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Written Communities: Imagining Connection in Virginia Woolf's Novels

Abstract: Starting from recent takes on the concept of community as an impossible form of the mandatory coming together of finite beings (mainly, Blanchot's unavowable community and Alphonso Lingis' "community of those who have nothing in common"), the present paper attempts an exploration of Virginia Woolf's work as the practice of sketching temporary, episodic connections emerging from the confrontation between the singularity of the "modernist" consciousness and the demand placed on the former by the Other. A selection of extracts from two novels (*Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*) serves as the basis for the proposition that Woolf's short-lived communities evolve from shared acts of attention most often represented through a figuration of the act of writing.

Keywords: Elective Communities; Cosmopolitanism; Writing; Singularities; Virginia Woolf.

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For it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

In her study of the communitarian and cosmopolitan concerns of modernist fiction, Jessica Berman describes the relatively recent interest on the part of the critics in the political dimensions of Virginia Woolf's writing, which had been formerly ignored in favor of an alleged, but in fact misplaced, preference for formalist and aesthetic experimentation.¹ Actually, a closer examination of her work in the light of the latest theories of communal being reveals Woolf, just like in most respects, to have been almost prescient in her figuration of both the necessity, and the impossibility of relation under the pressure of a present appearing as catastrophic history. Rejecting clear belongings to traditional groups, including class, nation, and even gender, Woolf's characters opt for what Maurice Blanchot terms "elective communities" – the community that "exists only through a decision that gathers its members around a choice without which it could not have



taken place.”² Moreover, Woolf’s texts seem not only to confirm Blanchot’s definition, but also to take up the challenge that he offers to this notion by wondering what the circumstances of such an act of choice are and by questioning the reality of the freedom it implies. Novels like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* or *Between the Acts* problematize the ways in which their protagonists enter – always episodic, always short-lived – associations formed not on the basis of shared interests, but, as Alphonso Lingis has put it, as “the community of those who have nothing in common.”³ This casts a new light on Clarissa Dalloway’s unexpected connection to the absent Septimus Warren Smith, or on Lily Briscoe’s attempt to salvage the image of a missing Mrs. Ramsay from the remainders of a lost past, as Woolf’s writing itself can be read as an effort to reconstruct forms of community from the “orts and scraps” haunting the imagery of *Between the Acts*. While admitting a fascination with the multifaceted forms of elective community enacted by Woolf’s writing in general, my paper will mainly focus (in an arbitrary gesture mirroring the arbitrariness of community-making itself) on *Orlando* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, seen as samples of the negativity of writing that produces the condition of belonging.

Berman’s definition of modernist communities reworks the Nancean notion of inoperativeness in order to focus attention to the mixture of cosmopolitanism and emplacement put forward by the project of modernist fiction. It is a nomadic version of a community on the move, which “creates itself as a recognition of both affiliation and its limits at once, and as both bordered and always opened to dispersal”; a coming

together of differences in “overlapping webs of relation, some clearly woven out of local affiliations.”⁴ Berman’s premise is that “in much modernist fiction we can already see community being imagined over and over again,” as the fiction of Henry James, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein “consistently place[s] the notion of community at [its] core. Their writings return again and again to issues of commonality, shared voice, and exchange of experience, especially in relation to dominant discourses of gender and nationality.”⁵ What Berman calls the “deepening cosmopolitanism” characterizing the patterns of community suggested by modernist novels appears in reaction to both the weakening of communal feeling and the ever-growing threats of nationalism and fascism. Such attitudes should not necessarily be viewed in terms of a coherent political program, of which modernist authors, fearful of ideologies, remained rather suspicious. Instead, their writing starts from a notion of “community [that] might grow even within the private sphere, as a part of identity-building itself, emerging from an imagined set of contingent relations between subjects who always already exist both in common and separately.”⁶ The singularity of beings persists even against the realization of their own insufficiency and against the openness of Woolf’s mobile, fluid identities.

In order to understand how community functions in the writing of Woolf, we might benefit from a detour through the philosophical work of Maurice Blanchot and Alphonso Lingis, both heavily influenced by the legacy of Emanuel Levinas. Firstly, Lingis delineates the potential of a form of community that is not based on similarity or shared purposes, but springs,



on the contrary, from the irreducible difference that forms the texture of the relational world: the community of those who have nothing in common. The community of those who have nothing in common has little to do with the drive “to give a reason”⁷ that characterizes most of Western thought and sets the foundations of modern science, because, as Lingis points out, seeking a universal reason for events constitutes a performative speech act that presents itself as a pledge to truth which includes all others as witnesses or accessories:

Rational practice elaborates a discourse that is one and common to any lucid mind. In what each one says on his own and takes responsibility for, he finds implicated what the others say. The whole system of rational discourse is implicated in the statements put forth by any researcher, by anyone who endeavors to think rationally. Each one speaks as a representative of common discourse. His own insights and utterances become part of the anonymous discourse of universal reason.⁸

“The community of those who have nothing in common” refuses the responsibility to the verisimilitude that verifies itself through those surrounding us, but emerges from the recognition of the demand of the stranger and constitutes the spectral double of the rational community. It subsists not through the rational imperative of offering one’s values to rational scrutiny by those who are the same, but through the response to the naked touch and fragile look of the other, through the exposure to the loss and death embodied by the presence

of the other: “The one becomes the brother of the other when he puts himself wholly in the place of the death that gapes open for the other.”⁹ The other’s death turns into the presence of community not necessarily in sympathy for what awaits me as well – which would still be selfish – but because all things, all exteriority, materialize at the expense of other possibilities:

Our substance acts out of a sense of the contingency of the position that supports it and out of the sense of its power to apprehend possible positions ahead and to cast itself with its own forces unto them. In every movement toward exterior things, which are grasped as nodes of possibility, we sense the contingency of the reality exposed to our initiatives and the eventuality of the impotence that things harbor. To exist in action is to cast ourselves with our own forces unto the eventuality of impotence. Death is everywhere in the interstices of the world, the abyss lies behind any of its connections and beneath its paths. It is this abyss of impossibility, which shows through as we advance, that opens our understanding, indefinitely, beyond the things within reach and the ground upon which we stand, makes our stance vertiginous and without repose in itself, and makes our existence action.¹⁰

By centering community around an impossible shared death, Lingis echoes Blanchot, who, following Bataille and Nancy, also claims that the possibility of community rests on the passivity of death – crucially, not my own death, but the death



of the other – which the individual takes on as his or her burden. The simultaneous founding and erasure of singularity is how community resembles death: community and death are “mine” as long as I appropriate them, but by this appropriation I cease to remain an I that can belong somewhere, just as my death makes possession (my death) impossible. I will be returning to this theme later on, but what is important for my topic is Blanchot’s claim that this kind of community is also “unavowable”: unavowable because it cannot be captured by language, and because it has to do with the uncertainty of the end:

The unavowable community: does that mean that it does not acknowledge itself or that it is such that no avowal may reveal it, given that each time we have talked about its way of being, one has had the feeling that one grasped only what makes it exist by default? So, would it have been better to have remained silent? Would it be better, without extolling its paradoxical traits, to live it in what makes it contemporary to a past which it has never been possible to live?¹¹

The obscure use of the word “unavowable” – which almost sounds like a coinage of Blanchot’s – is meant to perform the distance existing between language and community. In J. Hillis Miller’s words, communities “are unavowable in the sense of being secret, hidden, and shameful, but also in the sense of being incompatible with the ‘felicitous’ public speech acts. Such public ‘avowals’ found, support, and constantly renew the communities we all would like to live in or even may think

we live in.”¹² The latter stay unavowable not because individuals do not want to be identified with it, but because by naming it we objectify it, presentifying a false structure that erases the potential of the “past which it has never been possible to live.” To Blanchot, language comes close to death inasmuch as it draws the speaker into the anonymous space of the “neutral” that lays bare the darkness of being and renders time impossible. Written language in particular, as the depository of the traces of a reified past, inserts an unpassable distance between things and the discourse, a distance turned into death when the individual voice of experience dissolves into the multiplicities of the past. Therefore, writing (especially literature), death and community bring about an unexpected concatenation, but one that can be encountered in Woolf’s works as well.

In Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, the protagonist, having narrowly escaped the “spirit of the age” (shrewdly described by the author as the legal consequences of being a woman) by means of an unexpected marriage, decides to isolate herself in her country mansion and indulge in the passion she had abandoned centuries ago because of the devastating censure of the literary critic Nicholas Greene: writing. The text of the novel often makes it quite difficult to distinguish between the narrator’s biting-ly ironical commentary and the character’s thoughts. However, in this particular fragment from the beginning of Chapter 6, the narrator seems to tacitly approve of Orlando’s conclusions by allowing her a full position of authority when she presents writing as a duplicitous gesture, situated in an ambiguous space between the integrity of the self and the communal values:



“Orlando had so ordered that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote, she wrote.”¹³ Writing is inter-mediated by an ultimately dishonest act of double betrayal that dissolves both the ethical code of the age and the commitment to the authenticity of the self shared by the narrator and character alike: a false marriage in which the partners live apart, but which guarantees the independence of both, and avoiding censorship by a retreat in a private space that will ultimately prove insufficient. She defeats “the spirit of the age” by simultaneously submitting to and subverting its conventions, by framing a gesture of social integration (“putting on a ring and [...] finding a man on a moor”) and by refusing participation (“loving nature and being no satirist, cynic or psychologist – any one of which goods would have been discovered at once”).

Writing is therefore, for Woolf, the defiant complicity (if such a juxtaposition may be accepted) that questions both the singularity of the self and the borders of community by placing its eruption within the hierarchy of stable communal values. Nevertheless, there is more to this issue than modernist paradox and disobedience. The narrator’s voice returns to its accustomed acidity when she points out that Orlando’s feverish writing bout, which occupies the length of a year, may well allow for self-expression, but renders the responsibilities of the biographer unmanageable. Humorously reduced to jotting down the list of the months of the year, rather than relating momentous events, the narrator exposes herself to the derision of the

mercantile reader, who might not think the money he has paid purchasing the book was worth it. The biographer’s predicament embodies the contradiction inherent at the heart of writing as an act simultaneously private and public, as well as the incongruities proper to the possibility of community, faced with the unimaginable choice between the individual and the group. Writing is poised between nothingness and violence, thus becoming of a figure of the interruption of discourse, a blank in the discourse of the narrator covering Orlando’s missing text – for we are only allowed glimpses at it:

Thought and life are as the poles asunder. Therefore – since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando is doing now – there is nothing for it but to recite the calendar, tell one’s beads, blow one’s nose, stir the fire, look out of the window, until she has done. Orlando sat so still that you could have heard a pin drop. Would, indeed, that a pin had dropped! That would have been life of a kind. Or if a butterfly had fluttered through the window and settled on her chair, one could write about that. Or suppose she had got up and killed a wasp. Then, at once, we could out with our pens and write. For there would be blood shed, if only the blood of a wasp.¹⁴

The novel attempts to solve the conundrum of the interruption by using the voice of a dramatized narrator (uncommonly intrusive for Woolf’s typical techniques) which often allows the protagonist to take center stage through the device of the free indirect discourse. Anna Snaith



has helpfully framed Woolf's preference for free indirect discourse (which, as she remarks, has been widely discussed by structuralism and poststructuralist narratology with little attention paid to its political implications) in terms of the interplay, or "dialectic" between the public and the private. Woolf's narrators are public, external voices insofar as they control the ordering and the focalization of events and experiences, and because they remain stubbornly anonymous and self-effacing: "they have the omniscience to move the narrative while their own private realm remains untouched";¹⁵ it is at the same time their public quality that allows for the dramatization of subjectivities:

Woolf practiced a sharing of voice; she employed neither the omniscient, omnipresent recounting of external detail for which she criticized Bennett, nor the narrator who is made absent by the characters' internal monologue as in, for example, Molly Bloom's monologue in *Ulysses*. She was concerned precisely with the movement from public to private – the relationship between inner and outer.¹⁶

What is vital to remember is that this "union of public and private [...] is not a synthesis or a replacing of one voice by another, but a combination of two separate, distinctive voices": the free indirect discourse attracted Woolf insofar as it enabled her to capture and effortlessly perform endless difference. Snaith further points out that the high incidence of the technique in Woolf's works can be best explained by the indeterminacy it creates, thus facing the reader with "the fact of

irresolvable readings" and with its highly stylized, antimimetic presence.¹⁷ The indeterminacy springs from the simultaneous foregrounding and subversion of the dichotomies between speech vs thought, subjectivity vs objective representation, mimesis vs diegesis etc., as well as from the ambivalence towards the narrator's authority inherent in this duplicitous strategy. The free indirect discourse allows for an effortless concatenation between the public and the private, blurring the boundary between them without erasing their specificity: "the external is rendered at the moment when it becomes internal,"¹⁸ as the surrounding reality shared by multiple consciousnesses is made available to the reader through the frequent shifts among the subjective filters of the characters. The free indirect discourse presents itself therefore as the perfect device for staging the distinctive instability of "the community of those who have nothing in common," since it performs both the irreducible singularity of the subjective and its impossible representation in collective discourse.

Discussing the famous car and airplane scenes in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Snaith describes what she terms as "communal free indirect discourse, internal thoughts which are not attributable to any one character, to create the sense of the crowd's unity." This type of communal discourse undermines interpretive authority – whether narratorial or readerly – which it turns into the absent signified hinted at by the empty car and the indecipherable smoke letters written on the sky by the mysterious airplane.

Her use of multiple voices through free indirect discourse acknowledges the variety, fragmentation and



situatedness of subjectivity: it cannot be totalized or contained. Through its continual reworking of the relationship between public and private, free indirect discourse breaks down any notion of a fixed binary opposition.¹⁹

Although this is by no means the only trope used to figure community, Woolf's images of (temporary) communities often seem to stage a *mise en abyme* of the act of looking together, rather than the conscious self-organization of a group of people animated by similar purposes or interests. The airplane scene, with its emphasis on a type of scripting that remains decidedly provisional (as the smoke letters disappear in the sky) indicates the connection between the instability of community, writing and death not only by rejecting any final concord among the beholders, but also by Septimus' symbolical plunge into the "exquisite beauty" produced by a process of over-signification that ultimately obliterates his identity and even prompts Rezia to wish him dead:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with pre-meditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds.²⁰

Septimus' irrational interpretation accords with the modernist attempt to

subvert the foundations of logical discourse and the general mistrust with the Logos defining of writers like Woolf or Joyce, to be interpreted not as an attempt to recover the lost magical meaning of the world, but rather as an effort to capture the empirical singularity of people and objects by presenting them as caught up in a web of connections that do not erase their constitutional difference. This might be an explanation for Clarissa's exhilaration at walking aimlessly through the streets of London, in the famous first pages of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*:

Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.²¹

The acts of Parliament fail to contain Clarissa's "frumps" and "miseries" precisely because the totalizing type of rational discourse needed to make law cannot be applied to effectuate a veritable kind of



community, one that does not do violence to its members. What we should keep in mind is that modernist writing, for all its retreat into the innermost depths of the psyche, and despite its reputation for favoring the supremacy of the individual over those of society, manages to preserve the relatedness of things in its materiality precisely because it presents consciousness as the space of multifarious perception: a space where distinctiveness is received, but not appropriated, hosted, but not erased. By continuously creating and re-creating “life” “every moment afresh,” Clarissa’s mind avoids the violence done to things by the stability of universal discourse, and allows them to present themselves in their multiplicity. The key sentence of this paragraph might be “For Heaven knows why one loves it so, why one sees it so,” with its insistence on the word “why” and the impossibility of finding a reason. Though the fact remains that for Clarissa all the people she observes during her walks seem to be unanimous about loving life, there is no shared reason – not even a reason for her own reaction; causality, as Lingis has remarked, would force them into the violent unity of “information belonging to anyone” and of collective action.²²

However, Woolf’s version of community is not concerned with collective action; as Lingis points out, the community of the rational is equated with work: the effort to instrumentalise the world with a view to the communal purpose of universal progress. Members of this community presuppose that the reason for finding reasons is to invent new technologies, to build new airports and roads and start more businesses. The logic of the industrialized world presents itself as the effect, rather

than the foundation of scientific reasoning, thus making us blind to the obscuring of difference that we perform when we turn the world into our own image. In Woolf’s writing, what is privileged is not so much the utility of things or technics, but their potential to create in the mind of the perceivers a temporary community based not on shared interpretation, but precisely on the clash of possible meanings. Thus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, doors do not close, but get unhinged; cars backfire, rather than carry passengers, and they are turned into the object of fretting inquiry by passers-by curious to know who was inside; rather than mere means of transport, planes become pretexts for over-interpretation and excess of meaning, or for making present the traumatic shared past of the war that had just ended. In *Between the Acts*, Roman roads serve as a reminder of the human integration into cosmic history, and gramophones become active agents in the simultaneous creation and “dispersion” of the community.²³ Woolf’s use of objects is non-instrumental: even man-made objects are meant to emphasize the strangeness of the world, rather than a world that is comprehended, produced and utilized for human purposes.

Reason-centered communities, Lingis shows, recognize themselves in every object (“in the animals, vegetables, and minerals of our environment”²⁴), since rather than being concerned with the nature of singular beings, they are interested in their instrumentalizable properties. Rational explanation of the world and its uses does not appeal to the modernists in general and to Virginia Woolf in particular because it engenders an overarching simulation of nature meant to hide the distance between the collective and its environment,



and freeze the effervescence of relatedness into stable hierarchies. This facilitates the illusion of sovereignty that modernity has induced upon the individual in the service of the ideology of unified knowledge and universal ethics. For Woolf, the dangers posed by unbridled sovereignty, inextricably caught in the expansionist drive of both the person and the nation, were embodied by the ethos of the nineteenth century. The reification of the world is ironically condemned in *Orlando* by means of an enumeration of incongruous objects which the protagonist, suddenly thrust in the midst of the utilitarian and imperialist Victorian era notices in the street:

But what was her surprise when, as it struck the earth, the sunbeam seemed to call forth, or to light up, a pyramid, hecatomb, or trophy (for it had something of a banquet-table air) – a conglomeration at any rate of the most heterogeneous and ill-assorted objects, piled higgledy-piggledy in a vast mound where the statue of Queen Victoria now stands! Draped about a vast cross of fretted and floriated gold were widow's weeds and bridal veils; hooked on to other excrescences were crystal palaces, bassinets, military helmets, memorial wreaths, trousers, whiskers, wedding cakes, cannon, Christmas trees, telescopes, extinct monsters, globes, maps, elephants and mathematical-instruments – the whole supported like a gigantic coat of arms on the right side by a female figure clothed in flowing white; on the left, by a portly gentleman wearing a frock-coat and sponge-bag trousers.²⁵

However, the depersonalisation enacted by adherence to the rational community is opposed by the encounter with the stranger, which for Lingis “begins with the one who exposes himself to the demands and contestation of the other” and which, functioning predominantly as interruption, “is not simply absorbed into the rational community; it recurs, it troubles the rational community as its double or its shadow.”²⁶ It represents “the community of those who have nothing in common,” paradoxically founded not on the inclusion, but on the exclusion of what we share, commanded by the imperative of bodily presence. This is what Clarissa experiences at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway* successively, first by finding out about Septimus' suicide, and then, in a famous scene, by abandoning social convention and returning the gaze of an old woman who lives across the street and who had unashamedly stared at her:

One exposes oneself to the other – the stranger, the destitute one, the judge – not only with one's insights and one's ideas, that they might be contested, but one also exposes the nakedness of one's eyes, one's voice and one's silences, one's empty hands. For the other, the stranger, turns to one, not only with his or her convictions and judgments, but also with his or her frailty, susceptibility, mortality. [...] Community forms with one exposes oneself to the naked one, the destitute one, the outcast, the dying one.²⁷

As Blanchot suggests, the possibility of community emerges from its very impossibility – a reality made manifest by the possessive adjective “my” in the phrase “my



community.” The community is “mine” insofar as I belong to it, but at the moment of belonging I cease being the “I” that can possess something.²⁸ For Bataille, Blanchot explains, the openness necessary to the emergence of the community occurs as “my presence for another who absents himself by dying.”²⁹ As Clarissa finds out, death represents the sole possibility of communion that does not turn the Other into the Same: the impossible communion of impossibly sharing: a relation based not on economic profit or the necessity for survival, but the terrible substitution of one person to another in death. Community’s possibility includes therefore its own renunciation, even destruction: “the absence of community is not the failure of community: absence belongs to community as its extreme moment or as the ordeal that exposes it to its necessary disappearance.”³⁰ Its founding paradox is that at the moment

of its experience it radically writes over the one who experiences it, thus making itself unexperienceable. Community *works* insofar as it is also *unworking*, it connects only to the extent that it unravels, since it appears to position itself on the margins of irreducible singularities it attempts to both limit and preserve. To come to a speedy conclusion, Woolf’s communities are therefore unlikely, apolitical, accidental and multifarious: shoppers driven by curiosity at the blackened windows of a car, passers-by contemplating a mysterious plane writing letters on the sky, uncomprehending holiday-makers bemused by the painting of a woman they all adore, a confused audience faced with an unfamiliar version of history that strikes too close to home, or a desired community of readers whose presence Orlando, crushed by the feeling or her own finitude, invokes by taking the train to London.

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NOTES

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