

HOURL'S END: A QUEST TOWARDS DEATH IN MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S *THE HOURS*

Vanessa Cianconi Vianna Nogueira
Universidade Federal Fluminense

ABSTRACT: For Cunningham to die is to leave a legacy. The novel, based on Virginia Woolf's life and characters, shows the passing of time as an orientation of what death is. The characters understand that while leaving their legacies they leave their will to remain and share their lives.

In 1920s London, Virginia Woolf is fighting against her rebellious spirit as she attempts to make a start on her new novel while trying to come to terms with her deep, ungovernable longings for escape and even for death. Laura Brown, a young wife and mother in 1949 Los Angeles, cares for her toddler and prepares a birthday party for her husband as she tries to resist increasing waves of panic and feelings of alienation from her dull yet demanding life. And Clarissa Vaughan, a book editor, steps out of her Greenwich Village apartment in the 1990s New York to buy flowers for a party she is hosting for her oldest friend, Richard, an AIDS-stricken poet who has just won a major literary prize. Cunningham draws on the life and work of Virginia Woolf to tell the story of three women struggling with the conflicting ideas of life and death, creation and destruction. The novel moves along three separate but parallel stories, each focusing on the experiences of a particular woman during the course of one day. This article is, thus, an attempt, as the novel jump-cuts through the century, to come to *The Hours'* end, the day and experiences of these three women that converge, stunningly, to death.

The term 'death' is ambiguous. The ending of life is one thing, and the condition of having life over is another. 'Death' can refer to either. In dying, our lives are progressively extinguished, until finally they are gone, in a process that stretches out over a period of time. This is true even if death is a threshold concept, so that a sufficiently substantial extinction of life must occur before death takes place. 'The ending of life,' hence 'death,' can refer either to this entire process, or solely to its very last part — the loss of the very last trace of life. Thus death can be a state, the process of extinction, or the denouement of that process. Epicurus says that: "Death . . . , the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not". Likewise,

Heidegger understands death as not something we can experience (live through), in this sense, death *is* not - it does not *exist* for an individual to experience. But since "death," in the sense of the termination of all possible experience is inevitable, a given fact of human existence is related to being. The manner in which the human being lives as it aims *toward* death. The old saying that as soon as we are born we are old enough to die, Heidegger notes, is not something we can ignore - for how we live in light of this fact makes all the difference.

Accordingly, Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) is a story towards death. Not only is death in the sense that one ceases to exist, but also in the sense of defiance, as an attempt to communicate. Death might offer a solution to death as the continuity of life, that is, death might be a way towards life. Mary Joe Hughes (2004) in her essay "Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Postmodern Artistic Re-Presentation" argues that there is an identification of the plunge into life and the plunge towards death. Cunningham expands the boundaries between life and death that is explored on the circles that connect one character to the other.

The Hours (*op. cit.*) opens with Virginia Woolf's suicide, the moment when **she** ceased to exist. She sees herself as a failure, even at the moment of her attempt of suicide she believes she had failed. "She herself has failed. (...) She has failed and now the voices are back" (Cunningham, 1998: 4).

Almost involuntarily (it feels involuntary, to her) she steps and stumbles forward, and the stones pulls her in. For a moment, still, it seems like nothing; it seems like another failure (...). It feels personal. (Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 5)

Her death is what links all of the characters together in only one web of events towards life. It is the moment of her death which turns her into something immortal, thus, her work lingers on. Death is seeing as an attempt to protect what matters in life, a tribute, a plunge toward the central mystery, and a gesture to others (Hughes, 2004: 352). A celebration of death.

... Laura wonders, could someone who was able to write a sentence like that – who was able to feel everything contained

in a sentence like that – come to kill herself? What in the world is wrong with people? (Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 41)

In his essay “Rewriting Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day novel by Cunningham, Lippincott, and Lancaster”, James Schiff argues that Woolf’s struggle between life and death is astonishing since she swings between pleasure, relish, excitement and vacuity, self-annihilation, and despair - a real mediator between life and death, being and nothingness. The irony, according to Heidegger’s ideas, is that if she could not experience her own death, her readers, namely Laura Brown, certainly could. Heidegger adds that we usually go beyond "ripeness," ending up unfulfilled "or else disintegrated and used up" (Honderich, 1995: 347). Accordingly, this is how Laura felt: disintegrated and used up, as exemplified in this excerpt from the book: “For a moment she wants only to leave him – not to harm him, she’d never do that – but to be free, blameless, unaccountable“. (Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 78) Because Laura’s life is a humdrum she tries to escape the nothingness she lives in, a housewife’s life, to at least try to be freer and be able to keep on living. Her reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* is her exit towards a more secure path by penetrating Clarissa Dalloway’s underworld. Likewise, Clarissa Vaughan is aware of her and Richard’s finitude. She knows that he is closer to death than anybody else due to his illness.

...no, not the realm of the dead, exactly: there is something worse than death, with its promise of release or slumber. There is dust rising, endless days, and a hallway that sits and sits, always full of the same brown light and the dank, slightly chemical smell that will do, until something more precise comes along, as the actual odor of age and loss, the end of hope. Richard, her lost lover, her truest friend, is disappearing into his illness, his insanity. Richard will not accompany her, as planned, into old age. (Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 90)

Because he is sick she is aware he is going to die soon, that is, a part of her is lacking somehow; she is disintegrating.

The presence of death is felt at all times in the novel; in Virginia Woolf’s suicide or in the imminent death of Richard Brown or, even, in the thoughts of suicide of

Laura Brown. Heidegger believed that we wanted to survive for fear of annihilation, for fear of deprivation. Epicurus suggested that this fear of death is irrational since death is something that we cannot experience, however, even though we would not be able to experience death ourselves, our death would be experienced by others leaving, thus, our legacy behind (or, onwards into the future). Failure would be considered a form of death if one did not have what to leave for a future generation. Considering that death is a need of survival Richard Brown would have been annihilated if he had not killed himself. His name and work outlived his own self. “Remember her? Your alter ego? Whatever became of her? This is her. I’m her.” (Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 198) Again, “I’ve failed”. (Cunningham, *op. cit.*: 199) Richard, like Virginia, thinks he had failed. Failure was for both of them an excuse to commit suicide, to end their defeated lives. Life was a burden they could not carry any longer. It is interesting to notice that only Laura Brown is the one who actually failed – she failed as a mother, and above all, she failed at trying to die. She remained alive.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy defines suicide as “intentionally cause self-destruction” (Honderich, 1995: 859). For David Hume suicide is permissible (and on occasion laudable) if, on balance, more value is produced for the individual or more value is produced for society than would be produced by not performing the act of taking one’s life (Honderich, 1995: 859). Accordingly, any attempt to suicide such as Richard Brown’s would, therefore, be valuable. On the other hand, the several occasions his mother, Laura Brown, thought of suicide would not justify such an act. However, the Stoics held that whenever the means to living a naturally flourishing life are not available to us, suicide was justified. Our natures require certain "natural advantages" in order for us to be happy, and whoever recognizes that such advantages may be lacking in his or her life sees that ending his or her life neither enhances nor diminishes his or her moral virtue. When a man's circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is appropriate for one to remain alive; when he possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is appropriate for him to depart from life. Seneca claimed that since "mere living is not a good thing, but living well"; one "lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can." For Seneca, it is the quality, not the quantity, of one's life that matters. Moreover, according to Hume, sickness, old age, and other misfortunes can make life sufficiently miserable that continued existence is worse than death. In the end, Hume concludes that suicide "may be free of imputation of guilt and blame." Death is, thus, the only acceptable form of defiance. The only

way to preserve ones fragile integrity is to kill oneself (Marder, 1986: 67). In contrast to Richard's attempt of suicide, Laura Brown's trial of ending her life would only be accepted if viewed under Hume's light. She felt so miserable in her little housewife role that she saw no sense in continuing leading her usual life –

Virginia Woolf put a stone in the pocket of her coat, walked into a river, and drowned. Laura will not let herself go morbid. She'll make the beds, vacuum, cook the birthday dinner. She will not mind, about anything. (Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 101)

Thoughts of death invaded her, as if her time has finally ended:

It is possible to die. Laura thinks, suddenly, of how she – how anyone - can make a choice like that. It is a reckless, vertiginous thought, slightly disembodied – it announces itself inside her head, faintly but distinctly, like a voice crackling from a distant radio station. She could decide to die. It is an abstract, shimmering notion, not particularly morbid. (...) It could, she thinks, be deeply comforting; it might feel so free: to simply go away. To say to them all, I couldn't manage, you had no idea; I didn't want to try anymore. (Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 151)

This very thought of death was quite persistent: "...she has been thinking longingly of death".(Cunningham, *op.cit.*: 188)

To conclude, according to Heidegger, the traditional notion of time is incoherent because it rests on an inability to think together two assumptions: that the present is the most real aspect of time, and that the scientific model of time is infinite, continuous, and constituted by a series of more or less identical points. For Heidegger, this contradiction, which privileges the present and thinks of time as ongoing, derives from a confusion about Being. He suggests that it is not the present but the future that is the primordial ecstasies of temporality. For Heidegger, death provides an orientation for our authentic temporal understanding. For Levinas (*apud* Stambaugh: 1996), it is the death of the other that

determines our understanding of time. Death is an attempt to protect what matters in life, it represents a form of apprehension and mysterious transmission of what is most precious in life, that is, time. All of the three female characters are aware of the passing of time, either towards the end of the day, or to the beginning of the party they are all planning to someone they love, which also could be understood as the end of life. The party – the party of life – is a form of celebration of life towards death.

Hughes argues that the possibility of death is for all living beings a mode of transmission of the mystery and beauty of life, a mystery and beauty that in turn nourishes creation, whether of more life or of art. Death, art, and love itself all function as portals to that mysterious realm that can burst the bonds of time, an apprehension of what is most precious in life. Heidegger believes that the present is the moment of decision, time is significant, it is what shapes and defines the future. Likewise, Derrida agrees with Heidegger that the knowledge of finitude is what encourages the infinite process and the endless dialogue, that is, the will to linger on and share one's work of art with who stays alive. In *The Hours* Virginia Woolf's and Richard Brown's works survived beyond their own deaths. Clarissa Vaughan, Virginia Woolf and Laura Brown, even though live in different times, they are all interwoven by one event: suicide, which leads to death. At the moment that Virginia Woolf killed herself, she propelled a series of events which would happen in the future. The future and the past are brought together in the same limitless impulse that made these women face death either by conforming and keeping on living, or by putting an end to the party their lives were. Life is a party where we all leave one by one.

As horas finais: uma busca da morte em *The Hours* de Michael Cunningham

Resumo: Para Cunningham morrer é deixar um legado. Baseado na vida e nas personagens de Virginia Woolf, *The Hours* mostra a passagem do tempo como forma de compreender a morte. As personagens entendem que ao deixarem o seu legado elas abandonam a vontade de permanecer e dividir a vida.

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