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A MODERNIST'S SOLUTION TO THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD'S CRISIS

Anca Mihaela DOBRINESCU*

Abstract
The modernists' works were seldom considered to have any relevance to the topical issues of the cultural background against which they were created. Too little interested, at least apparently, in their immediate cultural environment, it is very improbable that a modernist's work could possibly open up new ways of understanding the twentieth to the twenty-first turn-of-the-century society and it is even less probable that it should imagine solutions to the world's crises. Yet, it is Virginia Woolf's book-length essay 'Three Guineas' that contradicts our original assumptions about modernist literature and demonstrates that a modernist's work is likely to offer solutions to the crises of our contemporary world.

It is at least surprising to look at a modernist's work from the point of view of its relating to and considering the issues with which the writer's society confronted itself. It has been often stated that one of the major flaws of the modernist writers was their conscious withdrawing in the 'ivory tower' of their own creation. Their works were seldom considered to have any relevance to the topical issues of the cultural background against which they were created. Under these circumstances, it is even more surprising to analyse the work of a modernist with a view to demonstrating that it is likely to offer solutions to the crises of our contemporary world. Too little interested, at least apparently, in their immediate cultural environment, it is very improbable that a modernist's work could possibly open up new ways of understanding the twentieth to the twenty-first turn-of-the-century society and it is even less probable that it should imagine solutions to the world's crises. Yet, it is Virginia Woolf's book-length essay Three Guineas, published in 1938, that contradicts our original assumptions about modernist literature and proves that many of the disastrous effects of World War I did not remain unnoticed in the literary circles of the time.

Modernism came to the fore of the artistic stage during a period whose main characteristics were relativity and fragmentariness caused by violent economic, social and political crises. These attributes of the twentieth century, mainly in its first decades, when the modernist artistic offer tended to replace the realist one, can be better accounted for by the twentieth century being contrasted with the relative stability of the nineteenth century, and in particular of the Victorian era. Thus "[…] the foregrounding of the self, doubled by an apparent unawareness of the objective outer world is characteristic of all artistic movements of innovation at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, as the sign of the self-conscious break with the tradition of realism."[1] Yet, the modernists' break with the inherited tradition was the result of their carefully analysing both the cultural context of the Victorian period and the literary conventions of their predecessors. 'Three Guineas' clearly shows that Woolf, born a Victorian, was perfectly aware that many of the problems of the society before and after World War I were not twentieth-century-made, but represented the consequence of a set of ideas and beliefs that formed the ideological core the Victorian society. Scientifically, technologically, artistically, the twentieth century world had changed and Woolf approximately places this change in the year 1910.[2] Yet the mentality and the ideology of the Victorian times had too little

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[1] Anca Mihaela Dobrinescu, Modernist Narrative Discourse (Ploiesti: Editura Universitatii din Ploiesti, 2001) p. 17.

changed. Shaw, Conrad, Henry James had signalled the change and had subtly warned through their work that otherness should be acknowledged and accepted rather than rejected on account of difference. With all its negative effects, World War I was expected to be a test in the twentieth-century society initiation into coming to terms with difference and accepting the other for what they really were. Quite on the contrary, World War I inflamed further more the patriotic feelings of the British, still in possession of the greatest empire of the world, contributing thus to an increased confidence in their uniqueness. An important principle of intercultural communication had been violated. Woolf could just anticipate that World War II was but a matter of time. And she tried to look for its causes in the old mentality of the preceding period, mentality underlying both private and public relations.

Woolf constructs her non-fiction work 'Three Guineas' as an answer to several letters through which she is requested to contribute one guinea for an apparently well justified purpose. One guinea should be given to a men's society meant to help prevent war. As the essay was written in June 1938, it is certain that the danger of World War II was already felt by the Western world, especially as Hitler was ascending on the political stage. The guinea would have thus been more than necessary. Just that Woolf decided to go deeper into the mechanisms of power that had triggered World War I and were about to lead to the outbreak of World War II. Her argument could make readers interpret her essay as essentially anti-Nazi. But on further consideration, one discovers that the writer's main focus is the problem of communication in general and of communication between cultures, of intercultural communication, in particular. Woolf identifies the cause of the imminent the war at the very heart of the 19th century value system and mentality. She feels little inclined to look abroad to find the guilty ones. She would rather have an insight into the English society itself. She discovers the germs of totalitarianism and the desires to dominate at the very heart of the society which claimed to be the most democratic one. When analysing England's position to itself and to the world, Woolf abandons the essentialist view of culture "that presumes that there is a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture"[3] and tries to train herself in the more flexible non-essentialist approach according to which culture is, or should be seen as "a fluid creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations."[4] While acknowledging the cultural diversity as a characteristic of the modern world, Woolf also signals the individuals' dangerous tendency to over-generalize and judge the other based on stereotypes. "[…] in our age of innumerable labels, of multi-coloured labels, we have become suspicious of labels; they kill and constrict."[5] She finds an explanation for this tendency in the Victorian system, a system whose apparent stability and force were generated by Great Britain possessing at the time the greatest empire of the world. Even more subtly, Woolf finds fault less with Britain than with England, whose policy of domination affected not only Britain's relations with the rest of the world but also the relations between people within the British Isles. In an unusually bold, even unorthodox, manner, Woolf contests the very concept of patriotism and its acceptations during the Victorian period. English patriotism, from Woolf's point of view, is based on the exclusion rather than on the acceptance of the other. Feelings of patriotism are the result of ethnocentrism, a tendency inherent in human nature, which makes people "consider [their] own cultural practices as superior and consider other cultural practices as inferior."[6]

[2] See Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' in Collected Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf, vol. 1 (London: Hogarth, 1966) pp. 319-337.

[3] Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde & John Kullman, Intercultural Communication. An Advanced Resource Book (New York: Routledge, 2004) p. 2.

[4] Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde & John Kullman, op.cit., p. 3.

[5] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas' in A Room of One's Own/ Three Guineas (London: Penguin Books, 2000) p. 266.

This inclination towards otherization[7], i.e. to reduce the other to something different, but always less than what they are, based on stereotypes and over-generalizations, is likely to encourage forms of patriotism that lead to blockages of communication between different cultures at best, to armed conflicts between nations at worst.

"What then […] is this 'patriotism'? Let the Lord Chief Justice of England interpret it for us:

"Englishmen are proud of England. For those who have been trained in English schools and universities, and who have done the work of their lives in England, there are few loves stronger than the love we have for our country. When we consider other nations, when we judge the merits of the policy of this country or of that, it is the standard of our own country that we apply … Liberty has made her abode in England. England is the home of democratic institutions … It is in our midst there are many enemies of liberty – some of them, perhaps, in rather unexpected quarters. But we are standing firm. It has been said that an Englishman's Home is his Castle. The home of Liberty is in England. And it is a castle indeed – a castle that will be defended to the last … Yes, we are greatly blessed, we Englishmen." [8]

Pride, positively connoted in appearance, engenders negative attitudes as far as the relations between individuals, groups of people or nations are concerned. Pride implicitly means adopting a position of superiority, considering oneself the incontestable norm by which the other should be judged. The nineteenth-century Britain imposed the norm of the white, male, Anglo-Saxon protestant by which the rest of the people were to be judged. Woolf's analysis is carried out in depth, focusing successively on international, national, professional, class and finally gender relations. What Woolf attempts to do is to reveal the most hidden springs of human behaviour and causes of human action eventually underlying a worldwide military conflict.

"For almost every biography we read of professional men in the nineteenth century, to limit ourselves to that not distant and fully documented age, is largely concerned with war. They were great fighters, it seems, the professional men in the age of Queen Victoria. There was the battle of Westminster. There was the battle of the universities. There was the battle of Whitehall. There was the battle of Harley Street. There was the battle of the Royal Academy. Some of these battles, as you can testify, are still in progress. In fact the only profession which does not seem to have fought a fierce battle during the nineteenth century is the profession of literature."[9]

A less obvious, though extensively present conflict in the twentieth century is the one between the man and the woman with roots in the mentality of the Victorian society. Yet, Woolf does not present this relation as necessarily conflicting. She rather uses the opportunity to enlarge upon issues of identity and introduces the idea of the dissimilar other. She might seem to have adopted a feminist's voice, pleading for women's rights. What she does is, however, deeper and more subtle than that. She looks into the mechanisms of communication, interpersonal, but also intercultural and tries to find an appropriate explanation for what makes communication ineffective.

"It is now that the first difficulty of communication between us appears. Let us rapidly indicate the reason. We both come of what, in this hybrid age when, though birth is mixed, classes still remain fixed, it is convenient to call the educated class. But … those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it. […] And the result is that though we look at the same things, we see them differently." [10]

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[6] Stella Ting-Toomey, Communicating Across Cultures (New York, London: The Guildford Press, 1999) p 14.
[7] See Adrian Holliday, Martin Hyde & John Kullman, op.cit., p. xv.
[8] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', pp. 123-124.

The ideal of the Victorian woman was the 'Angel of the House', the no property, hard-working, obedient woman, willing to please her husband, taking care of her children. It is this stereotypical image of the woman that Woolf wants to do away with in her essay 'Professions for Women'. After World War I, though women in Britain had obtained the right to vote, right denied to them throughout the whole reforming 19th-century, Woolf has to admit that the nineteenth-century mentality outlived the turn of the century. She brings as evidence an article published in *Daily Telegraph* of January 22nd, 1936, in which a young Englishman deplores the present state of affairs and complains about the social and political changes after World War I. Nostalgic about the older Victorian system, the young man sees in the women's emancipation, and in particular in their having got the right to work, the cause of the twentieth-century men's misery. Yet, what the young man really complains about is the male having lost their position of supremacy, the status of power. He signals the end of a period that Woolf harshly considers one of slavery for women. "And, if checking imagination with prosaic good sense, you object that to depend upon a profession is only another form of slavery, you will admit from your own experience that to depend upon a profession is a less odious form of slavery than to depend upon a father." [11]

"I am certain I voice the opinion of thousands of young men when I say that if men were doing the work that thousands of women are now doing the men would be able to keep those women in decent homes. Homes are the real places of the women who are now compelling men to be idle. It is time the Government insisted upon employers giving work to more men, thus enabling them to marry the women they cannot now approach." (*Daily Telegraph*, January 22nd, 1936)[12]

But what is even more shocking than the Victorian mentality having outlived the turn of the century is that the very same ideas, beautifully dressed and morally and humanely justified appear in an article published by *Sunday Times* at almost the same time, a few months later, on 13 September 1936, presenting not an Englishman's opinion, but one of a German.

"There are two worlds in the life of the nation, the world of men and the world of women. Nature has done well to entrust the man with the care of his family and the nation. The woman's world is her family, her husband, her children, and her home." [13]

The reader can easily infer from the phrasing of the article that the author is male, given the mentality of the period. The world is seen as inevitably and immutably segregated. And it is at this point that Woolf gives the name of the German contributor to *Sunday Times*, Adolf Hitler. She cannot help noticing the similarities between the ideas and standpoints in the two articles. All she has to do is to draw the conclusions about the attitudes that generate segregation and exclusion, thus blocking communication and finally leading to conflicts. Stereotypes, overgeneralizations, prejudice, reducing the other to less than what they are seem to be all intrinsic to human nature and have nothing to do with nationality or religion, or, to extrapolate, the colour of the skin or even sex.

"There we have in embryo the creature, Dictator as we call him when he is Italian or German, who believes that he has the right whether given by God, Nature, sex or race is immaterial, to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do. […] But where is the difference? Are they not both the voices of Dictators, whether they speak English or German, and are we not all agreed that the dictator when we meet him abroad is a very dangerous as well as a very ugly animal? And he is here among us, raising his ugly head, spitting his poison, small still, curled up like a caterpillar on a leaf, but in the heart of England."[14]

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[9] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', pp. 187-188.
[10] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', pp. 118-119.
[11] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', p. 131.
[12] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', p. 175.

Woolf dares go even further with her analysis. As a matter of fact, she offers readers an insight into the human nature. Thus, she does not see Hitler as an isolated case. She warns that there is a dictator in all of us, who behaves ethnocentrically, who has a tendency to dominate and look down upon the other, who considers him/herself the norm by which any difference is to be appreciated as a deviation, and thus discarded as bad. She dares ultimately hold a mirror in front of each and every of us. Moreover, what she had started doing by comparing the two apparently unrelated articles she continues through her insight into the nature of human life and actions, into the social and political organization of the world and into the necessary relationship existing between the private and the public life.

"Another picture has imposed itself upon the foreground. It is the figure of a man; some say, others deny, that he is Man himself, the quintessence of virility, the perfect type of which all the others are imperfect adumbrations. He is a man certainly. […] He is called in German and Italian Fűhrer or Duce; in our own language Tyrant or Dictator. And behind him lie ruined houses and dead bodies – men, women and children. […] It [the picture] suggests that the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other. But the human figure even in a photograph suggests other and more complex emotions. It suggests that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure. It suggests that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life." [15]

If we have the courage to identify with the man in the picture, we will certainly have the courage to look more attentively into our self, Woolf seems to suggest. Becoming aware of one's innate tendencies in the relations with the other will probably contribute to one's changing one's attitudes and mentalities. But the change is more likely to happen if private actions are accompanied by the public effort. Woolf, asked to contribute a guinea for a women's college as well, thinks that the world could function better, that intercultural communication could become really effective, if the education system were changed. She holds the nineteenth-century education system fully responsible for the conflicts tearing the world apart. She characterizes it as a system teaching power and perpetuating segregation rather than uniting people. Consequently, the college she thinks could bring about change should be organized along totally different lines.

"It should teach the arts of human intercourse; the arts of understanding other people's lives and minds, and the little arts of talk, of dress, of cookery that are allied with them. The aim of the new college, the cheap college, should not be to segregate and specialize, but to combine. It should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to co-operate; discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life." [16]

In the context of the contemporary hybrid world, in which knowledge of the other is in most cases based on stereotypes, in which communication with the other is often marred by prejudice, in which the visible frontiers are more open than ever, while the invisible ones become insurmountable walls isolating individuals[17], Woolf proposes a modernist's solution.

"Even here, even now, your letter tempts us to shut our ears to these little facts, these trivial details, to listen not to the bark of the guns and the bray of the gramophones but to the voices of the poets, answering each other, assuring us of a unity that rubs our divisions as if they were chalk marks only; to discuss with you the capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity." [18]

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[13] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', p. 176.

[14] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', p. 176.

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[15] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', pp. 270-271.

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[17] See Salman Rushdie, 'Step Across This Line' – The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Yale, 2002 in Step Across This Line. Collected Non-fiction 1992-2002 (London: Vintage, 2002) pp. 407-442.

[18] Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas', pp. 270-271.