

Life-writing and the Poetics of Temporal Experience in Woolf and Sartre

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Abstract: The article aims to discuss how Virginia Woolf and Jean-Paul Sartre sought to bring their “poetic answer” to the question of temporality. Woolf and Sartre were fascinated by the possibility brought by fiction to unveil aspects of the world to the reader, by configuring ways of approaching the daily human experiences that cross us and that we are often not even able to name, but which are a fundamental part of life and what it is to be human. The exploration of language possibilities through literary means emerges as a method to reinvent ways of giving a voice to the incomplete and inconsistent character of the self, welcoming it in its moments of instability, conflict, crisis, and anguish. Opposing the ways of writing lives that showed the ready and finished self, they sought to reveal what was lived in its intrinsic movement of creation. Through their writing, both were able to create a place and a voice in the face of the times in which they lived, in continuous dialogue and tension with their contemporaries, thus renewing the possibilities of life-writing.

Keywords: Life-writing, temporality, subjectivity, Virginia Woolf, Jean-Paul Sartre

Since a life has to begin with birth and to continue through the years, these facts must be introduced in order. But have they anything to do with him [the subject of the biography]? That is where doubt begins; the pen trembles; the biography swells into the familiar fungoid growth. . . . Facts have their importance. But that is where the biography comes to grief. The biographer cannot extract the atom. He gives us the husk. Therefore, as things are, the best method would be to separate the two kinds of truth. Let the biographer print fully completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; Then let him write the life as fiction. (Woolf, Notebooks).

I. Introduction

By exploring the correlation between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience, in *Time and Narrative* (1983), Paul Ricoeur states that, although temporality has an inescapable condition and seems to never be completely transmutable into a form of language or knowledge, narratives draw the characteristics of temporal experience and work as a linguistic articulation that makes the incessant process of temporalisation intelligible. Situated in a specific cultural horizon, we are continuously in a movement to attribute meaning to lived experience and render shape to an existence that, instead of having a ready-made foundation, reveals itself before us in its character of indeterminacy and incompleteness. Thus, as a process of creation and incessant transformation, the self can acquire certain characteristic traits and contours, always constituted within unique material and symbolic circumstances, in a permanent relationship with the values of the historical time in which the subjects are situated. This process does not happen in a linear, controllable, predictable and stable direction, but rather involves oscillations, moments of crisis, and estrangement.

When debating our human possibility to direct a gaze at our own experiences, Ricoeur (1986) criticises both the idea of a subject that is capable of immediately apprehending oneself and the idea of a subject that is incapable of any form of apprehension about oneself. In this way, Ricoeur demarcates his position on this important issue that crosses the field of philosophy and resonates with intensity in the field of psychology, and states that “we only understand ourselves through the great shortcut of the signs of humanity deposited in the works of culture” (Ricoeur 116). Thus, although deprived of an intuition that gives direct access to their being, the subject finds possibilities of elaborating a “hermeneutics of the self” through the mediation of language and cultural meanings. Writing about life, understood as the human experience of temporalisation, is a complex task which involves creating a language to translate sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts, all experienced in its singularity and flux, and always historically situated. It involves looking at something that is in continuous movement and beginning a journey to explore possible ways of describing, naming, and expressing aspects of human processes. To act in the world through writing and to have life as material for reflexion and inventiveness, could be a way to open new possibilities for attaining, exploring and comprehending sensitive human experiences in the world. Producing a vast and multifaceted work, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) wrote about their own lives and those of other historical subjects, while exploring many forms of fictional representation of life. Both authors maintained an important relationship with writing since they grew up in households where books had a lot of room and writing was part of daily life. Woolf and Sartre developed the habit of writing profusely throughout their lives, and upheld their position on crucial issues of the time in which they lived. From the debate about the interface between language, culture and subjectivity, this article aims to explore the contributions of Virginia Woolf and Jean-Paul Sartre to the field of discussions involving the topic of life-writing, and seeks to point out how each of the authors sought to bring their “poetic answer” to the question of temporality from unique ways of weaving the threads between life and the narrative.

II. The poetics of temporal experience in Woolf and Sartre

Throughout her works, Virginia Woolf demonstrates an enormous ability to describe certain “emotional atmospheres” with immense sensitivity. As Hermione Lee (2010) states, Woolf was interested in “how a book works on the reader’s feelings” and she was always exploring new ways to convey emotions “by lingering on the atmosphere of a particular scene” (Lee 98). In the record of her memoirs in *Sketch of the Past*, written between 1939 and 1940, she reveals her desire to rescue these “moments of being”, which permeate her daily life by bringing sensations of intense emotional shock to reality (Woolf, 1985). Whether she refers to the writing of memoirs or fiction or discusses biographical writing, her concern is to narratively reveal the subjective experiences as lived. As Guiguet writes: to her, existing meant “experiencing that dizziness on the ridge between two abysses of the unknown, the self and the non-self” (Guiguet 461). In essays such as *The New Biography* (1927) and *The Art of Biography* (1939), Woolf openly criticises biographies that are written in such a way as to not seem to be an account of a person’s life, but rather of a “wax figure”. The “moments of being” which Woolf sought to give a voice to do not necessarily refer to a voice that emanates from a “self” and she clearly shows, in an entry of her Diary of the 26th of January, 1920, her concern about the need to avoid the “danger” of the “damned egotistical self”.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that, although Virginia Woolf’s primary raw materials for her writing were her own memories and life experiences, while writing her

novels, she considered herself to be the “vehicle for the sensation” (Nalbantian 143). It was precisely the search for a way of narrating to allow the expression of emotionally significant “moments of being” that led Woolf to develop her “tunnelling process”. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), we see the richness of Woolf’s fictional style, which is capable of revealing temporality as experienced by a singularity, but not presenting a perspective of subjectivity as something closed in itself. As Deborah Parsons (2007) writes: “*Mrs Dalloway*, despite the suggestiveness of its title, nevertheless presents the thoughts and perceptions not of one consciousness but of several” (76). In this novel, Woolf reveals the complex process of becoming a subject, something always experienced within a field of inter-subjective relations. As Ricoeur (1984) comments, the “tunnels” dug in the narrative allow her to show the vision that the characters have of each other and make it possible for her to oscillate between the past and present. Woolf transformed her way of experiencing life into stories that people could relate to by maintaining aspects of certain “universal” human processes revealed from the singular experience, through her method of “scene making”. It is remarkable how Woolf leads us to follow the character of *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) to the banks of a river, to the college lawn, to the library, to dinner parties, to the British Museum and to the streets. She aims to decipher the place of women in society not by means of a purely conceptual description. Woolf creates scenes and makes use of imagination to bring us closer to reality.

As Woolf lived in a period marked by gender fixed roles, and as a woman writer, she found her way to appropriate language to speak from her own viewpoint. In a movement that goes beyond the ready-made forms of naming and meaning in a male-dominated society, this affirmed the possibility of re-establishing women’s place in culture. In this regard, Deborah Parsons (2007) highlights that, in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1920, Virginia Woolf quoted the words of Bathsheba Everdene as exemplifying the position of women as subjects and writers of the English novel: “I have the feelings of a woman, but I have only the language of men” (Parsons 81). Woolf’s quest to create her own style was closely related to a movement to find a language capable of giving expression to women’s experience in society, to account for a historical absence. Therefore, in “Professions for Women” (1931), Woolf reveals that her process of becoming a writer involved an inner struggle with the figure of the “Angel of the House”, which appears as a shadow upon her page (Woolf 142), referring to the modes of being and social roles imposed on women that limit her possibilities of expression. One notes the relationship between aesthetics and ethics throughout Woolf’s path, as her aesthetic quest for a unique style may be closely linked to a quest for affirming the value of women’s experiences, historically neglected by a culture dominated by men. Regarding the way in which women’s lives are represented in books, in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf portrays the immense scarcity of records of female experiences in the biographical or fictional works of her time, saying that she prefers the record of the story of “the girl behind the counter” to “the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon”.

Orlando: A Biography (1928), the fantastical biography of a time-travelling, sex-changing noble wo/man, illustrates the idea that men’s and women’s lives are conditioned by social and historical circumstances by revealing how Orlando’s transformation into a woman brings new restrictions to her movements and constraints to her pen (Parsons 107). It is worth highlighting that *Orlando* is full of metabiographical fantasies on how to write lifetimes and Woolf’s narrative choices made it possible to explore the multiplicity that can be part of a single character. As Woolf writes in *Orlando* (1928): “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand”. As Saunders (2010) highlights, this shows Woolf’s radical development of the technique of literary portraiture and also her deconstruction of the Victorian notion of “character”.

In this regard, throughout her work, Woolf manifests this opposition to any form of writing about life that starts from a pretension for objectivity. From her diaries, essays and works of fiction, Woolf is permanently creating new ways to describe “life itself”. She seeks to show life as an unfinished process that swings between familiarity and strangeness, memory and perception, facts and imagination, seeing oneself and being seen by others. Alluding to this inherent complexity of subjective human processes, James Naremore states: “In nearly everything she wrote, we can notice [...] a division between a feeling of selfhood and a feeling of selflessness” (248). In this sense, in works such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), Woolf manages to introduce temporality as something experienced, thus providing a valuable contribution to the development of perspectives on human reality, and strongly influencing many contemporary authors. Among the latter, there are records that show the impact of Virginia Woolf’s works on Beauvoir¹ and Sartre.

Although it is rarely mentioned, Sartre explicitly assumed Woolf’s influence on his work as a novelist: “I tried to take advantage of the technical research carried out by certain novelists of simultaneity such as Dos Passos and Virginia Woolf”, and further remarks: “I picked up on the question where they left off and tried to find something new in that direction. The reader will say if I have succeeded” (Sartre, 1981, 1912). Emphasising the impact of Woolf’s work on Sartre, Annie Cohen-Solal, in *Une renaissance sartrienne* (2013) says that these lectures of the *Le Havre Lyre* could represent a precious “black box” for *La Nausée* and *Les Chemins de la Liberté* (Cohen-Solal, 2013). In *La nausée* (1938), Sartre makes use of apparently banal situations of urban daily life as a starting point for the character’s existential questions. Following the wanderings of Antoine Roquentin, initially “very bourgeoisly installed in the world” (13), well-adjusted to his occupation as a historian and avoiding further questioning that might cause him discomfort, suddenly, something inexplicable surprises him and he is overcome by a feeling of uncontrollable nausea. In his activity as a historian, he realises that the files he must base the biography of the Marquis of Rolleston upon are not enough to establish a logical order of events. Everything depends on the way in which the narrative will develop, on how the facts are linked by the narrator. The character is faced with great existential questions: what is the reality that surrounds us? What is the role of man within this reality? What is the meaning of everything we do? The experience of nausea empties all the reality from the already given senses and places him before his freedom. It is precisely this process of constitution of the subject as temporality and freedom that Sartre seeks to express throughout the three volumes of *Les Chemins de la Liberté*. In *L’Age de raison* (1945) it is possible to note that Mathieu’s actions aim to achieve absolute freedom, a condition that detaches him from his historical process. This man, who chooses to watch life go by from his window, projects himself towards an absolute closure of his existence, so that he is not at the mercy of the oscillations of temporality and can maintain a stable identity. In *Le Sursis* (1945), the character is led to comprehend facticity in the most radical, abrupt, and unavoidable way. Faced with the conscription to war, his existence is “put on hold”, awaiting a new future that must be invented by him at every moment. In *La Mort dans l’âme* (1949), when he realises that the use of reason will not provide him with an ultimate foundation for existence, Mathieu is driven to act in a way that will make him capable of “filling in” his “lack of being”. However, his action only serves to annihilate the idea of man that had served as his guide. Man, who was annihilated as an idea in *La Mort dans l’âme*, remains to be reinvented. The fact that the narrative does not have a final closure compels us to reflect on the opening condition of existence itself. Therefore, Howells states that “Sartre will dismiss as impossible any attempt to take a totalising overview of the human condition” (Howells, 1988, 46). Faced with the scenario created by the war, man finds out that he has always been situated

and that historicity is something that constitutes him. Therefore, he makes the discovery of his own existential condition. It was up to the writer to produce a situated literature, capable of portraying the drama experienced by man in the face of the discovery of his historicity.

This is exactly what Sartre seeks to do throughout his plays, short stories, and novels. Jameson (1961) highlights that Sartre's style results from facing the challenge of describing human existence in a continuous experimentation with new modes of expression. The realisation of the impossibility of finding a language that is capable of "saying" fully and absolutely what is experienced is what opens up the multiple possibilities of "saying it", with the multifaceted work of Sartre being a demonstration of this.

[...] for when all forms are impossible, in the single one is any more impossible than any other, and suddenly they all come into being, all possible, criticism and plays, philosophy, novels, and political and historical and biographical analyses, bringing us face to face with the image of a consciousness for which everything can be understood, and of an untimidated language for which there is nothing that cannot be said (Jameson 204).

Sartre's style was being shaped in order to awaken in the reader the feeling of restlessness and estrangement that accompanies the temporalisation process, as he seeks to provide a re-appropriation of each subject's original condition of freedom. His literature on "extreme situations" sought to portray human dilemmas, not to comfort the reader. His way of configuring his narratives sought to create a fertile ground to awaken a kind of "face to face" with the dynamic and paradoxical character of daily life. Along his intellectual path, Sartre develops a perspective that intends to understand human actions as being part of the process of temporalisation. As far as he is concerned, in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948), language appears to be a tool in the context of human activities and of interpersonal relations. Saying something is a way of revealing aspects of the world and thus producing changes in reality. Thus, when the writer resolves to build a literary narrative, she decides on a theme and a way of telling it, revealing certain aspects of the world to readers; by doing this, the writer engages herself in the world. As a result, Howells (1988) says: "For Sartre, then, literature is not merely fictive, subjective and anecdotal: it is a form of *universel singulier* which reveals the world to its readers" (Howells 48). When the writer chooses to act in the world through the creation of literary narratives, she is choosing a unique way to live her temporality, designing new possibilities of narrating that become part of the culture.

It is precisely this link between temporality, narrativity and subjectivity that Sartre endeavours to investigate when he makes efforts to understand the life of writers such as Gustave Flaubert (1971-2). According to Sartre (1943), biographies usually base their analysis on the "great explanatory idols" of each time: heredity, education, the environment, and physiological constitution. According to him, this type of analysis ends up reducing the complexity of a subject's behaviour, feelings and tastes to some properties which are analogous to those of chemical bodies. Viewing things from a different perspective, Sartre emphasises that Flaubert's literary ambition must be understood as a signifier, and therefore is free. A perspective based on freedom will seek to understand how the writer's literary ambition reveals a radical decision to be unified in the world. Emphasising the process of creation that is intrinsic to the act of telling the story of a life, Sartre (1976) himself assumes that his autobiography *Les Mots* is "a kind of novel, a novel in which I believe" (146). Even when we look at our own past, the facts are told from a chosen point of view, in a movement of creation that brings a plot to life. The action of narrating reveals the existing effort to try to make a dynamic and inapprehensible temporalisation process intelligible. Language is therefore used as a mediation of this narrative creation of the self and of this search for an identity, which involves a movement of reflexive re-appropriation of the original temporality. This moment of reflexive recovery of that which was experienced is conducive to the emergence of multiple possibilities, among which are the various modalities of life-writing that are constructed by the subjects.

III. Conclusion

We can consider that the main challenge that Virginia Woolf and Jean-Paul Sartre faced throughout their lives was to find a narrative style that is capable of expressing the process of temporalisation as experienced. Writing about life involves taking lived experience as an object. This experience is lived in a “pre-reflexive” way, as pure existential flux. The challenge for both, therefore, was to develop aesthetic possibilities that would enable them to achieve a description of what was experienced based on their sensations and emotions. By doing so, they would provide readers with a “dip” in the atmosphere proposed by the narrative. Woolf and Sartre nurtured an interest in moving the object of writing away from “great men of history”, massively represented in the biographies and monuments that are there to tell us the “official” history. Finding a style that is capable of narratively capturing the experiences of common people in the midst of everyday tensions becomes a challenging exercise for both. Inviting us to shift our gaze (from “heroes”, who are placed in a position of social recognition as those who “make history”, to “ordinary” people who are put in the place of those who are “made” by history), Woolf and Sartre seek to make room by writing about human experiences that are often relegated to an absence of representation and considered worthless. Both choose these experiences as the object of their writing, revealing an effort to validate these experiences and show that, throughout life, there is an intense process of creation in progress.

Woolf and Sartre were fascinated by the possibility of fiction unveiling aspects of the world to the reader, configuring aesthetic-ethical ways of approaching the daily human experiences that cross us and that we often cannot even name. The exploration of language possibilities through literary means emerges as a method to reinvent ways of giving a voice to the incomplete and inconsistent character of the self, welcoming it in its moments of instability, conflict, crisis, and anguish, which Ewald (2017) calls “circumstantial emotional estrangements”. Experiences of conflict and confusion, as Peter Goldie (2012) states, must not be seen as a “threat to the survival of the narrative self”, but as part of the process of what it is to be human. Woolf and Sartre portrayed these moments in their works in multiple ways, opening our way of understanding human processes. In contrast to the ways of writing lives that showed the ready and finished self, they sought to reveal what was lived in its intrinsic movement of creation. Through their writing, both were able to create a place and voice in the face of the times in which they lived, in continuous dialogue and tension with their contemporaries, renewing the aesthetic and ethical possibilities of life-writing.

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Notes

¹ In an interview with Madeleine Gobeil, published in *Paris Review* (1965), Simone de Beauvoir says: “Virginia Woolf is one of the women writers who has interested me most.” Tidd (2004) states that Beauvoir “alighted on Woolf’s fourth novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), to provide answers to her own questions concerning language and the novel” (138). Kate Kirkpatrick’s (2019) mentions that Beauvoir used to take “refuge” in the books of Virginia Woolf as a way of “returning to herself” (Kirkpatrick 298).

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