

## REVIEW ESSAY

### **A GRANDE VAGA DE FRIO ('THE GREAT FROST'): THE TRANSMIGRATION OF ORLANDO INTO PORTUGUESE**

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Ah! But what is herself? I mean, but what is a woman?  
(Woolf [1931] 1988b: 60)<sup>1</sup>

To read a book well, one should read it as if one were writing it. Begin not by sitting on the bench among the judges but by standing in the dock with the criminal. Be his fellow worker, become his accomplice. Even, if you wish merely to read books, begin by writing them.  
(Woolf [1926] 1932: 43)<sup>2</sup>

#### **1. BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION – THE VOICE OF THE DRAMATIST**

In October 2017, Luísa Costa Gomes (LCG), a Portuguese playwright with a recognized career, created for the stage what she called a 'genre transformation' of *Orlando*, or more accurately, as she says, a 'transmigration' of Woolf's large spectrum fictional (utopian, fantastical, parodic) biographic narrative, that roughly spans three centuries of English history, while accompanying the extraordinary life trajectory of its protagonist, Orlando. The term 'transmigration' is a key concept in the context of this adaptation, referred to by LCG (in her extensive interview with the Portuguese critic Pedro Sobrado),<sup>3</sup> to mean the transformation process that Woolf's text of *Orlando* underwent through her dramaturgical adaptation. In the first instance, she claims, it signifies that the original text is shifted from a genre towards another, a novel into a play, a novelist towards a dramatist, one body towards another, and mostly processed by another experience, another mind and another objective. Such processing,

1. This article is an abbreviated version of the speech Virginia Woolf delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931. It was only posthumously published in 1942, in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*.
2. Virginia Woolf wrote the article 'How should one read a book?' in January 1926, to deliver as a lecture at a private girls' school in Kent. The article was published in a revised form in *The Yale Review* in October of that year and was subsequently collected by Woolf in *The Common Reader: Second Series* ([1926] 1932). In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, she commented on the writing of this lecture in the following words: 'I have to write a lecture for schoolgirls: "How should one read a Book?" and this, by a merciful dispensation, seems to me a matter of dazzling importance

and breathless excitement' (McNeillie 1994: 399, footnote 1).

3. In this first section of my article, I follow closely the interview between LCG, the dramatist of *A Grande Vaga de Frio* ('The Great Frost') and critic Pedro Sobrado, entitled 'Sendo Orlando' ('On being Orlando'), *Journal of Teatro Nacional S. João*, Porto, 17 October 2017 (n.pag.). The *première* of the play took place on 12 October 2017, at Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon.
4. I borrow the term 'recycle' from Susan Stanford Friedman, in her edited volume *Contemporary Revolutions: Turning Back to the Future in 21st Century Literature and Art* (2019). In her introduction to the volume, 'The Past in the present: Temporalities of the contemporary' (4–20) and first chapter, 'Recycling revolutions: Re-mixing *A Room of One's Own* and Black Power in Kabe Wilson's performance, installation, and narrative art' (20–47), she engages in a rich debate concerning the significance of the concept for the understanding of what she calls 'the past in the present'. Friedman further explains that her usage of the concept of 'recycling' was inspired by the narrative experiment of Kabe Wilson, a young researcher and multimedia artist based in London, who 'had spent five years cutting up *A Room of One's Own* and recycling each of her [Woolf's] to construct a novel for the 21st century'(4). Kabe Wilson's narrative (unpublished at the writing of this article) was called *Of One Woman or So*, by Olivia N' Gowfri.

LCG claims, is closely intertwined with technical issues and formal matters in tune with the required transformation of a narrative text, which condenses 300 years of literature and history into a dramatic monologue.

The play was staged during 2017–18 in the main cities of Portugal, from Lisbon to Porto, and toured the country always with great public acclaim, which should be understood as the result of the perfect combination of a fluid text in Portuguese (translation by Ana Luísa Faria), a language resonating with rhythm and musicality, and crucially, the virtuosity of the acting by Emília Silvestre, an actress with an androgynous body perfectly illuminating the required corporeal metamorphoses the text conjured. Word, gesture, demeanour, light, bare scenery all interlaced to create an atmosphere of enchanting plasticity, conveying gender and genre fluidity, a true 'world of becoming', as evoked by Woolf in the source text, through the interlacing of words and imagery. The rich and multifarious ambivalence of Woolf's text is explored in LCG's transformation, first of all in terms of its rendering into a dramatic monologue, which condenses the original narrative in just about 40 pages, to create what she calls a 'programmatically reconstructed of the source text', achieved through the authorial interpretation of the dramatist, which, the latter contends, is nothing but a 'commented and seasoned active reading', after all the fundamental prerequisite of any reading, as she modestly claims in the above-mentioned interview 'On being Orlando', for the *Journal of Teatro Nacional S. João*, Porto (2017: n.pag.).

The play aims to capture the essence of Orlando's transmigration in between genders, in between cultures and historical moments. It amplifies the inner dialogues of the text with the texts of history and the lives of the male and female protagonists that traverse it, plus the necessary dialogue of the authorial voice and the voice of the dramatist as yet that of another reader. Thus creating, as LCG adds in her interview, a 'haunted monologue' that is, after all, deeply plurivocal and uncannily dialogical.

Therefore, the 'transmigration' that takes place from Woolf's narrative to LCG's dramatic monologue, is also a 'genre migration', which involves a complex travel/trajectory through time, geography, idiom, as it is now a text 'recycled'<sup>4</sup> into Portuguese for the stage, in the twenty-first century, through the pen of a female dramaturg and playwright, to be acted by a female character who looks distinctively androgynous (in Woolf's terms), or queer, to use a denser contemporary concept. The text of arrival aims at being a 'commentary' of the original, in LCG's phrasing: a 'commented reading' that is 'seasoned with' another 100 years of history, which span from Woolf's narrative to the Portuguese dramatic monologue and all that it implies in terms of the rendering of the text, in visual terms, from the page to the stage, from the reader's to the viewer's fruition. Moreover, the Portuguese text also clearly wants to perform a 'programmatically reconstructed' of the original, in the observance that only what is 'essential' from this new interpretation or processing, must remain, as this is not meant to be a systematic or imposing commentary (Costa Gomes 2017b). That concern is made explicit in the very title of the play, *A Grande Vaga de Frio (The Great Frost)*, after which one reads: 'With *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf'. In diegetic terms, the play starts where Woolf's narrative ends, projecting onto the fabric of the text the readings and reception it engendered over the years, as you cannot expurgate the book from its multilayered readings, the dramatist consistently argues. The viewer of the transmigrated text, *A Grande Vaga de Frio*, is also made aware that the recycled new text is meant as an 'affectionate parody' of Woolf's text, as well as a 'reparation' of Woolf's

destiny, and besides, a reparation of the dramatist's own destiny, as the latter claims. Parody and dialogism often go hand in hand, as Bakhtin famously noted (1982), as is well exemplified in the level of intricacy and the intertextual relation achieved between the source text and the Portuguese stage version, as a gesture of reverence and a love bond engendered. One could thus say that the 'recycling' here at stake entails a deeply interwoven process between hypotext and hypertext, through the creation of a textual *mise en abyme*, signifying a self-reflexive and specular process where the voices, lives and creativity of the two women creators separated by time, geography, language and culture, visibly and affectionately interlace.<sup>5</sup> The new *Orlando* is thus the old *Orlando*, and beyond, materialized into a new text, which actualizes the transgressions announced in the original into a different genre, space and context. The 'fidelity' to the original or the 'authenticity' of the replica is not questioned; on the contrary, the new text performatively exhibits its total fascination with the original, enhancing its aura and its complexity. Moreover, the ironical mode is as much inextricable to the original text (deeply *inter* and *intradialogical*, as made explicit since its opening pages, via the Preface, the dedication to Vita Sackville-West), as to the Portuguese 'commented' version, and yet the ironical mode stands as another crucial bond linking both texts in their dense intricacy. A quasi-physical bond, like the one described by Walter Benjamin in his celebrated article 'The task of the translator', between the original text and its translation, understanding the latter as the 'afterlife of a work of art', that which vigilantly safeguards its enduring life in times to come, or 'marks their stage of continued life' (Benjamin 1979: 71). For, as Benjamin famously argues, 'all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages' (1979: 75, emphasis added), hence 'the task of the translator consists in finding the intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original' (1979: 76, emphasis added). In a similar vein, the recycled text lovingly 'appropriates' the original and thus 'refigures' or 'reshapes' its central image as through the lens of a kaleidoscope, aiming at producing in it the 'echo of the original', or again, to paraphrase the critic, its 'reverberation' in a new language, style or mode (Benjamin 1979: 76).<sup>6</sup>

Innumerable are the facts that one could cite and see here revisited: from the 'duty of the biographer' to start with, and the veneration of past glory, to the exaltation of reading and literature, vis-à-vis the caricature of the exhibitionism and ridicule of Nick Green, the presumptuous writer, side by side with the struggle of women for recognition, visibility and, in sum, 'a room of their own', regardless of the father's name or husband's protection. *Orlando* is a vehement manifesto about all this, permeated throughout by an ironic mode that does not deny the seriousness of the matter, notwithstanding its ludic strategy, a narrative mode akin to a theatrical 'alienation effect', which one could simply call poetic.

In the article 'Women and fiction', published in 1929, a year after *Orlando*, Woolf used a more political rhetoric to champion the rights of women and to enunciate her vision of a feminist genealogy or 'gynocritics',<sup>7</sup> as it would later be called:

The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female. Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction [...] But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great grandmothers, what remains?

5. For a detailed analysis of the meaning and uses of this concept, a trope and narrative strategy often used in art and literature alike, see Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* (1977).
6. 'Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one' (Benjamin 1979: 76, emphasis added).
7. Elaine Showalter famously developed this concept in her article 'Toward a feminist poetics' ([1979] 1989a), and in a subsequent one, 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness' ([1981] 1989b), where she establishes the distinction between the study of 'woman as reader', as a first phase in the feminist critique, and as a second phase in this process, the study of 'woman as writer' and producer of textual meaning, which she named 'gynocriticism' ([1979] 1989a: 128).

Nothing but a tradition. One was beautiful; one was red-haired; one was kissed by a Queen. We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore.

(Woolf 1988a: 44)

So, if we may prophesy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history [...] women will have what has so long been denied to them – leisure, and money, and a room to themselves.

(Woolf 1988a: 52)

Besides, we are reminded by the Portuguese dramatist, *Orlando* is also a gerund mode in the Portuguese language: literally, since *orla* means the seashore where waves roll, it translates a trajectory and a movement – it is ‘a going by the *orlas*’, as LCG argues in the interview previously referred to, signifying both a process and a becoming.

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity [...] His memory – but in the future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’, and ‘she’ for ‘he’ – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle.

(Woolf 1983a: 87)

## 2. THE ‘FREEZING ALLEGORY’

As its epicentre, the play *A Grande Vaga de Frio* explores the ‘freezing allegory’ of the text, i.e. its fracturing moments, when the gender fluidity of the character ‘crystallizes’ as masculine or feminine; when the protagonist loses fluidity to become a ‘historical or cultural persona’, playing either a male or a female role, clarifies LCG. Hence ‘loneliness’ is one of the main threads of the text, both Woolf’s narrative and its ‘recycled’ version in this dramatic monologue. And what sort of loneliness is that of Orlando? Here I quote the dramatist: ‘[i]t is the loneliness of the serious reader, of the creative person, a loneliness peopled by ghosts, her other selves, and her other lives’, haunted by voices of literary spectres, that of Shakespeare, central to the whole plot, but also other canonical poets whom she fears and despises at the same time, like Alexander Pope. On another level, the voice of Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, the celebrated Victorian biographer, with whom the author seems to be in permanent dialogue, notwithstanding the pretended univocality of the narrative. This is thus a ‘haunted’ text, pregnant with echoes, such as any rewriting or recycling process is bound to be.

But going back to the ‘freezing allegory’ of the text, that is not only a rhetorical device or figure of speech, but it unfolds literally too in the text, as it is not accidental that the dramatist names her play after the episode of the *Great Frost* that assailed the British Isles in 1608, which creates a significant nodal mode in the narrative, vis-à-vis the whole anxiety that the metaphorical *unfreezing*, central to the text, engenders, the refusal of being *either/or*, male or female, but rather wholeness. The ‘freezing allegory’ is, however, in plot terms,

the inverse of the fluidity that characterizes Orlando and that which he/she stands for.

'One loses plasticity but also discards anxiety', claims LCG. It is also an allegory of Woolf's own life struggle against madness, her uncontrollable drive for rupture and discontinuity. The conflict between *freezing and unfreezing* is the dramatist's own interpretation of Woolf's life quest, her continuous drive for creativity and her innermost divide. Whereas in social and historical terms, the Victorian world Woolf rebels against is a *congealed entity*: in terms of values, gender relations, hierarchical roles, it is a frozen world Woolf vehemently wants to discard forever and out of which she desperately seeks to find an 'open gate'. Her articles, her lectures, her novels are about that desire for disruption and doors opened ajar, as she captiously wrote in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924):

on or about December, 1910, human character changed [...] All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910.

(Woolf 1924: 4–5)

*Orlando* partakes of that utopian dream, or 'fantasy of wish fulfilment', as Sandra Gilbert wrote in her groundbreaking article, 'Costumes of the mind: Transvestism as metaphor in modern literature' (Gilbert 1980: 406). Hence the freedom, the liberation Woolf experiences when writing it, as a true 'unfreezing moment' of her own, one of her 'moments of being', which she so desperately longed for throughout her life. Thus Orlando is Virginia and Virginia is or *would be* Orlando, in a *future à venir*, an *unfreezing* of the momentum of history.

And yet, we are reminded, Woolf's inquisitive mind never considered her 'battles' fully accomplished. Notwithstanding the confidence in her 'vision', her utopian dream, she was strongly aware of the 'formidable nature' of the obstacles women were facing and would have to face in times to come. Her novels, her lectures, her articles are both a symptom and a premonition of this awareness. In 'Professions for women' ([1931] 1988b), reflecting on 'the two adventures of her professional life', she claimed:

The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. *The obstacles against her are immensely powerful – and yet they are very difficult to define.*

(Woolf [1931] 1988b: 62, emphasis added)

But besides this, it is necessary also to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with these formidable obstacles. *Those aims cannot be taken for granted; they must be perpetually questioned and examined.*

(Woolf [1931] 1988b: 62–63, emphasis added)

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Adaptations, as Brenda Silver has argued, are 're-fashionings' or 're-dressings' of *other texts*, to be globally understood as 'performances', rather than 'existing in a hierarchical relationship to each other' (original and adaptation), but rather in a 'fluid, shifting, intertextual cluster' with the original, as a product of a particular encoding: historical, geographical, cultural, much in the same way as translations exist in relation to the original or source text (1999: 212–13). In fact, one cannot help seeing that the adaptation itself easily assumes the status of 'original', being read or seen *against* (instead of) the archetypal version (as in the well-known case of Sally Potter's film version *Orlando* [1999], or Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* [1999] in relation to *Mrs. Dalloway*).

Literally, LCG's stage version of *Orlando* actualizes the original in a foreign idiom and for a contemporary public (in terms of sexual politics, transgenderism, power relations, ecology, pacifism, hybridity, queer body language, etc.), accentuating its circular writing made of flashbacks, repetitions and refrains – '*same person different sex!*' / 'Life life life'. In sum, it displays onstage and visually exhibits before the public's eyes the ritual nature of a text that escapes genre and gender categorizations and rejects any form of monoglossia, as a 'haunted text' where voices incessantly reverberate.

I would like to end this text by summoning Virginia Woolf's voice from the same article that I quoted in my epigraph, 'How should one read a book?' ([1926] 1932), as I believe its core argument is important to our debate and to the pleasures and the risks of *reading Woolf today*. In the last paragraph of her article, she sums up the reasons for 'reading a book', in one word – '*pleasure*' ('mysterious, unknown, useless as it is', she adds), and she justifies her claim in the following words:

That pleasure is so curious, so complex, so immensely fertilizing to the mind of anyone who enjoys it, and so wide in its effects, that it would not be in the least surprising to discover, on the day of judgment when secrets are revealed and the obscure is made plain, that the reason why we have grown from pigs to men and women, and come out from our caves, and dropped our bows and arrows, and sat round the fire and talked and drunk and made merry and given to the poor and helped the sick and made pavements and houses and erected some sort of shelter and society on the waste of the world, is nothing but this: *we have loved reading*.

(Woolf 1994: 398–99, emphasis added)

'Recycling' is, likewise, a form of reading for pleasure, an 'after reading', or simply an 'accomplice way of reading'.

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## FIGURES

Note: The following Figures were mistakenly omitted from the original publication of this Review Essay. The Figures were added to the online version in May 2021.



*Figures 1–4: A Grande Vaga de Frio © TUNA/TNSJ.*

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