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■ AN INTOXICATING CONTEMPORARY READING OF
VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *FRESHWATER*: A COMEDY IN
JAIR BOLSONARO'S ERA

Victor Santiago

*For Davi Pinho, who has helped me look after
the milk-white horse in the stable¹.*

In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil notwithstanding his controversial far-right candidacy and defense of military dictatorship. Since then, Bolsonaro has been involved in innumerable scandals, including cases of artistic and cultural censorship, his indirect support of indigenous genocide and of Amazon fires, not to mention his abounding racist, homophobic and overall neo-Nazi public speeches. Furthermore, due to the president's remiss treatment in coping with the massive deaths from Covid-19, which has delayed a nationwide vaccination against this virus whose severity Bolsonaro insists to play down, Brazil (except for some of Bolsonaro's supporters and deniers of the impact of this pandemic) has entered a gloomy zone of disbelief and sadness. As a gay man writing a PhD thesis, Woolf's work (and not her signature as summation of genius and depression, something that is still somehow prevalent in the Brazilian mindset) has helped me redirect my gaze and offer something back to this national community that seems to be caught in a collective state of melancholia.

After attending one of the post-graduation classes on Virginia Woolf, designed and taught by professor Davi Pinho at UERJ in 2019, some months before the outbreak of pandemic, I was impressed by the fact that Woolf had written a farce titled *Freshwater: A Comedy* (1923; 1935), scribbled in 1923 and revised it in 1935 for one of the Bloomsbury amusing encounters. The first question that I asked myself was: "How come you have never heard of this play?" I could have felt incompetent before this inquiry, but as curious researcher I started searching for more information. I immediately realized that it had been barely annotated and it did not use to be accounted for as one of Woolf's worth mentioning experimental works, even though her

¹ Reference to Virginia Woolf's essay "How It Strikes the Contemporary" (1925), as part of Woolf's first *The Common Reader* (1925).

relationship with theatrical aesthetics is noticeable and noteworthy, as Steven Putzel has made clear in his book *Virginia Woolf and the Theatre* (2012). Even when we consider some major companions and studies which are intended to provide a broad account of Virginia Woolf's *oeuvre*, her only play is either not mentioned or receives sparse notes (sometimes indeed mere footnotes)². Nevertheless, we have the chief and inescapable contribution of Lucio P. Ruotolo (1975;1976)³ who first annotated and edited Woolf's two versions of the play in the 1970's. In addition to that, as Steven D. Putzel notes, not only did Ruotolo uncover Woolf's play, but he also staged it at Stanford University on 3 March 1974. However, even though Ruotolo's annotation provides special notes that place *Freshwater* in a demarginalized and more prominent position among other Woolf's groundbreaking works, this farce is still not the critical object of many Woolfian critics. This overlook might have been influenced by Woolf's own ambivalence about the play or even by the fact that the play was originally a birthday gift for her niece Angelica Bell (1918-2012) or even a diversion from a more demanding project.

On 30 January 1919, Woolf wrote an entry to her diary and spoke about the possibilities of writing a comedy.

I must note for future use, the superb possibilities of *Freshwater*, for a comedy. Old Cameron dressed in a blue dressing gown and not going beyond his garden for twelve years, suddenly borrows his son's coat, and walks down to the sea. Then they decide to proceed to Ceylon, taking their coffins with them, and the last sight of Aunt Julia is on board ship, presenting porters with large photographs of Sir Henry Taylor and the Madonna in default of small change. (Woolf: 2008, p. 67)

Woolf seems to have been captured by this eccentric image of her great-aunt, the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, and her husband, the jurist Charles Hay Cameron. This apparently gloomy image of coffins proceeding to Ceylon was also bewitching and somehow hilarious to Woolf, for she continued to go back to it. In 1923, as a diversion to distract herself

² Christine Froula's *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* (2005); Jane Goldman's *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf* (1998), just to mention two important works on Woolfian aesthetics, do not include *Freshwater* as part of their studies.

³ It is also important to acknowledge some studies closely related to performance and theatrical aesthetics which dedicate some important accounts of *Freshwater* - even though it is not analyzed in a detailed way -, such as in Nicola Shaughnessy's doctoral dissertation *The dramatic writings of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath* (1995), Penny Farfan's *Women, Modernism and Performance* (2004), R. S. Koppen's *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity* (2009) and Steven Putzel's *Virginia Woolf and the Theatre* (2012).

from the consuming writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf drafted the first version of *Freshwater*. On 8 July 1923, Woolf wrote in her diary that she wished she could “write *The Hours* [*Mrs. Dalloway*] as freely and vigorously as I scribble *Freshwater*; a *Comedy*. It’s a strange thing how arduous I find my novels; and yet *Freshwater* is only spirited fun; and *The Hours* has some serious merit” (Woolf, 2008, p. 165). However, Woolf seems to be musing about *Freshwater* in a more serious way, for, as Ruotolo (1976) noted, on 17 August 1923 Woolf sent Vanessa Bell a letter expressing her concern about some revisions to the play: “Won’t you and Duncan come over? – any day except Wednesday, or Tuesday. I want to read you my play, as soon as possible” (Woolf, 1977, p. 67). So, this indicates that the play for Woolf was not merely a matter of diversion, and this is corroborated when on 6 October she sent Desmond MacCarthy a letter speaking about a possible staging of the play for Christmas: “Nessa says that you may consent to stage-manage a skit upon our great aunts, which we want to act for Christmas” (Woolf, 1977, p. 72). However, Woolf’s great preoccupation and self-deprecating attitude towards the play prevented her from continuing with the project. She did not believe it was worth staging and some days after having sent Desmond a letter, she wrote to Vanessa.

On thinking over the play, I rather doubt it’s worth going on with. It seemed to me, when I read it last night, that it’s so much of a burlesque, and really rather too thin and flat to be worth getting people at infinite trouble to act. I could write something much better, if I gave up a little more time to it: and I foresee that the whole affair will be much more of an undertaking than I thought. I don’t think this is vanity on my part: more common sense. (Woolf: 1977, p. 75)

Then, the play was shelved, which might have disappointed both Vanessa and Desmond. On the other hand, Woolf’s concerns are also indicative of her intentions to write something reasonably good, as Penny Farfan has noted (Farfan: 2004, p. 49). It is possible to affirm, then, that Woolf was trying to come up with a play that could express her feminist and aesthetic ideas, as Jane Goldman (1998) calls it. Not for nothing, in 1935 she revised the thin and burlesque one-act play and added two more acts. Again, her motivation was due to “spiritual fun”. On 18 January 1935 at Vanessa Bell’s London Studio, *Freshwater* was staged for the first time for one of the Bloomsbury Group’s theatrical evenings. On the following day, Woolf registered in her diaries that “the play came off last night, with the result that I am dry-brained this morning and can only use this book as a pillow. It was said, inevitably, to be a great success; it is good to have an unbuttoned laughing evening once

in a way” (Woolf: 2008, 365). According to Quentin Bell in the biography of his aunt, “spectators laughed so loud and so long that the dialogue was practically inaudible” (Bell: 1972, p. 189).

After this “unbuttoned laughing evening” at Vanessa Bell’s studio, *Freshwater* has been adapted and performed a few times, usually by university theater groups, as Steven D. Putzel (2012, p. 170) notes. As I have already mentioned, Lucio Ruotolo staged it at Stanford University in 1974. After that, it was adapted by the French theater director and stage designer Simone Benmussa for Woolf’s centennial birthday. On 15 December 1982 at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, *Freshwater* was performed by French actors, including the Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco and his wife Rodica Ionesco. Benmussa’s adaptation was performed many times in France, and on the 20th and 21st of October 1983, it was staged at New York University. On 21 November 1983, an account of this performance, written by Natacha Stewart, was published in *The New Yorker*. Such an account also contributed to the uncovering of Woolf’s play although Stewart had considered it “a joke for amateurs to act in front of family and friends” (Stewart: 1983, p. 43). After that, back in Europe, it was performed on 7 November 1983 at *Théâtre du Rond-Point* in Paris, on 26-27 November 1983 at the Riverside Theatre in London, and on 4-5 July 1984 at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston (Putzel: 2012, p. 170).

More recent attempts to uncover Woolf’s farce to bigger audiences had more interesting contours, as Putzel notes (2012, p. 170-171). Andy Vores (1956 -), a Welsh opera composer, made it into an operatic form. In 1994, *Freshwater* was performed at Boston University and received a review by Richard Dyer, who told his *Boston Globe* readers that this piece “holds, as ‘twere, the funhouse mirror up to life, and in it we find our own reflections” (Dyer: 1994, p. 47 *apud* Putzel: 2012, p. 170), referring to one of the last scenes of Woolf’s last novel *Between the Acts* (1941), when La Trobe makes her audience see themselves in fragments. This account by Dyer is of great importance since it starts to shape the play positively, calling attention to the fact that *Freshwater* was not conceived in a vacuum. Woolf’s apparent amateurishness as a playwright was in fact a theatrical experiment which culminated in a theatrical novel, that is, *Freshwater* had been part of a broader aesthetic and political project that intended to call into question women’s and men’s roles in society. Take for instance Ellen Terry’s feeding a porpoise with her wedding ring in the second act of the 1935 version of *Freshwater* (Woolf: 1935, p. 34). It is a way of challenging the idea that women must perform established roles in a male dominant society.

Furthermore, Putzel (2012: p. 172) also mentions Anne Bogart's adaptation of *Freshwater*, which is arguably the only off-Broadway staging of Woolf's farce. In order to celebrate Woolf's 128th birthday, from 15 January to 15 February 2009, at Julia Miles Theater in New York, *Freshwater* was performed. It even received a review by Charles Isherwood in *The New York Times* whose title was *Proof That Virginia Woolf Did Have a Light Side*⁴. Isherwood's title and approach is completely different from Natacha Stewart's 1983 account, for from the very beginning Isherwood values Woolf's laughter above all else.

Finally, I would like to account for a very recent production of *Freshwater*. After having attended a life changing class at UERJ, I started working on the translation of the play rather amateurishly. Later, there was the outbreak of the pandemic and I had to work from home. Whenever I had free time from work, the translation process was my diversion. When the news about the numbers of deaths came in, it was with *Freshwater* that I kept myself alive. Then, I decided to contact a friend of mine, Gabriel Saito, who is an actor, and talked to him about the possibilities of staging *Freshwater* in Brazil. He had never heard of the play before, but he loved the idea. Both of us had mixed feelings about it, for we knew that it would take us a long time to get it off the drawing board due to the pandemic.

In November 2020, we were told that the Brazilian Law for Funding the Arts, Aldir Blanc, which is a governmental initiative to provide financial support for cultural professionals - had announced that they were selecting artists from the city of Petrópolis, also known as the Imperial City, a city in the mountains that surrounds Rio, to be granted emergency basic income to put their projects into practice. Without thinking twice, I wrote the project, while Gabriel contacted some artists from Petrópolis. The project caught the attention of the artists we had selected, especially because they could never imagine Woolf had written a play. We submitted the proposal and to our surprise we were awarded the grant.

After such amazing news, we worked hard for three months to meet the deadline established by the government. As a translator and dramaturgist, I worked as a literary mentor, whose responsibilities included providing as much information as possible about Woolf's play for the actors and the director, as well as helping actors with their performances, especially regarding how to make their creations Woolfian. So I worked in collaboration with the director, Fabiano de Freitas. In addition to that, I set the ground on

⁴ Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/26/theater/reviews/26fres.html>. Retrieved on 30 May 2021.

intercultural studies, for this project was also a research experiment which intended to reflect upon how Woolf could be read and staged in Brazil during Bolsonaro's era. According to Walter Benjamin in "The Task of the translator" (1923), the task of the translator entails a special form of communicability, one that goes beyond communication; that is, it might be understood as an affectionate encounter between languages, as the Brazilian Benjaminian scholar Isabela Pinho (2019) proposes. In other words, this encounter aims to communicate an intimate and ethical relationship between cultures that may overcome the cultural and linguistic barriers of "national" languages. From an intercultural perspective, following the works of Brazilian scholars and translators such as Fernanda Martins (2015) and Paulo Henriques Britto (2012), I methodologically framed my translation of *Freshwater* as a tool that could enable Brazilian and English cultures to coexist in a dehierarchized mode of interaction. This way, the actors and the directors were able to understand that a farce written 86 years before in England had a lot to tell. Moreover, as Britto (2012) affirms, literary translations are not supposed to be mechanical tasks; they are in fact creative operations and a radical work of rewriting. And this "little art", as the translator and writer Kate Briggs (2017) calls it, is intrinsically connected to the creative work of a dramaturgist. When translating a play, the translator becomes a dramaturgist, which enables him/her to participate in the theatrical business more actively, not just as someone who just turns one language into another.

The outcome was on 29 March 2021, when, one day after the 80th anniversary of the death of Virginia Woolf, *Água Fresca: uma comédia de Virginia Woolf* (2020) was "staged online" under the direction of Fabiano de Freitas, the technical direction of Juracy de Oliveira and the arts direction of Raquel Theo. This Brazilian version of the Woolfian farce is starred by Ana Cecília Reis, as Julia Margaret Cameron, Gabriel Saito, as George Frederick Watts, Sidney Carneiro, as Lord Alfred Tennyson, Simone Gonçalves, as Charles Hay Cameron, Stephanie Carvalho, as Ellen Terry, and Yuri Mendes, as John Craig. As a gesture against summations, both the ones inflicted on Woolf and on Brazilians, *Água Fresca* - which in Portuguese means water that is clean and safe for drinking -, was broadcast live on YouTube to more than 400 viewers/ playgoers, that is, not only the translation was meant to establish a dehierarchized mode of interaction, but also its staging. Unlike Woolf's *Freshwater*, which was meant to be performed privately for amusing Bloomsbury friends, *Água Fresca* was staged and viewed from home, reaching out to a larger number of people who did not leave their homes, blurring the lines between the public and the private. And the fact that this first

Brazilian staging of Woolf's farce was held during this severe pandemic is also of great significance. After the performance, the actors even commented on the strangeness of performing to an audience they could not see, but they knew and could feel they were there. This strangeness I consider to be the *viral/intoxicating* quality of our work. While pandemic viruses break into people's houses and lives with their invisible power that does not choose between genders, religions, races or social classes, *Água Fresca* streamed into people's houses - also not choosing over any type of creed or social difference - to provide "an unbuttoned laughing evening", with the help of technology, which is not yet something to which everybody has access, but since it was for free, it was easier to *intoxicate* playgoers.

This *intoxicating* interconnection between the public and the private is also discussed by Elizabeth Outka in her recently published book *Viral Modernism* (2020), in which she problematizes the liminality and the powerful invisibility of another pandemic virus. By shedding some light on the outbreak of the 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed hundreds of thousands of people, Outka calls attention to the fact that the influences of pandemic on literature have been overlooked, while war generally gains visibility. Outka's research not only shows that the pandemic influenced writers and artists, such as Woolf and T.S. Eliot, but she also envisions a new type of writing, an ill and *intoxicated* writing, a new and creative way of reading and capturing the world, something I also discussed elsewhere⁵. In "On Being Ill" (1926/1930), an essay first published in *The New Criterion* and edited by Eliot, Woolf goes over the possibilities of writing from the perspective of the ill. Woolf herself, as Outka documents, underwent several periods of isolation or quarantine (Outka: 2020)⁶. Then, the images she used in her essay seem very familiar to our times. Her personal experiences seem to have helped her devise new possibilities for a so-called healthy language that does not account for a greater range of experiences.

Therefore, following this contemporary concern, our adaptation of *Freshwater* employed Woolf's gesture of laughing at a certain tradition as a means to open, question and redirect the stage in which it was performed: Brazil in Bolsonaro's era. Through colour and gender blind casting, we forced the racist and homophobic gaze to a limit, laughing our way into our moment and marking that, in spite of Bolsonaro's mandate to destroy difference, we are here, with Woolf, proliferating it.

⁵ *Tradition, Writing and Intoxication: the Phantoms of Virginia Woolf* (2018), my Master's dissertation presented at UERJ.

⁶ E-book version

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