

*“In the manner of a palimpsest” –
Virginia Woolf’s diaries:
an interview with Ana Carolina Mesquita*

Ana Carolina Mesquita (USP)

Interviewers:

Márcia Cristina Fráguas (UERJ/CAPES)
Vinícius Rangel Bertho da Silva (PUC-SP)

In this dossier which deals with artists' writings, *Palimpsesto* – student journal of the Postgraduate Program in Literature at UERJ – had the opportunity to interview professor, translator, and writer Ana Carolina Mesquita. With a PhD in Literature from the University of São Paulo (USP), she is a professor at Faculdade Santa Marcelina (FASM) and a member of KEW (Kyklos de Estudos Woolfianos) and IVWS (International Virginia Woolf Society). Her experience with translation and analysis of English writer Virginia Woolf's diaries accredits her as an important voice not only in the field of literary studies, but also in translation studies. Not less important, it is worth mentioning that Mesquita has also translated Woolf's short stories and essays published independently by Nós Publishing, among which we highlight *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street* (2022), *Thoughts of peace during an air raid* (2021) and *A Sketch of the Past* (2020) – one of the last texts published by the author during her lifetime.

Since 2021, readers and specialists on Woolf's work have been treated to exquisite editions of her *Diaries* published by Nós. The first volume comprises the writing undertaken between the years 1915 and 1918, the period in which Virginia published her first novel (*The Voyage out*, 1915) and was about to publish the second one (*Night and Day*, 1919). The second volume (2022), on the other hand, concentrates what was written between 1919 and 1923, the period in which she published *Jacob's Room* (1922), one of her most important works. The third volume was released in 2023 and consists of the writer's period of artistic maturity – 1924 to 1930. The *Diaries* Brazilian editions have been published annually, therefore, there is an expectation of the publication of what was noted by Virginia Woolf in her intimate writings between 1931 and 1941, the year of her death.

In this interview, given virtually to Márcia Cristina Fráguas and Vinícius Rangel Bertho da Silva (organizers of this issue of *Palimpsesto*), Ana Carolina Mesquita reports on the experience of translating Virginia Woolf's diaries, in addition to the importance of the *diary as a genre* for the life and work of the author of *The Waves*, since it was through this type of writing that Woolf established herself as one of the greatest women and artists of her time. Thanks to Mesquita's consistent research work, readers will be able to understand the role of Leonard Woolf, Quentin Bell, Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeille in the process of making the *Diaries* accessible to the readers.

PALIMPSESTO

1) After decades, Virginia Woolf's readers have gained access to a new translation of her Diaries. How did the initiative to research the diaries during your PhD and translate the five volumes of Virginia's diaries into Portuguese in partnership with Nós Publishing come about?

ANA CAROLINA MESQUITA

Virginia Woolf's diary had never been fully translated into Portuguese before my translation. All we had were excerpts or translations of selected entries, and these were sometimes offered cut, that is, not in their entirety (this is the case with Bertrand's Portuguese edition). It was not clear what criteria led the organizing translators to choose certain entries and exclude others. On the contrary to Leonard Woolf's criteria, when the first edition of Virginia's diary was published, in 1953, it was indicated in the preface that he would exclude everything that did not concern her writing, which led him to cut practically everything... Woolf himself entitled his edition *A Writer's Diary*, which is something quite consistent with his editorial choice. We may not enjoy it, we may have our criticisms, although there is a project there, something that did not happen with the available editions of Virginia's diary in Portuguese. It happened recently once again, with Rocco's edition. The selection of entries seems to occur in these cases less based on criteria and more based on a kind of personal taste.

My intention in translating her diaries was precisely to make it available in its entirety, since Virginia's diary has several particularities which can be only noticed when we read it over long stretches of time (years in a row, for example). In brief, it is possible

to see an arc of change for the author, both as a writer and as a person. However, there is also, mainly from 1919 onwards, a project for her diary, which she establishes formally – and it is the same project that she would establish shortly afterwards for herself as a writer of novels and short stories. Such a project, even though, can only be glimpsed in the materiality of the text when we read the diary in long continuous sections. I was lucky myself to have found a publisher who took responsibility on it, as it is expensive to publish such extensive translations and with this level of care, but, above all, I was lucky to find an editor as passionate and intelligent as Simone Paulino. A published work is always the result of dialogue: it was no different here, the translation could finally be discussed, and it changed significantly from my PhD to the book version.

Another reason that led me to the diary was the fact that, in many ways, it can be considered Virginia's great modernist work, in the sense that it actually encompasses the insignificant writing and the masterful one side by side, without hierarchies; that it is a work above all concerned with time and how to represent it; it focuses on modes of representation of reality as also perceived by the movements of the interiority of the narrators and not just by the exteriorities of its events, leading some to have repercussions on others; this is entirely reflected in the language resources and the way they are used. Virginia made her diary a great testing ground for other works, but, above all, she made it a masterful work by itself in this sense.

PALIMPSESTO

2) The period in which Virginia and Leonard Woolf lived at 52 Tavistock Square (1924-1939) is highlighted in your doctoral research as one of the most important periods in the Woolf couple's life and work. Why?

ANA CAROLINA MESQUITA

It was during this period that Virginia published and wrote the works that made her best known, such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Common Reader*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, *A Room of One's Own*, *The Waves*, *The Years*. It was also during such period when the couple really made their publishing, Hogarth Press, flourish, by editing authors who otherwise might not have found a place in the market. Above all, Hogarth

allowed Virginia to have control of her own books, without making concessions in order to be published – a rare privilege, especially by taking into consideration an author whose works had so many particularities which could have been undermined.

PALIMPSESTO

3) While reading your PhD thesis, an excerpt from *A Room of One's Own* came across our minds as we were reflecting on the tension between the literary and the so-called “factual” on Virginia Woolf's diaries: “Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact” (Woolf, 2015, s/p.). In your work, you point out that her diaries, due to their confessional or factual character, tend to be seen as “a field of transparency”. Therefore, in exchange for this supposed privilege of “telling the truth”, there is a tendency to separate them from literature or fiction, using them as a kind of support to help in reading other works. For Quentin Bell, one of Virginia's biographers, the diaries can be read as a “great work by itself”. What was it like for you in your research, to make such a leap from formulating the concept of “cross-form” that is applied to Virginia Woolf's diaries?

ANA CAROLINA MESQUITA

It seems that had been a leap, but in reality, it was a finding which came slowly and over time of contact with Virginia's diary and a lot of reflection on diaries as a genre, especially writers' diaries. What was evident were the countless signs of textual elaboration with which, in their diaries, writers tried to trip up this supposed “regime of sincerity” (considering all the values that come with it: spontaneity, transparency, truth), especially from the 20th century onwards. Perhaps the most interesting writers are exactly those who, most emphatically, refused to accept the procedure which connects the diary to life and separates it from literature – understanding them as a double path between deliberate construction and the real. Ernst Jünger rewrote his diary before publishing it. Lúcio Cardoso prepared part of his diary for editing, and only did not finish the rest because he was unable to do so due to a stroke. Katherine Mansfield wrote different versions of the same note, sometimes on the same page. In the manner of a palimpsest, Woolf occasionally pasted rewritten passages, elaborated later, over the originals – and reread her passages and commented on them in terms of text structure. Faced with findings like these, the traditional way of analysing diaries is gradually falling apart. The

new directions of criticism began to include different perspectives on so-called self-writing and its intersections with other genres, increasingly questioning and challenging the limits of what is commonly seen as literary.

In Virginia Woolf's case, the diary turns into a hub: it is crossed by and traverses her other works. That's why I called it a crossover form, in which not only the works intersect, but the genres do it as well. There is a questioning about genders throughout Woolf's work, and her diary also takes part in this – or rather, perhaps it is one of her works that most brings this aspect to the fore. It is not a document. Or rather: it can *also* be a document, but I would say that this is in the background, since it is literarily thought, with objective literary thinking and very clear literary marks aligned with modernism.

PALIMPSESTO

4) Woolf was an avid diary reader in her youth. Among the forms of writing she mastered, the confessional narrative had great value in her daily life. Why did diaries help VW to establish herself as an artist and woman of her time? How did she move away from a Victorian tradition and transformed her diaries into a modernist work?

ANA CAROLINA MESQUITA

Virginia Woolf was not an avid reader of diaries only in her youth, but throughout her life, and diaries are not necessarily confessional – much less in the case of writers' diaries, those which especially pleased her precisely because of their literary work and recreation of the real.

To my mind, the diaries led Woolf to constitute herself as an artist and woman of her time because they allowed her a space for free creation and, at the same time, for reflection. It is important to remember that she periodically reread her diaries and revisited themes, shapes, textures, and considerations. It is worth to emphasize what this means: it means that she was not just a writer of her diaries, but a large and constant reader of them.

PALIMPSESTO

5) The second part of your thesis was the complete and annotated translation of the Tavistock Diary, in which you state a comprehension in the translation act itself an approximation to the critical act. Could you tell us more about this rapprochement between translation and literary criticism?

ANA CAROLINA MESQUITA

I tend to agree with [Jacques] Derrida on this point, that translation (at least literary translation) is not done in terms of thinking about an arrow that hits the target. Here I recall an account of a poet, I cannot remember what his name is, who received a call from a translator who was translating his poem into English. He read his translation to the poet, and in a certain verse the poet spoke of a “target”. In the poet's conception, he was referring to the target as that which is reached. But the translator had interpreted it as “white”. The poet liked it so much that he wanted it to be left that way in English, and so the poems, paired together, now found themselves unfolding in many ways.

In other words, I see this issue in terms of the philosophy of translation, and not in translation studies itself. What does it mean to translate? From this point of view, translating is already criticising. Because it does not set communication above the matter of language, the word, the nature of exchange, but, as Barbara Cassin says, “it complicates the universal”. Benjamin says that “translation is form”.

In literature, words are not translated, but intentions, implications, what remains unsaid and which, however, also lingers in the folds of the text. Translating is interpreting, just like writing, just like exercising criticism. It is the closest reading that can be done, the most intimate, as Gayatri Spivak points out, who compares it to a sexual relationship. The translator's point of view shines through in the choices made, the paths taken or those that, on the contrary, are ignored, just as a critic does when following the turns proposed by the text. However, there is a difference: the critic can only go through the turns and comment on them, talk about their beauties and difficulties. The translator is always required to provide a solution to the problems that he points out himself.

PALIMPSESTO

6) Alongside Leonard Woolf, Anne Olivier Bell (wife of Quentin Bell, Virginia's nephew) was one of those responsible for publishing Virginia's diaries over the years. Could you specify the importance of her role in such a process?

ANA CAROLINA MESQUITA

Anne Olivier Bell, with the aid of Andrew McNeille, dedicated many years to editing Woolf's complete diaries (or almost, as it turned out) and had done a detailed job, going after the historical gaps, the events that are only suggested by the author, to correct Woolf's mistakes in terms of facts and dates. It organizes the diaries, gives them shape, makes them understandable to us, in many ways. (One of them deciphering Virginia's handwriting, which is sometimes difficult to understand.) It is due to her work that we were able to understand the monumentality of this work and its significance.

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