

# Writing on the Woolfian Palimpsest. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

Michaela PRAISLER\*  
Alexandru PRAISLER\*\*

## Abstract

Contemporary literary texts increasingly recycle older writings, assuming extra depth and addressing a cultivated reader. Their scaffolding reveals the intertextual net and renders the reading process at once challenging and rewarding. A case in point is Michael Cunningham's 1998 novel, *The Hours* – Woolfian in content, form and politics, with obvious references to Mrs. Dalloway, as well as oblique allusions to "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" and other writings. Along these lines, the paper is intended to advance an analysis of Cunningham's multi-layered novel, foregrounding its dialogism and the strategy of its discourse.

**Keywords:** *novel, discourse, intertext*

## Introduction

Michael Cunningham's rewriting Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and recycling the novel's initial title (*The Hours*) seventy-five years after the project's inception, and over three thousand miles across the Atlantic, show literary experimentation at its best, in the tradition assumed and carried through. Accepting the challenge of reviving the already canonical high modernist novel discourse, Cunningham seems to embark upon a risky journey, yet he manages to create a meaningful postmodernist frame for the kaleidoscopic range of topics resonant of Virginia Woolf's, as mentioned in the Tuesday, June 19<sup>th</sup> 1923 entry of her *Writer's Diary*:

But now what do I feel about *my* writing? – this book, that is, *The Hours*, if that's its name? One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoyevsky. And

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\* Professor, Faculty of Letters, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania, michaela.praisler@ugal.ro

\*\* Lecturer, Faculty of Letters, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania, alexandru.praisler@ugal.ro

do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do? No, I think not. In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense. (1953: 57)

Overtly acknowledging the literary heritage that the late twentieth century text inscribes itself within, in one of the peritexts introducing *The Hours* – another relevant entry from Woolf's *Diary* (of August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1923) – Michael Cunningham announces the underlying theme, while simultaneously revealing the deliberately chosen strategy and technique, as well as the narrative scaffolding supporting the world(s) of his novel.

I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a great deal about *The Hours* and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment. (1953: 60)

The “beautiful caves” in the background of *The Hours* seem to be exactly what has brought the novelist The Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1999, one year after the book's publication. Their role in representing the human condition trespasses the boundary of American topics (considered for either of the two famous prizes), but is essential in opening up the text to multiple interpretations by a global readership, invited to decode the language and structure of the novel in order to reach its deepest significance.

Writing on the Woolfian palimpsest, Michael Cunningham's “language for the individual consciousness”, to quote Mikhail Bakhtin, “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's.” (1981: 293) He tells his story in words which are appropriated, which have had previous ‘owners’, previous uses, which have been contaminated by previous contexts. The double-voiced discourse of *The Hours* “expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author.” (Bakhtin 1981: 324) Virginia Woolf's voice(s) and Cunningham's own are intertwined to destabilise any authoritarian construction of society, any so-proclaimed ‘truthful’ representation of the world.

But Cunningham's discourse is not simply horizontally heteroglot. It is also built vertically so as to show literary tradition as a continuous flow, as eternally in the (re)making – supporting Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, whereby any text also feeds on previous ones and, in turn, informs future writing. Obvious in *The Hours* is the coincidence of the "horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and [the] vertical axis (text-context)", which "bring[s] to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read." (Kristeva 1980: 66) The identifiable literary corpus which may be read into *The Hours* includes, but is not restricted to *Mrs. Dalloway*, *A Writer's Diary*, *Suicide Note*, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, *Modern Fiction*, *Men and Women*, *A Haunted House*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* – which will be foregrounded in what follows.

### **(Inter)Textual Architecture in *The Hours***

The novel's matrix consists of a prologue and twenty-two chapters – all unexpectedly entitled 'Mrs. Dalloway'<sup>1</sup>, 'Mrs. Woolf'<sup>2</sup> or 'Mrs. Brown'<sup>3</sup>, occurring in varying combinations and permutations, in sets or groups of twos and threes: DWB, DWB, WDB, WDB, WD, WDB, DBW, BD.

The prologue briefly describes the surroundings of Monk House, the country residence Leonard and Virginia Woolf owned in Rodmell, near Lewes, East Sussex, and then suddenly plunges the reader into the waters of the River Ouse where, on March 28<sup>th</sup> 1941, Virginia Woolf, aged 59, chose to end her life. The suicide note she left (retrieved and preserved at the British Library) is inserted in the novel and used to build the sought after atmosphere of "life and death, sanity and insanity." The ensuing image built is that of her body bouncing in the undertow, trapped "against one of the pilings of the bridge at Southease" (Cunningham 2002: 7), while up above a mother is holding her little boy to see the troops driving past. "[Virginia's] face, pressed sideways to the piling, absorbs it all: the truck and the soldiers, the mother and the child." (2002: 8) From beyond, the world at the surface is grimmer, duller still, somehow justifying the final act, and the conveyor belt existence of three women that follows is the argument supporting the thesis.

The first, Virginia Woolf, is built out of illustrative fragments: at her most fertile (writing the novel in 1923) and her most fragile (committing

suicide in 1941); incapable of separating reality from imagination, she lives through her fiction, accepting, for some time, the therapy of writing. The second, Laura Brown, is the stereotypical post-war American housewife and mother, trying to find personal fulfilment beyond her bland status of a 'happily married' woman; she is constructed as the reader of Woolf's novel, who empathises with its central character; the place is Los Angeles; the year is 1949. She also appears at the end of the novel, fifty years later. The third, Clarissa Vaughan, also known as Mrs. Dalloway, lives in New York, at the end of the twentieth century (1999); the fifty-two-year-old publisher re-enacts, with a vengeance, the life of Woolf's character, proof of the real being contaminated and modified by fiction rather than the other way around.

The interlinking of the main characters and their mirrors in *The Hours* and *Mrs. Dalloway* shapes the puzzle and outlines the architecture Cunningham advances.

### **Level 1: The writer**

On one level, that of the writer, as Cunningham confesses in *A Note on Sources* at the end of his novel, the people "who actually lived appear in this book as fictional characters", and he has "tried to render as accurately as possible the outward particulars of their lives as they would have been on a day [he]'s invented for them in 1923." (229) Scenes from Richmond overlap those from Rodmell, in a mix of lived realities that only fiction is capable of outlining, which shows Cunningham's opting to add the socio-cultural dimension of the Woolfs' life, with their (especially Leonard's, actually) contribution to promoting the modernist aesthetics through primarily publishing the works of the Bloomsbury Group at the Hogarth Press.

As for the additional sources informing the text, they include various Woolf biographies, monographs, correspondence, autobiographies published by Leonard Woolf posthumously, articles and reviews on her non-fictional writing (the numerous direct quotes from *Mrs. Dalloway* being saved for later, to support the subsequent levels, of reader and character).

Even if not explicitly referred to, Virginia Woolf's *Modern Fiction* may easily be read into the fabric of Cunningham's novel, here as elsewhere, and promote it as breaking with precursor modes of writing and

outdated patterns of thought (with chronological referentiality deliberately slipping from under control).

‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss. And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured. (in McNeille 1984: 164)

Moreover, like Virginia Woolf, Michael Cunningham – speaking from a position which interrogates the complexity and highly personal nature of sexuality – discards patriarchy and the materialism it instituted, although not altogether. Significant examples of canonical, male produced literature are given by both to confess to valuable sources of inspiration, but also to point to the necessary shift inwards, towards the previously silenced, feminine universe. If Woolf, for instance, uses to this end the words of a character Thomas Hardy created – ‘I have the feelings of a woman’, says Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, ‘but I have only the language of men.’ (1977: 44) –, Cunningham openly admits to this goal, while acknowledging her contribution, saying

One of the things that I so love about Virginia Woolf is [...] her insistence that outwardly ordinary lives are anything but ordinary to those of us who are living them. We find our lives to be fascinating and of epic proportions. And Woolf came along – with Flaubert, who was a little bit earlier, and Joyce – and said, essentially, no, no, no. There is no such thing as an ordinary life. There are only inadequate ways of portraying the lives of the people of Earth. To me, Woolf was especially heroic because she insisted not only on the importance of outwardly ordinary lives but the importance of women’s lives. (Interview for Radio Free Europe, December 5, 2010)

In *The Hours*, Cunningham imports Woolf’s free indirect style to add a covert meta dimension and to render the creative process, having Virginia narrate about Virginia (frequently to Virginia) as she writes her *Mrs. Dalloway*. The first mention of her retreat in fiction is one of anticipation, of using the coming hours to bring to light the treasure buried in the shadows of her being<sup>4</sup>, as she begins her day:

This is one of the most singular experiences, waking on what feels like a good day, preparing to work but not yet actually embarked. At this

moment there are infinite possibilities, whole hours ahead. Her mind hums. This morning she may penetrate the obfuscation, the clogged pipes, to reach the gold. She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she were religious, she would call it the soul. [...] She picks up the pen. *Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.* (Cunningham 2002: 34)

Two hours later, as the headaches and voices return to torment her, Virginia reads her first scribbled pages and meditates on what (and how) she has written so far. In so doing, and with the reader in mind, crucial decisions are made as regards the future of the narrative and the state of its newly-born central character.

It seems good enough; parts seem very good indeed. She has lavish hopes, of course – she wants this book to be her best book, the one that finally matches her expectations. But can a single day in the life of an ordinary woman be made into enough for a novel? [...] Clarissa Dalloway will die, of that she feels certain, though this early it's impossible to say how or even precisely why. She will, Virginia believes, take her own life. Yes, she will do that. (Cunningham 2002: 69)

The next 'Mrs. Woolf' chapter features Virginia walking along the streets of Richmond and pondering on the 'me' and the 'you' of the same personality, on past experiences and imminent death (very much like Eliot's Prufrock<sup>5</sup>), specifically on the sins and alternatives/motivations for suicide available to her Clarissa.

Clarissa will have had a love: a woman. Or a girl, rather; yes, a girl she knew during her own girlhood; one of those passions that flare up when one is young; [...] during that brief period of youth when one feels free to do or say anything; to shock, to strike out. [...] Eventually she will come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man. Yes, she will come to her senses, and marry. She will die in middle age. She will kill herself, probably, over some trifle (how can it be made convincing, tragic instead of comic?). (Cunningham 2002: 81-82)

The afternoon finds Virginia entertaining her sister, Vanessa, and her children. The latter (and the bird funeral ceremony they organise in the garden) trigger thoughts of life and death / fertility and sterility, made to bear on her life and autobiographical writing, eventually changing the course of her novel-child.

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This, Virginia thinks, is the true accomplishment; this will live after the tinselly experiments in narrative have been packed off along with the old photographs and fancy dresses, the china plates on which Grandmother painted her wistful, invented landscapes. (Cunningham 2002: 118)

Clarissa, she thinks, is not the bride of death after all. Clarissa is the bed in which the bride is laid. (2002: 121)

The warm commonness and safe familiarity of the scene where Virginia has five o'clock tea in the kitchen with Vanessa (whom she also unexpectedly kisses), while engaged in small talk about children and buying them coats, fascinate the writer and change her mind for good with respect to the evolution of her autobiographical character.

There is this hour, now, in the kitchen.

Clarissa will not die, not by her own hand. How could she bear to leave all this? [...] Someone else will die. It should be a greater mind than Clarissa's; it should be someone with sorrow and genius enough to turn away from the seduction of the world, its cups and its coats. (Cunningham 2002: 153-154)

The recurring headaches and grim thoughts which make Virginia suddenly leave the house that evening, on her way to the train station and, from there, to London (where she would have settled had she not been intercepted and brought back home by Leonard) bring about the fear of nothingness in life and fiction alike.

It is the close of an ordinary day. On her writing stand in an unlit room lie the pages of the new novel, about which she cherishes extravagant hopes and which, at this moment, she fears (she believes she *knows*) will prove arid and weak, devoid of true feeling; a dead end. (Cunningham 2002: 163)

The last 'Mrs. Woolf' chapter is governed by Virginia's hope of experiencing the bustling London life again, as well as by the clarification of her writing strategy. With the authority of the decision-maker, the novelist spares Clarissa and turns her tale into a tragedy by choosing the rebel, the visionary as victim.

Yes, Clarissa will have loved a woman. Clarissa will have kissed a woman, only once. Clarissa will be bereaved, deeply lonely, but she will not die. She will be too much in love with life, with London. Virginia imagines

someone else, yes, someone strong of body but frail-minded; someone with a touch of genius, of poetry, ground under by the wheels of the world, by war and government, by doctors; a someone who is, technically speaking, insane. [...] Yes, someone like that. Clarissa, sane Clarissa – exultant, ordinary Clarissa – will go on, loving London, loving her life of ordinary pleasures, and someone else, a deranged poet, a visionary, will be the one to die. (Cunningham 2002: 211)

All in all, this first level of *The Hours* is the foundation on which Cunningham places his building bricks to design the storeys inhabited by Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway. On the other hand, the dialogism and intertextuality which threaten its stability confer dynamism to the novel and add the element of surprise consisting in the clashing views expressed and in the abrupt shifts from one speaker / ‘language’ / point in time to another.

## Level 2: The Reader

On another level, that of the reader, a day in the Brown family’s life is brought forth, featuring Laura – the character who takes one back to Virginia Woolf’s *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, despite the fact that the 1924 essay is not mentioned among Cunningham’s sources. It is striking, however, how this most elusive character of *The Hours* reminds of Woolf’s “phantom”: “My name is Brown. Catch me if you can.” (1924: 1) The story Virginia Woolf tells in her treatise on modernism explains much about the frame and the nucleus of Michael Cunningham’s demarche. Her character

sits in the corner of the carriage – that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface. (Woolf 1924: 13)

His serves a similar purpose, rewriting tradition, with insertions of individual talent, as T. S. Eliot might say<sup>6</sup>.

The literary theory put forward in ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’, and taking material shape in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is also identifiable in *The Hours*.

Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other. [...] The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him



willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. (Woolf 1924: 14)

By making Laura Brown a latter-day equivalent of Mrs. Brown, but also by converting her into a reader of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Cunningham offers Woolf the perfect recipe for encoding, then decoding an idea, a state of mind sooner than any creature in flesh and blood. Laura/Mrs. Brown – “the spirit we live by, life itself” (Woolf 1924: 21) – is used in negotiating the multiple meanings generated by the representation of the self in and the self of fiction, with the readers

as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs. Brown? For she is just as visible to you who remain silent as to us who tell stories about her. [...] But do not expect just at present a complete and satisfactory presentment of her. Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked in a good cause. (Woolf 1924: 20-21)

Deciphering the young and old Laura Brown appearing in the novel – on the one hand trapped in a marital relationship with dull Dan (and the allusion to Dan Brown, the writer, does not seem be accidental), and on the other hand having freed herself from the ties of convention (at the end of a journey of self-discovery, away from both husband and children) – is the mind game proposed by Cunningham, who thus proves Virginia Woolf right once again, when she predicts that “we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown.” (Woolf 1924: 21)

The first “Mrs. Brown” chapter of *The Hours*, set in Los Angeles, presents pregnant Laura waking up in the morning and starting to read *Mrs. Dalloway*. Fascinated by the ethereal universe of the novel she does not want to leave, she vents her anger at the clock on her nightstand, “this hideous thing, with its square green face in a rectangular black Bakelite sarcophagus.” (2002: 37) And so she begins her day in June, with the sacrifice of the ideal for the modest joys of domesticity. Whole sections from Virginia Woolf’s novel are inserted in Cunningham’s text without any notice (or referencing for that matter), to access both the book inside the book and Laura’s stream of consciousness. (2002: 37, 38-39, 40-41; 42, 48) In Laura’s mind, facilitated by Cunningham’s use of free indirect speech and

subtle irony, the writer and the reader overlap and are seen as sharing similar purposes.

[S]he is fascinated by the idea of a woman like that, a woman of such brilliance, such strangeness, such immeasurable sorrow; a woman who had genius but still filled her pockets with a stone and waded out into a river.

Here is the brilliant spirit, the woman of sorrows, the woman of transcendent joys, who would rather be elsewhere, who has consented to perform simple and essentially foolish tasks, to examine tomatoes, to sit under a hair dryer, because it is her art and her duty. (Cunningham 2002: 42)

The next glimpse into Laura's universe reveals her willing her banal life onto herself. The equation includes her husband, her son Richie (who is helping her make a cake), and the second child she is about to bear. The (re)solution, however, is overburdening, which is why the temptation to follow in the footsteps of more emancipated women remains strong.

She will not lose hope. She will not mourn her lost possibilities, her unexplored talents (what if she has no talents, after all?). She will remain devoted to her son, her husband, her home and her duties, all her gifts. She will want this second child. (Cunningham 2002: 79)

The third section focuses on Laura's conversation with her neighbour and friend, Kitty (with whom she shares an unexpected kiss), about women's life, death and literature. The models discussed are that of apparent marital bliss, childlessness and gynaecological ailment (in Kitty's case), that of deeply ingrained unhappiness as (house)wife and mother without any possibility of personal growth (in Laura's case), and that of *Mrs. Dalloway* (the novel) – both capturing and questioning the surface and the inner core of a woman's being.

Kitty has seemed, until this moment, like a figure of bright and tragic dignity – a woman standing by her man. So many of these men are not quite what they were (no one likes to talk about it); so many women live uncomplainingly with quirks and silences, the fits of depression, the drinking. Kitty has seemed, simply, heroic. (Cunningham 2002: 109)

They are both afflicted and blessed, full of shared secrets, striving every moment. They are each impersonating someone. They are weary and

beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work. (Cunningham 2002: 110)

The fatigue of wearing the expected social mask is amplified in the fourth 'Mrs. Brown' chapter, which sees Laura check in a hotel and ponder on the liberating potential of self-inflicted death. The novel she has brought with her and is now reading, as well as its author, offer a way out and eventually help her make her final decision: in favour of life, in favour of self-sacrifice.

Still, she is glad to know (for somehow, suddenly, she knows) that it is possible to stop living. There is comfort in facing the full range of options; in considering all your choices, fearlessly and without guile. She imagines Virginia Woolf, virginal, unbalanced, defeated by the impossible demands of life and art; she imagines her stepping into a river with a stone in her pocket. (Cunningham 2002: 152)

Laura's next step tracked by *The Hours* is that of picking up Richie and plunging into life once again. The adult Richard is founded here, in the silent bond between mother and son. Perceptive, the little boy reads beyond Laura's cover, worried about the deep waters menacing her calm surface.

He is devoted, entirely, to the observation and deciphering of her, because without her there is no world at all. [...] He will watch her forever. He will always know when something is wrong. He will always know precisely when and how much she has failed. (Cunningham 2002: 192-193)

The sixth entry further narrates Laura's "day in June", with the small-scale party she is "hosting" on Dan's birthday. As night falls and the last page of these her twenty-four hours is read, her entrapment is complete. Chronology and routine, silence and convention are her accepted deaths for the time being.

She herself is trapped here forever, posing as a wife. She must get through this night, and then tomorrow morning, and then another night here, in these rooms, with nowhere else to go. She must please; she must continue. [...] Laura reads the moment as it passes. Here it is, she thinks; there it goes. The page is about to turn. (Cunningham 2002: 205, 208)

The last 'Mrs. Brown' chapter sums up Laura's day and advances metafictional remarks about the specificity of literature and the nature of

interacting with its universe. Using Woolf's mode of writing, Cunningham has his character-observer-reader take up the task of analysing the self in fiction and the self of fiction.

She might, at this moment, be nothing but a floating intelligence; not even a brain inside a skull, just the presence that perceives, as a ghost might. Yes, she thinks, this is probably how it must feel to be a ghost. It's like reading, isn't it – that same sensation of knowing people, settings, situations, without playing any particular part beyond that of the willing observer. (Cunningham 2002: 215)

This episodic "spasmodic", "obscure", "fragmentary", "failure" (of) Mrs. Brown, with feminist undertones, represents Virginia Woolf's rejuvenated legacy, and demonstrates Michael Cunningham's wit and skill of recycling an otherwise hermetic writer, benefitting the contemporary reader.

### **Level 3: The Character**

The patchwork of Laura's construction forms the basis of the third level, that of the character, which is structured around the figure of Clarissa Vaughan. Her day, like Clarissa Dalloway's (and Laura Brown's), is devoted to organising a party; her special occasion is meant to honour her former lover, gay close friend, Richard (Richie) Brown – the poet suffering from AIDS and mental illness, who has recently been awarded a prestigious prize for his life's work. This level brings the Woolfian philosophy on the contemporary American stage, where it helps outline the 'new' woman, still carrying the traces of the old.

The first section of this re-enactment of Clarissa Dalloway's day introduces Clarissa Vaughan, and explains her literary birth.

The name Mrs. Dalloway had been Richard's idea – a conceit tossed off one drunken dormitory night as he assured her that Vaughan was not the proper name for her. She should, he'd said, be named after a great figure in literature, and while she'd argued for Isabel Archer or Anna Karenina, Richard insisted that Mrs. Dalloway was the singular and obvious choice. [...] She, Clarissa, was clearly not destined to make a disastrous marriage or fall under the wheels of a train. She was destined to charm, to prosper. So Mrs. Dalloway it was and would be. (Cunningham 2002: 11)

Experiencing the intense rhythm of New York City, while running errands and buying flowers, she bumps into an old acquaintance (Walter Hardy) – who is in town for the medical treatment of his spouse, Evan – and invites him to the party despite strongly disliking him (just as Clarissa Dalloway bumps into Hugh Whitbread – who has arrived in London to visit his wife, Evelyn, in a nursing home – and makes a similar invitation to a similarly despised character).

The celebrities who interrupt the flow of thought rendered in both novels (assumed to be Meryl Streep or Vanessa Redgrave in *The Hours*; The Queen, The Prince of Wales, or The Prime Minister in *Mrs. Dalloway*) build atmosphere and cultural specificity (Eighth Street and Fifth Avenue; Oxford Street and Piccadilly), simultaneously ridiculing the British high life and its American simulacrum.

What Cunningham adds to Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is a meta level which outlines his Clarissa's functional status. At the flower shop, an apparently casual conversation between Clarissa and Barbara – customer and saleswoman – sets the stage for a serious discussion on the borderline separating reality from fiction, as the florist (embodying the uneducated reader) is checking whether Clarissa-the-woman is the same as Clarissa-the-character in Richard's novel. While Clarissa Dalloway only exchanges pleasantries with Mrs. Pym – the florist –, Clarissa Vaughan – the character in the novel inside the novel whose main character she is as a consequence of intertextual contamination – has supplementary burdens to carry in-between and outside the pages of the book(s).

The second 'Mrs. Dalloway' chapter, in which Clarissa pays her daily visit to Richard, is actually dedicated to drawing the latter, an essential character in the structure of *The Hours*.

[He] alone sees through to your essence, weighs your true qualities [...], and appreciates you more fully than anyone else ever has. It is only after knowing him for some time that you begin to realise you are, to him, an essentially fictional character, one he has invested with nearly limitless capacities for tragedy and comedy not because that is your true nature but because he, Richard, needs to live in a world peopled by extreme and commanding figures. (Cunningham 2002: 61)

The whole scene is fractured. On the one hand, there is the sordid materiality of Richard's accommodation facilities and of his abundant medication. On the other hand, there is his beautiful abstract mind and his

perfect analytical skills, which are therapeutic to a certain extent and for a certain period of time. The symbol of the window (recurrent in Woolf's fiction also) illustrates yet another separation: between pulsating life and dormant existence. Like Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Richard is contemplating death and looking through one of his windows at an old woman's window, across the street, still noticing signs of life there, in her having moved around the three decorations she keeps on the sill. His drive to life remains stronger for the time being, fuelled by Clarissa's presence and energy.

The flashbacks Clarissa experiences in the following chapter dedicated to 'Mrs. Dalloway', with Sally, her life partner, in the background, bring Richard to the limelight once again. The memory of the kiss they shared on the outskirts of Plymouth, at Wellfleet, when they were young (and she was reading Doris Lessing), and the total (though fleeting) happiness it brought turns Richard into the very source of well-being and explains her clinging on to him for life.

It had seemed like the beginning of happiness, and Clarissa is still sometimes shocked, more than thirty years later, to realize that it *was* happiness; that the entire experience lay in a kiss and a walk, the anticipation of dinner and a book. [...] Now she knows: That was the moment, right then. There has been no other. (Cunningham 2002: 98)

The scene reminds of *Mrs. Dalloway*, with Clarissa going through her day under the pressure of memories about Bourton, and with Peter Walsh remembering how he had been passionately in love with her and how he had never felt happier than during their boating trip on the lake by moonlight at Sally Seton's suggestion. The characters are changed, their roles permuted, but the central notions of time passing and the joy of life fading are preserved and skilfully rendered.

Clarissa's receiving the early visit of Louis Waters (another 'ghost' from her past) in the next chapter establishes another link with sunnier times – preserved to alleviate the illness of being.

Clarissa returns with two glasses of water [...], and at the sight of her Louis smells the air – pine and grass, slightly brackish water – of Wellfleet more than thirty years ago. His heart rises. [...] She still exudes, somehow, an aspect of thwarted romance, and looking at her now, past fifty, in this dim and prosperous room, Louis thinks of photographs of young soldiers, firm-featured boys serene in their uniforms; boys who died before the age of

twenty and who live on as the embodiment of wasted promise. (Cunningham 2002: 127)

The other connection made, with a soldier's untimely death, brings Virginia Woolf's Septimus to mind, and with it, the shadow of death looming large over one's continuous present.

The generation gap focused on in the fifth 'Mrs. Dalloway' section also supports the idea of time passing and of cyclical life. Finding it easy to understand her eighteen-year-old self, but impossible to communicate with her nineteen-year-old daughter, Julia (Elizabeth), Clarissa wonders about the bond between parents and children, about love and hate, in true Woolfian style<sup>7</sup>.

Clarissa holds Julia, and quickly releases her. "How are you?" she asks again, then instantly regrets it. She worries that it's one of her tics; one of those innocent little habits that inspire thoughts of homicide in an offspring. Her own mother [...] prefaced all contrary opinions by saying, "I hate to be a wet blanket, but –" Those things survive in Clarissa's memory, still capable of inspiring rage, after her mother's kindness and modesty, her philanthropies have faded. (Cunningham 2002: 156)

The successive scenes covering talk of adapting novels for the screen, and visits to high end shopping arteries – having Sally at the centre – in the sixth 'Mrs. Dalloway' unit append more meditations on the consumerist society and the loss of moral values, within the same cyclical routine of living.

Death and resurrection are always mesmerizing, Sally thinks, and it doesn't seem to matter much whether they involve the hero, the villain, or the clown. (Cunningham 2002: 180)

Explanatory for Cunningham's strategy in *The Hours*, Sally's thoughts reinforce Mrs. Woolf's hesitation in choosing the perfect 'victim' to die in the novel and continue dying multiple deaths, with each future reading, thus paradoxically living on.

The character who dies and, dying, stays alive, is Richard. The choice is Mrs. Woolf's – in that the visionary will pay the final price – and Michael Cunningham's – avenging, through rewriting, the imprisonment of Virginia Woolf's Clarissa in her marriage to Richard Dalloway. This occurs in the penultimate 'Mrs. Dalloway' chapter, where Richard comes to his

final epiphany and, like Septimus, throws himself out of a window (turned here into a reversed symbol), leaving Clarissa shell shocked.

She does not move. She finds the window of the old woman, with its three ceramic statuettes (invisible from so far down). The old woman must be at home, she hardly ever goes out. Clarissa has an urge to shout up at her, as if she were some sort of family member; as if she should be informed. (Cunningham 2002: 202)

This ending, though much more direct and violent, makes explicit that which is understated in Virginia Woolf's novel, as ageing Clarissa ends her day and watches the symbolical spectacle of an old woman who, after staring at her from the window of her room across the street, turns off the light and goes to sleep – mirroring Clarissa Dalloway's fate and approaching death<sup>8</sup>.

Correspondingly, the closing chapter of *The Hours* brings together an old woman and an ageing one – Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway – stepping out from the fictions they have inhabited up to this point.

Here she is, then; the woman of wrath and sorrow, of pathos, of dazzling charm; the woman in love with death; the victim and torturer who haunted Richard's work. Here, right here in this room, is the beloved; the traitor. Here is an old woman, a retired librarian from Toronto, wearing old woman's shoes.

And here she is, herself, Clarissa, not Mrs. Dalloway anymore; there is no one now to call her that. Here she is with another hour before her. (Cunningham 2002: 226)

Two ordinary women emerge from Michael Cunningham's novel, which circularly returns upon itself and the main Woolfian texts which hold it together on multiple levels: *Mrs. Dalloway* and 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'.

## Conclusion

Cleverly crafted, the architecture of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* displays three layers, each of which is cemented by an intertextual net whose knots are Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *A Writer's Diary*, *Suicide Note*, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, *Modern Fiction*, *Men and Women*, *To the Lighthouse*, *A Haunted House*, *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* (not to mention



Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* or Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*) – which in turn branch out to other, multiple writings generated by world literature.

An explicit exercise in rewriting, therefore “a most outspoken form of intertextuality” (Fokkema 2004: 6), it might receive criticisms either of commercial motivation or of over-complexity. Nevertheless, it seems little likely that, in our contemporary world, texts are produced in strict isolation, protected against external contaminating factors, and, with a text like *The Hours*, “[plunging] us into a network of textual relations” (Allen 2011: 1), the phenomenon is more than evident.

It also seems little likely that a limited perspective, a simple technique or a superficial narrative structure meets the expectations of a reading public already accustomed to polyphony and high experimentation. In Cunningham's own words, “what I wanted to do was more akin to music, to jazz, where a musician will play improvisations on an existing piece of great music from the past” (2003: 111).

The musicality of the novel only partly results from the voices he weaves into it (British and American, feminine and masculine, sane and insane, present and absent, old and new, ordinary and elitist). The carefully orchestrated literary practices and techniques employed by the writer show ingenuity and versatility. Indeed, the language of *The Hours* clearly indicates that Cunningham masters all the tricks of the trade. Abrupt beginning, open ending, suspense, coincidence, defamiliarisation, surprise, irony, comedy, symbolism, romanticism, stream of consciousness, unreliable/multiple narrators, free indirect style, metafictional caveats and asides, etc. are all part of the strategy of his discourse.

## Notes

1. Abbreviated here as D.
2. Abbreviated here as W.
3. Abbreviated here as B.
4. The notion is developed at length by Virginia Woolf in her short story, ‘A Haunted House’, where it is used as a metaphor for love.
5. See the poem ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1917).
6. See the essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919).
7. See little James's reaction to his father, Mr. Ramsay's objective comment on the weather, in the opening pages of *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

8. See the short story 'The Lady in the Looking Glass' (1929), in which Woolf develops on the symbol of the mirror as revealing the ugly and the old, telling one's story in advance.

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