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Małgorzata Hołda

University of Łódź, Poland

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3772-6297>

e-mail: margaret.c.holda@gmail.com

The (Self)portrait of a Writer: A Hermeneutic Reading of Virginia Woolf's (Auto)biographical Writings

Abstract

Woolf's maturing as a writer was deeply influenced by her traumatic experiences in childhood, the (in)capacitating states of mental instability, as well as her proto-feminist convictions. Long before Barthes, she toppled the traditional position of the author, and her literary enshrinement of "the other reality" reached unity with the world rather than individuality. This article ponders Woolf's creative impulse and investigates her autobiographical writings to show the import of their impact on her fiction, which, as Woolfian scholarship suggests, can be viewed as autobiographical, too. I argue that philosophical hermeneutics sheds light on the self-portrait that emerges from Woolf's autobiographical writings and offers a rewarding insight into her path of becoming an author. I assert that Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of subjectivity, and, in particular, his notion of narrative identity provide a route to examine how Woolf discovers her writing voice. In light of his hermeneutics of the self, the dispersed elements of the narrative of life can be seen as a possibility of self-encounter. Woolf's writings bespeak her gradually evolving self-knowledge and self-understanding, which come from the configuration of those separate "stories" into a meaningful whole. The article also interprets Woolf's autobiographical writings through the prism of Michel Foucault's reflection on discourse and subjectivity, indicating that her texts instantiate his assertion of the subject's constant disappearance.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, autobiography, hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault

Introduction

After the publication of *The Waves*, which Woolf considered her greatest novel, she confesses: "Oh yes, between 50 & 60 I think I shall write out some singular books, if I live. I mean I think I am about to embody, at last, the exact shapes my brain holds. What a long toil to reach this beginning – if *The Waves* is my first work in my own style!" (*Diary* 4, 1983: 53).¹ In this way Woolf writes about the many years of her writerly enterprise and the achievement of a unique writing voice, which she deems "the beginning." This diary entry records an important moment of self-discovery which conveys the reaching of a writing maturity. The truth about her outstanding creativity, which

¹ Virginia Woolf's writings are cited with title or acronym included in parenthetical citation wherever appropriate.



she self-consciously encapsulates as “the exact shapes my brain holds,” manifests her attempt to control the proliferation of ideas and an exigency to put them down on paper in a satisfactory way.

Becoming an author, as a processual venture, invites us to pose a question about its constitutive elements. Woolf's autobiographical texts as well as her novels, which, as researchers agree, can be viewed as autobiographical (cf. e.g., Amselle 2008; Lounsberry 2015; Showalter 2016; Booth 2016), are a space in which one can locate the novelist's search for her self. Addressing Woolf's fictional and autobiographical writings in light of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self allows us to see her creative production as an intriguing self-narrative, in which all the diffused elements of her all at once dramatic and intriguing life find meaning. An employment of Ricoeur's critical perspective prompts us to view Woolf's “reach[ing] this beginning” as a hermeneutic process of self-understanding and unraveling of the writing “I.” The many selves that emerge from Woolf's writings inspire us also to seek an insight into Foucault's examination of the human subject in discourse. The shifting positioning of Woolf's writing “I” – the polyphonic space that it occupies in discourse – prompts an investigation into how his query of “what is an author?”, propounding the subject's ungraspable nature, its continuous partaking in the appearance/disappearance game, relates to her writings.

The Intimate Liaison between Woolf's Autobiographical and Fictional Writings

Without a shadow of a doubt, the scrutiny of the interconnections between Woolf's diaries, letters, memoirs, and her fiction enhances an understanding of the essence of her creative idiom. Her *oeuvre* shows a lack of the rigid generic distinction between the fictional and autobiographical writings; her novels look more like passages in diaries containing records of loosely connected thoughts; and her memoirs, letters, and diaries resemble novelistic writing in its concentration on extensive and detailed evocations of the inner and outer reality. Woolf's autobiographical writings display an innovatory touch in defying a rather inflexible, matter-of-fact way of chronicling life. Her diaristic style impacts the stylistics of her fictions, resulting in the superabundant, detailed accounts of events, but, also, her modernist, experimental fiction influences the way she records life in her diaries and memoirs. Woolf's diaries show a lack of a clearly demarcated line between writer and reader – she is a dedicated storyteller/chronicler, capturing the beauty of life phenomena, and a careful reader/interpreter of that which happens and calls for interpretation. Responding to an urge not only to depict but to fully comprehend, she captures the real in the epiphanic “moments of being” which are poetic disclosures of Being. Her hermeneutic sensibility of a patient reading/interpreting of the inner world of the human mind and the outer reality results in the disruptions of the writer/reader boundary. Her autobiographical writing is a hyper-conscious reading in which she transgresses the barrier between her private self and the writing persona. Reflecting on her life in diaries and viewing it in hindsight, especially in “A Sketch of the Past,” she disavows the self/Other dichotomy – the writing self becomes the Other that is reading and rereading the private self.

In many ways the beauty of Woolf's fascinatingly autobiographical *oeuvre* (fictional and non-fictional) rests on upgrading the significance of everydayness. The particularity of the present moment is captured in exhaustive accounts of that which is happening. This exceptional rendering of minute elements of reality, as evidenced in her autobiographical writings, influences the creation of her fictional imaginings. Frequently, the spark of an idea, blooming and expanding in her diaries, finds its final, crystalized form in fiction. Lyndan Gordon notices that whereas Woolf “saw [her fiction] as ‘the finished article’; the diary was ‘the raw,’ and one was in some indirect way dependent on the fertility of the other” (2005: 11). In a similar way, after Philippe Lejeune (2006: 36–37) and

Barbara Lounsberry (2014), Adele Cassigneul stresses that a diary functions as a “workshop ... a reflexive space of creation,” and emphasizes that this definition aptly applies to Woolf’s diaristic writing (2015: 2).

The import of the quotidian in Woolf’s works, however, draws attention to another, even more central aspect of her writing – her exquisite concentration on the “moment of being” – which is the moment of a heightened awareness of being, capable of disclosing something vitally real behind the façade of appearances that she names the “cotton wool” – the everyday, repeatable activities of “non-being” (Woolf 1985: 70). The “moment of being” is one of the elements of Woolf’s experiment. There is a close affinity between her autobiographical writings and her experimenting with the novelistic form. The conceptual conjoining of the two results in a mature writing style in Woolf’s masterpiece novels (Dahl 1983: 175). The evocations of “the moment of being” greatly contribute to the beauty of her mature novels and are the source of an unflagging critical interest. Giving examples from *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, Nicole L. Urquhart writes about Woolf’s “moment of being” thus: “Unlike Joyce’s epiphanies, these moments do not lead to decisive revelations for her characters. But they provide moments of energy and awareness that allow the character who experiences them to see life more clearly and more fully, if only briefly” (1998: 2). The “moment of being” as a staple feature of Woolf’s fictions accords with its importance in her autobiographical writing, potently shown in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, which feature the epiphanic moments in her life. I discuss in detail the quotidian and “the moment of being” as contributing to the autobiographical visage of her novelistic writings in the later part of the present study.

The interdependence between Woolf’s fiction and her autobiographical texts can be viewed as having two forms. Woolf either self-consciously prepares the ground for her yet-to-be novel in diaries before she sets off to write it, and/or converses with her imaginative self while the novel is in progress. For instance, in a diary entry from 30 April 1926, she writes:

Yesterday I finished the first part of *To the Lighthouse*, & today began the second. I cannot make it out – here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing – I have to give an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to: well, I rush at it, & at once scatter out two pages. Is it nonsense, is it brilliance? Why am I so flown with words, & apparently free to do exactly what I like? (*Woolf Online, Diaries*)

This and countless other diary entries show Woolf as an enticing self-commentator of her fiction. Being her own interlocutor, censor, and confidant, she lives in two inseparable worlds: the private, intimate world of chronicling (diaries, letters, memoirs), and the superabundant world of her imagination as reflected in her fiction. Woolf’s adamant interpreting of her work, beliefs, gifts, etc., which demonstrates her profound hermeneutic sensibility, becomes her inimitable *modus scribendi*. Her diaries flourish with self-commentary and self-analysis. For example, in a diary entry from 9 May 1926 we read:

Obscurely, I have my clothes complex to deal with. When I am asked out my first thought is, but I have no clothes to go in. Todd has never sent me the address of the shop; & I may have annoyed her by refusing to lunch with her. But the Virginia who refuses is a very instinctive & therefore powerful person. The reflective & sociable only comes to the surface later. Then the conflict. (*Woolf Online, Diaries*)

Most importantly, Woolf’s commitment to experimenting with both the novelistic genre and autobiography – an attempt to construe autobiography more in the vein of a novel and to create a novel in a way which would make it resemble autobiography – becomes one of the goals that she

passionately pursues. Interestingly, reflecting in her diary on the creation of her most experimental novel, *The Waves*, she shows her attempt to mold it in the vein of autobiography in its propensity to unify the otherwise disjointed mental elements – the portraits of “A mind thinking”:

Tuesday 28 May, 1929 I am not trying to tell a story. Yet perhaps it might be done in that way. A mind thinking. They might be islands of light – islands in the stream that I am trying to convey: life itself going on. The current of the moths flying strongly this way. A lamp & a flower pot in the centre. The flower can always be changing. But there must be more unity between each scene than I can find at present. Autobiography it might be called. (*Woolf Online, Diaries*)

As she confesses, in this innovative novel she does not aim to tell a story, but rather to capture “life itself going on.” The work towards this effect involves Woolf’s nearing the angle of vision to that which is traditionally attributed to (auto)biography. Her unique grasping of the ungraspable passage of time and the screening of the inconclusive processions of people, places, sentiments, moods, tastes, and sounds in her diaries resonate in her experimental, modernist prose. The thesis of the creative possibilities in Woolf’s diarist production is effectively highlighted in Adele Cassigneul’s review of Barbara Lounsberry’s *Becoming Virginia Woolf* (2015: 2). Constructing her narratives, Woolf interweaves them with her non-fictional writing through meaningful allusions to events and reflections recorded in her diaries. For instance, Clarissa’s love of walking about in London (in *Mrs. Dalloway*) and the discovery of a death within her party echo a diary entry from 25 May 1926:

The heat has come, bringing with it the inexplicably disagreeable memories of parties, & George Duckworth; a fear haunts me even now, as I drive past Park Lane on top of a bus, & think of Lady Arthur Russell & so on. I become out of love with everything; but fall into love as the bus reaches Holborn. A curious transition that, from tyranny to freedom. Mixed with it is the usual “I thought that when you died last May, Charles, there had died along with you” – death being hidden among the leaves. (*Woolf Online, Diary of Virginia Woolf*)

Woolf’s diaries do not only chronicle life events but reflect her continuous self-analysis and contain important commentaries on her writing process:

When I read a bit, it [*To the Lighthouse*] seems spirited too; needs compressing, but not much else. Compare this dashing fluency with the excruciating hard wrung battles I had with Mrs. Dalloway (save the end). This is not made up: it is the literal fact. Yes, & I am rather famous. (*Woolf Online, Diary of Virginia Woolf*)

Woolf’s autobiographical production is not a secondary source but a fully-fledged literary enterprise bespeaking her talents and literary aspirations. Her novels are accompanied by her diaristic and journalistic intertexts, which are captivating sideline narratives partaking in the process of their creation (Lounsberry 2014: 10–12, 62–63; cf. also Cassigneul 2015: 2). Lounsberry’s analysis of the significance of the interconnections between Woolf’s autobiographical and fictional writings is an important continuation of the earlier analyses developed by Philippe Lejeune & Catherine Bogaert (2006), and Frédérique Amselle (2008).

By their very nature, diaries monitor the events of some period; usually, they contain day-by-day recollections. Woolf’s prose and diaries demonstrate a similar approach in “... keeping that fount of life going” (Gordon 2005: 11). She is an inveterate chronicler, an admirer of life, begrudging even a short period of time which slips by unreported: “She castigated herself if she did not catch every drop in the diary. If eleven days went unrecorded, it was a lapse – ‘life allowed to waste like a tap left running’” (*Diary 1*: 239 in Gordon 2005: 11). Woolf’s disconsolation when life passes by unattended or is painfully neglected, which Gordon’s interrogation emphasizes, is

recuperated in her novelistic writing, in which she makes the most of the manifold sensations and observances she has, piling up images that ooze like shadows and inhabit her fictions – the “lost opportunities” regained.

Woolf's outstanding productivity in autobiographical writings (“nearly four thousand letters, thirty volumes of diaries, and unfinished memoirs” (Gordon 2005: 12) was backed up with her theoretical work on biographical writing (generically close but displaying a dissimilar focus – that space of reflexivity and chronicling is delimited to another author's life): “The New Biography” (1927) and “The Art of Biography” (1938), *Roger Fry* (a biography of Bloomsbury's famous member); as well as her pseudo-biographies, *Orlando* and *Flush* (Reviron-Piegay 2017: 2–3). Her search for a new form of biographical writing was assisted by the reading of the biographies of other famous writers. For instance, she was inspired to seek new ways of rendering an auto(biographical) form while reviewing Henry James's autobiography published posthumously. Similarly, her “discovery of Walter Scott's ‘Gurnal’” expressed a keen interest in the genre of biography (Gordon 2005: 11). The impact of the biographies of other authors on Woolf's diaristic writing was meticulously examined in Lounsberry's studies (2015 and 2020). After Lounsberry, Adele Cassigneul cogently stresses the influence of autobiographical writings of famous literary figures on Woolf – “diary-reading and diary-writing”² (2015: 2–3).

Woolf's diaries, pseudo-biographies, and novels burgeon with countless thoughts and memories that are quicksilver and broken into pieces. She fashions her autobiographical writing against the fossilized rules of Victorian biography with its faithful, personality-centered approach, considering them shallow and defective (Reviron-Piegay 2017: 3–4). Shattering the conventions of realism, delving into the meanders of the mind and the flow of the outside reality that constantly impinges on the inner world, she poses the oft-asked query about *mimesis* anew and shows a novel, more flexible and more capacious approach to the notion. She meaningfully includes in her literary representations the interior reality of a human being's mind – associations, projections, and fantasies (Showalter 2016: 1). Woolf's supreme capability of representing the quotidian paves her path towards her mature novels, which show an exceptional aptitude in re-formulating the circumscriptions of mimetic writing. Her writing idiom embraces the new collusion of the inner and outer world. Scrupulous evocations of the inner workings of the characters' minds are accompanied by masterfully detailed accounts of the outside reality. A passage from *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which Woolf portrays Septimus' ecstatic infatuation with spring's beauty, instantiates the radical shift in her understanding of *mimesis* – a detailed description of a physical reality is filled with multiple thoughts and sensations that come through the character's mind and body. As the narrator notes in the excerpt, an ordinary walk in the park becomes the site of a refined, contemplative response to reality:

Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round ... and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper ... – all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. (*MD* 47)

Woolf's portrayals of dailiness are not only beautiful evocations of the quotidian but, brimming with details, they show an agreement between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the

² This includes Woolf's reading of the diaries of Fanny Burney, Mary Berry, Lady Stanhope, Mary Coleridge, to name a few.

immanent and the transcendent. The world of objects is both contrasted and saturated with the fleeting sensations of that which is beyond and above. In her novel *To the Lighthouse*, an excerpt illustrates Woolf's deep understanding of reality – its immersion in Being. During the famous diner party scene, Mrs. Ramsay, the hostess, is depicted as sensing the subtlety of the belonging-together of the material and the immaterial. "It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity" (*TTL* 69). By the same token, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf sketches Clarissa, the eponymous heroine, as belonging to the material reality of London and wholly submerged in her spiritual world: "She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone" (*MD* 6). For Woolf, human everydayness is a captivating territory through which she explores the human mind:

While Woolf sought to remove the heavy furniture of the realist and naturalist novel in order to render the inner workings of the mind – "the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall" – she knew that the modern novel could not flee from the external world of everyday things ... Woolf's finest writing calls attention to ordinary experiences in a world full of ordinary things. (Olsen 2003: 42–43)

The new formula of rendering dailiness which marks Woolf's novels is well noticeable in her autobiographical and biographical writings too, *Roger Fry* and *Flush*.

All the loosely connected thoughts and images in Woolf's multi-faceted (auto)biographical texts (diaries and memoirs) emanate the same kind of enticing appeal. Her capacity of presenting a free flow of thinking stretches *ad infinitum*, with the covers of a novel, or a decision to close a day entry in a diary serving as the only boundary. The lavishness of imagery in fiction echoes the extremely sensuous perception of human existence articulated in her autobiographical writings. In a similarly fascinating way, the individual, secretive, and intimate, as well as the collective, social, and convivial find a genius expression in both Woolf's poetic prose and her daily records or reminiscences in autobiographical texts. Delving in the joys and sorrows of the quotidian and exalting in the momentous epiphanies of the real thing, she attains ultimate mastery of a chronicler in a modern style.

The novelist's incessant quest to capture the ever-escaping reality powerfully marks both her autobiographical and fictional writings. Woolf's autobiographical writings reveal her unparalleled flair for grasping fleeting sensations; thus, her diaries and memoirs read not just as down-to-earth chronicles but as recollections suffused with a sense of an enigma of human existence. Aware that it is impossible to arrest life in its ever-changing potential, realizable in multiple ways, she follows the experimental, innovatory path of doing justice to life's factic changeability and unrepeatability. In a diary entry she confesses: "I have to some extent forced myself to break every mould & find a fresh form of being, that is of expression, for everything I feel & think" (*Diary* 4 233). In her fictional writings, this novel approach – the finding of "a fresh form of being" – gives rise to her attempts to picture "moments of being": the moments of unique awareness of Being which disclose something utterly important about human existence and the universe. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf creates her heroine, Mrs. Ramsay, as discovering, experiencing, and reflecting on the significance of the moments of sudden revelation – visionary moments that reveal some fundamental truth about Being against the backdrop of the ever-changing and ever-escaping reality:

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something

different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from a change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (*TTL* 69)

In a similar vein to Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, the artist in the novel, attempts to comprehend the significant “content” of the moment of being which encapsulates some important truth about human existence:

And to those words, what meaning attached, after all? Standing now, apparently transfixed, by the pear tree, impressions poured in upon her of those two men, and to follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil, and the voice was her own voice saying without prompting undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things, so that even the fissures and humps on the bark of the pear tree were irrevocably fixed there for eternity. (*TTL* 15)

In *To the Lighthouse* and her other works of fiction, Woolf captures reality “... in fits and glimpses, through impressions, comments, and discursions, through conviction and instinct” (Bimberg 2001: 2). Woolf's concentration on the moment of being, the inimitable feature of her fictional and autobiographical writings, can also be discerned in her new approach to biography. As Alison Booth emphasizes, Woolf was “... born and bred in a culture of biography and commemoration. ... Woolf's version of fresh, vital biography for the new age resembles her father's principles for good biography, with the crucial difference that the subject might be obscure or female. Biography should be neither weighted down with fact nor idealized, but honed to essential moments of being” (2016: 13–14). The modern stylistics pertaining to (auto)biographical and fictional writings is discernible in the already hinted upon disavowal of the rigidity of genres' prescription. Woolf's famous *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the novel-cum-biography, debunks the factual mode of representation and argues for the *novelistic* form of a biographical account. The mixing of genres is taken even further when Woolf conceives a mock biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, *Flush*. Its satirical tone compellingly expresses Woolf's talent for deconstructing the idea of a “solid,” traditional biography. The inclusion of personal details and of ordinariness molds modernist biographical writing. Woolf's biographies are a vivid exemplification of this new way of looking at biography:

In her [Woolf's] lifetime, it became widely acknowledged that the truth about someone's life should include personal details and private moments rather than polite generalizations, and that many kinds of lives were worth noting, not just those of eminent public figures. These realizations about the value of ordinary experience inspired Woolf as a novelist, to be sure. Yet it is also worth noting how much of what Woolf wrote consisted of non-fiction life writing or commentary on documented lives of the past. (Booth 2016: 14)

This highlights the import of cross-fertilizations between Woolf's fictional and non-fictional writing; her meticulous evocations of human everydayness give shape to her modern novels.

Working towards biography's new form, Woolf engages narrative's discontinuity and fluidity. This kind of writing becomes her *modus operandi*. It is discernible in her experimental biography of Roger Fry and magnified in “A Sketch of the Past” – a portrait of her childhood memories, which Woolf writes as a break from *Roger Fry*. Defying the “fixed and lifeless” representation of life, she subverts the abiding ramifications of autobiography and aims to achieve “a portrait of a self created and constructed by the specificities of time, space, physical sensation and memory” (Kirkwood 2014: 1). In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf counterpoints the many memoirs that she

reads as mere records of events, which, to use her words, “leave out the person to whom things happened” (Gilbert 2011: 2). Clearly, an attempt to capture “the self as contingent and in constant flux coupled with the impossibility of defining it ...” (Kirkwood 2014: 1) becomes the key feature of her autobiographical and fictional writing.

Woolf, Ricoeur, and the Contingent Self

Woolf’s unwavering interest in the intangibility of the human self and its constructedness inspires us to investigate the self’s representations in her diaries, letters, and memoirs in light of Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of subjectivity. Her conception of the human self, as well as her projections of *self* (or *many selves*) onto her created selves analyzed through the prism of Ricoeur’s state-of-the-art notion of narrative identity, engenders a possibility to understand the otherwise irresolvable nature of the human subject in a literary discourse in terms of a cohesive narration which embraces the versatility of the authoress’ voices.

Ricoeur’s *narrative identity* provides for the constancy of the self, the *idem* constituent, and identity that is changing in time, the *ipse* element. He ascertains that as the narrative of one’s life unfolds, the self gradually and retrospectively grasps the meaning of her identity, recognizing and reconciling her many selves into a “synchronized,” unified self (Ricoeur 1991: 74–76). Deploying his philosophy of the self in Woolfian scholarship helps appreciate hermeneutic insights into the process of her becoming an author. Hermeneutics as the art of understanding illuminates the pathway to uncover meaning in existence and enhances one’s capability of self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*) (Jervolino 1990: 40–42). And this also meaningfully applies to the activity of imaginative writing as a meaning-laden part of human (writer’s) existence. To unveil its conditions, to near an understanding of the creative self remains within the domain of hermeneutic investigation.

There are three clearly distinguishable facets of Woolf’s writing which contribute to her enterprise as an authoress. Each of them, in their own way, is expressive of her genius and a pathway to authoring books. First, there is the therapeutic stratum, which involves a continuous process of the synchronization of her life experiences. This is geared at reconciliation – an attempt to explicate, to come to an understanding, and to see via writing. Second, which interlinks with the first, is writing as a possibility of channeling her mental capabilities as well as instabilities into an activity structuralized in time and space. Third, Woolf’s writing is an expression of her social and political thinking, her proto-feminist attitudes. Writing is then a creative, individual response to the problems of her time, for instance, to a woman’s position in society (with the prominent example of her most influential “A Room of One’s Own”).

This study narrows an explication of the factors contributing to Woolf’s career as an author to the therapeutic and structuralizing ones. There is a substantial body of research on the interconnections between mental instability, depression, and psychic syndromes and creativity (see e.g., Janka 2004; Rihmer *et al* 2006; Hetil 2004; Kaufman 2014; Alvarez 2020). It seems justifiable to pose a question whether Woolf’s fiction arises to some degree from an impasse to effectively communicate her mental states to her family and friends, and thereby give meaning to her inner experience of desolation and despair as shown in severe nervous breakdowns and suicidal attempts. Whereas phenomenological hermeneutics does not attempt to give an answer to the enigma of one’s mental predicament and its connection to creativity, it enhances – via the abundance of the investigated phenomena – the process of self’s discovery and self-understanding (see e.g., Gander 2017), as well as an understanding of the relationship between mental states and writing capacity. Woolf’s creative capability seems to be stranded between the times of ultimate, almost divine,

productivity and the most acute bouts of depression and physical exhaustion. Woolfian researchers posit that while the novelist's life was haunted by returning depression, she created her fictions in the intermittent states of relative mental stability (see e.g., Lombardi 1997; Koutsantoni 2012). With a poignant awareness of her encroaching madness, Woolf conceived her writing as embedded in the moments of stability. Her intense writing between depressive attacks is discussed, for instance, by Gustavo Figueroa (2005).

Most significantly, the extremity of her ups and downs, as well as the undulations of her creative activity, bespeak the fluid nature of her identity. The many selves that seem to be her, analyzed through the lens of Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, allow us to see them as greatly contributing to the persona of a writer – they are her writing self. The multiple, discordant, or even contradictory voices that emerge in her narratives (orphaned, androgynous, feminist, mentally distraught, political, etc.) are the outward expressions of her manifold selves, also of the socially constructed ones. Woolf grapples with her subjectivity by framing her diffused self that responds to the manifold external forces in autobiographical writings and projects her self onto the selves created in her fiction.

Her versatile and multi-layered self finds its meaningful expression in the way she sketches her characters with, at times, only a flimsy barrier between one character's self and that of another. For instance, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf creates Clarissa and Septimus, her *Doppelgänger* (both are the figures of the novelist herself) as two consciousnesses and yet, in the moment of the novel's climax – as one. The six children in *The Waves* do not seem to possess separate selves but are all part of some greater consciousness; the barriers between the self and the Other hardly exist. The impact of Woolf's multiple selfhoods on her writing self manifests itself in the autobiographical character of her narratives which are to a great extent literary epitomizations of the self caught in the toils of mental predicament. For instance, *To the Lighthouse* dramatizes Woolf's tragically curtailed relationships with her mother and father. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, the two main characters who portray her own parents "... reflect Leslie Stephen's background as a former university don and intellectual, and Julia Stephen's visiting of the poor and ill" (Booth 2016: 22). *Orlando*, a literary expression of Virginia's love for Vita Sackville, features an androgynous hero, hinting upon Woolf's sexuality (Booth 2016: 22).

Undeniably, in her fictional writing the novelist traces her self, which seems to be more than one. The dispersed self, encrypted in the many stories of her life, in Ricoeurian terminology, is configured and reconfigured. Significantly, in the process of configuration and reconfiguration, which furnishes her texts, her writing self is being built: it undergoes a process of creation in response to the changing reality of her identity. For instance, Woolfian scholarship seems to agree on the interconnection between the novelist's attempts at suicide and medical treatment and the creation of Septimus and his suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her success in fictional writing was preceded by suicidal attempts but also it was haunted by fits of "manic depression" (cf. e.g., Booth 2016: 14–15). Woolf's wounded self is reflected in the suffering self of her characters. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, the reconfigured reality of her self – the self-discovery of homosexuality – "inhabits" *Orlando*.

Woolf's confused voices of "the untold," finding their way in the "told" on the page, work towards a formation of her as an author. Explicating the creative, dynamic, and changing aspect of identity, Ricoeur uses the terms "concordant discord" and "discordant concord," which convey the movement from discordant and often highly tangled elements of the narrative of one's life towards a configuration of a cohesive life story, expressed in narrative identity (Ricoeur 1991b: 426). In the process of becoming a writer, Woolf emerges as a powerful reader of her own life story, or stories,

while attaining identity which comprises the entirety of her individuated voices. An analysis of authorship through the prism of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, explored mostly in *Oneself as Another* (1992), allows us to understand more deeply the import of authorship as a processual, formative, and self-creative phenomenon. According to Ricoeur, the self is not a ready-made entity, but is changing over time and is formed horizontally in relation to the present (one's relations with relatives and other people) and diagonally, by its sense of belongingness to a certain past and tradition, as well as anticipating the future (1991a: 75–78, see also e.g., Hołda 2018: 115).

The articulation of the many voices that comprised Woolf as a writer as well as the unrestricted "movement" of her self from one cameo appearance to another in her major fictional writings show her unflagging search for her personal and writing self. Her autobiographical texts and fiction-cum-autobiography demonstrate an indissoluble oneness of those two "streams" of identity. Woolf's cameo appearances in her fiction are her well-known device. For instance, Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf's stand-in) appears in a group of six stories, under the title *Mrs. Dalloway's Party*. Woolf discusses the process of composing *Mrs. Dalloway* but also her other novels in letters and journals (Showalter 2016: 8). The same observation is made in Monica Latham's essay "Clarissa Dalloway's itinerary: narrative identity across texts." The critic accentuates that the boundaries across her novels in terms of character's "existence" seem to be fluid (Mrs. Dalloway is present in *The Voyage Out* and in "Clarissa Dalloway in Bond Street") (Latham 2015).

Evoking the fluid self in her fiction, Woolf acknowledges the great impact of the outside reality on the formation of the human subject. Thus, her notion of the self is not that of a separate entity, but rather she reveals its free moving between selves, its melting with the self of the Other, or even its being meshed with some exterior phenomenon. Her texts manifest a pantheistic belief in the unity with the world of nature. For instance, Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* seems to be one with the stroke of the lighthouse light (Woolf 2018: 42). The dynamic, changeable self that emerges from Woolf's autobiographical texts and novels-cum-autobiographies expresses an inimitable conviction of self's oneness with some reality that is other than itself, even if those in-dwellings are temporary and unstable.

Woolf, Foucault, and Text as the Space of Self's Constant Disappearance

Woolf's versatile embodiments of her self across texts – the appearances of the same character (a stand-in) in more than one narrative, moving liberally between the writer/reader roles, and the self's various "habitations" – invite us to ponder Foucault's reflection on the function of the author and the space Woolf occupies as a writer in relation to her poetic discourse. The hermeneutic condition of writing is an engaging point of convergence of Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity and Foucault's insistence on the self-creative or self-formative aspect of subjectivity (cf. Hołda 2018: 75–82), which by extension can be applied to the writing self and Woolf's articulation of her many selves in writing. While Barthes proclaims the death of the author, Foucault delves deeper into the enigma shrouding the function of an author and highlights the subverted status of the author. Echoing Beckett's provocative query, he asks: "What does it matter who is speaking?" (2000: 174).

Foucault makes two important claims in relation to the position of the author. The text is the dispersion of the writing self into many selves and it is the space of self's constant disappearance (Foucault 2000: 182). In "What Is an Author?" he ascertains:

... writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority. This means that it is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier.

Writing unfolds like a game [*jeu*] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exhaust the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears. (Foucault 2000: 175)

The impossibility of pinning the subject within language defies the illusion that we may cherish about the “solidity” of the subject in discourse. The last statement in the excerpt accentuates an impasse in articulating the univocal subjectivity as contained in writing and evokes the dynamic dispersion of the self into many consciousnesses. Foucault underlines the plurivocity of the self that the writing self is: “... all discourses endowed with the author-function do possess this plurality of self” (2000: 182). He explicates further: “The author-function is not assumed by the first of these selves at the expense of the other two, which would then be nothing more than a fictitious splitting in two of the first one. On the contrary, in these discourses the author-function operates so as to effect the dispersion of these three simultaneous selves” (Foucault 2000: 182). The simultaneous existence of more than one self provides a significant insight into the intricate world of Woolf’s mediating selves. In her texts, the self generates a sense of originality and immediacy, while retaining the correspondences with other voice/voices. Woolf manifests her conviction that we possess multiple selves – “built one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter’s hand” (Woolf 2008: 293) – in her fictional and autobiographical texts, both through creating characters as shadows or alter egos and by “inhabiting” her characters in the form of versatile “embodiments” of her self in and across texts.

Going beyond the rules, transgressing the limits of the “writing game,” Woolf’s writing self continually disappears – which means it melts its own contours, it devours its own firmness – as none of the selves she seems to be takes on the monumental once and forever established quality. The remarkable variability of her selves partakes in the play of concealment and un-concealment, moving freely from the center to periphery, homodiegetically participating in the narrative, and viewing it from the extradiegetic perspective of an outside observer. Reflecting on the interrelation between authorship and subjectivity, Foucault endeavors to “grasp the subject’s points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies,” and raises a set of other related questions: “How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?” (2000: 186).

Showing an awareness of the misty ramifications of the author’s position, Woolf moves freely between the status of writer and reader. Foucault’s contention of the subject’s continuous disappearance in discourse sheds an interesting light on Woolf’s freedom in shifting the position of the subject. The most vivid example of the blurred distinction between writer and reader is her autobiographical “A Sketch of the Past,” where she continually strives to grasp the clash between the self and the ways it can be represented in a text, devising strategies of rendering the unmatchable space between one’s memory of the event and the event as such. Woolf observes that a memoir writer’s difficulty lies in the focus on events themselves and not the person that experiences them (Goldman 2006: 2). The text of *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* inspires us to see how Woolf copes with the disparity between the mental image of an event and that which has happened when she adopts the position of a reader and remains in a dialogue with the subjective accounts of her youthful years.³

Displaying the anti-mimetic and anti-monumental approach to biography, Woolf participates in various modes of authorial functioning. She is not just aware of the unavoidable unreliability of

³ A cogent discussion of Woolf’s approach to the workings of memory is offered in McIntire. 2008. *Modernism, Memory and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf*. McIntire emphasizes Woolf’s flair for evoking bodily sensations as the site of memories.

autobiography but crafts its new form. Her novelistic-autobiographical writing, professing the truth of the momentary glimpses of the past, rather than portraying reality as it was, indicates the veracity of Foucault's assertion that to "pin a subject within language" (2000: 175) is impossible. In her documentary texts, Woolf catches the truth of "the impossibility to write authentically about the self" (Kirkwood 2014: 2). As Kirkwood explains: "There is always a gap between the narrating voice and the subject; any attempt to unify the two and self-consciously analyze one's experiences results in false justifications and constructions of the self" (2014: 2). The unavoidable impossibility to grasp the subject – its intangibility – demonstrates not just an impasse in seizing the self, but also in seizing comprehension of the past in memoirs and autobiographies. Woolf responds to this insufficiency through her attempt at an autobiographical narrative, which dismisses the stark, downright factuality, and becomes a story that is agile and full of grace rather than a record, or a slavishly faithful account of events.

Conclusion

The insights afforded by philosophical hermeneutics in the interpretation of Woolf's autobiographical texts and fictional imaginings (viewed as predominantly autobiographical) help understand her writing self in light of the fluid subjectivity that she endorses, and which emerges from her novels, diaries, and memoirs. When Woolf subversively claims that, "There's no Shakespeare ... no Beethoven ... no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (1985: 70), she discloses her profound understanding of creative subjectivity not as refuting the individual human subject all together, but rather manifesting the loss of the boundaries in the creative process, the blurring of the distinctions between self and Other, writer/reader, and autobiography/fiction.

In the first part of the article, I posited that the self-interpreting stance Woolf takes in her diaries in relation to her novels in progress bespeaks an exceptionally intimate liaison between (auto)biographical and fictional writings. Woolf's formal experimenting is not just an issue of an awe-inspiring originality and newness but precipitates a gradual uncovering of her specific writing idiom. The entirety of her texts – fictional and non-fictional – constitutes a fabulous body of writing – a unique self-narrative. The second section of this essay rests on Woolf's remarkable propensity to approach human existence and writing as hermeneutically analyzable. The novelist is not only an interpreter of life, but a stunning interpreter of her own prose, which she does in her diaristic production. Her inveterate flair in interpreting and re-interpreting human existence, the self, and the Other (discernible in her fictional and non-fictional writings) draws attention to the wealth of her hermeneutic sensibility and opens an uncharted territory for an application of hermeneutics in Woolfian scholarship. Deploying Ricoeur's critical perspective heightens our awareness of the many selves and their evocations in fiction and non-fiction – the writing self comprises the many selves and completes the portrait of a writer.

The third part of this article draws attention to Foucault's reflection on the function of an author: how it helps reveal Woolf's awareness of an impossibility to seize the self in writing. Inhabiting many selves, Woolf moves unrestrainedly from one character's self to the other, as if changing one habitation for another. Dwelling in the many consciousnesses of characters in her autobiographically oriented fiction, she displays a sharpened awareness of dispersed subjectivity. In her autobiographical writings she renders the self as mirroring the spatio-temporal dimensions of the outside reality, and thus subscribes to Foucault's insistence on the formative aspect of identity as socially constructed.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self and Foucault's reflection on subjectivity and authorship help appreciate Woolf's continually evolving and maturing autobiographical texts as having an important bearing on her novelistic imaginings. The two critical perspectives employed here enable us to see Woolf-autobiographer as a hermeneutic thinker aware of the indispensability and universality of interpretation. Woolf emerges from the pages of her diaries, memoirs, and autobiographical novels as a modern writer open to the new ways of seeing human subjectivity and the possibility/impossibility of taking hold of it in a literary discourse. Undeniably, autobiographical writings can be viewed as nourishing her fiction, and her distinct approach to (auto)biography is the effect of her fiction's inspirational and fertilizing capacity.

Woolf's creative impulse and productivity, investigated through the prism of her autobiographical writings, shed light on the portrait of her as a writer. The self-portrait that emerges from her journals, letters, and diaries allows us to better understand the complex reality of her writing self and the richness of the motifs standing behind her fictional writings as remaining in close relationship to the events of her life. The fecundity of her diaristic writing reveals a writer whose unflinching interest in chronicling the outside reality and rendering the psychological reality of a human mind contributes greatly to the exceptional beauty of her modernist fiction.

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