

Carmen Raluca Nițu

**Reading Cultural Representations of the
Body in Virginia Woolf's Novels**



**EDITURA UNIVERSITARIA
Craiova, 2013**

Referenți științifici:

Prof.univ.dr. Radu Surdulescu

Universitatea București

Prof.univ.dr. Monica Bottez

Universitatea București

Prof.univ.dr. Eduard Vlad

Universitatea Ovidius din Constanța

Conf.univ.dr. Cristina Ungureanu

Universitatea din Pitești

Copyright © 2013 Universitaria

Toate drepturile sunt rezervate Editurii Universitaria

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

NIȚU, CARMEN RALUCA

Reading cultural : representations of the body in Virginia

Woolf's novels / Carmen Raluca Nițu. - Craiova : Universitaria, 2013

Bibliogr.

ISBN 978-606-14-0723-1

821.111.09 Woolf,V.

929 Woolf,V.

Apărut: 2013

TIPOGRAFIA UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN CRAIOVA

Str. Brestei, nr. 156A, Craiova, Dolj, România

Tel.: +40 251 598054

Tipărit în România

1. Constructing/Construing the Human Body

An in-depth analysis of the cultural representations of the body in Virginia Woolf's novels needs to be set against the general historical and theoretical background characterising Western European culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. One needs to know how the human body was understood and perceived at the time (both at a theoretical level and at the level of cultural representations) in order to be able to grasp the whole meaning of embodied identities constructed in Woolf's novels. This first chapter will provide a brief outline of the theoretical framework encompassing theories and ideas which focus on the position the human body occupied within human subjectivity at the time.

The modern understanding of the human body is usually traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, to René Descartes' attempt at developing a rigorous theory of the nature of persons by employing a philosophical method which was to incorporate the precision provided by the newly emerging mathematical and natural sciences. Trying to replace the method of authority, imposed by mediaeval scholastics and largely employed during the seventeenth century, with this new method of free examination, Descartes reached the conclusion that the only thing that could be trusted beyond any doubt was human reason. He "introduced a reduction of truth to what can be clearly and distinctly apprehended by mind, employing a method that it constructs from its own resources exclusively" (Welton 1). He argued that human beings exist only in their capacity as rational beings, and that any individual would cease to exist if he stopped thinking. He doubted any knowledge that was acquired through the senses or imagination, considering reason the only reliable source of human knowledge and understanding. His philosophical analyses provided a new understanding of human subjectivity in terms of a split between body and mind, with the former utterly subordinated to the latter. He defined the mind in contrast to everything material (substances extended in time and space), arguing that it was completely independent of the body. For him the mind

was not “a stream of individual experiences but the ego, directly known because of the self-reflexive structure of consciousness that grasps what is given in its essential truth” (Welton 2). Descartes represented the human body as an entity without any value in itself, as a machine directed by instructions from the mind. Cartesian dualism, with its main contention, *Cogito, ergo sum*, set in motion a whole process of rationalisation in Western European culture, which was to last for almost three centuries. Bryan Turner conceptualises Cartesianism as an ideology operating within three domains: there is first the arena of thought and rational inspection which excludes and denies the irrational, the superstitious and the magical. There is then the arena of emotions, sexuality and affective life which is regulated through the regulation and discipline of the human body. And finally there is the form of instrumental rationalism which was associated with the growth of colonialism, within which Western technology and civilisation subordinated and controlled other cultures. Within this Cartesian ideology the body was understood as a “threatening, difficult and dangerous phenomenon” which had to be “adequately controlled and regulated by cultural processes” because it was seen to be a “vehicle or conduit for the unruly, ungovernable and irrational passions, emotions and desires” (Turner: 11).

***1.1. The End of a Long Supremacy:
Deconstructing³² the Body/Mind Dichotomy
in Western European Thought***

After having dominated Western European thought for almost three centuries, Cartesian rationalism started to be questioned and critiqued at the end of the nineteenth century, a process which was to continue throughout the twentieth century. Human subjectivity was reconsidered and the clear-cut split between body and mind, with the former utterly subordinated to the latter, ceased to be the only way of defining individuals. This was the time when the human body started to be seen as something more than a mere vehicle for one's mind, more than just a machine obeying instructions from the mind. There were two main humanistic areas within which this "deconstruction" process began: philosophy within its phenomenology branch, which made attempts at defending the facticity of everyday life, and psychoanalysis, with its redefining human subjectivity in terms of ego, id and super-ego. It is precisely on these two areas of human knowledge that this chapter will focus, with a view to providing a brief outline of the theoretical framework dominating Western European thought at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the deconstruction of Cartesian dualism is a complex, non-linear process covering more than a century and taking place within various humanistic disciplines, I shall briefly focus here only on those names which open almost all (modern and postmodern) debates on the body in all areas of humanistic scholarship.

The (post)modern rejection of Cartesian dualism depends heavily on the legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche. All contemporary studies on the meaning and representation of the human body (in the areas of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, feminist studies, gender studies, etc) send the reader back to this starting point: Nietzsche's philosophical theories. His

³² I used the term "deconstruct" in a larger sense than the one defined by Derrida. It is employed with the sense of examining, studying, critiquing, reviewing, and sometimes criticising the body/mind dichotomy.

view of human beings has shaped, Bryan Turner argues, “much of the twentieth century social thought as a critique of the legacy of Cartesian rationalism” (19). He was the first to approach the body in terms other than those imposed by Cartesian rationalism, reconsidering the traditional body/mind dichotomy and the position the body occupied within human subjectivity.

Nietzsche represented the traditional Cartesian dualism through the contrast between Apollo, standing for formalism, rationalism and consistency, and Dionysus, standing for ecstasy, excess and sensuality. He argued that it was “only through the reconciliation of these two dimensions that human beings could achieve any real balance in their lives, namely through a reconciliation of art and existence” (qtd. in Turner 19). Describing human subjectivity in terms of a never ending struggle between the principles of rationalism on the one hand and human beings’ necessity for sensual satisfaction in their lives on the other hand, Nietzsche preaches human beings’ return to the earth, i.e. to the telluric side of their existence; he urges them to remain “faithful to the earth” (1996a: 68 - my translation). He critiques and criticizes the two main ideologies dominating Western European metaphysics, which did their best to annihilate the body and its natural pleasures: rationalism and Christian ethics. Defining rationalism as the “most enduring error” (2007: 38 - my translation), Nietzsche argues that, ever since Socrates started to set a high value on rationalism and formal dialectics, man has lost the metaphysical contact with his own existence. Rationalists stated that it was only through reason that human understanding was possible; they argued that the world of ideas was the only true world, everything else being just an appearance. Individuals were defined exclusively by their capacity for thinking, instincts and imagination being considered misleading, and therefore subject to repression. Rationalists were claiming, Nietzsche argues, that “these senses, which are generally so immoral, are misleading us where the *real* world is concerned” (2007: 30 – my translation). That is why, they continue, one should reject everything that is known through one’s senses; one should give up one’s body, which they define in terms of “this pathetic *idée fixe* of the senses” (2007: 30 – my translation).

The same rejection of senses and the body was practised by Christian ethics, which reduced corporeality to a mere illusion. All virtues of the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche argues, were established by sick people, who were jealous of the healthy ones; they turned health, strength and pride into something immoral, into vices that had to be expiated. Those sick, unhappy people tried to revenge themselves on the healthy, happy ones by making them feel ashamed of their happiness. Nietzsche argues that nothing else has destroyed the health and the strength of the races the way this ascetic ideal has; he sees asceticism as a disease, as a feature of those who are weak and cowardly; he calls it the ill-fated misfortune within the European history of health.

Rationality at any price, living one's life lucidly, consciously and cautiously, fighting one's instincts are all categorised by Nietzsche as serious mistakes, as diseases that thoroughly affect modern men and modern life. He urges philosophers and rationalists to be wary of the old ideal of pure reason, pure knowledge, and of the atemporal subject with no will whatsoever. They should stay away from the tentacles of such contradictory notions as absolute spirituality and self-consciousness. Eliminating the body, ignoring one's feelings and one's senses are equivalent – in his philosophy – to a castration of the intellect. He claims that “we are wrong in leaving aside the nervous system, the bodily coating” (1995:16 – my translation) and he preaches the subject's return into the world and to the body. The world of the senses is the only one existing, he states, the world of ideas being nothing but a “deceiving supplement” (Nietzsche 2007:31 – my translation). Therefore, it is tremendously important for humankind to start its culture at the right place: not the mind, but the body, the gesture, the diet, the physiology. “We had better listen to the voice of the healthy body: it's a more honest, a much purer voice” (2007:130 – my translation), runs Nietzsche's final urge in his attempt at subverting the traditional superiority of mind over body in Western European metaphysics.

For Nietzsche the body is not hypostatised as a concept, Scott Lash argues, but it is rather spoken of in biological terms, such as physiology, the organism, the senses, the sensuous. Nietzsche understood the human body in the context of the bodies of all organic beings, which are all dominated by

the will to power - a drive to absorb and dominate other organisms. The body was defined by Nietzsche as a “political structure, in which cells and tissues struggle; in which lower organs are subdued by higher ones, and the former serve as functions for the latter” (Lash 271). A body’s organs, as well as the whole multiplicity of events within an organism, are an effect of its will to power. Sense organs serve as a means of interpretation, being fundamental to the Nietzschean notion of the body.

Nietzsche was not the only one within nineteenth century Western European metaphysics to have employed new concepts of the body: G.W. Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Søren Kierkegaard made their own contribution to the process of deconstructing Cartesian dualism. Nietzsche himself did not consider his focus on the body to be particularly original, since he “saw his post-Darwinian epoch as one in which philosophers have begun to speak of bodies rather than souls” (Lash 270). Nevertheless his contribution is considered within most areas of humanistic scholarship as essential to the modern and postmodern understanding of the human body. Hence my choice of focusing in this introductory chapter on his theories on the body as representative for Western European thought at the end of the nineteenth century.

All contemporary attempts at understanding and analysing the body point to the rise of phenomenology in the twentieth century as the starting point for a true counter-tradition to Cartesian rationalism. Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty set up a new understanding of human subjectivity, defined in terms of a union (no longer a split) of body and mind. Their theories triggered what Scott Lash calls a “shift in the locus of agency from the mind to the body” (275).

Although he was not a philosopher of the body but a philosopher of consciousness, and the main goal of his work was not to “describe the sensuous texture of incarnate existence”, but to “establish the autonomy and efficacy of reason” (Welton 39), Edmund Husserl discovered the horizontal character of human reason, shedding light on what had been hidden for such a long time. His phenomenology of the body, his attempt at understanding what the perceptual world meant for consciousness managed to reveal what no other philosophy had previously seen. Using phenomenological

reduction as a main tool for his analysis, Husserl reduces all experience to the sphere of the ego. Starting from the (traditional) assumption that the world is nothing else but what exists and what is valid for one's consciousness, he makes attempts at eliminating everything that does not belong to the ego, everything that is foreign to it. The final result is *simple nature*, which has lost the characteristic of being available to everybody; it is something that belongs exclusively to the pure ego. Within the area of this *simple nature* Husserl discovers his body, which is characterised by its uniqueness, by its being the only object within this world he obtained by reduction. The body is the only entity within which the pure ego is absolutely and directly in charge; the ego can act – directly or indirectly – only through the body. The body cannot be subjected to phenomenological reduction. In order to reach the pure ego, one can reduce the others, one can reduce the world with its objects, but one cannot reduce the body. The ego is active within the body and – through the body – within the world; there is a psycho-physical unity, a unique relationship between the ego and the organic body.

The body is for Husserl an organ of perception, the medium of all perception, endowed with senses, by means of which the subject experiences the external world. He argues that all that is thingly-real in the ego's surrounding world has its relation to the body, which is involved in all perception and all experience as "freely moved sense organ, as freely moved totality of sense organs" (Husserl 1999:12). Seen from within, the body is more than just another thing in space; it is the very source of that space. Since each ego has its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives these things in a certain orientation, the body is essential for the construction of the spatial world for the ego. It is not merely the centre in terms of which all things are situated, but the lived-body of free movement, of grasping and repelling, of approaching and distancing from these things. The body is "the bearer of the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and the now, out of which the pure ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses" (Husserl 1999:12). Seen from the outside it presents itself as a reality, as a material thing having special appearances, as something situated between the subject and the material world.

Besides being the medium of all perception and the zero point of orientation in space and time, the body is also “an organ of the will, the one and only Object which, for the will of the pure ego, is moveable immediately and spontaneously”, being also a “means for producing a mediate spontaneous movement in other things” (Husserl 1999:29). Husserl argues that only bodies are immediately and spontaneously moveable and that they are so by means of the free ego and its will.

As Donn Welton argues in his analysis of Husserl’s phenomenology of the lived body, the characteristics that Husserl attributes to the body – kinaesthetic sensations, the role it plays in constituting the spatiality and materiality of things and its function of bearing the soul – “go beyond traditional theories in that the correlation between body and world is understood as a whole with interdependent moments” (Welton 44). For Husserl the body is something more than just a mechanism, it is understood as being “ensouled”, as living; the term he uses is *Leib* (lived-body), as opposed to *Körper* (the body described in strictly physical terms). Edmund Husserl has set the ground work for the phenomenological approach to the issue of the body, Donn Welton argues, approaching precisely that term that the whole movement of modern philosophy thought most unproblematic and providing a new understanding of human subjectivity.

This new understanding of human subjectivity and this process of deconstructing Cartesian dualism are brought again into focus by Martin Heidegger’s philosophical work. Heidegger was not a philosopher of the body; he did not focus on body or embodiment with the explicit aim of understanding and explaining them. According to David Michael Levin, most of the scholars analysing Heidegger’s thought claim that there is virtually nothing on the body to be found in Heidegger’s writing. Whenever the course of his thinking compelled Heidegger to approach the issue of embodiment, he found himself entering a realm where he had no compass, no direction and where he lost his way. He admits in *Being and Time* that “this ‘bodily nature’ hides a whole problematic of its own” (qtd. in Levin 124) and in a subsequent seminar he acknowledges that “the body phenomenon is the most difficult problem” (qtd. in Levin 124). Nevertheless he does try, in a more or less direct manner, to tackle the issue

of the human body. Levin argues that all of Heidegger's reflections on perception, his reflections on the relationship between the human and the earth, his philosophical interpretations of human nature and his definition of the rational animal can be gathered under the title "discourse of thought on the body" (125). One could conclude that his philosophical work also contributed to the development of a phenomenology of the body and to the twentieth-century understanding of embodied subjectivity.

Replacing the notion of subjectivity with that of Dasein (human existence), Martin Heidegger turned from the question of the body to the question of embodiment. Human existence is no longer limited to a transcendental mind situated above everything and dominating everything from outside the world. It is embedded in the world; it is in the world and of the world at the same time. Dasein is defined by Heidegger in terms of being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world does not refer to some spiritual entity residing in a bodily entity; it is not something given once and for all in a particular way. Heidegger argues against what he calls the naïve opinion that man is first a spiritual entity which is subsequently transposed into space. Dasein has a world in which it moves and lives, and at the same time Dasein is this world. The relationship between Dasein and the world is not the same as the (traditional) relationship between subject and object. Dasein is not a pure subject capable of contemplating - through merely looking - the pure things in the world. Human existence is no longer defined in terms of a "distant being taking a theoretical look at the things in the world" (Heidegger, 1999: 600 – my translation), but in terms of interdependence, of a constant collaboration between being and the surrounding world with all its tools and functions. The simple "being-together of the physique and the psychic is utterly different, ontically and ontologically, from the phenomenon of being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1999: 275 – my translation). Human existence can no longer be defined in terms of the traditional body/mind dichotomy; it should be defined in terms of being-in-the-world, i.e. in terms of lived experience, or embodiment. Every feeling, he argues, is an "embodiment attuned in this or that way, a mood that embodies in this or that way" (qtd. in Levin 124). For Heidegger the body is not simply a physical entity; it is not read exclusively in terms of

anatomy or physiology. He argues that “most of what we know from the natural sciences about the body and the way it embodies are specifications based on the established *misinterpretation* of the body as a *mere* natural body” (qtd. in Levin 124 – emphases mine). He contends that “bodily being does not mean that the soul is burdened by a hulk we call the body. We do not *have* a body; rather, we *are* bodily” (qtd. in Levin 124).

Heidegger’s conclusion was to seal the new understanding of human subjectivity in terms of a unity between body and mind. The traditional dichotomy has been outdated; the body has (re)gained its position as more than just a carrier of one’s mind. The body now has value in itself and is acknowledged to represent an important part of human subjectivity. This recognition led to an increasing amount of interest in the analysis of embodied consciousness within the field of phenomenology. In Jean Paul Sartre’s study *Being and Nothingness* there is a special chapter approaching the issue of the human body. According to Sartre, human subjectivity cannot be conceived of in terms of a split between body and mind, because it would be in vain, he argues, “to suppose that the soul can detach itself from this individualization by separating itself from the body at death or by pure thought, for the soul is the body inasmuch as the for-itself is its own individualization” (310).

In his approach to the body Sartre distinguishes three ontological dimensions: the body-for-itself, the body-for-others and the intersection of these two dimensions. The body-for-itself is not merely a physical fact for him, not merely an object, since his lived experience in the world is always from the point of view of his body. He apprehends his body through objects which indicate his location in the world. Following Husserl’s theories, he argues that his body is the point of orientation in the world, the starting point for his world: “Thus by the mere fact that there is a world, this world cannot exist without a univocal orientation in relation to me” (307). Sartre defines, just like Heidegger, human subjectivity in terms of being-in-the-midst-of-the-world; belonging to the world and having a body is one and the same thing for him. He argues that his body is “co-extensive with the world, spread across all things” (318). The body-for-itself is defined by Sartre as “the contingent form which is taken up by the necessity of my contingency”