

## SELF, WRITING AND FEMININE TRANSACTIONS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO* AND CLARICE LISPECTOR'S *THE STREAM OF LIFE*

*Sujeto, escritura y transacciones femeninas en Orlando, de Virginia Woolf, y Agua viva, de Clarice Lispector*

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### Resumen

Este artículo realiza un acercamiento a *Orlando*, de Virginia Woolf, y a *Agua viva*, de Clarice Lispector, como obras que logran escribir la multiplicidad, la fluidez y la contingencia del ser. Jugando con las convenciones de la biografía y la autobiografía respectivamente, estas obras encuentran los medios para presentar un sujeto multidimensional y para mostrar, en particular, cómo la dimensión relacional, forjada por un orden simbólico patriarcal, ha hecho de la mujer el “otro” del hombre; un “otro” que debe ser dominado. Se exploran en este artículo los conceptos de “economía masculina” y “economía femenina” teorizados por Hélène Cixous y se propone al lenguaje poético como un medio capaz de eludir los dictados del falocentrismo. Lo poético, que no puede ser nunca agotado por uno o varios sistemas de significación, brinda la posibilidad de ir más allá de las categorizaciones y de explorar la multiplicidad. Tanto *Orlando* como *Agua viva* muestran las estrategias y las esperanzas de personajes y escritoras que ven en el lenguaje poético, en la “escritura femenina” como la entiende Cixous, el potencial de desarticular la “economía masculina” y abrir un nuevo espacio para sujetos diversos, múltiples y complejos.

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**Palabras claves:** (Auto)biografía, *Orlando*, *Agua viva*, Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector, Hélène Cixous.

### **Abstract**

This paper looks at *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf and *The Stream of Life* by Clarice Lispector as works which exemplify a type of life writing which manages to do justice to the multiplicity, fluidity and contingency of the self. By playing with the conventions of biography and autobiography respectively, these works find the means to portray a multi-dimensional self and to show, in particular, how the relational dimension, shaped according to a patriarchal symbolic order, has made women: “the other” of man who needs to be appropriated. This paper explores the concepts of “masculine and feminine economy” as theorized by Hélène Cixous and advocates poetic writing as a suitable means by which woman can construct herself escaping the dictum of a phallogentrism. The poetic, which cannot be accountable for by reference to a sole or to several systems of meaning, provides the possibility to move beyond categories and to explore multiplicity. Both *Orlando* and *The Stream of Life* portray the ruses and the hopes of characters and women writers who see in poetic language, in “feminine writing” as understood by Cixous, the potential to dislocate “masculine economy” and open a new place for diverse, multiple and complex selves.

**Keywords:** Life writing, *Orlando*, *The Stream of Life*, Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector, Hélène Cixous.

### **Introduction**

Several scholars, including Christine Chaney and the French critic Michel Beaujour agree that we have been locked into “a particular model of unitary, stable selfhood in our conversation about life writing” and that we need “to re-frame our critical vision to include as life-texts those narratives which may instead be a more accurate representation of a human being's ‘real life’ because they aren't stable, unitary, continuous and retrospective” [Chaney: 282]. This paper will look at *Orlando*

(1928) by Virginia Woolf and at *The Stream of Life* (1973)<sup>2</sup> by Clarice Lispector, arguing that these fictional works, which play respectively with the genres of biography and autobiography, constitute examples of life writing which portray the self as multiple, fluid and contingent, and which pay due attention to the multiple dimensions of the self. Dependence and autonomy, the limits posed by the bodily and, in particular, the relational dimension of the self, are key issues presented by these works. Written by women, both *Orlando* and *The Stream of Life* will bring to the fore the burden that the relational dimension places on women, who have been and still are forced to live under the dictum of societies dominated by phallogentric and logocentric metaphysics. This paper will look at H  l  ne Cixous's formulation of "masculine economy" and "feminine economy". "Masculine economy", which fosters the appropriation and subjugation of "the other", and which advocates an eternal return to the "self-same", dominates every single aspect of the Symbolic, including the practice of writing. We intend to show how within this closed system of "masculine economy", there has been no chance for women but to be and to write in the margins of the law, finding the necessary ruses to cross borders, to slip away from suffocating categories, to carry out unaccountable transactions in order to grant themselves the freedom to be. Until a different economy truly respectful of diversity comes to guide our transactions, there is no chance for woman but to smuggle, to trespass. Both *Orlando* and *The Stream of Life* show the contraband, the ruses by which female subjects have been able to write themselves against the grain of male dominated discourse. We will show how language, the accomplice of the all-pervading phallogentric

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<sup>2</sup> The book was written in Portuguese and published under the title *Agua viva*, which means both a running stream of water and a jellyfish. I will be following here the translation to English done by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz. Throughout this paper, I will be referring to this book as *The Stream of Life*, as the English version will be my source for quotes and references.

metaphysics, can also be used to crack this same metaphysics open, to break the closed circle of “masculine economy”, to create a “feminine economy” in which “the other”, woman, can slip in and write her self. Language, but only unpredictable language, subversive language, language which cannot be accounted for by “masculine economy” and metaphysics: poetic language, will be woman's ally providing the means to write selves that demand to be acknowledged in all their diversity.

### **A Multidimensional Self**

In the first chapter of his book *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century*, Jerrold Seigel makes a distinction between one-dimensional and multi-dimensional accounts of the self. He tells us that, mainly since the times of Descartes and Locke, the basis of selfhood in Western culture has been thought in connection to three dimensions: “the bodily or material, the relational, and the reflective dimensions of the self” [Seigel: 5]. The bodily dimension involves the physical, corporeal existence of individuals and refers to the ways in which we are shaped by the body's needs. The relational dimension arises from social and cultural interaction, making us “what our relations with society and others shape or allows us to be” [5]. The reflective dimension refers to the human capacity to observe not only the material aspects of this world (including our own bodies), and our relation to others and our culture, but also our own consciousness. This last dimension of the self is related to its ability to put itself at a distance, so as to be able to “examine, judge, and sometimes regulate” itself [6].

As Seigel makes it clear, multi-dimensional accounts of the self have the capacity to portray the complexity of the self, by referring to the several elements and relations that constitute

it. It is from and within the continual interplay and tensions between these three dimensions that the self exists. Multi-dimensional accounts of the self do not present reflectivity as totally dependent or independent from bodily conditions and relational circumstances, but instead acknowledge that a mix of autonomy and dependency can be the condition of personal experience.

The self is then a complex arena where autonomy is never absolute, yet not completely impossible either. The bodily and relational dimensions put forward their demands and set their limits, and reflectivity may attempt to check how solid these boundaries are, and how much they can be bent or be made permeable. Having been shaped according to a masculine paradigm, these boundaries (and those of reflectivity itself) will be particularly tough on women, imposing on them a relational mode and a conception of their own body which is not theirs, training them to look at themselves from a male gaze, and making them believe that they can only follow the dictum of a phallogocentric order in the exchanges they carry out with others. However, and in spite of these adverse conditions which proscribe female modes as foreign, strange, outside the norm; many women have not given up and have looked for ways in which they can carry out transactions with other individuals and participate in the public world without their singularity being annihilated. As long as all relations continue to be framed in terms that do not welcome diversity, but only approach "the other" as that which needs to be dominated, there is no chance for women but to be furtively "other", to smuggle, to play on the borders of phallogocentric metaphysics in order to be. "To fly/to steal is woman's gesture [...] We have all learned flight/theft, the art with many techniques, for all the centuries we have only had access to having by stealing/flying; we have lived in flight/theft, stealing/flying, finding the close, concealed ways-through of desire" [Cixous and Clement: 96]. "There is no

room for her if she is not a he” [Cixous 1976: 888]. Therefore, she has had to create a different space for herself, surreptitiously, stealthily crossing the borders of the Law, looking for the cracks in the system where there would be room for a different body, a different reflectivity, a different way to engage with others, a different way to write.

### **Feminine Economy and Poetic Language**

In “Sorties. Out and Out. Attacks/Ways Out/Forays” (2008), Hélène Cixous tells us that logocentrism and phallogentrism dominate our symbolic order, which organises reality in terms of binary oppositions. One element of the dyad is always privileged over the other: Self/other, man/woman are examples of these dichotomous pairs. This division into dyads is dominated by “masculine economy”, which only conceives the other as something that must be appropriated and subdued in order to return to the Self-same. Woman is for man, and for symbolic systems organised under a masculine logic: the stranger, who only exists to be appropriated. In this type of logic, “the body of what is strange must not disappear, but its force must be conquered and returned to the master” [Cixous and Clement: 70].

Psychoanalysis, which has been central in the investigation of the notion of the self and its unconscious, and which has done so much to highlight the importance of the bodily and the relational dimensions in the construction of the self, has not been able to escape the logics of a “masculine economy”. It has assigned to woman, once again, the role of “the other” who needs to be appropriated. Woman plays the role of that which deviates from the model according to which the Law has been fashioned. Not only is she a deviation from the norm modelled according to man, but she is a deviation that needs to be subdued by that same law. The Law of the Father, the law that

postulates the Phallus as the supreme symbol. Cixous explains how Freud's views backs phallogentrism's position of strength by conceiving the "fate" of the feminine situation as "an effect of an anatomical 'defect'", by thinking that there is only one libido and that it is in essence masculine, and by stating that "since the first object of love, for both sexes, is the mother, it is only in the boy that the love of the opposite sex is natural" [Cixous and Clement: 81]. In "Castration or Decapitation?", Cixous explains how Lacan in his linguistic turn, keeps Freud's main concepts about the way in which psychosexual subjectivity is developed in relation to the person's sexed and gendered body. "For Freud/Lacan, woman remains 'outside the Symbolic', that is outside language, the place of the Law, [...] because she does not enjoy the orders of masculinity- the castration complex" [Cixous and Kuhn: 46].

For Lacan, "The Phallus" is the "transcendental signifier", the primary organizer of subjectivity. The Phallus inscribes its effects of castration and resistance to castration, and the very organization of language as unconscious relations. For Cixous, these conceptions of psychoanalysis define woman as that which "lacks the Lack", that which "lacks the Lack of the Phallus. [...] So supposedly, she misses the great lack, so that without man she would be indefinite, indefinable, non-sexed, unable to recognize herself: outside the Symbolic" [Cixous and Kuhn: 46]. Psychoanalysis has inscribed woman according to a "masculine economy"; woman is the element in the dual opposition which needs to be re-appropriated and explained according to its powerful opposite in the pair. "Masculine economy" has framed all systems of thought. "There is phallogentrism. History has never produced or recorded anything else- which does not mean that this form is destinal or natural" [Cixous and Clement: 83].

Cixous wonders if there might be a possibility to organise the relationship to "the other" in a different way that would not

rely on appropriation. She distinguishes between “masculine economy” and “feminine economy”. Man’s relationship to the other is always one that must result in a “revenue”, in capitalization, and “masculine profit is almost always mixed up with a success that is socially defined” [Cixous and Clement: 87]. Woman, however, has the “capacity to de-appropriate herself without self-interest”, she “doesn’t try to ‘recover expenses’” [87], she seems to grant herself the possibility to waste, “she is able not to return to herself” [87]. This is the reason why Cixous feels that it is necessary to grant room to the feminine as that which allows us to open up to “the other(s)”, to the unknown, in a “loving” relationship that does not annihilate “the other” as such by trying to dominate it.

The type of writing that Cixous calls “feminine” (independently of whether it is written by women or not) is precisely that which could be referred to as poetic language, for it deviates from the predictable patterns of discursive language and makes room for the unknown, without aiming to return to the self-same, without aiming to be re-appropriable in an all-encompassing logic. The poetic, and more specifically poetic language, which resorts to incalculable means in order to work its spells: imagery, metaphor, condensation and ellipsis, rhythm, musicality, the possible disruption of syntax, escapes the possibility of being accountable for by reference to a sole or to several systems of meaning. The poetic (whether operating in poetry or other genres) always seems to create an “excess” a “surplus” that cannot be calculated, whose participation cannot be measured nor anticipated, and which, consequently, cannot be fully accountable for in any system.

Poetic language can only come into being if there is complete openness to “the other”, to that unpredictable “something or someone” which we will meet in an encounter whose results we cannot possibly anticipate. For there to be poetic language, we must assume the risk of deviating from pre-established



meanings, we must dare break the rules of clear-cut denotative language, we must dare disrupt symbolic order. Poetic language, faithful only to its own demands, is “a kind of deconstruction of the superficiality of the law” [Cixous 1987: 13]. If we want the poetic to work its deconstructive powers, the writer and the reader of poetic language must dare even disregard preconceptions about their own beings. As many labels and categories as possible should be left aside, if the experience is to be fruitful:

[...] there is no invention possible, whether it be philosophical or poetic, without there being in the inventing subject an abundance of the other, of variety: separate-people, thought-/people, whole populations issuing from the unconscious, and in each suddenly animated desert, the springing up of selves one didn't know\_ our women, our monsters, our jackals, our Arabs, our aliases, our frights [Cixous and Clement: 84].

The self that writes, is open to changes in the writing process and cannot be conceived as a close and stable entity: it is a self open to its own re-discovery and the discovery of others. Cixous sees in this practice of writing a great potential, since love and acceptance of the other can only come about through “an intense and passionate work of knowing” [Cixous and Clement: 78]. She tells us that she has found this type of writing in poets who let something different from tradition get through at any price. It is in this disruption of established categories that what she calls “feminine writing” occurs. It is “feminine”, as it is “poetic”, precisely because it operates disrupting the laws of the symbolic, of the phallo-logocentrism within which it is still forced to operate. In the disruption caused by the poetic, woman (and whoever dares give herself/himself over to the unknown) “enters, she between- she mes and thees between the other me where one is always infinitely more than one and more than me, without fearing ever to reach a limit: sensualist

in our becoming” [Cixous and Clement: 100]. Whoever dares to embrace the risk of welcoming “the other”, whoever dares to follow the poetic music that breaks open pre-conceived structures, can feel the self being many, can feel the self opening up, can try singing the sounds that attempt to name the unknown.

### ***Orlando and The Stream of Life: beyond (auto)biography***

Virginia Woolf and Clarice Lispector are two iconic female writers; Woolf being a central and founding figure of Modernism in the English speaking world, Lispector being representative of what has been called “the third wave” of Modernism in Brazil (that of the 1945 generation), and a central figure in Latin American literature. Despite coming from quite different geographical, historical, political and cultural contexts, Lispector’s writing was soon compared to Woolf’s. Scholarly work has traced the similarities between these two writers, who share the use of the stream of consciousness as a frequent technique, and who have both displayed a tendency towards experimentalism. Alda Maria Jesus Correia refers to the study of female characters and gender questions, the relationship to their own writing, the notion of epiphany, the reflexive mood of narrative, the constant interrogation about the essence of life, the trip to the inner self and the use of the body as symbol as important aspects shared by these two writers. The works by Woolf and Lispector are not only exemplary of the Modernist traits of their times, and fundamental in bringing to the fore questions of gender, but they are also anticipatory of notions that postulate a multiple, fluid and contingent self, which were later theorized by post-structuralist thinkers, among them feminist Hélène Cixous.

*Orlando* by Woolf and *The Stream of Life* by Lispector relate to and play with the genres of biography and autobiography

respectively, contesting the conventional norms of these genres in order to do justice to the complexity of a self that comes into being within the tensions of its multiple dimensions. These works dislocate the realist stand traditionally taken by biography and autobiography, in order to highlight the interior quests and struggles of a multiple and contingent self. *Orlando* introduces fantastic elements as it portrays the life of a young aristocratic poet whose life expands through four centuries and different geographies, and who experiences a sex change half way through the narrative. *The Stream of Life* dives straightforwardly into a poetic register as the first person narrator attempts to record life as it flows inside her, with “the very lack of sense that a pulsating vein has” [Lispector: 8]. Using the genres of biography and autobiography as a necessary reference, *Orlando* and *The Stream of Life* break these genres open looking for new ways to write a complex and fluid self that is in a perpetual becoming, and that always slips away from the categories with which we attempt to define it.

a) *Orlando*, beyond biography

Written by Woolf in 1928, the parodic biography of Orlando is the fictionalized biography of Woolf's friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West. Woolf confided to Sackville-West that she intended to “revolutionise biography in a night” while also working to “untwine and twist again” the various strands of Sackville-West's character. [Woolf in Burns: 156]. Indeed, she succeeded in revolutionising biography by questioning the more unitary and stable self traditionally portrayed by the genre, by bringing to the fore the tension between essentialist notions and constructive notions of the self.

It must be remembered that Woolf was very well acquainted with Victorian models of biography, as her father, Leslie Stephen, was a renowned writer and editor of biographies, who even established his own biographical project the *Dictionary of*

*National Biography*. However, to this traditional model of biography, Woolf was going to bring the notions that were beginning to flourish after Freud's influence and that focused on notions of constructed subjectivity. Woolf's friend, Lytton Strachey, who emphasized psychology in his own work on biography, had met with great success, and his work may have inspired others to include Freudian notions into biography. In any case, Woolf was well acquainted with the findings of her "psychoanalytic age" in which thinkers were increasingly aware of "the immense effect of environment and suggestion upon the mind" [Woolf in Burns: 344].

Woolf's choice of a parodic register is extremely important in her project, for it enables her to question powerfully the essentialist notions that pose the existence of a unitary stable self and the possibility of capturing it in writing. As Christy Burns explains, "a parodic text will unravel any fantasy of pure and perfect mimetic reference. Parody must always simultaneously point towards the "source'- here Victorian notions of biography\_ and humorously distort, debilitating the very act of pointing" [350]. Parody in *Orlando* plays out the impossibility of locating a unique stable Orlando, for he/she keeps mutating and changing categories so that none of these labels can possibly pin him/her down. It is then by engaging with the genre of biography and by parodically moving beyond its boundaries, that Woolf can refer to the impossibility of thinking and writing the self within solid inflexible categories. Only by referring to and being unfaithful to the norms of biography can she succeed in being more faithful to a mutable and multiple self.

b) *The Stream of Life*, beyond autobiography

The nameless narrator of *The Stream of Life* announces that she does not intend to be "autobiographical", that she wants "to be bio". That is, she wants to move beyond the self which may be

spoken under the sign of the proper name, she wants to disavow, as much as it is possible, the particulars of her biography in order to see life “as seen by life itself” [Lispector: 12]. However, if we look closely at this nameless narrator and if we follow the history of *The Stream of Life* from its early drafts to its final version, we will come across a literary work which bears very strong echoes of the subjectivity that created it.

The first draft of *The Stream of Life* bore the title *Beyond Thought: Monologue with Life* and it was narrated by Lispector under her own name, thus presenting many autobiographical references. Apparently, Lispector was unsure about this new turn in her writing and sought for the opinion of people she respected. These critics seem to have discouraged the autobiographical turn that her writing had taken in this book. As a consequence, Lispector decided to rewrite the manuscript, and although the second version called *The Loud Object* had been stripped off the most obvious autobiographical references, it still appeared to be narrated in Lispector's own name. This direct overlapping of narrator and writer was reinforced by the fact that Lispector included in this draft fragments that had previously appeared in the non-fictional space of the *crônicas* she wrote for the *Jornal do Brasil*. Some of these fragments eventually made their way to the final version of the book named *Agua viva* and translated to English as *The Stream of Life*. This last version presents a fictional nameless narrator in an attempt to distance narrator and writer. However, for readers familiar with Lispector's work, the effect of the textual *déjà vu* between fictional and non-fictional pieces “works against the grain of Lispector's revisions, endowing the non-autobiographical protagonist with an equivocal autobiographical resonance” [Peixoto: 65].

In spite of being fiction, *The Stream of Life* remains then closely related to autobiography. However, the poetic register used by Lispector quickly places *The Stream of Life* at a great distance

from the conventions of realism, making it evident that we will have to tune in a poetic register, if we are to follow the narrator's self coming into being in writing. *The Stream of Life* flows poetically, and does not have a traditional narrative structure with a beginning, middle and end. The narrator's stream of consciousness records her living experience through the time span of a night, finding in the poetic use of language the best means to express the diversity that inhabits her, the flow of her constant transformations as she comes into being. *The Stream of Life* bears a strong relation with the genre of autobiography; however, it is only by being unfaithful to this genre and by contesting its norms that *The Stream of Life* can write the complexity of the its narrator's self as it creates and is created in writing.

### ***Orlando*: a multidimensional self and the necessary ruses to write woman**

*Orlando* clearly portrays the tensions emerging from the different dimensions of the self as the main character experiences the changes triggered by the societies of different times and places, as well as the changes brought about by his/her male or female condition. As Nancy Cervetti notices, the novel “mocks its own pursuit of Orlando, its own attempt to pin him down, to know the biographical facts of her life and define her essential person. The text marks subjectivity as multiple and shifting, and any attempt to define Orlando's identity is useless” [175].

One of the greatest achievements of *Orlando* is precisely the way in which it explores the tension between autonomy and dependence, in particular in relation to the constraints posed by the relational dimension in connection to gender. The limits posed by sexual difference from the physiological point of view are not stressed in *Orlando* as being particularly oppressive.

Perhaps the one instance that refers to the physiological possibilities of each sex, is the fact that Orlando as a woman becomes a mother. Rather than focusing on the physiological possibilities and limitations of each sex, *Orlando* focuses on gender as a social construction. Either as a man or as a woman, Orlando is never totally conditioned by his/her sex and may bear the appearances of both genders. As a young boy dressed according to the fashion of Elizabethan times, Orlando often looks like a girl. As a woman, Orlando takes pleasure in dressing and performing as a man or woman (she sometimes does not even define herself/himself, as when she/he reads dressed in a China robe of ambiguous gender) depending on what circumstances demand and on his/her own desires. "Gender becomes a cultural performance shown to be historically, even geographically, contingent and in the service of the regulatory systems of reproduction and compulsory heterosexuality" [Cervetti: 168]. But although at times Orlando appears to manipulate social conventions to his/her own advantage, in order to satisfy his/her desires; other times, the spirit of the different ages can be seen shaping her dress, her body, and even her personality, as when Victorian dresses and shoes are responsible for the fact that her "muscles had lost pliancy", or that she becomes "nervous lest there should be robbers behind the wainscot and afraid, for the first time in her life, of ghosts in the corridors" [Woolf: 245].

The restrictions that the spirit of the age, in this case Victorian times, imposes on women become still more evident when Orlando finds out that she cannot write, she cannot become an author unless she first complies with the dictates of her age and becomes a married woman. She has never felt this urge before, yet it is clear to her now that she will not be able to achieve her greatest ambition: to become a poet, a writer, unless she complies with social demands and becomes a wife, for "such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age [...],

that it batters down anyone who tries to make stand against it [...]” [Woolf: 244]. This is a crucial moment in the novel, for throughout his/ her experience along three centuries we have never seen Orlando willingly yield to the dictums of society when this means losing his/her much cherished autonomy. However, Orlando soon lets us know that this outward conformity to the spirit of the age has been a ruse, a trick, a pirouette in order to gain the freedom which would otherwise have been denied to her as a woman. Her marriage has been a way out, in order to get the permission and the necessary room to write and to finally become an author:

For she was extremely doubtful whether, if the spirit had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have had to pay the full fine. She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth. She had just managed, by some dexterous deference of the spirit of the age, by putting on a ring and finding a man on a moor, [...] to pass the examination successfully. And she heaved a deep sigh of relief, for the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement of the two the whole fortune of his work depends [Woolf: 266].

Previously in the novel we have witnessed both Orlando's deep desire to become known through his/her writing, and the constant tension between the genuine artistic outpour of his/her soul and the unwelcoming spirit of the different ages. During Elizabethan times his aristocratic origin had been a constraint for him to be acknowledged as a poet; during her time with the gypsies in Turkey, the mere wish to record her impressions in writing had separated her from a culture that had otherwise received her warmly. Now, during Victorian times, the restrictions posed by society are directly connected



to Orlando's female gender. The spirit of the age dictates that she has to be married if she wants to be truly welcome in society; only then, would she be free to write and to make her writing public. Orlando yields to this social demand, only to be able to come closer to what seems to be her greatest desire: writing. She has been forced to make use of a ploy in order to be able to become herself in writing. In order to remain herself in all her diversity, she has been forced, to use Cixous words, "to steal/to fly". "Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she needed neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself. Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did" [Woolf: 266]. Still, she is very well aware of having gained this position by means of a ruse. She has performed a transaction that satisfies the dominant "masculine economy" and its need to appropriate the feminine and assign to it a clear and controlled role, while yet managing to grant herself access to her greatest source of pleasure. "Yet, she could not deny that she had her doubts. She was married, true; but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? [...] if one still wished more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage?" [Woolf: 264].

Writing is in *Orlando* one of the privileged sites where the bodily, the relational and the reflective dimensions of the self carry out their complex transactions. Orlando's lifelong wish to become a recognised author represents the need to be socially accepted for what he/she thinks most clearly stands for his/her singularity as a unique self: his/her poetry. Her manuscript wanted to be read: "It must be read. It would die in her bosom if it were not read" [Woolf: 272]. In order to finally access the possibility to be known and accepted for what she is, Orlando finally accepts the rules posed by the spirit of the age, she not only gets married, but she enters into the literary circuits by the hand of the now professor and influential critic Nicholas Green.

Green, who always condemns the commerce within the literary world but inevitably participates in it making out of it his own living, has now managed to climb the social ladder thanks to his now respectful literary career.

Meeting Nicholas Greene once again in Victorian times, Orlando can see that everything she has associated with literature has little to do with the literary world Greene represents: “Orlando was unaccountably disappointed. She had thought of literature all these years (Her seclusion, her rank, her sex must be her excuse.) as something wild as the wind, hot as fire, swift as lightening; something errant, incalculable, abrupt, and behold, literature was an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about a duchess” [Woolf: 280]. Orlando has thought of literature as “the poetic”, as that which is “wild” because it cannot be totally accounted for by rationality; that which keeps its singularity escaping the “masculine economy” of re-appropriation and return to the self-same. Yet, it now seems to Orlando that the literary world is dominated precisely by this “masculine economy” and, once again, transactions with this world are necessary if she wants to attain fame and recognition. She seems to give into these demands, making the necessary social contacts, attending lectures, going to dinners, until she finally receives the long awaited recognition. But once again, she does not seem to take this transaction seriously, she does not seem to buy into the values posed by this “masculine world”.

Fame! (She laughed.) Fame! Seven editions. A prize. Photographs in the evening papers [...]; and we must here snatch time to remark how discomposing it is for her biographer that this culmination and peroration should be dashed from us on a laugh casually like this: but the truth is that when we write about woman, everything is out of place culminations and perorations;

the accent never falls where it does with a man [Woolf: 312].

The truth is that much as he/she has desired to be acknowledged as a writer, Orlando has discovered that in order to gain social recognition in this system, one has to cease speaking from one's self freely. "For reading Sir Nicholas and his friends [...], she somehow got the impression that one must never, never say what one thought [...] They made one feel [...] that one must always, always write like somebody else. (The tears formed themselves in her eyes)" [Woolf: 286]. And while she feels the constraints put forward by the institution of literature, which functions according to "masculine economy", she can sense the freedom of the poetic in the private language which she uses to communicate with her husband, Shelmerdine, who is far away at sea. The unruly playful language they use among themselves, which is closer to emotions and the dictates of the body, is the one that retains the wildness which she has always thought belonged to literature: "[...] a cypher language which they had invented between them so that a whole spiritual state of the utmost complexity might be conveyed in a word or two without the telegraph clerk being any the wiser [...]" [Woolf: 282]. It is this language, with its ability to move beyond the symbolic, which best represents the "feminine economy" advocated by Cixous. It is this type of writing which does not need legitimization by fame and social recognition, for rather than complying with social expectations, it subverts them, it disrupts them by welcoming what is different, what cannot be conceived by the rules of the dominating system. "What has praise and fame to do with poetry? What has seven editions [...] got to do with the value of it? Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? So that all this chatter and praise [...] was as ill suited as could be to the thing itself\_ a voice answering a voice?" [Woolf: 325].

Orlando seems to feel that freedom belongs with this poetic voice which can answer to the complexity and diversity of her self. This voice and its freedom, however, do not have room in the public world, in the world of relations dominated by a “masculine economy”. The value of this voice cannot be grasped in prizes. It has nothing to do with praise and fame. Orlando has tried several ruses to make room for herself in the public world as a writer. However, at the end of the day, there seems to be a discomfort, a disparity between the potentialities of her singular voice, and the room given to it by the public sphere, where this voice has been re-appropriated in order to play by the rules of a “masculine economy”. There still seems to be a great distance between Orlando's voice, and what the world can hear. The questions related to the private and the public spheres, fame, authenticity and recognition are then not finally resolved in *Orlando*; but the message is clearly conveyed, that woman does not have a comfortable public position yet from which to share all her diversity and multiplicity. She has only managed to do so partially, by means of ruses and unexpected transactions, but a new type of economy, a “feminine economy” is awaited in which social relations could welcome her without categorizing her, especially by not categorizing her according to her dichotomic pair: man.

### **The Stream of Life: the poetic as the possibility to write woman**

In *The Stream of Life*, references to the multiple dimensions of the self, in particular to the bodily and the relational dimensions, are a bit more subtle than in *Orlando*, as the poetic register and the stream of consciousness in this work invite us to follow the inner meanders of the self in its own voice, rather than to witness its transactions from an outward third person perspective. Still, the narrator's female body is very palpable in

its words, as the metaphor of giving birth, and the capacity of the female body to nurture and bring to life an “other” is highlighted. However, here the female narrator does not give birth to another being, it is her self that she gives birth to as an “other”, welcoming the unknown in her, bringing to life the multiple selves that inhabit her. “I can now prepare for the “he” or “she”. [...] I can stand it because I'm strong: I've eaten my own placenta. [...] I am going to go back to the unknown within myself and when I'm born I'll speak of him or her. For the time being what sustains me is the ‘that’ that is an ‘it’. To create a being from oneself is something very serious. I'm creating myself” [Lispector: 35].

It is in this sense that *The Stream of Life* strongly represents the type of writing advocated by Cixous as “feminine writing”, because it welcomes “the other”, and makes the emergence of multiple unknown selves possible. The relational dimension portrayed by this work, precisely, has to do with establishing a mode of relation that does not perpetuate hierarchical binary oppositions, but that instead welcomes “the other” with an amorous gesture respectful of alterity, both the alterity that other beings represent and the alterity within the self. It is in the powerful use of poetic language and in the narrator's attempt to bring to a halt the calculations of logical discourse that a multiplicity of selves can emerge.

I want to capture my is. [...] I divide myself a thousand of times, into as many times as the seconds that pass, fragmentary as I am and precarious the moments [Lispector: 4];

I don't want what is already made, but what is tortuously in the making [6];

What I ask myself is this: who is it in me that remains outside even of thinking? [55].

Still, for all its advocacy of “feminine economy”, *The Stream of Life* makes reference to the pressures of the “masculine order”. The addressee to whom the female narrator seems to be writing to is male, and a former lover. Several times in the book, the narrator imagines the objections that this masculine other may pose questioning her venture into the unknown and the improvisation that creates her self in writing, in consonance with each passing instant. “When you come to read me you'll ask why I don't stick to painting and exhibiting my pictures, since my writing is coarse and orderless. It's just that now I feel the need for words [...]” [Lispector: 4]. The narrator seems to have the need to justify her decision not to side with the symbolic, her choice to write beyond the norm: “I write you this facsimile of a book, the book by someone who doesn't know how to write; but in the most ethereal realms of speech I almost don't even know how to speak [...]” [43].

Subverting language poetically is the necessary ruse, the trick the narrator performs, to be able to welcome a multiple, fluid and contingent self. Writing poetically is the transaction with language that permits her to explore her self fully. The way she finds to bypass the impositions of a “masculine economy” has to do precisely with making use of language (that first degree accomplice of the symbolic), in such a way that words themselves can crack the system open. For as Cixous expresses, “[E]veryone knows that a place exists which [...] is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing” [Cixous and Clement: 72]. Words, if used properly, if used in an attempt beyond grammar and the discursive, can crack the symbolic and metaphysics open, can inaugurate a “feminine economy”: “Writing then is the way followed by someone who uses words like bait: a word fishing for what is not a word. When the non-word \_ the whatever's between lines \_ bites the bait, something's been written” [Lispector: 14].

It is in language itself, in “feminine writing” and in the “feminine economy” it implies that the self can emerge in all its multiplicity, fluidity and contingency. *The Stream of Life* portrays a contingent self that comes into being as she writes, knowing that a new “I” emerges in consonance with each running instant: “I want to capture the present which, by its very nature, is forbidden me: the present flees from me, the moment escapes me, the present is myself forever in the now [...]. And in the instant resides its own is. I want to capture my is” [Lispector: 4].

But the self's fragmentariness and multiplicity is not only presented in connection to its unfurling in time. The self is also understood as multiple because it can harbour consecutively, and even simultaneously, different and sometimes opposite views and feelings. As in *Orlando*, each of us is several, is many, a profusion of selves. The narrator in *The Stream of Life* states that it is impossible to bring all the fragments of the self into a clear synthesis, into a figure that could hold and express them all: “I can't add myself up because it is impossible to add up a chair and two apples. I'm a chair and two apples. And I don't add up” [Lispector: 60].

*The Stream of Life* presents this fragmentary self flowing, precisely, like water. The book has no divisions except paragraphs, but as Cixous has noticed in her prologue to the book, there is a sequence of themes. These themes, seem to catch each time a new and different image of the writing self, as if they were fragments of a broken mirror. One theme/fragment mutates into another like the images in a kaleidoscope, which are different and yet are connected in their flow: “One instant takes me to the next [...] the athematic then keeps unfolding without a plan like the successive figures in a kaleidoscope” [Lispector: 8].

But fragmentation, multiplicity and mutation are not the only ways in which the self seems to disperse in these texts. There are moments in which the self seems to be able to flexibilize its limits as much as to actually sense its dissolution and its merging with others. “I am the you-are,” says the narrator in *The Stream of Life*. “You are a way of my being me, and I a way of you being you: hence the limits of my possibility” [Lispector: 54]. And not only this, she manages to sense that she is not only the “you-are”, but also the “it”, the impersonal power of life that lies at the core of everything: “I am myself. But there is also the mystery of the impersonal that is the ‘it’: I have the impersonal within me and it is not rotten and corruptible by the personal that sometimes drenches me: but I dry myself in the sun and I’m impersonal, made of a dry germinating seed” [22].

Lispector refers to this moment in which the self seems to embrace the impersonal as a state of Grace, and the final passages of *The Stream of Life* reflect this state in which “true thought seems authorless” [Lispector: 74]:

Beatitude begins at the moment thought-feeling has gone beyond the author's need to think – he doesn't need to think anymore and he now finds himself close to the grandeur of nothingness [...]. True incommensurability is nothingness, which has no barriers and is where a person can spread out her thought-feeling [74].

This attitude of complete openness to the other, which is only possible if the boundaries of the “I” are made flexible to their maximum, parallels Cixous's advocacy of a “feminine economy” in which woman is not afraid to disperse herself, to wander into the unknown without the need to come back. “[S]he is able not to return to herself” [Cixous and Clement: 87] and this is what truly makes the life of “the other” possible.



There is in *The Stream of Life* the pervasive question about constructiveness and fictionality. The arts, poetry, are seen as the terrain where “the other” is possible, where transformations are possible.

No, all this is not happening in real facts but rather in the domain of... of an art? Yes, of an artifice through which there arises a very delicate reality that comes to exist within me: that transfiguration has happened to me [Lispector: 13];

To interpret and shape myself I need new signs and new articulations in forms which are found both on this side of my human history and on the other. I transfigure reality, and then another reality, dreamy somnambulant, creates me in turn [15].

Lispector believes in the constructiveness of all realities and selves, and opens herself to the transfigurations that her creations may bring. These are transfigurations which she actively conjures up and invites, but which escape prediction and complete manipulation, for the poetic terrain where she is now moving does not respond to a rational logic and cannot be explained by metaphysics.

In *The Stream of Life* poetic language is the artistic practice that incarnates “feminine economy” where woman finds the freedom to be multiple, contingent, fragmentary, where she can construct her self without having to answer to the labels coined by a “masculine economy”. The poetic “feminine writing” is the place where she can be her known and unknown selves without fearing domination. The hope exists that this practice of writing will be able to pervade the relational dimension so that all social practices can truly welcome alterity and both men and women can explore the multiplicity that constitutes them.

## Conclusion

This paper has looked at *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf and *The Stream of Life* by Clarice Lispector as works which exemplify a type of life writing which manages to do justice to the multiplicity, fluidity and contingency of the self. By being unfaithful to the conventions of biography and autobiography respectively, these works have found the means to portray the self in its complexity. We have referred to the mix of autonomy and dependence that characterises a multi-dimensional self, and which these works portray. We have shown, in particular, how the relational dimension shaped according to a “masculine economy” forces women to be what men have conceived them to be: “the other” who needs to be appropriated. Women, as the female characters in *Orlando* and *The Stream of Life*, have had to look for ruses, for tricks in order to be able to carry out transactions with the others and the public world, while trying to keep their singularity and to express themselves in their own voice. We have drawn on Hélène Cixous's formulation of a “feminine economy” in order to refer to relational modes which may escape the hierarchical dichotomies put forward by “masculine economy”. Following Cixous, we have advocated poetic writing as a suitable means by which woman can construct herself escaping the dictum of a phallogocentric symbolic order. The poetic which grants words the capacity to crack the symbolic and metaphysics open, provides the possibility to move beyond categories and to explore multiplicity. Both *Orlando* and *The Stream of Life*, in different ways, have shown the quest, the ruses and the hopes of characters and women writers who see in poetic language, in “feminine writing” as understood by Cixous, the potential to dislocate “masculine economy” and open a new place for diverse, multiple and complex selves\*.

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