The texts collected in *Moments of Being* come to be a meditation on her own relationships, on her responsibilities and on her art.

Interesting also, is the fact that the selection and possible editing that her husband did, for the publication of *A Writer's Diary*, gave the reader the idea that Virginia Woolf was mostly concerned by her professional, intellectual and literary life, leaving behind all the ontological levels of her existence as a woman and her intense interaction with people in her day-to-day life. Leonard Woolf wanted his wife to be read as someone who was fully inside the literary and professional canon of the elitist intellectual circles of the beginning of the century. But Virginia left us another lesson - the possibility of a double articulation of the knowledge of the self and the care of the self, of the constraints of daily life and of the intellectual circles.

In "A Sketch of the Past" we have a narrative that frames the narrative of the past, in a juxtaposition of the past and of the present selves. By introducing each entry with fragments of her present self Virginia Woolf chooses a strategy which makes the reader aware that her mature consciousness is continually searching and commenting on the past, explaining for herself and for the reader the meanings and the positions which at the time of happening had not been clear and evident for the self who had experienced them. At the moment of writing, a moment which has already determined the beginning and the end of the story, as well as the mode how the self is represented and has developed throughout the times, Virginia Woolf finds the strategy to represent memories of the past, and knows that to represent a past experience means to reflect on it in the present: "I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present - at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon" (MB 75).

It is from the critical position of the present, an adult, mature and widely recognised as a literary figure, that she looks at the past, using, as she says, her present experiences as a platform, as a filter to look back; it is only in the present that she can represent the lived experiences and conceive the past and the future, in a temporal dynamics (cf. Pickering). We are before a self who is filtering past experiences through a succession of present selves, in a process of rewriting the self. Through a backward and forward movement, the past and the experience structure and restructure themselves mutually (cf. Pickering) allowing the reader to understand the fictional strategies of Virginia Woolf in her emphasis on the changes and continuities of an individual identity, putting the stress on what Luisa Flora (2002: 57) has called "the fluid contradictory method Virginia Woolf developed".

Thus, "A Sketch of the Past", mapping possibilities of the self, figures a possible representation, a moment of being in a geography of the possible

- in a landscape of being - where "this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time" (MB 75). The author knows that the process of recounting an experience, of rewriting the self is a process that "leave[s] out the person to whom things happened" (MB 65). Questioning, "Who was I then?" (MB 65) Woolf claims that "[i]t would be interesting to make the two people, I now; I then, come out in contrast" (MB 75). In the act of remembering the past in the present, she imagines the existence of another person, of another world, none of which real and under no circumstance having a possibility of existing in the present. The horizontal axis of the past is crossed by the vertical axis of the present, the one that contains in itself the immediate and the real (cf. Gilmore).

For Virginia Woolf, to write these autobiographical fragments is an act of interpretation, where the lived experience is shaped, constrained and transformed by representation to which the self owes its existence and in which it evolves and finds expression:

Many bright colours; many distinct sounds, some human beings, caricatures; comic; several violent moments of being, always including a circle of the scene which they cut out; and all surrounded by a vast space - that is a rough visual description of childhood. This is how I shape it; and how I see myself as a child (MB 79).

Accepting that the self represented in "A Sketch of the Past" is a fluctuating one, a self that represents itself in several layers of meaning, the text constitutes a discursive arrangement that brings together, in tension, the different lines of meaning of the self and raises a fundamental question: how does Virginia Woolf organize the experience and the knowledge of the self? By means of a process of choice and selection, she creates the coherent knots and the insertion in the real. Woolf is profoundly aware that in all the writing she had done - as critic or as novelist - she had had to find a representative scene, "a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable little threads" (MB 142). This acquired capacity and technique is very valuable when writing about herself, since "scene making is my natural way of marking the past" (MB 142).

In "A Sketch of the Past" the process of selection and of scene making culminates in the representation of a few important knots - the most intimate memories of Virginia Woolf: the relationship with her mother, leading the reader to a private, emotive, affectionate realm of existence, and the relationship with her father. The latter takes the reader to the intellectual circles which she

knew from the inside and to the house in Hyde Park, described as the cage, conveying her discomfort in living in such a neighbourhood:

The street below was a cul-de-sac. Our house was near the blank brick wall at the end. Hyde Park Gate, which led nowhere, but made a little sealed loop out of the great high road running from Hammersmith to Piccadilly, was something like a village street. a place which led nowhere" (MB 119).

The memories of her mother are memories of an obsession – "She was the whole thing" (MB 83) - of an omnipresent creator, in the very centre of "that great Cathedral space which was childhood" (MB 81) of the creator of "that crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood" (MB 84).

Her father was also an obsession to Virginia Woolf; he keeps alive in her memory as the writer, rather than as the father; "I call him a strange character" (MB 107), "a little Victorian early Victorian boy, brought up in the intense narrow, evangelical yet political, highly intellectual yet completely unaesthetic, Stephen family, that had one step in Clapham, the other in Downing Street" (MB 108).

Through his books I can get at the writer father still; but when Nessa and I inherited the rule of the house, I knew nothing of the sociable father, and the writer father was much more exacting and pressing than he is now that I find him only in books; and it was the tyrant father - the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self-pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father - that dominated me then (MB 116).

However, she is able to exert her present consciousness and critical capacity and look back in time, recognizing that, in the moment of writing, she is able to understand and see what she had not been able to see - "the gulf between us, that was cut by our difference in age" (MB 147) - was but the gulf between two ages - the Victorian and the Edwardian -, where the latter wishing to look into the future was still under the power of the former and thus creating a friction and a conflict.

We were not his children; we were his grandchildren. There should have been a generation between us to cushion the contact. [...] Explorers and revolutionists, as we both were by nature, we lived under the sway of a society that was about fifty years too old for us. It was this curious fact that made our struggle so bitter

and so violent. For the society in which we lived was still the Victorian society. Father himself was a typical Victorian. George and Gerald were consenting and approving Victorians. So that we had two quarrels to wage; two fights to fight; one with them individually; and one with them socially. We were living say in 1910; they were living in 1860 (MB 147).

The description of the house is also revealing of Virginia Woolf's strategies in representing herself and the social and historical conditions of her life. Totally Victorian in style, "a complete model of Victorian society" (MB 147), it was a three-storey house, where, as she recalls, her two realms of existence co-existed: downstairs there was pure convention, "The tea table, the very hearth and centre of family life [...]. The tea table rather than the dinner table was the centre of Victorian family life (MB 118); upstairs pure intellect, there "[f]rom ten to one Victorian society did not exert any special pressure upon us" (MB 148); Virginia could dedicate herself to her realm of creativity.

However, as she says "I was thinking; feeling; living; those two lives that the two halves symbolized" (MB 124).

In "A Sketch of the Past" we can find a balance between the meaning to express the experience of the self, in its physical and mental component and the way how that experience is verbalized, given to the others in the contexts of social experience. The epistemological use of experience proves the interrelation of structural determination and the individual relationships; if at an ontological level experience postulates a separate realm of existence – "the immediate experiential self"- (Probyn 1993: 16), at an epistemological level, Virginia Woolf reveals herself in her conditions of possibility and finds alternative enunciative positions in the construction of the self in general and of herself in particular. In an articulation of subject, discourse and history, Woolf constructs a self who has no existence prior to the text and who does not coalesce with its creator.

The several enunciative modalities, the discontinuity of the planes (cf. Foucault 1972) Virginia Woolf uses as daughter, sister, friend and woman of letters, do not refer to a synthesis or to a unifying function, but rather show dispersions, revealing the different states, places and positions that she occupies or is given in the moment of writing.

In tracing maps of identification and belonging (cf. Grossberg), the act of remembering is a political act in the sense that what is recollected and what is obscured is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past and thus to the terms of Woolf's self-knowledge and authority.

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