

# VIRGINIA WOOLF AND GABRIELA LLANSOL– ‘SWEEPING THE THICK LEAVES OF HABIT’

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"I make my phrase and run off with it to some furnished room where it will be lit by dozens of candles" (*The Waves*: 95)

"Eu divago por entre o sentido" (I wander amongst meaning) (*O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma*: 15)

I.

What immediately makes possible a comparison between V. Woolf and G. Llansol is a total opposition to the limits imposed by the literary tradition of realism,<sup>1</sup> a strong will to overcome orthodox thinking, placing themselves in the margins of a representational logic to privilege signifiers with multiple meanings, which are provoked by the affects and perceptions and a disquiet about beings and life. This comparison is even more pertinent if we consider, as Perry Anderson suggests, that almost all the aesthetic characteristics of post-modernism, such as reflexivity, hybridity, pastiche, figuration and the dissolution of identity were already present in modernism.<sup>2</sup> But, while in V. Woolf the dissolution of identity involves a negative feeling of the loss of the Self and is a consequence of an obsession with the fugacity of things and its consequent instability, with G. Llansol the dissolution is synonymous with liberation and affirmation of difference.

In one of her many essays, Virginia Woolf considers words an "impure medium",<sup>3</sup> because being "faithful" to the real, they are incapable of transmitting the many facets of Being, the flux of reality, or of capturing the movement of life in its different singularities. According to G. Llansol, the words which submit to the laws of reason or to objectifying forces, following

a logic of identity, are an "imposture" and cannot destroy the oppression, the ideological falsity of the language in order to open onto new and unlimited landscapes. In opposition to a platonic concept of the Good in itself and of the Beautiful, which are absolutely pure, not only V. Woolf, but also G. Llansol, reclaim hybridity or the impurity of literary genres which is fundamental for an understanding of aesthetics, where the beautiful and the pure appear in the encounter with the unknown, that is, the sudden encounter with alterity. Between pure and impure, the two works under analysis in this paper, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (TW, 1931) and Gabriela Llansol's *O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma* (JLA, 2003) (*The Game of the Freedom of the Soul*), while self-reflexive works, develop around an encounter in that unknown territory, which may be Elvedon or Herbais, but these are the places of writing, where the figures are transfigured, perception is shattered into a million fragments and the meaning of words falls headlong.

In this article, I will read that encounter with the other and its implications not only at the level of subjectivity, but also at the level of language and writing implicit in the works.

## 2.

Imagine the source-image of a writer \_\_\_\_\_  
 He draws me. While drawing, he desires me and writes. He  
 Has a drama, which turned grey in the dry ends of his hair. What?  
 He draws a cascade, water that rustles in the lines and in the  
 Sketch. I hear at a distance a sound of pain, of someone hungry  
 And persecuted. I don't want it to be me. I can't, but shudders.  
 Doesn't love what he/she writes nor what desires, isolated in the comfort  
 Of his/her gift. If he/she thought about me!....  
 This is, I think, the image of Virginia Woolf \_\_\_\_\_  
 She applied it to the *metanight* and it resulted in a *dispersal* of water<sup>4</sup>

This fragment was written by Gabriela Llansol. Her reference to V. Woolf, working as an inter-text, allows an approximation between the two works and its relation with a concept of a self-reflexive, anti-mimetic and rhizomatic form of writing, which is inseparable from an effect of the dissolution of identity.

"The dispersal of water" is linked to the recurrent image which appears in *The Waves* – "a waste of water", where the word waste is a synonym of dispersion, wandering and excess "unattached to any line of reason" (TW 157), in opposition to a contained and realist writing, chained to a compulsion to reproduce and perpetuate "neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets

of note-paper" (TW 199). One could, perhaps, characterize *O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma* as that dispersal of water, where the *textuality* or the "melancholic confirmation of the night" (JLA 9) is also a synonym of excess, wandering and subversion to any literary convention, and presents itself in the very title as a game, in contrast to a totalitarian and reductive conceptual knowledge, to become chance, liberation of new pulsations, instant of an affirmative saying to the future. *The Waves* was defined by V. Woolf as a "Play-poem",<sup>5</sup> a game of language, of experimental fiction, or a Dionysian game of the world, where only the imagination coupled with the freedom of the soul allow the permanent destruction and reconstruction of beings and the world according to the rhythm of the waves. It is, thus, only a sketch, where six chalk figures (TW 16), vague and with no substance or "figures without features robed in beauty" (TW 226), are drawn, and where they self-reveal themselves in juxtaposed sequences.

According to Jankélévitch "[...] la pureté est, comme le verre de la vitre, *l'invisible qui laisse voir*, la transparence elle-même n'est pas faite pour être vue, mais pour qu'on voie des corps opaques et massifs au travers" (Jankélévitch 14), since the function of the pure transparency is to reveal a landscape full of contrasts, of shadows, where "all is somewhat obscured by steam from a tea-urn" (TW 74). In *The Waves*, writing, while only a sketch, appears as pure and crystalline like the water of the cascade, because only such a "pure" writing, compared to the white tablecloth on the table around which the six friends gather, may allow for the shadows, the ghosts, the multiple interior voices that in *The Waves* follow the dialectic rhythm between the violence of the Same and the ethical epiphany of the Other.

The *source-image* of writing is represented by a line, because it is triggered by an unforeseen encounter, it is the "vision of the invisible",<sup>6</sup> or the moment of the encounter with the Other, that unattainable figure that only Love, in the margin of any form of power, may allow and that enraptures the writer in a desire impossible to quench. It is the encounter with what remains forever other, what escapes possession, domination and is prompted by perceptions and sensations which provoke an assemblage between interior and exterior, stirring forces and overcoming, not without pain or sacrifice, the limits of an interiorized world. It escapes, therefore, from the webs of the world to become a river, a fountain, water, life itself sprouting. In this sense, the two texts are unfinished, because they are infinite, they are not a book, but "just the flow of writing" (JLA 8), as the calling of the Other, to which they respond, breaks with the logic of sameness opening it up to a polyphony of meanings. In both texts, clock time is suspended, a different time

is invented, that of the encounter with alterity or the diachronic solicitation of the Other. This opening to the Other is, according to Levinas, the gift, which corresponds to the abandoning of the imperialism of the Same or the dis-interest comparable to what Silvina Rodrigues Lopes called "des-possession",<sup>7</sup> as the one who writes sees him or herself with no centre - "Let solidity be destroyed. Let us have no possessions" (TW 177). Bernard, who is "a natural coiner of words, a blower of bubbles through one thing and another" (TW 94) maintains that: "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am - Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs" (TW 230).

Bernard's self, which is compared to a boat (TW 176), is constantly being threatened by the loss of a centre, metaphorically symbolised by the death of Percival, that is, by the shadow of alterity or those "mocking...observant spirits" (TW 72), which, nevertheless, enrich him "with their comments, and cloud" his "fine simplicity" (TW 72). His self is constituted as a paradoxical identity, absent from himself, because he was called by an Other, it does not even allow for the succession between the moment of presence and the moment of absence, but rather for the juxtaposition of the two moments in the same diachronic time "in bursts of sound and silence" (TW 73).

Bernard and the other characters are not unified substances, but they form a "collective assemblage",<sup>8</sup> that is, through these characters there are desires, affects and percepts (the invisible form of the forces) flowing, conveyed by the different points of view, without a definite subject of enunciation or the traditional omniscient narrator. That is why we cannot talk about a character that perceives or feels, but in places of perception or "blocks of becoming"<sup>9</sup> which only vaguely can be identified with names to the point that each of them dissolves in the flux of language: "we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory" (TW 11). We may even consider that Bernard works as the main or the foundational character and all the others are mere proliferations or "connective cogs of an assemblage"<sup>10</sup> which correspond to a position of desire, not desire for power, but desire for language and the flowing of writing.

Susan is in strict relationship with nature, with maternal fertility, with fermented bread, but she is also related to writing, because the interminably vagrant swarm of bees (TW 69), a metaphor of Bernard while a creator, is also associated with Susan and with a lover she is waiting for. Rhoda, in her world of games and imagination, ponders about the things that lie beneath the semblance of things (TW 134) and her gift will be to give back beauty to the world, lying,

dissimulating, because she, having no definite goal, is "to be cast up and down among these men and women,...with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea" (TW 86). Rhoda, who has no face and does not possess anything, feels impotent in relation to reality and she can only escape the aggressiveness of the world by escaping from that same reality, that is, by letting herself dissolve into the waves (TW 171), where the real and the imaginary worlds merge. With Jinny, in opposition to the Cartesian concept, body and mind are inseparable and her body flowing "forming even at the touch of a finger" (TW 184) implies the impossibility of a corporeal fixed state, because it is a body "in-becoming", a place of mutation, confluence of unified bodies, which transform themselves into pure intensities, because as she concludes: "The body is stronger than I thought" (TW 83). All the encounters she has with men and women, as well as her body always dancing, always in movement, correspond to an infinity of possible states, which do not refer to the biological body, but are mainly a function of her "corporeal imagination"<sup>11</sup>. As Jinny affirms: "My imagination is the body's. Its visions are not fine-spun and white with purity like Louis's" (TW 184). Her corporeal imagination compels her to an "impure", disorganised and not objective perception, because each act of perception is a consequence of her body always "in-becoming" Other, implying an infinite of possibilities. Jinny is also associated with love, which urges her to go out of herself into the warmth of another being (TW 84), but she is also related to wine in a Dionysian dance, which follows the rhythm of an Other when: "[W]ords crowd and cluster and push forth one on top of another" (TW 84) in the moment of ecstasy, where there is no limit for the body or for thought. At that moment, of opening and encounter with the Other, she may sing her song of Love: "Come, come, come" (TW 146) during the night "traversed by wandering moths; night hiding lovers roaming to adventure" (TW 146). Neville, the poet, who loves life and inhabits a room lighted up by the fire, where the tick-tack of the clock of time is abolished (TW 150), looks for order and exactitude in the poetic word and, refusing illusion, he does not let himself involve "with rosy clouds or yellow" (TW 70). While Louis, also presented as a poet, in the same way seeks to impose an order through the precision of sentences built with concentrated and everlasting words, Bernard searches for the perfect phrase suited to the passing moment, as an unfinished letter of love, where the sentences, built with spontaneous and unpredicted words, compared to the *moths*, may flow like lava (TW 63) in that insatiable curiosity about the human being. Being conscious of the need of language, but simultaneously aware that sentences are made of "evasions and old lies" (TW 109), Bernard wishes an other language,

more suitable to the alterity of beings and things, away from imposed schemes, or "some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement" (TW 199). A "minor language" in a Deleuzian sense, closer to sound and rhythm, a non-pragmatic language, which continuously produces meaning, as the constant references to gold with its alchemic connotations indicate: "something sulphurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch. Of story, of design, I do not see a trace then" (TW 200).

There is no story or plot in this kind of writing, which is a space of tension between transparency and opacity, therefore Bernard wants to invent a language for his writing made of sentences "dabbling always in warm soluble words" (TW 54). Words that are following their line of escape in order to reactivate desire and make its connections proliferate as an intense experimentation that reveals the limits of our language-habits. Therefore, Bernard wants a different language from that of Percival, who is a hero, the symbol of imperialism, also characterised as a "God" or the omnipotent egocentric and totalitarian subject with his "violent language" which only serves to reproduce and maintain "the thick leaves of habit" (TW 236).

### 3.

In "The Task of the Translator", Walter Benjamin, reflecting upon the role of the translator and his/her relationship with language, supports the need of a *pure language* as the one where the original remains hidden and fragmentary, because the purity comes from the infinite and pure movement of signification. The *pure language*, in a Benjaminian sense, seems to illuminate the concept of language present in Woolf and Llansol, as it is a language that may be defined as creative *Word*, lacking any information or ultimate signification<sup>12</sup>.

In *O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma*, we also observe the need for a non-pragmatic language, a language conceived in the margins of what Llansol calls "imposture", because "the use of words went on sticking identifiable images" (JLA 43), that is, words are used only to reproduce what exists and this is what Llansol rejects in her text. If "the text insists in the dream" (JLA 79) and creates a *reality* beyond the reality of the world, the word of the text has to be pure, that is, deprived of its habitual meaning, to impregnate itself with its semantic potential in an encounter with what is not recognizable. Only this way can the text, "saying life" (JLA 91), open up its "way in the matter" (JLA 90), contradicting a closed and totalising said. Therefore, lines are the raw material of the text (JLA 35), lines of flight with their deterritorializing force and which produce

a *reality* in a mode of "writing pure and rapid" (JLA 54, 55). Likewise, Virginia Woolf, while writing *The Waves*, wrote in her diary: "[W]hat I want now to do is to saturate every atom",<sup>13</sup> meaning that she wanted to make the language vibrate, to disturb the equilibrium or to activate, from inside language itself, the lines of continuous variation to unsettle syntactic and semantic patterns.

And, it is in this context, in which words become sonorous vibrations, that we may understand that the textual author is a "dreamer without memory" (JLA 50), because losing memory, in a Nietzschean sense, is an active mode of continuously recreating the present, opening it up to the new and the unknown, and where all things "are created from pure purity" (JLA 45). *O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma* is not only a reflection about writing itself, but also about art in general, posing the fundamental question about the *source image* of the aesthetic experience or the principle which presides to that unpredictable encounter made of sensations, perceptions, actual images and also "images snatched from the past" (JLA 7).

At a certain point in the text there is the question: "[W]here is the principle of our encounter?" (JLA 73), to which the text itself answers and, besides, all the other texts written by G. Llansol are continuously answering, as there is no answer that may define or describe the encounter with the Other or where "the real gestation of a vision starts" (JLA 70). Therefore, *O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma* emerges as an answer to a *there is*, being the performance itself of that *there is*, or of that incessant rumour, that excess of Being or disquiet shadow, from which we cannot liberate ourselves and that, as Levinas suggests, impels the Self to decentre and to open to alterity<sup>14</sup>. The aesthetic experience in G. Llansol is the experience of alterity itself, where everything is free from the conceptual possession of the subject, to be returned to the materiality of existence, through the transmutation which allows the writer or the artist to think *the different* from what is established. The non-definition of the enunciative subject, and, it is important to emphasise that the text itself enters into a dialogue with the other voices, affirms the plurality of points of view, because the subject, when placing him/herself in the place of an other looking, becomes him/herself other, suffering a process of dissolution: "I is the other I see in me. A non-fragmented, unite, vast place, creating ever more and larger amplitude" (JLA 17).

In *O Jogo da Liberdade da Alma* the I-other writer (*escrevente*) is simultaneously a musician (*musicante*), because there is an intrinsic relationship between text and music; but G. Llansol chooses a pianist, because to play the piano implies numerous tactile contacts between the pianist's body and the

piano. Abandoning himself to the creative power of his body, the pianist lets himself be guided by his spontaneity, letting himself also be invaded by the unexpected, in a kind of affective commotion, because in music the sound has no thickness, no materiality and its essence, being of a fugacious and fluid nature, is a pure intensity that traverses the body. Therefore, G. Llansol writes: "[I]f you keep the sound, the image will be indestructible, and your body corruptible. If you only listen, you have already started dying" (JLA 63).

Like the pianist's wandering hand, the writer (*escrivente*) lets herself be led by the rhythm, the melody and by the *power of the touch* to affect and be affected in a mode of writing where "the images run towards the inside of strong waters" (JLA 84) with the intent to "devastate the souls" (JLA 8). In contrast to Woolf, where death is seen negatively as the losing of the subject's centre, in G. Llansol, death has to be understood as the impossibility of dying or of an end, because death is only the possibility of beginning again "where a free word is born" (JLA 91) in opposition to those words which "are not of the body but of the inadequately punitive libidinal Moonlight" (JLA 91).

I must conclude, now, and so I wish to emphasize that in spite of the proximity between the two texts, it is impossible not to refer that, unlike G. Llansol, in Woolf's text, the renewal of the poetic language, understood as erasure of reason, is related to the flow of consciousness, to self-analysis or to a search for the inner state of the characters, through their visions, intuitions, and the unveiling of their opacities. In spite of the time, space and distance which separate both writers, in these two texts V. Woolf and G. Llansol are both searching for a way to express the immanent possibilities of life in that infinite encounter which is the text, where "we feel happy for dying and dying again and again" (JLA 24). For both V. Woolf and G. Llansol, writing, which is weaved with any kind of filamentous matter (JLA 48 and TW 144), means their respective searches for the invention of space and time where the pre-individual and pre-social singularities, or the world of pure intensities, may reveal themselves and live in community like "shoals of wandering fish" (TW 58) or as G. Llansol calls them "fish of affect" (JLA 84). In Elvedon or Herbais what remains is the feeling of the impossibility to know and grasp the mystery of life and the will to continuously say it, through a non-submission to rules and codes and through the "infinite power of language" (JLA 79). Therefore, and taking the recurrent image in *The Waves*, I would say, that it is not one lady, but two ladies who sit "between the two long windows, writing. The gardeners sweep the lawn with giant brooms" (TW 12; 224), stirring up the huge *leaves* of sameness, habit and tradition.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All translations from Gabriela Llansol's works are my own responsibility. See Virginia Woolf "Modern Fiction" in *The Common Reader*, Vol.1.
- <sup>2</sup> See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernism*, p.80.
- <sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Walter Sickert: A Conversation" in L. Woolf (ed.), *Collected Essays*, Vol. II, p.237.
- <sup>4</sup> *O Começo de um Livro é Precioso (The Beginning of a Book is Precious)*, p.240.
- <sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Narrow Bridge of Art", in *Collected Essays*, Vol. II, p.219.
- <sup>6</sup> José Gil, *A Imagem-Nua e as Pequenas Percepções: Estética e Metafenomenologia*, p.23.
- <sup>7</sup> See *Teoria da Des-posseção. Ensaio sobre textos de Maria Gabriela Llansol*, pp.83-84. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'Exteriorité*, p.86.
- <sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, p.65.
- <sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, p.277.
- <sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, p.55.
- <sup>11</sup> José Gil, *A Imagem-Nua e as Pequenas Percepções: Estética e Metafenomenologia*, p.294.
- <sup>12</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in *Illuminations*, pp.70-82.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol.3, 28 November 1928, p.209.
- <sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps et l'Autre*, pp.26-27. It is interesting to note that in *O Senhor de Herbais*, Gabriela Llansol affirms: "[...] nobody has ever managed to wipe out the unknown which follows us like a shadow", p.250.

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