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VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE POLITICS OF FORM

A thesis presented by
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$\pi \rightarrow 730$

To My Parents

Abstract

This work is concerned with the poetics of Virginia Woolf. Taking her historical and literary context into account, it considers her fictional production in relation to her aesthetics and her politics. The novels of the 20s are seen as establishing a new aesthetics motivated by a feminine point of view on reality. The Waves is then considered as the space for a change of emphasis in the work in general. As a consequence a reading of the novels of the 30s as directly political is offered. This work thus describes the dynamic relation between aesthetics and politics within the oeuvre.

It will show how this movement is informed by Virginia Woolf's politics of form, which is highlighted by the concept of the frame. At a thematic level, this concept will be used to indicate her engagement with the visual arts, in particular with the notion of significant form, in forging her new representation. At a formal level, it will be used to underline the political character of her textual practices. Her transgression of formal boundaries, of which the frame is a marker, is understood as a political stance against the essentialist system underlying patriarchy.

This work sees Virginia Woolf's politics of form as anticipating some aspects of the most recent feminist theories. Her achievement in creating a new political aesthetics, which produces an open text, will also be considered in relation to some elements of modern feminism. Virginia Woolf's powerful and idiosyncratic voice will be emphasised as the reason for her modernity as well as the relevance of her works to the contemporary feminist debate.

I, Frédérique Stintzy, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 110,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

date *23/05/00* signature of candidate

I was admitted as a research student in October 1993 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in July 1994; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1994 and 1998.

date *23/05/00* signature of candidate

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of PhD in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

date signature of supervisor

22 May 2000

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INTRODUCTION

The object of this work is to examine Virginia Woolf's poetics. In particular, her aesthetics is considered as a political practice, which exhibits 'the collapse of contrary categories into a third vision of alternation as a principle of her style.'¹ Virginia Woolf's ability to create a new text, disengaged from a binary essentialist model of representation, highlights her relevance to contemporary feminist debates.

Clearly, it is important to take into account the author's own version of her endeavour and comments from Virginia Woolf's own essays, diaries and letters are considered in the individual analyses of the texts as well as the main argument of this thesis. Several studies have been used, notably by Quentin Bell, James King and Hermione Lee, in order to establish Virginia Woolf's biographical background. The analysis undertaken by this thesis is situated within the evolution of Virginia Woolf's critical reception. This is characterised by an interest in the author's stylistic experimentations, particularly in relation to the visual arts, but also as an idiosyncratic response to literary tradition. The modernity manifested at a formal level is also considered in relation to her political position, that is to say her feminism, which criticises a society dominated by masculine values as well as the type of literature it produces. In the last two decades critical attention has been paid in more detail to the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Virginia Woolf's fiction, and it is within this framework that the thesis operates. Particularly, the relevance of her text to the contemporary debate on politics in general has been considered in the light of postmodernism.

The approaches which seem to give the most insight into her work are modernism, feminism and post-modernism. My own reading of Virginia Woolf has been informed by all three approaches, which clearly correspond to particular concerns of Virginia Woolf

¹ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991) p. 192.

herself. Her aesthetic attempt to 'create new forms for our new sensations'² understandably takes place in opposition to former traditions; a position which is examined and further illuminated by some account of the contemporary reception that this attempt received. A typical reaction was that of E.M. Forster who dismissed the political element in her fiction as an aesthetic flaw. Analyses such as Randall Stevenson's Modernist Fiction: An Introduction, Michael Tratner's Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats and Alex Zwerdling's Virginia Woolf and the Real World will help to situate the author's historical background and relationship to her society.

A particular emphasis will also be put on the aesthetic experimentations of Bloomsbury artists, such as Roger Fry and critics, as Clive Bell, paying closer attention to the former's art criticism. Clive Bell's notion of 'significant form' is also undoubtedly relevant to Virginia Woolf's own challenging aesthetics, as expounded in Allen McLaurin's The Echoes Enslaved or David Dowling's Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf. An acknowledgement of Walter Pater's influence in Orlando with Perry Meisel's The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater is also presented together with a thorough examination of the fruitful exchanges between the author's aesthetics and issues in the visual arts, such as the concept of the frame. Critics such as Diane Filby Gillespie with The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf, C. Ruth Miller with Virginia Woolf: The Frame of Art and Life and Marianna Torgovnick with The Visual Arts, Pictorialism and The Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf were used to shape this discussion. A psychological understanding of the philosophical choice involved in this collaboration with the visual arts is also present in this study, informed by Harvena Richter's Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage.

As a student of English literature my particular interest in the work of Virginia Woolf has been shaped by my gender so that my reading of her fiction is principally informed by the sexual/textual approaches of the last decade as expounded by French feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Makiko

² See Virginia Woolf, 'Hours in a Library' in The Essays of Virginia Woolf, edited by Andrew McNeillie, projected 6 vols., (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986-), vol. 2, (1987), p. 60.

Minow-Pinkney's Virginia Woolf and The Problem of the Subject and Clare Hanson's Virginia Woolf, in particular, are useful in a semiotic reading of the texts. An anti-imperialist reading is also present in this study as an integral part of the argument on feminism. Among the studies consulted are Laura Marcus' Virginia Woolf, Clements and Grundy's Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays, Elizabeth Abel's Writing and Sexual Difference and Rachel Bowlby's Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf. More precisely, the use of these political approaches will be informed by Toril Moi's account of them in Sexual/Textual Politics. As Pamela L. Caughie indicates in Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself, 'whatever approach we use, however ... what we find in Woolf's writings is not "there" prior to our readings but posited by and constructed in the very course of our readings.'³ Likewise, as with all the critical approaches previously mentioned, references to theoretical positions will be intermittent. This choice is guided by a close yet open reading of the text. This position allows specific concerns to be highlighted without necessarily endorsing all the conclusions built into a particular theory. A reading of Virginia Woolf's text as open-ended, that is to say deconstructed, multiple and various, as this work intends to offer, thus requires a similarly flexible approach.

While this is the type of approach the thesis proposes, it still undertakes to consider Virginia Woolf's works as a whole, in order to posit a change of emphasis between different periods of her production. Traditionally critics have made distinctions when considering the fiction. Whether it is articulated in terms of fact and vision, like Alice van Buren Kelley's The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision, or in terms of realist and experimental novels, like Jane Wheare's Virginia Woolf: Dramatic Novelist, the distinction hinges on the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Also typical, is for the distinction to be applied in terms of early and later fiction. The overall judgement of the works is generally informed by the reading of The Waves, which is often posited as central to Virginia Woolf's career. For instance, in The World Without a Self: Virginia

³ See Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest of Itself, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1991), p. XIII of preface.

Woolf and the Novel, James Naremore writes: 'As is generally agreed, The Waves is Woolf's ultimate attempt to transform the customary world of the novel.'⁴ As a consequence, the works following this novel have often been considered as a disappointing return to a more traditional type of fiction.

However, in the last decade or so the theoretically informed work of critics such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis in Writing Beyond the Ending, Jane Marcus in Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy or Sue Roe in Writing and Gender have set about retrieving Virginia Woolf's later works within the context of re-appraising their radical character. My central argument will be articulated in relation to this recent effort. It considers the interaction between aesthetics and politics. Studies such as Pamela Transue's Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style and William Handley's Virginia Woolf: The Politics of Narration argue a similar point of view, namely that Virginia Woolf's narrative techniques actually constitutes her feminist politics. However, it is notable that Pamela Transue's analysis of The Years is still negative unlike that of Jane Marcus, for instance. Similarly, William Handley's study of the novels in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory still sees The Waves as the most experimental of her works. _

This thesis proposes to show how both The Years and Between the Acts achieve a textual pattern that is based on Virginia Woolf's particular use of significant form. The politics thereby created will be demonstrated as wider ranging than in earlier texts. This analysis borrows from Herbert Marder the notion of an enlarging of Virginia Woolf's frame of reference but not his analysis of androgyny as a reconciliation of the feminine and the masculine. Instead, it posits the author's new identity understanding of self as a continuum of identity. In that respect, the argument also places itself within the context of Clare Hanson's study and sees a similar change of direction, also located in The Waves, within Virginia Woolf's oeuvre.

A first section will endeavour to highlight the elaboration of Virginia Woolf's idiosyncratic aesthetics in the production of the 20s. Owing to the structure of the

⁴ See The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 151.

argument, the fiction of the 20s is considered in relation to the output following The Waves, with the exception of Night and Day, as will be explained later.

The second section will highlight the qualities of The Waves in relation to the novels preceding it. It will also examine to what extent The Waves can be seen as the space within which a change of emphasis takes place, between a retrieving of the feminine as oppressed by patriarchy and a wider attack on essentialism as a system of dominance. This work defines itself as a contribution to the re-reading of the fiction of the 30s within the context of the overall production, keeping in mind such assessments as put forward by Virginia Woolf's husband, who designated The Years, which was produced immediately after The Waves, as her 'dead novel' or E. M. Forster's overall appreciation of her oeuvre as less successful when it was at its most political.⁵

My overall argument, in a third section, will precisely centre on Night and Day and The Years, together with Between the Acts. I would like to argue that the earlier novel already shows some of Virginia Woolf's experimentations with the absence of conventions, which will be embodied to the full in the fiction following The Waves. I also present a reassessment of the organicity of Virginia Woolf's works as a whole. Jeri Johnson, in his introduction to The Years indicates how 'critics find The Years a shocking departure ... [which] looks startlingly like a "traditional" novel.' This is exemplified by his citation of Victoria Middleton's view of it as 'an ugly and poorly written novel, at best a misfit' as a typical critical reception of this last but one novel. His sympathetic study, though, indicates how 'The Years ... is a much subtler, more complex, more difficult work in virtually every way than any of its immediate progenitors.'⁶ I would like to show that in the period following The Waves the novels actually create, at a structural level, a pattern which is more directly political than ever

⁵ In 'Virginia Woolf', his obituary presented in the Rede Lecture, (Cambridge 1941), E. M. Forster sets the tone of the reception of her work for the next two decades by underlining again how The Waves is an extraordinary achievement' but carrying on by dismissing her politics: 'But feminism is also responsible for the worst of her books - the cantankerous Three Guineas - and for the less successful streaks in Orlando.' Nevertheless he does recognise 'However, I speak as a man here, and as an elderly one. The best judges of her feminism are neither elderly men nor even elderly women, but young women', thus prefiguring the later re-appropriation of her texts by predominantly female feminist critics. (p. 23, Cambridge, at The University Press, 1942).

before as well as being political in a wider sense. Whereas in the early part of her production the author considered the relationship of women to patriarchy, in the later production she engaged with the relationship between individuals within an essentialist system. This is evident in the genesis of The Years as an attempt at being directly political, which would produce the pamphlet Three Guineas.⁷ The fact that The Years has been introduced as 'extraordinary and undervalued ... [Virginia Woolf's] most challengingly political novel, and the most popular of all her writings during her lifetime'⁸ precisely indicates both its importance within the oeuvre and the fact that it struck a chord among the public despite such educated criticisms as that of E. M. Forster.

Thus this thesis argues that Virginia Woolf's writing, in the wake of The Waves, demonstrates a departure from a narrative informed by a feminist view of the world to a political practice transposed⁹ into form, where the narrative structure is not only informed by feminism, in a wide sense, but becomes its very substance. In other words, this thesis reads Virginia Woolf's overall production as marked by a thematic interest in political matters in the novels preceding The Waves, which also experiment with form as a means. The fiction of the 20s thus engages mainly with the problems attached to traditional narrative conventions. This first part of the production is thus predominantly aesthetic. In that light, The Waves benefits from earlier aesthetic experimentations but also illustrates the political implications of form. Thus, within the oeuvre, this novel functions as a space for a change of emphasis both aesthetically and politically. The third and last part of this oeuvre, on the other hand, is characterised by the politics of form.

⁶ Virginia Woolf. Introductions to the Major Works, edited by Julia Briggs, (London: Virago Press, 1994), p. 319.

⁷ Since this work is principally concerned with the fictional production of Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas and A Room of One's Own will not be examined at length, but only used to the extent that they illuminate the political aspect of the author's fiction.

⁸ See back cover of The Years in the Oxford Paperback edition, 1992.

⁹ The use of this term clearly requires some explanation. It entails the notion of transfer between two elements, the one replacing the other. Although this is the nature of the aesthetic transaction between reality and representation which literature involves, it does not adequately describe Virginia Woolf's intention. This semantic difficulty highlights the challenging character of Virginia Woolf's modernism, which precisely attempts to offer an alternative to the binary structure of language. Since the aim of this study is to explore the aesthetic and political motivation of such an attempt, whenever the term 'transpose' is used, it merely designates the process of representation.

The production of the 30s is thus seen as expressing the author's political concerns in terms of form; the very shape of the narrative has become a feminist practice. This interpretation is supported by Virginia Woolf's own analysis, which sees The Waves as a new beginning:

'Oh yes, between 50 & 60 I think I shall write out some very singular books, if I live; I mean I think I am about to embody, at last, the exact shapes my brain holds. What a long toil to reach this beginning -- if The Waves is my first work in my own style!'¹⁰

The focal point of this thesis is to counter arguments which still see The Waves as the ultimate experimental work. The shift in relation between content and form exhibited in the oeuvre can also be expressed in terms of moving away from an aesthetics informed by vision towards a political aesthetics, which, while retaining its visionary quality, combines it with a factual approach.

One of the main purposes of my work is to look at Virginia Woolf's political use of form, through language and the visual arts, in order to translate her own sense of modern reality, and particularly that of the self. This inquiry is articulated around a questioning of the traditional definition of these concepts, which will be described as established by patriarchy. Finding a voice for the feminine is thus at the centre of this reading of Virginia Woolf's work and it clearly originates in an understanding of the world from a woman's perspective. Apprehending reality thus lies at the root of her work and enables her to situate herself within the literary tradition. However, as we will see, the author's thinking became even more far ranging by equating the plight of the feminine in patriarchal society with that of any outsider in a system of dominance.

Indeed, as the author wonders 'Who's to decide what reality is?'¹¹ This work sees her achievement in putting forward an alternative point of view on reality, breaking off

¹⁰ The Diary of Virginia Woolf, [D], edited by Anne Olivier Bell, 5 volumes, (London: Penguin Books, 1979-85), vol. 4 (1983), p. 53.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf to Hugh Walpole, 8 November 1931, from The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 6 volumes, edited by Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, The Hogarth Press, 1975-80, IV, p. 402.

with the tradition expounded by her father's generation.¹² In her memoirs, she describes how this was a personal as well as an aesthetic struggle, a fact which has bearings on her general endeavour:

Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing-room at Hyde Park gate. The Victorian age and the Edwardian age. We were not his children; we were his grand-children.¹³

This overwhelming sense of rupture with the past -- 'There was no connection. There were deep divisions'¹⁴ -- was manifested in different ways in the literary and artistic world. In the visual arts, it crystallised in the very public law suit concerning Whistler's painting,¹⁵ while in literature the subversive element in Ibsen's plays was met with public outrage. The official face of such opposition appeared in the censorship applied to numerous works of fiction, in particular to James Joyce's, whose Dubliners took almost a decade to be published.¹⁶ In all these cases, the artists were intent on questioning ways of telling and ways of seeing. Inevitably, this questioning centred on the relation between aesthetics and morality, in a way which was bound to create a deep rift between them and their Victorian public. In essence these two concepts were deeply intertwined for the mid-Victorians.¹⁷ Art was moral and taken to reflect the values of the age; its function was to promote society's cohesion. Morality is thus at the centre of such a vision, in which both writers and readers abide by a unifying 'unwritten code.'¹⁸ In opposition to this, towards the end of the century, the late Victorian Realists abandoned notions of

¹² The strength of this tradition is revealed in Leslie Stephen's acknowledgement of the motivation behind his editing of Thomas Hardy's text: 'Excuse this wretched shred of concession to popular taste; but I am a slave.' The fact that Virginia Woolf's father was considered a liberal further indicates the kind of influence she had to confront in order to produce her own modern fiction. The argument surrounding this 'end to reticence' is recorded by Peter Keating in The Haunted Study. A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), pp. 241-284.

¹³ See p. 160 in Moments of Being (MB), edited by Jeanne Schulkind, (London: Grafton Books, 1989).

¹⁴ See p. 172 in MB.

¹⁵ See James MacNeill Whistler, The Gentle Art of Making Enemies, (London: Constable, 1967).

¹⁶ These last two examples are taken from The Haunted Study, p. 265 and 268 respectively.

¹⁷ This brief review of the nineteenth century debate on art is informed by the reading of Linda R. Anderson's Bennett, Wells and Conrad: Narrative in Transition, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988).

morality in favour of the integrity of a factual transposition of character and reality, precisely advocating 'that art should find and reproduce truths which society repressed or concealed.'¹⁹

The plurality of truths suggested here is very important, since for the mid-Victorians, harmony in society was the reflection of a singular truth 'which was general and harmonious.'²⁰ This concept is thus based on a notion of essentialism, which is reflected in their writing practices, whereby a 'transcendent position of knowledge [is] constructed for the reader, a position which is in itself non-contradictory and which is seen as the guarantee of moral autonomy.'²¹ This definition of poetics, with its emphasis on morality and its understanding of the world as unified, also entails the acceptance of a divine. For the mid-Victorians, the principle of poetic justice 'satisfies our inborn sense of right; it transports us into a purer atmosphere; it vindicates the ways of God to Man.'²² The end of this system of belief was heralded by the developments in science and industry at the turn of the century. Virginia Woolf's particular rejection of the Victorian model is fierce -- 'certainly and emphatically there is no God'²³-- for the political reasons that this work will emphasise. A search for a new aesthetics thus represented a way to deal with new systems of belief or lack of it, and the realist form of fiction bears testimony to this with its insistence on 'a sacred right [for the artist] to obey the impulses of his own temperament.'²⁴ This signalled a shift in literature from the outer to the inner, that is to say, from the objective to the subjective, as exemplified in Henry James' fiction, for instance. Indeed, Randall Stevenson remarks that 'the roots of transformation in modernist writing need to be considered as reaching back at least to the fiction of Henry James' as one of 'the spirits of psychoanalysis.'²⁵ In other words, the

¹⁸ See p. 252 in The Haunted Study.

¹⁹ See p. 4 in The Haunted Study.

²⁰ See p. 8 in The Haunted Study.

²¹ See p. 83, in Catharine Belsey's Critical Practice, (London and New York: Methuen, 1980).

²² See p. 85, in Kenneth Graham's English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

²³ See p. 81 in MB.

²⁴ See p. 12 in English Criticism of the Novel.

²⁵ See Modernist Fiction: An Introduction, (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 2.

severance of the link between the writer and the approval of the public allowed him to become more self-conscious and aware of his own processes.

This quality is clearly at work in Virginia Woolf's writing and always goes back to the concept of reality. By the time she was born, the period presented a deep contrast with the opposition between the ideal of the mid-Victorians and the real of the late Victorian Realists. In some ways, this opposition is still running through her fiction with its concern for both vision and facts. This work will demonstrate that her contribution lies in the rejection of both what she came to see as the merely imitative aspect of realism and the essentialist Victorian tradition, with its underlying metaphysical dimension. It is out of this intellectual and aesthetic turmoil that Virginia Woolf's endeavour was born. She was able to create a form capable of expressing the baffling character of modernity, exposing the discrepancy between the genders, and addressing the urgency of social issues. In that light, 'Edwardian realism is considered by Woolf to be at once historically necessary and necessarily overtaken as only a first stop on the line' to conceive the modern novel.²⁶ The total detachment from moral and social preoccupations of this new aesthetics paradoxically allowed the next generation to produce a deeper reflection on social issues disengaged from morality.

This thesis demonstrates how the end of a belief in the function of art as representing the codes of society, as the Victorians envisaged it, corresponds in Virginia Woolf's texts to an increasing questioning of the coalescence between reality and meaning, signified and signifier. This intellectual rejection of the notion of essentialism leads to a new aesthetics precisely exploring the discrepancy between reality and its representation. In that light, the author rejects the use of an omniscient narrator as based upon an essentialist paradigm. This rejection is informed by the link between essentialism and patriarchy, which will be explained as the key link between aesthetics and politics exemplified by Virginia Woolf's fiction. This link itself is seen as political to the extent that she considered problems of aesthetics in terms of gender relation; the aesthetics of

²⁶ See Rachel Bowlby's essay 'We're Getting There', in Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 7.

her father's generation is thus informed by a society largely based on masculine values. Virginia Woolf understands the gendered practices established by society as feeding into politics, since the particular issue of gender relations is one manifestation of the complex structures underpinning society. This explains the link she establishes between sexual politics and politics in general. By recording an alternative perspective, a vision of the world from women's point of view, her fiction makes a case for equality. The fact that the kinds of attitudes she is preoccupied with are manifested culturally in the tradition of realism accounts for her exposing them. This work shows how Virginia Woolf's understanding of patriarchy is set in an increasingly wider context within her oeuvre. In that light, her writing practice makes the link between aesthetic preferences and patriarchal practices increasingly strong. What this study calls the politics of form is seen as the centre of her fiction, with the works of the 30s proposing an alternative to the larger system of essentialist dominance. This study thus considers her oeuvre as a crucial journey; the first section looks at her early production with hindsight, owing to the author's self-awareness manifested in her prolific diary, while the second and third sections investigate how the political element increasingly comes to the fore. This journey is thus marked by a shift in priorities, first attacking patriarchy in its specific cultural manifestations and then crucially exposing the intellectual structure that allowed it. It also presents a continuity, which took Virginia Woolf from the awareness of being a woman to that of becoming a fully-fledged member of the community. This general debate between the old and the new, morality and art, as well as some propositions towards a new aesthetics of facts and vision, is already at work as early on as in Night and Day. This supports the notion of a change of emphasis in the oeuvre as a whole and explains the decision to consider this early novel in the third section of this work. It also indicates that Virginia Woolf retained the same intentions throughout her writing career; however the means of implementing these intentions can be seen as undergoing a change.

The work of Virginia Woolf can thus be seen as an attempt to describe what George Eliot designates in Middlemarch as 'that tempting range of relevancies called the

universe.²⁷ Accordingly, in the reading of what is experienced as a series of seamless texts all questions are intimately related, yet the demands of an analytical criticism of this body of works require that each point should be treated individually. However the very organic nature of this body also compels the line of the argument to be flexible enough to weave in and out of specific points whenever required. In order to do justice to the diversity of Virginia Woolf's text, this thesis is presented as an interrelation of ideas as well as a single line of argument. The same reason applies to the need for a balance between the specificity of each work and the overall argument. Aesthetics and politics will thus feature in this enquiry as separate points in their own right but they will also be used as methodological tools.

More specifically, this thesis develops the argument in three stages.

The first section focuses on the works written during the 20s. It takes the form of a series of thematic essays, which examine the specific problems that emerged from the attempt to break away from established modes of representation. Each text will be considered in turn along different lines of investigation. As already mentioned, all questions will ultimately be related to aesthetics. Thus the first part of this work considers how Virginia Woolf refined a new type of representation for the new stories she wanted to tell. Accordingly, this period is marked by an effort to retrieve the values of the feminine.

Considering the tradition from which the author wants to position herself, Jacob's Room is her first attack on biography as a genre which characterised her father's generation. It examines the conditions of knowledge and the question of understanding the reality of a new era. The text reflects this difficulty in the elusiveness that surrounds its eponymous character. The problem of representing this new reality leads to a search for a new aesthetics. This first novel answers some of these questions.

²⁷ George Eliot, Middlemarch, (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), chapter 15, p. 137. This notion is all the more interesting that Virginia Woolf herself described Middlemarch as 'one of the few English novels written for grown-up people', Collected Essays, 4 volumes, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), vol. 1, p. 201.

A comparison between Jacob's Room, Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse follows, centred on the author's questioning of an essentialist definition of the self; a theme broached in Jacob's Room and further pursued in these two following novels. To that effect, Mrs Dalloway enquires into the nature of time and our perception of it, in order to develop the concept of 'the halo of consciousness.' The position taken in the text then allows a new, internal, mode of representation; that is at the level of consciousness, at the expense of plot, which is constituted by external events. This in turn entails a questioning of the traditional language of representation, which is deemed unable to express the modern character of reality. A new type of expression is envisaged, informed by the visual arts. Both Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse feature women as their central character, thus reinforcing this new aesthetics as principally feminine. Hence, these texts can be seen as presenting a retrieving of feminine values.

Orlando, another more direct attack on the biographies of great men furthers this feminist aesthetics by examining the notion of self in relation to gender.²⁸ In that light, it offers an alternative point of view on history, that is, from where women stand. This perspective necessarily affects the concept of representation; a point which is addressed by the theme of gender in relation to writing. Thus the text proposes a new modern way of articulating the debate opposing aesthetics to politics. The notion of 'pattern-making' is further emphasised in this text as a means to uncover the underlying structure of reality.

A focus on the short-stories 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens' further establishes this possibility, by suggesting the notion of 'significant form', first defined by Bloomsbury artist Roger Fry and the art critic Clive Bell in relation to painting, as a potential ontological tool. To that extent, these two stories can be seen as providing a formal answer to aesthetic questions of representation.

²⁸ Significantly, Michael Tratner sees the biographical genre as 'the literary equivalent of imperialism' in Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 223-4.

All the texts examined in this first section are thus considered as refining tools, which enabled Virginia Woolf to produce a new aesthetics, rid of the traditional conventions that she found crippling in the attempt to express a new sense of reality.

In a second part all these lines of enquiry will focus on The Waves to define this novel as an example of feminist aesthetics but also a questioning of it. The aesthetic question of representation will be considered in relation to the function of art as mediating the relation between outer reality and inner self. The use of visual arts as an alternative to the realist line of representation will be examined with a focus on the concept of framing. This concept functions as a reminder of the transaction between reality and representation. At a thematic level, this transaction can be expounded in psychological terms as the transaction between self and other, or in aesthetic terms when the consideration of the visual arts becomes an element of the story. At a structural level, it can be embodied as a constitutive element of the narrative. This, in turn, leads to a consideration of questions of form, entailed by the use of formal patterns instead of plot in the understanding and description of reality. This notion of formal pattern will then be shown to be consistent with a feminine representation of the world. This concern with representation will consequently focus on questions of language, particularly in relation to transposing a feminine point of view on reality. Finally, the extent to which all these considerations contribute to an account of modern reality will be discussed. In conclusion, The Waves will be evaluated as furnishing the author with her voice, and by indicating possibilities of a formal kind, it constitutes a space of change in the overall understanding of Virginia Woolf's oeuvre.

As a transition, the key link between form and feminism in the author's aesthetics will be highlighted, as a stepping stone for the change of direction manifested in the works following The Waves.

Finally, a third section will examine the fiction produced after The Waves, in view of highlighting the way in which they formally embody the author's politics. As indicated earlier, Night and Day, despite its position within the chronology of the oeuvre, will be considered at this point to highlight and strengthen the argument for a

move, in Virginia Woolf's fiction, towards a wider political commitment. While The Waves showed the potential of form in representation, it has to be considered as an achievement of vision rather than fact. On the contrary, Night and Day already indicated the need for a dialectic between both aspects, and what this novel does at a thematic level foreshadows what later works will embody in their very structures. Night and Day addresses the question of the relation between language and literature, as a problem of expression of the self. The attempt to articulate this problem runs throughout the author's fiction but is never more powerfully articulated than in her later works. In that respect, this text also prefigures the extensive use of visual arts that the author will make in the works of the 30s. Because it centres on a family, and more particularly, the journey of the elder daughter into self-discovery, it also reveals most of the political concerns, which will be voiced in a direct way the texts following The Waves. Considering its vast theme, which examines the relation between art and life in terms of personal expression, Night and Day can be seen as holding the seeds for Virginia Woolf's later works, insisting as it does that 'We have to have faith in our vision.' (412) It is this faith which enabled her to produce The Years and Between the Acts, in which the intentions of the author are carried out to the full. These last two novels manage to embody Virginia Woolf's aesthetic vision of a form flexible enough to encompass both fact and vision, to finally merge form and content. Both texts consider the extent to which the concept of history has a bearing on representation. The language of history, particularly in the Victorian context, will be described as a tool of division. This will be shown to be particularly evident in the concept of class and gender it informs, thus breeding patriarchy and ultimately fascism. Because of its binary nature, the metaphor of the frame will be used here as a tool of analysis, to highlight the political character of boundaries. The bearing of such a division on the self, articulated in terms of a paradigm 'inner versus outer', will then be examined, with the conclusion that transgressing the boundaries of an essentialist system based on binary oppositions is necessary in the search for an new expression of the self. This transgression, which is highlighted by a rejection of the closure provided by the notion of frame, is accomplished in both texts by

a ceaseless questioning of established values, which also provides an alternative mode of representation. This new feminism is at work in the open-ended character of a form that suggests rather than defines, thus overriding the duality of essentialism and its intrinsic concept of difference.

A note on terminology

In order to study the text closely, a number of specific terms have been used. Considering my interest in the modernist aspect of Virginia Woolf's fiction, this terminology is modelled on Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan²⁹ who partly based it on Gérard Genette's structuralist work on poetics³⁰. Thus, narrative fiction, which is the narration of a succession of fictional events, is studied in relation to its basic aspects³¹. 'Story' designates the events and their participants in their chronological order, abstracted from their position in the text. The term 'diegesis', which is used by Genette, is equivalent to Rimmon-Kenan's 'story' and will be used in a similar way. The ensuing opposition between 'diegesis' and 'mimesis' thus overlaps that which contrasts 'telling' and 'showing'. For the purpose of this study, a difference will be established between 'plot' and 'story'.³² While 'story' has been defined as the events conceived in a time-sequence, 'plot' will indicate the same events but stress the element of causality underlying the sequence³³. This choice is reinforced by Virginia Woolf's own use of the term 'plot'³⁴. The 'text', in turn, is the written discourse that undertakes their telling; it is what the reader reads. The process of telling, with its implied narrator, will be called 'narration.' In accordance with Genette's terminology, in the hierarchy thus constituted, the level of the story is designated as 'diegetic' while the level immediately superior to the story, and concerned with its narration, is designated as 'extra-diegetic'. Focalisation is clearly a large and important part of the process of narration, and Genette in particular devotes a whole chapter to this aspect of narratology, which he calls 'mode'. Rimmon-

²⁹ See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics, (London and New York: New Accents, Routledge, 1983).

³⁰ See Gérard Genette, Figures III, Collection Poétique, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972).

³¹ These different aspects are based on Genette's distinction between 'histoire', 'récit' and 'narration', pp. 71-6.

³² This difference is drawn by Forster but Rimmon-Kenan, despite underlying it, does not use it in her study.

³³ Forster gives the following example: "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot.' p. 17 in Narrative Fiction.

³⁴ See quotations in this work on p. 114.

Kenan points out in her own chapter on focalisation that, according to Genette 'most studies of points of view ... treat two related but different questions as if they were interchangeable. Briefly formulated, these questions are 'who sees?' versus 'who speaks?' She carries on to argue that 'in principle, focalisation and narration are distinct activities.'³⁵ This distinction is sufficient for the purpose of this study and thus whenever the term 'focaliser' is used, it is to be understood as the character who sees, as opposed to the 'narrator' who speaks; the former is related to the point of view while the latter is related to the voice.

³⁵ See pp. 71-3 in Narrative Fiction.

SECTION I:

THE NOVELS OF THE 20S; A FEMINIST AESTHETICS

This section focuses on the aesthetics characterising Virginia Woolf in the fictional production that was to lead up to The Waves; an aesthetics which appears to be increasingly shaped by feminist concerns. This feminist aesthetics is less theoretically informed than responsive to a tradition of realism established in accordance with masculine values. In that light, the transposing of a feminine gaze on the world necessarily entails a departure from the aesthetics of realism into a feminist aesthetics.

This first part of the work will take the form of a series of essays which examine what problematic is established by Virginia Woolf in the succession of fictional works written during the 20s. The method and the extent to which the author engaged with these problems, which are mainly of an aesthetic nature, will be considered. This examination will progressively develop and support the argument that her methodology in this part of her production can be defined as a feminist aesthetics.

More particularly, Jacob's Room will be considered for its ontological character in its dealing with the conditions and limitations of knowing the reality and people surrounding us. This novel questions the essentialist model of understanding reality, on which realist fiction is based, which presupposes the possibility of ultimate knowledge. In other words, Jacob's Room challenges the notion of biography. A further comparison between Jacob's Room, Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse will then focus on the traditional definition of the self in terms of essentialism. It will ask whether the individual reality of the self can find expression in this essentialist model, and if not, what are the alternative modes of understanding and enunciating the self. More specifically, an examination of Orlando will highlight the stalemate of a definition, and subsequent representation, of the self in relation to gender. As a result, it will also establish a link between ontological questions and feminist aesthetic strategies as a necessity in order to challenge a predominantly masculine point of view on reality. This viewpoint is seen as

informing a realist type of representation that is unable to translate a feminine understanding of reality. These questions will be considered in the light of their shaping Virginia Woolf's aesthetics in terms of style and representation. A focus on each text in turn will show how the author was encountering specific philosophical questions that demanded a new approach to ontology and thus enabled her to elaborate an aesthetic strategy, feminist in its impulse.

1. Jacob's Room: 'It is no use trying to sum people up'

Although chronologically Jacob's Room is Virginia Woolf's third novel, after The Voyage Out, and Night and Day, it is interesting to consider it as her first novel of importance since, in her words, it marks a turning point: 'There's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice.'¹ The philosophical motive behind the text is an enquiry into the conditions and limitations of human knowledge according to our perception of reality. It centres, in particular, on an attempt to get to know Jacob, the central character. This questioning, in terms of the aesthetics of the text, involves a problem of representation: how is it possible to throw light on what is called personality in an adequate manner, that is, create a full portrait of someone which would not be reductive. Indeed, in order to ask new types of questions and to formulate possible answers, a change of methodology is necessary. This study undertakes to show the extent of the novelty of the narrative technique used by the author in Jacob's Room, a novel 'which narrative technique are so innovative that they call attention to themselves.'² This, in turn, will highlight what she felt to be the remnants of a Victorian world in the throes of changing into the modern era.

Jacob's Room, although an early work and despite the traditional tinge which the title yields to the text, is considered by Quentin Bell as 'mark[ing] the beginning of her maturity and fame.'³ Such a statement should entice the reader or critic to cast a particularly inquisitive look at the work, in search for its qualities. Jacob's Room was initially dismissed by many critics on account of its lack of continuity in the narrative line and more generally speaking, with the judgement that it does not eventually come together as a finished product. The Times Literary Supplement's review on publication

¹ D, Wednesday 26 July, 1922, vol. 2 (1981), p. 186. Of The Voyage Out, reading it in 1920 for the first time in almost a decade, she says: 'I can do little to amend, and must go down to posterity the author of cheap witticisms, smart satires and even, I find, vulgarisms -- crudities rather -- that will never cease to rankle in the grave.' Wednesday 4 February, 1920, vol. 2 (1981), p. 17.

² See Alex Zwerdling, Virginia Woolf and the Real World, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), p. 62.

illustrates this response with the opinion that the novel "'does not create persons and characters as we secretly desire to know them"' while The Yorkshire Post's assessment sums up the general mood with the comment that 'the novel had "no narrative, no design, above all no perspective"' and dismissed it as "'a crowded little album of pictures.'"⁴ In the light of this adverse criticism, it is particularly interesting to consider the way in which this novel operates as well as its actual intentions.

At first sight, Jacob's Room actually looks like a Bildungsroman, as did The Voyage Out, making them both, in Clare Hanson's words, 'studies of sexual types and of gender stereotypes.'⁵ Indeed, Jacob's Room features the successive stages in the short life of the male eponymous character, from infancy to death during World War I, through the traditional episodes of education at university and abroad as well as those of his sentimental life. As a consequence of this conventional outlook, the reader is justified in expecting the centrality of Jacob to the story; in other words, his status either as the main focaliser or as the main object of focalisation. Another legitimate expectation concerns the continuity and coherent quality of the temporality of the narrative; a quality entailed by this specific literary genre. Thus, the actual beginning of the novel leads the reader to expect an accurate account of Jacob, building a portrait of his personality and existence over more or less thirty years. The aim of such a novel would be to disclose to the reader as accurately as possible the true self of a young man by the name of Jacob, living in London at the turn of the century, much in the same way as Dickens did with the young Pip in Great Expectations.

Yet, such expectations are not fulfilled in the reading. Instead, the development of the narrative can be described as chaotic, as much in the treatment of temporality as in the blatantly elusive account of Jacob. These characteristics give to the whole novel a random quality that could be regarded as irrelevance, bordering on irreverence, by the Edwardian reader. Clearly, it is more challenging to consider the author's intentions

³ Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf, A Biography, 2 volumes, (London: Pimlico, 1996), vol. 2, p. 88.

⁴ Virginia Woolf A to Z, compiled by Mark Hussey, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995), p. 127.

⁵ See p. 28 in Virginia Woolf, 'Collection' Women Writers, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994).

behind this process, that is to say, a systematic and wilful undermining of expectations. As Laura Marcus underlines: 'Jacob's Room is a textual representation of incompleteness -- of narratives and of lives.'⁶

In this respect, the opening pages are noticeable for setting the tone in a potent manner, foreshadowing the ultimate aim of the novel. The first page illustrates the narrative treatment to which the eponymous character will be submitted from then on. The reader's attention is immediately focussed on his mother, Betty Flanders, but one has to wait until the third page to be invited to turn it to Jacob, so that from the very start his character is tinged with an impression of absence. This sense is reinforced by the calling out of -- 'Ja - cob! Ja - cob!' --- (8) punctuating the first three pages, together with the irritated mention of his name by his mother, underlying the common character of his absence. To a certain extent, Jacob is -- already -- out of the picture and seems always to hover on the margin of the narrative and escape its attempt to frame his portrait. This notion is metaphorically translated by his absence from the picture that Charles Steel is painting at the opening of the novel. This initial use of the notion of the frame by Virginia Woolf will be highlighted as becoming more and more elaborate with the following works. Here, it only appears at a thematic level, as a marker of the transaction of representation between the external world and the object of art.

In an even more powerful way, Jacob is actually hampering the painting by being the cause of the 'exasperation' of the painter. The process by which Jacob is brought up on the scene clearly identifies the aim of the novel as an enquiry into the conditions of knowledge. In spite of his being the object of four different points of focalisation -- that of his mother and his brother, of the painter and of the narrator -- the reader still does not have the usual information he might expect to be given about him, such as his physical appearance, for instance. This process is taken a step further with the incident experienced by the little Jacob. The episode picturing him losing his way on the beach is fairly usual in the life of a young child. Yet, the interest does not lie in the episode itself but in the narration of the incident. During the whole episode, the point of focalisation is

⁶ See p. 33 in Virginia Woolf, (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1997).

the eyes of the child, requiring the adjustment of the external world to his own measure: the rock is 'tremendous' and Jacob 'has to stretch his legs far apart, and indeed to feel rather heroic, before he gets to the top' and the people he sees are 'an enormous man and woman.' This adjustment is pushed to the extreme with the illusion of the rock perceived by the child as his nanny, which results in his eventual feeling of helplessness at having lost his bearings. However, the incident is even more significant in its outcome. The apparition of an adult -- his mother -- in the landscape counterbalances the account of his reality: the beach on which Jacob 'ran farther and farther away', his mother 'covers ... in a few seconds.' These shifts in focalisation stress the main concern of the text as the problematic involved in accounting for reality. Clearly, the reality of Jacob is not that of Betty Flanders, yet hers is no more adequate if taken comparatively: 'Scarborough ... was her native town; the hub of her universe.' (8-10) The implied conclusion, of course, is that every apprehension of the world is subjective and relative; in that light there is no given reality, but only individual bearings, a multitude of points of view on the real. Harvena Richter's thorough study of Virginia Woolf's methodology confirms the amount of subjectivity in the observer's perception with, for example, the notion of angle of vision. Thus, when Mrs Flanders, on the very first page of the novel, 'had the illusion that the mast of Mr Connor's little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun' (7), the reader understands that from then on the reality he is presented with will be screened or coloured by the individual character's emotions or temperament.⁷

Thus the surprising treatment of the narrative gives a clear indication to the reader of the object of the novel. Beyond foreshadowing a new treatment of literary subject, the fact that Jacob is not the centre of attention from the beginning of the novel onwards, together with the recording of his first experience, point towards the intention of the author as recording the difficulty of grasping and transposing the feeling of reality, and more specifically the experience of knowing people. As Avrom Fleishman underlines, one of the major innovations of the novel lies in 'the characterisation of the putative hero

⁷ This is Harvena Richter's example, see p. 97 in *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

as a "problem" in identity.⁸ This novel asks to what extent knowledge is possible, and whether the fragment that can be acquired is likely to be deceptive, considering our vision of reality is itself subjective and deceptive. This point is made by the author when showing how, in accordance with her character or temperament, Mrs Jarvis, the rector's wife, has a reductive view of womanhood:

...marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in the open fields, picking up stones, gleaning a few golden straws, lonely, unprotected, poor creatures. (8)

Later in the novel, another episode tackles this question more precisely by putting into play a method that can be understood as 'perspectivism.'⁹ Mrs Norman is sitting opposite Jacob in the train that takes him to Oxford. Thus acquiring the role of a diegetic narrator and becoming the main focaliser, she tries to get an insight into his personality. The scene develops a step further the inaccuracy of the image we can forge of people, the unreliability of our vision. This is conveyed by the irony of the extra-diegetic narrator when indicating that '[Mrs Norman] stealthily looked over the edge [of her newspaper] to decide the question of safety by the infallible test of appearance...' (32) Yet the most important information is put forward by the extra-diegetic narrator, thus undermining Mrs Norman's judgement. This is the difficulty that lies in trying to understand character and even more in conveying this feeling. The main point of the narrative is not what happens to Jacob, but the way in which it reveals something of the main concern of the author: the business of knowing people. This is made clear in the assumption -- by which the whole novel will proceed -- that

nobody sees anyone as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange man in a railway carriage. They see a whole -- they see all sorts of things -- they see themselves... It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. (33)

⁸ p. 46 in *Virginia Woolf, A Critical Reading*, (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

⁹ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 47.

This is a key passage, as many critics have pointed out,¹⁰ despite the fact that it does not disclose any thematic clue, because it informs the reader of the methodology at work in this novel. Rachel Bowlby, in particular, gives a useful account of its role:

While the passage at first sight implies that 'each' person has a full, inside knowledge of himself or herself, compared to which knowledge of others is only partial, the reading metaphor dispels this distinction by taking away the unity of the self-reader, and thereby puts into focus the partiality, in both senses, of any reading of another, including the reader.¹¹

And indeed, since the -- supposedly -- thorough account of the hero in the Bildungsroman is dismissed, the text is taking the form of a succession of hints, which might be able to reveal something about Jacob.

As was indicated by the general literary background against which Virginia Woolf defines her attempt, her position stems from a particular stance on reality. In this context, aesthetics becomes of primary importance. Here, it is relevant to consider the author's theory on fiction, which she formulated in an essay entitled 'Phases of Fiction'.¹² There, she reviews and evaluates different types of approach to fiction, a move which is useful in putting Jacob's Room in perspective as her first real attempt at embodying her own understanding of what fiction should be.

Clearly, for Virginia Woolf, 'the novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of the life of a real person'. (141) This definition is ontological in nature and thus reveals the author's understanding of reality. This point of view on reality, though, is informed by whether or not the author believes in the concept of truth, and if so, how this concept is defined.

¹⁰ See Laura Marcus, p. 34, Ralph Freedman, in Virginia Woolf. Revaluation and Continuity, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 132, or again Harvena Richter, who gives this as an example of 'mirror mode', p. 109-10.

¹¹ See Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 100.

One kind of truth, which Virginia Woolf dismisses, is that of 'perfunctory fact-recording' which she sees as ultimately having 'nothing of truth in it but the respectable outside.' (103) The urge of 'on with the story' which she feels characterises Defoe's fiction, for instance, is clearly not at work in Jacob's Room, where the notion of story is very minimal. Thus, truth not residing in facts, facts become superfluous in relation to a 'truthful record of the life of a real person'. This position accounts for the lack of factual elements in this novel, which purpose is precisely to truthfully 'record'. For Virginia Woolf, the imbalance that an emphasis on story-telling entails, which is manifested in the characters being deprived of 'the power of self analysis', has to do with a specific point of view, whereby reality can be understood in terms of facts. (97) An opposite point of view is at work in romantic fiction, producing an equal imbalance, although in a different direction. Indeed, a total obliteration of facts accounts for a total loss of perspective which results in characters which are drawn 'not in a minute, introspective way, but largely and in outline.' This method Virginia Woolf finds as lacking as the previous in that it does not achieve a 'final consummation'. (107)

In what she calls 'the character-mongers' or 'comedians', she finds more sympathy to her purpose, such as in the fiction of Jane Austen and George Eliot. Ralph Freedman, for example, sees Virginia Woolf as belonging to the same tradition of the English novel as Jane Austen, that is focusing on the texture of manners.¹³ In this category also features Dickens. However this thesis puts his fiction in direct opposition to Virginia Woolf's. In Jacob's Room for example, the distance implied by Dickens' 'extreme typ[ing] of human beings' (113) is what separates Pip from Jacob, an exaggeration which does not allow characters to 'interlock', which is precisely one of the impulses behind Virginia Woolf's fiction, as well as one of her routes to discovering 'a real person'. The fact that she deplores a lack of interlocking -- that is a fusion of elements into a pattern -- in 'romantics' and 'comedians' alike is illustrative of the central concern of her aesthetics, which is form. This explains why she looks more favourably on Jane

¹² 'Phases of Fiction' in Granite and Rainbow. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), pp. 93-145. This essay is all the more important that it was actually intended to be a book and announced as such by The Hogarth Press in 1927 (PhF).

Austen than on Dickens, because the former possesses 'a quality which is not in the story but above it, not in the things themselves but in their arrangements'. (117) This 'architectural quality' is very important to Virginia Woolf's understanding of fiction, as reflected in the methodology of her critical assessment where she encourages the reader to 'compare book with book as we compare building with building.' Significantly, this methodology is outlined in an essay entitled 'How Should One Read a Book',¹⁴ which warns that 'the book as a whole is different from the book received currently in separate phrases. ... We see the shape from start to finish; it is a barn, a pig-sty, or a cathedral.' (66)¹⁵ Still, all this structural clarity accounts for the lack of 'experience' of Jane Austen's characters, whose 'edges' are too 'sharp' and do not allow for 'the accidental' which for Virginia Woolf is an important part of life. In that respect, Jacob's Room precisely registers the accidental character of life, the external, the passing. The characterisation of Jacob is also a very clear departure from that of Jane Austen or George Eliot. For both of them drawing characters involves a complete knowledge of them, illustrated by the omniscient position of the narrator. In Pride and Prejudice characters are overtly defined by the author with one stroke, that is by one trait of temperament which accounts for their pattern of behaviour, particularly in the case of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy; their consciousness is directly open to the author. Similarly, George Eliot's Dorothea is open to the narrator, who not only can read her mind but also comment on her actions to such an extent that the novel reflects the mind of its author rather than that of its characters, albeit through their indirect speech, and thus entices the reader to implicitly accept the author's values.

Virginia Woolf's characterisation is set in opposition to these traditions, owing to her specific understanding of reality. This enables Ralph Freedman to see Jacob's Room

¹³ p. 124 in Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity.

¹⁴ See Virginia Woolf, The Crowded Dance of Modern Life, edited by Rachel Bowlby, vol. 2, (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 59-69.

¹⁵ David Dowling sees this essay as marking Virginia Woolf's use of the concept of significant form for her purpose. See Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1985), p. 104-5.

as a paradigm in which facts and fiction are brought together.¹⁶ This thesis envisages the text in less certain terms. For Virginia Woolf, these earlier traditions have seen reality and truth in facts or sets of values that are based on an essentialist system. In other words, they believed that 'the life of a real person' could be fully understood in relations to their actions or positions within the social spectrum; they are thus defined as an example, a reflection of something transcendental. This belief, which informs the traditional type of narrative, is translated aesthetically into an intrusive narrator: 'something intervenes.' (118) By contrast, Virginia Woolf writes about the contemporaneous, a modern era, which no longer believes in the stability of things or in their essentialist quality. 'The process of discovery goes on perpetually', and changeability has become the only certainty. (144) In such a climate, knowledge becomes a complicated issue, certainly not easily accessible: 'one must follow hints'. And since conception of the real and truth imposes its perspective on fiction, as indicated earlier, the specific position of Virginia Woolf is what underlies the novelty of her approach to narrative.

Thus the author provides us with the fragments of a mirror which eventually aims at reflecting the image of Jacob. The novel develops along what Ralph Freedman terms a 'choral pattern' with a long stream of people dealing with or catching sight of Jacob;¹⁷ he is 'the silent young man' (63) for Miss Eliot, 'yet distinguished-looking' (65) for Mrs Durrant, but most of the time 'a young man in grey smoking a pipe'. (69) Significantly, although these portraits should be giving a fairly clear outline of Jacob, they paradoxically leave him in the mist, even when it comes to his mistresses. Jacob looks 'like one of those statues ... in the British Museum' (85) for Florinda, or embodies forever 'the beauty of young men ... however lustily they chase footballs, or drive cricket balls, dance, run, or stride along roads' (126), or else sustains comparison 'with the head of the Hermes of Praxiteles' (155) for Sandra. Although the fragments are numerous, the mirror does not in the end yield for us the reflection of the real Jacob, as

¹⁶ See p. 127.

¹⁷ See p. 127.

metaphorically indicated in the text by Jacob's final dissolution into what seems to be, in the last few pages, a world turned to liquid, flowing shapelessly. Mrs Durrant and her daughter Clara, once admired by Jacob, are featured on their way to the opera, caught in a rush, where even the 'long mirrors held the ladies suspended' only temporarily, since 'one must follow; one must not block the way'. And so, poignantly, when 'Clara, looking at the blazing windows ... starts' for 'she saw Jacob', in fact, 'she saw no one.' (187) Finally, the last page crystallises the situation with the disclosure of Jacob's death. The characters that knew him and loved him in the novel together with the reader are left with those fragmented and scattered visions to try and recollect him: 'the narration of a man's life by a synthesis of multiple points of view.'¹⁸

At this point, it might be worthwhile turning to a character that the reader along with Jacob will by then have judged as minor, that is Jinny Carslake. Jacob meets her briefly in Paris while travelling on the continent. She works as a sitter to his painter friend, Cruttendon, and the three of them spend a day together sightseeing in the capital. Owing to her occupation, she is naturally described as loose:

Miss Carslake comes from your part of the world, Flanders. From Devonshire. Oh, I thought you said Devonshire. Very well. She's a daughter of the church too. The black sheep of the family. Her mother writes her such letters. (137)

Yet, paradoxically because of her status as a lost woman, that is to say, on the margin, an outsider both to Jacob's life and to the plot, she is the character entrusted with a significant habit:

and now you find her in pensions in Italy, cherishing a little jeweller's box containing ordinary pebbles picked off the road. But if you look at them steadily, she says, multiplicity becomes unity, which somehow is the secret of life. (140)

A later examination will show that this technique is particular to Virginia Woolf in her attempt to undermine the central position of the omniscient narrator as a position of

¹⁸ See Avrom Fleishman. p. 46.

power, which can be seen as emulating that of the father at the head of the patriarchal family. In a modern reality, knowledge is no longer passed from father to son, as is powerfully illustrated by the conspicuous absence, in this novel, of father figures. Jacob's dead father is but an ineffectual memory at the opening of the text and the Reverend Andrew Floyd, as his early teacher, does not leave any trace in terms of influence, as indicated by his invisibility to Jacob, while passing him on the street. Thus Jacob's education is rounded through discussion with his fellow-students and friends, that is his own generation, in much the same way as the author expanded her education through her experience of the Bloomsbury group. Knowledge is no longer perceived as a monolithic given, but rather as a multi-faceted concept, forever evolving.

This re-evaluation of established values entails consequences for the position of women in society, a fact that Virginia Woolf was keen to translate into her fiction, and the dismissal of the omniscient narrator is but one of its manifestations. Indeed, the presence of a comparatively large number of female characters in this novel only just starts to indicate Virginia Woolf's concern for women in society and their representation in literature, a theme that will increase in importance in her following works. This is also visible in the ironical treatment of Jacob's mother or Mrs Norman or the limited Clara as repressed victims in a society defined by men. Most of all, of course, this concern is sustained in entrusting the character of Jinny with the key to the novel. Considering the novel's attempt at conveying a particular sense of life, Jinny's secret is also a clue to deciphering the novel at large. Readers might here be provided with the key to the problematic ending that the text seems to impose on them.

It is important, in that respect, to disagree with Ralph Freedman's position. His reading of Jacob is that his education taught him how 'to be himself in integrity and freedom.' Although he does perceive Woolf's ironical treatment of her 'hero', he still insists on her role as an omniscient narrator, which allows her and her readers alike a form of identification with Jacob.¹⁹ This position clearly does not take into account the difference in the sexes between the multiple intra-diegetic narrators or the main extra-

diegetic narrator and Jacob as their object. For instance, Alex Zwerdling finds that 'Woolf wanted to maintain an ironic distance between her reader and her main character' and so finds her tone 'patronising.'²⁰ This is indeed one of the main points of the novel and cannot be disregarded. Clare Hanson actually views this novel as a punitive text, in which Jacob is a puzzle for the successive female narrators' point of view.²¹

Hence by lending a careful ear to Jinny Carslake, one understands why even the assembling of the different pieces of the mirror does not give a satisfactory answer to the puzzle of Jacob's self. Fact-collecting does not reveal the soul, and in the same way that looking into Jacob's room will only reveal that it is empty, neither would the reader find Jacob's reflection in the would-be mirror created by the collected visions that the people who happened to cross his screen summoned of him as a person. The text actually suggests that the very process we usually use to give an accurate account or a satisfactory image of the people we want to know is irrelevant. Indeed, 'the secret of life' does not lie in 'the jeweller's box' -- i.e. our would-be mirrors -- but in the very process of 'looking at [the pebbles] steadily', so that the actual self of Jacob is truly to be found in his role as a catalyst. He functions as the common point of intersection in the disparate lives of the characters surrounding him, thus allowing the pattern of the narrative to emerge. If it were not for Jacob, the reader would not have to strain his eyes so as to try and make out the weaving of a fabric in which Jacob is but one of the threads.

This is the way in which from scattered bits and pieces, Jacob and the novel alike make sense, as a pattern more than as a sequential narrative. It is in the pattern thus created that Jacob's self can be known to the extent that it can; in his relationship to other characters, but also to nature and his environment. In this pattern of 'interlocking

¹⁹ See his chapter on the novel: 'The Form of Fact and Fiction: Jacob's Room as Paradigm', particularly pp. 125-138.

²⁰ See p. 70.

²¹ See p. 28. This is also William Handley's opinion, see Virginia Woolf: The Politics of Narration, Stanford honors essays in Humanities, Number XXXI, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 10.

minds', however, Jacob rarely takes an 'active part.'²² Thus he cannot be precisely defined as a portrait because his self resides in each of the different realities that he constitutes for various people. This novel represents an attempt to provide a glimpse of the texture of the world through a structure of relations between elements, both on a personal or thematic level and on an artistic or aesthetic level. In this structure, Jacob functions as an organisational device, in other words, he gives it form. It does not offer us a true or definite image of Jacob as a character, but much more significantly, the reflection of a part of the general pattern of the world, through the prism of art. Aesthetically, it can be seen as an attempt by the author to find a new shape for her fiction.

It is also important to realise that this structure is different in nature from the metaphor of the web used by George Eliot, in Middlemarch for instance. The impulse behind this metaphor is of a moral nature; in this light, because all humans are seen as related in spite of divisions of all kind, the actions of the one affect the other: 'If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally'.²³ The structure created by George Eliot is openly aimed at enforcing specific values, such as moral responsibility; it is a means to an end. Virginia Woolf's idea of structure is not as a means, but an end in itself; the important part of the concept lies in the relation itself. This is illustrated by the fact that Jacob's ties with the people surrounding him are loosened. In effect, and in keeping with a refusal of essentialism, the pattern thus created by the novel is not referential, but significant in itself; from that point of view, it has no moral connotation. To find Jacob, it would be useless to go and knock on the door of his Cambridge room. A better solution would be to let Virginia Woolf lead the reader to discover that

behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we -- I mean all human beings -- are connected with this; that we are part of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is a truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But, there is no

²² See Freedman, p. 134, who actually sees this novel as prophetic of The Waves.

²³ See p. 5 in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics. (London and New York: New Accents, Routledge, 1983).

Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically, there is no God; we are the words, we are the music; we are the thing itself.²⁴

Jacob's Room is the first in a series of attempts at transposing the 'hidden pattern' of life and in that light, Jinny Carslake's secret can be seen as a metaphor for Virginia Woolf's first formal attempt, as Quentin Bell remarked, at meeting her own modern vision of the world with the appropriate aesthetic tool. That Jinny should be a woman and an outsider also signals the desire of the author to elaborate an aesthetics which addresses the specificity of a woman's view of the world as opposed to the given masculine reality, embodied in Jacob; in other words a feminist aesthetics. A study of her works of the 30s will emphasise to what extent this agenda has been met.

From a philosophical point of view, it is clear why the traditional realism of the Bildungsroman is void, since it presupposes a factual reality, a 'Hamlet or a Beethoven' or indeed a Jacob that could be accounted for by his date of birth or place of education. Yet, in Virginia Woolf's mind, we cannot describe and know or look and tell. The aim of the narrative is an ontological enquiry, the outcome of which is that there is no objective given reality but only subjective personal feelings of reality. It challenges the 'real' in 'realism' and in the same move the notion of 'story' understood as 'plot'. The emphasis of the narrative on the notion of pattern also initiates a shift from content to style; an aesthetic strategy which will be more and more prevalent in the following novels as an elusive manner to translate the elusive character of human knowledge. The claim that this text can be considered as her first important piece of fiction can be justified by its modernism which opposes Edwardian expectations in a most dramatic way by downplaying the plot, so that Jacob really escapes the frame of the story. Critics have seen this 'extension of the Bildungsroman form into a fitful sequence of unachieved experiences rather than a coherent process' as one of Virginia Woolf's principal

²⁴ See p. 81 in 'A Sketch of the Past' (SP) in MB.

achievements in this novel.²⁵ It is clearly illustrative of the author's individual attempt at establishing a new aesthetics.

In Jacob's Room, the author lays her emphasis on the object observed -- the character of Jacob -- in order to make her point. The following comparison between this text and two of her subsequent novels, Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, seeks to show how she refined her analysis by shifting her focus. This shift is bi-fold.

On the one hand and since reality is perceived subjectively, the emphasis, this time, will be put more specifically on the self as a subject observing and no longer as an object observed.²⁶ There is a move from the outer to the inner space. Indeed, 'much of To the Lighthouse as well as Mrs Dalloway attempts to define the movement, quality and component parts of thought.'²⁷ This movement positions Virginia Woolf's attempt in the wake of novelists closer in time, in whom she finds some interest. Henry James, whom she knew, figures as one of them because of his describing 'the mind within rather than the world without.'²⁸ The subject observing the complexity of the world also finds an echo in Proust's vast A la recherche du temps perdu, which she was enthusiastic about.²⁹ Yet, the amount of authorial presence as well as the difficulty of the structure of their fiction, makes them both novelists against whom she wants to define herself. Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse are part of this effort as their careful attention to form will show.

On the other hand, the emphasis from then on, after the initial Jacob's Room, is also put more closely on female characters as opposed to the male character of this previous novel. This is particularly true of Mrs Dalloway, where the multiple relations of which Jacob was the centre are concentrated into one main relationship between Mrs Dalloway

²⁵ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 46.

²⁶ This thesis thus disagrees with Ralph Freedman's view of Jacob as a perceiving mind related to perceived objects (p. 132), which is actually the pattern that Mrs Dalloway undertakes.

²⁷ See Harvena Richter, p. 44.

²⁸ See p. 121 in PhF.

and Septimus Warren Smith. To the Lighthouse, on the other hand, is a mixture of both strategies. It focuses on the Ramsay family, with a particular emphasis on the female characters of Mrs Ramsay, for the object observed, and of Lily Briscoe, who, as an artist, is aptly entrusted with the observing process. For example, in her study of Woolf's work, Clare Hanson finds that both novels function as romancing the feminine.³⁰ A gradation of some sort is also at work in the leading of the enquiry into the nature of reality, from Jacob's Room in 1922, where the self is the object being observed, through Mrs Dalloway in 1925, where the self is the source of the observation and becomes a subject, to To the Lighthouse in 1927, where the self is both observing and being observed. Considering the philosophical enquiry in question is articulated along different lines, from an aesthetic point of view it also demands different techniques. This is supported by Harvena Richter's opinion that 'all of her novels ... seek to explain and redefine the self in terms of [Virginia Woolf's] increased awareness and understanding of it. Certainly the view becomes more complicated with each work.'³¹ For instance, the pattern of relationships surrounding Jacob takes place on the level of the diegesis whereas the pattern of which Mrs Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith become a part is strictly established on the structural level of the narrative since the two characters never actually meet each other but instead function as two elements in relation with each other in the text. This technique reinforces the shift from content to form initiated in Jacob's Room and in so doing enables the author to draw an increasingly complex picture of this new sense of reality.

²⁹ Quentin Bell recalls how after completing Orlando, Virginia Woolf 'of course found plenty of fault with it and, reading Proust, everything else appeared insipid and worthless.' p. 138, vol. 2.

³⁰ See chapter III of her study.

³¹ p. 113.

2. Jacob's Room, Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse: a comparison

While Jacob's Room endeavoured to indicate that the self is not an object open to mere pinning-down, Mrs Dalloway further undermines the traditionally essentialist definition of the self as subject and centre. Clare Hanson describes the attempt of the novel as 'creating a subject which would always be exposed and traversed by "the other"' thus putting forward a feminine economy.³²

In Mrs Dalloway, a new consideration is introduced, of how the self is inscribed in time, that is to say, how time is perceived and lived psychologically as opposed to physically. Indeed, Harvena Richter explains how, for Virginia Woolf, time was not measured by the clock but experienced emotionally.³³ This dialectic of time and self takes the shape of what the author termed 'the luminous halo of consciousness.'³⁴ The philosophical inquiry into the self is in turn articulated by shifting the focus onto the inner life and consciousness of the characters at the expense of the development of the plot. This technique, already at work in Jacob's Room, albeit to a lesser extent, reinforces the novelty of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic position. As Susan Dick remarked, the broad external perspective of the narrator in Jacob's Room has evolved into a narrowly focused internal one in Mrs Dalloway.³⁵ This shifting from the outer to the inner space entails a questioning of the realist mode of representation. This inevitably carries consequences for language that will have to be considered. In furthering the overall argument of this thesis, the three texts will be used to show how they contribute to the development of an aesthetics suited to the author's purpose. This thesis proposes to show how Virginia Woolf sought to replace the essentialist definition of the self, in terms of representation, by underlining the influence of the visual arts on her technique. This is particularly relevant in To the Lighthouse.

³² See p. 58. She takes this concept from Cixous.

³³ See p. 38.

³⁴ See p. 8 in 'Modern Fiction' in The Crowded Dance of Modern Life.

³⁵ See p. 185 in her article 'The Tunnelling Process: Some Aspects of Virginia Woolf's Use of Memory and the Past' in Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1983).

The enquiry into the nature of reality that Virginia Woolf started with Jacob's Room is taken a step further in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, both in form and content. This time the main theme concentrates on a feminine vision of the world, which constitutes a new direction that she will adopt in her work from then on. It contributes to understanding her oeuvre as an embodiment of her feminist aesthetics.

In addition to the modern quality exemplified by the narrative treatment of Jacob's Room, the ensuing works of Virginia Woolf are also characterised by a political concern for women which marks her as one of the foremothers of modern feminism. Her modernism is all the more potent and significant for this association with feminism and can be seen as dictated by the need to find an appropriate method to represent reality from a feminine standpoint. Lily's painting, for instance, as 'a feminine marking of the canvas' clearly exhibits her alternative point of view on the world, as we will see.³⁶ And so both the aesthetic and the political elements are intimately merged on a diegetic level.

From an aesthetic point of view then, the author's opposition to the prevalent shape of realist fiction has a political basis. For her, realism conveys a representation from the standpoint of men, describing their sense of reality and thus defining the world according to a masculine model that leaves very little room for the feminine element. This is emphasised, for instance, by the fact that the author herself, in spite of being a member of an intellectual family, felt acutely that she was 'never at school.'³⁷ The literary tradition she inherited was thus shaped by a specific type of culture, patriarchal in essence. This lack of formal education being typical of the period, it is no wonder that in coming to literature she did not find an aesthetics able to translate her vision. As a consequence, what could be perceived as a lack of organisation on her part, such as the random quality of development of her plot, was at the time explicitly deplored by the almost entirely male critics, as noted in the analysis of Jacob's Room. This attitude is internalised in her fiction as a criticism of tradition, which is reflected in the implicit

³⁶ See Clare Hanson, p. 91.

³⁷ See p. 73 in SP.

condemnation of such rambling processes by the male characters themselves. Mr Dalloway, for instance, cannot help being irritated at his wife's lack of accuracy in general, reinforcing a masculine view of the world where everything can be defined according to precise rules, such as the dividing of the day in equal units of time. This is underlined through the constant interruptions of Mrs Dalloway's vagaries by the peremptory chime of Big Ben. Clearly, the development of this text is mirroring her meandering and thus rebuking his exactitude. Maybe more significantly, in To the Lighthouse, this worship of exactitude, which so easily becomes exacting, is a strong feature in the characterisation of Mr Ramsay, who is mainly drawn from the author's father, Leslie Stephen. This particular trait is aptly applied to his intellectual ability, in other words, his understanding of the world:

[His] was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. ... But after Q? What comes next? ... Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. (42-3)

This extract indicates the kind of intellectual legacy Virginia Woolf inherited at the beginning of her career. This autobiographical element also allowed readings of the novel as a reworking of the phallogentricity of the Oedipus complex. Clare Hanson goes against such interpretation, in an argument that this thesis supports.³⁸ Although the novel deals with the relationship between Mr and Mrs Ramsay, it mainly centres on the relationship between young girl and daughter, as played out by Lily and Mrs Ramsay, and further developed in Lily's painting. In that light, the quotation above is to be seen within the context of the ontological inquiry Virginia Woolf started with Jacob's Room, which defines her whole enterprise, and so, appropriately, Mr Ramsay's philosophy centres on 'subject and object and the nature of reality.' (28) The ironical tone of the

³⁸ See p. 72.

whole episode recording this intellectual feat is also an indication of the political link between this way of thinking and patriarchy.

At a first level, it is seen as the basis for defining gender roles:

[If he] requires sympathy, and whisky, and someone to tell the story of his suffering to at once? Who shall blame him? Who will not secretly rejoice when the hero puts his armour off, and halts by the window and gazes at his wife and son, who very distant at first, gradually come closer and closer, till lips and book and head are clearly defined before him, though still lovely and unfamiliar from the intensity of his isolation and the waste of ages and the perishing of the stars, and finally putting his pipe in his pocket and bending his magnificent head before her - who will blame him if he does homage to the beauty of the world? (43)

The woman here functions as a foil to give perspective and validate the effort of the husband; his adventures, whether physical or intellectual, settle her in the background, in a passive role.

At a second level, that of representation, the description is clearly done in romantic terms, echoing Mr Ramsay's predilection for Sir Walter Scott, who also was Leslie Stephen's favourite novelist. It is significant, then, as indicated earlier, that Virginia Woolf rejects the romantics as a model for her enterprise because of their failure in characterisation and 'final consummation'. Interestingly, when one considers that she modelled Mr Ramsay on her father, she finds 'the romantic spirit [to be] an exacting one' (107) because of the demands it puts on the characters it describes. This spirit is clearly at work in Mr Ramsay's attitude towards his wife. It is also relevant, in this context, to compare Mr Ramsay's mental picture of his wife and child seen through the window with the actual portrait that Lily, a friend of the family and one of their guests, is painting of 'Mrs Ramsay sitting in the window with James' (24), looking at the very same scene. Whereas Mr Ramsay's understanding of this scene is all details and exactitude -- 'till lips and book and head are clearly defined before him' --, Lily's preoccupation is with 'the mass, ... the line, ... the colour...' This is significant in that it expresses their respective ways of apprehending reality. Mr Ramsay's obsession with facts, emphasised by his

swearing at his wife, for 'the folly of women's minds enraged him', (38) explains his trust in rationality to give him the key to reality. Once analysed and then defined, order is imposed upon the world, which becomes open to knowledge, if only one can 'reach Q'. James Naremore draws attention to the fact that Virginia Woolf's metaphor is 'an analogy which holds the reader's outside Mr Ramsay's highly verbal patterns of thoughts' whereas in Lily's case 'the metaphor is applied from without in an attempt to get at qualities of mind which are below the level of conscious verbalisation.'³⁹ Thus, Lily, in contrast to Mr Ramsay, is not interested in the precise position or features of her sitter but rather in the overall impression conveyed by this scene, which is indicative of her particular sense of reality; that of the relationship between mother and child,⁴⁰ of her own feeling towards Mrs Ramsay and also, the reality of the here and now, the 'moment'. In her vision, 'life does stand still for a moment as past and present fuse in a fleeting revelation.'⁴¹

This different interpretation of the nature of reality is further emphasised by the relation between self and the world. Indeed, Mr Ramsay uses the scene to affirm his masculinity but also more fundamentally, his status as a subject. This is effected by treating the scene as an object observed, hence the accumulation of details, turning himself into the observer and yielding to him the position of centre. Mr Ramsay's observation of the scene is thus self-centred; he is not primarily interested in the object formed by his wife and son in themselves, but merely in the reflection they send back to him of his own sense of self. Harvena Richter underlines this point by explaining how, for Virginia Woolf's characters, the object becomes a mirror-image, an extension of the self.⁴² This point is made clear by the author in characterising Mr Ramsay's transposition of the scene as a romantic tableau of which he is the hero. Lily's representation of what she sees could not be more striking and different:

³⁹ See pp. 130-1 in *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973).

⁴⁰ Clare Hanson finds that in this novel the author commits matricide and then recreates the mother in the section 'The Window.' p. 73.

⁴¹ See Susan Dick's understanding of the painting, p. 193.

⁴² See p. 67.

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and the staring white, since she saw them like that, fashionable though it was, since Mr Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent. (25)

Thus Lily's vision is not self-centred and does not need the acceptance bestowed by fashion. As Clare Hanson remarks, Virginia Woolf's construction of this character can easily be seen as a forerunner of Luce Irigaray's specifically female subjectivity or 'intersubjectivity', which is precisely based on a refusal of a position of mastery in relation to the other.⁴³ And indeed Lily is concerned with the intrinsic qualities of the object, its materiality -- in other words, 'the thing itself.' From an aesthetic point of view, Lily's painting offers a new form for a new attempt at understanding reality quite unlike the traditional type of representation exemplified by Mr Ramsay.

Virginia Woolf is thus refining a new form, much more rewarding in its outcome than the realist fashion metaphorically echoed in the accuracy praised by Mr Dalloway or the ordered linearity of Mr Ramsay's rational thinking. She uses the notion of structural patterns, such as Lily's painting, in order to make a point about her initial concern. This pattern created by an inward and evasive transposing of characters conveys to the reader much more of their personality, yearnings, and interests than a thorough description would because it captures the very unique reality of being alive, hidden behind the surface of a life regimented according to external rules imposed by society, and more specifically men, owing to their position of power in this structure. A clear image of Mrs Dalloway does not emerge from the novel, save for her wits, and of Mrs Ramsay, except for her beauty, yet both texts manage to convey to the reader a very strong sense of their consciousness in the varying circumstances of their lives. One can say that for Virginia Woolf, this awareness of inner thought is the closest one can hope to come to knowing a person.

⁴³ See p. 86.

This is achieved technically, especially in the case of Mrs Dalloway. In her diary, while she was writing the draft of this novel, Virginia Woolf recorded how she had discovered a new fictional technique that would allow her to explore the psyches of her characters in her new novel:

I should say a good deal about [Mrs Dalloway] and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters ... the idea is that the caves shall connect, & each come to daylight at the present moment.⁴⁴

This supports the author's philosophical concept of a change of the very definition of self. The prevailing essentialist definition of the self as determined by social codes and unified in the thinking process constitutes a realist representation of it. In opposition to this representation, the author seeks to describe characters for themselves, through the fragmented discourse of their consciousness. As Makiko Minow-Pinkney underlines this fragmentation of the psyche, which is the general experience of modernity, is understood by the woman writer as 'a positive force for heterogeneity, unlike her male counter-parts who tends to look nostalgically back to some pre-Renaissance "unified sensibility."⁴⁵ Aesthetically, Virginia Woolf is searching for the shape that will embody 'the pattern behind the cotton wool' and this constitutes the main direction of her work throughout her life. Indeed, Susan Dick sees a strong evolution of this 'tunneling' technique. While it is not yet used in Jacob's Room, it is perfected for Mrs Dalloway and further developed in To the Lighthouse, foreshadowing the use of it in the later works.⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf's method attempts to mirror 'the work of art we are part of' with the hope that it will reveal glimpses into the hidden aspect of the self, buried beneath the humdrum of daily life. As James Naremore observed: 'It is likely that Virginia Woolf regarded the aesthetic act ... as a means of apprehending an underlying order in life which is

⁴⁴ Diary, 30 August 1923, ii, p. 263, quoted by James King in Virginia Woolf, (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

⁴⁵ See p. 168 in Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

⁴⁶ See p. 176-7.

concealed from us by everyday existence.⁴⁷ Thus the relation between the two main characters in Mrs Dalloway is one of form, which positions them both as a part of 'the work of art' and their respective sense of self is illuminated through this meaningful connection.

Similarly, the character of Mrs Ramsay and, after her death, what she represented in Lily's life, is transposed technically by the painting of a 'triangular purple shape.' (59) Harvena Richter underlines how To the Lighthouse shows the best illustration of the abstractive process through Lily's "painter's vision", that is to say, how complex interrelationships and emotions may be expressed in geometric form.⁴⁸ Clearly, the picture is not meant to be representational, although some critics, like Avrom Fleishman, have been intent on elucidating what the picture actually looks like. His evidence brings him to see the line running down the painting as the lighthouse. This literal understanding makes him define Lily's achievement as bringing 'certainty in thought and completion in form.'⁴⁹ In contrast, this thesis sees it as constituting the same departure in painting as the departure from realism operated by Virginia Woolf. Lily's attempt to find a form, significant in its organicity, to account for the reality of Mrs Ramsay's life and her own part in it, illustrates as much the question of representation as the problem of ontology which the author positions at the centre of her literary attempts. As with Mrs Dalloway's party, the important part of Lily's portrait is that it enables her to give shape to the feeling that 'one could not say what one meant' (26) by offering relations between various elements, a method reminiscent of the notion of 'multiplicity within unity', central to Jacob's Room.⁵⁰ In turn, this pattern creates a 'unity of the whole' (61) which is open as opposed to being centred on the self, in order to capture 'the thing itself before it has been made anything', (208) a portrait without a name. Susan Dick underlines that

⁴⁷ See p. 74.

⁴⁸ See p. 186.

⁴⁹ See p. 132-3.

⁵⁰ See Harvena Richter's example, p. 43-4.

'it is clear from her treatment of Lily's struggle that Woolf is more interested in the process than in the product and that it is where the reader's attention is directed, too.'⁵¹

As indicated above there are many different interpretations of Lily's purple triangle and to a large extent they shape the reading of the whole novel. This very fact indicates that a realist understanding of the painting, like that provided by Avrom Fleishman, would only diminish the significance of the novel, as an Oedipal reading does. Clare Hanson, in keeping with her notion of To the Lighthouse as romancing the feminine and echoing Herbert Marder's view of Mrs Ramsay as the ideal personality,⁵² sees the painting as a representation of 'a transcendent feminine ideal.'⁵³ However, the fact that it is presented under an abstract shape, that it is neither signed nor titled⁵⁴ and will not be put on display, all seem to direct the reader towards a less definite assessment of it. Indeed, it might even indicate Virginia Woolf's reticence towards the risk of idealising Mrs Ramsay. In other words, she might have sensed that taking such a direction would implicitly comply with the essentialist model she rejected. In To the Lighthouse the author's vision is thus truly modern in that it undermines an essentialist definition of the self as subject and centre. This is supported by Laura Marcus in her recent study, which describes an evolution in Virginia Woolf's writing which becomes increasingly more radical in her questioning of the self.⁵⁵

While Jacob's Room questioned the notion of self as defined by external signs, using the notion of the frame to that effect, in Mrs Dalloway it is the frame of time that is put under scrutiny.

This questioning is sustained by a new consideration of how the self is inscribed in time, a question that is treated at length in this novel and illustratively symbolised by Big

⁵¹ See p. 192.

⁵² See p. 178 in Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁵³ See p. 93. Although her principle of concretization is very useful (see p.185), Harvena Richter still takes an essentialist position on the meaning of the picture: 'The slanting lines which finally connects the two masses, or worlds, in Lily's canvas are the enduring emotion between wife and husband which Lily at first did not perceive.' (note 21, p. 78) This sense of reconciliation also presents the painting as a finished product.

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note here that Avrom Fleishman actually gives a title to the picture -To the Lighthouse- thus again putting a limitation on the potentiality of meanings that it carries, p. 134.

Ben which stands as a metonymy for the Establishment and its laws. In direct opposition to this, modernists perceived how one does not feel and live one's experiences by clock-time but rather by a psychological time that does not have the same value as the former one.⁵⁶ This is why Virginia Woolf can devote a hundred pages to either a few hours or a few years depending on how fraught with emotional intensity these periods are. The indication is that the characters' consciousness of reality is best penetrated at a deeper level than that of the surface reality as organised around social dealings. This is exposed in this novel, in which Mrs Dalloway's reality, that of her consciousness, constitutes the very body of the text. Harvena Richter explains how the reader experiences the novel vertically. In other words, he is plunged into it, since he is literally submerged into Clarissa's consciousness.⁵⁷ The social organisation of her life does not equate with her conscious reality, as exemplified by her feeling of being two persons at once: 'She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on.' (12) This notion is emphasised by the author identifying those rare occasions of acute awareness as 'moments of being',⁵⁸ akin to a revelation about the nature of self. She further indicates her aesthetic intentions by explaining that this experience

is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words.⁵⁹

Accordingly, and since time can be felt by the subject to expand at will, actions recede into the background to make way for feelings, thoughts, and fleeting impressions, as the material for those all important 'moments' which are deemed more likely to render the character in his/her full consciousness and thus sense of self. Indeed, these moments can

⁵⁵ See p. 15 in Virginia Woolf, *Writers and Their Work* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997).

⁵⁶ Some early criticism of Virginia Woolf finds the influence of Bergson's 'concept of "la durée" (duration) as the reality of time, demonstrated by the phenomena of memory' in her handling of time. This is the case of Harvena Richter, who nevertheless mentions that Virginia Woolf evolved her own theory of the 'moment of being.' See also Shiv Kumar, Bergson and the Stream-of-Consciousness, 1953.

⁵⁷ See p. 10.

be understood as the 'gaps' or 'pauses' that Patricia Oudek Laurence sees in the author's work as 'associated with the suspension of the "ordinary cotton-wool of experience", marking the moment before the mind [sinks] to meditative, perhaps unconscious depths.'⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf's questioning of the self is thus based on a particular philosophical concept that

life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. ⁶¹

In other words, since one's awareness of life operates at the level of consciousness, its representation ought to follow this pattern. Indeed, the novel can be seen to follow 'a pattern based on the alternating movements of two basic emotions: an upward movement to convey a feeling of vitality and a downward or falling movement to show despair.'⁶² These insights into the author's feelings about life explain why she considers the realist tradition, which gives life as a pattern 'symmetrically arranged' as unable to translate the feeling of reality. As a consequence, this position accounts for the structure of the narrative of Mrs Dalloway, whereby this character's 'stream of consciousness'⁶³ takes the fore in comparison to the actual descriptions of her physically preparing for her party which functions as the focus of the novel. Harvena Richter finds that 'in no other novel has Virginia Woolf penetrated more deeply into subjective states and attempted in so many ways to reproduce the sense of the flow and pattern of the mind', an opinion

⁵⁸ See p. 82 in SP.

⁵⁹ See p. 80 in SP.

⁶⁰ See The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 200.

⁶¹ See p. 8 in 'Modern Fiction'.

⁶² See Harvena Richter, p. 227.

⁶³ The initial definition of this term comes from 'William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to describe the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind'. (p. 180 in A Glossary of Literary Terms, M. H. Abrams, Cornell university, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, Inc., The Dryden Press, Saunders College Publishing, 1988). The term has since been used in varying ways, notably as a synonym for 'interior monologue'. For my purpose, I mean by it an extreme use of mimesis, by which the narrator's presence is as little felt as possible.

which will need to be assessed later on.⁶⁴ Still, if one considers the ending of the novel, once again the puzzling effect encountered with her previous novel is strongly felt, for on the level of the story, the expectations about an event that have been building-up throughout the narrative are rather deflected. Indeed the party offers very little in terms of event and its real value is aesthetic: it has to do with the handling of form in its transposing. It culminates as the climax of the novel in two different ways.

Firstly, it affords the afore-mentioned pattern, by which all the disparate characters encountered previously come together and connect. Secondly it makes the link between Mrs Dalloway and the other important character of the novel, Septimus Warren Smith. They never meet and yet it is quite clear that the shell shocked war veteran is linked into a relation with the socialite. In a traditional sense, as Ralph Freedman has shown, Clarissa stands for the world of manners and Septimus embodies the realm of tragedy.⁶⁵ Yet, it is more interesting to see Septimus, as Minow-Pinkney has done, as a 'defensive' splitting, so that Clarissa and he are part of one composite character. This relation is truly achieved at the party where the casual mention of his death by a surgeon guest connects Septimus with Clarissa,⁶⁶ and one can believe, redeems her from her superficiality, by shedding light on 'the pattern hidden behind the cotton-wool'. Harvena Richter goes further and sees his suicide as an 'atonement' for Clarissa's guilt at her social position.⁶⁷ Indeed, this connection helps her to realise emotionally her persistent feeling of being an outsider; a feeling which is invaluable to her sense of self. In other words, the reality of her self does not reside in her role as a socialite, that is an insider who is part of the establishment, but in the inward world of her own consciousness. This connection also has a strong political connotation, with the notion that women only ever belong to the system by association. Effectively Clarissa has the same status as Septimus. Mrs

⁶⁴ See p. 58.

⁶⁵ See his article Jacob's Room as Paradigm in Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, p. 138. This assessment is echoed in Avrom Fleishman view of the novel's uniqueness in its portrayal of high-society life, and his judgement that among Woolf's works, it is the one that most closely satisfies the traditional view of what a novel should be, despite its technical innovation, p. 69.

⁶⁶ James Naremore finds that by absorbing the suicide of Septimus, Mrs Dalloway comes to terms with death, p. 110.

⁶⁷ See p. 119.

Dalloway's position in society, through a successful marriage, is as precarious and arbitrary as Septimus' dismissal from it, through the failure of his sanity. Their connection is thus deeply meaningful; potentially they are both outsiders. Indeed, Septimus' classification as 'insane' can be seen as the same sign of containment by patriarchy as the management of women in society.⁶⁸ This is powerfully transposed on the level of form, which has both characters engaged in a common pattern. Thus the novel functions at a formal level rather than on the level of plot and makes sense aesthetically.

In that light, the aesthetic movement towards form as opposed to content initiated in her previous novel is here further enhanced. This is also noticeable in the fact that the use of the frame remains thematic in Jacob's Room, with mentions of frames and paintings at a diegetic level, whereas in this novel the notion of the frame of time starts to affect the structure of the narrative. Indeed, the sequentiality of the events narrated, encapsulated within a given temporal structure, which makes for the traditional notion of story, is here distorted. As remarked earlier, Jacob escapes the frame of the story, in that no thematic account ever seems to give a definite impression of him. Mrs Dalloway, on the contrary, is always present, but the narrative itself is informed by the author's specific understanding of the relation between self and time. This is reflected by the way in which the usual time sequence is distorted by contractions and expansions.⁶⁹ This provides a meandering narrative, which follows every alley of the mind, so that the whole text describes the span of one day as

a myriad impressions -- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old ...⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See Clare Hanson's point on this, p. 17, or Harvena Richter on Septimus as the unconscious and Clarissa as the conscious, p. 120.

⁶⁹ This is Harvena Richter's terminology, p. 158.

⁷⁰ See p. 8 in 'Modern Fiction'.

Thus, the philosophical enquiry of Virginia Woolf into the nature of the self and the reality of its manifestation from a feminine point of view requires her to shape her fiction in a new way.

In that light, the sense of novelty experienced in reading Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse is similar to that of reading Jacob's Room and so is first perceived as a feeling of surprise, if not discomfort, at the way the stories are handled. For, as indicated earlier, story and plot seem to have vanished along with such Edwardian rules as chronology, detailed description of setting, or link of causality. While Jacob's Room presents a very irregular and blurred chronology with an 'episodic organisation ... [which] progresses with a series of discreet jumps through Jacob's life',⁷¹ Mrs Dalloway devotes a large two hundred page section to a single day and To the Lighthouse centres on a prospective journey which is postponed by a period of ten years. Moreover, the sense of blurredness experienced at the reading of Jacob's Room is created by the elusiveness of Jacob in spite of his being the central object of a criss-crossing of gazes, whereas this sense is furthered in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse by the emphasis being shifted from the object to the subject, with a particular stress on the inner life and consciousness of the characters as subjects. This, as a consequence, entails the downplaying of the plot, so that the first overall impression is one of lack of development and progress.

From an aesthetic point of view, this progression is part of Virginia Woolf's intention to get rid of 'this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner.' It is this mode of representation, which contents itself with 'the cotton-wool' thus obscuring 'the pattern behind', that she finds to be 'false, unreal, merely conventional.'⁷² Jacob's Room opposing the traditional time-scale of the Bildungsroman, was the first part of a challenge to the realist tradition. The distortion of the frame of temporality in both her following novels constitutes a further challenge, which contributes to her modernism. With each new novel, the author elaborates a new

⁷¹ See Sue Roe's introduction to Jacob's Room in Virginia Woolf, Introductions to the Major Works, edited by Julia Briggs, (London: Virago Press, 1994), p. 91.

aesthetics, which increasingly challenges the writing conventions of her time. Like the fictional writer in a Room of One's Own, 'First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence.' (76)

In order to understand fully the nature of this new aesthetics, it is interesting to consider the essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.'⁷³ Written between Jacob's Room and Mrs Dalloway, it constitutes an attempt at defining this new attitude to fiction. Built on the episode of the old lady in the carriage in Jacob's Room, it reverses roles and pictures an old lady as a metaphor for the quintessential character, that is 'human nature.' (80) She is the object that the novelist tries to capture.

As underlined, one of Virginia Woolf's main difficulties as an author lies in the lack of models and the inefficiency of convention to express her particular vision. In this essay, she precisely positions herself as a writer of 'modern fiction' and it is from this vantage point that she attacks the tradition preceding her. (69) When reflecting on this tradition, she also highlights that fiction is directly related to what the author understands by 'reality' and 'truth'. This is the debate that divides 'the Edwardians' and 'the Georgians.' For Virginia Woolf this is emphasised by the evidence that

all human relations have shifted -- those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. (71)

In the light of such fundamental alterations to the fabric of life, what is called reality is bound to have changed. As a child of the modern era, of which she is also the champion, she endeavours to capture the multi-faceted character of this new-found sense of reality. Her indictment of the traditionalists, in particular Mr Bennett, is precisely founded on their failure to recognise and transpose this sense of modernity. Although she admits the need for realism as a step in the overall development of literature, the general understanding of 'reality' as 'lifelike, true and convincing', that is mostly concerned with the surface 'practical business of life', does not take into account or do justice to the

⁷² D, Wednesday 28 November, 1928, vol. 3 (1982), p. 209.

changes which constitute life in the early part of the twentieth century. The desire precisely to take these changes into account is what shapes Virginia Woolf's fiction. As Pamela Transue underlines, 'Woolf's stylistic innovations function as subtle vehicles of a feminist consciousness.'⁷⁴ In this respect, it is illustrative that in the essay, the character observed, Mrs Brown, is female, while the author observing, Mr Bennett, is male.⁷⁵ Mr Wells' fiction is characterised as 'manly', for instance. Part of the new reality, though, is the political element of feminism, which not only entails a new perspective on female characterisation, but also allows the possibility of a female author telling the tales of women's lives on their own account and not only in relation to men. The question of representation then becomes all-important in the endeavour to render modern reality from the feminine point of view. To fit this new purpose, a radical new method is needed, since 'the literary convention of the time is so artificial' that it 'becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment.' Thus Virginia Woolf finds that:

[Edwardians] have made tools and established conventions which do their business; and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools death. (80)

The bluntness of this assertion highlights the degree of questioning of the unitary and humanist vision of the self. At the other extreme, Virginia Woolf's works are an attempt at 'relating the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary' (80), which the straightforwardness of realism is unable, as well as unwilling, to do. This 'relating' needs to be expressed in a different way, which entails forging a new shape of fiction. As Virginia Woolf wondered:

⁷³ See pp. 69-87 in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', in *A Woman's Essays Selected Essays*: vol. 1, edited by Rachel Bowlby, (London: Penguin Books, 1992) (B&B).

⁷⁴ See *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 12.

⁷⁵ Gillian Beer also makes this observation in her essay 'We're Getting There', p. 5 in *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996)

Is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display?⁷⁶

Form itself answers this question. To translate this 'uncircumscribed spirit' her works are going to take as uncircumscribed a shape until the fiction of the 30s becomes characterised, in Harvena Richter's words, by this sense of the fluid, the shifting, the fragmented in life.⁷⁷ Her texts thus provide a space where random memories, fleeting impressions, and impulsive feelings -- the very material of consciousness -- can express themselves at length and are allowed to follow their natural course without being constricted by an arbitrary shape, imposed from the outside. The way the subject perceives life then, his/her very perception of it, becomes the only reality that matters to him/her and this is what informs this new narrative shape.

The author's questioning of realism can thus be defined as a change of perspective resulting in a drawing from the outer to the inner space, hence from 'plot' to 'stream-of-consciousness', thus giving an inward turn to literature. This aesthetic position, in turn, has bearings on the language used for representation and on its reliability both as a means of expression for individuals and representation for the artist. Indeed, if one accepts that the vision that matters is subjective, then the position of the omniscient narrator cannot be tenable any more, since it presupposes an objective knowledge of reality. Instead 'Woolf insists that this hierarchical relationship [between author and character] be reversed, the author deliberately inhibiting himself and straining to listen to his characters.'⁷⁸ As indicated earlier, the narrative voice is another question that she considers in relation to tradition. In her view, Mr Bennett's fiction is to be dismissed on account of the overpowering presence of the author's voice in the text, which by imposing his point of view leaves the reader to infer the elements of human nature. His accumulation of details and facts obscures rather than illuminates his characters. This is related to an understanding of self as unitary, that is, potentially open to full knowledge. Virginia

⁷⁶ See p. 8 in 'Modern Fiction'.

⁷⁷ See p. 6.

⁷⁸ See Alex Zwerdling, p. 43.

Woolf does not subscribe to this notion, but rather denounces it as a social construct. This is exposed by Mrs Dalloway's conscious effort to focus her being into the self she presents to people:

She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self -- pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room... (42)

Indeed, when on her own, her sense of self is fragmented and she perceives it as multiple, so that when she deals with others, the unitary identity she features is really an artifice, a concession to a social order. The fact that she operates this change in front of her mirror also stresses the artificial character of this image. Although Harvena Richter finds that by looking in a three-folded mirror Clarissa shows the reader her multi-emotional self, she does not see this as a political point.⁷⁹ The important fact is that Clarissa is compelled to reduce the multiplicity of her personality to one public façade: her social self.

The implications for Virginia Woolf's aesthetics of the subject's loss of unity and centrality have to be considered again, entailing in turn the loss of the omniscient narrator.

This study underlines that in terms of representation, the notion of pattern and significant form⁸⁰ acquires an importance superior to that of development of plot. From then on, meaning is to be found not only at story level, in themes indicative of

⁷⁹ See p. 112. Harvena Richter actually finds that 'the search for a key self is the goal of the individual on each novel' and she offers Clarissa's diamond as a point in case for 'a symbol of total personality integration.' (p. 117, note 9) This seems to infer an essentialist notion of the self that the thesis does not support, particularly in view of the theme of the novel as the political restrictions imposed on the individual, and particularly women, by a social order defined as patriarchal (cf. the character of Dr Bradshaw).

⁸⁰ This notion becomes of such importance to Virginia Woolf's aesthetics that a section of my work will concentrate on this concept. Thus, every time I use the term 'significant form' before this section I am merely indicating the use and position of the concept within the early works and take it to mean the possibilities of formal relations as opposed to content.

connections, but also at narrative level, in the very structural character of the text. If, at the same time, one considers the author's vision of lending a voice to women's experiences, then the emergence of an increasing gender division becomes noticeable, particularly in relation to language; that of characters as much as that used for representation. So it appears that, significantly, the ability of gaining access to deep meaning and discovering the self 'behind the cotton-wool' is mostly granted to female characters.

Here lies the link between modernism and feminism, for this feminine answer to the ontological question is embodied in a modernist shape, as it is to be found in the notion of pattern; a notion more easily accessible to women because of its non-referential and non-linear character. The author uses this notion of pattern, because it does not restrict meaning by giving definition, and is significant as such, in itself. From that point of view, it enables her to give character according to her own notion that 'we are the thing itself'. In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' the author expresses such a strong dissatisfaction with the traditional novel that she wonders 'if we are right to call them books at all.' (77) This feeling is prompted by the referential character of this type of fiction, its beckoning to the outside, which she says leaves the books it produces 'incomplete'. On the other hand, books with formal qualities, that is 'interested in the book in itself', are those capable of giving an adequate representation of character. This notion that novels should work organically, invent their own formulae and thus become 'self-contained' constitutes the driving force behind the author's search for a new aesthetics. This also clearly entails a change in the relationship between the author and the reader, whereby the latter has to become involved in a process of participation.⁸¹

A powerful parallel thus emerges between the pattern of the novel -- that is on a structural level -- with its fine entanglement of echoes, images, and correspondences which finally come together as a 'work of art; where one thing follows another and all

⁸¹ This point is also made by Harvena Richter, p. 11.

are swept into a whole'⁸² and the pattern which the characters are looking for -- that is on a thematic level. This pattern is illustrated by Mrs Dalloway's party:

But it was her street, this, Clarissa's; cabs were running round the corner, like water round the pier of a bridge, drawn together, it seemed to him, because they bore people together going to her party, Clarissa's party. (176)

and Lily Briscoe's picture:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was -- her picture -- ... Its attempt at something. ... With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there in the centre. It was done, it was finished ... Yes, she thought, I have had my vision. (224)

The episode of the dinner in To the Lighthouse operates in a similar way. It starts as an ordinary family occurrence at which Mrs Ramsay presides 'wearily.' Her sense of division and waste is powerful, since she feels that 'nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate.' This feeling is highlighted by the fact that all she sees are disparate elements, meaningless in their familiarity, 'all the plates making white circles on [the table].' (91) The dinner only takes on significance when it comes together as a 'whole' into which each participant is drawn:

Nothing need to be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all around them. It partook, she felt, ... of eternity, ... there is a coherence in things, a stability. (113)

This notion of togetherness is illustrated by the magical quality invested in the pattern created by 'the dish of fruit', which is described in the manner of a still life.⁸³ The

⁸² See p. 84 in SP.

⁸³ See p. 117 in TL. The Post-Impressionist emphasis on form and colour of this description makes it reminiscent of Cézanne's numerous still lives of fruit dishes such as Still life with basket of apples. (David Bowling tells how Virginia Woolf had an exhilarating discussion with Roger Fry and her sister Vanessa about one such painting, see p. 97). Virginia Woolf's notion of the moment of being, by which ordinary events or objects are invested with significance can also be linked to Roger Fry's definition of Cézanne's achievement: 'Cézanne whom most of us believe to be the greatest artist of

pattern is thus the instrument of this 'one-making': 'But looking together united them.' (105) It creates a moment of being which allows all participants to feel reality at a deep level by being immersed in the present: 'Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain.' (114) This can allow to see Mrs Ramsay as a poet of her own life, since she effectively organises a whole scene around the image of the object, thus using the principle of creativity.⁸⁴

This is felt as the only way in which the world makes sense, becomes significant, as opposed to a male world informed by Mr Dalloway's accuracy or Mr Ramsay's exacting intellectuality, which only contribute to the weaving of 'the cotton-wool' and turn 'the semi-transparent envelop' into an opaque structure. This is what female characters are forever opposing with their attempt at breaking-up this structure. Indeed, both Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay exhibit their feminine quality by letting go of their sense of self so that their event functions as a getting-together.⁸⁵ It is also precisely what Lily is doing by setting Mrs Ramsay free from the frame of the traditional portrait and thus her painting stands, metaphorically, for the breaking up of the frame of traditional representation. Her vision is one of form, which goes back to the aesthetics of the author.

This comparison between Jacob's Room, Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse shows how with each new work carries out Virginia Woolf's vision in a different way, thus contributing to the refining of her aesthetics. Indeed, each new novel shows more clearly that what counts in the search for reality is being part of the pattern, connected with moments of being to the wider scheme of things and being aware that 'one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does.'⁸⁶ This is illustrated by Mrs Dalloway's feelings of being part of London and its incessant flux of life even in death:

modern times expressed some of his grandest conceptions in pictures of fruit and crockery on a common kitchen table.' 'The Artist and Psychoanalysis', p. 362 in A Roger Fry Reader, edited by Christopher Reed, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). Virginia Woolf's relation to the visual arts will be considered in detail in a later section.

⁸⁴ See Harvena Richter, p. 70.

⁸⁵ This is Clare Hanson's observation, p. 64.

⁸⁶ See p. 81 in SP.

... did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces at it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (13)

This concept stands in opposition to the omniscient narrator's gaze as an organising principle of the world, shaping only one given reality. So this succession of works represents different stages of relationships and attempts at description of a pattern. After Jacob's Room, both Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse give a further blow to the realist tradition of representation and thus prepare for a complete departure from it. They epitomise the author's modern aesthetic vision with her use of elements derived from the notion of significant form, instead of plot. This is evident in a growing influence of the visual arts on her narrative technique and her increasing reliance on methods borrowed from the visual arts to give shape to her vision.

This progression can be seen in comparing Jacob's Room with the two following novels. In the first text, pictorialism is used at a thematic level only, in scenes reminiscent of impressionist paintings, for instance. This level of use is symbolised by the incident of the painter at the opening of the story, which functions as a metaphor only and does not affect the structure of the narrative. Mrs Dalloway, by contrast, already shows in its structure the notion of relation between elements central to Post-Impressionism.⁸⁷ So, similarly, in Mrs Dalloway, it is not merely the object observed which matters, as in Jacob's Room, but the very relation between the objects, since the

⁸⁷ The section dealing with Virginia Woolf's experimental short stories will give a detailed account of the relation between her writing and Roger Fry's exposition of Post-Impressionism. (pp. 80-97 of this work) For this point, it is enough to know that Roger Fry considers plastic design as a distinctive element of Post-Impressionism: 'When once the plastic relations are duly established in a design, when once the relations of each volume to the other are ascertained, everything takes its due place "in the picture," even though the artist may choose to disregard the niceties of tone and colour values, even though his proportions are obviously inaccurate as representation.' 'Plastic Design', in A Roger Fry Reader, p. 138.

novel is built, at a structural level, on the relation between Mrs Dalloway and Septimus. To the Lighthouse takes this use of pictorialism even further not only by leaving the final resolution to a painter on a thematic level but also by presenting the text as a painting. On a structural level, the text is constituted by three sections, 'The Window' and 'The Lighthouse' effectively framing 'Time Passes'. The sense of framing is reinforced by the fact that this middle section, as underlined by the title, can be seen as a 'nature morte.' Clearly, it deals with the morbid atmosphere of the house following Mrs Ramsay's death, and thus the element of action linked to the notion of plot is here at its minimum. From that point of view, it is the literary equivalent of a still life painting; it partakes of the imaginative life as opposed to the sections of the narrative framing it, which partake of the actual life of the characters' actions. Moreover, Lily's painterly vision can be seen as a demonstration of Virginia Woolf's theory of representation in literature:

It was Mrs Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection -- that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. (60)

In the process, Virginia Woolf establishes herself both as a modernist and as a feminist, her strength being to succeed in progressively and inextricably merging these two qualities on the level of content and form. Thus, she quite naturally appeals to a female readership which finds in her work a sympathetic voice uttering their concerns, focusing their wonderings and interests and providing insights into their own part in the general pattern of life -- giving them a personality of their own. As a consequence, one can say that, at long last, Virginia Woolf is getting nearer her vision by presenting women with the gift of 'a room of their own'. Her aesthetics is thus feminist in its nature and modernist in its manifestation. This feminist concern is crystallised even more in her next novel, Orlando, which focuses on the notion of self in relation to gender, bringing the concept of a feminist aesthetics a step further.

At this point of the discussion, it is useful to remember Clare Hanson's argument. In keeping with her view of these last two novels as romancing the feminine, she finds that in Mrs Dalloway in particular, Virginia Woolf aligns herself with 'feminine' structures of relationships and also, in general, with a primary maternal principle of creativity.⁸⁸ Yet, as my analysis of Lily's painting emphasised, this position presents the danger of reiterating the essentialist model, based on biological categories, which Virginia Woolf herself sees as the basis of patriarchy. Thus in a logical step, and as Clare Hanson emphasises, the author 'begins to move away from an articulation of the feminine as ideal to an examination of the feminine as it has been culturally constructed.'⁸⁹ This is the project behind Orlando.

⁸⁸ See p. 71.

⁸⁹ See p. 92.

3. Orlando: 'a voice answering a voice'

While Jacob's Room set out the author's project as an enquiry into the conditions of knowledge, and Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse identified the problems attached to a realist representation of an essentialist self, Orlando, on an even larger scale, concentrates more specifically on the consequences of such a representation in relation to gender.⁹⁰ This identification of the metaphysical problems involved in defining the self in relation to 'biological sexuality and psychological gender' operates at different levels.⁹¹

This discussion starts by considering what are the implications for the self of an identity constructed on an essentialist notion of gender. In turn, this consideration underlines the problem of the illusion created by social codes, a theme which will be explored in many a subsequent novel. The link between the Paterian conception of personality and the author's conception of feminism and modernity will also be discussed. This ties into the question of time and the nature of the present moment in relation to the concept of self, a question already investigated in Mrs Dalloway, which will here be given more of a feminist edge.⁹² Orlando also entails a particular point of view on history and the role of the individual, or more specifically women's part in history, which can be seen as another component in the definition of the self as a social construct.

The extent to which these questions affect representation in art in general and literature in particular is then considered. A focus on the interaction between gender and writing will concentrate this consideration in political terms. In that light, the notion of significant form in relation to an aesthetic production, such as literature, is considered as

⁹⁰ Avrom Fleishman notes an evolution in scope from one life novels, like Jacob's Room or Mrs Dalloway to family history novels, like Orlando. See p. 135.

⁹¹ Clare Hanson, p. 99.

⁹² Harvena Richter remarks on this point that Virginia Woolf is very sensitive to the relationship between time and personality, like Walter Pater, and goes on to give a detailed study of the three main modes of time in the oeuvre. See chapter ten, pp. 149-79. She does not, however, make the explicit link between this particular understanding of the self and feminism.

a marker of this interaction. This argument highlights to what extent this is a new way to formulate the link between aesthetics and politics. This rapport can also be seen in the concept of 'one-making' which will become increasingly central to Virginia Woolf's texts.

Thematically, the novel is centred on a character plagued with a double problem of gender and composition. Orlando starts his life, spanned over several centuries, as a man, only to metamorphose into a woman. This extraordinary life is spent in search of the adequate identity and the adequate form of literary expression in the shape of an attempt at poetry. The dual character of this search naturally embodies the author's concept of a significant form for her feminist aesthetics, and points towards the fundamental link between these two elements. Indeed, it becomes clear that Orlando's ability to write or his/her being impeded in this activity bears a direct relation to her situation in life, in respect of sexuality, society or time. The appropriate interaction of all these elements will finally culminate in the completion of her poem, 'The Oak Tree'.

The whole narrative, then, can be seen as a series of attempts to represent all the different patterns of balance possible between those elements so as to reach the fine alchemy, which ensures an understanding of the reality of the self. This sense of reality is embodied in Virginia Woolf's works by the principle that Herbert Marder terms 'being true to one's feelings.'⁹³ By its very nature, this principle is highly individual and thus escapes definition within an overall system, such as essentialism. Orlando can only write when she has found herself, that is when she manages to create her identity on her own terms, since her aesthetic experimentation in form with 'The Oak Tree' parallels her philosophical search for an authentic pattern of identity. To achieve this aim, Orlando goes through a process of investigating and finally discarding all the false identities that society is imposing on her by defining her sense of self. In that light, it is important to note that what she finally endorses as her identity is not framed rigidly in terms of class or gender -- a young upper-class female writer -- but formulated in a pattern of fluidity,

rhythm, and ecstasy, which is embodied in the omni-present image of the 'sea', or 'ocean'. The way in which this search functions aesthetically also needs to be examined to understand Virginia Woolf's intention in this text.

Orlando's problematic search for an adequate understanding and expression of the self is to be argued within the debate centring on essentialism. Indeed, a social/historical construction of the self is seen in the novel as informed by essentialism since it takes for its basis the binary opposition between male and female. The dress is the main ground for the opposition between the sexes to be articulated since it illustrates the social input in the construction of gendered identity. Throughout the narrative, detailed importance is attached to the way in which Orlando is arrayed. It is notable that her gender is assigned to Orlando through the medium of dress in much the same way as any other function, such as class or profession.⁹⁴ By contrasting the effect that wearing the ducal robe or the crinoline produces on Orlando, one can see that the dress operates as a code to signal and reinforce the social rules of class and gender. This point is worth paying attention to, particularly because it functions along the lines of traditional depiction of characters in the realist mode. Indeed, one can see the omniscient narrator's discourse as framing his character as a definite portrait in much the same way as society's dress code frames Orlando as the portrait of a woman. This is apparent in the character of Orlando's biographer, whose task it is to record his subject's life in terms of facts. However, Orlando's wavering gender gets in the way of his task and in doing so, illustrates how a realist account of character is concomitant with an essentialist definition of self. Thus, Orlando's biographer gives a detailed description of Orlando's dress, with the intention of giving a clear indication of gender and status. The reader is presented with a succession of attitudes to dress on the part of Orlando contrasted with the attitudes of society at large which are indications of the role of culture in the constitution of identity. The elements of attitude which derive from society and those which derive from the

⁹³ See p. 170. Herbert Marder's quotation contains the notion of 'moral obligation' which does not seem to comply with Virginia Woolf's vision of life, despite which his point remains valid.

definition of identity according to sex then concur to support gender, but especially womanhood, as a social construct of which dress is the guardian. Thus, whether identity is based on a natural opposition between the sexes or on a cultural opposition of genders, within the social context of which Orlando is part, it is founded on essentialism, that is to say, on a binary system of division.

From the outset, the fact that there is always an antagonism between Orlando and her time, or her society, points to the author's rejection of this social framing. In that respect, the whole book can be considered as encouraging women to formulate an expression of identity for themselves rather than being framed by a patriarchal definition, upheld by a society ordered according to men's principles. This thematic concern is developed later, at length, by Virginia Woolf in overtly political works, such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, and is a testimony to the strength of her feminism and its centrality to her vision.

From that feminist point of view, the temporal development of the narrative is equally informative. Indeed, the successive periods through which the story progresses seem to provide a background for Orlando's successive stages in psychological development, reaching at last the maturity of being fully aware of the multi-dimensional quality of self.⁹⁵ All of these stages are deeply marked by a particular stance on sexuality. This takes either the form of adopting the characteristics of one sex as opposed to the other and exploring all the consequences that this binary system involves or it rejects this duality and explores more fully the possibilities of an unsettled sexuality and by so doing, rejects society's picture of gendered identity. This voyage in identity leads to a movement to and fro, from inside to outside and all the way back across the frame of gendered identity. Using the notion of frame in this instance illustrates the rigidity of society when establishing sexual identity. Women and men are literally framed in portraits that define their gender by representing them in specific environments, such as the home for women and the battlefield for men. A further double standard appears in the

⁹⁴ The political implications of the interaction between dress and society are addressed by Virginia Woolf in a full-length discussion in *Three Guineas*, (London: Vintage, 1984), p. 127-30, [3G].

fact that men are portrayed as active whereas women are passive and only activated into life by the gaze of a male admirer. When Orlando adopts traits of the opposite sex, he/she transgresses the boundaries of gender and metaphorically rejects the frame of its representation. This pursuit finally settles in a specific balance, the conditions of which are important to consider in detail since they provide the reader with the author's statement of her main concern, that is to say the concept of feminine identity with regard to society and the creation of art in general, and writing in particular. As Virginia Woolf pointed out, 'A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine.'⁹⁶

In that light, an examination of dress as a metonymy of sexual identity understood as a social construct is necessary. The importance of this notion is reflected in its being the focus of the narrator: '[clothes] mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.' (144) This point of view is indeed supported by the change of behaviour exhibited by Orlando when dressed as a woman, which is socially typified as feminine -- frightened, dependent, and weak, as is clear from the following example:

... when Captain Bartholus saw Orlando's skirt, he had an awning stretched for her immediately, pressed her to take another slice of beef, and invited her to go ashore with him in the long-boat. (144)

It is important to remark here that there is an obvious change in the way the author presents Orlando when compared with Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay or Lily, which is that the feminine is no longer 'romanced' but rather questioned and even satirised.⁹⁷ The argument carries on by stressing the central status of dress in a social construct of identity. Dress functions as a warrant of social cohesion since it fixes sexual identity so

⁹⁵ See Harvena Richter, p. 113. Her study deals in detail with the stylistic ways in which this aspect of the self is conveyed to the reader.

⁹⁶ See Elaine Showalter, 'The Flight into Androgyny' in A Literature of Their Own, from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing, (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1978), p. 281. _

⁹⁷ See Clare Hanson who actually sees Orlando as a woman as a satirical portrait of Mrs Ramsay, see p. 97.

that behaviour between the sexes is chartered according to a definite and precise set of rules. This cohesion is of critical importance to society and so dress is used to enforce it, framing individuals within the boundaries of their assigned gender. The instance of the use of a crinoline is particularly illustrative of this. Its capacity to hide the physical appearance of a pregnant woman is used as a tool at the service of nineteenth century patriarchy in order to enforce a strict Victorian code of values. Even more importantly, it reinforces the opposition between the sexes by exaggerating the female body shape to the point of caricature. Yet, dress is felt by Orlando to be of no relevance whatsoever to the individual, and indeed,

it is often only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (145)

This arbitrary conventionality is further exposed by the comic episode during which Orlando assumes the identity of the archduke/duchess Scaap-op-Boom who, while taken for a woman because of her dress, is actually a man, and taking off her female outfit is enough to turn her into one. Thus while identity is not changed by clothes, psychological gender is.⁹⁸ Immediately afterwards, Orlando finds herself acting the part of a woman. This behaviour is prompted by the sight of a man, which instantly triggers a social response in her, doing justice to her conditioning. This point about dress is essential to the argument; dress goes beyond segregating the sexes, a role which is clearly established by the fact that during the nineteenth century, when the sense of decorum is at its most acute, Orlando observes that 'the sexes drew further and further apart.' (175) It instils in individuals the very awareness of the fixity of their gender by isolating each sex in a frame of its own, thus creating a wide gap between them. This is a strategy that Orlando feels strongly impedes and restricts her liberty. Thus Virginia Woolf uses dress as an aesthetic strategy, drawing a parallel between the 'spirit of the age' and the usage of dress and society's attitude to it. On account of the constricting aspect of the dress code during this period, the Victorian age is contrasted with freer and stronger eras preceding

it, such as the end of the sixteenth century, when the link between sex and dress is very much weaker:

He - for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it (11)

Significantly, this is the period when *The Great Frost* occurs, which functions as a break in the usual temporality, since time itself seems to have frozen. This 'temps mort' in the narrative is then used to embody a similar breach in the rules of society, which is enacted by a carnival. Makiko Minow-Pinkney links this carnival to 'Jackson's account of the phenomenon (which relies on Mikhail Bakhtin): "Carnival was a temporary condition, a ritualised suspension of everyday law and order."' She carries on to explain that 'Sasha is so uncategorisable in terms of Orlando's social world that she is wholly ambiguous.'⁹⁹ This then accounts for her dress not being used as a tool to define gender:

whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise sex. (29)

This tension between one's sense of self and the social encoding of gender is further articulated by the narrator in a counter-argument, when Orlando describes 'the difference between the sexes' as 'happily, one of great profundity', adding that 'Clothes are but symbols of something hid deep beneath.' (145) Once again, within the debate about the self, the tension between the outer image imposed by society and the inner sense of one's individuality is confusing the search for identity. Dress only gives surface indication of identity and although society uses it as a means to culturally construct the notion of gender, Orlando finds that self is actually independent both of sex and gender and that, whatever society's effort to set up strict boundaries around identity, 'different though the sexes are they intermix.' (145) This was already emphasised in *Mrs Dalloway*, when that character needed her reflection in the mirror to send back to her a seemingly unified

⁹⁸ See Clare Hanson, p. 99.

image of her self, in preparation for meeting society and its demands on the self. The mirror functioned there as a frame, a technique that will be increasingly developed in Virginia Woolf's fiction, to unify the multi-sided self of her characters. This binary model of equating dress with gender, operated in this example through the frame of the mirror, implies an essentialist definition of the self, which Virginia Woolf strongly rejects. Indeed when Orlando, from being an ambassador, which is presented as the peak illustration of dress as a social code,¹⁰⁰ turns into a woman, she carries on wearing the androgynous Turkish coat and the reader learns that 'the change of sex, ... did nothing whatsoever to alter [her] identity.' (106) For Orlando, the problem is one of identity first. By using her dress, she effectively subverts the essentialist model of definition by categories, be it natural or cultural, and thus escapes a restrictive binary system of identity.

This is a turning point in the author's argument, which condemns the notion of gendered identity as a social concept based on essentialism. As soon as Orlando understands the artificiality of this concept, she is able to play with it and explore all the potential of the image as illusion created by her different fashions of dressing. For instance, when she is portrayed dressing herself up and taking pride in her beauty, it is associated with her search for 'Life and a lover'; in other words, she is using dress as an artifice, an outfit for love.

The conventionality of dress is further exposed by her gender being assumed to be male by her fictional biographer. In the light of Virginia Woolf's enquiry into the conditions of knowledge, particularly that of people, the character of the biographer is of some importance. In most of her novels she gives it a deprecatory treatment and in this case particularly, the characterisation displays a great deal of irony. Jacob's Room, in that light, can be held as an attempt at biography and its methodology compared to that of Orlando's biographer. Considering the purpose of the author's project, biographies are relevant as well as a part of her cultural heritage owing to her father's interest in the

⁹⁹ See p. 123.

¹⁰⁰ This strong link between power and dress in respect of masculinity is discussed in details in Three Guineas, see reference n. 117.

genre, manifested in his editing of The National Dictionary of Biography. She precisely stands against the tradition exemplified by her father, in a gesture as much political as aesthetic, and her attempt at drawing portraits is of an entirely different nature. Its modernity is illustrated by her comment, in her own memoir, that

people write what they call 'lives' of other people; that is, they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown¹⁰¹

and so illustrates the aesthetic questions that this attempt suggested to her. The biographer of Orlando embodies everything that the author rejects in the realist assumptions about self and its representation in literature. He is working on behalf of society to give a definite picture of Orlando, drawing a frame around him that sets him out as a member of an eminent family and the symbol of the class and gender division that supports the values of English history. This explains the ideology behind the importance of the subjects of biographies as males, therefore accounting for the mistaken identity of Orlando. Yet, of course, being pictured as a man by society cannot prevent her from being a woman.

This highlights again the key articulation of the argument as the division between inner and outer, a concept which is emphasised by the metaphor of the frame in this study:

In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place. ... for it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn. (145)

Thus Orlando effectively escapes the frame of gendered identity by taking a position which offers an alternative to the reductive character of the dichotomy of a gender division, established for the sake of order at the expense of the truth that is individual reality. This position could be thought of as androgynous, but for the fact that it does not

¹⁰¹ See p. 78 in SP.

erase sexual characteristics. Instead it allows a description of the self which is not entirely polarised by the sex division. As Clare Hanson underlines, this androgyny is not 'a synthesis of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics in a single harmonious whole' but rather 'the possibility of an oscillation between "masculine" and "feminine" positions.'¹⁰² This androgynous character, understood strictly in these terms, is one that has always been present in Orlando's life, but was repressed by social codes. Indeed from the very beginning, and significantly to the dislike of his biographer, Orlando is portrayed as a young nobleman, full of promise, yet blessed with features of beauty and an interest in poetry revealing a sentimental character, enhanced by a love for animals. These characteristics which are usually attached to a woman sit very much at odds with manly pursuits such as hunting. Later on, Orlando's passionate love for Sasha is partly prompted by her displaying just as much of an androgynous outlook as himself. Finally, Orlando's only successful union is with Shelmerdine who immediately realises that under her external image 'You're a man, Orlando' while Orlando equally recognises the woman in him. Because both sexes within them are almost evenly balanced, Herbert Marder finds that 'Orlando and Shelmerdine are truly androgynous.'¹⁰³ This character enables both to reveal their true self through the ambivalence of their identity. This truth, which is their own reality and peculiar to them only, as opposed to the essentialist truth of gender imposed by society, Orlando only attains it when, in James Hafley's words, 'she becomes "a real woman", that is perfectly androgynous.'¹⁰⁴

Thus Orlando finally manages to live according to the actual changing rhythm in her own self, defined in her own terms, by liberating herself and breaking free from the limitations imposed by the frame of a fixed sexuality. Her personality, if it can be defined at all, is all 'variation, motion and internal change.'¹⁰⁵ As a consequence, inevitably, she finds herself on the margin of society -- an outsider. This point is reinforced by her being described as mostly of an 'ambiguous gender' and submitted to the dictates of society in

¹⁰² See p. 103.

¹⁰³ See p. 115.

¹⁰⁴ This view is quoted by Herbert Marder, p. 116.

¹⁰⁵ See Harvena Richter, p. 127.

its strongest manifestation, the law. The matter is pursued by her suit in court, which is the official space where the debate about the self takes place. This is a significant episode as far as the feminist aspect of the novel is concerned, since the law being constituted by men, is really the Law of the Father. In that respect, it is illustrative that a public body, that is mainly male, should be entitled to decide about a private matter, here female. The law is effectively reinforcing the division that underpins social structure, by drawing the gender question into the public sphere, that is the sphere of the Symbolic.¹⁰⁶

The novel concludes with a time period that is understood to be modern time, and despite Clare Hanson's view of the main character as going back to a female role,¹⁰⁷ Orlando is actually described as much in masculine as in feminine terms. The whole atmosphere changes and little emphasis is put on gender and fertility. Here, it is worth remembering that this novel is also dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, with whom Virginia Woolf was very much in love. Indeed much of Orlando is drawn from Vita Sackville-West, who was noted for her open marriage, which allowed both her and her husband to have homosexual affairs. As well as representing a tribute to this personality, the novel also uses this couple as a possible pattern for a modern understanding of the self as multi-faceted and variable, 'a complex of personalities; consisting not of a single integrated ego, but rather of separate states of awareness' as opposed to framed by gendered identity.¹⁰⁸

This understanding of self as a development of the possibilities of one's personality to the full, free from consideration of gender, might have partly originated in Virginia Woolf's interest in Walter Pater.¹⁰⁹ She was taught Greek by his sister¹¹⁰ and records

¹⁰⁶ Sara Mills, in her essay 'No Poetry for Ladies: Gertrude Stein, Julia Kristeva and Modernism', underlines how for Lacan 'The Symbolic is also the sphere of patriarchal and institutional control ... characterised as the sphere of the Law of the Father.' p. 87 in Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon, edited by David Murray, (London: Batsford, 1989). This study will refer more clearly to the 'symbolic' when considering Julia Kristeva's use of this concept in her theory of semiotics.

¹⁰⁷ See p. 110.

¹⁰⁸ See Harvena Richter, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ In the preface to Orlando, Virginia Woolf quotes Walter Pater, among a long series of names, as one of the 'dead and illustrious' people, without whom 'no one can read or write without being perpetually in debt.' p. 9.

¹¹⁰ See p. 162 in MB.

in her memoir an early passion for Marius the Epicurian.¹¹¹ That only the full expression of all the possibilities in oneself is the key to expressing oneself and the governing principle of one's life is a Paterian conception of personality. Orlando's symbolic journey in time represents her search for her own self hidden under the 'cotton-wool' of conventionality. This influence is also at work in the imagery used in the novel, principally the metaphor of Orlando's horse as her self, or that of 'the cathedral tower which was her mind' (126) or again in the natural similes such as 'the pool of her mind', which Perry Meisel describes as Paterian tropes.¹¹² This interaction, instead of being described in terms of influence, can be seen as underlining the scope of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic preoccupations in designing a new model for the novel.

The extent of the eponymous heroine's success in her quest is somewhat masked by the playfulness of the whole narrative. Nevertheless, considering Orlando's position among Virginia Woolf's other works, its eponymous character can be seen as achieving her 'moment of being',¹¹³ her reconciliation with the ambivalent aspect of her self. Harvena Richter describes this moment as 'a cross-section of consciousness in which perceptions and feelings converge and form for an instant something round and whole.'¹¹⁴ This is indicated, as in all the preceding novels, by a formal pattern. Indeed, her moment of 'one-making' with the present, i.e. her ability to situate herself in relation to time, society, and writing, is equivalent to Mrs Dalloway's party or Lily's painting. This is particularly so in that she achieves expression of an authentic kind, in her own medium and for herself, regardless of society's pressures:

¹¹¹ See p. 198 in 'Old Bloomsbury' in MB. It must be mentioned that in spite of this passion and Perry Meisel's study, assuming that she had inherited modernism from Walter Pater rather than creating an original and personal poetics, Virginia Woolf never recognised this influence. Hermione Lee also sees the influence of Pater's Studies in the History of the Renaissance in the style of Jacob's Room, particularly in the episode describing his travels to Greece. See Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), pp. 221, 228.

¹¹² Perry Meisel, The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 62.

¹¹³ Virginia Woolf defines this notion in her memoirs: 'Every day includes much more non-being than being. [description of her day before] These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being. ... Although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool.' p. 79 in SP.

¹¹⁴ See p. 27.

What has praise and fame to do with poetry? ... Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? So that all this chatter and praise and blame and meeting people who admired one and people who did not admire one was as ill suited as could be to the thing itself -- a voice answering a voice. (248)

In the same way that Lily's portrait was never intended to be exhibited or Mrs Ramsay's dinner was never to be realised as anything else than a familial event and then significant only to her, Orlando's poetry is a private transaction, a means of understanding the nature of the self. This structural climax of 'put[ting] the severed parts together'¹¹⁵ is the aesthetic answer to Virginia Woolf's questioning of the self; it functions as a significant form that assumes the value of an epiphany:

everything was partly something else, as if her mind had become a forest with glades branching here and there; things came nearer, and further, and mingled and separated and made the strangest alliances and combinations in an incessant chequer of light and shade. (246)

In respect of the feminist aesthetics put forward by the author, Orlando brings her vision further on two counts. Firstly, her feminist theme establishes the opinion that there is more to being a woman, or indeed being a particular woman than social or biological determination. This theme is thus part of her attempt at defining the feminine. This carries on with the undermining of the traditionally accepted essentialist definition of the self. Such a definition only favours the few – principally men -- who decide what rules society is to adopt in order to support their own chosen values. Orlando only ever manages to express her being to the full when she gets out of the stalemate of binary opposition between the sexes.

In respect of the debate on the self in terms of feminism, the remarkable modernity of Virginia Woolf is illustrated by its relevance to the contemporary debate on gender. Indeed, her text very nearly embodies, some sixty years earlier, one of the tenets of the

¹¹⁵ See p. 81 in SP.

thinking of the French contemporary feminist critic, Julia Kristeva.¹¹⁶ A feminist reading of *Orlando* can see it as a demonstration of the three successive stages that Kristeva defines in her thinking about the concept of gendered identity. The first two stages stand for the elements of the binary system of definition used by essentialism; firstly, the masculine and secondly, defined in opposition to the first, the feminine. Hence Orlando is enjoying all the privileges of and following a typically masculine pattern of behaviour in the first part of the narrative to turn, in the second part, to the difficulties and restrictions attached to a typically feminine pattern of behaviour. In opposition to these two reductive views of identity, Kristeva formulates a third position, free from the rigidity of an identity strictly formulated according to sex difference.¹¹⁷ Likewise, in a third part, Orlando who is dissatisfied with both the masculine and the feminine models turns to an alternative; one of positioning herself within the patriarchal society while not allowing herself to be reduced by its system and defined by her gender. This is symbolised by her description as physically androgynous. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains, 'woman is neither wholly "subcultural" nor, certainly, wholly main-cultural, but negotiates difference and sameness, marginality and inclusion in a constant dialogue.'¹¹⁸ However this dialogue still has to take place since the mention of her giving birth, although described in rather female notions of rhythms and ruptures 'now floods back refluxent like a tide, the red, the thick stream of life again; bubbling, dripping...' leaves the fictional male biographer struggling. He finally settles for the facts: 'In other words Orlando was safely delivered of a son on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o'clock in the morning', (225) thus indicating a very strong lack of a language to describe women's lives and experiences.

¹¹⁶ See Toril Moi's exposition of Julia Kristeva's theories in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1985), p. 12. Since the third section of my work will consider the political dimension of Virginia Woolf's work and thus use Kristeva's criticism more extensively, only a broad outline of her theory is noted here.

¹¹⁷ This is in opposition to the Freudian model of development open to girls, which leads them in either completely retreating from sexuality, or clinging to their threatened masculinity, or else developing into 'normal femininity.' See Clare Hanson's exposition on this model, p. 104-5.

¹¹⁸ See p. 43 in *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

This tension, in the novel, between a tendency towards an androgyny capable of exposing 'the constructed nature of "femininity" and a will to describe and celebrate values peculiar to women is at the centre of a definition of the feminine which remains problematic.'¹¹⁹ This novel, though, more than any of the preceding, asserts the feminist aspect of the author's aesthetics, if only by its direct description of the argument.

Secondly, Orlando also advances the author's vision from an aesthetic point of view by overtly, if metaphorically, treating the problem of representation as a theme. Virginia Woolf's literary enterprise is mirrored, somewhat self-deprecatorily, in Orlando's undertaking to write a poem. Significantly, Orlando can only complete 'The Oak Tree' when she has managed to find the expression that reveals the nature of her own, individual self. Indeed, the novel consists in a dilution of emotional time, which extends the personal moment over several centuries so that the 'separate selves of the moment' can be explored individually since 'each ... has its own identity yet is part of the whole.'¹²⁰ Moreover, it is only when she is able to trespass the boundaries within which the awareness of her gender -- instilled in her by society -- frames her, that she can express herself at last, without being impeded by anything, or imitating anybody else's style. The fact that over-awareness of gender is getting in the way of literary expression is, of course, a constant with Virginia Woolf, underlying the whole of her work. This is metaphorically translated in a recurring image of hers, which is the inkpot spilt over the page whenever female characters are interrupted or incapacitated by external opposition to their writing. Thus, fully expressing all the possibilities of her personality by exploring the sum of emotions she is capable of is what allows Orlando the only valid expression in literature, at least in Virginia Woolf's eyes¹²¹ -- not match-making between the blue of the sky or the green of a laurel and a specific rhyme or semantic frame, but the perfect integrity of an idea fully expressed, regardless of gender or rule --

¹¹⁹ As noted by Clare Hanson, p. 107.

¹²⁰ This is what Harvena Richter calls the mode of memory or time selves, p. 115.

¹²¹ This definition comes from Harvena Richter's study, p. 111.

of meaning producing a form of its own. In that respect, and in the light of the author's interest in Walter Pater, *Orlando* can be seen as

the consummate Paterian portrait, asserting as it does the unity of a strong and unified temperament capable of subduing time and sexuality alike to the law of personality alone.¹²²

This conclusion has vital consequences for the debate on representation and shows to what extent the author is formulating an answer to her aesthetic problems both thematically and formally. Indeed, *Orlando* is the most developed of her novels up to that point, in relation to her stand against realism. It establishes clearly the main articulation of her argument: an essentialist conception of the self both entails and supports a realist mode of representation. The tradition of realism is based on a division between reality and representation, which presupposes the possibility of strictly equating them, modelled on equating signified as object with as the name that designates and validates the object. In view of Virginia Woolf's position on reality -- that it consists mainly of the individual's emotional life and thus remains highly individual and subjective¹²³ -- it becomes evident to what extent realism is an impossibility, for her and its 'tools death', as she emphasised in her comment on the biographical genre.¹²⁴

In searching for an adequate pattern for her feminist aesthetics which would translate her own sense of reality, the author graduated from her first attempt at portrait, describing the male character of Jacob, to a second portrait of the female character, Mrs Dalloway, and then to a third portrait of family relationships with the interplay of both male and female characters in *To the Lighthouse*. Following on this, *Orlando* is the portrait of a character that evades the notion of self defined in terms of gender, a necessary step in view of Virginia Woolf's attempt at describing a new type of character reflecting her new ontological approach to self and reality. Because this attempt takes

¹²² See p. 45 in *The Absent Father*.

¹²³ See Harvena Richter's description, p. 115.

place within an examination of the feminine, it also entails a re-appreciation of women's experiences, and this text clearly puts forward the hitherto overlooked women's point of view on self and reality.

The irreverence and the tone of mockery of Orlando, which turns it into a fantasy and a jest, is illustrative of the extent to which it deals a blow to the tradition of realism. This is further emphasised by the extreme license with the time scale and sexuality of the main character. As Avrom Fleishman noted, 'it seems fitting that this book about the intermingling of the sexes should be a hybrid of several literary types.'¹²⁵ This novel offers an experiment in vision and form instead of story and plot, which is further accentuated by its embodiment of a feminist aesthetics. The way in which the feminist and aesthetic elements are respectively asserted thematically and formally, and combine in an attack on a realist aesthetics has already been underlined. Orlando exposes the way in which this aesthetics is consonant with patriarchal values, which rely on models of opposition, that is 'the masculine force that lies behind the seemingly neutral Edwardian equipment.'¹²⁶ The notion of an essentialist self provides the model for the binary opposition of signified and signifier which, in turn, justifies the overemphasised division between men and women and the ensuing division, pervading the whole of society, between private space and public sphere, inner self and outer image. The way in which society would have Orlando defined by her dress parallels the way in which the omniscient narrator portrays his character, justifying Virginia Woolf in the use of an altogether new form for her narrative. In that light, the incorporation of literary texts into the fabric of the work, as noted by Avrom Fleishman, performs a similar function as the wavering of the main character; both methods aim at breaking boundaries, be it between facts and fiction or between masculine and feminine.¹²⁷ The form of Virginia Woolf's feminist aesthetics fits a vision which while refusing to pin down characters also transgresses the reductive mechanics of a sexually defined self; this can be understood as

¹²⁴ See quotation in this work, p. 51.

¹²⁵ See p. 114.

¹²⁶ See Rachel Bowlby, p. 9.

¹²⁷ See p. 149.

a deconstructed, as opposed to essentialist, vision of identity. Orlando can thus be seen as a step closer to embodying this formal vision.

Looking at the earlier section of Virginia Woolf's oeuvre enabled this study to identify the specific philosophical problems that she encountered in her attempt to describe a new modern reality particularly from a woman's vantage point, be it that of the author or that of the characters. Due to its modernity this attempt inevitably demands the embodiment of a new shape. This last narrative is thus shaped according to 'the acceleration or deceleration carried out by the qualities of thought and emotions which swell the moment' which is reflected by 'the speed at which the [text] itself moves.'¹²⁸ The result of this search is typically that a heightened importance is given to formal features at the expense of plot, to the point that the narrative method has become more significant than the story line. In that respect, Virginia Woolf displays a coherence in her inquiry that is manifested in her interest both in Walter Pater as a writer and in Roger Fry as a friend and art critic. J.B. Bullen, in his introduction to Vision and Design, Roger Fry's influential text, also indicates that

As early as 1877 Walter Pater in his essay on the school of Giorgione had drawn attention to the fact that pictures were pictures before they were illustrations or reminders of natural appearances. He wrote that 'essentially pictorial qualities must first of all delight the sense, delight it as directly and sensuously as a fragment of Venetian glass', and that in its primary aspect 'a great picture has no more definite meaning for us than an accidental play of light and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor.'¹²⁹

This comment further highlights the formalist nature of the aesthetic theories of Roger Fry, which beyond 'the contemplation of events and objects' is 'dominated by a passionate feeling about form.'¹³⁰ This position entails that 'unity of some kind is

¹²⁸ See Harvena Richter, p. 150.

¹²⁹ See Roger Fry, Vision and Design [V&D], edited by J.B. Bullen, (London, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), p. XII.

¹³⁰ See p. 267 in 'Children's Drawing' in A Roger Fry Reader.

necessary for our restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole' and more precisely, that 'in a picture this unity is due to the balancing of the attractions of the eye about the central line of the picture.'¹³¹ This is clearly resonant of the modernity of Virginia Woolf's position on representation, embodied by Lily's resolution of her aesthetic problem in To the Lighthouse. To highlight the specific nature of this modern approach, this study will now turn to two short stories, which illustrate this position. They both feature a strikingly similar theme to that expressed by Walter Pater, and are worth considering because they reveal the extent of Virginia Woolf's interest in the idea of formalism, which she stretched further by applying it to literature and then refined as her own to fuel her theory of representation.

¹³¹ See p. 22 in 'An Essay in Aesthetics', in V&D.

4. 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens': vision and design

Although 'The Mark on the Wall'¹³² and 'Kew Gardens'¹³³ were published respectively in 1917 and 1919, a couple of years before Jacob's Room, it is interesting to focus on them at this point in the discussion in order to understand fully how the author's view of the world gave rise to her technical experimentation in representation. They are particularly informative for showing the development of the author's reflection on her methodology and for formulating her aesthetic attempt in her own words. Indeed, Edward L. Bishop suggests 'that "Kew Gardens" is the artistic application of the aesthetic manifesto Woolf had published a few months earlier, ["Modern Fiction."]¹³⁴ These two short stories also illustrates Roger Fry's influence which, unlike that of Walter Pater, Virginia Woolf was keen to acknowledge. As was already pointed out, Virginia, being a daughter, was taught at home and did not have the privilege of an Oxbridge education. Nevertheless, being part of a family of intellectuals together with her association with the educated friends of her brother provided the intellectual environment that was to encourage her talent. It was in these circumstances that Roger Fry was introduced to her by Clive Bell, her sister's husband, in 1910. Her recording of this meeting in her memoirs testifies to his immediate influence on her:

So, Roger appeared. ... And at once we were all launched into a terrific argument about literature; adjectives? associations? overtones? ... The old skeleton arguments of primitive Bloomsbury about art and beauty put on blood and flesh. There was always some new idea afoot; always some new picture standing on a chair to be looked at, some new poet fished out from obscurity and stood in the light of day.

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¹³² See Virginia Woolf The Complete Shorter Fiction, edited by Susan Dick, (London: Grafton Books, 1991), pp. 83-9, (MW)

¹³³ See Virginia Woolf The Complete Shorter Fiction, pp. 90-5, (KG).

¹³⁴ See Virginia Woolf A to Z, p. 137.

¹³⁵ See p. 214 in 'Old Bloomsbury' in MB.

It was to be the beginning of a life-long friendship between them and her agreeing to write his biography after his death as a tribute bears testimony to the strength of their relationship.¹³⁶ By introducing the British public to modern art with the Post-impressionist Exhibition of 1911, Roger Fry became a major influence on Virginia Woolf. The similarities between their attempts to create new types of representation are worth noting, since Roger Fry's experiment in the visual arts gives a useful insight into Virginia Woolf's experiment in terms of language.

A first part will show, through a discussion on the nature of reality, to what extent thinking about the concept of significant form allowed the author to create a medium capable of translating her perception of reality. In both these short stories, from a technical point of view, the prose is considered as matter or stuff, and thus structurally yields a three-dimensional character to the text. Indeed the text functions as a whole rather than in a sequence, since the element of story and the temporality it implies are dismissed. As David Dowling underlines, for Woolf,

the sense of form ... is a sense which can be grasped only when the temporal experience of reading is finished and all the disparate elements come together for a moment, to be held by the lucky reader like a Cézanne which he has recreated for himself.¹³⁷

This is related to the problem of finding a medium to embody the modernist vitality that finds a solution in the use of dynamic formal features. As will be explained, the coalescence of form and content is central to Virginia Woolf's project and so form becomes simultaneously medium and product. As a consequence, value is conferred on the object because of its formal properties and its thought-provoking character, that is to say its significant form. In other words, objects, whether natural or formal, are significant insofar as they possess an 'inner life', and thus their materiality positions them at the core of reality, bypassing the binary system of the relation between signified

¹³⁶ David Dowling calls the biography 'a labour of love indeed' to underline the extent of Woolf's admiration for Roger Fry, p. 96.

¹³⁷ See p. 107.

and signifier on which language is based. Yet, in that respect, the question of the necessity of the eye of the beholder to grasp this 'inner life' arises, which in turn goes back to the notion of significant form. Is this life intrinsic to 'solid objects' or imposed upon them by the gaze of the onlooker? This problem is to be considered in relation to Roger Fry's notion of 'imaginative life'.

The study then focuses on how these two texts provide a formal answer to these aesthetic questions. This becomes apparent through their acknowledged influence on Jacob's Room, for instance. As far as the problem of representation is concerned, Virginia Woolf's style is liberated by a new approach to form as well as the content of the text. This is a marker of the way in which she is using her aesthetics as a political tool, blurring the dichotomy between form and content. This blurring of opposites is also at work in the aesthetic use of the dichotomy between the solid and the ethereal, the one indicating the other as exemplified by 'that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow.'¹³⁸ In direct relation to this, the discussion on form and structure is articulated around the notion of texture,¹³⁹ which goes back to the relation between line or form and emotion. These two texts are thus answering some important questions about form.

In her introduction to Jacob's Room, Sue Roe stresses the 'undeniable influence of Roger Fry's aesthetic theories' on Virginia Woolf.¹⁴⁰ She mentions that Virginia Woolf was profoundly impressed by Vision and Design while writing Jacob's Room and draws a parallel between 'Negro Sculptures' and 'The Mark on the Wall', where she says, 'Fry closely echoes the style of Virginia Woolf.' This shows, at an early stage, the extent to which they influenced each other. Christopher Reed even mentions in his portrait of Roger Fry how

¹³⁸ See p. 155 in 'The New Biography' in Granite and Rainbow. This point is also made by Ralph Freedman.

¹³⁹ This concept will be defined in the relevant section.

¹⁴⁰ See p. 91 in Virginia Woolf, Introductions to the Major Works.

having 'translated' one of [his] paintings into words, Fry exclaimed, 'I see, now that I have done it, that it was meant for Mrs Virginia Woolf'-- it is 'almost precisely the same thing in paint that Mrs Virginia Woolf is in prose'.¹⁴¹

Allen McLaurin also mentions this 'translating' of Roger Fry and infers that he is probably referring to these two sketches.¹⁴² A focus on 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens' is thus particularly relevant since her shorter fiction can be regarded as a space where she delineate her aesthetics and tried her hand at new techniques before tackling larger-scale works. Indeed, these two texts best illustrate what Roger Fry calls 'the relationship with her *matière*',¹⁴³ together with the element of form and structure that show the same concern as his theories on formalism. To fully comprehend what this concern for *matière* means and entails 'The Mark on the Wall' will be considered alongside an enlightening later short fiction, 'Kew Gardens', which Virginia Woolf found 'very interesting and intense'.¹⁴⁴ As both these titles foreshadow, and this examination will endeavour to show, they challenge the traditional narrative form in many ways.

The stress on material or stuff is predominant in both pieces -- hence their relevance as an insight into Virginia Woolf's aesthetics. 'The Mark on the Wall' concentrates on a conspicuous mark above the mantelpiece which the narrator, sitting in a chair at a distance, tries to make out, only to be told at the end of the narrative that it actually is a snail. As for 'Kew Gardens', it centres on the natural life of the garden with the materiality of its animal life and the colours of its flowers. This thematic concern is then translated by the author into formal features, which can all be identified by Roger Fry's classification of the five 'emotional elements of design.'

¹⁴¹ See p. 283 in A Roger Fry Reader.

¹⁴² See The Echoes Enslaved, p. 32.

¹⁴³ See Sue Roe's introduction to Jacob's Room in Virginia Woolf, Introduction to the Major Works, p. 91.

Virginia Woolf's emphasis on form in these two pieces is revealed in examples of 'rhythm of the line with which the forms are delineated':

In certain lights that mark seems actually to project from the wall. Nor is it entirely circular. (86)

and features of 'mass, space, light and shade, or colour'¹⁴⁵ in 'The Mark on the Wall':

The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall. (83)

as well as in 'Kew Gardens':

The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour. (90)

The methodology only sketched here is indeed already used at length in the incipit of Jacob's Room to describe the would-be nanny or the couple of lovers. It involves a description of the object in terms of its materiality as opposed to naming it for what it is and by doing so, defining it. In other words, it gives an image instead of a story, which is a process clearly akin to the visual arts. In this instance, the aesthetic use of form was seen as an indicator of a thematic concern; the change of perspective between Jacob and his mother gave an indication of the author's point of view on reality.

The aesthetic and thematic importance of matter is also reinforced structurally by the pattern itself of both texts. Indeed the first sentence of 'The Mark on the Wall' focuses on the object 'the mark on the wall' (83) while the last one ends on an even more definite description of it, very factual, and finally asserting it as an object: 'It was a snail!' (89) The same narrative pattern is noticeable in 'Kew Gardens', which starts with the minutia of a description of 'oval-shaped flower-bed' (90) to finish with 'the petals of myriad of

¹⁴⁴ See David Dowling, p. 99.

flowers.' (95) Both as theme and structure, the object is a pretext for fiction. This is indicative of Virginia Woolf's attempt to formulate her new aesthetics and give shape to her vision. The object then is depicted as triggering off the thematic train of thoughts in the narrator, which in turn, constitutes the very body of the text, its structure:

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little that way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly and then leave it. (MW 83)

Yet at the same time the objects focused upon seem to hamper this random wondering of the mind. This is startling in the 'The Mark on the Wall' where the recognition of the indiscriminate object as a snail puts an end to the narrative. This paradox is again formulated in a different way in 'Kew Gardens'. There, it lies in the conversation between two women being interrupted when one of them 'came to a standstill opposite the oval-shaped flower-bed.' (93) This interest then, and its embodiment in fiction, has to remain part of a mediation between the inner self and the outer world. This point is also made in 'The Mark on the Wall', where 'purely subjective fantasies ... seem liberating' yet 'bring their own distortion.'¹⁴⁶ One of the characters in 'Kew Gardens' demonstrates the danger of not managing this transaction:

After looking at [the flower] for a moment in some confusion the old man bent his ear to it and seemed to answer a voice speaking from it, for he began talking about the forest of Uruguay which he had visited hundreds of years ago in company of the most beautiful young woman in Europe. (92-3)

Another paradox can also be remarked in the fact that although these are solid objects they are pointing at the various quality of reality:

¹⁴⁵ Roger Fry's 'An Essay in Aesthetics' gives a full discussion of these elements, see p. 12-27 in Vision and Design.

¹⁴⁶ See Herbert Marder in Reference Guide to Short Fiction, edited by Noelle Watson, (London and Washington D. C.: St. James Press, 1994), p. 797.

Opals and emeralds, they lie about the roots of turnips. What a scraping paring affair it is to be sure! (MW 84)

Thus one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passed the flower-bed and were enveloped in layer after layer of green-blue vapour, in which at first their bodies at substance and a dash of colour, but later both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere. (95)

Ultimately, solid objects are also a reminder of the transient character of human life, the cultural connotation of gems being here swallowed up by the earth and the physical presence of men and women erased by nature. These two remarks are of particular importance to the argument about representation. They underline the author's belief that, in the search for an understanding of reality, trying to define objects or people in precise terms is irrelevant; what is significant is the process, the very questioning: "'What's "it" - what do you mean by "it"?"' (94) As indicated earlier, this is the aesthetic precept she adopts in her novels, particularly in the biographical genre. Certainly, Jacob's Room and Orlando abide by it. This position also enabled her to attempt to capture the 'uncircumscribed spirit' of life in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse for instance. Indeed, there is a paradox only within the realist mode of representation, the aim of which is to frame the object within a precise definition. This notion vanishes, though, within a modern aesthetics, which proposes that what has to be considered as providing the very stuff of thoughts is the object in its solidity, materiality, and not as artificially informed and organised by man. Only in that light will it yield a glimpse into the meaning of reality, which 'lies about' at the core of materiality and ordinariness.

The doings of the men and women in the garden are thus only an artificial first level of reality. Its metaphorical equivalent in 'The Mark on the Wall' is Whitaker's table and it is developed into the historical evidence presented by museums:

in the case at the local museum, together with the foot of a Chinese murderess, a handful of Elizabethan nails ... [lies] the wineglass that Nelson drank out of -- proving I really don't know what. (87)

On the other hand, in 'Kew Gardens', objects are valued for their materiality. The story indicates that objects only become significant when considered for their intrinsic qualities -- in their purity of form, refined out of the mark of man:

The light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and dome-shaped leaves. (90)

Whereas the artefact 'is getting in the way' (MW 89) of the search for reality under social appearances, the object as matter is actually salutary:

I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadow of shade. (MW 88)

This opposition is significant in the light of the author's ontological inquiry because it states her own point of view on reality, which she then endeavours to transpose from her short fiction into full-length novels. These two texts articulate this opposition as two divergent ways to envisage reality. On the one hand the reality 'of the surface, with its hard separate facts' (MW 85) and on the other, the level below to which 'a vast upheaval of matter' (MW 89) gives access, a reality of the visionary order. In other words, the reality of society or history which is the interest of realist representation does not tackle the deeper nature of reality, but only organises social elements into a semblance of it. Thus doing, it leaves out individuals who do not fit with this definition of reality but experience it in a personal and deeper way. The historical/social reality is imposed on top of 'the level below' of individual feelings of reality, for ideological reasons. Typically, it alienates women as outsiders.

Virginia Woolf's vision is thus elaborated against a paradigm of 'outer/inner' or 'above/below' as shown in the previous analysis of her fiction of the 20s. These two pieces exemplify her philosophical position very clearly. This division permeates the

whole of society as Orlando demonstrated and is based on looking at reality from the outside on the one hand and from the inside on the other. In the realist philosophy, reality is observed from a dominant position -- that of the omniscient narrator -- and thus objectified into the content of the novel, that is to say, the story. This traditional position reinforces the notion of subject as centre, organising reality in an orderly surface. In opposition to this realist self-centred philosophy, the author's modern attempt is to recreate the individual experience of reality, from the inside, as one part of a greater structure. In her novels, this individual share in the general pattern is transposed by the different characters taking it in turn to give their idiosyncratic points of view.

This position deflates the idea of subject as centre and envisages the subject rather as a continuum of changing possibilities. It also calls attention to the importance of the form of fiction, that is the overall structure of a novel, as opposed to its content, as indicative of a deeper reality, meaningful in its individual character. This in turn, is an indication of the modern attitude of the author in relation to representation. This plasticity of the text, that is the notion of texture, stands in opposition to the sequential character of realist representation. Significantly, Patricia Oudek Laurence defines this textural aspect of the author's style as 'composed of thematic as well as temporal and spatial counterpoint.'¹⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf's methodology in literature thus echoes the dismissal of the narrative element in painting by formalism. It is the paradigm already noticed in Mrs Dalloway, for instance, which serves as a basis for all of the following works. It also explains the reason why, philosophically, it is necessary to go from the outer surface to the inner level down 'below' and therefore transpose this motion aesthetically, as a technique, in order to put across her point of view on reality and life. The vision of a world where nature and culture interact at the same level, like in 'Kew Garden', exemplifies this narrative technique. More specifically, the traditional use of nature as a background to human activity is deftly inverted since the narrative opens first unto the flower-bed and its world and men and women are only introduced at the very end of the paragraph, as incidental to the primal drama of nature. This duality also accounts for Virginia Woolf's

¹⁴⁷ See p. 186.

use of the frame of paintings or mirrors as an analogy for the question of representation along with the use that this study makes of the frame as a tool of analysis. This use is thus intensified in proportion to the increasingly formal character of her production during the 30s.

Out of the 'vast upheaval of matter' there derives a whole set of formal features converging into an organic pattern, such as the remarkable 'smooth grey back of a pebble, or the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins.' (KG 90) It is this dynamic underlying structure which for Virginia Woolf is the key to comprehending reality. This dynamic process is what Virginia Woolf wants to use in her fiction, as a structural technique informing her narrative:

Looked at again and again half-consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.¹⁴⁸

This process consists of transposing the formal qualities of the object as matter into the work or object of art as fiction. In this respect, the narrative of 'Kew Gardens' is quite illustrative. It metaphorically provides an answer to formal problems that directly concern fiction:

Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men, women and children, were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then, seeing the breadth of yellow that lay upon the grass, they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue. (95)

This voices the question which Virginia Woolf, as a writer, tried to answer in so many different ways without ever being sure which method was best fitted to her aim -- how to embed in a suitable structure the bits and pieces of our experience of being alive, how to

¹⁴⁸ See Solid Objects, p. 104.

make them stand together in a significant relationship, which would reach the unity of a work of art without depriving each element of its intrinsic vitality. According to Roger Fry, she had already succeeded in Jacob's Room.

This problematic has to be considered within the debate about representation. As already mentioned the author drew a lot on the aesthetic theories of Roger Fry, and this influence can be traced very clearly both in 'The Mark on the Wall' and in 'Kew Gardens', which, when compared with the essay 'Negro Sculptures' in Roger Fry's Vision and Design, display numerous similarities.

For a start, the utter freedom she advocates and manifests in her treatment of theme by abandoning the supposedly 'real thing' --exemplified as 'Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses' in realist fiction-- gives a sense of 'illegitimate freedom' (MW 86). A similar attitude is echoed in 'Negro Sculptures':¹⁴⁹

Now, the strange thing about these African sculptures is that they bear no trace of this process. Without ever attaining anything like representational accuracy they have complete freedom. (71)

This study showed how Virginia Woolf traded a Mr Bennett-like 'representational accuracy' in her fiction for the feeling of the vitality of life. As Sue Roe emphasises, 'this new, kaleidoscopic form affords her a sense of freedom from narrative constraints.'¹⁵⁰ The awareness of the vitality of modern life and the problem of transposing it into a work of art is also at the heart of both Virginia Woolf's and Roger Fry's thinking and articulated in much the same way:

Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour -- landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair. (MW 85)

¹⁴⁹ See 'Negro Sculptures' in Vision and Design, pp. 70-6, [NS].

¹⁵⁰ See Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 24.

But from 1860s onward, knowledge and perception have poured upon us so fast that the whole well-ordered system has been blown-away and we stand bare to the blast. (NS 70)

The way in which Virginia Woolf then deals with the difficulty of embodying this vitality is echoed by Roger Fry's reference to the work of African sculptors. He explains that:

Our emphasis has always been affected by our preferences for certain forms which appeared to us to mark the nobility of man. (NS 71)

This would be 'a pensive brow' in sculpture and the orderly form of 'historical fiction' or again 'the business of getting on from lunch to dinner' in realist literature. He carries on:

[The African] preferences happen to coincide more nearly with what his feeling for pure plastic design would dictate. (71)

Thus it seems that Virginia Woolf's concept of form, in terms of the structure that would best embody the experience of being alive, is reminiscent of the African sculptor's use of form, since according to Fry:

he manages to give his forms their disconcerting vitality, the suggestion that they make of not being mere echoes of actual figures, but of possessing an inner life of their own. (72)

This link, which might be surprising at first, is actually clarified when one thinks of Virginia Woolf's resistance to tradition. This attitude was very much part of her intellectual environment, influenced by the philosopher G.E. Moore, and Bloomsbury's general

insistent emphasis on the authority of one's personal judgement and the rejection of the authority of mere tradition and inherited taste.¹⁵¹

In that light, the African culture is relevant for its freedom from a western essentialist conception of the self and its ensuing emphasis on 'the nobility of man.'

Moreover, the impression of 'inner life of their own' displayed by African statues is very appealing to Virginia Woolf in her quest for meaning, and is clearly voiced in 'The Mark on the Wall':

Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green forest depth all about is no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people. (85)

Similarly, in 'Kew Gardens', a feeling of 'inner life' radiates from inanimate objects:

Brown cliffs with deep green lakes in the hollow, flat blade-like trees that waved from root to tip, round boulders of grey stone, vast crumpled surface of a thin crackling texture – all these objects lay across the snail's progress between one stalk and another to his goal. (91-2)

However this inner life can only be brought to the fore by the action of the beholder, or here the narrator. It cannot surge from the hard facts of real life. The cause and effect paradigm, which is the basis of realist representation, is thus abandoned by Virginia Woolf, who perceives that a type of representation drawn from the visual arts can give more adequate access to a deep understanding of reality. It takes the eye of the artist, a process that is clearly defined by Roger Fry in his 'Essay in Aesthetics':

Art then is an expression and a stimulus of this imaginative life, which is separated from actual life by the absence of responsive action.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ See p. 36 in The Absent Father.

¹⁵² See p. 15 in V&D.

Both Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry thus see art as a means of transaction between 'imaginative' or 'inner life' and the 'actual' life of the outer world. It is only by giving a voice to the 'inner life' that one can gain access to the deeper reality, which is obscured by the action of everyday life. This influence is clear in 'The Mark on the Wall', where it really functions as the catalyst of the whole text:

And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really --what shall I say-- the head of a gigantic old nail ... what should I gain? Knowledge? ... I can think sitting still as well as standing up. And what is knowledge? (87)

Virginia Woolf's attempt at describing an ideal shape for her vision of the world is significantly carried out mainly in terms of formal features, colour and shape. This fascination for the purity of design, which is to be found in Post-Impressionist painting, was already noted in To the Lighthouse, for instance. In his essay on 'The Double Nature of Painting', Roger Fry explains this fundamental characteristic of Post-Impressionism by focusing on Cézanne, whom he sees as one of the first artists to make the break from Impressionism. This rupture occurs precisely when the object he painted was no longer used as 'a vehicle of associated ideas but as a plastic volume.'¹⁵³ Importantly for this study, Roger Fry theorises this opposition by actually using the notion of literature. He contrasts 'pure painting' with illustrational painting. The first he sees as 'appealing to our emotions through plastic ... and chromatic harmonies' and likens to our feeling for architecture and music and the second as appealing to the 'ideas and emotions' associated with the object represented, 'in a manner corresponding to literature.'¹⁵⁴

Virginia Woolf's literary attempts are to be considered in this context, as the clearly Post-Impressionist painting of Lily suggests. It is also relevant to consider here an influence closer to home -- that of the author's own sister, Vanessa Bell. Indeed, as a

¹⁵³ See p. 385 in A Roger Fry Reader.

¹⁵⁴ See p. 386 in A Roger Fry Reader.

painter she was part of the modernist movement and wanted to transpose her vision in much the same way as Virginia, albeit in a different medium. One can surmise what discussions on aesthetics passed between them¹⁵⁵ and how fruitful these must have been in defining their respective ideas and techniques:

There will be nothing but spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks ... and perhaps rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour. (MW 84)

The style of this description, typical of post-impressionist painting, can indeed also be noticed in the fiction published in the 20s. For instance in Jacob's Room, there is an extensive use of the notion of 'blot of ... colour', indicating how prompt Virginia Woolf was to put language as an artistic medium to the test. However, her borrowing from the visual arts as an aesthetic methodology is mainly used at a local level in these novels, such as specific scenes in Jacob's Room or Mrs Dalloway and the painting in To the Lighthouse. She will be increasingly successful at embodying this aesthetics to political ends in works such as The Years and Between the Acts, with engaging results. The third section of this argument will show the importance of this method in relation to her vision.

At this stage, it is necessary to pause and apply a particular focus to the concept of 'significant form' which this argument sees as shaping Virginia Woolf's aesthetics. As early as 1913 Virginia Woolf was reading Art by Clive Bell, where he gives his definition of this concept. Moreover, considering their family tie, and the atmosphere of Bloomsbury, Virginia and he were at leisure to discuss their respective views on representation.¹⁵⁶ The special relationship between Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry was also underlined. From this, it could be inferred that she took up formalism, and its main tenet, the notion of significant form and merely transposed it to literature. This, of course, is not the case, and Hermione Lee actually sees some of Virginia Woolf's short

¹⁵⁵ See Diane Filby Gillespie, The Sisters' Arts. The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1988), for a full-length discussion on the sisters' interaction.

stories as an indictment of the excess of formalism, like 'Solid Objects', which she understands as a comedy.¹⁵⁷ One has to remember that contrary to the general impression, particularly in later art criticism, Fry and Bell did not present a united front on the question of representation. In his essay of 1914 'A New Theory of Art', Roger Fry distances himself from Clive Bell in the criticism of his book Art.¹⁵⁸ Apart from this contrast, it is also useful to keep in mind that Roger Fry did not establish a dogmatic theory on art, unlike Clive Bell. Rather he responded to different events in the form of essays, the assertions of which he himself qualified later in his 'Retrospect'. Thus, he did not define rigidly his thinking on representation in relation to form.¹⁵⁹

Furthermore it can safely be said that Virginia Woolf felt more indebted to Fry than Bell, and this is apparent from her biography of the former, where she endorses Fry's criticism that Bell had stolen some of his most important ideas on art.¹⁶⁰ Roger Fry was also keen on integrating literature in his thinking, something that Bell did not always do.¹⁶¹ In this context, it becomes evident that when this thesis mentions the influence of such theories on Virginia Woolf, the term is used loosely. She did not borrow these notions word for word, but only strove, in her own way, towards the same kind of endeavour. Hence, in this work, 'significant form' should not be understood as a ready-made concept taken from Bell or 'formalism' a dogma borrowed from Fry but these concepts should be considered in the wider context of her experimentation on form.

¹⁵⁶ David Dowling discusses the relationship between Virginia Woolf and her closest friends who were painters and critics in his chapter on 'Woolf and Painting', pp. 95-107.

¹⁵⁷ See p. 375 in Virginia Woolf.

¹⁵⁸ '[Mr Bell] says in his preface that he differs profoundly from me. I feel bound, therefore, to do my best to return the compliment.' in A Roger Fry Reader, p. 158.

¹⁵⁹ 'I am afraid that my attitude to aesthetics is essentially a practical and empirical one.' p.61 in the 1908 lecture entitled 'Expression and Representation in the Graphic Arts' reproduced in Christopher Reed's A Roger Fry Reader. See 'Roger Fry and the problem of representation' for a discussion on the evolution of Roger Fry's criticism, by Allen McLaurin, Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 17-25.

¹⁶⁰ See James King, Virginia Woolf, p. 544.

¹⁶¹ When Roger Fry analyses Clive Bells' Art he deplores this fact. 'I wish [Mr Bell] had extended his theory, and taken literature (in so far as it is an art) into fuller consideration, for I feel confident that great poetry arouses aesthetic emotions of a similar kind to painting and architecture.' p. 159 in A Roger Fry Reader. This clearly shows why Virginia Woolf would find more sympathy with Roger Fry's thinking.

This analysis of 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens' intends to show that Virginia Woolf's use of form can be seen as 'significant' because it is indicative of an underlying structure, a 'hidden pattern' which, intrinsic to life, is a manifestation of reality. Her writing can be considered as formalist insofar as it aims at revealing this 'inner' structure 'below' the surface of realist representation. To achieve this she will increasingly succeed in treating her text in a similar fashion to that used by the post-impressionist painters. The way in which Roger Fry describes the problem of representation for the artist can be used to define Virginia Woolf's method. In her endeavour to get closer to expressing and understanding reality by exposing its underlying structure, she increasingly manages to 'represent the outside world in such a way that it enters completely into the ... unity' of her text.¹⁶²

To conclude, in Roger Fry's opinion, Virginia Woolf's main aesthetic achievement is her modernist treatment of theme through a formalist handling of overall pattern and narrative technique, or her attempt at using a pictorial technique as a form of literary representation. In other words:

She seemed to share with only the French novelists the relationship with her *matière*, which [Roger Fry] had identified first in the work of G erald Brenan: 'he believes that everything must come out of the *mat re* of his prose and not out of the ideas and emotions he describes.'¹⁶³

There is here a parallel between two different media used in a similar manner. 'Mati re' is defined by Roger Fry as 'the special sense of the quality given to his pigment by an artist.'¹⁶⁴ Applied to Virginia Woolf's particular type of representation it operates at two different levels. In the same way as pigment implies texture, her style, at a diegetic level, is itself worked like paint and shows texture in its alliterations, play on words and general physicality. At a meta-diegetic level, her text itself is worked as a structure, with

¹⁶² See p. 381 [A Roger Fry Reader](#).

¹⁶³ See Sue Roe's introduction to JR, p. 91.

its patterns and leitmotifs, so that ideas are conveyed by the integration of content and form. As Lyndall Gordon underlines, 'she wanted her writing to be judged as a "chiselled block."¹⁶⁵

Her short stories, in particular 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens', afford Virginia Woolf a space to elaborate a formal answer to a question of aesthetics prompted by her stance on reality. At the same time she is able to present the reader with an ideal key to her novels and a valuable insight into their genesis. The short stories throw light on the content and form of her writing and put the aesthetic embodiment of her vision in perspective. They also highlight the importance imparted by the author to the notion of pattern, which is to be found in every single one of her works and the main impetus, as will be demonstrated, behind her novels of the 30s. Close examination of these two short stories gives a better understanding of her methodology. Using form instead of plot, her aesthetics will progressively give shape and voice to an epitome of modern vision entirely disengaged from realist representation.

¹⁶⁴ See p. 426 in *A Roger Fry Reader*.

¹⁶⁵ Cited in Patricia Oudek Laurence, p. 174.

5. Defining a feminist aesthetics

The works considered in this first section can thus be seen as resolving a series of aesthetic questions, particularly regarding the ontological question of the conditions governing the knowledge of reality and the subsequent representation of this reality. The answers they provide then enabled the author to 'find her voice'; in other words, find a particular aesthetics to express her vision. In particular, 'Virginia Woolf rejects professional knowledge in favour of the beauty of the world of sensations.'¹⁶⁶ This study highlighted how this aesthetics was progressively informed by women's concerns, such as the transposing of a feminine view of the world as opposed to the reality hitherto defined in terms of masculine values which underpin realist fiction. The production of the 20s thus identified specific feminist themes, which required specific forms of representation. Thus Virginia Woolf started by challenging the realist point of view on reality in Jacob's Room, intensified the feminine element in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, and finally became more directly feminist with the main theme of Orlando. This first section thus demonstrated how Virginia Woolf, moved by a sense of 'the gravest injustice',¹⁶⁷ started by voicing the unequal treatment of women within a patriarchal society which highlights the difference between the sexes.¹⁶⁸ In that light, these novels have asserted the author's feminism thematically, by retrieving and reasserting women's values. They are thus part of Virginia Woolf's on-going attempt at defining the feminine. From that point of view, and as Clare Hanson argues, the author anticipates Hélène Cixous with her attempt at reinserting the difference of femininity into the symbolic.

The formal aspect of her aesthetics was finally considered in the comparison between 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens'. The general argument can be articulated in terms of the opposition between facts and vision, which covers

¹⁶⁶ See Allen McLaurin, p. 66.

¹⁶⁷ See Rachel Bowlby, 'We're Getting There', p. 11.

metaphysical oppositions such as the division between men and women, inner and outer space, or again private and public spheres. In aesthetic terms, Virginia Woolf wants to embody her philosophical vision of life in a mode of representation disengaged from that of the realist model. In political terms, the latter type of representation, based on facts, is also consistent with patriarchy, which is another reason for the author to oppose it. This is what she shows her characters striving towards, such as Lily in To the Lighthouse, who transposes her vision in a painting resisting definition. This pattern of opposition is then articulated with the aesthetic concept of the frame, which is also treated as a theme, particularly under the guise of the portrait. This theme, in turn, provides a metaphor that can be used as a critical tool. Consequently, the eponymous character is seen as escaping the frame of the story in Jacob's Room and the frame of temporality is in turn challenged in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse. To support her feminist stance, the frame of gendered identity is further subverted in Orlando. In defining her aesthetics, Virginia Woolf removes, one by one, of all the conventions of the realist mode of representation inherited from the Edwardians. In other words, she is concerned with breaking traditional forms. By the same token she progressively refines the medium of a significant form and pattern instead of the traditional plot to represent adequately her vision of modern reality. In that light, each of these works can be seen as describing in a different shape what she had set out to do -- that is to transpose the pattern of reality, or in her own terms to:

record the atoms as they fall upon the mind, ... trace the pattern, however disconnected or incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon consciousness.¹⁶⁹

The first section of this work endeavoured to explain how Virginia Woolf, out of the will to tell a new story, established a new method, which is designated as a feminist

¹⁶⁸ This thesis thus supports the position of Herbert Marder as exemplified in Feminism and Art.

¹⁶⁹ See p.9 in 'Modern Fiction'.

aesthetics. This new and modern attempt is further ascertained in the major novel that is The Waves.

It is relevant to consider here to what extent the work on the novels prior to The Waves provided the author with the necessary 'tools' for producing this novel. Indeed, all the aesthetic answers provided by them are to be found at work in The Waves. In that respect To the Lighthouse and Mrs Dalloway prefigure this novel where the same techniques are utilised to the fullest extent.¹⁷⁰

The first section of this work thus considered the author's borrowing from Post-Impressionism, for instance, in relation to the notion of significant form and the emphasis was put on *matière* in its formal features rather than theme or content. As a consequence, the object of the text is to operate both as theme and structure. The notion of objects possessing 'an inner life of their own' which was considered in the study of 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens' is here to be related to the attempt at writing an 'eyeless' book, which is the way in which Virginia Woolf describes The Waves.¹⁷¹ Similarly, another contribution to this text is the idea of the 'shell of personality' as defined in Orlando. This latter text in particular, but also others, can be seen as providing the feminist element for the production of The Waves, that is 'the essential liberation upon which others followed'¹⁷² while 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens' provide the aesthetics used for this achievement. While those elements were outlined but still disparate in the fiction preceding it, I would like to show that they are more consistently merged in The Waves to make it an example of the author's feminist aesthetics. This is evident, I will argue, in the way the notion of pattern and significant form are handled, turning this novel into 'the shape of her prophecy'.¹⁷³ All of the characteristics exemplified by the preceding texts, that is to say, the displacement of interest from theme as plot to theme as form, the already perceptible link between feminism and representation, together with the aesthetic use of the frame and the thematic

¹⁷⁰ See James Naremore, p. 174.

¹⁷¹ D, Wednesday 7 November, 1928, p. 203.

¹⁷² See Herbert Marder, p. 111.

¹⁷³ See Harvena Richter, p. 8.

use of feminism, are used together to produce the aesthetic quality of The Waves. There, these two elements, feminist theme and aesthetic form, are fused together in a manner which is adequate to translate the author's idiosyncratic sense of reality and to shape her ontological enquiry. This leads James Naremore to comment that this novel 'represents in many ways the ultimate refinement, the purest example of what is idiomatic about [Virginia Woolf's] work.'¹⁷⁴ In a second section, this thesis will assess to what extent and in which specific ways this text can be described as Virginia Woolf's 'greatest aesthetic achievement.'¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ See p. 62.

¹⁷⁵ This is Ralph Freedman's opinion, p. 126.

SECTION II: THE WAVES

This section will focus more closely on The Waves and look at the specific ways in which this novel builds on her previous works to provide another answer to Virginia Woolf's aesthetic search for the best form to embody her vision and the extent to which it.

The first part will consider the aesthetic question of representation, especially the function of art within the relationship between outer reality and inner self. A second section will look at the notion of modernity together with the use of visual arts in this particular text. It will focus on the problematic of the frame in relation to the question of representation, whereby framing is a reminder of the transaction between reality and representation, and as such a marker of the nature of art. This transaction can be expounded in psychological terms as the transaction between self and other, in aesthetic terms with the consideration of the question as an element of the story, or again embodied in formal terms as a constitutive structure of the narrative. The role of the visual arts in questioning the boundaries established in those terms will then be discussed as well as their role in providing an alternative to the realist line of representation. This leads in turn to reflections on how to transcribe the new line of representation in terms of significant form. This new approach to representation uses formal patterns instead of plot in the understanding and description of reality. The next point will explain that this notion of formal pattern is also consistent with a representation of the world seen by women, so that it also contributes to the on-going exploration of the feminine. Thus a formal, that is aesthetic, position also underlies and validates a political translation of reality into a feminist text. This concern with expression and representation will consequently focus on questions of language, particularly in relation to giving women's point of view on reality. For instance, the author's interest in the possibilities of the 'little language' and the exploration of the vertical axis of language will be considered.¹ Finally

¹ This term is used in the context of linguistics. The analysis of syntax, with which linguistics is concerned, draws a distinction between 'paradigmatic' and 'syntagmatic' relations between words.

this study, in keeping with Virginia Woolf's ontological quest, will discuss how all these considerations contribute to give a novel account of reality or in her own words 'new forms for our new sensations.'²

As a consequence, The Waves will be appreciated as an achievement of form and accordingly, it will be necessary to assess its position in the author's writing career.

The Waves is probably the most metaphorical of all of Virginia Woolf's titles, as it is indicative of both the content and structure of the novel.³ Indeed, set against the titles Orlando, To the Lighthouse or The Years, The Waves does not yield meaning immediately, unless of an evocative nature. The metaphorical character of this title clearly marks this work as the most challenging of her attempts at formulating a text along the lines of her feminist aesthetics.

This novel has been considered as the most experimental of her works. Clare Hanson, for instance, finds that it is 'the novel of Woolf's which seems to come closest to parallel contemporary texts.'⁴ The commitment to move away from the more traditional method of the realist model of representation is particularly evident in a novel that can be considered as self-aware. Indeed, it expands the earlier model of a narrative based on a main relation between two characters by constructing the text through the subjective view of six characters.⁵ A balance between three female characters and three male characters allows an observation of the self within the category of the

'Paradigmatic' refers to the relation between any single word in a sentence and the other words that might be substituted for it, the relation being described as 'vertical.' 'Syntagmatic' describes the sequential relation between words which form a syntactic unit; a relation which can be seen as 'horizontal.' This distinction echoes that between metaphoric, that is 'vertical' relations and metonymic, that is 'horizontal' relations. See A Glossary of Literary Terms, M. H. Abrams, (Cornell university, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, Inc., The Dryden Press, Saunders College Publishing, 1988), p. 217-8. Virginia Woolf's interest in what is described as the vertical axis of language is not surprising considering her attempt at transcribing reality and its necessary aesthetic transaction.

² See 'Hours in a Library' in Collected Essays, in The Essays of Virginia Woolf, edited by Andrew McNeillie, projected 6 vols., (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986-), vol. 2, (1987), p. 60.

³ Jane Wheare finds the style of the novel esoteric and metaphorical, p. 1 in Virginia Woolf: Dramatic Novelist, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989)

⁴ See p. 144.

⁵ As remarked by Harvena Richter, p. 120-1 in Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). James Naremore also observes that The Waves uses the soliloquy as a progression from what he calls 'the indirect method' in Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, p. 69 in The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973).

psychosexual.⁶ This expanding frame of reference presents the reader with an even more complex understanding of identity. The characters are thus mainly concerned with the problem of language as a tool to negotiate reality, a concern which is echoed by the way in which Virginia Woolf herself is conscious of her medium. The nature of this novel is clearly intimated from the outset with the sense of frame dissolution afforded by the waves. The endlessly repetitive motif their reference creates in the text functions to cancel out the notion of either beginning or end.

Some critics, such as James Naremore, have attempted a realistic reading of the text, which inevitably led them to see The Waves as a failure. He finds the atmosphere created in the novel static, the characters' voice superficial and the prose stifling in effect.⁷ Yet, considering the novel's highly experimental, it seems appropriate to return to Virginia Woolf's own formulation of her attempt by examining the following passage from 'A Sketch of the Past' in her memoirs, Moments of Being, which throws light on the genesis of The Waves:⁸

If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver and green. There was the pale yellow blind; the green sea; and the silver of the passion flowers. I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent; I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf -- sounds indistinguishable from sights. Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions. When I think of the early morning in bed I also hear the caw of rooks falling from a great height. The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air; which holds it up; which prevents it from being sharp and distinct. The quality of the air above Talland House seemed to suspend sound, let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil. The rooks cawing is part of the waves breaking -- one,

⁶ Clare Hanson borrows this term from Freud and finds it particularly useful to describe 'the grey area between physiological sexual difference and the sociological category of gender', see Virginia Woolf, Collection Women Writers, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994 p. 103.

⁷ See pp. 151-2 and 170.

two, one, two -- and the splash as the wave drew back and then it gathered again, and I lay there half awake, half asleep, drawing in such ecstasy as I cannot describe. (74)

This excerpt is informative because it provides the reader with a set of intentions that seem to have been worked out in The Waves.

The opening sentence, remarkably, directs us towards the painter thus giving the whole passage an aesthetic climate, which unveils the full extent of Virginia Woolf's debt to the visual arts. As observed in the first section of this work, Virginia Woolf had an on-going interaction with artists throughout her life. As a friend of Roger Fry, Walter Sickert was introduced to her. Their mutual admiration for each other's work led Virginia Woolf to write an essay entitled 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation'. An examination of this essay together with an earlier one, 'Pictures', sheds light on the manner of her forays into the visual arts.

As their titles indicate, in both essays the author makes a comparison between words and painting principally, as different media of artistic production. In the same way as the excerpt above surprises the reader by supplementing words with physical sensations of a visual order, the overall contention of 'Walter Sickert' is that 'talk ... abounds in exaggeration and inaccuracy' and that paintings express 'something so deeply sunk that [one] cannot put words to it.'⁹ A comparison of another kind is offered in 'Pictures', namely that 'literature has always been the most sociable and the most impressionable of [all the arts].'¹⁰ Both these comments can be verified by the experimentation of the works of the 20s, but as will be demonstrated, The Waves is more directly concerned with this question of the limitations of traditional language. The descriptions of Walter Sickert's paintings in the essay, for instance, recall the interludes of this text as a painterly attempt. In the same way, the visit of the writers to the museum narrated in 'Pictures' echoes a similar visit by Bernard, the main narrator of The Waves, to The

⁸ Clare Hanson, who cites a shorter excerpt from this passage, thinks that it actually forms the 'base' of the novel, p. 126-7.

⁹ See 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation', (London: The Hogarth Press, 1934), pp. 5 and 11 respectively. [WS]

National Gallery. Importantly, pictures elicit a similar reaction in all these characters; that is to say, they relieve the feeling that 'words are an impure medium.' (WS13) However, these are particular paintings, created by 'silent painters' (P142) who manage to convey the 'zone of silence in the middle of every art.' (WS11) By so doing, the author seems to say, these paintings become complete, in a way that novels very rarely are. However, as mentioned earlier, Virginia Woolf finds this quality in Marcel Proust's work and significantly, she attributes his success to the fact that 'it is the eye that has fertilised [the] thought.' (WS141) As this study will show, the text of The Waves presents a similar structure, where

it is the eye ... that has come to the help of the other senses, combined with them, and produced effects of extreme beauty, and of a subtlety hitherto unknown. (WS 141)

The importance of these two essays lies in the recognition that 'painting and writing have much to tell each other; they have much in common' (WS 22) and that, as a writer, Virginia Woolf 'can never refuse the temptation' of this invitation. (P 142) The Waves is evidence of the fruitfulness of such collaboration. Its attempt at functioning organically, as a whole, so as to 'make [a] complete and flawless statement' about the lives of its characters without 'those miserable impediments called facts' (WS 12), clearly indicates The Waves' indebtedness to the visual arts.

The way in which, in the text, light -- sometimes condensed into colour -- informs matter, gives shape to reality, in effect creates the world, focuses the question of the aesthetic and philosophical implications of a narrative technique alert to the visual. This is especially relevant to story telling in view of the author's previous experiments and also understanding of reality: 'The sun rose higher. ...The rocks which had been misty and soft hardened and were marked with red clefts.' (23) The effect obtained, while akin to that of modern paintings -- by Matisse, for instance -- re-focuses attention on the on-

¹⁰ See 'Pictures' in The Moment and other Essays, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947), p. 140. [P]

going problem of representation in art, or the aesthetic response to reality, as exemplified earlier in Orlando.

To write The Waves the author was sustained by the autobiographical memory quoted above, as the opening passage and the interludes testify, focusing on the very same objects of these early recollections, such as the blind, the sea, or the flowers: 'the sea blazed gold', '[the sun] rested like the tip of a fan upon the white blind and made a blue fingerprint of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window.'⁽⁸⁾

The ensuing mention of 'a picture that was globular; semi-transparent' echoes Virginia Woolf's very description of life as 'not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged [but] a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.'¹¹ Although this definition clearly already informed the texts of the 20s, it takes on a new dimension in this work. Indeed, the descriptions in The Waves are in terms of shape, texture, and colour, which is precisely the way the children perceive the world at the beginning of the narrative: 'how colour blazes, unrelated to any object, in the eyes of children.'¹² Harvena Richter underlines the object seen through the eyes of the child as one of the ways of seeing in Virginia Woolf's work. This method was at work locally in Jacob's Room as we saw, but here it takes on a much wider scope as exemplified by Bernard's 'ring' or Neville's 'globe' and his noting how 'Stones are cold to my feet. ... I feel each one, round or pointed, separately' and again Susan's 'slab of pale yellow' and 'purple stripe', or Jinny's 'crimson tassel.'⁽⁸⁻⁹⁾ It shows the ability of the child 'to infuse the perceived object with emotion [and] its delight with the isolated object which is experienced wholly and separately.'¹³ James Naremore objects that the children cannot be said to literally speak these lines.¹⁴ However such a reading ignores the political reasons, which will be developed later, why this relation to the world is seen as positive in The Waves, and most of the

¹¹ See p. 8 in 'Modern Fiction' in Virginia Woolf, The Crowded Dance of Modern Life, edited by Rachel Bowlby, vol. 2, (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

¹² See 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation', p. 7.

¹³ See p. 74.

characters as adults seem to be yearning for a means of expression capable of recapturing what Luce Irigaray describes as:

The sensual pleasure of birth into a world where the look itself remains tactile -- open to the light. Still carnal. Voluptuous without knowing it. Always at the beginning and not based on the origin of a subject that sees, grows old, and dies of losing touch with the enthusiasm and innocence of a perpetual beginning.¹⁵

The impulse for borrowing from the visual arts manifested in such a perception sheds light on Virginia Woolf's narrative technique as made explicit in the fourth sentence of the memory: structurally, the narrative does 'make [this] picture', with the interludes showing through the main body of the text, while thematically the characters are not given 'a clear outline.' This notion of structure further reinforces the formal character of her aesthetic attempt in The Waves.

In this novel the opposition between the interludes, where 'shells' are 'semi-transparent', and the main body of the text can also be seen as a metaphor for the dynamic of the passage from childhood to adulthood. As the shell of personality hardens with adulthood, the vision of the adult becomes blurred and spoiled as opposed to that of the child. This is supported by Herbert Marder's understanding of the novel's use of the snail as an image for personality.¹⁶ This theme has already been explored in Jacob's Room or Orlando, where both characters, the one willing, the other resisting, are being fashioned by society and the 'cotton-wool' of social codes, in such a way as to cover up the 'hidden pattern' of reality which is manifested in the structural pattern at work in nature and its materiality. The implication is clearly that the 'ecstasy' of the sensations in childhood is being dulled by a growing-up process that favours the language of the intellect over that of the body. To Avrom Fleishman the very point of the novel is to inspire a sense of determinism, whereby human life is presented as a progressive

¹⁴ See p. 154.

¹⁵ See Luce Irigaray, 'The fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, Totality and Infinity, "Phenomenology of Eros"', in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p. 185.

narrowing of freedom.¹⁷ This process seems to be particularly evident in terms of creation. Looking at children's drawings, Roger Fry marvelled at what 'makes the visual life of children so much more vivid and intense than the visual life of almost all grown-up people' which in turn enables them 'to convey to the spectator something of the emotional force of its own perceptions.'¹⁸ Hence, one can see that 'certain aspects of so-called artistic vision bear a resemblance to modes of vision of primitives and children, ... such as the all-absorbing focus on the single object.'¹⁹

This dynamic can also be seen as prefiguring one of the main articulations of Julia Kristeva's feminist theories. Her terminology derives from psychological terms, whereby the semiotic corresponds to a pre-Oedipal stage while the thetic marks the child's entry into the symbolic stage, that is to say, the world of language. 'A Sketch of the Past' is interesting in that respect because it presents numerous examples of synesthesia, as indicated by 'Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions.' They clearly indicate a particular concern with perception and its representation, which is another aspect of The Waves. The very fact that these first impressions are related to childhood memories is also telling.²⁰ While Harvena Richter understands Virginia Woolf's use of synesthesia as one of the ways to show the motion of the mind, one can also postulate that in the novel synesthesia is used as an aesthetic translation for a psychological state attuned to the inchoate and the merging, breaking through the thetic surface of life as arranged by society.²¹ In other words, it can be seen as a mark of the semiotic, which is linked to young children's understanding of the world. This proposition which clearly has consequence for language and thus

¹⁶ See note 32, p. 133 in Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

¹⁷ See p. 151 in Virginia Woolf, A Critical Reading, (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

¹⁸ See p. 268 in A Roger Fry Reader edited by Christopher Reed, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁹ This is Harvena Richter's observation, which echoes that of Roger Fry as exposed in the study of short stories. See p. 81, note 3.

²⁰ This is evidenced by 'when I think of the early morning in bed', which refers to the many times the author describes her experience, waking up and lying in bed, listening to the outside world from her nursery, p. 73 in SP.

²¹ See p. 49.

representation, will be given some thought later on when considering the feminist aspect of the text.

The next striking metaphor is that of the 'blue gummy veil'. It is very clearly akin to Virginia Woolf's understanding of perception. Indeed the way in which the caw of the rooks seems to be perceived as muffled through a 'veil' echoes her understanding of the way in which reality is being impressed upon consciousness. The opening passage of The Waves sets out this transaction as one of the most important topics in the novel. Moreover, this metaphor is an overriding one, since it is conferred upon the central character Percival -- a status which needs to be assessed.

The predominance of this topic is manifested by the recurrence of the phrase 'as if' which yields, in an appropriate play on form, a wavery quality to the style of The Waves. This quality presumably originates in Virginia Woolf's sense of life being at once solid and ethereal, 'granite' and 'rainbow', by which, as seen earlier, solid objects actually underline the transient character of life.²² This feeling then is also to be linked with the notion of division between 'inner reality' and 'outer surface' established in the first section of this discussion.

Interestingly enough, the caw of the rooks in the next sentence is not considered in itself, for its reality; instead the emphasis is laid on the awareness of the sound being registered by the consciousness of the perceiver. This discrepancy between reality and perception is where language finds its place, in an attempt to bridge them. This is an indication of the interest of the novel in the aesthetic question of rendering the physical experience of sensation as truly as possible since it allows us to get to the core of reality. Yet as the examination of her previous works demonstrated, Virginia Woolf does not find the binary nature of language adequate to transcribe this reality. Indeed, while attempting to mediate between physical reality and its inscription into consciousness, language actually creates a gap and thus 'we move away from "the naked soul of

²² The ultimate example of this process is given by Patricia Clements as the Great Frost in Orlando. See her article ' "As in the rough stream of a glacier": Virginia Woolf's Art of Narrative Fusion' in Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays.

things."²³ Clearly, as the text features characters always questioning language, and from an aesthetic point of view, this gap between reality and representation is worthwhile investigated. The various possibilities for a successful means of transaction are to be considered, such as rhythm for instance, which functions both at the level of the narrative and as a pattern in the novel. Indeed, Virginia Woolf declared in her diary to have written this novel 'to a rhythm not to a plot.'²⁴ This transaction also raises the problem of naming, that is distinguishing what 'is part of' what, a problematic exemplified in Bernard's pursuit of the story that he cannot describe, the whole-encompassing tale of 'the waves breaking'.

The intentions expressed in 'A Sketch of the Past' provide the reader with a whole range of approaches to The Waves, such as the aesthetics and the modernity of a text that borrows from visual arts. Such concerns inevitably lead to the problem of form. The specificity of the form itself is better understood in terms of feminism, which in turn sheds a distinctive light on Virginia Woolf's attitude to language and literature as a means of comprehending the nature of reality. All of these concerns informed her previous novels and I will try to indicate in which specific ways they have enabled her to carry on in the same direction and given her the appropriate tools to delineate her feminist aesthetics more clearly.

1. Problems of aesthetics: imperfect phrases

Considering aesthetics first in a study of The Waves seems justified as the text opens on a 'tableau' which calls attention to itself by its subsequent development in the text as a structural feature. It is also relevant in the light of the author's general debate on representation.

In that respect it is illustrative that in Virginia Woolf's novels, there are always some characters in the throes of the creative process, such as Orlando and her poem and in To

²³ See Allen McLaurin, Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 47.

the Lighthouse, Lily and her painting. This theme is still at the centre of her last novel, Between the Acts, with the character of Miss La Trobe, at pains to set up a pageant. This emphasises even further the author's relentless thinking on this subject. As Randall Stevenson points out, 'awareness of words and language, of how they "paint" reality, inevitably formed a central part of the increasing artistic self-consciousness of modernism.'²⁵ Painting, of course, is topical for The Waves, not only because of the interludes -- which remind the reader of pictures by Monet with their impressionistic play of light -- but also because the characters are all concerned in one sense or another with art: the novel offering a wide range of reactions to art and its function. Aesthetics, then, is one of the main questions the novel sets out to explore. The author deems the language of realist fiction as unable to transcribe reality and thus looks towards the visual arts to inform her new vision. The characters' attitude towards art in The Waves provides a formulation for this important problematic. Once again, a realist interpretation of the dialogue finds fault with a language that does not grow with the characters themselves.²⁶ The point of the novel, though, precisely resides in presenting a large selection of the different guises of the self, in other words, to voice subjectivity itself.²⁷ This attempts accounts for the different characters' reactions, which span the whole range from the total commitment of the aesthete to the uncompromising denial of the farmer.

Neville's attitude towards art is one of total surrender; he uses the beauty of poetry as an ordering principle. He retreats from the ugliness of reality by creating a protected world of his own:

But Neville, delicately avoiding interference, stealthily, like a conspirator, hastens back to his room. I see him sunk in his low chair gazing at the fire which has assumed for the moment an architectural solidity. If life, he thinks, could wear that permanence, if life could have that order -- for above all he desires order, and detests [Bernard's] Byronic untidiness; and so draws his curtains; and bolts his door. ...

²⁴ Diary, 2nd September 1930, iii, p. 316.

²⁵ See Modernist Fiction: An Introduction, (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 165.

²⁶ See James Naremore's comment, p. 157.

²⁷ See Harvena Richter, p. 128.

Then he stretches his hand for his copy-book -- a neat volume bound in mottled paper -- and writes feverishly long lines of poetry, in the manner of whomever he admires most for the moment. (72)

The opposition between 'delicately' and 'feverishly' is telling. It can be seen as reminiscent of the binary model of opposition underlying the language of which Neville is so fond. This division in his appreciation is reminiscent of the argument of 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens', where the artificial 'order' imposed on reality by Whitaker's table functions on a social level, which is set in opposition to the deeper individual reality which comes from understanding the accidentality of matter. This is also reflected in the fact that Neville merely borrows an established and traditional style as opposed to following Orlando's search for a genuine expression of one's own sense of reality.

Louis's need for poetry comes under the same urge for order, yet his motivation stems from the tension between his scholarly ability and his acute sense of alienation:

I will read in the book that is propped against the bottle of Worcester sauce. It contains some forged rings, some perfect statements, a few words, but poetry. You, all of you, ignore it. What the dead poet said, you have forgotten. And I cannot translate it to you so that its binding power ropes you in, and makes it clear to you that you are aimless; and the rhythm is cheap and worthless; and so remove that degradation which, if you are unaware of your aimlessness, pervades you, making you senile, even while you are young. To translate that poem so that it is easily read is to be my endeavour. I, the companion of Plato, of Virgil, will knock at the grained oak door. I oppose to what is passing that ramrod of beaten steel. (75)

For Louis, poetry provides something solid and stable on which to rely in the face of what he sees as the 'aimlessness' of life, which in the author's eyes, derives from its accidental quality. For him, poetry thus belongs to a higher order, which transcends the awareness of life's fickleness. Clare Hanson sees this attitude as 'a patronising and

appropriative attempt to "redeem" what he perceives to be the squalor of the lives around him.²⁸

Bernard, who comes the closest to a narrator figure, uses the language of literature as a tool to apprehend reality and build his own sense of self:

'Had I been born' said Bernard, 'not knowing that one word follows another I might have been, who knows, perhaps anything. As it is, finding sequences everywhere, I cannot bear the pressure of solitude. When I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness -- I am nothing'. (105)

Again, there is the same sense of a duality by which reality can be apprehended and life shaped through language alone. In that sense, Bernard experiences the gap created by this duality as a psychological necessity. Without language, he cannot make sense of the world because then he is not dissociated from reality and his sense of self is no longer determined by his role as the beholder.

The way in which the three male characters of the novel use language as art, like in poetry, stems from the common necessity for a way to come to terms with reality. This is exemplified, for instance, by Louis's equating the opposition of art and life with that of order and chaos. Whether art provides a means of establishing a grasp on reality or a shelter from it, it establishes a relation between the outer world and the inner self which affords Neville, Louis and Bernard with a sense of their own stance in life. This transaction between art and reality can thus be understood as an endeavour to create as a glimpse of the deeper rhythms of the self.²⁹ Language being the medium through which this transaction is effected, it also becomes the space where the self is constructed.

This use of art by the male characters is an attempt at rendering reality accessible by imposing order on its accidental character. Yet the varying degrees of success are indicative of the author's ambivalence towards such a use. The opposition between

²⁸ See p. 146.

Neville and Bernard is here illustrative, and has to be considered as taking place within a society based on language as an ordering principle. Hence, Neville will be successful in his effort because his artistic temperament, like the language he uses, preserves him from the deeper reality of human relationships, throws the 'cotton-wool' on the 'hidden pattern', 'the contrast' that he has no wish to discover, equating as he does accidentality with disorder. Bernard, on the other hand, is aware of the artificial nature of the order imposed by language, which does not translate his impressions as accurately as he would like and this also explains, as will be examined, his ambiguous feelings towards Percival:

The old woman pauses against the lit window. A contrast. That I see and Neville does not see; that I feel and Neville does not feel. Hence he will reach perfection and I shall fail and leave nothing behind me but imperfect phrases littered with sand. (73)

This notion of accidentality that is peculiar to life pitted against the idea of elimination or distinction peculiar to art is another way to express the relation between chaos and order. This problematic of the relevance of the incidental scene was widely and relentlessly probed by Virginia Woolf both as a writer and as a woman in her search for the adequate representation of reality:

How stimulating the scene is, in its unconsciousness, its irrelevance, its perpetual movement -- the colts galloping round the field, the woman filling her pail at the well, the donkey throwing back his head and emitting his long, acrid moan.³⁰

It is interesting to note that the female characters' reaction to art differs from that of the male, if only in their unease towards literature, that is to say, their reservations about language -- a notion that will be studied at length later on. This difference also reinforces

²⁹ Sue Roe explores this notion in her study of *The Waves* in *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice*. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

³⁰ See p. 63 in 'How Should One Read a Book' in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*.

the development of a feminist aesthetics and echoes the division between men and women observed in the novels preceding The Waves.

Rhoda's antagonism to art, unlike that of Jinny and Susan, is not complete, although her attitude towards language as an ordering principle remains as inflexible. Indeed she expresses herself in terms of visual art using the abstraction of the geometrical shapes she perceives in music, for example. This position is of course emblematic of the emphasis on form as opposed to content supported by the author's aesthetics. In that light, it is informative to consider the development of this character more closely.

Why ask, like Louis, for a reason, or fly like Rhoda to some far grove and part the leaves of the laurels and look for statues? (156)

Jinny takes the irreverence for art a step further with her self centred in her body as opposed to being informed by the sequentiality of language:

I dance over these streaked, these impersonal, distempered walls with their yellow skirting as firelight dances over teapots. I catch fire even from women's cold eyes. When I read, a purple rim runs round the black edge of the textbook. Yet I cannot follow any word through its changes. I cannot follow any thought from present to past. (34)

Susan, finally, actively resists language or art as a distortion of reality, and lives at one with nature:

I like to be with people who twist herbs, and spit into the fire, and shuffle down long passages in slippers like my father. The only sayings I understand are cries of love, hate, rage and pain. This talking is undressing an old woman whose dress has seemed to be part of her, but now, as we talk, she turns pinkish underneath, and has wrinkled thighs and sagging breasts. When you are silent you are again beautiful. I shall never have anything but natural happiness. ... I do not understand phrases. (104-5)

The fact that both Jenny and Susan resent or overlook language in their apprehension of the world illustrates their oneness with reality. They do not need a tool to prise the world open; they have their bodies instead, anchored in the physical reality of the material world. Their transaction with reality is thus effected through their bodily responses to the world and consequently, their sense of self originates there rather than in language.

This presentation of the six characters thus allows to show the multipersonal aspect of identity, whether they are considered as individuals or, like Harvena Richter does, as six aspects of one mind.³¹

In respect of the use of language to gain access to reality, Percival is at the heart of the problem; his being structurally at the centre of the novel clearly indicates from an aesthetic point of view that the shift from content to form is here consummated. Indeed, Percival operates as the centre around which not only the lives of the characters, but also the narrative, function. He is the referent, that is 'the thing itself', who is not described but created as the absence at the centre of the novel. This pattern can be seen as a more complex elaboration of the pattern created in Jacob's Room, where the eponymous character was playing the same role, and this shows how the works of this decade were indeed of capital importance to the writing of this novel. 'All six characters are [thus] linked together through a network of leitmotifs or key words which varies slightly with each person.'³² The character of Percival also works as an organisational centre in that he stands for the perfect embodiment of reality, as much in ontological terms as in terms of representation:

'Percival has gone now' said Neville. '... He takes my devotion; he accepts my tremulous, no doubt abject offering, mixed with contempt as it is for his mind. For he cannot read. Yet when I read Shakespeare or Catullus, lying in the long grass, he understands more than Louis. Not the words -- but what are the words? Do I not know already how to rhyme, how to imitate Pope, Dryden, even Shakespeare? But I cannot stand all day in the sun with my eyes on the ball; I cannot feel the flight of the

³¹ See p. 53

ball through my body and think only of the ball. I shall be a clinger to the outside of words all my life. Yet I could not live with him and suffer his stupidity. He will coarsen and snore. He will marry and there will be scenes of tenderness at breakfast. But now he is young. Not a thread, not a sheet of paper lies between him and the sun, between him and the rain, between him and the moon as he lies naked, tumbled, hot, on his bed.' (38-9)

All the male characters -- save Percival, which illustrates his status as the signified -- are described as using art or language to get to the core of reality. As Neville realises, the intrinsic difficulty with the process of naming lies in the discrepancy it creates between the signified and the signifier. At the same time as language enables him to comprehend reality, to master its chaos, it also alienates him 'on the outside of words'. Makiko Minow-Pinkney argues that 'in quest of a meaning impeded by the opacity of the signifier, the text has to face the still more troubling prospect that the signified may not be just postponed but absent from the start.'³³ However, one can see the character of Percival as standing on the other side of art or language. In other words, he can be construed as the inspiration, the signified, at one with the world. Significantly, his state is clearly related to his ability to be totally absorbed in the physical world, not unlike a child. This sends the reader back to the beginning of the novel where all the characters were portrayed in their childhood. This notion is supported by his inability to read or deal with language, in other words his non-inscription in the world of language and his affinity with the merging that characterises reality before the process of differentiation is imposed on it by language:

Lines and colours almost persuade me that I too can be heroic, I, who make phrases so easily, am so soon seduced, love what comes next, and cannot clench my fist, but vacillate weakly making phrases according to my circumstances. Now, through my infirmity I recover what he was to me: my opposite. Being naturally truthful, he did not see the point of these exaggerations, and was borne on by a natural sense of the fitting, was indeed a great master of the art of living so that he seems to have

³² See Harvena Richter, p. 53.

³³ See *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987). p. 154.

lived long, and to have spread calm around him, indifference one might almost say, certainly to his own advancement, save that he had also great compassion. (123)

Bernard, longing to be the master of words, understands the limitation of his medium by contrasting it with Percival's central position. The pattern of opposition between two elements that it presents him with goes a long way beyond words in terms of significance. Indeed, it was indicated earlier that in the author's use of representation, language cannot translate reality because it implies the finite identification between the signified and the signifier, and this Virginia Woolf sees as limiting meaning. Her representation can only be expressed with the approximation of the pattern in visual arts, which on the contrary opens up meaning by evading the binary system of language. This aesthetics is thus embodied in the notion of pattern and significant form proposed by the previous works:

We have come together (from the North, from the South, from Susan's farm, from Louis's house of business) to make one thing, -- not enduring for what endures? -- but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves -- a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution. (100-1)

For Clare Hanson, this important passage suggests 'a multiple subjectivity, with differences both highlighted and drawn together through the catalysing presence of Percival.'³⁴ This moment of being, brimming with significance for the characters, is of course in the same line as Mrs Dalloway's party, Lily's painting or Mrs Ramsay's dinner. The shift from content to form initiated by these novels is here carried out more completely. What were recognised as moments of being from a thematic point of view in these novels are here transferred on the level of structure. As Harvena Richter explains:

³⁴ See p. 140.

For Mrs Woolf, the moment of being becomes the emotional unit out of which the larger complex of her fiction is span. That complex depends on an intricate relationship of emotions ... the pattern of these inner tensions as they shift from changing moment to moment make up the form of her novels.³⁵

In other words, the text of The Waves itself is interspersed by interludes and activated by the formal pattern of all the characters coming together, arranged around the elusive Percival. This moment of being is structurally inscribed in the text as the way to make it function. Whereas similar moments in the fiction of the 20s were functioning at the level of the story, here they have become the centre of the narrative. This is manifested by the fact that moments of being in both To the Lighthouse and Mrs Dalloway feature at the end of the narrative, where they signal the denouement of the story. This is particularly true in the former where Lily's 'I have had my vision' closes narrative and story alike (224), bringing 'the novel to a resonant close' in Susan Dick's words. She underlines how 'the movement of the narrative is completed with this final return to the present.'³⁶ In The Waves, on the contrary, the moment of being operates on the level of the narrative rather than on that of the story since the 'many-petalled flower', as a pattern, actually embodies the very structure of the narrative. Indeed, the text only really functions when the characters are put in a structural relation the one with the other, in other words, making a pattern.

By operating as a magnet, Percival enables the six characters to experience a profound understanding of the nature of reality, which they realise for themselves as a moment of being. While, on the diegetic level, it allows the male characters in particular to escape from the binary character of language, it also forms the basis of the narrative on a structural level. At this level, the author manages to make the moment of being accessible to the reader. This is imparted by the notion of significant pattern afforded by visual art, which, unlike the language of the realist novel, can accommodate the multi-faceted character of reality and self. The six characters can thus be seen as dividing the

³⁵ See pp. 30-1.

self to illustrate various aspects of mind and body, of conscious and unconscious.³⁷ Typically, it is by a description akin to painting that the moment is registered. It is 'single' but also and at the same time 'sided' or multiple. Thus the nature of the pattern is as open and indefinite as the moment itself; the relation between the parts, escaping definition and always in process, is what grants significance to the moment as well as understanding of reality. On the other hand, as Bernard understands, the sequential character of language does not allow the expression of some of the deepest feelings. This is underlined by the dismissal of the omniscient narrator that a reality perceived by 'many eyes simultaneously' entails. It is only in this multiplicity that the moment functions as 'a moment of being', a point which builds on Jinny Carslake's intuition in Jacob's Room. As a consequence, it is to painting and its silence that Bernard turns in order to come to terms with Percival's death:

Yes, but I still resent the usual order. I will not let myself be made to accept the sequence of things. I will walk; I will not change the rhythm of my mind by stopping, by looking; I will walk. I will go up these stairs into the gallery and submit myself to the influence of minds like mine outside the sequence. There is little time left to answer the question; my powers flag; I become torpid. Here are pictures. Here are cold Madonnas among their pillars. Let them lay to rest the incessant activity of the mind's eye, the bandaged head, the men with ropes, so that I may find something unvisual beneath. Here are gardens; and Venus among her flowers; here are saints and blue madonnas. Mercifully these pictures make no reference; they do not nudge; they do not point. (123)

From this passage, it seems that the 'finest arts supply a sense of answer to their own questions',³⁸ whereas literature, at least of the realist form, uses language in a referential manner, the signifier always 'pointing' to a signified in a movement that defers meaning. On the other hand, the modernist use that Virginia Woolf makes of literature is significantly reflected in the character of the narrator, Bernard, whose appreciation of the

³⁶ See Susan Dick, p.195 in Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1983).

³⁷ See Harvena Richter, p. 121.

visual arts renders meaning in a self-contained manner. The contrast offered by this passage between 'the sequence of things' and 'minds ... outside the sequence' is of course reminiscent of Roger Fry's theories. It has been emphasised that Virginia Woolf understood and supported the modernist movement in painting and that Roger Fry saw some similarities between her attitude to writing and that movement's attitude to painting. The main similarity lies in the downplaying if not dismissal of the narrative element,³⁹ as demonstrated, or here 'the incessant activity of the mind's eye' which stands in opposition to the significant form of 'the cold madonnas among their pillars'. Remarkably, Bernard actually excises referentiality from the paintings of Madonna and child, that is to say, from one of the most fundamental stories. This aesthetic position is of course reminiscent of Lily representing Mrs Ramsay and James as a triangular shape. Both these paintings give an understanding and appreciation of a formal order; they do not need to tell a story to be intelligible but rather become meaningful with the formal relation between elements of which they are constructed.

This idea is further developed by the opposition that Bernard feels between literature and the visual arts:

Painters live lives of methodical absorption, adding stroke to stroke. They are not like poets -- scapegoats; they are not chained to the rock. Hence the silence, the sublimity. Yet that crimson must have burnt in Titian's gizzard. No doubt he rose with the great arms holding the cornucopia, and fell, in that descent. But the silence weighs on me -- the perpetual solicitation of the eye. ... I am titillated inordinately by some splendour; the ruffled crimson against the green lining; the march of pillars; the orange light behind the black, pricked ears of the olive trees. Arrows of sensations strike from my spine, but without order.

'Yet something is added to my interpretation. Something lies deeply buried. For one moment I thought to grasp it. But bury it, bury it; let it breed, hidden in the depth of my mind some day to fructify.' (124)

³⁸ See p. 62 in C. Ruth Miller, *Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988).

³⁹ Clearly, and as defined in the earlier discussion on visual arts, when Roger Fry applies the term 'narrative' to painting it is to be understood as 'telling a story'; the dismissal of this element by the Post-Impressionist generation is to be seen in their predilection for still lifes or landscapes as opposed to classical scene painting.

Again the painting is valued for its sensual character, sparked off by the richness of the colours and in the text it echoes the sensuality experienced by the characters as children at the beginning of the novel and mirrored again in the interludes. Similarly, it is also seen through Bernard's eyes as a structure of volume and lines, recalling a formalist understanding of the visual arts. The painter is also described as more truthful in conveying his vision than the writer. This notion is apparent through the silence emanating from his work, in stark contrast with Bernard's own medium. It is clearly implied that beneath this silence there is something deeply significant to discover, and of course the fact that Bernard does not translate it into words is illustrative of its nature. It is similar to the narrator's refusal to ascertain the mark on the wall as a snail or to the narrator's unanswered questions in 'Kew Gardens'. This is related to the notion that significant form does not define as language does but embodies the underlying structure of our individual sense of reality. Silence becomes preferable for its non-description, its non-inscription in the sequential, which opens up possibilities. To use Patricia Oudek Laurence's terminology, significant form allows the 'unsayable'. What literature as an artistic medium cannot achieve is thus linked to the nature of its medium, that is to say language. The whole dialectic of this novel is one of articulation – a relation between elements -- and structure, as opposed to story telling and its implied sequence, and it can only be articulated to the full of the author's aesthetics in terms of visual arts. Bernard's dilemma with aesthetics is of course also Virginia Woolf's dilemma; his predilection for the pictorial is an indication of the novel's departure from content in order to function on a structural level. It is useful to remember here Virginia Woolf's wish to write a novel about silence.⁴⁰ Such a seeming paradox becomes more understandable in the context of an aesthetics drawing from the visual arts.

⁴⁰ Her very first attempt at novel writing, *The Voyage Out*, is indeed centred on trying to record the 'reality dwelling in what one saw and felt, but did not talk about...' The heroine, Rachel, has to deal with the challenge of coming out of the silence imposed on her by society while her fiancé, Terence, wants 'to write a novel about Silence ... But the difficulty is immense.' (See Lyndall Gordon's understanding of the novel in *Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Life*, Oxford: O.U.P., 1984, pp. 97-111.) This difficulty is a recurrent theme, as will be underlined when considering *Night and Day*. See also

2. Modernity: the frame as a marker of the visual arts

The visual arts thus provide a convenient context for a discussion on The Waves. The concept of framing is immediately relevant to a text that features a highly formal structure in which interludes disrupt the continuum of the narrative and story alike.⁴¹ Indeed, the frame functions as a token of the nature of art since it both indicates and delineates the boundary between reality and art or the object and its representation. The very notion of the frame, which implies a division, can thus relate to the text as a metonymy for the dialectic of inside/outside or order/chaos. Beyond providing an engaging tool for the understanding of the text, this approach can also account for the modernity of The Waves. The metonymy of the frame was already at work in previous novels, where it defined the paradigm of inside/outside in terms of representation as well as signalling an increasing recourse to the visual arts. I would like to show how this use is refined in The Waves and how the initial challenge to a fixed definition of the boundaries of time and space, exemplified particularly in Orlando, is here pushed to its extreme.

The problematic of the frame has a bi-fold relevance. Indeed Virginia Woolf makes two distinct, although not mutually exclusive, uses of it.

The most immediate use consists in bringing frames into the story. This is done by treating painting as a theme, whether incidentally, with secondary characters, as in Jacob's Room or as a point of focus as in To the Lighthouse, where Lily's painting actually constitutes the denouement of the narrative. Significantly, this theme was even already present in Night and Day, where the portrait of Richard Alardyce holds a central position in the Hilberys' household. This first use of the frame as a corollary to paintings is of a thematic nature and highlights the specific content of these novels.

The other way in which the frame operates is of a more aesthetic nature; in this context, the frame is used as a scene-making instrument and thus becomes a structural feature, which operates at the level of the narrative. This aesthetic character is reinforced

Patricia Oudek Laurence's study, The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991).

by the fact that such a use of the frame is primarily a feature of the visual arts. In his 'Essay in Aesthetics' Roger Fry gives a clear account of how important this feature is in relation to any aesthetic activity:

The frame of the mirror, then, does to some extent turn the reflected scene from one that belongs to our actual life into one that belongs rather to the imaginative life. The frame of the mirror makes its surface into a rudimentary work of art, since it helps to attain to the artistic vision.⁴²

The aesthetic use that Virginia Woolf makes of the frame is strongly evidenced by many texts and many critics have noticed the importance of rooms and windows in her novels.⁴³ Night and Day, for instance, presents numerous scenes entirely built upon the sight of a window and the life revealed behind it – that is the object of the scene is delineated by the frame of the window. The author is aware of the possibilities of this process to such an extent that she reflects on it in several of her essays; for instance -- and quite appropriately -- in 'How Should One Read a Book':

Shall we read [books] in the first place to satisfy that curiosity which possesses us sometimes when in the evening we linger in front of a house where the lights are lit and the blinds not yet drawn, and each floor of the house shows us a different section of human life in being? ... the servants gossiping ... the old woman at the window with her knitting.⁴⁴

Windows as frames and thus as scene-making instruments appear frequently in her fiction, especially in the novels: To the Lighthouse is a relevant example here since it is constructed around the relation between Mrs Ramsay, framed by a window, as seen by Lily Briscoe and her subsequent translation of the scene into a proper painting. The window can thus be seen as a metaphor for the relationship between the artist and the

⁴¹ Clare Hanson actually calls the interludes a 'frame-scene' which she sees as changing throughout the novel, p. 127.

⁴² See p. 14 in Vision and Design (V&D), edited by J.B. Bullen, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990).

⁴³ See James Naremore, p. 240, or more importantly C. Ruth Miller's study on The Frames of Art and Life, mentioned before and Allen McLaurin's Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved.

world, as remarked by James Naremore.⁴⁵ The particular example of Lily prefigures the increasingly formal aspect of Virginia Woolf's fiction. The Waves' alternating between preludes and main text can be seen as expanding on the composition of this text into two sections framing a central part where 'Time passes'.

Other pieces offer an in-depth exploration of the possibilities of the metonymic nature of the frame, as in the short story 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection'⁴⁶. There, the idea that the frame functions as a clear separation, confining reality outside and representation inside, is being questioned by Virginia Woolf:

At once the looking-glass began to pour over [Isabella] a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like an acid to bite off the unessential and the superficial and to leave only the truth. (225)

The notion of representation as a direct translation of an outer reality is here challenged. Indeed the traditional image of the reflection of nature in the mirror of art is deftly inverted or at least distorted. This is to be seen in the author's effort to express reality in a modern fashion directly in opposition to realism as explained earlier. In that light, this short story, as a prelude to The Waves, constitutes a direct development from 'Kew Gardens' and 'The Mark on the Wall'. The image in the mirror is not considered as reflecting a superficial level of reality but, on the contrary, it is the outside reality that is construed as superficial. This is underlined by the narrative centring on the empty room, as opposed to the action of the lady in the garden, and by the narrator observing, about the objects reflected in the looking-glass, that:

They lay there invested with a new reality and significance and with a greater heaviness, too, as if it would have needed a chisel to dislodge them from the table. (223)

⁴⁴ See p. 61 in The Crowded Dance of Modern Life.

⁴⁵ See p. 241.

The fact that the narrative only deals with what is happening when there is nobody around the room indicates that the image in the mirror gives access to a deeper kind of reality. Harvena Richter understands this story to mean that the mirror is a simile for the 'mind-eye' and thus that the picture in the mind is the reality rather than the object itself.⁴⁷ However, the short story makes clear that the reality that is inscribed in objects' materiality, and exists outside the relation between self and its environment, is the one worth writing about. This is confirmed by the warning of the narrator:

People should never leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque-books or letters confessing some hideous crimes.
(221)

Thus the story operates in parallel with 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens' and the image in the mirror functions in much the same way as the objects of these previous texts. In both cases the stress is put on form, that of the pattern emerging from the relation between objects in the first and that created by the framing of a scene by a mirror in the second. 'The Lady in the Looking-glass' intensifies even further the foundations laid in the former short stories and deals a further blow to the realist tradition. It quite decidedly brushes away the core of traditional fiction, that is the protagonist's actions -- 'Isabella Tyson, ... had vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim of the looking-glass' (222) -- to centre instead on the accidental, the accessory of a reflection caught in the mirror, thus inverting realist aesthetic values.

This treatment also affects the role of the narrator. The device of the looking-glass can be understood as a self-conscious reference to the aesthetic opposition between 'showing' and 'telling.' Virginia Woolf makes her position clear with the use of a mirror to reflect a scene, which although mediated by a narrator, is less descriptive than showing. This is evident from the narrator being compared to a 'naturalist' under cover,

⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'The Lady and the Looking-Glass: A Reflection' in The Complete Shorter Fiction, edited by Susan Dick, (London: Grafton Books, 1991).

⁴⁷ See note 1 on p. 100.

in other words, unobtrusive.⁴⁸ The attempt of this short story, developed to its full expression in The Waves, is precisely to record reality with the least narratorial presence possible as opposed to defining it by telling it. This aesthetic position was already noted in the study of the previous two short stories in relation to the author's developing philosophy. The effort to 'prise open' involved in the business of knowing people was dismissed there as it is in 'The Lady in the Looking-glass'. The self of the protagonist in this story is seen to be better understood by the formal image created by her reflection rather than by direct confrontation with the narrator. By the same token, the characters of The Waves do not comprehend reality through the inquisition of language, but through the formal relation that they establish between themselves when coming together as a pattern. This striving for non-intrusiveness is explored aesthetically in the interludes by the absence of a character observing the scene. It is also a theme, discussed by the characters themselves on a philosophical level in the main text of The Waves. This overall shift from inside to outside or content to form, of which the frame is a marker, characterises Virginia Woolf in this work.

This use of the frame as a metaphor for representation is on-going since the author already engaged with it in Jacob's Room. It is significant that the novel actually opened on a painter engrossed in his endeavour to capture the moment. Ominously, though, Jacob was already out of the picture, an impression that was reinforced all through the novel with the recurring vision of his empty room.⁴⁹ This emptiness can be characterised in the same way as the silence or absence of voice it contains. Patricia Ondek Laurence sees it as 'related to the preoccupation with "inwardness" and the use of techniques of indirection in twentieth-century literature.'⁵⁰ The extent to which The Waves is a development on previous texts can be judged from the juxtaposition of Jacob's Room

⁴⁸ William Handley finds that in The Waves 'her most unobtrusive narrator allows the characters to speak with equal voice', see p. 3 in see Virginia Woolf: The Politics of Narration, Stanford honors essays in Humanities, Number XXXI, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ As also noted by Laura Marcus in Virginia Woolf, (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1997), p. 24.

⁵⁰ See p. 6.

and 'The Lady in the Looking-glass' which, being contemporaneous with The Waves, can be seen as a sketch for the latter's interludes:

Jacob's rooms, however, were in Neville's Court; at the top; so that reaching his door one went in a little out of breath; but he wasn't there. ... Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtains, the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. (41-2)

The room that afternoon was full of shy creatures, lights and shadows, curtains blowing, petals falling -- things that never happen, so it seems, if someone is looking. (221)

These two passages are in turn reminiscent of the middle section of To the Lighthouse, 'Time Passes', which is framed within the narrative by the beginning and end of the story. The similarity of these passages, which lies principally in the absence of a diegetic focaliser, highlights the problem of representation.⁵¹ Indeed, Randall Stevenson sees that 'the first and third section of To the Lighthouse concentrate comprehensively on the subjective life of the mind: the second creates a style not so much objective as adept in bringing objects themselves to life, dramatising, equally comprehensively, the domain beyond consciousness which inexorably resists its order and light.'⁵² This dialectic of inner/outer prompted by the frame is particularly relevant to The Waves, which in many respects -- as much structural as thematic -- is articulated around this dichotomy. Indeed the whole text oscillates between those two positions: the interludes are balanced against the main text, and thus work as a frame to the main narrative. Unlike Clare Hanson, who sees the interludes as 'the space of the origins of self and writing', this thesis reads the interludes as presenting the outer and natural world which is counter-balanced by the inner and psychological character of a main text based on soliloquies.⁵³ This is supported by Harvena Richter's definition of the soliloquies as 'presenting point of view

⁵¹ See Erich Auerbach's classic study of the narratorial position in this novel in his essay 'The Brown Stocking' in Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, translated by Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁵² See p. 57.

through ... an attempt to verbalise feeling.⁵⁴ The argument of a dichotomy is fully developed along the succession of interludes, which elaborate the changes that a growing intensity of light works on a scene perceived through the frame of a window. That, once more, 'The Lady in the Looking-glass' comes to mind is no more surprise than a variation on a theme; the questioning sketched out in it finds an ideal ground for expansion in The Waves:

But, outside, the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sun-flowers, the garden path so accurately and fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. (221)

The looking-glass whitened its pool upon the wall. The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower, for when a bud broke free the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too. (60)

This comparison highlights an important change in the work of Virginia Woolf as a whole. The shift from content to form, only partially applied in the works of the 20s, is fully activated in The Waves. In other words the stress is put on the structural element at the expense of the thematic element. This is clearly intimated from the above examination of 'The Lady in the Looking-glass' when contrasted against the fiction of the 20s. The use of paintings, as underlined in the first section of this work, had been mainly thematic up to this point in the oeuvre, with the family portraits of Orlando or the painting of Lily. Yet here portraits are not valued for their content but for the formal quality that their frames suggest. This second use of the frame is the one that prevails in The Waves, where it is used for its structural character, thus reinforcing the shift at work in the oeuvre in general. The fact that this shift is operated in this particular text also supports the idea of The Waves as an achievement of aesthetics.

The problem of the frame is actually construed as the problem of the disappearance of the frame, a point that is especially interesting in the examination of The Waves as a

⁵³ See p. 127.

modernist text. As in the example of the flower above, there seems to be a sense in which 'the reflector and the reflected merge'.⁵⁵ The most noticeable aspect of the disappearance of the secure boundaries afforded by a frame is found in the vague character of the story: its lack of geographical location for instance, apart from a few places such as London. This feature is reinforced when compared to texts such as Jacob's Room or Orlando, which give precise account of their geographical background. By contrast, in this text, the nature described in the interludes does not act as a backdrop for the characters' actions but rather engulfs any indication of a civilised space. With Patricia Oudek Laurence, one could say that 'nature frames the novel in narration and philosophy'.⁵⁶ This also powerfully affects the story-telling. In spite of the actual framing of each section, the rich style of the interludes along with their cumulative effect function as a disruption rather than an enclosing process and point towards the author's disbelief in the finality afforded by a sense of closure. As other texts indicated, the author sees this finality as concurrent with a realist type of representation, which implies an essentialist understanding of reality. In her fiction, the use of the frame can be seen as underlining the binary character of this essentialist economy as other examples will show. In political terms, the framing of the soliloquies by the interludes is a marker of the thetic phase. It functions as a reminder of the essentialist division between the semiotic space as the physically-grounded world of children and the symbolic space as the adult world shaped by the intellect. The overall impression, like the motion of the waves, is one of intrusion and competition between the two texts and spaces, subverting the idea of an enclosed space and challenging the view of the text as static.⁵⁷ Later on, this aesthetic position will be emphasised as a feminist textual practice, significant of the author's vision of reality. In this context, the notion of multiplicity pervading the whole novel is again at work; a renewed sense of need for a frame is counter-balanced against the initial sense of the disappearance of the frame. The dialectic of outer and inner space

⁵⁴ See p. 42.

⁵⁵ See Harvena Richter's examination of the mirror modes in Virginia Woolf's work, chapter 7.

⁵⁶ See p. 179.

⁵⁷ See James Naremore's comment, p. 151.

defined by the frame is thus maintained, although this time this need is of a psychological nature.

Indeed, from a psychological point of view, the need for a frame as a means of setting boundaries and putting life into perspective is indicated from the outset.⁵⁸ It enables the characters to make the distinction between inner self and outer reality thus initiating the differentiation between oneself and the other, which functions as a basis to create identity. This psychological need is exemplified by Rhoda who is unable to dissociate these two elements. As Harvena Richter remarks, for her the world of objects is not under control, which leads to a loss of identity.⁵⁹ It is important to note here that her difficulties are mainly inscribed within the space of language and thus enable the author to condemn a realist or essentialist use of language as inadequate in terms of representation. Indeed, Rhoda absolutely needs psychological boundaries because she is trapped in the binary economy of an essentialist environment. As demonstrated, this environment is modelled on a masculine interpretation of reality, translated in turn, into a realist mode of representation. In that light, Rhoda's rejection of a strict definition of the self is mirrored in the formal structure of the text, which equally refutes the enclosed space of realism. The character of Rhoda can thus be seen as quintessentially modern, in line with Virginia Woolf's attempt, and so it will be informative to consider its development at different points in this study of The Waves:

Therefore I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my feet stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body. (35)

That her escape from this state of 'supraconsciousness' should be found in art,⁶⁰ although only in the fine art of music, illustrates the fundamental inadequacy of

⁵⁸ A concept noted by C. Ruth Miller in Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life, p. 78.

⁵⁹ See p. 68.

⁶⁰ This is the term Harvena Richter uses to describe a 'brief disintegration of the moment' leading to 'a temporary sense of loss of personality itself', p. 41.

language. Through art, she is able to create her own sense of framing, in order to get a grasp on her self, effectively creating her identity in her own terms:

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. (129)

Even more significant is that music for Rhoda is conceived in terms of geometrical shapes. The structure of these is what effectively enables her to create a frame, which, in turn, affords her with protective boundaries. Although James Naremore finds a 'bitter irony' in the author's use of form in relation to Rhoda, it seems that it is only within this space that she can build her self and thus exist outside the essentialist dichotomy.⁶¹ So, once more, the structural aspect of the visual arts is the only tool that proves able to construe and express the true, that is the individual, reality of a multiple self, experienced emotionally.⁶² This marks the author's modernity as much in her aesthetic endeavour as in her philosophical quest. This modernity is enhanced by the fact that Rhoda's experience is remarkably similar to that of Katharine Hilbury, who is depicted drawing squares and circles in *Night and Day*. This novel will be considered at length later on, precisely on account of its modernity. Both Rhoda and Katharine use the visual realm, through a mental procedure which can be termed 'concretization' to come to terms with problems of a psychological order.⁶³ This indicates that certain consequences, both for women and literature, have to be drawn from this attitude. For instance, 'the square on the oblong' figure is clearly used both by Rhoda and the narrator as a way to describe something that goes beyond articulation.⁶⁴ This reinforces the author's position on representation. The use of visual techniques points again toward the limitations of literature as an artistic medium to express the vitality of modern life and the author's

⁶¹ See his treatment of significant form, pp. 182-3.

⁶² Harvena Richter defines the basic nature of the multiple selves as emotional, p. 114.

⁶³ Harvena Richter sees concretization as a way to show the characters' submerged emotions, p. 188.

awareness of the fragility of art's illusion. It is telling to remember here how Virginia Woolf customarily describes books in plastic terms, comparing them to buildings for example.⁶⁵

C. Ruth Miller underlines how, for Virginia Woolf, creative perception is associated with sight. This is evident in the characterisation of Rhoda for whom the visual is important to such an extent that when she is not seen by other people's eyes, she is 'threatened with negation'.⁶⁶ The impending dissolution of the self that such a process entails accounts for the necessity she feels to create an alternative frame. Psychologically, it allows her to turn herself into the point of focus, much in the same way as the frame of the mirror physically enabled Mrs Dalloway to gather her self together. Yet, at the same time, the process of being framed by others' gaze, because of the very nature of the experience, makes Rhoda feel pinned down and entrapped. This duality is important; using the concept of the frame enables us to show how The Waves does not dismiss the notion of boundary -- be it aesthetic or thematic -- as such, but rather its systematic use as a tool to encode the self in a patriarchal society. This is highlighted by the fact that the strongest rejection of one type of frame comes from a woman to whom enclosure quite literally means death, yet who at the same time willingly undertakes to create another type of frame. This illustrates the tension between inside and outside, as was already noticed in Jacob's Room. There the main character was persistently evading the boundaries set up by the narrative. This time, the question is more urgent since the problematic is entrusted to a character, that is to say, explicitly dealt with in terms of theme as well as methodology, as opposed to being left for the reader to work out.

The first part of this work highlighted what Virginia Woolf's called her 'flirt with the visual arts'. This derived from her acquaintance with Roger Fry and her interest in modern painting.⁶⁷ Before considering the effect of this friendship on the formal structure of The Waves, some analysis of the author's declared attraction for painting

⁶⁴ See p. 33 in The Frames of Art and Life.

⁶⁵ See p. 66 in 'How should One Read a Book.'

⁶⁶ See p. 23 in The Frames of Art and Life.

seems appropriate. Among the modern painters that Roger Fry championed during his two Post-Impressionist exhibitions, Matisse features heavily. Virginia Woolf was thus undoubtedly aware of his painting, and when considering The Waves it is relevant to consider this other attempt at modernity.⁶⁸ The following excerpt outlines Matisse's position on representation:

Composition is the art of arranging decoratively the various elements which the artist uses to express his feelings. There are two ways of expressing things: one is to show them plainly, the other to evoke them with art. In departing from the *literal* representation of movement, one attains more beauty and grandeur... The choice of colour does not depend on any scientific theory; it is based on observation, on feeling, on the dictates of one's own sensibility.⁶⁹

In literary terms, this could be a description of Virginia Woolf's approach to characterisation; it asserts the modernity of her ontological quest within this general movement of experimentation. The emphasis put on the artist's 'sensibility' also echoes Walter Pater's philosophy which was traced in Orlando. This contributes to establishing the consistent character of Virginia Woolf's work. Even more to the point, the interest the Fauves took in children is also present in The Waves, in which childhood functions as a constant point of reference:

At the same time artists became aware of the artistic sensibility of children, especially in that stage of their creative growth when they represent things not according to sight but by reason, with visual incongruities, the use of conventional instead of imitative elements, bright, vivid non-realistic colourings and two dimensions instead of three.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ A Cézanne in the Hedge and other memories of Charleston and Bloomsbury, edited by Hugh Lee, (London: Collins and Brown Limited, 1992), p. 79.

⁶⁸ Vanessa, Virginia's sister, was actually showing some of her own paintings there alongside Matisse's 'The Dance'. See p. 324 in Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996).

⁶⁹ Bernard Denvir, Post-Impressionism, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1992), p. 152.

⁷⁰ See p. 192 in Post-Impressionism.

This strikingly echoes the first section of The Waves, where the perception of the world is described by the characters as children. It is a fresh vision, not yet hampered by the reductive matching of language between signified and signifier, but still mediated by the body. This is confirmed by the fact that as the narrative goes on and the characters enter the thetic or adult world they lose this capacity:

It is difficult to keep the soul of a small child when one reaches maturity; it is even more difficult to recapture it once one has lost it.⁷¹

As Harvena Richter emphasises, common to the poet, the painter and the child is a heightened mode of perception, which Virginia Woolf wants to retain.⁷² Whether the loss of this freshness is a tragedy, as seems to be the case for Rhoda, or a blessing, as for Neville, is part of the more general problem exemplified by the frame. Indeed, the paradigm of inside/outside is an easy one to apply to childhood. As was already hinted and will be considered in depth later on, society envisages the self framed within certain boundaries, by certain rules, which define a precise space. Children are then considered outside this space, which is only entered by mastering language. These two opposing spaces can also be construed as the unconscious and the conscious, and Rhoda linked with the latter.⁷³ In other words, the semiotic or pre-Oedipal stage can be seen as without, while the entry into the thetic or the world of language ensures acceptance within society. Virginia Woolf's everlasting interest in children and their presence in virtually all her novels no doubt supports the view that they have a particular function in her vision of reality.

Furthermore, the way in which Virginia Woolf uses language as an artistic medium is strikingly similar to the use which a visual artist such as Matisse, for example, makes of painting. In his words:

⁷¹ See p. 192 in Post-Impressionism.

⁷² See p. 82.

⁷³ See Harvena Richter, p. 90.

The painter's idea cannot be conceived apart from the means he uses, for it is meaningful only so far as it is embodied in those means, and the deeper his idea, the more complete they must be. I am unable to distinguish between my feelings for life and my way of transposing it. A painting must carry all its meanings within itself, and impose it on the viewer before he identifies the subject-matter.⁷⁴

The distinct similarity between Virginia Woolf's approach to writing and the post-impressionist artists' approach to painting is thus evident but is perhaps better understood in terms of form – a concept which deserves a close examination considering its centrality to the author's aesthetics.

3. The pressure of form

The notion of the frame has been used to emphasise Virginia Woolf's attitude towards the visual arts in relation to her writing. The first part of this work, dealing with the fiction prior to The Waves, indicated that the frame was mainly used thematically. In this challenging novel, a structural use of this concept is developed to the full. Thus, for the author, form takes on a compelling character which she set out to address at great length in The Waves:

... when I sat surveying the whole book complete.... [I] felt the pressure of the form -- the splendour, the greatness -- as, perhaps I have never felt them. ... I keep pegging away; and find it the most complex and difficult of all my books.⁷⁵

The intricate relation between form and content, as illustrated by Matisse's quotation in the discussion on the visual arts, is of utmost importance in such a highly formal novel. For instance, the recurrent use of a semantic field related to natural elements such as light

⁷⁴ See p. 195 in Post-Impressionism.

⁷⁵ D, Friday, March 28th, 1930, vol. 3 (1982), p. 298.

and water, alongside frequent allusions to moths for instance, operate as frames of reference. These thematic frames, in turn, overlap the structural framing of the text by the interludes, and within the text by such means as actual window- or door-frames, as was noted above. Thus the concept of the frame is a useful tool to articulate the dialectic of theme and content, which is illustrative of the author's challenging position within the debate of representation.

On a formal level, the author's the main problem was the structure of the novel. This is clear from the entry in her diary on January 26th:

But how to pull [my book] together, how to comport it -- press it into one -- I do not know; nor can I guess the end -- it might be a gigantic conversation. The interludes are very difficult, yet I think essential; so as to bridge and also give a background -- the sea; insensitive nature -- I don't know.⁷⁶

Here, the way in which the text is characterised makes the concept of the frame as a critical tool even more relevant considering the analogy with painting. It confirms the idea of framing the episodes of the narrative while at the same time intimating that there is here a new use of the frame, which becomes significant in itself and not only as a tool. Moreover, this insight into the genesis of the novel provides a clue as to the modernity of Virginia Woolf's position within the long-standing debate between narrative and plot. Taking the fiction preceding this novel into account, it is interesting to examine how this dialectic is worked out in The Waves.

Indeed, although the interludes seem to be used as a backdrop for the plot -- that is the development of the characters' lives and destinies -- the reader is left with the sense that the narrative contained in the interludes is the only one, the important one, that of time itself, embodied and made visible in the natural world or 'insensitive nature' which outlasts any human narrative. This impression is confirmed by Bernard's contrasting suspicion that stories are lies, pointless but reassuring exercises, and indeed the text

⁷⁶ D, Sunday, January 26th, 1930, vol. 3 (1982), p. 285.

closes with the supremacy of the natural order over his own narrative, washed away by the waves breaking on the shore.

The character of Bernard and his attitude towards story-telling epitomises the problem of literature within the debate of art in general, this time focusing on the different implications entailed by the visual as opposed to the verbal arts. As early as in To the Lighthouse and Orlando, the author made clear that a realist type of literature was unable to transpose her own sense of reality. The venture into the domain of the visual emerged as a potential solution. If one considers Bernard's and Rhoda's attempt to give the world significance, one sees that their common ground lies in their recourse to the visual as opposed to the verbal, as exemplified by his recourse to painting and her use of formal images. This recalls the position of Roger Fry, who opposes the literary, purely referential aspect of painting. The characters of The Waves thus voice Virginia Woolf's dilemma. It is important to remember here the discussion on the short stories, and particularly 'The Mark on the Wall', where Roger Fry noted in her style the first signs of a modern approach to fiction. This thesis argues that, in this respect, The Waves is an aesthetic accomplishment, bringing forth the result of all the previous experimentations.

To examine it more specifically, let us consider, as Marianna Torgovnick notes, that there are clear ways in which these two forms of art -- verbal and visual -- interact:

Time becomes moreover, the literary equivalent of painterly light in the novel proper's progressive revelation of the characters' personalities and lives. As the agent which brings out the differences in the characters as they move on (in sections two through five) from childhood to young adulthood, time functions as light does ... 77

Thematically, the novel is a study in subjectivity, narrated to such an extent that instead of being realistic it becomes entirely subjective. This concern with subjectivity is, of course, a development from the inward turn that the author gave to the novel as a genre. As James Naremore remarks 'in almost every respect The Waves represents the ultimate

refinement of Virginia Woolf's so-called subjective novels.⁷⁸ This was described in the works of the 20s as a drawing into the inner space of the self, in keeping with Virginia Woolf's ontological enquiry. This enquiry into the realms of subjectivity is more fully developed in this novel, as made clear by Virginia Woolf's definition of the book as 'an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem.'⁷⁹ This definition of the text once again brings the discussion to bear upon the problem of form and content; a dialectic which can be articulated in several ways.

To start with, the dichotomy apparent between the interludes and the main text is one that can be expressed in terms of content and form. Indeed the interludes focus on matter as yet non-informed whereas the main text features the informing mind at work. Yet there arises the problem of the images and metaphors of the interludes and their highly literary style which implies the presence of a voice, that is a narrator. James Naremore actually finds that this voice is very similar whether it speaks the soliloquies or the interludes, and that it is always that of Woolf as a narrator.⁸⁰ Yet, considering the author's aim, this is not the case. As was indicated earlier, the problem of translating the feeling of reality as accurately as possible is a concern that the author has already dealt with in, for example, 'The Lady in the Looking-glass' or the empty room of Jacob. This issue of style should be considered in terms of narratology and related to the question of representation. Indeed, one can wonder with Patricia Oudek Laurence 'but how does the silence of nature speak?'⁸¹

In that light, it is significant that in spite of their stylistic dimension, the interludes are mediated by a narrator but this mind is not omniscient. This is evident in the minutiae of a description which merely records the object looked at. There is as little narratorial presence as possible since there is no obtrusive commentary. In this attempt at rendering

⁷⁷ See p. 131 in Marianna Torgovnick, The Visual Arts, Pictorialism and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf, (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁷⁸ See p. 175.

⁷⁹ D, Wednesday 7 November, 1928, vol. 3 (1982), p. 203.

⁸⁰ See p. 156.

⁸¹ See p. 197.

the world in its physicality, one can see an effort on the author's part to record the world simply as it is. Harvena Richter's description of a voice that exists in time rather than space or personality is useful here. She sees it as the voice of history, myth or legend, that is to say, as the most interior and the least conscious of all voices.⁸² This effort for non-intrusiveness is translated by a text which owes more to painting than literature and reminds the reader of an Impressionist series of paintings showing the same scene, at intervals in time, under different effects of light. However, neither the painter nor the writer can escape their medium, and this is the reason for Virginia Woolf's experiment. In keeping with his analysis of voice in the text, James Naremore argues that 'there is a sense in which the form of the novel tends to deny or qualify its content.'⁸³ A reading of the novel on its own terms would find on the contrary, that in the main text, voice becomes all-important at a diegetic level since the novel contends with the characters' view of reality and their mediating of it into meaning -- in other words, the problem of representation as the transaction between content and form. The extra-diegetic level, though, has almost collapsed in the sense that there is no story as such to be told and thus no omniscient narrator to tell it. From the point of view of representation, The Waves' achievement lies in the fact that it constitutes an example of pure narrative, as little told as possible, and almost entirely shown through the dramatised form of a succession of 'imagistic soliloquies' which render 'unverbalized feeling in artificially "spoken" thoughts.'⁸⁴ As discussed earlier, the extent to which the extra-diegetic narrative voice is present in the text defines varying understandings of reality and thus different types of narratives. The study of this novel will show what its specific narrative form reveals about Virginia Woolf's project.

Another way to consider the problem is to think of the relationship between the interludes and the main text as a formal matter of relations. Indeed, the interludes and the main text could be considered separately, yet the ten interludes framing and interspersing

⁸² See her chapter on the voice of subjectivity. This description is found on p. 140.

⁸³ See p. 158.

⁸⁴ See Harvena Richter, p. 58. Patricia Ondek Laurence makes a similar point: 'But these are not spoken voices as many critics claim; they are voices of different tones sounded from different aspects of being', p. 202.

nine sections of the narrative afford an aesthetic notion of balance, which cannot be disregarded. This is significant because the text itself, in its lay-out, mirrors the theme of mediating between the world and the self on which the novel focuses. This provides an answer as to the status of the novel by underlining its extreme care about formal matters and thus establishes it as an achievement of aesthetics. Indeed, The Waves appears as Virginia Woolf's best attempt, at that point, to deal with form in a modern way. In the words of Roger Fry, her achievement in this novel consists in treating the word as matter or texture in an attempt to disengage writing from what she considered as the stalemate of realist representation. It is worth remembering here that the clear boundaries between form as tool and content as theme that realism implies was defined by her as 'death' early on in her career. The following exchange between Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry is enlightening in this respect:

Roger asked me if I founded my writing on texture or structure; I connected structure with plot, and therefore said 'texture'.⁸⁵ Then we discussed the meaning of structure and texture in painting and writing...⁸⁶

Thus The Waves illustrates Virginia Woolf's aesthetics in many respects and deals with the problems of representation in a very direct manner. Indeed, pictorialism proper is mainly confined to the interludes, whereas a more theoretical use of the visual arts is at work in the main text. This is reflected in the opposition between a traditional impressionist use of light and colours in the interludes and a modern questioning of representation in the main text, such as in the scene at the National Gallery where Bernard looks upon the Madonna not as a religious or historical figure but apprehends her in formal terms of lines and shapes, much in the same way as Virginia Woolf relates writing to texture. It has already been noted that this questioning was present in the texts of the 20s, such as Jacob's Room. The particular quality of The Waves, however, is that

⁸⁵ This definition of the word 'structure' by Virginia Woolf seems to run counter to my use of it. Yet, the opposition between form and content is clear in the quotation and it is on this distinction that I base my argument. My use of the word 'structure' is in relation to form as opposed to plot and describes the author's aesthetics.

it deals with the question directly, as much thematically as aesthetically. Moreover, The Waves' aesthetic attainment is the result of a movement from the impressionistic images of Jacob's Room to a post-impressionist formal novel. The Impressionist overtone of the interludes is precisely indicating a world where the self does not yet exist, in the same way that Jacob existed only through other characters' eyes. However, the formal quality of the main text is an indication of the informing of the world by the self. The parallel with painting is here strengthened. In literary terms the author follows the same path as painters on a quest for modernity.

This point is further upheld by the individual mental imagery of the different characters. Rhoda's use of images is formal and abstract -- that is modern while Susan's for instance is typically representational. They respectively embody an abstract, new model of representation and a traditional realist model. In terms of narratology, Rhoda's vision is connected to narrative while Susan's vision owes everything to plot. This is evidenced in the way they each formulate their remembrance of the past. While Susan tells a story -- 'Bells rang punctually ... maids scuffled and giggled. There was a drawing in of chairs and a drawing out of chairs on the linoleum' -- Rhoda's description typically lacks causality: 'The tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped her wings in dark pools on the other side of the world.' (99-100) Harvena Richter calls this a type of landscape reflection, which indicates a certain mental atmosphere.⁸⁷ One can argue that this process goes beyond a description of character. The episode of Bernard in the gallery looking at the Madonna is typical of the whole process: there is a displacement of the notion of morality. Indeed, the picture does not convey a religious consolation any more but rather yields solace of a formal nature. It conveys a feeling of balance, of significant relations, which puts Bernard's mind at rest, by opposing meaning to the meaninglessness of Percival's death. As a consequence, the implications for the narrative as story have to be considered; indeed, what does this position entail, in this case, for the archetypal story of human death?

⁸⁶ A Cézanne in the Hedge, p. 79.

⁸⁷ See pp. 107-8.

To answer this, it is necessary to examine what exactly form is in relation to the work of art -- in other terms, to what use does Virginia Woolf put the notion of significant form in her aesthetics? The example of the Madonna is illustrative in that respect. The manner in which Bernard responds to this painting directs us back to an earlier instance in Virginia Woolf's work, namely Lily's treatment of her portrait of Mrs Ramsay. There too the details of a realistic representation of the figure observed have been lost to the power of significance of form. It is important to realise that this power is not one of expression, but rather lies precisely in the non-referential character of a significant form. Indeed, the purple triangle is clearly not expressive in the way that Expressionist paintings convey a strong emotion; Edvard Munch's works, for instance, present an easily recognisable human shape, despite the eradication of recognisable backgrounds.⁸⁸ This is a distinction of importance since critics like Anne Sheppard have dismissed the formalism of Clive Bell as another version of Expressionism.⁸⁹ Yet, I want to argue that the main difference lies precisely in the notion that Expressionism 'expresses pictorially the artist's state of mind, religious or social convictions in images...'⁹⁰ whereas 'significant form' does not refer to any external element and particularly does not exhibit any religious or social characteristics. And thus, in the same way as Bernard finds more solace in the formal character of the painting of the Madonna than in the religious meaning that this figure conjures up, Lily is able to make more sense of the death of Mrs Ramsay by resorting to the formal use of a shape than she would have been by painting a realist portrait as a tribute to her. Lily's purple triangle thus anticipates Rhoda's square stood upon the oblong. In all these instances, the focus lies

⁸⁸ It has to be granted that Expressionism has been seen as coming out of the Post-Impressionist movement. (For this argument see Post-Impressionism, pp. 185-6.) In that light, it shares common characteristics with the formalist theories of Roger Fry, such as a rupture with 'the conventions of academic art'. Yet, since I am concerned with Virginia Woolf's aesthetics first and with Roger Fry's expounding of 'significant form' only to the extent that it illuminates her aesthetics, and for the purpose of the current discussion, I only consider the problem of referentiality in my comparison of the two movements.

⁸⁹ See Anne Sheppard, Aesthetics, An introduction to the Philosophy of Art, (Oxford new York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 49.

⁹⁰ See Paul Duro and Michael Greenhalgh, Essential Art History, (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 121.

on the value of form and its purpose. In considering this problem, it is relevant to notice that

Bernard's visual impression -- triangular in shape -- mirrors Rhoda's impression of the swallow's wing cutting a triangular wedge in a pool of water⁹¹

which also mirrors the purple triangle as Lily's impression of Mrs Ramsay.

This specific form -- of triangular shape in the present example -- is not symbolic, though, in that it does not stand for a particular kind of feeling, but is rather self-contained, meaningful in itself; at once 'personal and universal, unrealistic and real.'⁹² Indeed, Lily's painting is clearly not a realist likeness; it is not a symbolist expression of her personal feeling either, since it is not only about her love for Mrs Ramsay, as we saw earlier. This is a very important point since, as Patricia Waugh explains, a reading which would 'confirm the image of a writer who produces internally coherent and permanent symbolist worlds, designed to assert the transcendental power of art as fixing the significance of the human imagination in the face of temporality and mortality' would only reiterate 'the historically recurring (masculine) ideal of the unified transcendental ego.'⁹³ This formal vision, then, is significant by virtue of the transaction it allows, since it enables Lily to respond to an outside reality. Indeed, when Lily, Bernard or Rhoda, for instance, are associated with formal modes of representation, either unconsciously as part of their mental imagery, whereby the shape becomes the envelope of their subjective feelings,⁹⁴ or consciously as part of an attempt at creation, it coincides with an emotional crisis such as the death of a friend and the ensuing feeling of waste. In such a situation, it appears that the comfort afforded by religion, for instance, is not enough. Instead, to have recourse to features of a formal order provides a sense of

⁹¹ See Marianna Torgovnick, p. 136.

⁹² Christopher Reed, 'Forming Formalism: The Post-Impressionist Exhibitions', in A Roger Fry Reader, p. 51.

⁹³ See Feminine Fictions, p. 89.

⁹⁴ This is Harvena Richter's description, p. 189.

resolution that cannot find an expression in any realistic mode. This is possible because of the significant nature of form. As Kandinsky summarised, the aim of these 'precise forms' is to 'express an inner emotional state -- to find satisfaction for vague feelings.'⁹⁵

Clive Bell's definition of 'significant form' was attacked by many as 'vague in the extreme.'⁹⁶ Yet, as Roger Fry explained, the idea that significant form is defined by its power to arouse aesthetic emotion, an emotion which is in turn aroused by significant form, actually has 'really got somewhere':

[It has] separated out the emotions aroused by certain formal relations from the emotions aroused by the events of life, or by their echoes in imaginative creations.⁹⁷

Form can be seen as significant to the extent that it is aesthetically pleasing in expressing a balanced relationship or rapport between shapes. In Virginia Woolf's fiction it is also intellectually satisfying, in providing an answer to a problem with the very concept of rapport. Significant form does not convey a totalising vision, but can be used to make sense out of the scattered bits and pieces of experience or at least give the sense of harmony which derives from a meaningful connection between different parts. As early as in her twenties, she compared her method with that of fresco painting and remarked of Perugino:

He saw [art] sealed as it were [whereas I want to] attain a different kind of beauty, achieve a symmetry by means of infinite discords ... some kind of whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems the natural process.⁹⁸

As was demonstrated in the first part of this analysis, the way she uses significant form is to characterise 'moments of being' as 'a token of some real thing behind appearances.' Furthermore, the abstract quality of the non-referential character of form escapes the

⁹⁵ This is cited by Harvena Richter, p. 187. She links this process with the notion of essence, however, which is clearly not the use Virginia Woolf's makes of it.

⁹⁶ See Anne Sheppard, p. 48.

⁹⁷ A Roger Fry Reader, p. 159. For a full discussion by Fry of the concept of 'significant form' see 'A New Theory of Art' pp. 158-162.

restriction of the signifier/signified association, thus allowing a wider space for meaning. It translates the personal, yet at the same time goes beyond it. A realistic portrait of Mrs Ramsay would translate her beauty and probably whatever trait of character Lily prompted by dealing with her, but it could not hope to capture the central place she came to take in Lily's life, the reality of her presence. The only reality for Virginia Woolf, and this is reflected in Lily's painting, is non-descriptive, undefined. So the form of the triangle is a way, for Lily, to capture Mrs Ramsay's reality, not only in relation to herself but also in relation to what she was as a person, outside relationship. The painting allows her to realise Mrs Ramsay in a self-contained manner. Lily, by drawing 'the line in the middle' is effectively activating her understanding of Mrs Ramsay, that is to say, her 'part of the work of art.' The important thing for Lily lies not in the finished product created by the use of formal features, but what the process allowed her to achieve, that is an understanding of the reality of the world, a world in which Mrs Ramsay is no more. Creating a work of art thus becomes a way of negotiating this reality by showing 'the thing itself.'

Virginia Woolf was deeply aware of the possibilities of the merging of the different arts or at least the borrowing from different disciplines, and thus when her characters are faced with the limitations of language they find themselves at liberty to use the visual arts. It is in that light that her understanding of form has to be discussed. And thus, as Jacky Thomson puts it in her study of Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry,

she was led by Roger Fry into that most seductive corner of the world of aesthetic theory, 'the sunny margin of the forest' as she called it, 'where the arts flirt and joke and pay each other compliments.'⁹⁹

Therein lies the warrant of her modernity concerning formal questions. Her own attitude to The Waves when typing out a draft is revealing: 'It is like sweeping upon an entire canvas with a wet brush.'¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ See James King, p. 140 in Virginia Woolf, (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

⁹⁹ See p. 79 in A Cézanne in the Hedge.

Following Fry, who said of the Post-Impressionists 'these artists do not seek to imitate form, but to create form: they aim not at illusion but at reality',¹⁰¹ Virginia Woolf linked the question of form to that of representation by using the meaning of formal features to embody her notion of the nature of reality. As it is, this reality is translated by a water imagery, which refers to the flux and the communal, the non-individual, in other words, everything that is merging. And here the author is faced with the problem of literary transaction, translating the flux into a text, which calls for the specific type of representation at work in The Waves. This transaction is effected by a highly formal text which, notwithstanding, remains fluid. Indeed, it was highlighted that formal features actually participate in allowing this fluidity through their non-referential character; they enable the pattern of the characters moving in and out of the reader's consciousness and then drawing together in place of a story line. This feeling of merging implies a specific handling of space that is highlighted by the image of Bernard, at the end of the novel, standing on a threshold, a final image which yields a powerful sense of open-endedness. Virginia Woolf is there questioning the validity of endings, and hence the temporality and structural lay-out of traditional novels. In that light, The Waves can be seen as dealing the final blow to a realist representation which centres on the story.

In addition, this ending may also be seen as a criticism of the tight structure and framing (as a metaphor for beginnings and endings) as typical of a masculine tradition. Indeed, because of its underlying principle of equating object and name, that is, define a signified by its signifier, realism is mainly consonant with masculine values.¹⁰² As a woman writer interested in reality seen from the point of view of women, Virginia Woolf is thus in search of a new type of representation of which the ending of this text is an example. Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls this strategy, 'that sever the narrative from conventional structures of fiction and consciousness about women ... "writing beyond

¹⁰⁰ D, Wednesday 13 May, 1931, vol. 4 (1983), p. 25.

¹⁰¹ See p. 80 in A Cézanne in the Hedge.

¹⁰² William Handley also makes this point, see p. 4.

the ending."¹⁰³ All the issues considered up to this point would thus gain from being considered in a feminist light. For instance, the dialectic opposing reality and illusion, which was discussed within the debate of representation, could advantageously be articulated in terms of semiotics. Similarly, the dichotomy within/without provided by the notion of frame also indicates a division in terms of gender. Examining these same problems from a feminist angle helps to reveal the rich complexity of The Waves.

4. Feminism: the Law of the Father

The consideration of the formal aspect of The Waves focused on the open-ended character of the text underlined in the development of the frame as a concept. This concept was understood as graduating from a predominantly thematic use in the works before The Waves to a progressively structural use in this text. This formalist aspect functions in two ways. On the one hand, it marks a division between inner life and outer reality and, on the other hand, it underlines the opposition between content and form which is reflected in the way the physical layout of the main text is disrupted by interludes. This sense of division, in turn, allows us to think of the novel in terms of semiotics as defined by Julia Kristeva.¹⁰⁴ This concept of semiotics was already mentioned at the beginning of my analysis of The Waves, in relation to the recurrent use of synesthesia in this text. It was defined as a notion drawn from the psychological

¹⁰³ See p. X in Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁴ Julia Kristeva's theories on the semiotic are very complex. I use only some aspects of her most interesting thinking on language so as to illuminate the aspects of Virginia Woolf's fiction that I am interested in. The following account of Kristeva's thinking by Toril Moi indicates why it is particularly relevant to an analysis of Virginia Woolf's fiction: 'Julia Kristeva has argued that ... the modernist poem, with its abrupt shifts, ellipses, breaks and apparent lack of logical construction is a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning. Since Kristeva sees such conventional meaning as the structure that sustains the whole of the symbolic order -- that is, all human social and cultural institutions -- the fragmentation of symbolic language in modernist poetry comes for her to parallel and prefigure a total *social* revolution. For Kristeva, that is to say, there is a *specific practice of writing* that is itself 'revolutionary', analogous to sexual and political transformation, and that by its very existence testifies to the possibility of transforming the symbolic order from the inside.' p. 11, in Sexual/Textual Politics. (London and New York, Routledge, 1985).

distinction between the pre-Oedipal and post-Oedipal stages in the development of the self. The first pre-Oedipal stage is characterised by the imaginary order which Julia Kristeva defines as 'a space of privileged contact with the mother' whereas the second stage coincides with entry into the world of language and represents the symbolic patriarchal order.¹⁰⁵ This transitional stage can thus be seen as a passage from the world of the mother to that of the father, which is effected through the mastery of language and its signifying process. Although the order of the father becomes predominant, Julia Kristeva argues that the semiotic still persists as a subtext of the official discourse, in the form of lapses, repetitions or any disruption of the structure of that discourse.¹⁰⁶ The psychological journey undertaken in childhood is, of course, a recurrent interest for the author as indicated from the analysis of Jacob's Room as a type of Bildungsroman or the explicit autobiographical element of To the Lighthouse.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the following novel, Orlando, prepare us more directly for this particular focus in The Waves, by drawing attention to the specific gender issues associated with this psychological journey. So it can be seen that the fiction written during the 20s displays an increasing interest in women's concerns and the representation of the feminine.

The implication of such a narrative as The Waves is clearly that the 'ecstasy' of the sensations in childhood is being dulled by a growing-up process which favours the language of the intellect over that of the body; in other words, it can be seen as the tension between the semiotic and the symbolic. This is evident in the fact that the sphere of language is defined in opposition to the physical relation between the child and her mother, which is mediated through the body: 'the semiotic consists of drives and impulses which traverse the body.'¹⁰⁸ In direct line with an earlier concern, The Waves focuses on the private and communal journey of all the characters from the symbiotic state of childhood, symbolised by the 'indistinguishable' character of the sea and sky,

¹⁰⁵ Maggie Humm, A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism, (New York, London ...: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 100.

¹⁰⁶ p. 101 in A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism.

¹⁰⁷ Clare Hanson points out how To the Lighthouse was seen at the time of publication as an Oedipal novel, p. 74.

merged into an initial oneness, through to the variously successful states of definition that is the thetic phase, or entry in the world of the Word.

In the light of a feminist approach, the opening passage of The Waves can be seen as recording the six characters' childhood in a way that strikingly foreshadows what Kristeva terms the 'chora'. This is defined as a semiotic space presided over by the mother, 'in which the linguistic sign as not yet been articulated as the absence of an object.'¹⁰⁹ Consequently, there arises the problem of representing such a state, which is by definition prior to language and more importantly intrinsically female, since as Julia Kristeva explains, it 'bears the most archaic memories of our link with the maternal body.'¹¹⁰ Lending a voice to the chora would thus project a feminine view of the world or tell a feminine reality. As Clare Hanson argues, the period of infancy is not without language, as Lacan suggests, but rather simply offers a language that operates differently.¹¹¹ Thus, the representation of a reality as experienced by women has strong feminist implications.

Kristeva's definition of the chora is in terms of rhythms. From that point of view, The Waves can be seen, as Makiko Minow-Pinkney does,¹¹² as a forerunner of later feminist texts through its extensive use of rhythms, such as the imagery of the sea. The way the semiotic is expressed is rhythmical and cyclical. This, in turn, recalls the woman's body. The alternation between the interludes and the main text, together with semantic patterns of recurrence in both, create a notion of rhythms in the text which echoes the same notion of rhythm in the female body. For instance, the rhythm of the waves can be seen as 'the rhythms of labour as structuring, generating and sponsoring the text.'¹¹³ These semantic recurrences were already at work in previous texts, as

¹⁰⁸ See Sara Mills, 'No Poetry for Ladies: Gertrude Stein, Julia Kristeva and Modernism' in Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon, edited by David Murray, (London: Batsford, 1989), p. 88.

¹⁰⁹ See Michael Payne, Reading Theory, An introduction to Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 239.

¹¹⁰ Julia Kristeva talking to Susan Sellers, in Women's Review (12), 1987, (London: Women's Review, 1985-), p. 20.

¹¹¹ See pp. 138-9 for this argument.

¹¹² See p. 186.

¹¹³ See Clare Hanson, p. 129.

recorded earlier, yet it is notable that their use was more localised and less emphasised than it is in The Waves, where they operate at a structural level.

Using Kristeva's theory can usefully highlight how the text functions in this way. It was explained earlier that she sees language as deriving from the distinction made by psychoanalysis between the imaginary and the symbolic order. In that light, women are linked to the imaginary or pre-linguistic world through their bodies whereas men, by a process of appropriation rooted in their urge for power, exist in the world of language. In such a configuration, she sees 'the social contract' as based on 'an essentially sacrificial relationship of separation and articulation of differences.'¹¹⁴ The consequence of such a division is the exclusion of children and of women from the 'higher order' that is regulated by language. Typically in a Victorian model, this is the outer sphere of professions, education and culture as opposed to the inner domestic sphere. Thus the novel can be seen as an exploration of these two seemingly mutually exclusive worlds, to uncover the mechanism by which identity is constructed, particularly in the case of women. This is clearly stressed at the point in the novel where the children leave for boarding-school, experiencing 'a second severance from the body of [their] mother' not only by their physical estrangement but more effectively by reduction to their 'name painted in white letters on [their] boxes' and their 'initials ... stitched on [their] socks and drawers.'⁽⁹⁹⁾ This union between name and self effectively erases the memory and knowledge of the first entry of the children into the world, through the maternal body, to replace it with their entry into the symbolic, which appropriately in this example, is the world of education.¹¹⁵ The name that was elusive in Jacob's Room is here all-important and denounced as a reductive tool of definition. This is particularly relevant within the debate on order considered in the novel, and the political implications it entails. For the word, as the key to the intelligible world, is the principal tool of power and oppression used by men and defining, by pinning down meaning, both allows and justifies

¹¹⁴ See Toril Moi, The Kristeva Reader, (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986), p. 199.

¹¹⁵ Michael Tratner shows that a division among the group is also effected here, 'a division that has effects throughout the book.' This is another manifestation of the divisive power of the symbolic. See

hierarchical structure, such as that of the Army or the Empire. 'By using the violent language which is natural to him' (108) Percival is hailed as the epitome of manly order. This is illustrated by his participation in submitting India to the Crown: 'the reign of chaos is over. He has imposed order' (97) and his demise can thus be seen as the decline of British imperialism.¹¹⁶

The intrinsic problem in this male ordered state, however, lies in its lack of space for those who do not answer its specific requirements. It is a society centred on the transcendence of God and by extension the Law of the Father, supported by a masculine system of values, which, intrinsically, alienates women. Thus Rhoda is driven to suicide by her inability to enter the masculinethetic world, which is foreshadowed by the fact that she 'has no father.' (17) Makiko Minow-Pinkney finds that as a consequence of this fact, Rhoda is 'excluded from and rejects genealogical continuity, temporal order, the clock of objective time.'¹¹⁷ As soon as she has to deal with the system of differentiation imposed by language or science, for her, 'meaning has gone.' (18) Interestingly enough, the character who is the least challenged or puzzled by her inadequacies is Louis. His origin as one of the colonised makes him experience the same lack of rapport with thethetic world as Rhoda. In a sense they operate as a mirror image of each other.¹¹⁸ This parallel is extremely significant in terms of representation and Virginia Woolf's modernity is once again manifested in her anticipation of what the French critic Hélène Cixous understands as one of the bases of patriarchy: 'Black to his white, woman is the "strangeness" man likes to appropriate'.¹¹⁹ To the ordered world, Rhoda and Louis embody two types of disruption which have to be either assimilated at the expense of their personalities, which is the case with Louis, or kept estranged, as the negative which validates the norm. The second position, which can be seen as a form of repression of

p. 219 in *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹¹⁶ See Michael Tratner for this interpretation, p. 221. Makiko Minow-Pinkney also sees Percival as 'a typical representative of patriarchy and imperialism, see p. 177.

¹¹⁷ See p. 161.

¹¹⁸ Harvena Richter explains the attraction between these two characters as form of mirror mode, p. 110.

¹¹⁹ p. 16 in Susan Sellers, *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France*. (London: Macmillan Education, 1991).

the unconscious, clearly proves untenable for Rhoda. This concept of reduction to the norm already appeared, movingly fraught with autobiographical echoes, with the character of Septimus in Mrs Dalloway. It is particularly significant though, that in The Waves, it is the female character that caves in under the weight of the thetic norm and commits suicide. Indeed in the earlier novel, we only know how close to the brink Mrs Dalloway is, as Harvena Richter puts it, through her identification with Septimus' anxieties, but never really directly.¹²⁰

Thus, one of the main points of the novel is about managing the transaction between the semiotic and the thetic without madness; in that respect, Rhoda illustrates the precarious dialectic of a self defined within an essentialist system. In other words, it illustrates the difficulty felt over 'a division between a feeling of selfhood and a feeling of selflessness.'¹²¹ Like Septimus in Mrs Dalloway, Rhoda's total absence of rapport with the symbolic 'sense of proportion' throws her into a world constituted only by the semiotic, where 'meaning has gone', and her inscription in reality is threatened: 'Alone, I often fall down into nothingness.' (35) Indeed, Julia Kristeva insists that the signifying process can only take place in an economy 'marked by an indebtedness to both' the semiotic and the symbolic.¹²²

This dialectic is also one that opposes vision to facts. Rhoda's problematic relation with the self can be understood as over-reliance on vision. Because her vision is not counter-balanced with facts, inescapably, she cannot live in the real world. In that respect, vision can be linked to the semiotic, pre-verbal stage of development, for which Rhoda yearns. Clare Hanson goes as far as suggesting that Rhoda actually yearns for a return to the womb, which in itself represents a 'birth into death.' This point is crucial, because, as she underlines, this novel is one of the first to investigate the possibility of negativity associated with the maternal body.¹²³ The symbolic stage, on the other hand, which is initiated by language, creates the gap of representation, that is to say, it deals

¹²⁰ See p. 89.

¹²¹ See James Naremore, p. 248.

¹²² Seep. 93 in The Kristeva Reader.

¹²³ See p. 131.

with facts by designating what things are and what they are not. The division it imposes directly threatens Rhoda's feeling of oneness with the world and in a world dominated by formal patterns is she seeks to recover this first undisturbed state. This endeavour can be seen in terms of the concept of community and anonymity, which is apparent in the pervasive reference to water as a symbol to express the feminine semiotic. Thus the question of merging with the flux of life or the communal consciousness -- Woolf's whole-encompassing 'semi-transparent envelope' -- is central to the process of differentiation and each character offers his or her own answer to it. This process has to be considered in relation to the question of order. As suggested by the example of Rhoda, total dis-order is as threatening to the self as a total suppression of the semiotic drives. The inchoate and chaotic character of life that can be accommodated by the notion of flux thus cannot find expression in a patriarchal system modelled on the symbolic at the expense of the semiotic. The social contract underlying this type of society, which is 'far from being that of equal men'¹²⁴ and even less that of equal women, is organised as a rigid hierarchical structure which denies any space for the accidental or the evasive. A possible management of the tension between these two extremes would lie in allowing the inchoate to function as a break of the semiotic through the symbolic surface. In other words, it would constitute a breach of the Law of the Father, while still being positioned within society. Order is thus acceptable as long as it is not prescriptive, as in the symbolic, but rather always in process and re-negotiated by the individual and society. To begin to imagine and construct this new economy though, it is primordial to disengage the self from the dichotomy of an essentialist system.

In that light, it is interesting to reconsider the framing device. As a narrative interspersed by interludes, The Waves clearly mirrors, and thus supports, the sense of interruption with its very structure. The frame thus becomes structural and, beyond a mere theme, contributes to the assessment of The Waves as an embodiment of feminist aesthetics. Indeed the frame of the story as the elaboration of self through language is disrupted by the interludes as natural rhythms, linked to the body by the overriding

¹²⁴ See p. 199 in The Kristeva Reader.

metaphor of 'a woman couched beneath the horizon.' (7) This disruption operates as the feminist pattern of the semiotic subverting thethetic. This argument is supported by Clare Hanson who suggests that the figure of the woman is an oblique way for the author to deal with the question of 'physical origin in the maternal body', later repressed in the final draft of the novel.¹²⁵ Thus Virginia Woolf's narrative technique and her new approach to representation in this specific text explore and expose to the full extent of its consequences the dichotomy involved in an essentialist definition of the personality. The dis-order or new, ever-changing order to be created in its place is valuable because of its whole-encompassing character and Virginia Woolf's next novel, The Years, is precisely concerned with forging a tool that would embody this new shape. Rhoda's need to find a system that embraces all and does not exclude, parallels the intention of The Waves, both thematically and structurally. Yet, some critics have found that ultimately this desire for an 'embrace' can only be realised in death.¹²⁶ However, in that context, the metaphorical death of the self can be seen as positive. Clare Hanson argues that

death can represent a supreme loss of self-consciousness which does not necessarily destroy the subject [but] rather ... allows the admission of the other, of what lies outside the self.¹²⁷

The dialectic of the frame can also be advantageously described in terms of semiotics where the language of the symbolic, as initiating the separating, shutting out process, presents a particular significance for this text. Indeed, one can see the main text as the emergence of the symbolic stage with its enunciation of the self, interrupted by the feminine unsaid of the interludes, hidden in 'elemental metaphors of earth, fire air and water', in the words of Luce Irigaray.¹²⁸ The question of language, then, becomes all important, with the notion of designating as indicating what things are not, that is, initiating the process of differentiation on which the self is founded. Susan's attitude is

¹²⁵ See p. 128.

¹²⁶ See James Naremore, p. 245.

¹²⁷ See pp. 136-7 for a discussion on death informed by Cixous.

¹²⁸ See Maggie Humm's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism, p. 107.

illustrative in this respect: 'I do not understand phrases.' (105) She deliberately refuses to grant power to language, and thus breaks free from what Julia Kristeva calls 'the jurisdiction of the (father's) word' into the 'jouissance of the female body'¹²⁹: 'I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation'. (104) In turn, her jouissance finds an echo in that of the reader who is drawn into the processes of a text which 'persistently shocks, baffles, and frustrates standard expectations.'¹³⁰ Indeed, 'in allowing more silence into the text than other modern writers, Woolf creates a space for the subjectivity of the reader.'¹³¹ Susan's silent voice precisely echoes the motive behind The Waves, which produces what Roland Barthes would term an 'unreadable' text.¹³²

5. Problems of language: like, like and like

Since the main narrator is a writer, this novel is greatly concerned with language. The very nature of language presents the problem of constructing meaning and self, that is the relationship between the signified and the signifier. Bernard exemplifies the awareness of the opacity, unreliability and shortcomings of language, and thus the urge to borrow from other media. The first instance of that awareness occurs at the beginning of the text, when the children are introduced to the world of the word. Tellingly, at that early stage, words are defined in terms of association with colours rather than with the objects they designate, so that for Susan 'those are white words' and for Jinny 'those are yellow words.' (17) Bernard then becomes gradually conscious of the gap between linguistic and ontological reality -- that is the concept of aporia.¹³³ This is the gap in the meaning,

¹²⁹ See 'The Father's Word: Julia Kristeva' in Language and Sexual Difference, p. 14.

¹³⁰ See p. 247 in A Glossary.

¹³¹ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 8.

¹³² Roland Barthes, in S/Z (1970) proposes a distinction between two kinds of texts: the traditional, 'readable' text, which conforms to literary conventions and thus is easily understood in the process of reading, and the modernist, 'unreadable' text, which evades conventions and thus draws attention to the artifice of literature. See 'Text and Writing' in A Glossary, p. 247. Virginia Woolf's texts can clearly be seen as 'unreadable' in their attempt at subverting traditional literary assumptions.

¹³³ This term is used by the French thinker Jacques Derrida to define a process of 'double-reading' by which 'he interprets a text as, in the standard fashion, "lisible" (readable or intelligible), since it

the centre of emptiness that is created by words themselves, which destroy reality, by the very process of representing it. As Derrida puts it 'What writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays is life.'¹³⁴ Neville thus understands that 'nothing should be named lest by doing so we change it.' (65) This is the problem of the metaphor, which by itself puts reality at arms' length, justifying Rhoda's complaint:

"like" and "like" and "like" -- but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? (128)

This attitude allows Bernard, for one, to distance himself from human situations by treating them as a work of art. His awe at Percival's death is settled in the picture gallery. There arises the question of whether it is culpable or necessary to undergo this process of distanciation, which is entangled with the notion of art as a necessity or a lie.

Thus, words can be used as a barrier, a means of protection, or, by the means of the image they create, that of the circle for instance, delineate the necessary boundaries, the 'protective circles of expectations provided by society and forged by individuals.'¹³⁵ They enable individuals to position themselves within the clear boundaries of society but also exact from those individuals the price of the reduction to the norm. Indeed, if meaning itself and thus identity are forged through a thetic phase characterised by the acquisition of language, then identity itself cannot but be constructed along the same line. According to this model, then, the self can only be described in terms of biological opposition and social hierarchy. As Bernard is painfully aware, this type of language falls short of reality, and it is featured as inadequate throughout the novel. By contrast, a new language can be created, such as the little language of lovers, with its individuality, which is presented as an alternative, because of its relation with the body. As Clare Hanson argues, the origin of meaning can escape the obligatory passage through a

engenders "effects" of having determinate meanings. But this reading, [he] says, is only "provisional," as a stage towards a second, or deconstructive, "critical reading" which disseminates the provisional meaning into an indefinite range of significations.' p. 205 in *A Glossary*. My specific use of the term is to interpret the discrepancy between signified and signifier as political.

¹³⁴ Cited in Patricia Ondek Laurence, p.6.

¹³⁵ See p. 38 in *The Frames of Art and Life*.

oedipal crisis and metaphorically find its place within a non-gendered scene of birth.¹³⁶ This new language, rid of meaning derived only through binary oppositions, is what Bernard imagines:

I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. (188)

Already in Night and Day, the main couple only arrive at a profound understanding of each other through this new and individual kind of expression:

The explanation was a short one. The sounds were inarticulate; no one could have understood the meaning save themselves. (419)

It is a new language which has yet to be invented by the couple since the old way of using language is not designed to communicate the individuality of each self but rather to impose one particular definition of it. As Neville realises, 'when we reason and jerk out these false sayings, "I am this; I am that!" Speech is false.' (109) By contrast, '[Katharine] felt [Ralph] trying to piece together in a laborious and elementary fashion fragments of belief, unsoldered and separate, lacking the unity of phrases fashioned by the old believers.'¹³⁷ Ultimately, the vindication of their relation both to themselves and to each other is marked by the fact that 'Katharine ... seemed to have communicated silently with Ralph', overcoming the falsity of words.¹³⁸

Thus it seems that language becomes adequate principally when related to love. This might be linked to the open character of a language that can be said to originate in the feminine, a language that does not define, thus 'overcoming the masculine repressions through the creative possibilities of language.'¹³⁹ For instance, the text explores the vertical axis of language as opposed to the syntagmatic chain, and this accounts for and

¹³⁶ See pp. 132-3.

¹³⁷ See p. 431 in Night and Day, [N&D], (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

¹³⁸ See p. 421 in N&D.

allows its fluid character. Makiko Minow-Pinkney explains how this exploration operates by

playing associational variations on a single signifier which, as Saussure argues, 'will unconsciously call to the mind a host of other words' from the paradigm. Lacan contends that 'strict coherence in the syntagmatic chain provides a position for the transcendental ego', and thus ... to juxtapose rather than subordinate signifiers, threatens that security.¹⁴⁰

The search for 'some perfect phrase that fits this very moment exactly' (56) is underlined by the central position of Percival, who embodies the perfect identity between signifier and signified: 'Not a thread, not a sheet of paper lies between him and the sun, between him and the rain...' (39) Yet, significantly, 'He cannot read' (38) since language, particularly as defined within an essentialist model, precisely investigates the gap between signified and signifier, that is reality and its representation. His position as signified, or 'the thing itself', is underlined by his absence which pervades the narrative, since he is not amenable to definition, and thus escapes representation. As Harvena Richter remarks: 'Percival serves as a giant reflector for the feelings of his six friends. Like the mirror itself, Percival is never seen.'¹⁴¹

The complexity of this argument is illustrated by the text itself. To dispute the argument that the author uses in the novel the very 'phrase-making' process that Bernard denounces, one can say that the text records various ways of making use of language, namely according to each individual.¹⁴² By moving away from 'syntactical elaboration' the novel can actually be seen to endorse Bernard.¹⁴³ This is reflected in the study of free play between signifiers and signifieds, exemplified by the notion of things being part of other things. For Roger Fry, the partiality of the English temperament towards 'the association of things' as opposed to 'things in themselves' explains the predilection for

¹³⁹ This political use of language is advocated by Cixous in 'Sorties'. See Language and Sexual Difference, p. 16.

¹⁴⁰ See p. 171-2.

¹⁴¹ This is another type of mirror mode, p. 110.

¹⁴² This is James Naremore's comment, p. 159.

referential art.¹⁴⁴ This notion can be seen as characteristic of the process of representation. In that respect, it is a notion with which Bernard is incessantly faced, as were Lily and Orlando,¹⁴⁵ since the question of language has to be considered in view of the reality it endeavours to render. Significantly, unlike Rhoda who commits suicide, Susan manages her integration into reality, precisely because of her disengagement from a language that is alien to her. Thus, her language can be seen as a successful example of a 'little language', centred on the body, which Bernard is yearning for at the end of his life and the narrative alike:

And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up some scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl; a cry.
(233)

That this new language should be likened to that of children is no accident. It could be modelled on the opening paragraph of the novel, where the characters as children speak a language of 'perpetual beginning' outside the linearity of an essentialist sequence.¹⁴⁶ Harvena Richter thus understands the 'little language' as 'an imitation of the primitive or child-mind's mode of thought which expresses itself directly in pictorial images that symbolise its emotion rather than in word sequences.¹⁴⁷

At that point in her career, *The Waves* is probably Virginia Woolf's most formulated attempt at expressing reality. It deals with the eminently modern question of the gap between identity and self, whether in terms of the notion of self born through language as opposed to originating in the body or, in psychological terms, with the body as the unitary identity of a transcendent subject.¹⁴⁸ It also questions the western concept of individuality at the expense of the sense of community and the notion of the stability of

¹⁴³ See Makiko Minow-Pinkney, p. 167.

¹⁴⁴ See p. 30 in *The Frames of Art and Life*.

¹⁴⁵ This is noted by C. Ruth Miller in *The Frames of Art and Life* p. 31.

¹⁴⁶ See the complete quotation from Luce Irigaray on p. 95 on this work.

¹⁴⁷ See p. 133.

the self, by exposing the multiple character of reality and the perpetual oscillation of extremes within which personality is inscribed. Ultimately, The Waves can be said to expose

'the ways in which the social construction of an appropriate self may be jeopardised by an exploration/acceptance of psychic bisexuality and of the plurality of identity.'¹⁴⁹

In that light, the consequences of 'a world without a self' are addressed in the main text, while, more literally, the concept of 'the thing that exists when we are not there'¹⁵⁰ is investigated in the interludes. This attempt at description is further complicated by the fact that reality or life evades language. In the final instance, there arises the problem of writing about the silence at the heart of life and what is better left unspoken, an attempt already undertaken by texts at the beginning of her career, like The Voyage Out and Night and Day, but further developed in the fiction of the 30s.

6. A new politics: "I" rejected: "We" substituted'¹⁵¹

In way of conclusion, The Waves was shown to intensify all the concerns, thematic as well as aesthetic, that were addressed in the novels prior to it, and as a result it can be seen to build up on previous achievements.

Indeed, the problems of aesthetics, in terms of the visual arts and of form, that the artist character of Lily in To the Lighthouse encountered with her painting are still at work with the question of poetic creation faced by such characters as Louis and Neville. Similarly, Orlando's difficulties in writing her poem are voiced anew by Bernard, in

¹⁴⁸ Clare Hanson reads Percival's death as the metaphorical death of the transcendent subject, p. 140.

¹⁴⁹ See Clare Hanson, p. 145.

¹⁵⁰ This theme is recurrent and already appeared in Jacob's Room, where 'One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there' (p. 42) and in 'The Lady in The Looking-glass', as mentioned earlier, which considers 'things that never happen, so it seems, if someone is looking.' (p. 221).

¹⁵¹ D, Tuesday 26 April, 1938, vol. 5, (1984), p. 135.

search of an appropriate language to express his feelings on life. Previous characters, such as Rachel in The Voyage Out or Mrs Dalloway, embodied the problem of finding one's place as a woman in a patriarchal society. The feminist issues involved in these novels are further crystallised by Susan and Rhoda's responses when facing this problem. Finally, the question of the nature of reality, which all of Virginia Woolf's works consider, finds a particular focus in The Waves. This underlines the extent to which The Waves is grounded in novels preceding it. In the same way as the motif of the waves pervades the whole novel, the text seems to encompass all the previous ones, and Virginia Woolf here finally succeeds in 'netting the fin in the waste of water',¹⁵² at least until the reality of the water defeats her. It can thus be seen as 'the purest and most ambitious treatment of those themes which preoccupied [the author] in all her earlier fiction.'¹⁵³

Thus this novel, as well as being a new attempt in its own right, shows clear signs of intertextuality. It is important to underline this link since it affords the author with all the necessary tools to find 'her voice'. Noticeably, the narrative voice of The Waves closely echoes that of previous texts, such as 'An Unwritten Novel', the section 'Time Passes' in To the Lighthouse or again certain passages of Jacob's Room. More particularly, there is a striking likeness between the description of the interludes and the short story 'The Mark on the Wall'. The novel has also been described as having links with both T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land and Katherine Mansfield's 'At The Bay'.¹⁵⁴ From an aesthetic point of view, Virginia Woolf elaborated her own voice with these first texts, which she further asserted with The Waves.

However, this novel also enabled her to pitch her voice as a novelist according to the definition she gave in A Room of One's Own, completed two years before this later text: '--the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist.'¹⁵⁵ Indeed, this novel is less autobiographical, less personal, than works such as To the Lighthouse

¹⁵² D, Saturday 7 February, 1931, vol. 4 (1983), p. 10.

¹⁵³ See James Naremore, p. 175.

¹⁵⁴ See Clare Hanson's chapter 'Generations in The Waves and The Years.'

¹⁵⁵ See p 93 in A Room of One's. (ROO), (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991).

with its reminiscent mood. The Waves can thus be seen as a step in a new direction, in that the element of anger from a woman writer battling against a patriarchal society has there been overcome. As Pamela Transue indicates, '[Virginia Woolf's] novels themselves would seem to represent in part successful sublimation of that anger.'¹⁵⁶ This, in turn, opens the way for a fiction which precisely redefines the relation between the personal and the communal. There is evidence of this change of emphasis in the author's use of the stream-of-consciousness for instance: '[It] is only a starting place for her explorations. She begins with the private self in order to escape from it or at least deny its supremacy.'¹⁵⁷ This movement away from the personal can also be seen in the narrative voice consistently moving away from the impulse to 'tell' towards an attempt to 'show' instead. Jane Wheare, for instance, in her interpretation of Virginia Woolf's novels, finds a difference between her experimental works – Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse and The Waves -- and her dramatic works, which include The Voyage Out, Night and Day and The Years.¹⁵⁸

Thus, considering the extent to which this text answers some of the author's most important questions of aesthetics, it can be seen as a moment of transition between two different impulses within her oeuvre. For instance, the dramatic voice, which characterises the following works, can already be seen at work in the interludes of The Waves as indicated earlier. Similarly, it is an example of a feminist aesthetics, but also starts to show the shift of balance between content and form by stressing the possibilities of a political use of form as meta-structure. The Waves thus still exposes the failures of realist representation but also points towards the possibilities of significant form as a new space to construct reality.¹⁵⁹ The next section of this work intends to show how, in the ensuing fiction, form precisely goes beyond aesthetics by providing this new political

¹⁵⁶ See Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 4-5. She underlines how Virginia Woolf was 'intensely aware of the manifold temptations to anger that a woman writer must face' but also underlined its 'potentially disastrous' effects.

¹⁵⁷ See James Naremore, p. 189.

¹⁵⁸ See the introduction of Virginia Woolf: Dramatic Novelist.

space. The structural function of Percival in the novel points towards this process, and significantly Clare Hanson reads his death as the metaphorical death of the transcendent subject.¹⁶⁰

This study endeavoured to highlight how The Waves embodies a feminist aesthetics; in other words, the aesthetic representation of a feminine reality, or outlook on the world. This feminist concern is also part of a modernist awareness, and as such, The Waves can be considered as the most modernist text at this point in her career, as was suggested by its readiness to be enlightened by some of Julia Kristeva's theories. Indeed, such questions as the fundamental estrangement between life and art, or chaos and order, which is symbolised in The Waves by Rhoda's suicide, establish the unavoidable, intrinsic link between politics and aesthetics.

The aesthetic use of all the devices -- frame, leitmotifs, rhythm of recurring semantic fields, or pattern at narrative level -- in the texts prior to this one were highlighted in the first part of this argument and culminates in The Waves. In turn this novel intimates a shift of emphasis from a feminist aesthetics to a wider political context. This is manifested in the use of the frame. In the first section, it operates as a theme only, on the level of content, then shifts to the level of structure, or form, in The Waves, and finally will be put to a political use in the third part of this thesis. The works of the 30s will be shown to radically challenge the concept of framing as a marker of their political character. This feature is all the more radical because of the 'traditional' format of The Years in particular. Thus the element of feminism, which is present in all the works, can be seen to function at different level. To the Lighthouse for example, clearly addresses issues concerning the genders but they function within the framework of a story: Lily finally finishes her painting and Mr Ramsay eventually takes his children to the lighthouse. In The Waves however, the fact that the story has become minimal is worked out at the narrative level by the use of the interludes, which constitute a challenge to the notion of beginning and ending characteristic of stories. As indicated earlier, The Waves

¹⁵⁹ Michael Tratner, for instance, finds that 'aesthetic and political analyses of the novel can reinforce each other', p. 218.

¹⁶⁰ See p. 140.

should be read as a text, not a story, which accounts for the work being sometimes judged as 'superficial' or 'improbably symmetrical'.¹⁶¹

All the elements of The Waves prepare for a change in the general argument, which can be seen as moving away from an aesthetics informed by feminism to feminism in a wider political sense. The Waves represents an asserting of the author's ability to use representation in her own idiosyncratic way in order to give a voice to the hitherto ignored feminine point of view so that it is indeed an epitome of feminist aesthetics. However the very fact that it is based on the 'improbably symmetrical contrasts between six friends',¹⁶² three of them men, the three others women, also indicates what Clare Hanson sees as 'a marked loosening of automatic gender identifications'.¹⁶³ James Naremore's complaint that all the characters, including the male ones sound female reinforces this point.¹⁶⁴ Thus, using Herbert Marder's terminology, this thesis observes an enlargement of the political frame of reference in Virginia Woolf's works. Harvena Richter's psychological interpretation of the six characters as different aspects of the self allows to think of The Waves as a philosophical enquiry into the construction of the self within an essentialist system.¹⁶⁵

Another way to formulate this change in balance can be articulated in terms of fact and vision. The Waves, despite its formal accomplishment, is primarily an achievement of vision rather than fact. If this novel stands as a successful embodiment of a feminist aesthetics, it also provides the stepping stone for a change in direction whereby Virginia Woolf's following works take a more overtly political tone. Thus the visionary aspect of this text will be balanced with facts, more particularly of a historical nature. Virginia Woolf, in that light, can be linked once more with Roger Fry with 'his connection of

¹⁶¹ See James Naremore, p. 151-2.

¹⁶² See James Naremore, p. 151-2.

¹⁶³ See p. 141.

¹⁶⁴ See p. 159.

¹⁶⁵ See pp. 247-8 for a diagram explaining this view.

aesthetics and social imperatives.¹⁶⁶ This will be of particular relevance to Night and Day and The Years.

In order to fully understand the specificity of Virginia Woolf's contribution, it is important to situate her writing within the wider context of history. The beginning of this century witnessed many changes and World War I put an end to the era of the 'eminent Victorians', which provided a backdrop to Virginia Woolf's childhood. The turmoil in which the world of art was finding itself can be seen as another war being waged, which would have the same kind of lasting consequences, by presenting a radical challenge to realism and opening new territories for the modern imagination to explore. The importance of these experiments, both in literature and the visual arts, was acutely perceived at the time by their protagonists, and acknowledged with hindsight by most critics. Virginia Woolf famously captured the spirit of the time with the phrase: 'in or about December 1910, human character changed'.¹⁶⁷ This statement can be seen as radical in two ways. In the first place ascribing such a precise date to such a vague feeling is another way for the author to highlight the arbitrary character of the biographical method, which is also indicted in Orlando.¹⁶⁸ Yet, at the same time, Virginia Woolf did capture a moment in history and her statement was much later to find an echo in Kenneth Clark's feeling that 'In so far as taste can be changed by one man, it was changed by Roger Fry'.¹⁶⁹ As James Naremore indicates 'Her fiction suggests a crisis in bourgeois culture had led artists to the discovery of new levels of personality'.¹⁷⁰

As this study demonstrated, the similarity between these new attempts by Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry draws on an equal concern for the relation between content and

¹⁶⁶ See p. 2 in A Roger Fry Reader.

¹⁶⁷ See p. 70 in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', in A Woman's Essays Selected Essays: vol. 1, edited by Rachel Bowlby, (London: Penguin Books, 1992) (B&B).

¹⁶⁸ See Rachel Bowlby on this point in 'We're Getting There', in Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 6.

¹⁶⁹ See p. 1 in A Roger Fry Reader.

¹⁷⁰ See his essay 'Nature and History in The Years' in Virginia Woolf. Revaluation and Continuity, edited by Ralph Freedman, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 241.

form and the resulting aesthetic implications. The lasting influence of Virginia Woolf's essay 'Modern Fiction' is illustrative in that respect:

If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. (105-6)

The first part of this argument showed how she exemplified this notion in Jacob's Room. Traditional fiction, such as novels focusing on the education of the hero, put the emphasis on a linear plot with characters described in detail and the accuracy with which this pattern is followed accounts for the realism of the text. Virginia Woolf's novel, on the other hand, was considered for its radical quality, constituted as it is by a juxtaposition of images, and recurrent liberties with the time sequence, thus undermining the reader's usual expectations. Typically, the room of the title is always empty and the characters as well as the readers always seem to lose track of the elusive Jacob. An examination of the novel led to an understanding that the protagonist only operates as a catalyst, a pretext, around which a whole range of impressions is structurally arranged. This, in turn, was shown to undermine the traditional focus on the main character, which is a central feature of this literary genre. More significantly, it also announced the author's shift in emphasis, from content to form, and thus stood as a metaphor for her determination to do away with the 'accepted' rules of narrative fiction. The analysis of the author's fiction during the 20s underlined to what extent this treatment of literature exemplifies Virginia Woolf's major contribution to modernism and by the same token, throws an entirely new perspective on fiction.

The argument then considered how another influence and a similar notion came from the field of the visual arts, where Roger Fry was undertaking 'to find out what the function of content is' and 'trying a theory ... that it is merely directive of form and that

all the essential aesthetic quality has to do with pure form.¹⁷¹ The closeness of these similar attempts in different media is underlined by Roger Fry's acclamation of Jacob's Room and Virginia Woolf's recognition of his contribution at the time: 'You have kept me on the right path, so far as writing goes, more than anyone.'¹⁷²

The distinct novelty that characterised the conclusions reached by these experiments is best appreciated when considering the violence of the reaction they prompted. Indeed, allegations of anarchism in relation to the content of the first Post-impressionist Exhibition set up by Roger Fry in 1910 at the Grafton Gallery, were not uncommon. The paintings were declared 'of no interest except to the student of pathology and the specialist in abnormality'¹⁷³ and the whole exercise was read as an attempt to undermine the institutions of art. It was highlighted that to appreciate to a full extent this reaction and the relevance of Fry's theory to literature, it has to be understood in relation to the question of representation in art. In his collection of essays, Transformations, where he expounds his vision, Roger Fry comments favourably on an excerpt from 'Oxford Lectures on Poetry' by A.C. Bradley:

This passage at least suggests to us that the purpose of literature is the creation of structures which have for us the feeling of reality, and that these structures are self-contained, self-sufficient and not to be valued by their reference to what lies outside.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ See Frances Spalding, Roger Fry: Art and Life, (London, New York: Granada Publishing, 1980), p. 163.

¹⁷² See David Dowling, Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1985), p. 97.

¹⁷³ See Malcolm Bull's article, 'Cézanne and the housemaid', in The Times Literary Supplement, April 5th, 1996, pp. 12-14.

¹⁷⁴ See Roger Fry, Transformations: critical and speculative essays on art, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1926), p. 8.

This challenge to the imitative and illustrational¹⁷⁵ conventions in both writing and painting, while distressing to the Academy, offered stimulating encouragement for articulating the reality of the modern world.

The argument developed in the first section of this thesis demonstrated to what extent Virginia Woolf was indebted to Fry for his conclusions on the matter of form, and her own experiments showed her how fitting to her purpose such notions could be. Indeed, her short story 'The Mark on the Wall' was understood as an example of her readiness to put them to the test. She maintained that the realism displayed by traditional novels implies that 'form' is in the service of 'subject matter'; therefore the function of form is only of an instrumental nature and its principal purpose is as a vehicle for ideas. The oddity and the striking novelty of the short story thus lie in the treatment of its content and its form. As we saw this meant a daring shift of emphasis, from the traditional development of a theme for the making of the story, to the innovative development of a theme for the making of a structural form. Instead of being led towards the elucidation of the question surrounding the mark, the narrative repeatedly slips away, yielding a dreamy and fluid quality to the text that gently but persistently blurs the expected linearity of the inquiry. In the text, the formal features of the mark, such as its colour or texture, place it at the centre of a structural web, triggering an ever-new string of reflections whenever the narrator ponders on them. Significantly, when the narrator realises that the mark is actually a snail, all interest in it comes to a halt and the narrative with it. Thus, the shift becomes apparent whereby the mark on the wall is granted importance only for its formal properties and its thought-provoking quality. The narrative is thus constituted only by trains of thoughts of which the subject -- the snail -- is a mere pretext. Form has come to the fore, becoming the very content of the text while the subject has become merely instrumental. Form thus functions both at a diegetic level, where the prose is considered for its physicality or *matière*, and at an extra-diegetic level,

¹⁷⁵ It is useful here to remember that this term is used in reference to Roger Fry's distinction between 'the artist' and 'the illustrator': 'This power of evoking voluminous and plastic ideas of form seems, indeed, to distinguish more than anything else the artist from the illustrator or delineator.' p. 138, in A Roger Fry Reader.

where the narrative produces an overall structural pattern. In that respect, the text was linked to Fry's assessment of a novel:

he judged it by the same aesthetic standards that he applied to art: it was form that mattered, the *matière* of the prose, and the ideas and emotions described had only secondary importance.¹⁷⁶

'The Mark on the Wall', then, was shown to emphasise the radicalism of a method which finds structure and its formal qualities more meaningful than content and its imitative method. This position was described within the context of the visual arts, in which Clive Bell articulated the concept of 'significant form' as 'a combination of lines, colours and forms that moves one aesthetically.'¹⁷⁷ A close examination of Virginia Woolf's production of the 20s indicated how she drew from this same method to find her own aesthetic methodology, urged as she was by the desire she expressed in 'Modern Fiction' to find a new and adequate form to voice the radical changes of the period:

Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity: we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.¹⁷⁸

This revolutionary attempt to tell life 'with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible' entails the same radicalism as the main tenet of Fry's formalism, which is the important notion of self-containment. This concept is particularly present in Virginia Woolf's texts of the 30s, as The Waves exemplifies. Percival's elusive quality, manifested by his always missing on any gathering of the six other characters, was perceived as owing a lot to the character of Jacob. Yet as we saw, his function within the

¹⁷⁶ See p. 258 in Roger Fry: Art and Life.

¹⁷⁷ See p. 164 in Roger Fry: Art and Life.

¹⁷⁸ See pp. 105-06 in 'Modern Fiction'.

text likens him to the mark on the wall, that is to say, a pretext necessary to the structural organisation of the text.

Here, the very nature of life is touched on by the intricate web of relationships, the way in which the characters stand in relation to each other and to time. The 'uncircumscribed spirit' is conveyed by this rapport between elements, much in the same way as, in modern painting, significance is conveyed through structure. Remarkably, the text stands on its own, between dawn and dusk, complete, unmarred by 'the alien and the external'. This self-contained and non-referential quality is reinforced in the narrative by the challenging attitudes of certain characters to language. The referential quality of language, defining an object by its name, supposes both an ability to pinpoint reality and a reference to something outside the thing itself. The Waves opposes these views not only by its fluid style and its self-sufficient structure, but also by its assumption that language cannot render the whole 'complexity' of reality. Because of its assumed power of definition, it also presents a potential danger.

The main narrator's search for 'some perfect phrase that fits this very moment exactly' remains fruitless (56). Indeed, he cannot attach a piece of language to a particular reality in the same way as the realist painter attaches a title to his picture and by so doing expects to validate it. This failure thus questions the traditional method of representation, which is activated through language. In this respect, the title of the book is revealing; while this designating process is clearly simplifying, The Waves indicates a whole range of possibilities and thus functions as a junction in the oeuvre as a whole. It also suggests a pattern, that of the waves breaking relentlessly on the shore, which, through its formal quality, points to the author's belief in the capacity of form to express significance. This is where the book is at its most radical: it requires from its readers a certain sensibility to form, which is best found in the modernist spirit. It does not fulfil their expectations in terms of a realist imitation of life but it does provide them with 'structures which have ... the feeling of reality' and of which they have to be the 'silent performers' to uncover the full extent of the creativity of the text.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 172.

As mentioned, it is remarkable that the female characters of The Waves still present the strongest resistance to language. For instance, Susan instinctively recoils from the pointedness of words, which by defining, reduce and simplify the multiplicity of meaning. In this text, more clearly than ever before, the author stresses that while language defines, it also indicates what things are not, thus functioning according to a principle of difference, which underlies the notion of hierarchy. Because of her resistance to language as an ordering principle, Rhoda is in breach with the world as organised by men and consequently, she is estranged as the negative that validates their norm. Virginia Woolf precisely advocates the position of the Outsider, albeit not to the extent of suicide, because of its lack of definition, which constitutes an opposition to the symbolic and thus a feminist practice. The author's understanding of the radical implications of realist representation for women is clear in the fate she reserves for the character of Rhoda. However, this also illustrates the danger in romancing the feminine as a category. Indeed, while the novel hopes for a language accessible to women, none of the female characters achieve this proposition. Thus Virginia Woolf's attitude to form not only proves her to be a major modernist in literature but also, and just as importantly one of the major makers of modern feminism.

At a general historical level, the climate of social unrest that provided a backdrop to the challenging new forms these experiments exhibited, in literature and the visual arts, certainly played a part in their rowdy reception. Two decades earlier, at the beginning of Virginia Woolf's career, a large amount of this restlessness was due to the Suffrage Movement, which was the first significant public exercise of political activism by women. In this general context, Virginia Woolf's contribution to the feminist agenda, although in the shape of a debate on fiction, was just as important and radical as the physical demonstrations of the Suffragettes.

Essential to this movement towards equality is the fundamental questioning of the representation in literature of reality in general and of gender in particular. The treatment of female characters in literature is particularly relevant to this debate because it provides society with certain images of womanhood and thus definitions of the feminine. Virginia

Woolf understood that because of its referential nature, the representation of women in traditional fiction is a reflection of the outside world, and thus shows women in society as second-class citizens, only just starting to vote. Furthermore, since the literary canon was largely dominated by men, those images allow the appropriation of women by the male gaze, which more often than not creates them as objects of desire rather than as the subject of their destinies. As Randall Stevenson remarks, 'one of the pressures this [male-dominated world] exerts is in seeing women not just objectively, but quite often actually *as* objects, evaluated principally for their external appearance, however inwardly or subjectively they may wish to see themselves.'¹⁸⁰ In other words, women's reflection originates in the mirror society holds to them, quite literally as well as metaphorically. This is a point that the author makes in *A Room of One's Own* which, written before *The Waves*, foreshadows the more political turn of her writing during the 30s and thus establishes the role of this novel in her overall production.

In the same way as formalism challenges the established, or 'official' as Fry calls it, way to judge paintings -- that is according to their degree of 'accuracy of representation'¹⁸¹-- the type of modernism expounded by Woolf questions such 'custom' as the emphasis traditional novels put on the plot and is able to dispute these stereotyped representations of women in literature. Considering that women have been marginalised in the order of society, the fact that modernism disrupts the notion of establishment is also extremely relevant to feminism. As the feminist critic Adrienne Rich writes:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves ... and how we can begin to see and name -- and therefore live -- afresh.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ See p. 42.

¹⁸¹ p. 164 in *Roger Fry: Art and Life*.

¹⁸² See *Writing and Sexual Difference*, edited by Elizabeth Abel, (Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982), p. 12.

This is exactly what Virginia Woolf's exploration of form in literary narrative achieves. In the part of her production covering the 20s, she first exposed the restrictive terms in which the feminine is defined. In The Waves she started to reassess her consideration of the difference of the feminine as a category because of the danger it presents of reasserting the essentialist binary model. Thanks to her resistance to external references, such as the role of women in society, which serves to define them in terms of gender, she started to challenge the construction of subjectivity as only possible through a Oedipal crisis that inevitably results in binary definitions. As Clare Hanson explains, she challenges 'the scene of castration as a dominant metaphor for meaning.'¹⁸³ By doing so in this novel, she secured a space for alternative representations in her following texts and thus allowed women to construct their own image of themselves, however elusive and multiple. This is exemplified thematically in To the Lighthouse, where the use of visual art by the artist Lily is a first attempt at this self-contained, non-referential type of representation. As a feminine expression of another woman, it escapes the stereotypical representation of women by society. This is illustrated in a painting that is not actually a portrait of Mrs Ramsay, although its attempt also constitutes a recognition of the painter's feeling for her.

Indeed, interestingly enough, under this shape -- a purple triangle -- Mrs Ramsay has lost her name, the picture having no title. This is in direct opposition with the naming and defining of traditional masculine fiction, where women are represented and their feminine identity established through language. When in her fiction Virginia Woolf subverts this use of language, typically in The Waves, with the character of Susan who does not 'understand phrases' (105), then she is effectively opening up a space for women to discover and tell themselves in their own way, that which suits the specificity of their sex. As she remarked herself, 'Directly I'm told what a thing means ... it becomes hateful to me.'¹⁸⁴ The free and open-ended style used and advocated by the author,

¹⁸³ See p. 132.

¹⁸⁴ This comes from a letter to Roger Fry, which is quoted by Isobel Grundy in her essay ' "Words Without Meaning -- Wonderful Words": Virginia Woolf's Choice of Names', in Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1983). p. 200.

the psychological sentence of the feminine gender ... of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes ...¹⁸⁵

is particularly suited to accommodate the multiple and fluid quality of the feminine self in all its dimensions.

However we saw that, while formally asserting this 'psychological sentence', one of the main themes of The Waves is to carry on with finding a description for the feminine. In that light, this novel reassessed the feminine as difference, that is to say, as a category, which was presented in the fiction of the 20s. Clare Hanson underlines the importance of the fact that 'it is Bernard who carries the burden of speech in [the] last section of the novel.'¹⁸⁶ Indeed one might have expected the main narrator to be a woman considering the theme of the novel. Yet, precisely, the female narrator/body of the interludes on the one hand and the male narrator of the main text on the other can be seen not as a binary model of opposition but as two poles or aspects of personality. Thus, 'it could be argued' as Clare Hanson does, 'that The Waves is a novel in which sex and gender boundaries are more fluid or permeable than in some of Woolf's earlier texts.'¹⁸⁷ In other words, feminine does not necessarily imply female anymore than the semiotic does. As Julia Kristeva intimates, any attempt to subvert the thetic quality of language can be seen as semiotic and this process is open to the marginal or suppressed groups within a dominant structure, such as women living in a patriarchal society. The production of Virginia Woolf towards the end of her career can thus be understood as motivated by an investigation of femininity as difference in a deconstructive sense.¹⁸⁸ That is to say, it considers the effect of patriarchy and dominance on society at large, as well as on women.

¹⁸⁵ See p. 51 in 'Romance and the Heart' in A Woman's Essays.

¹⁸⁶ See p. 139.

¹⁸⁷ See p. 144.

This consideration of Virginia Woolf's work also clearly underlines the remarkable way in which she prefigured Julia Kristeva's thinking on identity. Thus the first part of this thesis explained how the radicalism of Virginia Woolf's experimentation on form led her to challenge the rules of the realist novel as based on an essentialist model. In Jacob's Room, To the Lighthouse and Mrs Dalloway, she can be seen as reproducing and thus exposing the limitations and dangers of an essentialist economy to which women have to submit in a patriarchal society. Orlando as well as The Waves seem to attempt to retrieve and write the semiotic. However, escape into fantasy or death seems to be the price to pay for such an attempt, indicating the problems attendant to defining the feminine as a category by accentuating its values. As Patricia Waugh points out, 'Unity does not exist *except as "nothing"* and is thus a dangerous illusion both in art and life.'¹⁸⁹ However the fantasy of androgyny of Orlando is actually viable when envisaged in terms of a new model for the self, a continuum of personality, disengaged from the obligatory polarity of the sexes. As Makiko Minow-Pinkney explains, 'the quest [of the Woolfian personality] always involves a sense of the impossibility of fixing the essence.' In other words 'there is no inherent substantiality to the personality, which turns out to be the concurrence of all surrounding elements.'¹⁹⁰

This new way of being is what Julia Kristeva imagines: a new economy outside the essentialist model. This thesis argues that Virginia Woolf, in her text, effectively creates this new space by using the notion of significant form to shape the structure of her novels. The second section of this thesis focussed on The Waves, underlining how she put the emphasis on form and structure as opposed to theme and content, thus preparing for the shift in balance between these two elements which characterises the fiction of the 30s. This notion, implying an advocacy for a self-contained and non-referential mean of expression, was bound to disrupt in a major way the 'customary' representation of

¹⁸⁸ This is Clare Hanson's position, who sees To the Lighthouse as turning point in Virginia Woolf's production. See p. X.

¹⁸⁹ See Feminine Fictions, p. 115.

¹⁹⁰ See Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject, p. 157.

reality. More importantly, it challenges the way gender construction has been reinforced by fictional treatment, which is precisely achieved through references to an 'external' reality. This formal rejection of realism had dramatic implications because it allowed psychological innovations, which enabled and continue to enable radically new representations of women and as a consequence of the self. The original language that emerged as a consequence secures the possibility for the Other to construct their own reality and tell their difference in a celebratory manner.

However, this new space was only actualised in the works following The Waves. Precisely because of their intentions, the works of the 20s can be seen as demonstrating the difficulty of writing the semiotic within an essentialist framework of representation. Thanks to her 'sincerity and courage' in pursuing her vision, Virginia Woolf empowered herself with the appropriate tool to create a new shape of fiction offering an alternative economy. This is what marks her output after The Waves, which is construed as a space for the change of direction from a feminist aesthetics to a wider political context. An examination of her production during the 30s will explicate the functioning of this political position.

SECTION III

THE FICTION OF THE 30s; THE POLITICS OF FORM

The previous examination endeavoured to show that Virginia Woolf's aesthetics was first influenced by a woman's point of view, directing her gaze into the cracks of the picture men had drawn of the world. By so doing, she exposed specific areas of contention such as the definition of self or identity and the use of language and literature as an ordering principle. Voicing these concerns enabled her to secure 'a room of [her] own' in this patriarchal space, both for herself and for women at large. This was the major achievement that was established in the works prior to The Waves and highlighted in the first part of this argument. For Virginia Woolf, however, finding her voice was essentially a matter of aesthetics. In that light, the progression of her work, including The Waves, can be seen as a project of feminist aesthetics.

This study argues that, after the achievement of the fiction of the 20s, her production during the 30s became even more engaging. The third and last step in the development of this argument is marked by an emphasis on politics in a wider sense. The following study of the texts of this decade intends to show that this shift in balance is achieved through a radical use of all the elements aesthetically defined by her oeuvre in and up to The Waves. The use of such notions as significant form and pattern at a structural level, as opposed to the local level of the previous fiction, represents a political practice. The rhythmical quality of the prose was shown to be primarily aesthetic but also modern, both in means and goal, in its attempt at blurring the strict boundaries between content and form. Yet more importantly, the political function of such an aesthetic element was already foreshadowed in the study of The Waves. The extensive use of rhythm and pattern as constitutive feature of the text entails a challenge to a unified concept of the text and thus representation of reality. This is but one element that functions to a political end in the texts following it.

This study will help to uncover the economy of this shift from a feminist aesthetics to a wider attack on essentialism, together with its function within the oeuvre as a particular political answer to historical reality, in the same way that the author's aesthetics was a specific answer to realism. As underlined in the general approach to this work, such a study also puts in perspective the earlier part of Virginia Woolf's production. There, Virginia Woolf first identified the difficulties attached to the specific situation of women within a patriarchal system that devaluates their experiences. The principal aim of the fiction up to The Waves was thus to retrieve feminine values. The Waves then attempted to find a new language to tell a different tale but also started to question the validity of the feminine defined as a category, as a response to the plight of women. By doing so, it pinpointed the essentialist mode of understanding and representation as the basis, not only of patriarchy, but of any kind of structure of dominance. It also highlighted the need to find a new language in order to create a new text, expressing an alternative way of living, a new social order.

The Waves is thus an important novel, both aesthetically and politically. In direct relation to it, this thesis centres on the importance of Between the Acts and The Years. These texts will be considered for their ability to use the achievements established at the beginning of Virginia Woolf's career in order to actually realise in their own structure the kind of new representation they advocated.

As Virginia Woolf put it herself:

This is the true line, I am sure, after The Waves -- The Pargiters -- this is what leads naturally on to the next stage -- the essay-novel.¹

This clearly defines both the shape of The Years and, in a different way, that of Between the Acts. After The Waves these novels present a successful integration of fact and vision, manifested in their readiness to investigate the social environment of the characters on a larger scale than the group of friends of the former novel. This shift of

¹ D, Wednesday 2 November 1932, vol. 4 (1983), p. 129.

balance between the aesthetic and the political elements in Virginia Woolf's output is at the centre of this understanding of her work. The political use of form is effected both through language and a particular use of the visual arts. By using form to create a shape disengaged from an essentialist economy, she enlarged her politics towards a new space no longer centred on binary structures. In other words, the dominant force is not embodied in patriarchy specifically but, more widely, in the essentialist system that produces it. Further support from the works of Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva with her notion of semiotics, together with the use that this study makes of the concept of the frame will underline the nature of this development.

This line of argument considers Virginia Woolf's works as a whole, each period of her career establishing different aims, with varying degree of success. Certainly, the works of the 30s start to create a form that had been elusive at the beginning of her career. This is supported by the view of The Years as a re-working of this earlier attempt.² In that light, the fact that this novel was initially entitled 'The Pargiters: An Essay based upon a paper read to the London/National Society for Women's service'³ gives a clear indication of its political slant. Thus in the same way that The Waves is the success of a feminist aesthetics, The Years and Between the Acts embody the success of a form that fully integrates politics and aesthetics. This is confirmed by the author herself:

Yet, Heaven help me, have a feeling that I've reached that no man's land that I'm after; and can pass from outer to inner and inhabit eternity.⁴

Importantly, this space is a 'no man's land', not a man's place nor a woman's, but outside this dichotomy. Indeed, 'Woolf draws attention to factors other than the writer's

² This is Laura Marcus's opinion, among others, p. 137 in Virginia Woolf, (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 1997).

³ See note on the text, by Sue Asbee, p. XXIX in The Years, The World's Classics, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴ D, Wednesday, November 27th, 1935, Vol. 4 (1983), p. 355.

sex and the time of writing that bear upon different uses of language and different literary possibilities.⁵

These novels thus explore more directly than previous texts the issues which address the nature of modern reality and the changes of the self within it. At the same time, these questions are still underpinned and reinforced by aesthetic qualities such as the specific form of representation achieved in The Waves. The author's intentions were to

give the whole of the present society --nothing less: facts as well as vision. And to combine them both. I mean, The Waves going on simultaneously with Night and Day. Is it possible? ⁶

In order to discuss how the author's intentions were fulfilled, this study will now consider the 1919 novel, Night and Day, which she thought of as 'a book that taught me much, bad though it may be.'⁷

⁵ See Rachel Bowlby, 'The Trained Mind', in Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 23-4.

⁶ D, Tuesday, April, 25th, 1933, Vol. 4 (1983), p. 151-2.

⁷ D, Thursday, January 5th, 1933, Vol. 4 (1983), p. 142.

I. Night and Day

Significantly, Virginia Woolf first indicated the damage occasioned by an artificial division between the political and factual and the aesthetic and visionary at the beginning of her career in a novel aptly entitled Night and Day. This work, which chronologically belong to the beginning of her writing career, was tellingly bundled up with The Years by Leonard Woolf as the first of her two 'dead novels' and this partly accounts for choosing to concentrate on this novel at this later stage in the analysis of the oeuvre as opposed to treating it chronologically. Indeed, this first attempt thematically proposes an integration of the aesthetic and the political through various means which is structurally integrated in the narrative formulae of both The Years and Between the Acts. Laura Marcus concurs in finding that

both The Voyage Out and Night and Day have been underrated by critics, for whom they represent a plot-driven realism which Woolf was later to transcend. Yet in many ways they laid down the tracks which she was to follow throughout her writing.⁸

The Years can actually be seen as a rewriting of Night and Day, particularly since they are the only two long novels in all of the works.⁹ However its scope is wider and fusion between the political and the aesthetic advocated in Night and Day actually informs its narrative structure. The position of Night and Day in the chronology of the author's career, that is her second novel, after The Voyage Out and before Jacob's Room, shows that this fusion between the aesthetic and the political had always been one of her primary concerns. Its implementation, on the other hand, can be seen as progressive.

A negative view of the novel is still prevailing, as P. Reid Broughton demonstrates in her article on 'Fry's Aesthetics and Woolf's Non-"Literary" Stories'. She still accepts

⁸ See p. 8.

Leonard Woolf's assessment of Night and Day as 'fairly traditional' and sees it as a disappointment after the experimentations of 'The Mark on the Wall'.¹⁰ This study proposes another assessment of the novel, which precisely because of these earlier experiments recognises a deeper significance to this text than a mere reverting to traditional fiction. On the contrary, it seems that the formalist techniques of the short story are again at work in Night and Day. Indeed, the most significant passages of the novel, as well as the innermost thoughts of the main characters on reality, are informed by abstract shapes and relations directly shaped by formalism. The main protagonists' scribbling and designing specific shapes, throughout the novel, come to translate their aspirations and understanding of reality. This is illustrative of the author's general purpose, while at the same time directly related to 'The Mark on the Wall'. The first part of this argument underlined the ways in which the formalist expressions of this short story were related to reality and its representation. In the same way, these 'designs' are expressive of a deeper sense of reality than 'the hard separate facts on the surface' that other more traditional characters provide. In the text, the former type of expression is contrasted as intuitive and creative as opposed to the analytical character of the latter type. In such passages, these descriptions are directly linked to the 'imaginative' as defined by Roger Fry. This indicates an attempt at combining an aesthetic vision with the political character of facts, and in that light, foreshadows the works produced in the 30s. In order to appreciate fully this relation, Night and Day has to be considered in detail.

1. Language and literature: something real

From the point of view of the story, this novel focuses on a literary family, the Hilberys, who live a very traditional life. Their everyday routine, in particular that of the

⁹ This is noticed by Avrom Fleishman, in Virginia Woolf, A Critical Reading, (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 172.

¹⁰ Panthea Reid Broughton, 'The Blasphemy of Art: Fry's Aesthetics and Woolf's Non-"Literary" Stories', in The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf, edited by Diane F. Gillespie, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), p. 47.

only daughter Katharine, revolves around the composition of her late grand-father's biography, who was a famous poet. Ill at ease in this conventional environment, Katharine tries to find an alternative way to live her own life. She is also being pursued by two suitors who represent two different understandings of life and thus two opposing ways of expressing it. One of the aims of the novel is thus to suggest 'the polarities of personality.'¹¹ This opposition, in turn, provides a frame for a debate on literary values, which is fed by various direct references either to literary works or to literary figures to which characters in the novel are likened. As a consequence, the narration itself points to the literary nature of the novel as a text, making the novel 'essentially self-conscious.'¹² This novel is thus mainly concerned with language and literature, both at a fictional and textual level. This interest highlights the problem of dealing with words and the concept of representation.

More particularly, the literary debate between the ancients and the moderns, while pervading the novel, clearly sets literature as its metaphorical centre. Thus the characters are divided according to which school they favour:

[William Rodney] felt inclined to spend the time of waiting in writing a letter to Cassandra, exhorting her to read Pope in preference to Dostoevsky, until her feeling for form was more highly developed. (237)

The debate can thus be articulated around the opposition between expression and form, which this quotation entails, or the simple contrast between forgetting in order to produce something new and remembering in order to re-enact old models.¹³ This opposition is further echoed in much of the imagery of the novel. Wild, natural elements such as 'storm', 'weather', or 'birds' are contrasted with man-made, civilised elements such as 'formal gardens' or 'lighthouses'. This is of course reminiscent of the same opposition

¹¹ See Harvena Richter, 122.

¹² See Jane Wheare, p. 2.

¹³ See Susan Dick for the contrast between remembering and forgetting, p. 181 in *Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays*, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1983).

described in 'The Mark on the Wall' and indicates an attempt by the author at using her experimentations on a larger-scale work.

This novel is thus shaped as a statement on literature. Namely literature can be considered as an activity organising the life of the author and characters alike. The book provides different approaches to this concept through the various characters' attitudes to literature; that is language and expression, and consequently, self and life. These sets of attitudes are voiced by opposite opinions between couples such as Mr and Mrs Hilbery or Katharine and her mother, or again Katharine and Ralph.

Literature is conveyed as an organising principle for the Hilberys, asserting their status, since their stance is given as the established, or authorised position on literature and art. This organisation is prevalent to the extent that literature and art have become a substitute for life, so that the only access to reality is through these disciplines, and they end up replacing real life experience. Literature is thus what governs life and provides its values:

By these means, and from hearing constant talk of great men and their works, her earlier conception of the world included an august circle of beings to whom she gave the names of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley and so on, who were, for some reason much more nearly akin to the Hilberys than to other people. They made a kind of boundary to her vision of life, and played a considerable part in determining her scale of good or bad in her own small affairs. (28)

This hegemony of literature is powerfully conveyed by the image of the house as a sanctuary to the memory of the poet:

But the comparison to a religious temple of some kind was the more apt of the two, for the little room was crowded with relics. (8)

For the family, literature is sanctified by a sense of tradition, which forms an intricate part of the various characters' attitude to and definition of literature and art in general.

These traditions extend to manners, courtesy and familiarities, since literature like manners gives form and beauty to life which otherwise seems disorderly. In that light, beauty almost becomes a synonym for form, and in the same way, disorder more or less becomes ugliness.

The Hilberys subscribed to a library, which delivered books on Tuesdays and Fridays, and Katharine did her best to interest her parents in the works of living and highly respectable authors; but Mrs Hilbery was perturbed by the very look of the light, gold-wreathed volumes, and made little faces as if she tasted something bitter as the reading went on; while Mr Hilbery would treat the moderns with a curious elaborate banter such as one might apply to the antics of a promising child....

'Please, Katharine, read us something *real*.' (84)

The literature they admire is emphatically linked to the past, and has the somewhat morbid quality of death about it. Because of the way in which it engulfs Katharine, it is restricting and overwhelming:¹⁴

Often she has seemed to herself to be moving among them, an invisible ghost among the living, better acquainted with them than with her own friends ... They had been so unhappy, such muddlers, so wrong-headed it seemed to her. She could have told them what to do, and what not to do. It was a melancholy fact that they would pay no heed to her, and were bound to come to grief in their own antiquated way. ... She very nearly lost consciousness that she was a separate being, with her own future. (92)

This feeling is expressed with the image of the spider's web, which is also echoed in a plot establishing so many relations between the characters:

It was like tearing through a maze of diamond-glittering spiders' webs to say good-bye and escape, for at each movement Mrs Hilbery remembered something further about the villainies of picture-framers or the delights of poetry. (14)

¹⁴ As noted by Susan Dick, p. 179-80.

This image suggests the vision of the family being governed by their allegiance to literature and art, which is highlighted by the way in which Katharine is at the service of the temple erected to the glory of the poet.

Within the family, though, there are variations on this theme of literature. In this patriarchal tool par excellence that is the family, the tone is set by the father and seemingly received without contest. Yet to the extent that the novel is a Bildungsroman, it is less concerned with reinforcing established values than questioning them. This is reflected by the ending of the novel, which dispels the paternal authority. This questioning is entailed by a story deliberately focusing on a female character dealing with paternal authority, a theme that will be more fully treated in The Years. This tension is perceptible in the fundamental unit of the family -- the couple of Mr and Mrs Hilbery.

Mr Hilbery, who has been traditionally educated, is presented as a scholar. This intellectual status, within a patriarchal system, grants him a position of authority. On the other hand Mrs Hilbery, who has not been properly educated, stands at the opposite side of the spectrum to her husband:

She had never learnt her lesson, and had constantly to be punished for her ignorance. But as that ignorance was combined with a fine natural insight which saw deep whenever it saw at all, it was not possible to write Mrs Hilbery off among the dunces; on the contrary, she had a way of seeming the wisest person in the room. (33)

Her approach to literature is entirely intuitive and thus can be construed as naive. Shakespeare is alive to her on a different level than he is to her husband who studies the author with all the understanding of his education. In that light, she prefigures Mrs Ramsay, who equally admires masculine notions of understanding, but also comes to a deep understanding through intuitive illuminations, in the same way as Mrs Hilbury.

Mrs Hilbery is further measured against her daughter, although this is a less radical opposition than that which contrasts her to her husband, since Katharine dislikes literature, which she actually considers as 'a duty'. (30) Her daughter's self-

consciousness about her ability to read poetry the proper -- i.e. educated -- way, which is obviously derived from her father, also sets her against her mother's idealistic urge to give the uneducated full access to literature. More significantly, her mother's open-mindedness, which Katharine progressively learns to share -- 'She liked getting hold of some book ... without ... having to decide whether the book was a good one or a bad one' (111) -- is to be set against the authoritative approach to literature of Mr Hilbery. This gendered way of looking at literature will be considered later. It is worth noting that, despite Mr Hilbery's humorous attitude towards his work, it is ironically described as a petty and deadening labour and it does not gain the support of the narrator:

Mr Hilbery ... [was] placing together documents by means of which it could be proved that Shelley had written 'of' instead of 'and', or that the inn in which Byron has slept was called the 'Nag's Head' and not the 'Turkish Knight. (87-8)

By way of contrast, Mrs Hilbery's open-mindedness clearly coincide with the author's feeling:

And if the conclusion becomes in the process a little less conclusive, it may, for that very reason, approach nearer to the truth.¹⁵

This paradox is noticeable again in the discussion opposing the ancients to the moderns. There is a clear preference for the ancients by the older, established and generally male characters, particularly William whereas the moderns are favoured by the younger, socially marginal, and often female characters such as Katharine or Cassandra. This opposition thus polarises two different kinds of knowledge. The theory of Mrs Hilbery on Shakespeare's sonnets is illustrative of this. She elaborates the notion that they were actually written by his wife, in a move that anticipates Virginia Woolf's later creation of Shakespeare's fictional sister in A Room of One's Own. This new theory clearly gives a blow to the concept of male authorship and illustrates her originality and lack of

¹⁵ See p. 86 in 'An Essay in Criticism' in Granite and Rainbow, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958).

orthodoxy when dealing with literature. The fact that it is most probably wrong puts the kind of study her husband undertakes in perspective as mainly motivated by a desire for veracity. While Mrs Hilbery's notion of knowledge can be seen as wanting, Mr Hilbery's can also be considered as focusing on accuracy sometimes at the expense of understanding. The couple thus illustrates the two opposite ends of the spectrum within which meaning can be construed.

Yet, the most significant attitude to literature is entrusted to Katharine, thus granting her the status of main protagonist. This is her distrust of words, hence her shrinking from any traditional use of them as in the compelling case of writing:

The worst of it was she had no aptitude for literature. She did not like phrases. She had even some natural antipathy to that process of self-examination, that perpetual effort to understand one's own feeling, and express it beautifully, fitly, or energetically in language, which constituted so great a part of her mother's existence. She was on the contrary inclined to be silent; she shrank from expressing herself even in talk, let alone in writing. (32)

From this attitude, it follows that she becomes the object of others' expressions; for instance, William's sonnets, Ralph's fantasies, or again Cassandra's imaginings. This recoiling from language, of course, foreshadows the character of Susan in The Waves and as a consequence, anticipates one of the main themes of this novel. Yet, even more interestingly, the relation between Katharine and her father provides a paradigm for the Oxford father and daughter relationship developed at length in The Years.

This novel is thus built on a dialectic of life and the present as opposed to past and knowledge, which is originally exemplified by the tension between Mr and Mrs Hilbery's position on literary grounds, but even more convincingly conveyed by Katharine's battle:

sometimes she felt that it was necessary for her very existence that she should free herself from the past; at others, that the past had completely displaced the present,

which, when one resumed life after a morning among the dead, proved to be of an utterly thin and inferior composition. (32)

The same handicapping influence of such a position on literature is at work on William and Mr Hilbery, which is manifested in their inadequacy with feelings in actual day to day life. From that point of view, the novel is describing a quest for truth as opposed to illusion -- which is mainly pursued by Katharine. This truth is not defined dogmatically or in terms of essence, but rather lies in understanding oneself. For Katherine, it means becoming a subject of her life as opposed to an object of art. This notion of object of art is reinforced by Katharine's natural beauty, allied to the comparative lack of expressiveness of her face, interpreted by most characters as a certain coldness and aloofness. Significantly, at the end of the novel, Katharine is compelled to movement despite her preference for stillness and silence. Her love for Denham actually forces her to pursue him. The analogy generally drawn in the story between Katharine and a statue - - and thus a work or object of art, which is especially potent because of the notion of stillness associated with sculpture -- is emphasised by William Rodney's perception of Katharine as a source of inspiration, and rendered even more powerful by his inability to deal with her coldness:

'And we write sonnets to your eyebrows, you cruel practical creature' he added, as Katharine remained silent. (52)

This theme is further expanded with Cassandra, who is, by contrast, considered as a raw material to be moulded:

It was generally felt that, given a year or two of experience, introduced to good dressmakers, and preserved from bad influences, she would be an acquisition. (310)

This is particularly relevant, considering how Cassandra is mobile, and does not fit the description of a statue at all and thus needs to be made to submit to silence and stillness. Thus Cassandra undergoes the same type of process as Katharine; she is changed from a

subject -- this is manifested by her rather eccentric personality -- into an object fabricated by society, through the influence of William.

This theme of the quest and search for an understanding of the self -- which could be formulated along the lines of the anagnorisis of classical drama and thus find another reference to art -- is reflected in a turning point of the novel, which stands for its main problematic:

Katharine glanced at the portrait of her grandfather ... For perhaps the first time in her life she thought of him as a man, young, unhappy, tempestuous, full of desires and faults; for the first time she realised him for herself, and not from her mother's memory. ... she brought him her own perplexities -- perhaps a gift of greater value, should the dead be conscious of gifts, than flowers and incense and adoration. (271)

Indeed, the problematic is clearly expressed here, together with its answer; the poet is realised, understood as the active subject of his life and no longer as the passive subject of a work of art, that is the object of a painting. In other words, the notion of the frame, recalling the idea of art as the mirror held up to nature, thus becomes the marker of the division between art and life. This is the principal notion on which the novel is built. This notion is well developed, structurally as well as thematically, by the numerous allusions to frames of all sorts: mirrors, windows, frame of the comedy as well as that of the streets of London. In the same way that the frame of a painting defines its content as a carefully constructed image of the world outside, as with the poet's portrait, Katharine herself is framed many times by the windows of family house in the pose of the proper daughter, as Eleanor will be in The Years:

Growing weary of it all, Katharine turned to the window, and stood among the folds of the curtain, pressing close to the window-pane, and gazing disconsolately at the river much in the attitude of a child depressed by the meaningless talk of its elders. (101)

This explains her need to escape from this frame into the outside world of the city and later escape even from the frame of the city's streets into the outer wilderness of the moors. As James Naremore underlines, 'Virginia Woolf uses the room as an objectification of the individual personality, to suggest the ultimate isolation of the individual ego.' It is not until she manages to escape from this room that Katharine manages to define her own sense of self. In that light, 'the window suggests a means to reach the world outside.'¹⁶ This idea of the frame can also be seen in terms of time; the process of framing or erecting boundaries fixes the object, thus condemning it to belong to the past, as both Katharine's life style and the portrait of her ancestor indicate. It is significant, in that respect, that Katharine only gains full access to reality when she eventually succeeds in dealing with time in an appropriate way:

The future emerged more splendid than ever from this construction of the present.
(432)

This idea clearly foreshadows the same development in Orlando, in which the necessity of adjusting to the present is held as a key to understanding oneself. The instrument of that realisation is similar in both texts, that is to say, the profound connection rendered possible by love. It is only when Katharine can express her love for Denham that she is able to be at one with the present, and rid of the tyranny of the past. In that light, Shelmerdine's characterisation owes in part to that of Ralph Denham, in that they both enable their lovers to escape the frame of a traditional relationship. The former's androgynous character and the latter's social marginality provide this escape, which in turn enable the female characters' adjustment with the present. This process of realisation exemplifies the successful transaction between art and life, the necessary and salutary adjustment within the actual life of the present moment, which is the result of Katharine's quest. This similarity between the two texts can also be extended back to Virginia Woolf's first novel, The Voyage Out, which features the journey of discovery

¹⁶ See p. 243 in The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973).

undertaken by Rachel. It is also a Bildungsroman, yet cut short by the death of the young woman, an ending revelatory of the author's ever-present preoccupation with politics. In a sense, Night and Day can be seen as a sequel to Rachel's journey. The same idea of a voyage of self-discovery -- whether actual or metaphorical -- sustains the narrative. Yet Katharine succeeds where Rachel failed, a victim to the patriarchal system, as pointed out by Clare Hanson¹⁷. In other words, they can be seen as opposite, since Rachel ends up in the silence of death whereas Katharine finds a way out of her silence.¹⁸ This is significant and it allows this study to think of Night and Day as a truly political work, as opposed to The Voyage Out, which only adumbrated such concerns. Indeed Katharine is able to come out of her silence because she manages to create her very own language, real in the sense that it translates her understanding of reality and communicates her personality in all its complexity. As was demonstrated in the analysis of The Waves, this is only possible because Katharine refuses the definition of self within a binary system by forming a fundamentally androgynous partnership with Denham, unlike Rachel, who succumbs precisely because the point of The Voyage Out is to show the destructiveness of a patriarchal society based on essentialism. Indeed, this early story did not even allow its heroine to get as far as Jacob in her self-discovery, her descent into madness highlighting the repressive element of patriarchy.¹⁹ This point again reinforces a sense of evolution.

This problematic of silence leads to a closer examination of the articulation of language within the overall theme of literature, where the question of the transaction between feelings and words is paramount. This problem of representation is a point of focus throughout the text:

¹⁷ See p. 28 in Virginia Woolf, Collection Women Writers, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994.

¹⁸ See Susan Dick, p. 179.

¹⁹ See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, which explores this theme.

[Katharine] knew that any intercourse between people is extremely partial; from the whole mass of her feelings, only one or two could be selected for Henry's inspection, and therefore she sighed. (166)

The problem of expression, the business of shaping words, and saying what one means, proves to be a concern with virtually all the characters, and William's case is particularly accentuated:

'Ah!' Rodney cried, striking his hand once more against the balustrade, 'why can't one say how beautiful it all is? Why am I condemned for ever, Katharine, to feel what I can't express?' (52)

This is illustrative of the debate on a definition of literature; although William is educated he still experiences problems in expressing himself, as opposed to Mrs Hilbery, for instance, whose liberal attitude towards education seems to make her at ease with communicating her feelings. Whether William wants to express this feeling to himself, to others, or because expression is seen as a natural necessity is also indicative of the complex relation between art and life. This relation is further underlined with the extreme example of the disconnected discourse of the drunkard:

The ancient story of failure, ill-luck, undeserved disaster, went down the wind, disconnected syllables flying past Ralph's ears with a queer alternation of loudness and faintness. (334)

It represents the inarticulate narrative, which will not be recorded, the common story that is not told and thus not studied by the educated. It can also be seen as the voice of the mythical figure that speaks for a race producing a montage of history and memory.²⁰ Yet, this attempt is seen as the same failure of expression as that of the educated Rodney. In that light, then, the ultimate position towards language and the attempt at expression by the means of literature ends up in silence. This is partly due to the fact that what the

²⁰ See Harvena Richter's definition of a voice existing in time, p. 141.

author and her character want to communicate cannot be expressed directly,²¹ but only at the level of form, as The Waves intimates. Silence is also the only solution possible for Katharine because of her position in the patriarchal order, and because she has not yet developed her own language at the beginning of the novel, in the same way that the author will only describe the 'little language' in The Waves. However, the author makes clear that 'being a silent observer is an activity for women, a presence, not an absence':²²

Silence being, thus, both natural to her and imposed upon her, the only remark that her mother's friends were in the habit of making about it was that it was neither a stupid silence nor an indifferent silence. (32)

This positive attitude towards silence should be all the more noticed because it occurs in such a literary environment. Yet the notion of silence undergoes an evolution from providing a shelter from the reality of feelings to a more positive evaluation. It is put into perspective within a debate on literature articulated around an opposition between language and signs, literature and mathematics, and relationships and the impersonal nature of reality. The traditional expectations from a novel that can be seen as a comedy of marriage would be a resolution or at least a dissolution of this opposition. And indeed, the final reunion between Katharine and Denham could be seen as such, if it were not for the open-ended and indecisive character in which the conclusion is presented:

What woman did he see? And where was she walking, and who was her companion? Moments, fragments, a second of vision, and then the flying waters, the winds dissipating and dissolving; then, too, the recollection from chaos, the return of security, the earth firm, superb and brilliant in the sun. (432)

This is a union indeed, yet its indeterminate character leaves it open to negotiations. This ending goes a little way towards dispelling the obligatory sense of closure that this genre

²¹ As emphasised by James Naremore, p. 246.

usually entails, highlighting once more the political dimension of the work. This notion of opposition or division is indicated by the fact that 'in her mind mathematics were directly opposed to literature.' (34) As a consequence:

She did not want to marry anyone. She wanted to go away by herself, preferably to some bleak northern moor, and study mathematics and the science of astronomy.
(203)

This evolution into silence is more and more evident as the novel draws to a close. It is championed by Mrs Hilbery 'whose silence seemed to answer questions that were never asked' (410) and ends up with the telling silence of the couple: 'Katharine, ... seemed to have communicated silently with Ralph.' (421)

This apparent dismissal of language in favour of silence urges the reader to consider the notion of expression in a different light. As Patricia Oudek Laurence points out, quoting Gérard Genette, 'Woolf's silence [is] one of the "signs by which literature draws attention to itself and points out its mask."' ²³ To that effect, it is relevant to pause on the couple who uphold silence and consider their approach to communication, since one of the main themes of Virginia Woolf is the contribution of silence to talk.²⁴ It is characterised by signs as opposed to words and thus expression is informed by a notion of shape: the circles of Katharine and the 'blots fringed with flames' of Ralph (415). They represent another way to make sense, to answer the inadequacy of language. Indeed this novel voices directly Virginia Woolf's preoccupation with what she called 'craftsmanship.'²⁵ Her essay on the subject sharpens the contrast between the different types of language at work in Night and Day. She significantly re-titles it 'A Ramble round Words', which is indicative of a need for change in the use of language.

²² See Patricia Oudek Laurence, The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 212.

²³ See p. 5.

²⁴ See Patricia Oudek Laurence's discussion bearing this title in Title, p. 211 passim.

²⁵ This is the title she gave to a broadcast talk, on April 20th, 1937. The essay is reprinted in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), [C].

Craftsmanship, when applied to words, she understands as both 'making useful objects' and 'cunning' or 'deceit.' (126) However she posits that 'words ... hate being useful ... They hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change.' (131) Thus William's poetry, 'nail[ing] each line firmly on to the same spot in the hearer's brain' as it does (115), creates what the author defines in the essay as 'a monster fit for a glass case in a museum' (126), which might explain the 'sense of chill stupor in [his] audience' (115). Thus William is sterile because he does not succeed in giving a satisfactory answer to the limitations of language, and Virginia Woolf affirms, 'when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die.' (132) By contrast, Katharine and Denham's use of language, precisely because of its provisional and uncertain quality, allows words 'not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities' (C 127). As underlined earlier, it is this ability to develop a language of their own, a 'little language such as lovers use', which renders their union possible. It represents a tentative answer to the fundamental question the author asks in the essay, namely 'How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?' (130). The notion of shapes and patterns that characterises this attempt at forging a new language -- both formal and significant -- leads us to consider visual art devices in relation to expression and representation.

2. The visual arts: nothing further with words

The importance of visual art is manifested in the text by the use of a lexicon suggesting patterns, such as 'circuit', 'connection', 'weaving', 'mesh' or even 'knitting', an activity which is significantly common to all the female characters in the novel. Moreover, feelings are experienced and expressed in terms of patterns and so is life. For Mary, it is structured by the pattern that emerges from the connecting streets of London whereas for the group of feminist activists to which she belongs, life takes on the pattern of the

community that they create. For the Hilberys, this pattern is clearly provided by literature. Indeed, literature is understood as bestowing a pattern of coherence onto the disorder of reality. In turn, all these individual patterns are comprised in the larger scale pattern formed by lives intersecting:

From an acute consciousness of herself as an individual, Mary passed to a conception of the scheme of things in which, as a human being, she must have her share. (218)

Her sense of pattern is fitting in that it shows her opposition to the image of the proper lady with which, as a woman, she has to contend. This intersecting pattern effectively embodies a movement, which breaks the traditional boundaries surrounding women's role in society. Mary's sense of a pattern can be seen as a necessary emotional counterpoint to her love for Ralph, but it also allows her to situate herself in a wider, possibly more political, context; this 'conception of the scheme of things' also enables a deeper understanding of reality. Indeed, there is a difference between her feeling and that of the Hilberys. Whereas this family uses literature to organise reality into a pattern that reflects their values, Mary uses the notion of pattern as a means to grasp the nature of reality, as it is. Significantly, this same notion of pattern is the vital principle in Ralph and Katharine's couple, a means to assess the evolution of their relationship, as these contrasting quotations show. At first

The world had him at its mercy. He made no pattern out of the sights he saw. (129)

but later on:

They appeared to him to be more than individuals; to be made up of many different things in cohesion; he had a vision of an orderly world. (431)

As an outcome, their own couple becomes an instrument of pattern-making, by drawing different element into relation. Significantly this is only described as a 'semblance' of a

pattern, not a defined map to subdue reality, since 'in love, the other is not subordinated to the self, nor to the system of signs ("proper" language) which secures the dominance of the subject':²⁶

Together they groped in this difficult region, where the unfinished, the unfulfilled, the unwritten, the unreturned, came together in their ghostly way and wore the semblance of the complete and the satisfactory. (432)

This can be seen as defining the author's endeavour in this book. It confirms its experimental character, and while this pattern is not fully achieved and the fusion between opposites, such as fact and vision, is not yet realised, it is fitting that the novel should be considered as the starting point for an examination of The Years and Between the Acts, where these descriptions actually function at a structural level.

The extent of the importance of pattern is reflected in Cassandra's marvelling at the 'magical' quality of the pattern of a dinner table. This image is recurrent in the author's work, and points particularly to the character of Mrs Ramsay, which already seems to hover behind much of the novel. This concept of pattern-making is indeed central for it allows the notion of characters as artists of their own lives, since it reflects the same aesthetic transaction.

Alongside the use of pattern, the more explicit use of visual art devices also has aesthetic implications. The visit of Mary to the British Museum is described in such a way as to put the question of aesthetics in relation to life in terms very reminiscent of Roger Fry. The problem of emotion in the aesthetic judgement is what appears behind the ironical stance:

One must suppose, at least, that her emotions were not purely aesthetic, because, after she had gazed at the Ulysses for a minute or two, she began to think about Ralph Denham. (65-6)

²⁶ See Clare Hanson, p. 137-8.

This self-conscious statement relates to the problem of expressing and thus representing reality, which is at the centre the novel.

In particular, in the novel the characterisation is carried out in terms of shapes and colours, with clear pictorial allusions. This method brings back the notion of work of art, which becomes very significant within the dialectic articulated around an opposition between object and subject, as detailed earlier. This aesthetic treatment is illustrative of both the status and the development of the characters within the frame of the novel, as the episode concerning the poet's portrait indicated. When characters are described in these terms, i.e. as paintings, they are considered as such, in their quality of objects, hence as flat characters, both metaphorically and literally. This is evident in the account of the aunts of the family:

Portraits by Romney, seen through glass, have something of their pink, mellow look, their blooming softness, as of apricots hanging upon a red wall on the afternoon sun. (122)

On the other hand, characters who are not described in these terms are more likely to escape from the flatness of the frames of the paintings into actual life and thus become subjects. This has to do with the notion of being the artist of one's life as opposed to the object of someone else's art. In this sense Mrs Hilbery is an artist of her life, in that her aim is to achieve satisfactory endings, reduce tension, and complete a general pattern of harmony. Of course, she prefigures the same attempts as Mrs Dalloway with her party, Mrs Ramsay with her dinner, or more significantly Miss La Trobe and her play with a similar allusion to drama. This process involves the notion of the artist as the person who is in search of a pattern of significance, a unity, the main characteristic of which is its quality of communicativeness, its sense of togetherness. More often than not, this pattern consists of 'a visual image ... [which] can take disparate elements ... and organise them into a harmonious whole.'²⁷ This significance is thus better conveyed by a pattern that

²⁷ Harvena Richter uses this definition in the context of 'ways of seeing the object' but it seems to equally apply at a more general level, p. 71.

reaches beyond words, providing a new definition both of literature in particular and of art at large.²⁸

In terms of the problematic opposing subject to object, the novel offers a model for a literary text that would rather show than tell. In other words, the emphasis is put on formal features rather than on the diegesis. This turns the novel into an experimental text, closer in tone to the novels of the 30s. This is reflected in the text by the divergent definitions of literature that Mrs Hilbery and Mr Hilbery propose; hers relies on intuitive understanding, while his is shaped by traditional scholarship. Katharine also has her part in this view of reality, with her quest for meaning. In this respect her drawing circles and squares can be seen as an attempt to impart significance to the chaos of the world of feelings.

In this context of characterisation, a certain evolution in technique is observed, which is significant within the overall direction of the novel. If the characterisation of the aunts or the poet makes a direct use of pictorial devices, then a shift in the use of this technique can be seen, which is signalled by the increasing use of synesthesia. Katharine herself is marked by a green light or her presence by music, while emotions are described as haze, froth, or foam:

Like a strain of music, the effect of Katharine's presence slowly died from the room in which Ralph sat alone. ... the immense desire for her presence churned his senses into foam, into froth, into a haze of emotion that removed all facts from his grasp... (326)

In other words, this marks a departure from the classical to the impressionist or symbolic. As a consequence, the account of feelings, but more significantly of characters, becomes less and less realistic, as is apparent in the way in which Ralph pictures Katharine:

²⁸ Patricia Ondek Laurence makes an equivalent point with the notion of 'rhythm as an organising and emotional dimension of [the author's] writing' which is equally understood 'as a way of creating meaning for the reader that is beyond words.' See p. 172.

She obliterated a bookcase full of law reports, and the corners and lines of the room underwent a curious softening of outline like that which sometimes makes a room unfamiliar at the moment of waking from sleep. (413-4)

This movement finds its outcome in an abstract handling of characterisation, which is clearly drawn from modern painting, and the author's discussion about Post-Impressionism.²⁹ Indeed, as Allen McLaurin underlines, 'there is the beginning of an attempt in Night and Day to give a more solid "geometrical" structure, an attempt to move from impressionism to post-impressionism...'³⁰ The way in which both Katharine and Ralph express and see each other and their couple is significant in that respect:

it seemed to her that the immense riddle was answered; the problem had been solved; she held in her hands for one brief moment the globe which we spend our lives in trying to shape, round, whole, and entire from the confusion of chaos. (428)

In idleness, and because he could do nothing further with words, he began to draw little figures in the blank spaces, heads meant to resemble her head, blots fringed with flames meant to represent -- perhaps the entire universe. (415)

In this last example, the link between visual art technique and expression is clear. In that context, it becomes relevant to cast a glance on the attempt at expression, more particularly from women, running through the novel, the text itself indicating that the approach displayed above is as much feminist as it is modernist, at least in spirit.

Indeed, one can see an overlap, throughout the novel, between feminine characteristics and modern representation on the one hand, and masculine characteristics and traditional or realist representation on the other. Significantly, though, this point is illustrated by two men. Harvena Richter finds that Ralph represents the 'masculine' man in the novel whereas Rodney she describes as the 'old-womanish' type.³¹ This does not seem to be verified by Denham, who although being a man, shows an androgynous side

²⁹ Although Harvena Richter explains this alteration in the object perceived in psychological terms, such as 'structural repression', p. 35.

³⁰ See Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 37.

by being aware of the inability of language to express his feelings. This impossibility is the result of the linearity and sequentiality of language, which can be described as a masculine characteristic, and explains his recourse to the shapes and pattern of visual art, which by escaping sequentiality, allows him to embody that which language cannot express. This is what provides a common ground between Denham and Katharine who herself is not very 'womanly', in the same way as Shelmerdine's androgyny will answer Orlando's changing sexuality. This point is further illustrated by the contrasting approach to language that Rodney offers:

His mastery of metres was very great; and, if the beauty of a drama depended upon the variety of measures in which the personages speak, Rodney's plans must have challenged the works of Shakespeare. Katharine's ignorance of Shakespeare did not prevent her from feeling fairly certain that plays should not produce a sense of chill stupor in the audience, such as overcame her as the lines flowed on, sometimes long and sometimes short, but always delivered with the same lilt of voice, which seemed to nail each line firmly on to the same spot in the hearer's brain. Still, she reflected, these sorts of skill are almost exclusively masculine; women neither practise them or know how to value them; and one's husband's proficiency in this direction might legitimately increase one's respect for him, since mystification is no bad basis for respect. No one could doubt that William was a scholar. (115)

The two different kinds of pattern thus created by Denham or Katharine and Rodney or Mr Hilbery are shaped by a question of politics. This is signalled by the undercurrent of irony in this passage, which seems strong enough to authorise a closer examination of the feminist issues that the novel raises.

3. Women's issues: being the mistress of one's life

The fact that Mr Hilbery and Rodney use literature to create a pattern, a specific order, out of the accidental character of life, has clear political implications for the women in

³¹ See p. 123.

their society. Rodney creates a pattern with his poetry with the view of defining the world according to patriarchal rules, whereas the pattern created by Katharine, in the form of circles, does not attempt to make others subscribe to her vision of the world. Importantly, when she tries to explain its significance to Denham, this attempt is received as a profound act of sharing. The passage considered above thus aptly illustrates the issues regarding the relationship between men and women that the novel addresses, giving it a marked political character.

The phrase 'the basis of respect' underlines the pattern of relationship between genders in the society portrayed, which is one of subordination, whereby respect is used as a tool of power. The novel deals essentially with the social construct of the notion of gender that Katharine eventually manages to disengage from in order to become an individual as opposed to an object. This order, divisive by nature, is based on a dialectic centring on the opposition between subject and object. Within a patriarchal society, women are seen as objects construed through the gaze of men, which puts them in a position of dependence. This is epitomised by the character of Katharine, who is defined by her beauty. Her position within the family -- where she functions as a tool to preserve civilisation -- as well as within society -- where any recognition is granted because of her relation to the poet, that is as the grand-daughter and the daughter of a 'great man' -- is clearly delineated:

But the book must be written. It was a duty they owed the world, and to Katharine, at least, it meant more than that, for if they could not between them get this one book accomplished they had no right to their privileged position. (30)

Thus the novel questions the position of women in society, as well as their prescribed role. This is illustrated by different portraits of women such as 'the Angel in the House',³² represented typically by Katharine at the beginning of the novel, as well as

³² Virginia Woolf uses this phrase in a lecture entitled 'Professions for Women' which she gave to the National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931. The image is taken from a verse by Coventry Patmore, "idealising women in the domestic role." note 3 p. 203. She states that at the time when she started writing, 'Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman

Mrs Hilbery, or Cassandra. Katharine's case is particularly interesting, because her relationship with William exposes the demands of society on women. Significantly, he cannot deal with her because she does not fit into the expected mould. This is crystallised by her actual individuality being labelled as coldness. This problem is even plainer in the case of Mary Datchet, who being a feminist activist, rejects the gender role pattern even more powerfully:

it was quite evident that all the feminine instincts of pleasing, soothing, and charming were crossed by others in no way peculiar to her sex. (36)

Yet, the account of Mary in the novel is not one-sided and one can even feel a tone of irony in the treatment of the characters involved in political activism. Thus the novel seems to make a double-edged statement on feminism: it is supported within the frame of Katharine's quest for independence and individuality, yet more or less condemned in the case of activism. Indeed, Mary is more admired for working at all than for what she works at. This is very important in two respects.

Firstly it reinforces the sense in which this novel functions as a template for Virginia Woolf's attempt throughout her works, and so should be studied at this point of the argument. Indeed, the novel clearly attempts to deal with the political question of the role of women in society and through the sympathy it shows for the women it portrays, also prefigures the reclaiming of feminine values that Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay will embody later on. Yet, the ambivalence towards Mary also indicates the position that the author will take in later on, namely that active feminism with the aim of re-inserting the feminine within the symbolic actually reiterates the binary categories it wants to fight. This attitude is in keeping with the open-endedness advocated by Virginia Woolf, which is more a matter of finding a way to one's vision and keeping faithful to it than being dogmatic about one's position. As Pamela Transue points out, 'she saw in [feminist

writer', and so, 'Had I not killed her she would have killed me.' p. 103 in Virginia Woolf, The Crowded Dance of Modern Life, edited by Rachel Bowlby, vol. 2, (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

political organisations] the same destructive pigeonholing of people into hierarchical slots that she judged to be the pattern of patriarchy.³³

Secondly, and just as importantly in the overall argument, it also shows the way out of the binary system with the relationship between Katharine and Denham, that is to say, the possibility for an understanding of the self and consequently a construction of meaning outside the essentialist system, in a non-gendered, non-appropriative way. This highlights the importance of this novel despite its realist framework.

Precisely because of this attempt, though, it provides most of the elements which, much later on, will inform The Years and Between the Acts. As will be demonstrated, these novels are constructed according to the new system, and in the new language only adumbrated in Night and Day.³⁴

The political question is linked here with the notion of individuality, foreshadowing the Paterian element of Orlando. There is a strong theme of the individual against society, which is embodied by the oppression of the family: it is as much of a problem for Ralph and his sister, as it is for Katharine and her cousin Henry. The question of femininity as a socially constructed concept has to be put in that perspective: to fully understand oneself is to develop all the potentials of one's personality, without being trapped within the frame of gender. In that respect, it is illustrative that the most successful characters are also those who most evade the boundaries imposed on them, that of gender in Katharine's case and that of the establishment in Ralph's case. Moreover, the key to Katharine's success, in terms of being 'the mistress of her life' (428), is that she does not take sides either for the masculine establishment or the feminine demands. This is conveyed both through her initial refusal to marry Rodney and to behave in the same way as her cousin Cassandra. By refusing to take on the proper role of a lady, as defined by patriarchy, she can be seen as anticipating later characters who are not defined in these restricted terms anymore, such as Orlando or Nicholas. In that respect, it is interesting to

³³ See Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 6.

notice the choice of names bestowed by the author on her characters. Indeed, to some extent it is to be expected that Cassandra with such a classical name should finally marry William Rodney who is characterised by his predilection for the ancients in literature.³⁵ By contrast, in describing Katharine's course of action, Virginia Woolf anticipates Julia Kristeva's 'third position'.³⁶ Katharine and Denham manage to construct a space that is no longer framed by the boundaries of gender. And as Susan Dick stresses the novel ends on a hopeful note which will not be heard again until The Years.³⁷

Thus, Night and Day, if not a directly political work, already presents strong feminist elements, which Virginia Woolf is going to treat in depth later on in A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas. These include Katharine's hiding her mathematics as the image for the woman writer, her rebellion against the father, and the problem of having a room of one's own in order to have a life of one's own. This question is particularly apparent in the important theme of rooms that runs through the novel, with the image of the upstairs room as a defiance of society institutionalised by the family. The question of the education of women is another of the main themes of the novels of the 30s. It is illustrated here by Mrs Hilbery's lack of intellectual training, Ralph's sister's training to enter a woman's college, Katharine's own self-education and even William's programme of education for Cassandra. All these points of view lead to a reflection on education, which is construed as an opposition between the formal and intellectual education of men, which seems rather incapacitating -- as Mr Hilbery's inability to deal with the problems of his family testifies -- and the non-academic but enriching and psychologically enhancing voyage into self-knowledge experienced by women. The main idea then, is that of the importance of the process of self-discovery, which is in part linked with sexuality. In that context, 'night and day' can be seen as one of many images referring to sexuality. It describes the duality of a system in which there are things one

³⁴ This is also noticed by Laura Marcus, who sees the link in terms of the geometrical shape, p. 10.

³⁵ See Susan Dick's essay on 'The Tunneling Process: Some Aspects of Virginia Woolf's use of Memory and the Past' in Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays, p. 176-199.

³⁶ See Sexual/Textual Politics, (London and New York, Routledge, 1985), p.12.

does not talk about. The novel puts a focus on female sexuality, its possibilities, but also its dangers, illustrated by the main image of desire in Katharine's imagination. Desire is characterised in terms of surrender and dissolution of the self, which seems to pose a threat to her strong independent character. Conversely, Mary's renunciation of her desire for Denham is described as empowering, and the light from her house comes to represent 'something impersonal and serene in the spirit of the woman within...' (431) This novel thus foreshadows the later, more overt and complex, treatment of sexuality in The Years and Between the Acts.³⁸

Thus Night and Day, Virginia Woolf's second novel, contains most of the concerns that were to remain with her throughout her career and from that point of view, it is paving the way for almost every single novel that will follow. Mr and Mrs Hilbery are echoed in Mr and Mrs Ramsay as Katharine is in Lily. Some of the traits of Mrs Hilbery are also to be found in Mrs Dalloway and in the later Miss La Trobe. Moreover, the imagery used in this novel will be reproduced in others to follow, and also in A Room of One's Own. The formal attempts only just sketched in this second novel will also find their full expression later on. More importantly still, this novel explores how art -- literature as well as the visual arts -- stands in relation to life, individuality, gender, and sexuality. In that respect, it is based on a political theme, heralding the political structures of the texts of the 30s. At the centre of this problematic, lies a quest for truth, yet not for a universal truth -- that of society -- but an individual truth, a particular vision. This is significantly entrusted to the intuitive Mrs Hilbery:

'We have to have faith in our vision' Mrs Hilbery resumed. (412)

³⁷ p. 182.

³⁸ Hermione Lee sees Ralph and Katharine's relationship as prefiguring 'the sexless relationship between Sara and Nicholas in The Years, see Virginia Woolf A to Z, edited by Mark Hussey, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995), p. 190.

The struggle against illusion is one of the main issues the novel contends with. Avrom Fleishman observes that 'the general theme of illusion and reality' is worked in the novel by 'a systematic attempt to rework comic conventions' which gives a 'radical' character to the novel.³⁹ In this context, what is important is not the morality of conventions, which is an external code of rules. This understanding of morality accounts for William's inadequacy, in spite of Katharine partly forgiving him when Cassandra re-words his conventionalism as considerateness. Instead, it is a matter of integrity, which sustains the full development of the self. This can only be achieved, it seems, through a system that diffuses the tension between opposites such as individual and society, signs and literature, silence and language, feminine and masculine, the moderns and the ancients. In other words, it is an open-ended, all-encompassing system without which truth is threatened. Katharine and Denham reach their happiness when they have realised this both for themselves and for each other. In that light, Katharine and Ralph's marriage can be seen as positive because it is experimental and functions as a way to help each other perfect their androgyny:⁴⁰

Why, she reflected, should there be this perpetual disparity between the thought and the action, between the life of solitude and the life of society, this astonishing precipice on one side of which the soul was active and in broad daylight, on the other side of which it was contemplative and dark as night? Was it not possible to step from one to the other, erect, and without essential change? Was it not the chance he offered her...? (288)

This notion of attaining or at least articulating one's vision is a central point because it shows how this text, already early on in her career, provided the author with a model for a novel encompassing both facts and vision, which would serve for the production of her works during the 30s. In that light, Night and Day is an attempt to embody the view of reality as both 'granite' and 'rainbow', a fundamental dialectic of opposites, which tries

³⁹ See p. 23.

⁴⁰ See Herbert Marder, p. 128 in Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

to merge fact and vision to open up into a significant formal structure to embody the experience of life that is reality. Patricia Clements underlines the use of the image of 'glacial stream' in Virginia Woolf's work to 'embody [her] characteristic ambivalences: they suggest at once movement and arrest, identity and transformation, continuity and departure, creation and crumbling order.'⁴¹ Katharine's wondering thus voices Virginia Woolf's intention to find a form to embody 'that queer conglomeration of incongruous things -- the modern mind.'⁴² This possibility is treated here as a theme with the question of expression and representation that all the characters are confronted with. Although this novel provides some elements for the works immediately following, more particularly the use of pattern, they only constitute first attempts. This view is reinforced by the fact that, characteristically for a novel of the beginning of her career, Night and Day is rather traditional in its composition. Most of the novel is written as a social comedy; the element of plot is still very strong in contrast to Jacob's Room, which was to follow, and livened up with the comic character of quite a few of its participants. This traditional element is also noticeable in the narratorial stance, which is that of an omniscient narrator. This evidence points to the fact that, so early on in her career, Virginia Woolf had not found her voice yet, something that she declared happened with her next novel. Yet, she certainly had established some very definite aspects of her vision, that is to say which form it should take:

It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play.⁴³

This new shape for fiction was to inform her works towards the end of her career.

⁴¹ See p. 29-30.

⁴² See p. 20-1 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' in Granite and Rainbow.

4. An early vision

Night and Day thus constitutes a first attempt at voicing the type of representation that will inform the works written at the later end of her career. It points towards fundamental aspects of this new type of representation but does not integrate all the elements in a particularly significant structure. Yet by adumbrating a vision of it, Night and Day takes a place of importance in the overall development of Virginia Woolf's aesthetics. Thus, all these elements are addressed much more directly in The Years and Between the Acts, which are political in a way none of her novels had been before. Because of the movement traced along this work -- from a feminist aesthetic to a wider political context - - and even more powerfully because of the date of their production, 1937 and 1941 respectively, The Years and Between the Acts re-focus all the questions treated, positioning the oeuvre within a historical perspective. The dialectic at the heart of Night and Day, that Jane Marcus sees as 'the companion "novel of fact" of [The Years]', is there re-articulated in terms of the reality of the self inscribed in the given time of history as defined by society.⁴⁴

Thus, all the visionary elements of the works of the 20s are reinterpreted and counterbalanced by facts to produce a political form. This dialectic of fact and vision echoes a constant theme throughout the author's work and can be articulated as a paradigm of inner/outer, informed in the texts by the device of the frame. Indeed, in the first section, the use of the frame was first underlined as thematic only, that is on the level of content. It then shifted in use from content to the level of structure, that is form, in The Waves. This third section now intends to show how the use of the frame, both on the level of form and content, or on the level of what Roger Fry called 'texture' contributes to the political character of these texts of the 30s, at the very level of their structures. The following study of Between the Acts and The Years will show to what extent the frame, as a marker of the divisions enforced by patriarchy in the fiction of the

⁴³ See p. 18 in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art'.

⁴⁴ See p. 48 in Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

20s, is later transgressed by these works; a process which gives an indication of their political character. The argument of the frame functions here as a tool to blur all notions of limit in terms of boundaries between men and women, form and content, self and other.

This change of emphasis can be illustrated by the difference between two incidents from works belonging to different periods. In Mrs Dalloway, the notion of division and otherness is very clear in the rapport between the eponymous character and Septimus; although they function in relation to each other, they are still distinct and only join in the author's 'tunnelling process'. In opposition to this, Between the Acts presents several scenes where things are part of something else and boundaries have broken down. This is sometimes given a comical turn, for example with Mrs Swithin telescoping the image of her maid with that of a dinosaur. The use of the device of the frame in The Years is all the more radical because of the so-called traditional format of this text. The political implications in using the frame to highlight boundaries will then be stressed together with the extent to which all the earlier frame devices have been put to a political use by informing the very structure of the text. This study will try to indicate how these texts subvert the concept of history as the metonymy of a patriarchal use of the frame. Indeed, history will be shown to be construed as a discourse that entails a certain representation of reality, thus informing it to political ends.

In contrast with previous works such as Orlando, where the tone is still playful, as if unsure and political remarks are cloaked with comedy, these two texts are remarkably serious, revealing a shift directly into politics. This can be explained by their coming to light later on in Virginia Woolf's career; a time when she is established as a writer and can afford a more directly political discourse, and disregard criticisms more easily: 'I can take liberties with the representational form which I could not dare when I wrote Night and Day.'⁴⁵ This makes the argument for a change of emphasis in her work, from the aesthetic to the political, a valid interpretation. Indeed, as Herbert Marder observes, the early fiction is mainly concerned with externals such as young men and women finding it

⁴⁵ D, Thursday 5 January, 1933, vol. 4 (1983), p. 142.

difficult to marry whereas the later works deal with psychic problems such as the individual finding it difficult to reconcile masculine and feminine sides of himself.⁴⁶ What he understands in terms of reconciliation and describes as 'the doctrine of androgyny' is articulated in this study in terms of a continuum of personality or in post-modern terms, a deconstructed understanding of the self. As he further points out, the 'blot' is used in the novel to symbolise an ideal state of being and clearly is a precursor of the 'dot' of Eleanor in The Years.⁴⁷ This study is concerned with the way in which this 'ideal state of being' metamorphoses from a description in the story to its actual creation within the structure of a narrative.

This study can also be seen as a re-appreciation of these two texts -- her 'dead novels' -- an appellation which seems to owe a lot to their openness in dealing with feminist issues and their direct opposition to the patriarchal system at the basis of society.

In that respect, it is illustrative to mention the work that was written, by her own avowal, as a rest from The Waves and while attempting her 'essay-novel', The Pargiters, which was to become The Years. This is Flush, a 'too slight and too serious'⁴⁸ biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, seen through the eyes or really rather the nose, of her cocker spaniel. In tone, it echoes A Room of One's Own and indeed Flush the dog may owe a little to the cat without a tail of this earlier essay. It is, however, more directly political and as Susan Squier found 'Flush occupies a marginal position in human society, and in his marginality he resembles his invalid mistress, elegantly imprisoned in her bedroom in Wimpole Street, the centre -- as Woolf's description makes clear -- of patriarchal society.'⁴⁹ In that respect, it very much anticipates the political character of the works written in the 30s and upholds this new direction.

⁴⁶ See pp. 125 and 128.

⁴⁷ See p. 141.

⁴⁸ D, Friday 23 December, 1932, vol. 4 (1983), p. 134.

⁴⁹ Susan Squier, Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 125.

II The Years and Between the Acts

As demonstrated, The Waves constitutes a change of emphasis in Virginia Woolf's oeuvre. This is confirmed by the fact that The Years and Between the Acts differs from her previous works in many ways. As Jane Marcus points out, 'less lyrical than The Waves (her Parsifal), The Years skilfully blends mythic leitmotifs with realistic details.'⁵⁰ This is evident in Virginia Woolf's own opinion that 'Here in Here and Now I am breaking the mould made by The Waves.'⁵¹ These texts do so in terms of narrative, methodology and theme, yet still more importantly, in what they attempt to accomplish. Indeed, this study will show how they constitute a directly political answer to the historical reality of the time, which was marked by the rise of fascism and World War II. As Herbert Marder remarks, 'more than any of Virginia Woolf's other novels, The Years grew directly out of her feminism.'⁵² This openly political character is all the more apparent when one considers that the author's original plan was to write what she termed an 'essay-novel', entitled The Pargiters. Yet, in her diary, this title suddenly changes to what is then called The Years. Her initial project ultimately led to what this argument sees as a political novel -- The Years -- and a separate political pamphlet, Three Guineas. This shows what a strong need the author felt to put her political message across. The fact that these texts present a more political aspect also indicates that they manage the transaction between fact and vision. Laura Marcus argues that the dichotomy between fact and fiction is asserted again in the two separate texts.⁵³ This 'generally negative view of the text' can be counter-balanced by what 'this radical text' does achieve.⁵⁴ It is clear that The Years displays a reintegration of the visionary element within a political structure shaped by facts. These two texts not only challenge established notions, such as our understanding of history, but also give alternative patterns of understanding and

⁵⁰ See p. 49.

⁵¹ D, Saturday 28 July, 1934, vol. 4 (1983), p. 233. Here and Now was one of the provisional titles for The Years.

⁵² See p. 171.

⁵³ See p. 138.

behaving. This is important in reference to Three Guineas, which asserts that patriarchy leads to essentialist division and consequently to fascism and war.

This belief rings particularly true in the period during which Virginia Woolf wrote these texts, and thus justifies the directly political turn of her fiction. In this context, the link between aesthetics and politics is all-important and it is in terms of the relation between form and feminism that The Years and Between the Acts are articulated. They can be seen as proposing a different order to replace the Law of the Father and its binary system of difference. This new economy, based on a significant form, which is open and non-prescriptive, is particularly relevant to texts that question the essentialist model, based on the transcendence of God. In that respect, The Years, more than any other text before, answers Virginia Woolf's belief that

behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that we are part of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is a truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But, there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically, there is no God; we are the words, we are the music; we are the thing itself.⁵⁵

Significantly, as James Naremore underlines, this is also embodied most powerfully in her 'last words', Between the Acts.⁵⁶

Indeed, there is a strong connection between these two texts and in many ways, The Years paves the way for Between the Acts. For instance, both Eleanor and Sara can be seen as a sketch for different aspects of Lucy's character, particularly in reference to her always having a song, a quotation, or a dream to voice. Likewise Nicholas foreshadows William Dodge because of their homosexuality, and so Nicholas and Sara's friendship can be seen as a forerunner to that of Dodge and Isa.⁵⁷ Moreover, there are echoes

⁵⁴ See Clare Hanson's understanding of the novel's critical reception, p. 149 and her own appreciation of it, p. 167.

⁵⁵ See p. 81 in SP.

⁵⁶ See his analysis of the text as technically different from the earlier fiction, p. 223 passim.

⁵⁷ The subject of sexuality, which is treated more openly in these two works, even after editing, than in any of the previous texts also marks them out as directly political. Jeri Johnson in his introduction to The Years remarks that in the holograph, Virginia Woolf 'repeatedly returns to frank discussions of

between the texts in terms of images, or patterns. Yet, the tone is much more open in the later work as far as sexuality is concerned, with the theme of procreation, sexual attraction or homosexuality, and all the problems addressed in The Years are pinpointed much more clearly in Between the Acts. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the discussion on illustrational as opposed to significant painting; while this topic occurs only occasionally in The Years with Martin's passing remarks about pictures at the Lasswade home, Between the Acts actually devotes a whole passage to the subject, where characters explicitly compare these two types of painting. This change in tone is to be considered in relation to the length of the work and its chosen type of representation; that is to say, drama.

The main question that The Years and Between the Acts address is the ways in which history and culture, of a patriarchal type, inform society and the repercussions they entail for the members of such a society. These works underline the extent to which history is politically constructed and, consequently has to be contended with by the people. This question will be considered within the overall development of the author's thinking on reality as well as the problem of representing it, which is characterised by a shift of emphasis from a feminist aesthetics to a wider consideration of essentialism as a system of dominance. The elaboration of political radicalism and its various implications thus constitutes the main point of these two texts. The importance of these novels, and particularly The Years, is highlighted by the fact that they proved to be the most difficult books for Virginia Woolf to write. This is manifested by the several suicide attempts that accompanied their production:

It's beginning this cursed dry hard empty chapter again... Every time I say it will be the devil! but I never believe it. And then the usual depressions come. And I wish for death.⁵⁸

sexuality ... [and] talk of birth control and virgins.' p. 318 in Virginia Woolf, Introductions to the Major Works, edited by Julia Briggs, (London: Virago Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ D, Wednesday 5 June, 1935, vol. 4 (1983), p. 319.

This difficulty can be partly attributed to the reliving of her childhood that such a work involved. Poignantly, considering Virginia Woolf's background, still steeped in the Victorian era, the major contribution that these works make is a warning. They indicate what danger this type of history and society represents for the individual in general and women in particular, a danger inescapably crystallised in her death on completion of her last work.⁵⁹

In the novel The Years, Abercorn Terrace, the Pargiters family house, can be seen as a metaphor for history and the development of the narrative, as well as female identity.⁶⁰ In its gradual decay and division, the house charts the disintegration of the Victorian model of family unit, headed by the patriarch, as well as the increasing layering of the narrative. The way in which the language that informs this representation is used as a tool of division will be considered. In a manner reminiscent of Hawthorne's The House of Seven Gables, the facade of Abercorn Terrace covers a multitude of sins, such as prostitution, repression, and servitude.⁶¹ Similarly, the processes of history and the organisation of society entail a specific discourse. While this discourse is constructed around such values as the masculine understanding of virtue, honour, or knowledge for instance, by the same token, it also breeds hierarchy in the form of class and gender divisions. This hierarchy is seen as fuelling patriarchy and ultimately, fascism. The division or discrepancy thus created can be described in terms of an 'inner versus outer' paradigm; for example, private versus public spheres, or again the hegemony of culture over nature. At another level, it is manifested in the disruption of culture, which is the symbolic, by nature that can be described as the semiotic.

⁵⁹ It is clearly established that Virginia Woolf committed suicide because of what she called 'this madness' and declared her intention in a letter addressed to Leonard. Yet, one has to consider that she found Between the Acts 'silly and too trivial' to be published, presumably in the face of raging war, and thus might be considered a victim of fascism. This view is confirmed by Clive Bell who suggested that 'If she felt that she was in for another two years of what she had been through before, only to wake up to a world which will be the world another two years of war has made of it, I only wonder at her courage.' This notion of courage, though, can also lead to interpret her suicide as an act of power rather than a failure. See Hermione Lee, 761-2.

⁶⁰ See Clare Hanson, p. 158.

This study will then explain how such pervading division affects the notion of self and examine the necessity for the self to escape from this binary system. Thus it shows a shift of emphasis in the oeuvre between uncovering the external manifestation of patriarchy and offering an internal, more fundamental way to escape it, by showing changes in the human psyche. This climate of questioning inevitably entails a re-evaluation of the problematic of identity, leading to the question of whether a change of the notion of self is necessary. This is a key question that the novel poses. It undertakes to re-think the self within a non-essentialist or non-binary economy, which proposes a change of balance, of relation, between self and other. This thinking can be seen to prefigure Hélène Cixous' concept of 'economy without reserve' as noted by Clare Hanson.⁶² The escape from an essentialist definition of the self features within the questioning of traditional social and aesthetic values. The novels highlight this problem by a ceaseless questioning, already manifested in the open-endedness of Virginia Woolf's previous works. This questioning can be seen as a perpetual process similar to the rhythms of nature as opposed to the finality of man-made product. As in nature stasis is death and so what Virginia Woolf perceived as the unyielding character of the Victorian era hailed its downfall. The concept of the frame will be used to highlight this social rigidity.

As an answer to this questioning these texts provide a significant pattern, which in aesthetic and political terms exceeds and opens-up the dichotomy of traditional history and realist representation. This new balance is manifested in concepts of rhythm, cycles, and repetitions. Thus, the new novel not only offers a critique or questioning, but also an attempt at a solution, which takes the form of the same elements re-organised into a different relation. Indeed, in Roger Fry's words, it does not imitate form, but create it and it aims not at illusion but at reality.⁶³ This is expressed in terms of visual art, represented by the notion of pattern, as in the 'one-making' of Miss La Trobe, and all the

⁶¹ Yet as Jane Marcus points out 'If the House be ruinous...all the external Painting and Pargetting imaginable...can neither secure the Inhabitants from its Fall', which is the process recorded by this later text, p. 36.

⁶² See p. 15.

⁶³ See p. 80 in *A Cézanne in the Hedge*.

other parties in the oeuvre in general. All this double-dealing, or double-standard in the organisation of society and the discourse of history in general, underlined in The Years by the image of the tree split in the middle in Oxford, can alternatively be articulated in terms of fact and vision. Beyond the directly political argument -- developed to its full conclusion in Three Guineas -- the aesthetic treatment of the texts affords an example, and if one considers these books a success, a recipe or modus operandi for 'a new world' or a counter-history. As Harvena Richter points out 'the shape of Mrs Woolf's novels, as her work progressed, moved steadily towards an attempt to convey the total aspect of man and his consciousness, walled in by the influences that control it.'⁶⁴ The model they offer advocates to transcend 'the scare we have of each other' and the ensuing compulsory 'pretence'⁶⁵ which cannot but produce estrangement and difference or a 'split in the middle'⁶⁶ conducive only to relations of power. In terms of representation, there is no given, only possibilities, which are dramatised in the dialogues of both these texts.⁶⁷ In the words of the author, 'we are the thing itself.'

⁶⁴ See p. 205.

⁶⁵ See p. 396 in TY.

⁶⁶ See p. 397 in TY.

⁶⁷ See Jane Wheare, p. 130 passim.

1. Time, history, and society: a Grand Ensemble round the Union Jack

The narrative of The Years covers a long period of time, fraught with many events of historical importance -- from 1880 to approximately 1937 -- and so follows almost four generations in the journey of their lives. Accordingly, the novel is clearly meant as a historical tableau and in that light, Abercorn Terrace -- the Victorian mansion which serves as a backdrop to the Pargiters' life -- can be seen as a metaphor for history and civilisation. At the beginning of the novel, it is presented as an affluent house, a symbol of the family's status:

[The house was] full of furniture, ... a Dutch cabinet with blue china on the shelves; the sun of the April evening made a bright stain here and there on the glass. Over the fireplace the portrait of a red-haired young woman in white muslin holding a basket of flowers on her lap smil[ing...] (10)

By contrast, later on, it is dilapidated and empty, an image for the dissolution of the patriarchal family and the independence the female characters have gained:

the white light of the snow glared in on the walls. It showed up the marks on the walls where the furniture had stood, where the pictures had hung. (205)

In much the same way, the novel relates a stretch of history, from the apex of the Victorian era through to the eve of World War II, marking the end of an epoch.

While the temporal range is clearly announced in the opening passage -- 'Slowly wheeling, like the rays of a search light, the days, the weeks, the years passed one after another across the sky' (4) -- the historical tone is also intimated from the outset with a quintessential element of Victorian society:

Colonel Abel Pargiter was sitting after luncheon in his club talking. Since his companions in the leather armchairs were men of his own type, men who had been

soldiers, civil servants, men who had now retired, they were reviving with old jokes and stories now their past in India, Africa, Egypt, and then, by a natural transition, they turned to the present. (4)

This passage offers a parallel the opening of Between the Acts where

The old man in the arm-chair -- Mr Oliver, of the Indian Civil Service, retired -- said that the site they had chosen for the cesspool was, if he had heard aright, on the Roman road. (9)

This shows both texts to have the same interest in history as time past and present, with a variant in scale only, which in the latter case deals with the very definition of the history of England, i.e. from Chaucer's pilgrims to the present age, illustrated later in the novel by the pageant put on by Miss La Trobe. The similarity in position of the Colonel and Mr Oliver indicates that, alongside the mere temporality of history, these two books are much concerned with the societies that particular historical climates produce and the consequences that, in turn, come to bear on the individuals living in them. In The Years, for example, Bert and Giles function as embodiment of male dominance, so that in the text, women are generally passive while men are active.⁶⁸ In other words, these texts illustrate the process in which history informs society and the interaction between social and biological determinism.⁶⁹

This, of course, was particularly relevant for the author herself and in many ways The Years, more pointedly than Between the Acts, is also a personal history; the way the story of her life, that is to say her-story, as an individual was thwarted but also challenged by History with a capital H. As Hermione Lee notes in her biography:

The Years ... made an X-ray of her childhood as a prototype of Victorian patriarchal repression. ⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See Clare Hanson, p. 184.

⁶⁹ See Gillian Beer, p. 6 in Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

⁷⁰ See Virginia Woolf, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), p 96.

so that the autobiographical element enables this study to focus on the concept of history these texts are considering. As Laura Marcus emphasises, it is notable that 'repression played a key role in the novel in all its stages' so that 'The Years enacts that which cannot be said.'⁷¹ This is clear in the exploration of incest and sexuality, for instance.⁷²

The excerpts above from the first few pages of both books clearly outline the same kind of social organisation: these male characters are working in established positions, which typically help sustain the hegemony of England in its Empire, using force if necessary, as the military title of Abel Pargiter suggests. This type of employment provides for a specific community of wealth and exclusive activities. From this organisation derives a sense of order and balance, whereby elements are kept in place. This notion of place is reinforced by the mention of the portrait of the colonel's wife. It occupies the centre of the mantelpiece; that is the heart of the household. It frames her in a domestic attitude and in so doing defines her role in this Victorian era as clearly as her husband's regular visits to his club define his. This society is thus constructed around a system of polarities. Once more, Virginia Woolf drew on her personal experience, and it is difficult not to see some elements of the Stephen couple in the Pargiters. The intellectual status of the husband as opposed to the wife who, house-bound, cares for the large family is clearly modelled on Leslie Stephen's literary activities and Julia's embodiment of 'the Angel in the House'. Mrs Pargiter also dies early on in the novel, echoing the untimely death of Virginia Woolf's mother.

This society also defines its own history by authoritatively writing it:

The rain ... slipped gently over the leaden domes of libraries, and splayed out of the laughing mouths of gargoyles. It smeared the window ... where Dr Malone sat up late writing another chapter of his monumental history of the college. (61)

and further institutionalises this text-as-history by teaching it:

⁷¹ See p. 139.

⁷² As noted by Clare Hanson, p. 154.

[Edward] was working very hard. His day was parcelled out on the advice of his tutor into hours and half-hours. (47)

Thus it becomes the official version, issued by the established institutions that universities are, particularly, Oxford. It is a history constituted by feats of war and victory as manifested in The Years by North's excitement at going to war (271) and upheld by institutions, such as the Army, the Monarchy or the Empire. This definition of history is reinforced by Colonel Mayhew's bewilderment, in Between the Acts, at Miss La Trobe's unconventional view of the nineteenth century:

'The Nineteenth Century.' ... 'Why leave out the British Army? What's history without the army, eh?' he mused. Inclining her head, Mrs Mayhew protested after all one mustn't ask too much. Besides, very likely there would be a Grand Ensemble, round the Union Jack, to end with. (117)

Miss La Trobe's settling for a play to represent history is no accident either since, as well as being defined, history is also enacted:

They pushed through the swing doors into the Court where the case was being tried. ... Men in wigs and gowns were getting up and sitting down ... One of the barristers in the front row turned his head. It was Morris; but how odd he looked in his yellow wig! His glance passed over them without any sign of recognition. Nor did she smile at him; the solemn atmosphere forbade personalities; there was something ceremonial about it all. (104-5)

This striking parallel between institution and drama, which is only touched upon here, will actually be examined from a more theoretical point of view by Virginia Woolf in Three Guineas. Here, in The Years and Between the Acts, the link is explored from a more personal angle in order to show the impact of history on the individual psyche.

In the same way that a play has its setting, then, history has the backdrop of its monuments, like 'the vast funereal mass of the Law Courts' (104) or

The parks too -- St James's, the Green Park, Hyde Park -- were making ready. Already in the morning before there was a chance of a procession, the green chairs were ranged among the plump brown flower-beds with their curled hyacinths, as if waiting for something to happen; for a curtain to rise; for Queen Alexandra to come, bowing through the gate. (153)

This history then, defined as it is by its rituals and institutions, takes on a highly symbolical dimension, which is extended to the society it informs. The Victorian era is a typical example of this dimension, with its division in terms of gender, exemplified by the symbolism of portraits of women, placed as a rule at the centre of the home. It is manifested as well in the critical attitude of the 'Oxford ladies' towards the American Mrs Howard Fripp who 'had eaten ices when [she] ought to have been going round the Bodleian', (57) America standing for the country without a history, that is without institutions or regard for rituals, quite apart from its status as a former colony. This points towards a polarity whereby gender roles are created by men through the use of specific symbols. By the same token, this symbolic underpins the notion of history as an outcome of a specific hierarchical system. This system is based on a divisive order in terms of class, gender and race, which is reinforced along the years by territorial expansion and social domination, which accounts for the thematic and formal trespassing displayed by these two texts.⁷³

Yet, despite this focus on history and in the same way that Jacob's Room was not a Bildungsroman, The Years is no Forsyte Saga and its reception as such at the time of publication, mainly in America, prompted the author to consider it a failure.⁷⁴ Indeed, very early on in the reading, it becomes apparent that the novel is not so much about history as about its failures, or rather the devastating consequences such a construct of history as exemplified by Victorianism can have for its people. Although the narrative

⁷³ See Rachel Bowlby for an analysis of this notion in 'The Trained Mind', p. 19 passim.

⁷⁴ This is emphasised by the fact that Virginia Woolf changed her initial title of The Pargiters to Here and Now first and finally The Years specifically because 'It shows what I'm after and does not compete with the Herries Saga, the Forsyte Saga and so on.' D, Saturday 2 September, 1933, vol. 4 (1983), p. 176.

starts in the 1880s, an age marked by reforms, the author's point of view is that of modernity, so that the Victorian era is marked as a point of stagnation. After all, the gloom hovering over the first couple of pages of The Years is a direct outcome of, and as such, a warning against, the philosophy of the age; indeed it is clear that Mrs Pargiter is dying a victim of the 'Angel in the House' syndrome:

My mother...She seldom thought of her mother, but now the brass bed, the sallow picture of the man in uniform, with a high light on his nose, hanging above it, and her mother lying there, came before her, She had ten, she thought. Ten, counting the three who died. And Papa, she thought... He had hidden the letters in the long drawer of the bureau, the letters from the lady with yellow hair. What had their relationship been, she wondered-- her father's and her mother's? Had they been 'in love'? Perhaps. But it was too long ago; too far away; she could not remember her mother, for all the children she had borne! she was a shadow lying there.⁷⁵

The portrait of the man in uniform, be it father or husband, hung above the dying mother, speaks for itself; behind the light of symbols are hidden dark shadows. As the novel goes on, there is a lingering suspicion that this process is an absolute necessity. This is indicated, for instance, by the ways in which houses, used as a symbol for the institution of the family, are central to the novel. In that light, as was hinted earlier on, the facade of Abercorn Terrace covers a multitude of sins. As Harvena Richter explains, 'under the surface of the outward actions of the novel lie the crippling horrors of the past, entombed in memory.'⁷⁶ Among the horrors that the novel exposes, one can count prostitution:

It was sordid; it was mean; it was furtive. One of these days [the Colonel] said to himself...but the door opened and his mistress, Mira, came in. (7)

as well as repression:

⁷⁵ See p. 453 in Appendix of TY.

'Was it that you were suppressed when you were young?' [Peggy] said aloud, recalling vaguely some childish memory; her grandfather with the shiny stumps instead of fingers; and a long dark drawing room. (318)

or again servitude:

'I should think you'd be glad to be out of that basement anyhow, Crosby,' said Eleanor, turning into the hall again. She had never realised how dark, how low it was, until, looking at it with 'our Mr Grice', she had felt ashamed. (206)

In much the same way as the Pargiters' house is deceitful in its appearance, history entails its own vices in disguise.⁷⁷ This 'hidden or secret aspect of ... culture' is encoded in the text in the literal blank spaces on the page, 'which function as a metaphor.'⁷⁸ The particular discourse that sustains history thus entails specific consequences for the society it informs.

2. Language: we haven't the words

The coercive character of history's symbolic structure necessitates a prescriptive discourse. This discourse, for instance in the shape of historical writing, is constructed around certain values.

Such notions as virtue, or honour, for instance, when defined by men, greatly help to strengthen the particular symbolic of the family or the army. And again this is sustained by the large number of portraits mentioned throughout the narrative, which function as a type of repetition, particularly in The Years.⁷⁹ In order to extol specific values the paintings frame characters within certain attitudes and adorn them with

⁷⁶ See p. 178.

⁷⁷ This point is supported by Jane Marcus's analysis of the many meanings for the word 'pargiter'. See her chapter 'Stucco and Gold', p. 39 passim.

⁷⁸ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 173.

⁷⁹ See Jane Wheare analysis of 'Material Objects' in The Years, p. 142-4.

particular attributes. These are clearly reflected in the 'young woman in white muslin holding a basket of flowers on her lap' as opposed to 'the man in uniform' for instance. Beyond the obvious aesthetic dimension of a narrative activity, language thus becomes of primary thematic importance alongside history.

These two particular notions -- history's symbolic structure and its prescriptive character -- are intricately woven together in the novel, thus highlighting the way in which language is used in order to inform this particular symbolic structure. The presence of certain speech patterns or vernacular use of words is to be considered in that respect. Indeed, the same sense of structure or organisation which derives from the 'orderly architecture' (315) of the facade of Abercorn Terrace, in The Years, seems to be reflected in the given speech pattern of most of the characters. Here, language goes beyond mere characterisation.

For instance, the incident between Peggy and her mother has implications of a political character:

'They give ripping parties anyhow,' said Peggy.

'Ripping, ripping,' her mother complained half-laughing. 'I wish you wouldn't pick up all North's slang, my dear....' (194)

Language is here clearly gendered, with a liberal use for men, which becomes restricted when handled by women. The different way in which Peggy and her brother are allowed to use language precisely reinforces the gender division. It is the fact that Peggy does not use her brother's language that will turn her into a lady. The same type of implications can be inferred from the encounter between Eleanor and a real estate agent:

'The fact is, our clients expect more lavatory accommodation nowadays,' he said, stopping outside a bedroom door.

Why can't he say 'baths' and have done with it, [Eleanor] thought. ... She was annoyed; as he went round the house, sniffing and peering, he had indicted their

cleanliness, their humanity; and he used absurd long words. He was hauling himself up into the class above him, she supposed, by means of long words. (204-5)

Here, language signals and upholds a class division, and Eleanor's annoyance indicates the extent to which she has internalised such social mechanisms. This specific historical reality is thus informed by constructing a system, which is primarily based on a polarity in terms of gender and class. This polarity is further validated by the distinctive use of language that is attributed to women, and as such provides a foil for that which is used by men. In Between The Acts:

The nurses after breakfast were trundling the perambulator up and down the terrace; and as they trundled they were talking -- not shaping pellets of information or handing ideas from one to another, but rolling words, like sweets on their tongues; which, as they thinned to transparency, gave off green, pink and sweetness. (14)

James Naremore reads this scene as informed by the author's snobbism, 'a distance ... that is suited to an English lady of the upper-middle class.'⁸⁰ However this passage has to be considered within its context in the novel. It seems, on the contrary, to portray the all-encompassing and self-less 'little language' of women or lovers. Importantly, the tenor of the conversation is not transcribed, highlighting the fact that, in keeping with the author's line of experimentation, its point is not to designate but to communicate. The point that Jane Wheare makes about the ordinariness of the language used in The Years equally applies here. The language which the nurses use can be seen as 'the kind of speech described by Malinowski as "phatic communion", whose function it is not to impart information but to express community with the listener.'⁸¹ This language is positioned as a counterpart to the patriarchal language used as an ordering tool, sustaining the structure of society. Indeed, the latter language is not primarily a means of communication or a mark of the self but an implementation of a prescriptive and dividing order. This is highlighted by the fact that when the nurse tells off the child in her care,

⁸⁰ See p. 221.

'her sweet [was] swallowed.' (14) In other words, she switches to the prescriptive language of the symbolic, which sets down rules and gives order. This is indicative of the coercive character of such a society, which compels women to use the same language as men, in order to be heard. The use of colour to describe language is telling in that respect. It goes beyond the mere metaphor and links up with the argument of representation previously examined. In visual art terms, the masculine discourse belongs to the same category as illustrational painting, which describes and defines, while the 'green and pink' of the feminine language echoes modern painting which is significant without defining or pinning down meaning.⁸² In that light, The Years and Between the Acts look anew at the argument exposed in 'The Mark on the Wall' and further the implications that it showed in The Waves. As Peggy remarks in The Years:

Each person had a certain line laid down in their minds, she thought, and along it came the same old sayings. One's mind must be criss-crossed like the palm of one's hand, she thought, looking at the palm of her hand. (340)

Again and significantly, the image is that of structure, so that all characters have their own 'line' which indicate how their language situates them within and on the social spectrum, in other words how it frames them socially. Thus each character's attitude towards life is manifested in the language they use. Edward's use of classical quotation defines him as a scholar whereas Nicholas' consideration of 'the psychology of great men by the light of modern science' (267) ties in with the general interest in history displayed by The Years. Similarly, the speech pattern of Celia -- 'The bottle was tilted on its end again. ... Drop, drop, drop, out her questions came' (196) along with that of Hugh and Millie -- 'They fall and fall, and cover all, [North] went on, as he listened to the damp falling patter of his aunt's little questions' (355) shows that their use of language is not aiming at communication but operate as social markers. The implication is that language is used to carry out the characterisation, as opposed to the construction

⁸¹ See p. 138.

of the self, in terms of gender and class. The order such a use of language establishes is political and validates the symbolic structure of history.

In that light, language is used by men as a tool to inform reality in such a way that the world is reclaimed by them and mapped out into regional, sexual or social territories; a use that fits in with the pattern of colonial expansion manifested by history in general, of which the Victorian era is the epitome. This sense of territory is felt very strongly by North:

He was an outsider, he felt again, as he glanced round the room. ...

He listened. They were arguing. Politics and money, he said to himself; money and politics. That phrase came in handy. (383)

The fact that the topic is 'politics and money' reinforces the notion of establishment, these two elements being manifestations of it, a structure of which North is not part, since he's just come back from Africa; in other words he is defined as a regional outsider. The mapping-out process functions efficiently to create a notion of centrality, the inalienable character of which defines and validates the establishment as precisely that -- the symbolic centre of the map.

This validation is activated by the process of naming history and thus defining its constitutive characteristics. This enables the identifying of history by men only, in such works as the already mentioned 'monumental history of [Oxford]' by Dr Malone or 'The Constitutional History of England, by Dr Andrews', whom Miss Craddock calls "the greatest historian of his age" (64) and the 'Outline of History'⁸³ alike, which can safely be assumed to have a male author. To reinforce this process of definition, it is set against the alternative of women's point of view on history. This is exemplified in the general attitude of the Oxford male staff towards Miss Craddock who teaches history to Dr

⁸² This language also goes beyond James Naremore's 'fragile, pretty, feminine images'; it is to be linked to significant form, p. 221.

⁸³ See p. 12 in BTA.

Malone's daughter: 'So many of the Dons sneered at her.' (67)⁸⁴ Significantly, despite her father's position in the establishment, she is denied access to the 'proper' or 'official' version of history taught within the college:

[Kitty] strode along until she came to the cheap red villas that her father disliked so much that he would always make a round to avoid them. But as it was in one of these cheap red villas that Miss Craddock lived, [she] saw them haloed with romance. (61)

Yet, even though she is taught by Miss Craddock, the ultimate reference in the field of history is Dr Andrews' book, in the same way that Mrs Swithin, in Between The Acts, turns to the 'Outline of History' to answer her questions. The necessary consequence is that the historical discourse is set against the anonymity of women, thus sealing this version of history as definitive. Once again the notion of polarity is emphasised. In turn, it highlights the ambiguous character of a discourse that necessitates a foil to bring out its own, official nature and so it focuses on the gender division which underlies the notion of history.

This ambiguity thus reveals the political character of language, its artificiality as a means. Martin realises as a grown up man how easily language can be used to deceive:

It was a lie. He had no engagement. One always lies to servants, he thought, looking out of the window. ... Everybody lies, he thought. His father had lied--after his death they had found letters from a woman called Mira tied up in his table-drawer. (212)

This intentional lie, in turn, points to the intrinsic lie on which language itself is based. In other words, the gap of the aporia is laid bare; language does not signify what people are by communicating their sense of self but gives a false signified, a lie. Interestingly the characters who try to evade the lie are predominantly women and do so by avoiding this

⁸⁴ Jane Marcus sees the character of Lucy Craddock as a tribute to Virginia Woolf's own teacher, Janet

implied polarity altogether. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis shows 'Woolf makes community possible by the tactic of interpenetrating choral remarks so that each character is continuing, adding, intuiting, and humorously modifying the other's longing.'⁸⁵ Resistance to a monologic language also takes other forms. Sara does it by using language in a free-spirited, poetical and rhythmical manner that plays with strict definitions of meaning:

'But I don't want to come,' she said, waving him away. 'I want to stay; I want to talk; I want to sing--a hymn of praise--a song of thanksgiving...!' (284)

Her use of language can also be seen as marking her closeness to the unconscious, as Sue Roe remarks. Thus 'it is Sara's role precisely to remain outside the framework of society and its formalities and demands and to act as outsider to and commentator on its constraints.'⁸⁶ Eleanor effects her resistance by often not finishing her sentences, thus escaping the finality of discourse and remaining in the open-endedness of the discrepancy between language and the object it defines. As Harvena Richter notices, this use of language specifically embodies the new language Bernard was hoping for in The Waves: 'a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences...'⁸⁷ These two texts then, more than any before, question the relation between signifier and signified as a valid means of representation and more importantly, also actually present an alternative.

This question of language has, of course, been Virginia Woolf's preoccupation throughout her life; that is the problem of representation from an aesthetic and political point of view. Her works thus deal with the philosophical problem of communication. The relationship between the name and the object it designates is at the core of Orlando,

Case, p. 47.

⁸⁵ See p. 168 in Writing beyond the Ending.: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers. (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1985).

⁸⁶ See p. 132 in Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

⁸⁷ See note 16, p. 132.

as observed earlier, and as Virginia Woolf's 'last words on words',⁸⁸ Between the Acts fully explores the fragmented and experimental nature of language. Indeed, both Between the Acts and The Years deal with the same question of communication and expression in a more direct manner both at the level of content and form:

'We haven't the words - we haven't the words,' Mrs Swithin protested. 'Behind the eyes; not on the lips; that's all.'

'Thoughts without words,' her brother mused. 'Can that be?' (46)

They show the same need for a new language, comprising even this silence of the unspoken word.⁸⁹ However, the difference between these two texts of the 30s and the works of the 20s is major. Indeed one can say that, here, a direct attempt at actually using this language is made. Talking about Mrs Dalloway, Maria DiBattista argues that

the complicity of writing with the established power is the suppressed, never fully realised subtext of [the novel], the source of the novel's deep and unresolved ambivalence towards its own representational activity

One can suggest, as some critics have done, that the children's song in The Years actually goes some way to overcome this ambivalence.⁹⁰ Its remarkable, indecipherable character, which has led it to be characterised as 'one of the most bizarre episodes in all of Woolf's fiction', seems to warrant this interpretation.⁹¹

Maria DiBattista also points out that in this novel, 'the theme of writing is only expressed as the prerogative of men' and that 'women do not write until A Room of One's Own and Orlando.'⁹² Precisely because of the nature of these two works, the one

⁸⁸ See 'Virginia Woolf's Last Words on Words: Between the Acts and "Anon" ' by Nora Eisenberg in New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf, edited Jane Marcus, (London: Macmillan, 1981), chapter 12.

⁸⁹ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 183.

⁹⁰ Clare Hanson also sees the song as a vision of a new possibility for language, p. 166.

⁹¹ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 199.

⁹² For all three quotations, see her article 'Joyce, Woolf, and The Modern Mind', p. 109 in Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1983).

an essay and the other a fantasy, Between the Acts becomes even more important, since its pageant -- music, nature and chaos included -- is written by a woman. It also attempts to present this new language in the environment of the factual everyday life of a community. In that sense, both the language and its creator are meant to be taken seriously. This latter text in particular is described by Laura Marcus as 'the intersecting point of a multiplicity of voices and discourses.' This new language can be seen as originating partly in the semiotic, and so 'contribute to heal the apparent split between the mother and language, to link it back to maternal as well as paternal creativity.'⁹³ It can also be construed as 'the natural music', through its sense of pattern, a notion that will be studied at length later on. In any case it escapes definition. As Laura Marcus carries on, 'it is overtly "heteroglossic", in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, intermingling the "discourses" of the literary and extra-literary, popular and high culture, the oral and the written.'⁹⁴

The aesthetic dimension of this language has to be considered as well. A further section will concentrate on the problem of representation that both texts focus on. It will consider the question of language in relation to the narrative voice, in order to analyse the aesthetic direction of these texts. At this point, however, it is relevant to consider how language is conventionally seen as the way to knowledge, the implication being that it names and defines. Yet, in reality, both texts show that this is not the case, that people do not know each other, but only use handy labelling. This is what both Eleanor and North feel in The Years, despite their belonging to a different generation:

But now I'm labelled, she thought--an old maid who washes and watches birds. That's what they think I am. But I'm not--I'm not in the least like that. (193)

That's me, North thought. 'My cousin from Africa.' That's my label. (296)

As Isobel Grundy notices, 'Woolf's later novels reflect a certain awareness that one cannot live up to the meaning of a name like Rose or René, but they reflect an interest --

⁹³ See Clare Hanson, p. 25.

⁹⁴ See p. 164.

often oblique and ironical -- in meanings.⁹⁵ Considering the link thus established between language and knowledge, and the questioning of language at work in these texts, one has to investigate the consequence that such a link entails. The discourse of society is thus based around certain values, one of which is knowledge. Yet, as was intimated above, knowledge is also understood as the object or the product of language. The concept of knowledge, then, has a dual character, which is indicative of the structure sustaining Victorian society. This structure is divisive by definition, based as it is on a dialectic of opposition, notably between the cultured or knowledgeable -- represented in The Years by the characters linked to Oxford -- and those who are not.

The questioning of knowledge at work in The Years and Between the Acts is, of course, reminiscent of the same argument developed earlier on in the author's career, in 'The Mark on The Wall' and 'Kew Gardens.' The first part of this work underlined how these texts distinguished between a knowledge of surface, factual and divisive, and a deeper understanding of reality. In that respect, then, the texts examined in this section can be seen as an embodiment of this argument. In The Years North wonders:

It was his Uncle Edward. ... What had he been doing all these years? North wondered, as they stood there surveying each other. Editing Sophocles? What would happen if Sophocles one of these days were edited? What would they do then, these eaten out hollow-shelled old men? (385)

This questioning is inscribed within a wider inquiry into the notion of time as history, in other words an examination as to the nature of the present moment and modernity. This is particularly emphasised in Between the Acts, which, as already mentioned, centres around a pageant taking in the whole of British history. There, the notion of history and civilisation is challenged; the triumphalist narrative of development is tempered by the author, who 'meditates instead upon ways in which the pre-historic permeates the

⁹⁵ See p. 209.

present day.⁹⁶ This theme is also carried out in The Years through the characters' different attitude to time:

What is the use, [Rose] thought, of trying to tell people about one's past? What is one's past? (160)

In Between the Acts, for example, the natural time of the beast in the swamp is compared to the civilised time of kings and queens.

The consequence of a challenge to knowledge as traditionally defined --'But what was a good education?'⁹⁷ -- which puts the self as the centre, inevitably leads to a questioning of the nature of the self, which is the main emphasis of The Years. This problem of ontology and self-knowledge is entrusted more particularly to Eleanor, the main protagonist:

'There must be another life, here and now, [Eleanor] repeated. This is too short, too broken. We know nothing even about ourselves. We're only just beginning, she thought, to understand, here and there.' (406)

Avrom Fleishman finds this passage 'remarkable' because it shows 'Woolf's ability to state both the ideal and its impossibility with renewed commitment throughout her work.'⁹⁸ However, Eleanor's remark is taken up again on the very last page of the text in a much more hopeful tone showing more commitment to the ideal than to its impossibility.

Significantly, although all the characters in these novels are described dealing with this question of knowledge, women, together with those who feel sexually or geographically ostracised, are more often entrusted with the critique of a system from which they are mainly excluded. The structure that underlies Victorian society is thus

⁹⁶ See Gillian Beer, p. 10.

⁹⁷ See p. 384 in TY.

⁹⁸ See p. 199.

based on a divisive set of values, validated by a specific discourse. It sustains patriarchy through such implements as the definition and distribution of knowledge, which breeds hierarchy in the form of class and gender division. It is in this direct critique of patriarchy that the novels come into their own.

3. Feminism, patriarchy, and gender issues: the Angel in the House

The structure that underpins society is shown as a particularly pernicious means not only to mark the gap between men and women, but also to prevent women from uniting amongst themselves with the object of promoting their interest. Interestingly, this practice is shown as a particularly male tactic, as demonstrated by the numerous descriptions in the texts of clubs and male gatherings. This alliance, in turn, leads to the internalisation of patriarchy in women:

They were talking about a by-election. She could hear Lady Margaret telling some story that was rather coarse presumably, in the eighteenth-century way, since she dropped her voice.

'--turned her upside down and slapped her,' she could hear her say. There was a twitter of laughter.

'I'm so delighted he got in in spite of them' said Mrs Treyer. They dropped their voices. (246-7)

This process is then used as another tool to reinforce patriarchy as a system:

It was an abominable system, he thought; family life; Abercorn Terrace. No wonder the house would not let. It had one bathroom, and a basement; and there all these different people had lived, boxed up together, telling lies. (212)

The lies on which the system is based are highlighted by symbols, such as the facade of the Pargiters house which is draped in respectability yet hides dark secrets such as the myth of 'the Angel in the House'. Indeed, in the same way as women have to use the

coercive language of patriarchy to be heard, they also have to comply with the lies of this society in order to have a place in it. In Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf explains how this implicit support of patriarchy is exacted from women. She argues that because the home education women receive is preparing them for nothing else than marriage, their only way to acquire a standing in society is by marrying well. The character of Kitty in The Years exemplifies this logic. The success of this enterprise demands from women both that they openly concur with men's views, thus supporting their patriarchal rhetoric, and that they present themselves beautifully attired, thus sustaining the Empire.⁹⁹ This double-dealing accounts for the institution of the patriarchal family, which publicly romanticises women as 'angels' only to privately treat them as 'slaves.' This attitude is borne out in The Years, which Avrom Fleishman justly characterises as the 'least sentimental of family novels.'¹⁰⁰

This gap between men and women is further intimated in practice, for example by Kitty's father making a detour to avoid Miss Craddock's house, in The Years. As was emphasised, this character represents the established notion of his-story whereas Miss Craddock is estranged, pushed out to the margins, which is symbolised by her geographical position. Although she is shown as a type of woman who has internalised patriarchy and thus still sees masculine works as the point of reference in her area of knowledge, at the same time she is attempting to produce her own historical discourse. The fact that she is shunned by the learned establishment is telling. It illustrates a strategy; in order to make their version the official one, the establishment needs to contrast it against a discourse that is cast as outside the norm, off bounds.

The concept of history itself, which is such an important point in these texts, is thus again constructed on a division along the line of gender, since the history that is taught, is written by men. Significantly, Kitty feels totally excluded from Oxford, as a symbol of official knowledge and develops a hatred of the place:

⁹⁹ See p. 148-50 in 3G.

¹⁰⁰ See p. 188.

He had suggested that she should help him. Again she saw the ink flowing-- she had made an awkward brush with her arm-- over five generations of Oxford men, obliterating hours of her father's exquisite penmanship; and she could hear him say with his usual courteous irony, 'Nature did not intend you to be a scholar, my dear', as he applied the blotting-paper. (78)

To further assert the discourse and thus the division, men also enact or play out their version of history. This is evident in Martin enrolling in the army and Sara's ironical reaction to this decision and their ensuing argument:

The bell rang. 'that's the wash' I said. Footsteps came up the stairs. There was North--North,' she raised her hand to her head as if in salute, 'cutting a figure like this... 'What the devil's for?' I asked. 'I leave for the Front tonight,' he said, clicking his heels together. 'I'm a lieutenant in--' whatever it was--Royal Regiment of Rat-catchers or something...

'There he sat,' Sara resumed, 'in his mud-coloured uniform, with his switch between his legs, and his ears sticking out of either side of his pink, foolish face, and whatever I said, 'Good' he said. 'Good,' 'Good', until I took up the poker and tongs'--she took up her knife and fork--'and played 'God save the King, Happy and Glorious, Long to reign over us--' She held her knife and fork as if they were weapons. (271-2)

This passage could indeed stand as a metonymy for the general argument. It contends with the official version of history -- that of Oxbridge where women are outsiders. The Years clearly shows that this version is constituted by such elements as the courts of Law, government buildings in general and feats of war and victory. These elements are used as illustrative of the workings of a system patriarchal in essence. It was highlighted earlier how they are linked to dramatisation, and invested with significance as symbols. From a feminist point of view, this goes even further as exemplified in Eleanor's ironical description of the Courts, which proves so unbearable an environment that she finally has to flee the buildings:

She fidgeted. The air was fuggy; the light dim; and the Judge now that the first glamour had worn off, looked fretful; no longer immune from human weakness, and she remembered with a smile how very gullible he was, there in that hideous house in Queen's Gate, about old oak. 'This I picked up at Whitby,' he had said. And it was a sham. She wanted to laugh; she wanted to move. She rose and whispered: 'I'm going.' (107-8)

This is the stance of the outsider, of women who have no more participation in the making of the laws that govern them than in their rituals. The system is simply placated upon them.¹⁰¹

The discussion about history also highlighted how government buildings are a reflection of the very system and so their transposing in The Years is relevant to a discussion on feminism. This metaphor is exemplified by the London monument commemorating Edith Cavell, a British nurse shot in Belgium in 1915 by Germans for helping Allied soldiers.¹⁰² On the face of it, it pays tribute to the effort of women during the war. Yet it is of course a typically masculine projection of femalehood, 'another "cover-up" or pargetting of the truth', nothing but a variation on 'the Angel in the House', as Peggy's derogatory remark makes clear: 'Always reminds me of an advertisement of sanitary towels.' (319)¹⁰³

As a monument, it is praising women for their role in a conflict in which they had no say, and as the novel itself wants to establish, was actually born out of masculine egotism.¹⁰⁴ One of the merits of a novel that covers such a long period of time is that it enables the reader to register the metamorphosis, that is the hidden side, of this element. The concept of 'the Angel in the House' is first framed in the painting representing Eleanor's mother; it is then actually acted out, so to speak, by Eleanor herself, only to

¹⁰¹ This scene takes place in the '1891' chapter of The Years, that is, almost three decades before the Representation of the People Act of 1918, which gave the right to vote to men and women alike, above the age of thirty. p. 463. See André Maurois, Histoire d'Angleterre. (Paris: A. Fayard et Cie), 1937.

¹⁰² See explanatory note to p. 319 in TY.

¹⁰³ See Jane Marcus, p. 41.

¹⁰⁴ In Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf argues that women are unconsciously in favour of war because of their education. In this context, she sees the women who worked as nurses during World War I as having either internalised patriarchy or being driven to any extremities to get out of the patriarchal house. p. 149-50.

reappear in the next generation in the figure of the afore-mentioned statue. This seems to indicate that in order to eradicate this patriarchal structure, deep rooted changes are necessary. In other words, a change of surface, such as a change in the use of language, is but a cover that enables patriarchy to perpetuate the same ideas, whereas an alternative to the binary system that underpins and allows a patriarchal structure will deal in a more profound and permanent manner with the problem. This is the point that Herbert Marder makes when he emphasises that 'the last stronghold of patriarchal tyranny was in the minds of women themselves, in their adherence to alien modes of thoughts, in their attempts to be exactly like men, or to differ from them in everything.'¹⁰⁵ This is, of course, what Virginia Woolf advocates vehemently in Three Guineas where the logical sequence that sees gender roles and patriarchy as the seeds of fascism is fully expounded. So, significantly, the definitive version of history from a patriarchal point of view is also constituted by feats of war and victory. The extent to which this military element has become all-pervasive can be seen in the following excerpt:

the train was full of soldiers. ... The civilian passengers kept looking up at them surreptitiously over the edges of their newspapers. They looked at them admiringly; they smiled furtively at their chaff. There was a good deal to be said for their job, Bert Parker thought-- (TY 417)

Furthermore, this system is upheld by institutions, which are symbolised by their monuments, such as the army, the monarchy or the empire. This whole structure is ironically, but also plainly and openly described as a monster, which is symbolised by the drawing at the final party in The Years:

On top there was a woman's head like Queen Victoria, with a fuzz of little curls; then a bird's neck; the body of a tiger; and a stout elephant's legs dressed in child's drawers completed the picture. (370)

¹⁰⁵ See p. 106. However Herbert Marder also that Three Guineas has a very limited audience and thus that the program it proposes is impossible, p. 157.

The parody and laughter that is used here can be seen as prefiguring Bakhtin's discussion of 'laughter and parody in novelistic discourse that destroy distance and undermine authority, as well as allow for contradicting voices to be heard and contrasting perspectives to emerge.'¹⁰⁶ The drawing clearly represents the symbolic dimension of history, the way it is constructed on a division and institutionalised by a specific discourse. In other words, it can be described as the symbolic in Julia Kristeva's definition. It is related to language in a way that is post-Oedipal, at a stage where genders are clearly defined. If this is the case, then, the semiotic is what it defines itself against; a feminine version of the world, pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic. The picture can thus also represent 'another blow to the unified self', further denouncing the prescriptive order of the symbolic.¹⁰⁷

This symbolic history then, is opposed to the history that is lived and experienced by the people, on a personal and individual scale subsumed into the community.¹⁰⁸ It is a history with a small 'h', as told and recollected by women, left out of the grand scheme of things that constitutes the capital History of men. In contrast with a unified discourse, these are multiple histories, in harmony with the rhythms of nature, as will be shown later, and as such, not egocentric but all-pervasive. Harvena Richter describes how this contrast is inscribed into the text:

By presenting the initial stimulus, the character's successive memories of it and the means by which those memories are revived, the sense of internal change and motion which we feel as living, or growing older can be expressed.¹⁰⁹

This can be seen to constitute a semiotic approach to history, in the sense that this methodology does not follow the sequence of history as discourse but the circularity of

¹⁰⁶ See William Handley, p. 21 in see Virginia Woolf: The Politics of Narration, Stanford honors essays in Humanities, Number XXXI, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁷ See Clare Hanson, p. 145.

¹⁰⁸ In 1934, Virginia Woolf thought of Ordinary People as a title for The Years, D, Sunday 30 December, vol. 4 (1983), p. 285.

¹⁰⁹ See p. 163.

history as lived. Both Between the Acts and The Years thus explore the discrepancy between official and private history, or again the reality hidden behind the discourse.

It is quite clear from these texts that the author sees that a symbolic understanding of history as a basis for society is divisive, to such an extent, that ultimately, it leads to fascism. Indeed, History is really his-story, based on a principle of difference that pervades structure and discourse alike. Hermione Lee underlines how the correlation between Fascism and paternalism, which is at the centre of the argument in Three Guineas, met with vehement criticism. E. M. Forster, as indicated earlier, judged it 'cantankerous.'¹¹⁰ She supports Virginia Woolf's argument by drawing attention to the similarity between patriarchal and fascist attitudes towards women:

In theory women would be eligible for all posts within the Fascist state, but in practice a natural and inevitable differentiation of function would appear, women filling those posts for which they are best fitted ... We definitely prefer 'women who are women, and men who are men.'¹¹¹

Such a vision of history is further implemented, she points out, by the Nazi's antifeminist backlash. This is, of course, very clear to Virginia Woolf who was surrounded by male writers writing the history of 'great men', against which she set out to record the invisible history of women, such as in 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' or the appropriately titled 'Anon'.¹¹² This is the powerful suggestion of Miss La Trobe's pageant, in Between the Acts, which supports the history of the people at large, enacted by the people for the people; a vision which does not make distinctions of any kind, as the extensive participation of the village idiot in the performance

¹¹⁰ See introduction of this work, p. 5, note 5.

¹¹¹ p. XV, in Hermione Lee's introduction to Virginia Woolf A Room of One's Own Three guineas. (London: Vintage, 1996).

¹¹² As early as 1925, Virginia Woolf was gathering material for The Lives of the Obscure, 'which is to tell the whole history of England in one obscure life after another.' D, Monday 20 July, vol. 3 (1982), p. 37.

suggests.¹¹³ This is a mainly democratic vision of history as expounded in Three Guineas. This text proposes the concept of an 'anonymous and secret Society of Outsiders' with the aim of preventing war and ensuring freedom. (230) Significantly, this society would oppose the principle of difference at the base of patriarchy with its own indifference to any manifestation of patriotism or domination. While Clare Hanson understands this term as a paradox, and thus sees Virginia Woolf's subversion in negative terms, Laura Marcus draws attention to the fact that the name of this society is actually an oxymoron.¹¹⁴ This clearly indicates Virginia Woolf's aim towards a new society, which precisely would be constructed on an interplay of opposites. In that light, being an outsider is valued because, in Rachel Bowlby's words 'it ... might turn out to hold more possibilities for forms of activity or reasoning ruled out a priori for those who have to maintain the proprieties of the insider group.'¹¹⁵ Thus this position would expose the concept of history as civilisation, based on a process of distinction, for what it is; an institution geared towards hierarchy, which in turn fuels and sustains patriarchy.

Virginia Woolf identifies the most marked manifestation of this spirit of distinction in the 'symbolic splendour of [men's] clothes' and 'the ceremonies that take place when [they] wear them.' Clearly, as she observes, 'the connection between dress and war is not far to seek; your finest clothes are those that you wear as soldiers.' This spirit of competition and its attending drive for distinction she sees at work in the universities as well as the courts and connects with 'a disposition towards war.' (127-30) Within this context, this vision of history potentially holds the seeds of fascism. Obviously, this is particularly important in view of the general context against which the text was written, which also serves as a backdrop to the play in Between the Acts, that is the reality of Britain at war. In the play, patriarchy is attacked more clearly when it is at its height, that is to say, during the nineteenth century. This finds echoes in Orlando, which was highlighted as supporting the same sort of argument. Naturally, it also refers to the

¹¹³ Patricia Oudek Laurence sees this figure as representing 'madness or the surfacing of the socially unconscious as well as the historical silence of obscure people in the English history, p. 209.

¹¹⁴ See p. 176-78 and p. 158, respectively.

¹¹⁵ See 'The Trained Mind', p. 18.

author's own childhood, underlining the autobiographical element in these texts. The all-pervasive aspect of patriarchy is emphasised by the character of Mrs Mayhew and her reaction to the performance, which indicates the extent to which she has internalised patriarchal representation. The criticism, then, is directed at a Victorian society, which is in essence patriarchal. This character is embodied in the division between private and public affairs, of which 'the Angel in the House' is not only the symbol, but also the devastating reality. This model is illustrated by Lucy Swithin in Between the Acts,¹¹⁶ and in more details in The Years by the character of Eleanor and her life of looking after people, particularly her family, as opposed to her own private life:

He looked at her. She had never married. Why not? he wondered. Sacrificed to the family, he supposed --old Grandpapa without any fingers (354)

Her model is counter-balanced by that of Peggy, her niece, who is a doctor and whose attitude towards men is clearly no longer that of 'the Angel in the House'. One of the merits of The Years is indeed to chronicle the change of women's conditions over three generations. As indicated earlier, The Years was initially conceived as a 'novel-essay' but later evolved into a political novel as well as a separate pamphlet, Three Guineas. Not surprisingly then, the political concerns of the novel are developed to the full in the pamphlet, which Clare Hanson sees as 'a continuation of the work of [the novel].'¹¹⁷ Three Guineas, in many ways, can also be seen as a sequel to A Room of One's Own, although, significantly it is directly political and dispenses with the distance of irony which pervades the former. In The Years, the argument is worked into the novel as a subtext, in an oblique fashion, which makes the narrative more powerful, as Jane Wheare observes.¹¹⁸ This technique can usefully be seen in terms of the semiotic disrupting the symbolic of history and discourse.

¹¹⁶ As noted by Clare Hanson, p. 185.

¹¹⁷ See p. 169.

¹¹⁸ See p. 138.

The question of the education of women is thus at the centre of this criticism. This problem of girls not receiving a proper education is linked to most other concerns, in particular knowledge. Access to education is thus described as one of the most effective ways to oppose this system. Indeed, the gender division is never as strong as when it comes to education. This is portrayed in the novel by the fact that girls, by principle, are not educated until Peggy's generation. This link is reinforced in the passage where she is extolled as a bright student, and illustratively, the reaction of a male poet towards her is recorded. At her refusal to enter the game of sympathy dictated by the model of the 'Angel in the House', he is so threatened in his sense of self that he leaves abruptly, unable to have a conversation of which he is not the focus. The question of education is, of course, particularly powerful because of the Oxbridge setting of the novel.

Linked to the question of education is that of money. It is seen as a masculine tool of power and so goes back to the argument of A Room of One's Own. As Jane Marcus underlines, in The Years, 'money is associated with the male from the opening sixpence with which Abel Pargiter rewards Martin, to the sixpence worth of song for which Martin pays the children at the end.'¹¹⁹ This is clear in the way Eleanor insists on paying her share of a taxi ride as a mark of her independence. It is also indicated by Kitty's feelings about her marriage, which show that 'Woolf still sees marriage and family as deadening in [this novel].'¹²⁰ Walking about the grounds of the house she came into by marriage, Kitty is overwhelmed by her feeling of alienation, being a stranger, temporarily allowed access to fortune in her capacity as a depository of the male lineage. Clearly, money is associated with the masculine sense of self, as a validation of his standing in the world, which is reflected, on the death of Kitty's husband, in her leaving the house to the heir, her son, and settling in a comparatively simple flat. In other words, money like education is not acceptable for women, since they define masculine identity. Kitty and Eleanor are outsiders, delineating the clear boundaries of the patriarchal social

¹¹⁹ See p. 30.

¹²⁰ See Laura Marcus, p. 143.

system. The very notion of patriarchy thus depends on a dialectic of opposites, which need to be examined.

4. The outer and the inner¹²¹

The sense of division or discrepancy which these novels highlight can thus be described, as many critics have done, in terms of a paradigm based on a distinction between the inner and the outer;¹²² for instance, private versus public spheres or outside actions versus inner thoughts, a theme already adumbrated by Night and Day.

The previous sections have examined how this division operated in previous works in terms of boundaries or frames. The point of the interludes in The Waves was to blur these clear delimitations. Yet, in this third part of the argument, the concept of a binary system or understanding and representation is even more critical. In all the above discussions, whether on history, language or feminism, the danger of a system based on duality was outlined in Virginia Woolf's criticism of her age. This is particularly clear and significantly at its peak, in Between the Acts. Ralph Freedman, understanding this text as 'a most important novel' also underlines the fact that it is based on drama as 'crucial.'¹²³ Indeed, this allows the clear delimitation or boundary between stage and audience to be purposefully and most powerfully subverted. As Avrom Fleishman observes, 'the methods used to bring the pageant into the modern age are appropriately unconventional and even expressionistic.'¹²⁴ From a political point of view, it can be seen as a liberating process, setting free 'différance' as defined by Derrida.¹²⁵ Thus the

¹²¹ D, Monday 18 November, 1935, vol. 4 (1983), p. 353.

¹²² See James Naremore's essay 'Nature and History in The Years', p. 246-7 in Virginia Woolf. Revaluation and Continuity, edited by Ralph Freedman, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1980).

¹²³ See Virginia Woolf. Revaluation and Continuity, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 126.

¹²⁴ See p. 204.

¹²⁵ This term implies 'a fusion of the two senses of the French verb "différer": to be different, and to defer. The point of this double sense is that on the one hand there is indeed an "effect" of meaning in an utterance which is produced by its difference from other meanings, but that on the other hand, since

play put on by Miss La Trobe is really a play on words which, by offering the spectators to construct their alternative and individual meaning of history, undermines the coercive character of the unified discourse of patriarchy.

In The Years, the paradigm that opposes inner to outer also takes on a strong political character. The earlier part of this work indicated how the concept of the frame is a useful tool towards understanding how this paradigm functions. An overall examination of Virginia Woolf's oeuvre reveals how the use of the frame changed from a purely aesthetic to a more and more political purpose. The Years and Between the Acts fully explore this mechanism. Portraits play an important part in both, but more particularly in the former. This is epitomised in the original portrait, that of Eleanor's mother, which reappears as a reminder, at intervals, along the three generations that the novel embraces. Women are thus portrayed in attitudes that define them in men's eyes; literally, they are framed. The buildings in The Years can be seen as an extension of the framing process, since they function in a similar way. In other words, they are shown as trapping female characters inside and thus marking out the limits of their role in society as surely as portraits frame them in terms of representation. Naturally, Woolf's female characters often show a need to escape, often with dire consequences, as the example of Rhoda in The Waves indicates. One of the most illuminating examples is provided in The Years by the escapade of Rose as a little girl.¹²⁶ Importantly, it starts as a daring adventure and Rose sees herself as what would be a hero if she had been a boy. She is on a secret mission, and capably prepares her escape and manages to steal out of the house unnoticed.

Now the adventure had began, Rose said to herself as she stole on tiptoe to the night nursery. ... She was riding by night on a desperate mission to a besieged garrison, she told herself. ... All their lives depended upon her riding to them through the enemy's country. (25-6)

this meaning can never come to rest in an actual presence, or "transcendental signified," its determinate specification is deferred from one substitutive linguistic interpretation to another, in a movement, or "play," without end.' See A Glossary of Literary Terms, M. H. Abrams, (Cornell university, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, Inc., The Dryden Press, Saunders College Publishing, 1988), p. 204.

¹²⁶ Laura Marcus also mentions the importance of this passage, p. 140.

She is thus characterised as brave and full of initiative, but naturally disobedient. Her escape is in stark contrast with what is expected of her when indoors: 'Go and get your sewing, there's a good girl,' said Nurse as Rose shook hands with Mrs C.' (25) The episode is telling, as Rose changes role according to the boundaries surrounding her. Significantly her adventure is cut short by her encounter with 'The enemy!', that is a man, all the more defined in his malehood by his overt sexual activity as an exhibitionist. This episode can also be seen as a narrative of the oedipal crisis. In Freudian terms, 'the girl's tasks in the oedipal drama involve the repression of what he calls the "little man" inside her...'¹²⁷ Rose's "masculine" quality of activity and initiative are punished so that she complies with a model of "normal femininity" characterised by its passivity. In other words, the gender roles are defined by men, which is emphasised by the fact that Rose's escapade was prompted by her brother's refusal to accompany her to the shop. The boundary is thus clearly set up: women are safe at home, that is inside, and can only see the outside world under the protection of men. If they decide to try and trespass beyond the limits thus drawn around them, and venture into unknown territories as men do -- consider the Empire that gives a backdrop to the novel-- then the consequences are clear; they are but sexual objects to be preyed on. The totality of this system is further emphasised in Between the Acts by the way in which the rape of a young woman is recorded:

The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face... (21)

It is all the more powerful that the troopers are Whitehall guards, part of the set-up of society and supposedly in a position to defend citizens. The double standard is further exposed by the manner in which this event comes to Isa's understanding. First, it is '

¹²⁷ See Rachel Blau DuPlessis, p. 36.

"The guard at Whitehall..." which was romantic and then' the description of the violence, followed by her comment; 'That was real.' This powerful feeling of reality rings particularly true when one recalls the author's own childhood experience of sexual abuse.

Considering the theme of trespassing rules and boundaries that the whole episode of Rose's escapade carries, it clearly foreshadows her subsequent development into a self-declared feminist.¹²⁸ This development is particularly interesting because it gives a further insight into the binary nature of this system. Indeed, it is easy to see how the house has become a prison for the individualistic woman embodied by Rose, which will only be replaced in her adult life by proper imprisonment, this time in jail, for supporting the Suffrage Movement. As Clare Hanson explains, in the novel the house comes to represent female identity but also sexuality. Eugenie, for instance, is 'identified with the house as property which, like her body, must be guarded and controlled.'¹²⁹

The notion of the frame can also be used to define boundaries in terms of self and reality, that is boundaries of a psychological nature. As far as women are concerned, these two novels show how these boundaries as well can be described as political. Women are portrayed faced with a dilemma centring on the tension between private and public spheres, as the passage in the courts of Law in The Years indicates (178). This duality between the inner and the outer is indeed at work within the psyche, as in the character of Isa in Between the Acts:

Inside the glass, in her eyes, she saw what she had felt overnight for the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentle-man farmer. 'In love', was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver brushes and tooth-brushes, was the other love; love for her husband, the stockbroker -- 'The father of my children', she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in her eyes; outer love on the dressing table. (16)¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Although, remarkably, Avrom Fleishman, finds that 'this scene provides no easy explanation of Rose's subsequent career', p. 180.

¹²⁹ See p. 160.

The author's ironical use of 'the cliché provided by fiction' is interesting in two different respects. First, it underlines, once more, the role of discourse in fixing genders and informing reality, since in a masculine economy the self is constructed through language. This, in turn, allows identity to be further polarised along gender lines. Secondly, the ironical character of this allusion to fiction also indicates Virginia Woolf's everlasting resistance to the realist type of fiction for all the political reasons that have already been exposed. Regarding this passage, Allen McLaurin also notes how 'ordinary fiction ... cannot describe the complexities of experience or the possibilities of life.'¹³¹ This resistance is translated in The Years by the image of the portrait of the late Mrs Pargiter. It is passed down from generation to generation, but significantly, it progressively loses its contours and finally needs to be repaired:

'That picture wants cleaning,' he said, pointing to the picture of their mother.
 'It's a nice picture,' he added, looking at it critically. 'But usen't there to be a flower in the grass?'
 Eleanor looked at it. She had not looked at it, so as to see it, for many years.
 'Was there?' she said.
 'Yes. A little blue flower,' said Martin. 'I can remember it when I was a child...'
 (152)

This passage can also be seen to refer to what Susan Dick calls 'scene-making' through 'memory pictures' which she says 'in the later novels [become] one of Woolf's central means of dramatising a character's recollection of its most intense experiences.'¹³² Indeed these memory pictures shape the very structure of The Years and their progressive accumulation slowly superimpose past on present so that the boundaries of time become more vague. The frame of the picture in this quotation operates in a similar way. By extension, the duality between outside and inside, between reality and the realistic representation of this reality is blurred. The language that sustains the image and

¹³⁰ This is of course reminiscent of Mrs Dalloway looking into her mirror, as Harvena Richter noted, p. 112.

¹³¹ See p. 57.

¹³² See p. 181.

thus the concept of 'the Angel in the House' no longer applies. This is further enhanced in the novel by the background of the fall of the Empire. This study highlighted how the author perceived this duality to be at the core of history as she knew it. Here, she gives an indication that a new modern era would be based on anything but a binary system, which allows hierarchy and divisiveness of the type to be witnessed in the British Empire. This historical era coming to an end is significantly recorded in The Years by the similar fall of the house of Pargiters:

It was still snowing when the young man came from the House Agents to see over Abercorn Terrace. The snow cast a hard white glare upon the walls of the bathroom, showed up the cracks on the enamel bath, and the stains on the wall. (204)

Clearly, the disappearance of one of the main constitutive elements of the Victorian era, the Empire, is bound to affect the structure of its society. This accounts for the downfall of Abercorn Terrace as a symbol of the patriarchal family. This image carries a strong autobiographical element, since it mirrors a similar trajectory from Hyde Park Gate to Gordon Square and later Monks House in Virginia Woolf's life, with each change of address marking a different stage in her life.

This paradigm, based on the opposition between the inner and the outer, is also at the centre of another debate that looms large in these two novels, which is the opposition between nature and culture.

5. Nature versus culture: body and mind

The natural world, in its raw materiality unorganised by men, plays a part in most of the author's work. It is used for its beauty, particularly in works such as To the Lighthouse, but also functions for specific purposes. While in Mrs Dalloway, 'a match burning in a crocus' is a marker of a 'moment of being' (37), in Orlando, the 'green in nature' (14) represents the challenges of literary representation. More importantly, it also features at

the centre of the author's thinking on the perception of reality and understanding of form, as 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens' indicated.

As early on as in Night And Day, the author's use of nature already took on a more political turn, where it was subsumed into the debate on representation and consequently, of gender. The question of the hegemony of culture over nature is thus but another way to formulate the opposition between inner and outer examined above. In this context, Virginia Woolf shows that culture as defined by men in terms of masculine values, sustained by a divisive discourse, can be exploitative. For instance, she finds the opposition between culture as a male concept and nature as a female state to originate in a deep-seated feeling of jealousy, in the shape of the instinctual drive of 'infantile fixation'. In that light, one of the constitutive elements of culture as organised by men is actually 'a non-rational sex-taboo' which is clearly related to nature.¹³³ Earlier on in her career, Virginia Woolf indicted this feeling when recording the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Flush. The extremity to which the poet had to stoop in order to escape her father's possessiveness turns Mr Barrett into the most famous case of 'infantile fixation' or 'dominance craving for submission'.¹³⁴ The patriarchal use of culture thus allows society to secure a human, civilised appearance to hide the beast lurking within; that of racism, fascism, or closer to the author, sexual abuse. This latter point is particularly justified for Virginia Woolf to make, and at the same time very painful, in view of sexual abuse by her half-brother, George Duckworth:

Yes, the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also. ¹³⁵

This comment regarding the mixed perception of women, and consequently their misuse, is particularly illustrative of what seems to have been a common practice at the time.

¹³³ See p. 247 passim, in Three Guineas. Virginia Woolf bases her argument on the psychological analysis provided by the Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion, University of Oxford.

¹³⁴ See p. 252 in 3G.

Night and Day already showed the romanticising of the woman, her being described as and ascribed to the role of 'the Angel in the House' as a means to provide precisely that, the veneer, the facade of respectability. Again, this is a personal experience for the author, who described how her father, although a refined intellectual on the surface, underneath was really a savage:

Why then had he no shame in thus indulging his rage before women? Partly of course because woman was (though gilt with an angelic surface) the slave ... He needed always some woman to act before; to sympathise with him, to console him ... thus to Fred Maitland and to Herbert Fisher he appeared entirely self-deprecating, modest, and ridiculously humble in his opinion of himself. To us he was exacting, greedy, unabashed in his demand for praise.¹³⁶

This typical behaviour is translated in The Years with Kitty's attitude, playing a part, being a foil for her husband, or Eleanor's sacrifice of her personal life to the service of the family. These novels thus strongly question the notion of culture, at least as defined by men, as positive. Again, it is seen as based on a divisive principle, by which culture, the male prerogative, can only be praised by contrast with nature, that is the female state. The arbitrariness of this system can be seen in the fact that 'Preclassical Greece ... shows woman as a splendid spiritual source of society's rituals of breaking apart and coming together, of "natural" time and the death and rebirth of the Year-Spirit', which Jane Marcus sees as the main motif of The Years.¹³⁷ The patriarchal notion of culture is thus used to validate the position of men at the centre, as privileged members of society, which is only achieved by the necessary isolation of women as marginalised citizens. As Rachel Bowlby points out 'its very pretension to exclusiveness seems to imply that male power is always under threat.'¹³⁸ Hence, women might be construed as angel, but they are also slaves, primarily linked to nature by their menstruating and reaping bodies, as portrayed by Susan in The Waves. Their only tenable positions are either 'part slave, part

¹³⁵ See p. 193 in '22 Hyde Park Gate', in MB.

¹³⁶ See p. 159 in SP.

¹³⁷ See her chapter on The Years as Götterdämmerung, Greek Play, and Domestic Novel', p. 37.

angel' within the frame of the family, or as wives, that is literally reclaimed by men. This reclaiming process functions both from a physical point of view, when women bear their sons, and from a cultural point of view, when they are given their husband's name, which hauls them from the sphere of nature into that of culture. On this basis, Virginia Woolf famously argued that women do not actually belong to the same England, that is the same cultural space, as men.¹³⁹

Yet, despite all the pretence of civilisation, at bottom, men and the women that they have thus reclaimed, are still moved by primeval instincts. This is evident in the many instances where characters are compared to animals:

But they're not interested in other people's children, he observed. Only in their own; their own property; their own flesh and blood, which they would protect with the unsheathed claws of the primeval swamp, he thought, looking at Millie's fat little paws, even Maggie, even she. For she too was talking about my boy, my girl. How then can we be civilised, he asked himself? (TY 46)

In Between the Acts, this process goes even further when Lucy Swithin actually creates a monster in her mind by crossing the image of a dinosaur with that of her maid, thus bringing to light 'a conception of our animal origins':¹⁴⁰

It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest. (13)

As Gillian Beer emphasises, 'in Between The Acts the pre-historic is seen not simply as part of a remote past [like in The Voyage Out] but as contiguous, continuous, as part of ordinary present-day life.'¹⁴¹ Both these texts are thus full of natural similes, but above

¹³⁸ See p. 20.

¹³⁹ In Three Guineas, she argues that an English woman 'will reflect that for her there are no "foreigners", since by law she becomes a foreigner if she marries a foreigner.' p. 228.

¹⁴⁰ See Clare Hanson for this comment, p. 192.

¹⁴¹ See p. 9.

all, and in keeping with the interludes of The Waves, the weather in general is used as the metaphor for nature. Indeed, the weather in its perpetual changeability and the climate in its immutable permanence both indicate the impartiality and indifference of primeval nature to human dramas, and civilisation as a man-made product. Thus, although The Years is a novel about history and civilisation, each chapter begins with natural references. This method gives a clear indication of the importance of nature in the state of things, whether this is acknowledged or not, and 'suggests that nature has transcended both history and the unsatisfactory conditions of individual lives.'¹⁴² This is even more perceptible in Between the Acts, where nature not only serves as a backdrop to the play but also actively participates in the performance. Indeed, Patricia Ondek Laurence remarks that 'the ambient sounds of nature that might traditionally be dismissed from the genre of the novel as "irrelevant" also play they part in the music of conversation in Between the Acts.'¹⁴³ This new relationship between culture and nature is further asserted in the image of the great tree of life. As Avrom Fleishman indicates, it is 'an image of natural vitality which crowns the idea of human enterprise, established by the pageant' and also 'in its turn, becomes a further stimulus to art, for Miss La Trobe.'¹⁴⁴ This relation highlights the sense of cyclical rhythm the author wants to stress in a new type of representation. In both cases, this serves to put human events into perspective:

The fine rain, the gentle rain, poured equally over the mitred and the bareheaded with an impartiality which suggested that the god of rain, if there were a god, was thinking Let it not be restricted to the very wise, the very great, but let all breathing kind, the munchers and chewers, the ignorant, the unhappy, those who toil in the furnace making innumerable copies of the same pot, those who bore red hot mind through contorted letters, and also Mrs Jones in the alley, share my bounty. (46)

Importantly, in this passage, Virginia Woolf reclaims nature as an alternative to the cultural paradigm presented by a patriarchal society. Far from always being a force of

¹⁴² See James Naremore in his essay 'Nature and History in The Years', p. 249.

¹⁴³ See p. 207.

¹⁴⁴ See p. 215.

progress, culture also produces monstrosity, as illustrated by the deadening task of the factory work.¹⁴⁵ It is a concept intellectually defined by men in terms of education, to the exclusion of women and the lower classes, and its privileges are for them alone to be enjoyed. It allows them to position themselves at the centre of society, with the secondary effects of patriarchy on women and imperialism on other peoples. This description of nature, on the contrary, conveys humans as animals, that is to say, but a part of the creation. The cultural god of religion is also exchanged for the natural god of nature, which does not discriminate between a higher and a lower order. From that point of view, the link between women and nature that patriarchy forged as a negation of culture, is actually re-valued as positive. It allows women to exceed the dichotomy of the essentialist system and to create a new kind of culture, which is not divisive in essence. Gillian Beer explains that Virginia Woolf's vision might also have been shaped by 'the alternative insights offered by Darwin into kinship between past and present forms, the long pathways of descent, the literal ties between humankind and other animals, the constancy of the primeval.'¹⁴⁶

Thus the author does not reject culture at the expense of nature, which would be an attitude modelled on the masculine paradigm of opposition, but rather envisages a new system. It is described in Three Guineas as the mode of a brand-new education for women. Unlike the universities which educate men in 'the arts of dominating other people', it would focus on 'the art of understanding other people's lives and minds', a skill that the author associates with the uneducated women, and which is based on a natural intuition. She recommends that this new college

should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to cooperate [and] discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life. (143-4)

¹⁴⁵ This theme is clearly in keeping with the concerns of the Fabian Society, with which both Virginia and Leonard Woolf had regular contact. See Hermione Lee for a detailed account of the relationship between Beatrice and Sidney Webb, founder of the society, and the Woolfs.

¹⁴⁶ See p. 7.

The body is thus reclaimed as part of this new culture, which by doing so erases the arbitrary distinction whereby the mind is equated with the male and, as a necessary consequence, the body becomes equated with the female. The fixed boundaries erected from this equation are strongly disputed by Virginia Woolf:

But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record. People write always of the doing of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilised the universe.¹⁴⁷

The radical character of this position is apparent in the way it foreshadows later feminists, such as Antoinette Fouque who deplores 'the division of humanity between body and language [as] aberrant.'¹⁴⁸ Clearly, this is to be considered in the light of her own experience of the body, that is her numerous periods in the throes of depression, which left her bed-ridden for a significant amount of time.¹⁴⁹ She recorded these periods as a time of extreme distress: 'Never been so near the precipice to my own feelings'.¹⁵⁰ Yet, paradoxically, they also proved to be a valuable time of discovery as the essay 'On Being Ill' testifies: 'In illness this make-believe ceases.' (47) Illness thus becomes a mark or a reminder of the body. The fact that the body and its natural rhythm are also described as disease by men can be seen as political. The Victorian attitude to menstruation, of which Virginia Woolf still felt the effect,¹⁵¹ is typical of this patriarchal phenomenon:

¹⁴⁷ 'On Being Ill', p. 44 in The Crowded Dance of Modern Life.

¹⁴⁸ This quotation is cited by Clare Hanson, p. 25.

¹⁴⁹ Harvena Richter remarks on this link between self-absorption and ill-health which draws a strong parallel between Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust, p. 16.

¹⁵⁰ See Hermione Lee, p. 327.

¹⁵¹ Her satirical portrait of Sir William Bradshaw in Mrs Dalloway is generally recognised as a scathing attack on her own treatment at the hands of the male medical establishment. His perpetual mission to bring his patients back to 'his sense of proportion' (p.108) paints him as a 'Darwinian nerve specialist'. See, Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady, Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980, (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 18.

Theories of female insanity were specifically and confidently linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle -- puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause -- during which the mind would be weakened and the symptoms of insanity might emerge.¹⁵²

It is not difficult to see the origin of this equating of the female element with nature and ultimately insanity in what Virginia Woolf terms 'infantile fixation', that is the deep seated fear that men betray of female sexuality. In that light, the female body is threatening because it constitutes a reminder that the assumed linearity of the mind is indeed but an 'illusion', a cultural concept. This, in turn, prompts a need to reduce what they consider as an irregularity to the norm. Unsurprisingly, this is achieved by male doctors submitting recalcitrant women, labelled as insane, to a regimen of ladylike activities in the hope of reconciling them with a masculine notion of femalehood, such as 'the Angel in the House.'¹⁵³ Virginia Woolf makes it clear that this essentialist opposition between nature and culture and so women and men, if originating in an unconscious feeling of fear, was motivated by a very definite desire for power. This is made clear very early in her works, with the portrait of Sir Bradshaw's wife:

Once, long ago, she caught salmon freely: now, quick to minister to the craving which lit her husband's eye so oilily for domination, for power, she cramped, squeezed, pared, pruned, drew back, peeped through... (MD 109)¹⁵⁴

The idea of sickness is thus conceived as associated with the female, because it acts a reminder of the body, and further reinforced by the stereotyped role of the nurse. The second-rate value imposed on the body and its physical manifestation accounts for its absence as a subject of literature.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² See p. 55 in *The Female Malady*.

¹⁵³ Elaine Showalter remarks that 'the ladylike values of silence, decorum, taste, service, piety, and gratitude ... were made an integral part of the program of moral management of women in Victorian asylums.' p. 79.

¹⁵⁴ This is what Harvena Richter calls a 'compression', that is to say an image with vast meaning (p. 199), so that the patriarchal dimension of the episode is powerfully reproduced by the author on a stylistic level.

¹⁵⁵ This assertion can be verified in the outrage of the mid-Victorians when faced with the emergence of realism, which attempted to describe the reality of the body. Kenneth Graham records how one of the arguments levied against this new tradition precisely hinges on this dichotomy and hierarchisation

In a typical move, and in response to the concerns articulated in her previous novels, Virginia Woolf turns this hierarchy of the mind and the body on its head by proposing a new whole-encompassing system, which is only actually worked into the structure of the text in Between the Acts and The Years. The body is reclaimed by the author in a writing which textually evades the binary model as a division between nature and culture and thus it takes a prominent position alongside the mind. As Hermione Lee explains in her recent biography: 'It is "her" illness in that much of what we know about it is derived from what she wrote about it. Her illness has become her language'.¹⁵⁶ For Virginia Woolf, the real disease is a life governed by the mind only at the expense of the senses, "an awful mind- and soul-destroying life", which is precisely incapable of 'making combinations'. An education that promotes this hierarchy produces 'a cripple in a cave', out of whom 'humanity goes'.¹⁵⁷ As a daughter, Virginia Woolf had a first hand experience of such emotional crippling with Leslie Stephen:

The reason for that complete unconsciousness of his behaviour is to be found in the disparity, so obvious in his books, between the critical and the imaginative power ... To explain this one would have to discuss the crippling effect of Cambridge and its one sided education ... One would have to follow that by a discussion of the writer's profession in the nineteenth century and the mutilation of intensive brain work. He never used his hands.¹⁵⁸

This subversion of the essentialist dichotomy between mind and body becomes an integral part of Virginia Woolf's new approach to reality and thus shapes her

of mind and body: 'Pictures of the physical side of love are below the range of the "intellectual emotions", and stimulate the lower side of our nature, as in the case of Maupassant's Une Vie: "... like nine out of ten French novels, it dragged the imagination over physical details with which the imagination has no legitimate connection, which can only enervate, soil, and corrupt it." See English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 79.

¹⁵⁶ See p. 176 in Virginia Woolf.

¹⁵⁷ See p. 187-8 in 3G.

¹⁵⁸ See p. 160 in MB.

representation into 'a new narrative style and a new authorial position vis-à-vis the text.'¹⁵⁹ This new model of representation powerfully embodies the politics of form.

As a response to the hierarchic order of society, Eleanor in The Years, for instance, represents an appreciation of India for its own culture and values, as exemplified by her inviting Indians to stay with her. Clearly, one might argue that this is but another form of imperialism under cover of benevolence. Yet, in that respect, it is significant that she also dresses in a sari, a gesture aimed at lessening division and difference, exactly the opposite of the prescriptive Victorian dress code. Her understanding of culture is thus not coercive, as opposed to the masculine notion of culture, which is built on such concepts as colonisation. This reaction is also to be considered within the context of social awareness, created by such organisations as the Suffrage Movement or the Fabian Society, which had been eating away at this traditional society for a couple of decades. Both Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry were part of this general movement. Besides her writing, she regularly chaired meetings of the Women's Co-operative Guild and Roger Fry did a great amount of touring in order to bring art to a wider public than the educated few. Indeed, in the same way as Virginia Woolf does not reject the concept of culture but only its perversion by egotism, she also advocates a new kind of education for women as one of the main tools against fascism.

This dialectic of opposition between nature and culture can also be articulated in terms of the opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic. It sees the masculine established at the symbolic stage, which is the entry into thethetic world of language, marked by the Oedipal stage, that is the separation from the mother. In that light, women are linked to the semiotic or a pre-linguistic system that occurs before the Oedipal phase. It can be argued that because of this link with monumental time, women are in touch with a reality that outlasts cultural productions. In To the Lighthouse, Mrs Ramsay's dinner, her 'moment of being' is presented as self-contained, escaping sequentiality: 'Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever after. This would remain.'

¹⁵⁹ See Sue Roe in Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice, (London: Harvester

(114) It stands in comparison with Mr Ramsay's anxiety about his own sense of failure. 'How long would he be read...' (115) Women's understanding can be seen in terms of patterns or rhythms, in other words, cyclical as opposed to the linearity of the masculine language, which in turn enables the concept of hierarchy and thus patriarchy. Whereas Mrs Ramsay's dinner is only a localised example in the novel, the disruption of the sequentiality of discourse, for instance, occurs structurally in the whole text of Between the Acts. Miss La Trobe's pageant overflows its actual occurrence, since the boundaries of beginning and end have been nigh eradicated in the text. The cultural occurrence itself, to the extent that it can be said to occur, is constantly interrupted by some natural event, like a cow calling her young, which is enthusiastically welcomed by Miss La Trobe, if shocking for the audience. Laura Marcus reads this interruption as 'the negative showing-up of the blind group instinct'¹⁶⁰ suggesting another blow to the paradigm opposing culture to nature. The sense of evolution in the presentation of this argument is underlined by Avrom Fleishman, who finds that 'Virginia Woolf nowhere else makes so much of the raw materials of which art and civilised life are composed; nowhere is nature so roughly introduced into her work.'¹⁶¹ Significantly, it is she, a single woman, but also an outsider and social outcast, who is responsible for the play and thus initiates the disruption. Miss La Trobe's type as a character is emphasised by her name. Clearly, in view of her argument, Virginia Woolf's choice of names is significant. Isobel Grundy points out how it 'combines several different conceptions of the author's role, suggesting a star or diva... a mother of tropes or a troubadour, whose art is by implication ... chancy.'¹⁶² It is no surprise then, that her alternative interpretation of history comes as a challenge to the definitive patriarchal version, as defined earlier.

This feeling of disruption was of course very real at the time when the author wrote, with more and more demands from women on the male system. This climate of change is always perceptible, as a background line, which sometimes comes to the fore in The

Wheatsheaf, 1990) p. 122.

¹⁶⁰ p. 165.

¹⁶¹ p. 214.

¹⁶² p. 214.

Years. Between the Acts features the war in the same position, as the next major disruption to the system and challenge to culture. Ralph Freedman sees war as central to all the novels and understands it in terms of tragedy.¹⁶³ However, these texts make the link between war and patriarchy more powerfully than any before. They strongly argue that war is precisely tragic because it is not inevitable.

Yet, as in The Waves, the sun rises and sets, or in To the Lighthouse, time passes, and there is a feeling of everything being overturned as a mark of time and the cyclical nature of things. In a sense, despite perpetual attempts at leaving a mark, that is imposing culture upon nature, nothing is there to stay except nature. This is a feeling pointing towards human mortality and its finite character within the infinity of nature. At the beginning of the modern era when everything is challenged -- 'if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour - landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair!'¹⁶⁴ -- the centrality of the 'Captain self' is bound to come under scrutiny.¹⁶⁵

6. The economy of the self: being and non-being

Earlier discussions highlighted how, in a masculine economy, the self is constructed through a type of language that falsifies. In other words, it views characterisation mainly in terms of gender and class and thus provides a social lie. This language is about defining rather than communicating. The all-encompassing and self-less 'little language' of women or lovers was also understood as an antidote to a masculine language used as a tool to order and sustain the hierarchical structure of society. This alternative language, on the other hand, informs the kind of multiple and complex self advocated in Orlando, that is a notion of identity which has escaped a polarised definition according to gender.

¹⁶³ See p. 128.

¹⁶⁴ See p. 84 in MW.

¹⁶⁵ In Orlando, 'the Captain self' is 'the Key self, which amalgamates and controls [all the selves we have it in us to be.]' p. 236.

Similarly, the concept of the frame was used to highlight the divisive character of this binary economy, with notions such as the feminine private space as opposed to the masculine public space.¹⁶⁶ This dynamic involves a hierarchy of positive and negative, which could be articulated as 'the tension between instinctive needs and institutional repressions';¹⁶⁷ in order for the masculine identity to be defined as positive, it needs to be favourably compared to the feminine element, which, by contrast, is branded as negative or inferior. This point was illustrated by some male characters being unable to have a conversation that does not centre on them, thus challenging their sense of self. In the same way, masculine identity is also shown as reliant on external signs, such as money or social status.

The identity or the sense of self that relies on the ego is thus condemned by the author in all the novels. This was particularly so in To the Lighthouse, where the character of Mr Ramsay draws heavily on Leslie Stephen. Clearly, for Virginia Woolf, egocentricity leads to the 'savagery' of patriarchy.¹⁶⁸ A definition of the masculine self which relies on such centrality thus leads to disaster for women in general, but, just as importantly, also for men. Indeed, the discussion underlined earlier how a dialectic that polarises gender inevitably does the same for classes or races. This point becomes more and more apparent, which shows an enlarging of Virginia Woolf's frame of reference. This point is thus first strongly made in The Waves with the character of Louis and further explored in The Years with that of North, who both suffer from estrangement, if not explicit prejudice, because of their belonging to the colonies. This question of self and the ego was evidently always a strong preoccupation with an author who kept an extremely regular and prolific diary. It is thus found at the heart of all her works, but in this section, it is to be considered in a more political light. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis underlines 'But the dissolving borders of the self ... are not simply or only statements about personal psychology, experiences of private consciousness or that generative void

¹⁶⁶ James Naremore calls this use of the frame 'a room-window symbolism' which indicates the same sense of oppositions, p. 245.

¹⁶⁷ See James Naremore's essay 'Nature and History in The Years', p. 242.

continuous in Woolf's characters since Rachel Vinrace; in [The Years] the dissolution of the ego is "deeply political."¹⁶⁹ The destructiveness of an overblown ego was addressed in A Room of One's Own mainly from an aesthetic point of view, in the argument for a new kind of writing as opposed to realist fiction whereas the later Three Guineas charts its effects from a political point of view, that is to say, in respect of society at large. This is clear in their style: while the former starts with a world of opposition, 'but', the latter begins with engaging a dialogue with a man. This study demonstrated that this is clearly one of the main purposes of The Years as well as Between the Acts. After a consideration of most of the oeuvre, its general direction from a feminist aesthetics to a wider political context can be seen as motivated by the urgency demanded by a problem such as the political implications of a culture centred on the ego. As already pointed out, the author's belief is that, ultimately it leads to fascism. Although Britain clearly fought against fascism during this war, Virginia Woolf records how the country also vigorously opposed pacifism, as illustrated, in 1935, by the forced resignation from the Labour Party of George Lansbury on account of his advocating pacifism.¹⁷⁰ In this light, she strongly questions the motivation of patriotism, which she sees as a cover for male aggressiveness; an analysis overwhelmingly verified by World War II.¹⁷¹

Furthermore, within the context of a general questioning of history and civilisation, the question of the necessary implications for the notion of self is inescapable. As Nicholas put it in The Years: 'If we do not know ourselves, how can we know other people?' (293) Thus, a questioning of the nature of the self is the main emphasis of The Years, since by the same token, the novel challenges that idea of knowledge, which puts the self at the centre of enquiry. The program it proposes can be understood as 'a blueprint for individual action' stressing self-reform as opposed to reform of the outer

¹⁶⁸ Virginia Woolf explains how, in her father, 'There was something blind, animal, savage in [the horror and the terror of those violent displays of rage]' which leads her to the conclusion that 'nothing is so much to be dreaded as egotism.' p. 160 in MB.

¹⁶⁹ See p. 167.

¹⁷⁰ p. XIV, in introduction to 3G.

world.¹⁷² Indeed it is very important to realise that in these works the fundamental questioning of a patriarchal economy is no longer only entrusted to the female characters. Sue Roe finds that in The Waves 'Bernard celebrates the immortality of the hero: the myth of the all-powerful, withstanding masculinity.'¹⁷³ In opposition to this interpretation, this thesis argues that from this latter text onward, with Bernard's yearning for a new language, numerous male characters denounce the essentialist definition of the self as lacking. This is the case of Martin and North, as exemplified earlier, but also René, in The Years, who cries for the horrors of the war and particularly Nicholas Brown, who voices some of the most important questions in the novel. It is significant that Brown is not actually Nicholas' name. He is also largely characterised both as a foreigner who 'has no self-consciousness' (398) and as a homosexual, so that he is the character who most escapes definition in the novel, as testified by the range of reactions he elicits in the people he encounters. Above all, as Isobel Grundy remarks, he 'shares an elusive quality, transcending personality, with the Mrs Brown of "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown."¹⁷⁴

The final party in The Years can be contrasted with Mrs Dalloway's party to show that it is no longer the exclusive role of women to let go of the self, like Clarissa did.¹⁷⁵ This is exemplified by Peggy's 'masculine' refusal to play the 'Angel in the House' or Nicholas' 'feminine' lack of ego. The radical character of these texts lies in the directness with which they address the question of the self. 'North's sense that the relationship between self and other, subject and object must be reconstructed if "re-education" is to

¹⁷¹ See pp. 113-117, in Three Guineas, where patriotism is linked with manhood. As Virginia Woolf suggests, the urge to kill seems to be a purely male notion. She already put this point forward when she made Orlando loathe hunting, as a marker of his sexual ambivalence.

¹⁷² See Herbert Marder, p. 169.

¹⁷³ See Writing and Gender, p. 121. Makiko Minow-Pinkney also finds the ending of the text negative, with Bernard's 'final soliloquy increasingly pessimistic as it contemplates the disastrous consequences of a collapse of the thetic self that had been initially desired, see p. 183 in Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

¹⁷⁴ See p. 208 in her essay ' "Words Without Meaning -- Wonderful Words": Virginia Woolf's Choice of Names', in Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1983).

¹⁷⁵ Clare Hanson describes Mrs Dalloway as 'mainly showing "feminine" aspects', p. 64.

occur' dominates the party. As Clare Hanson points out this argument is 'close to the thought of post-modern feminists such as Cixous and Kristeva.'¹⁷⁶

This problem of ontology and self-knowledge, it was noted, is also entrusted more particularly to Eleanor, who can be seen as the unifying character of the novel. Significantly she can also be seen as a counterpart for Nicholas. Herbert Marder, for instance, finds that she has achieved 'an integrated personality', in other words, that she is to some extent androgynous.¹⁷⁷ Certainly, she also evades the category of the old spinster. In that light, her wondering about understanding the self is particularly important; remarkably it occurs at the very end of the narrative, a couple of pages before the end of Virginia Woolf's second longest work. This is illustrative of a strategy that characterises these texts: there is no traditional resolution of the problem, no given answer.

This is the most important point about these two texts. They are both a statement on the binary system, 'showing up some of the central paradoxes and dichotomies of the system' and a solution, or at least, an alternative to understanding reality and consequently representing it.¹⁷⁸ A new type of representation is proposed in the shape of significant form, pattern, and relationship; in other words, process. This is the point of The Years' final party, which crystallises earlier patterns within the text, and also the attempt of the pageant of Between the Acts. They both criticise the essentialist economy for its imbalance and its binary structure, highlighted as dangerous, and see the real problem as involving a change of our understanding of the self. Clare Hanson, for instance, sees Between The Acts as a direct continuation of Three Guineas in that 'it traces the construction of gender identity via the 'Oedipus complex.'¹⁷⁹ The Years, also has Martin wondering 'what would it be without "I"? (230) This is the recurrent line running through these novels; it is a question of rethinking the self in a non-essentialist or non-binary economy. A change of balance, of relations between self and other, is thus

¹⁷⁶ See p. 165.

¹⁷⁷ See p. 174.

¹⁷⁸ Sue Roe supports the first part of this argument, but does not find that these texts present an alternative, p. 132.

needed; a relation which does not glorify the ego. In other words, the relation of women to patriarchy is transmuted into the relation *between* individuals within a system of dominance.

Virginia Woolf's articulation of the question is in terms of her attempts at describing 'being' and 'non-being':

The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being (being and non-being). I think Jane Austen can, and Trollope; perhaps Thackeray and Dickens and Tolstoi. I have never been able to do both. I tried -- in Night and Day; and in The Years.¹⁸⁰

Significantly, this excerpt is from the author's 'Sketch of the Past' in Moments of Being, an autobiographical text taking stock of her life from the vantage point of maturity, which has been described as 'Virginia Woolf's final summing up.'¹⁸¹ Despite the anxiety that this comment reveals, this study highlighted the extent to which she did manage a great achievement, as much from a political as an aesthetic point of view. This is manifested in these novels, which have been described as directly political. Yet, it is also powerfully evident in the fact that, although The Years displays a strong autobiographical element, it successfully manages to subsume it into the larger pattern provided by the text. As Jane Wheare argues, the dramatic method used in this text allows Woolf to 'disguise the personal interest in social injustice which is manifest in The Pargiters.'¹⁸² If one keeps in mind the information provided by Moments of Being or the diaries while reading The Years, it is easy to recognise scenes, mental imagery or actual relations of the author. Yet, the overall effect, while still powerful, is well-removed from To the Lighthouse, written in 1927, with the anger that characterises the description of the Ramsay couple. This anger was explained by Virginia Woolf taking her parents as a model for this fictional couple and thus turning the writing of the novel into a cathartic exercise. By

¹⁷⁹ See p. 182.

¹⁸⁰ See p. 79 in MB.

¹⁸¹ See Susan Dick's interpretation p. 197.

¹⁸² See p. 127.

contrast, the catharsis of the ego is clearly no longer at work in The Years or Between the Acts.

In that respect, it is illustrative that her oeuvre presents numerous characters experiencing not only 'moments of being' but just as importantly, states of non-being. In previous works, particularly with the character of Rhoda in The Waves, the problems of fitting within the definition of self, given by a patriarchal society, were described as life-threatening.¹⁸³ Rhoda's suicide is prompted by her feeling of utter alienation, which could have no other result than the complete dissolution of the self into madness and finally, the nothingness of death. This episode is of course very touching in that it holds the future for the author. Indeed as Julia Kristeva indicates, precisely mentioning the suicide of Virginia Woolf, a return to the pre-symbolic is very precarious, if not always a death wish.¹⁸⁴ Significantly, Susan, one of the other female characters of The Waves, was seen to deal with this question of the self by a return to nature and its cycles, away from the linearity of discourse or the binary character of an essentialist definition of self. It could be said that she goes back to the semiotic, without any attempt at dealing with thethetic, a refusal that is manifested by her absolute distrust of words and her numerous pregnancies.

The texts which come after The Waves, offer a successful alternative to both these positions, and there lies their political value. They show that there is a way for the outsiders – 'women, the masses, and Jews' -- to manage thethetic without death, whether real or metaphorical.¹⁸⁵ Night and Day already posed this fundamental question in the following terms: 'Was solitude good; was society bad?' (293) This shows that despite its chronological position in the oeuvre, this novel truly belongs, if only in spirit, with the political novels of the 30s and reinforces the choice of studying it in this third section. Significantly, what is only adumbrated in it, is shaped to the full in The Years and Between the Acts. Indeed, 'in becoming part of a drama, the discovery of androgyny

¹⁸³ Sue Roe sees 'non-being' as the state of women under patriarchal rule, p. 127.

¹⁸⁴ See p. 157.

¹⁸⁵ Jane Marcus argues that 'those are the outsiders to patriarchal culture whose spirituality and vision Woolf celebrates in The Years', p. 37.

in The Years gains a dimension that was lacking in the earlier books.¹⁸⁶ The notion of people being scared of each other, because they do not open up, are not close enough, but instead feel that they need to pretend and fit in with the given definition of the self, is what Miss La Trobe is trying to overcome with her performance. As Avrom Fleishman declares about the finale of the play: 'This crescendo of words suggests that the pageant is not a mere pastiche of English literature but a representation of the collective mind of England, which is composed of just such bits and pieces of language.'¹⁸⁷ The individual experience of a state of 'non-being', in The Years is further transmuted into a collective experience by the audience in Between the Acts.

In other words, and in keeping with what has been underlined throughout this study, this new sense of self and reality is informed and made possible by the pattern or significant form provided by the getting together of parties, family dinners, group meetings or performances. Because these texts are structurally informed by such occurrences, they can be said to allow the semiotic to come through. Indeed, in the pageant 'the music and elements of nature ... become part of the unity of consciousness which the audience is shown to be forming. With this unification the manner of presenting the audience's speech finds its definitive form: no longer direct statements ... or erlebte Rede but quoted speech of the ensemble.'¹⁸⁸ All these reunions enable their participants to form links or patterns within which people can express the self outside notions of hierarchy; that is the reality of self experienced as multiple and ever changing, with integrity to their own being. This offers the possibility of a future society which would be 'post-humanist and post-individual' as Clare Hanson puts it, which is Virginia Woolf's 'time before time was.'¹⁸⁹ Experiencing the self through community allows this process to flourish as opposed to what a society patriarchal in its make-up promotes, which is framing individuals in definite roles, surface images at odds with the reality of the self beneath. In that respect, the collective offers the possibility of experiencing a

¹⁸⁶ See Herbert Marder, p. 129.

¹⁸⁷ See p. 217.

¹⁸⁸ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 210.

¹⁸⁹ See p. 194.

state which precedes the symbolic without the threat of a total dissolution of the self. As Patricia Waugh underlines Virginia Woolf's concept of subjectivity 'emphasises the collective, relational, and dispersed rather than the discrete and autonomous.' She goes on to quote Virginia Woolf:

Is the true self this which stands at the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June. Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are, indeed, ourselves.¹⁹⁰

The concept of the frame was considered in detail earlier for its ability to expose the binary character of an essentialist structure. By doing so, even more importantly, it also points to ways of challenging it.

7. Visual arts: opening up boundaries

Throughout this study, the presence of paintings in Virginia Woolf's oeuvre at large was highlighted. The first novel that she saw of real significance for her literary attempt -- Jacob's Room -- was noted for opening with the view that a painter is trying to capture. Her second important novel -- To the Lighthouse -- focuses on the same attempt, but this time by a female painter, in order to make sense out of her relationship with Mrs Ramsay. This trend carries on with the recurring portraits of ancestors in Orlando, and was even already present in the portrait of Katharine's grandfather, which is at centre of Night and Day.

The discussion underlined how the frame itself is used as a narrative device, so as to frame a scene through a window -- Mrs Ramsay with her son, for instance -- but also, and more importantly, it is used on a larger, structural scale. This is the case for instance

¹⁹⁰ See Feminine Fictions, p. 95.

in To the Lighthouse, where the middle section is framed between a first section -- The Window -- and a third section -- The Lighthouse.

It was emphasised how all these are aesthetic uses of the framing device and function primarily within an attempt at disengaging literature from a realist tradition. At the same time, these texts already give signals of what was to come in the author's later production. For instance, the fact that despite being the eponymous hero, Jacob is actually outside the picture in the opening of the novel was underlined. In a similar way, To the Lighthouse shows the poignant impossibility of an endeavour to frame, that is to transfix, that which cannot be, either literally in painting or metaphorically in narrative, that is, the notion that 'Time Passes'.¹⁹¹ Significantly, the resolution of the story and narrative takes the form of Lily's solution to her visual art problem; a painting without a frame or a title.

The concept of framing as a means of definition, which pins down meaning, was then increasingly challenged within a feminist aesthetics, since it highlights a masculine economy. The frame thus provides an effective tool to understand how the essentialist model of a patriarchal society functions as well as the consequences it entails. Mrs Dalloway, for instance, only manages to summon a unified identity when the mirror sends her a reflection, an image of her social self, clearly framed and defined. This image is of course an illusion and does not yield her sense of self. This use of the mirror or portrait to highlight an essentialist definition and thus confinement of individuals in general, and women in particular, within strict roles is systematic in Virginia Woolf's works before The Waves.

Interestingly, the use of the frame is even increased in The Years and Between the Acts, where references to the visual arts are numerous. Actual pictures and portraits of certain characters are given as snapshots of what they are; a 'likeness to life' encapsulating their essence in the same way as traditional fiction goes about characterisation.¹⁹² Not surprisingly these are the traditional characters who endorse the

¹⁹¹ Patricia Oudeck Laurence argues that this is one of the ways in which Virginia Woolf attempts to spatialise and temporalise silence. See p. 6.

¹⁹² See p. 8 in B&B.

establishment, such as Dr Malone, 'who, had a frame be set around him, might have been hung over the fireplace too.' (74) Thus, in The Years portraits function as social markers, as in the description of the Lasswades' home: 'He looked at another picture; a lady in a sea of green; the famous Gainsborough' (240) or as family markers, as illustrated by the portrait of Rose, thus reinforcing these social or familial structures by making them highly visible. The portrait of Kitty is also illustrative of this strategy:

'How I love that picture of you, Kitty!' said Mrs Aislabie, looking up at the portrait of Lady Lasswade as a young woman. Her hair had been very red in those days; she was toying with a basket of red roses. Fiery but tender, she looked, emerging from a cloud of white muslin.

Kitty glanced at it and then turned away.

'One never likes one's own picture,' she said.

'But it's the image of you!' said another lady.

'Not now', said Kitty, laughing off the compliment rather awkwardly. (244)

Significantly, the portrait of Kitty and that of her aunt, Mrs Pargiter, although separated by a generation, look almost identical.¹⁹³ They both represent women as the 'Angel.' Yet, Kitty does not really fit into a traditional environment, as the whole scene surrounding this mention of the portrait indicates. In that respect her portrait, giving a false image of her, further highlights the idea of illusion already indicated by the author in Mrs Dalloway or in 'The Lady in the Looking-glass', where the object of the story is significantly never reflected in the looking-glass of the title. The concept of framing, in the discussion on nature and culture, indicated how the author challenges the ready-made portraits of individuals that society provides as superficially civilised and at odds with their own sense of self. This question, which comes to a head in The Years and Between the Acts, is voiced in many of Virginia Woolf's essays, making the relation between the private self and the public persona one of her most important concerns:

¹⁹³ See quotation on p. 228 of this work.

Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown.¹⁹⁴

Significantly, the metaphor used to describe the innermost self is of the natural order, reinforcing the sense of dichotomy at the centre of a society.

From a political point of view, the consequences of such a system is increasingly underlined in Virginia Woolf's works and the call for the alternative that the author ceaselessly endeavours to shape in her fiction becomes more pressing in these texts. It is as a response to this urgency that they actually not only offer but also represent an alternative point of view. For instance, Jane Marcus finds that The Years is 'as daring in the use of mythical motifs and as radical in form as Ulysses or The Waste Land.'¹⁹⁵ In other words, the very structure of these texts embodies the author's response to her challenge. This is effected by an alternative use of the frames and mirrors, at the level of form. The narrative of The Years, for instance, can be seen as constructed around mirroring effects, that is scenes repeating themselves at intervals in the guise of memories or anecdotes. As Harvena Richter suggests the mode of memory release used in The Waves and The Years are more complicated than in the novels before.¹⁹⁶ The effect is that the images are diluted and distorted, thus subverting the would-be proper reflection of a mirror. Between the Acts furthers this distortion with the play, a cultural manifestation, operating as a mirror to external, or natural, reality. The traditional conceit of art as the mirror held up to nature collapses back onto itself when Miss La Trobe actually has her actors holding up reflective objects in which the audience can see themselves. In this radical text, 'people, objects, landscapes ... become a series of mirrors reflecting the many aspects of the character himself.'¹⁹⁷ The fixed and complete reflection usually afforded by the mirror is exploded into splinters, reminiscent of the way in which Jinny Carslake collected stones in Jacob's Room, which embodied her

¹⁹⁴ See p. 46 in 'On Being Ill'.

¹⁹⁵ See p. 36.

¹⁹⁶ See p. 164.

¹⁹⁷ See Harvena Richter, p. 99.

feeling that 'multiplicity becomes unity.'¹⁹⁸ Pamela Transue finds that 'as we read through the novel, its structure mirrors, brilliantly, the interplay of life and art, conscious and unconscious, time and timelessness which is Woolf's theme.'¹⁹⁹ Metaphorically, meaning is displaced, opened-up to the point of 'admitting the unconscious and the irrational into the halting rhythms of [the text.]'²⁰⁰

This manipulation of the frame indicates the point where form becomes political, that is to say a feminist practice. It contributes to the overall movement away from the feminist aesthetics of the texts of the 20s to a distinctive politics of form. As Susan Dick explains in her analysis of the 'tunnelling process', there is a difference between Lily as an earlier artist, who complete her work, so that in parallel 'the movement of the narrative is completed with [a] final return to the present' and later artists 'in the novels that follow To the Lighthouse' who 'subdue' themselves in a bid for anonymity, thus underscoring the finality of their work.²⁰¹ This latter process constitutes a way of overcoming the dual character of the binary system informed by essentialist thinking. In an examination of 'Repetition as Extrapolation' in Between the Acts, J. Hillis Miller also finds that this text has a wider scope than Mrs Dalloway where repetition is mainly constituted by the various ways in which memories are recollected.²⁰² The main way to embrace this new, enlarged, economy is a ceaseless questioning, which can be seen to originate in the open-endedness of The Waves. It takes the shape of a perpetual process, modelled on the infinite and open character of nature as opposed to the finality of a man-made product. The modernity of this form is underlined by William Handley:

In essence, the randomness, the indefiniteness and the inconclusiveness of Woolf's narrators and narrative lines are the formal enactment of all that characterises the content of the novel as a developing genre in Bakhtin's theory.²⁰³

¹⁹⁸ See p. 30 of this work.

¹⁹⁹ See p. 177.

²⁰⁰ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 195.

²⁰¹ See her essay on 'The Tunneling Process: Some Aspects of Virginia Woolf's use of Memory and the Past', p. 195-6.

²⁰² See chapter 8 in Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels, (Harvard: University Press Cambridge, 1982) for a comprehensive study of the function of repetition in Between the Acts.

²⁰³ See William Handley, p. 13.

Within this new understanding, whatever is fixed and final is also doomed. Thus, The Years makes clear that history is forever changing, cannot be realised through a finalised discourse, such as that which attends to the Victorian era. The very stability of this 'Age of Equipoise'²⁰⁴ is what heralds its downfall, crumbling from within and contaminated by its own ethos. 'The accumulation of the past and of identity in [the novel] are also a cancelling-out ... Individuals, like histories, will not coalesce' so that in both these texts 'linearity of the narrative and story are disrupted.'²⁰⁵ This is, of course, reminiscent of the argument of 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens', where objects are significant, invested with meaning, for their intrinsically natural qualities as opposed to their cultural uses. Importantly, what was only hinted at in this stage of her career is actually embodied or carried out in these two novels. What they achieve is to break the frame of both meaning and representation, and thus open-up boundaries. In particular, 'in The Years Woolf explores the possibilities of "breaking the sequence" of sex/gender/identity, calling into question the "natural" relation between these three categories.'²⁰⁶ Equally, in Between the Acts, Virginia Woolf's 'ability to listen to voices of all kinds ... involves her in extending the borders of the field of sound and thought and narration.'²⁰⁷

8. Rhythm and Recurrences: the wave of life

This new proposed economy is manifested in thematic concepts of rhythms and cycles and its representation is achieved formally with the use of recurrences and repetitions. Significantly, when Virginia Woolf talks of the vital energy of life, whether in her essays or in her fiction, it is described in terms of the rhythmical pattern of the waves: 'The

²⁰⁴ See W. L. Burn, in his work The Age of Equipoise. A study of Mid-Victorian Generations. (Aldershot: Gregg Revivals, 1964).

²⁰⁵ See Laura Marcus, p. 147.

²⁰⁶ See Clare Hanson, p. 163.

wave of life flings itself out indefatigably.'²⁰⁸ This cyclical image is used at the beginning of The Years, in a manner reminiscent of To the Lighthouse with the metaphor of the searchlight, 'giving a rhythm of change and durability as one of the central themes of the novel.'²⁰⁹ The image then reappears later on, literally this time, during the episode covering the war, and it is the mark of a work concerned with facts that The Years is 'the only novel to actually go through the war.'²¹⁰ Through the rhythm thus created human patterns are seen as echoing original natural patterns. This is further reinforced by the idea of nature used as a backdrop for human activities that is 'landscape reflection.'²¹¹ This is established by a narrative technique recalling the interludes of The Waves, which has each chapter opening with a natural description, generally of the season, before moving on to the diegesis concerning characters. In her essay 'On Being Ill', the author explains how:

What snatches we get of [the sky] are mutilated by chimneys and churches, serve as a background for man, signify wet weather or fine, daub windows gold, and, filling in the branches, complete the pathos of dishevelled autumnal plane trees in autumnal squares. (47)

Both Between the Acts and The Years subvert the essentialist order, upset the boundary thus erected by the mind to protect itself from the physicality of the body. In the first, nature refuses, so to speak, to act only as a backdrop for the outdoors pageant by repeatedly creeping in, under the guise of animal noises or interruptions because of the weather. Similarly, in the latter, the sky is the permanent feature, actually coming to the fore.²¹² Indeed, nature is what is really left, as opposed to human activity, which is but a part of its cycle, and this is tellingly apparent in the sentence concluding a long novel

²⁰⁷ See Patricia Oudeck Laurence, p. 20.

²⁰⁸ See p. 48 in 'On Being Ill'.

²⁰⁹ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 175.

²¹⁰ As noted by Laura Marcus, p. 144.

²¹¹ This is Harvena Richter's terminology, p. 107.

²¹² See Gillian Beer for the argument of the presence of pre-history in Between The Acts in her chapter on 'Virginia Woolf and Prehistory', pp. 6-28 in Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground.

about family and history, spanning four generations: 'The sun had risen, and the sky above the houses wore an air of extraordinary beauty, simplicity and peace.' (413)

Human efforts to appropriate and define nature by means of culture are shown as limited and vain, once again an 'illusion', and nature's endurance is contrasted with surface human lives.²¹³ The Years shows how this attempt is carried out through the notion of history as the embodiment of culture, while Between the Acts highlights the shortcomings of such an attempt with language and representation as embodied by the play. The treatment of history and representation in both texts illustrates the author's position. Thematically, as well as structurally, The Years is based on a pattern of recurrence, described by Harvena Richter as 'an extremely complicated nesting of schema.'²¹⁴ The very high incidence of repetitions, in various forms, clearly constitutes a very important feature of the text. They take the shape of objects disappearing and reappearing all through the narrative, of memories, remembered and recounted at intervals; of speech patterns, which while being part of the characterisation, also provide another type of repetition; and of specific narrative devices, such as the opening of the successive chapters by a natural scene. In that light, 'the recurrence of the street-folk, violet sellers and street singers [are but] part of the years' rhythmic round.'²¹⁵ All this play of repetitions, whether at an extra-diegetic or diegetic level, points towards a notion of cyclical rhythm.

In view of the general argument of this section, this is not only, or merely, a stylistic device but also, and more importantly, a feature which has everything to do with the content of this novel 'which happen to be as radical as its form.'²¹⁶ On a thematic level this stresses the repetitive character of life, underlined by the cyclical quality of nature. In other words, it represents human finitude embedded in the infinite of universal time. Texts, such as Mrs Dalloway or Orlando, investigated this relation between clock time as imposed by society and the private, psychological time of the individual, and underlined

²¹³ This is James Naremore's observation, p. 238.

²¹⁴ See p. 167.

²¹⁵ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 176-8.

²¹⁶ See Jane Marcus, p. 54.

their incompatibility. In these two texts the political nature of this antagonism is further emphasised. Earlier on the former type of temporality was linked to men and the latter to women. The linearity of a masculine understanding of time and culture is opposed by a feminine understanding, in terms of rhythms and characterised by its cyclical nature. These texts offer another way of breaking down the hegemony of the mind over the body, and thus of culture over nature, which lies at the heart of a patriarchal system. They embody an alternative way of being, where boundaries are transgressed and frames are blurred, so that instead of standing in a binary relation to each other, 'nature and art are placed on a continuum.'²¹⁷ In other words, they show the possibility of a 'community of feeling with other people.'²¹⁸

This is clearly the significance of Between the Acts. Miss La Trobe's pageant represents this new vision of history, where distinctive periods in time are all subsumed into the ongoing leitmotiv of the pilgrims, in a marked 'resistance to the developmental evolutionary plot.'²¹⁹ Illustratively, the gramophone, which is supposed to signal the end of the play, actually gets stuck, repeating over and over its message of 'Unity - Dispersity' and finally stopping with a 'gurgled Un...dis...' (148) Language itself becomes indefinite, poised between opposite interpretations; a point further enhanced by the disparate snatches of conversation that are recorded after the performance. As Patricia Ondek Laurence comments, Virginia Woolf 'seeks to preserve ... the unity and dispersal of the times and of the mind and to embody this in the novel.'²²⁰ The framing of the play in terms of time, space and representation is thus effectively subverted. To further suggest this point, the text does not finish with the representation of the play, unlike in To the Lighthouse, and appropriately it is deemed by Miss La Trobe to be a failure, an attempt that almost succeeded, but is yet another transitory endeavour at communication and understanding: 'But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the clouds on the horizon.' (153) Hence, Virginia Woolf's last words on words are anything but final and

²¹⁷ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 208.

²¹⁸ See James Naremore's essay 'Nature and History in The Years', p. 243.

²¹⁹ See Clare Hanson, p. 189.

²²⁰ See p. 191.

the sense of closure expected of traditional representation is aptly defeated. Language is used as an attempt to make sense of reality, and in that light, it is the last feature of this last work, both as a text and as a narrative: 'They spoke.' (160) This apparent vote of confidence for language, though, is qualified by its introduction: 'Then the curtain rose.' Language is but a pretence, an artifice, not 'the thing itself.' This, in turn, is rooted in the primeval, where humans are linked with other species: 'But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.' (160)²²¹

The purpose of these two novels is not much different from that which informed previous texts, which is the endeavour to understand what it is to be alive and to capture the meaning of the human condition. The difference lies in the fact that the fiction of the 20s indicted the traditional, essentialist system and its mode of representation as unable to touch reality, because of its artificial dissociation between mind and body, which allows for any numbers of division. While The Waves provides a powerful criticism of this system in its most extreme form -- that is imperialism -- The Years and Between the Acts go beyond this by actually providing an alternative way of understanding reality. They do so by both advocating on a thematic level and realising in the text a systematic undermining of notions of hierarchy and divisions. They show the possibility of 'an alternative view of human relations which emphasises provisionality but connectedness, a subjectivity defined in relationship and in specific but historically changing context.'²²² This new point of view takes the body into account and uses its rhythms, which are inscribed within the cycles of nature, as a means to understand reality at a deeper level than that provided by a patriarchal culture. As James Naremore remarks, 'the important historical events, if La Trobe can be taken as an authority, are not wars but loves.'²²³ Equally, the new mode of representation provided by these two texts also puts the body back into the picture, so to speak, by inverting the concept of framing -- particularly portraits of women -- as an accurate reading of the self. Framing is defining, giving an

²²¹ See Gillian Beer, p. 25.

²²² See Patricia Waugh, p. 91.

interpretation which cannot be but reductive at the least, and a political lie at the worst. In the author's eyes:

The creature within can only gaze through the pane -- smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant.²²⁴

By separating the intellectual element from the physical, the patriarchal system of organising society purposely puts in danger anybody who does not fit within the frame. This is clearly of political importance for women, but more widely, it threatens anybody who is defined as an outsider by the centre, as illustrated by the tragic consequences that Virginia Woolf among others, witnessed during two world wars, precisely prompted by such systems.

The motive behind these two texts of maturity is mainly political and thus carries certain implications in terms of representation. They are to be understood in terms of pattern, particularly that which is created by the natural and cyclical backdrop of the story and mirrored by the cycles of repetitions in the narrative. Virginia Woolf's intention could be said to create what Harvena Richter terms 'a apprehension, however vague, of a mind-body-feeling gestalt, a vision of the novel as a living organism.'²²⁵ This methodology by which content and form merge into a political form, entails a specific philosophical stance on reality and a specific aesthetic stance on representation in art. It opposes a system of representation that deals with the 'business of going from breakfast to dinner' as a view of reality. Instead, The Years displays a clear intensification of patterns of recurrence as the narrative progresses, a feature culminating in the last chapter. It is thus with the rhythms of the body organism as a whole that the author is concerned.²²⁶ The political intention of this technique is manifest; it constitutes the breaking of the frame, of our expectations as readers, of the narrative as a story and of

²²⁴ See pp. 43-4 in 'On Being III'.

²²⁵ See p. 205.

²²⁶ See Harvena Richter, p. 207.

representation as final. This is reflected in the closing sentence, inasmuch as it can be considered as such:

'And now?' she said, looking at Morris, who was drinking the last drops of a glass of wine. 'And now?' she asked, holding out her hands to him. (413)

This questioning, at the very end of The Years, points towards the open-ended quality advocated by the author, and ceaseless renewal as a condition of the understanding of reality. Again, this is steeped in nature, symbolised by the sunrise, which effectively closes the narrative and the story alike, yet with a new beginning, heralding another cycle.

It was stressed earlier that this proposal can be seen as the semiotic rhythms interrupting the symbolic of the story-telling as a cultural exercise. Ultimately, it invites the question of meaning, which significantly is the recurring concern of the author's last words on words: 'What did it mean?'²²⁷ The study of the oeuvre as a whole points towards the notion that meaning is closely linked with pattern.

9. Significant form: the common pool

At this point, it can be said that The Years and Between the Acts offer not only a critique or questioning of the established system, but also an attempt at a solution, which takes the form of the same elements reorganised in a different relation or a change of emphasis. This is formulated in terms of visual art, such as the notion of pattern in the 'one-making' of Miss La Trobe, and all the other instances of getting together in the oeuvre in general, such as Mrs Ramsay's dinner, Mrs Dalloway's party or again the periodic reunions of the six characters of The Waves. The first section of this study showed how these particular moments are invested with significance, precisely because of their links with pattern and attempts to overcome the shortcomings of language. Although the

representation of this new understanding of the self and the world is carried out through the medium of language, it is done in a radical manner, which could not be more at odds with that of traditional fiction. Thus the author's 'conscious use of rhythm' can be seen as 'a kind of meta-syntax that relieves the oppressiveness of "words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning" and enables her to express the richness that is concealed within them.'²²⁸

Each novel prior to The Years and Between the Acts indicated, in different ways, the necessity for a new means of representation, which came to be increasingly mediated through non-representative disciplines, such as the visual arts or music. The achievement of these two texts is that they manage to actually embody this new representation; an achievement which is all the more interesting since the author gives something to measure it against, when she defined The Years as 'The Waves going on simultaneously with Night and Day.'²²⁹

This embodiment of significant form is achieved through the consistent use of certain elements, such as leitmotifs, the structuring of silence in the text, or the dismissal of plot, in order to subvert the linear apprehension of the novel. As Laura Marcus explains, 'where Mrs Dalloway or To the Lighthouse offered completion, of a scene or a moment, however transient, The Years break up patterns as or before they are formed.'²³⁰ The narrative thus becomes a text, which is to be apprehended in a similar way as a modern painting or piece of music would be. This intention was really the main ambition of Virginia Woolf as a writer, as is suggested by her comment, as early on as when writing To the Lighthouse: 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel" '²³¹ or Mrs Dalloway: 'I should say a good deal about [Mrs Dalloway] and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters ... The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment.'²³²

²²⁷ See p. 156 in BTA.

²²⁸ See Patricia Oudek Laurence, p. 170-1.

²²⁹ D, Tuesday 25 April, 1933, vol. 4 (1983), p. 151-2.

²³⁰ See p. 148.

²³¹ D, Saturday 27 June, 1925, vol. 3 (1982), p. 34.

²³² D, Thursday 30 August 1923, vol. 2 (1981), p. 263.

These two texts can be seen as providing the form that 'supplant novel', refusing as they do 'standard generic categories.'²³³

The extensive use of music in The Years, for instance, testifies to this intention. As Patricia Ondek Laurence underlines, rhythm contributes to meaning and the author actually manages to incorporate in the genre of the novel a new music. It functions both on an aesthetic level, that is, as form with the composition of the novel as a variation on a theme, and on a thematic level, that is as content. As a theme, it presents political overtones with everything that Wagner's Siegfried stands for in Kitty's eyes, which is an unconscious association with sex and a sense of lost opportunities or Jazz music for Sara, which represents liberation from traditional constrictions and a sense of the mixed character of life. Indeed the novel is 'full of songs like Sara's for singing oneself to sleep or like the caretaker's children's, for waking up the world.'²³⁴ At a formal level, it is the very structure of the text, based on repetitions which 'create in the reader a sense of an audible music of humanity, of continuity and harmony.'²³⁵ Painting or the discussion about visual arts functions in a similar way. Both The Years and Between the Acts feature these at a thematic and formal level, so that this overlap provides a significant pattern which best translates the author's view of reality. This point has to be considered within the argument put forward by Virginia Woolf in 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens'. It is interesting, for instance, to consider that Eleanor scribbles a pattern very much reminiscent of Katharine's in Night and Day, which is indicative of a deep feeling that cannot be expressed with language but needs the non-linearity and the significant shape of a circle to be adumbrated. Form thus becomes significant, not because it is invested with content in an illustrational manner, but because it is an open expression of meaning, which cannot be otherwise accommodated. Form has thus become content and vice versa. The character of Isa in Between the Acts is illustrative of such a process,

²³³ See Rachel Bowlby, 'The Trained Mind', p. 31.

²³⁴ See Jane Marcus, p. 38.

²³⁵ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 176.

since as Harvena Richter she is the ultimate 'lyrical "I"', both feeling and analysing at once, by a process in which speaker and spoken-to have fused.²³⁶

This new type of expression is thus better accommodated by patterns of intersection such as the gathering of a party or the criss-crossing of Tube lines, or again patterns of cycles, such as the rhythm of the body or of nature, because it proposes to translate the multiple, ever-changing character of reality. Indeed, these 'aspects of inward form, (rhythm, pattern, space...) illustrates Virginia Woolf's method of defining certain qualities of felt experience, life in its experiential totality rather than in its single state of being.'²³⁷ The meaning of life or the human condition can only be articulated with a specific language, which allows for the inherently chaotic and fluid character of its experience. This new modern language can be described in terms of the semiotic, which is embodied by 'the natural music' featured in Between the Acts, for instance, since musicality is 'simply music functioning'²³⁸ so that its content cannot be dissociated from its form and fuse together in a whole that nonetheless retains individual components.

In that context, it has to be said that, although nature plays an important part in Virginia Woolf's writing, as it did in her life, it is not necessarily valued for itself, but for its role as a marker of deeper rhythms of understanding. Clearly, for a writer and an individual steeped in so intellectual an environment and family as Virginia Woolf, this is not a question of rejecting culture in its entirety. As argued earlier, such an attitude would comply with the patriarchal notion of women being equated with nature as opposed to culture, which is seen as a purely masculine construct. In a typical move, the author is rather reclaiming nature as an integrated part of a new kind of culture, not in opposition to it. It is achieved by the use of an all-encompassing form, capable of representing "'We" ... composed of many different things ... we all life, all art, all waifs & strays--a

²³⁶ See p. 135. Interestingly, Allen McLaurin mentions the passage in which Isa looks at herself in the three-folded mirror and sees the scene as an illustration of the impossibility of being inside and outside at the same time. See p. 57-8 in the Echoes Enslaved.

²³⁷ See Harvena Richter, p. 231.

²³⁸ See Sara Mills, 'No Poetry for Ladies: Gertrude Stein, Julia Kristeva and Modernism' in Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon, edited by David Murray, (London: Batsford, 1989), p. 90.

rambling capricious but somehow unified whole--the present state of mind?'²³⁹ In so doing, the author offers an alternative view of the world to the sets of dualistic oppositions underlying patriarchy and its essentialist system. For instance, as Gillian Beer notices, 'Virginia Woolf's work declares the fundamental kinship that goes beyond even family romance: living in the same time, sometimes in the same place -- whether or not you ever meet.'²⁴⁰

An instance of this is the recurrent use in the whole oeuvre of the image of the fish in the water.²⁴¹ Whereas it is only referred to fleetingly in previous books, the image is directly developed in Between The Acts. The implications of this natural simile are explored in the short story 'The Fascination of the Pool'. It features a pool as a collective of thoughts and voices past. It is inhabited by a 'giant carp' which 'was never caught' and seen but 'once'²⁴² but significantly reappears to Lucy in Between the Acts:

Then something moved in the water; her favourite fantail. ... Then she had a glimpse of silver - the great carp himself, who came to the surface so very seldom. (150)

In both cases, as in most of the fiction, the pool functions as a metaphor for meaning, which remains always elusive, so that the only hope is a glimpse of understanding on the surface level, but also and as importantly, as an affirmation of the existence of meaning, continuity and unity.²⁴³ This reinforces Virginia Woolf's understanding of reality as operating at a deeper level than the surface manifestation which traditional fiction is content with. This deeper sense of reality is thus to be found in the alternative culture of community and anonymity, which is reflected in the pool:

²³⁹D, Tuesday 26 April 1938, vol. 5 (1984), p. 135.

²⁴⁰ See introduction to Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground, p. 2.

²⁴¹ Makiko Minow-Pinkney points out that 'in a system of images that first appeared as the wild goose and the great fish in Orlando, Bernard's epiphany is symbolised as a bird or fish, see p. 180.

²⁴² See p. 227 in 'The fascination of the Pool' in The Complete Shorter Fiction, edited by Susan Dick, (London: Grafton Books, 1991).

²⁴³ See James Naremore, p. 238.

thoughts wandered in and out freely, friendly and communicative, in the common pool ... silently and orderly as fish not impeding each other.²⁴⁴

This is an image of a space in direct opposition with the pecking order of patriarchal dualism, as indicated by the dismissal of the notion of boundaries. It also shows, as Laura Marcus remarks, that increasingly, Woolf comes to despise 'publicity' and to espouse a 'philosophy of anonymity.'²⁴⁵ This notion is echoed in Between the Acts by Lucy looking at the fish 'slid on, in and out between the stalks, silver; pink; gold; splashed; streaked; pied. "Ourselves," she murmured.' (150) Indeed, Virginia Woolf wrote the novel with this idea in mind: 'but "I" rejected: "We" substituted.'²⁴⁶

It is significant that this deeper sense of reality is expressed in terms of fluidity, which represents the feminine in opposition to such images as 'the scimitar' for instance, which was associated with Mr Ramsay in To the Lighthouse. Yet, the characteristic as well as the achievement of these two novels, is to subsume such traditional characterisation in terms of gender or class and manage to create a new shape that encompasses both fact and vision, without 'impeding each other. Indeed, the image of the great carp is not defined, it does not bear a specific meaning, as Harvena Richter points out, but equally, anyone can attach their own meaning to it.²⁴⁷ Hence, one can see the novel as marked by 'ambivalence' as Laura Marcus does. She also finds that the female characters accept it whereas men are driven either by a single aggressive instinct or by the force of 'reason.'²⁴⁸ This is demonstrated by the opposition between Lucy and her brother:

He would carry the flame of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave. For herself, every morning, kneeling, she protected her vision. Every night she opened the window and looked at leaves against the sky. (151)

²⁴⁴ See p. 226-7 in 'The Fascination of the Pool'.

²⁴⁵ See p. 144.

²⁴⁶ D, Tuesday 26 April, 1938, vol. 5, (1984), p. 135.

²⁴⁷ See p. 189.

²⁴⁸ See p. 168.

However, this opposition is resolved in the form of the text itself and epitomised by Miss La Trobe's performance and the audience's reaction to it: "'Did you feel' [Mrs Swithin] asked, 'what he said: we act different parts but are the same?'" (157) Thus compared to previous novels, which exhibited a sense of feminine values needing to be retrieved, in the productions of the 30s, Virginia Woolf seems to have widened her frame of reference. The significant form on which The Years and Between The Acts are based provides a space for a post-modern self and thus reality, where language no longer functions on a binary model. To that extent it allows the author to figure in these texts, that which cannot be said, whether it is left unspoken because of social taboos, or unsayable such as the fundamental silence at the heart of life embodied in empty rooms.²⁴⁹

In other words, these texts prefigure Julia Kristeva's 'third space'. Indeed ambivalence, both of content and form, is their main purpose. The pageant, as an example of literary production, ultimately escapes interpretation. Avrom Fleishman explains how this is achieved:

Since the scenes are presented as viewed and interpreted by the audience, and since the latter is not a monolithic entity but an assemblage of individuals interested in the play and interested in themselves, the problem of interpreting the pageant is multiplied.²⁵⁰

In the light of this new shape, which cannot be more defined than by Isa's comment on the pageant: 'Orts, scraps and fragments' (157), a closer consideration of the question of fact and vision is important in order to fully understand the extent of this aesthetic and political achievement.

²⁴⁹ For this distinction between different kinds of silence in Patricia Ondek Laurence in TITLE

²⁵⁰ See p. 205.

10. Fact and vision

The first section of this study underlined how the author thinks of her fiction in terms of fact and vision, whether to embody one or the other or to combine them. Moreover, characterisation is often built along these lines. Night and Day provided an example where the opposition is actually and explicitly at the centre of the novel. This notion is both aesthetic and political. In that context, Virginia Woolf sees traditional fiction as needlessly factual whereas she considers modern fiction as having a visionary quality about it. So, from an aesthetic point of view, representation has to be visionary to be able to translate the modern feeling of reality. More importantly, though, this question of fact and vision can also be equated with the double-dealing or double-standard of a patriarchal society based on an essentialist principle, thus turning it into a political question. This is significantly epitomised in The Years by 'the tree split in the middle' in Oxford:

And in the garden of the Lodge outside Kitty's window [the rain] sluiced the ancient tree under which Kings and poets had sat drinking three centuries ago, but now it was half fallen and it had to be propped up by a stake in the middle. (61)

As well as functioning as a criticism of 'the half-dead academic traditions which Woolf herself abhors',²⁵¹ this metaphor is also indicative of the dangers of a system based on division, that is to say, on a strict opposition between fact and vision. When given ontological power, this dichotomy produces estrangement, particularly between the genders, which is ultimately conducive to dictatorship in the house and nation alike. This problem suffuses the whole text of The Years, which is to be expected considering the author's self-declared attempt at fusing both elements.

In that respect, the genesis of this work is revealing. Virginia Woolf intended it as a novel taking facts into account after the visionary character of The Waves, which does not of course mean that she was reverting to the traditional factual narrative, 'Mr Bennett'

style. What it really means, is that at this stage of her career, the political preoccupations which had always been present in her mind, the desire 'to give voice to some of the perplexities of [a woman's] sex'²⁵² as she phrased it in 1909, were now forcefully coming to the fore. In other words, her politics compelled her to perfect her aesthetics and achieve a new form of representation. So, as demonstrated previously, her aesthetics of the 20s, motivated by feminist concerns, as expressed in Mrs Dalloway or Orlando, gave way to a new far-ranging feminism -- no longer focussed only on a gender question -- by which form itself has become political, and this is what shapes both The Years and Between the Acts. Significantly, though, The Years was a very difficult novel to write and underwent many a transformation. Grace Radin, for instance, published in 1976-7 'Two Enormous Chunks', two large extracts which had been deleted by the author in 1936. As Laura Marcus underlines, 'the revisions entailed extensive cutting and ellipsis, a process which was in part a "poetic" condensation but also formed a kind of censorship or repression of the naturalist detail of the earlier drafts.'²⁵³

More important still, Virginia Woolf felt compelled to write a separate pamphlet, Three Guineas, dealing uniquely and very directly with political matters. The fact that the initial plan for 'The Pargiters' ended up with two separate pieces, The Years as fiction and Three Guineas as a pamphlet, could be seen as a failure to embody what this study calls her aesthetic feminist representation.²⁵⁴ Yet the reason the text was cut off to such an extent is actually positive. In view of her attempt at a communal vision, a shape that would be all-encompassing, the dogmatic discourse of the pamphlet would equate it with a type of coercion. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis put it: 'Woolf feared that The Pargiters had been Creonesque ... in contrast, she created an Antigonesque narrative: tolerant, humane, forgiving.'²⁵⁵ This feeling is echoed by Jane Wheare who finds the dramatic method of The Years more successful than The Pargiters's use of characters as

²⁵¹ See Jane Marcus, p. 136.

²⁵² See p. 258 in Hermione Lee Virginia Woolf.

²⁵³ See p. 141.

²⁵⁴ See Laura Marcus' reservations, p. 138 as well as Sue Roe's feeling that Virginia Woolf could not manage the matter of women's sexuality due to her own awkwardness in relation to the subject, p. 124.

mouthpieces for Woolf's argument.²⁵⁶ As Pamela Caughie indicates, when discarding The Pargiters, 'it is not a *form* Woolf abandons but a *motive*' so that 'what began as a study of sexual repression and social taboos in The Pargiters turns into a testing out of what Woolf calls "layers" of discourse in The Years.'²⁵⁷

Indeed one has to consider that the author did successfully manage to embody her politics of form in her fiction as the fusion of content and form in these two last texts testifies. In other words, they do achieve, even if temporarily, what the author set out to do. Also, in keeping with the notion that the representation they achieve is mediated through a new kind of language, Three Guineas can be seen as a companion, a key to the novel. Clearly, as the rise of fascism and the imminence of the war betrayed, Virginia Woolf's society was not yet ready for this new language. This explains the need for a direct pamphlet, talking to this society in its own language. Laura Marcus finds that in Three Guineas, 'Virginia Woolf makes a plea for a feminist gradualism' whereby the changes she advocates would be allowed to take place about fifty years hence.²⁵⁸ In that light, The Years and Between the Acts both anticipate and participate in the elaboration of the new cultural space uncovered by the rhetoric of Three Guineas.

This point of view is reinforced by the fact that The Years and Between the Acts do indeed encompass both facts and vision. The scope of The Years in terms of time and its preoccupation with history easily account for the novel being anchored in facts. Yet, as Harvena Richter underlines, 'we see that surface events are only part of [the novel] just as the calendar is only a visible or social recording of lived time.'²⁵⁹ As a consequence, it is significant that its visionary aspect is very much present and even seems to overtake facts in the final chapter.²⁶⁰ This is indicated when Peggy attempts to collect facts as a scientist, but always finds herself impeded by an element of vision:

²⁵⁵ See p. 175.

²⁵⁶ See p. 127.

²⁵⁷ See Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism: Literature in Quest of Itself, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 96-98.

²⁵⁸ See p. 139.

²⁵⁹ See p. 171.

'I'm good, she thought, at fact-collecting. But what makes up a person---, (she hollowed her hand), the circumference, --no, I'm not good at that.' (335)

Appropriately, this whole last part of the text is also rife with visionary elements and references to previous texts, such as the 'semi-transparent envelope' and 'the globe'. This is borne out in the medium of the narrative itself. Indeed, language is consistently undermined in its most fundamental manifestation, which is the designating process that proper names imply. As Isobel Grundy noticed, they are consistently transformed in the narrative. Particularly in the case of Rose, the name is at odds with the character.²⁶¹ In the same way, the text is structured by direct means of suggesting emotions, as opposed to describing them. Harvena Richter finds these in 'the exclamations and half-phrases, rhyme, repetition and refrain' which informs these two texts.²⁶² What this signifies is a reiteration of the impossibility to understand reality, and even less represent it, with an essentialist system that compromises 'the polymorphous nature of experience.'²⁶³ The image of the globe, on the contrary, intimates 'the microscopic aspect of the moment -- [containing the past but also the future] -- which holds within it the entire world of the self.'²⁶⁴

Thus, these texts go as much beyond the directly political argument, which is developed to its end in Three Guineas, as they go beyond the purely visionary element, to create a new radical form. In that respect, Between the Acts will take over again the main argument of Three Guineas, written a year earlier in 1938, when fascism was already rising in Europe, but a menace yet to touch Britain, thus demonstrating that the pamphlet by no means replaces the feminist character of the fiction. The way in which both texts embody this new form is by merging facts and vision. They can be seen as a rejection of setting one mode of experience against the other.²⁶⁵ In this new economy, a certain amount of factual knowledge is desirable yet the specific quantity is to be

²⁶⁰ Laura Marcus also sees a reintegration of vision in this novel of facts, p. 151.

²⁶¹ See p. 208.

²⁶² See p. 145.

²⁶³ See Makiko Minow-Pinkney, p. 163.

²⁶⁴ See Harvena Richter, p. 161-2.

assessed by relying on intuition. This new model thus takes the oeuvre from a feminist aesthetics to a wider consideration of politics. The modernity of what is essentially an inter-disciplinary approach to representation, 'combining the arts of painting and literature',²⁶⁶ and adequately suited to express the author's view of the world -- since 'the English language is much in need of new words'²⁶⁷-- constitutes the corner-stone of this politics of form.

11. Representation: an interesting attempt in a new method²⁶⁸

It is critical to realise, as this study highlighted, that in Virginia Woolf's understanding, history and society are intricately linked with the politics of gender. She made this point very clearly in A Room of One's Own as far as society is concerned, in demonstrating that access to status and recognition is a question of gender. In other words, Shakespeare's success was validated if not enabled by his gender, within a social environment that was partial, and consequently would ensure his failure had he been a woman. Similarly, Three Guineas does for history what this former essay did for society, by stating that this same partiality applies to race and class, making this dichotomy the basis for imperialism and ultimately fascism. Thus from society to history the author gives a picture of a whole system. It is based on an essentialist philosophy, which she sees as accountable for the dualistic economy of the self underlying it. Exposing the divisiveness of a system founded on a binary set of oppositions thus necessarily implies considering the politics of gender.

To render the picture of the system governing her culture, Virginia Woolf first had to develop an adequate medium, which would highlight the underlying structure of this system. She then had to provide an alternative concept for a new way of living.

²⁶⁵ See James Naremore's essay 'Nature and History in The Years, p. 259.

²⁶⁶ See David Dowling, Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1985), p. 100.

²⁶⁷ See p. 197 in 3G.

Considering this intention, the reason why facts and vision should both be encompassed within this medium becomes evident. It is with this in mind that she developed a new mode of representation, characterised in this work as a political form. To understand clearly how this representation is achieved in The Years and Between the Acts, it is necessary to consider her oeuvre overall.

In these two texts, one can see Virginia Woolf actually realise what Lily Briscoe endeavours with Mrs Ramsay in To the Lighthouse. From an aesthetic point of view, the author's oeuvre undertakes the same kind of voyage into experimentation and goes some way to answer the problems delineated at the beginning of her career in terms of 'What does it mean to travel from A to B, from Richmond to Waterloo, from the Edwardians to the Georgians, and perhaps from "realism" to "modernism"?'²⁶⁹ It is compelling, in that respect, that Lily's achievement is a painting and not a literary production. Indeed, overall, the oeuvre goes from the inside to the outside, that is from a focus on content towards a focus on form, to the extent that content has become form and form has taken the value of content. This is the space covered from The Voyage Out and its focus on diegesis, through The Waves and its focus on form, to The Years and Between the Acts, which are no longer stories but texts, as defined by Julia Kristeva. This is 'the process or place in which opposing terms alternate in endless rhythm, supported by the chora; as instinctual rhythms pass through specific theses, meaning is constituted and is exceeded by what is outside meaning (materiality, for example).'²⁷⁰ Indeed, in her last text in particular, meaning is always deferred, since enunciation is never final, as the last sentence indicates: 'They spoke.' (160) This new form manages to overcome the closure of a signified defined by a signifier and thus a reality defined by its representation. As Avrom Fleishman points out about the pageant, 'at the end, the line between art and life

²⁶⁸ D, Saturday 23 November, 1940, vol. 5 (1985), p. 340.

²⁶⁹ See Gillian Beer's essay on 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown': 'We're Getting There', p. 4.

²⁷⁰ See p. 241 in Michael Payne, Reading Theory. An introduction to Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

is blurred; as the actors mingle with the audience, "each still acted the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes."²⁷¹

This process is allowed by the significant form of a new political representation, which is manifested in terms of pattern and rhythms, and therefore can be seen as corresponding to the chora, since

this experience of the semiotic chora in language ... can be considered as the source of all stylistic effort, the modifying of banal, logical order, by linguistic distortions such as metaphor, metonymy, musicality.²⁷²

The Voyage Out also constitutes Virginia Woolf's initial voyage into fiction, and despite the obvious and frightening similarity between the author's tragic end and that of Rachel in the novel, the difference between them is illustrative of the achievement of the author. Unlike her heroine, she successfully manages her voyage out of the traditional context of her upbringing into modernity, both from a personal and professional point of view. This feeling is echoed in Orlando, charting a voyage in time covering several centuries, which can be construed as symbolic of the author's own voyage from the nineteenth century into the modern age. The evolution of Virginia Woolf's work can also be considered as positive because, increasingly, her female characters are allowed a better fate. The deaths of Rachel, Mrs Ramsay or of Rhoda are balanced by the stronger female characters of Katharine, Eleanor or Miss La Trobe. This point is crucial in asserting the validity of a political form. Indeed, despite Jane Wheare's feeling that Eleanor corresponds to Mrs Ramsay,²⁷³ it is significant that it is only in later works that female characters can escape their fate and forge a destiny for themselves. Indeed, it is only when Virginia Woolf inscribes 'her challenge to developmental narrative within the form of her text itself that she no longer needs to use 'the abrupt cutting-off of her heroine's

²⁷¹ See p. 204.

²⁷² See p. 20 in Women's Review (12), 1987, interviewed by Susan Sellers, (London: Women's Review, 1985-)

²⁷³ See p. 128.

life' to make her point.²⁷⁴ In these works, form itself translates the point. Indeed, Pamela Caughie remarks that 'as Woolf revised The Pargiters into The Years, she became increasingly concerned with "layers" rather than polarities, ... with contrast and change rather than stasis and continuance, ... with drama and its "particular relation with the surface" rather than surface and depth.'²⁷⁵

Moreover, this new model of representation literally creates the possibility of living anew. Indeed, the third section of this study showed that the aesthetic treatment of these texts offers an example, and if one considers these books as successful, a recipe or modus operandi for 'a new world'. It envisages a counter-history, which overcomes 'the scare we have of each other' and thus lessens the compulsory 'preening'²⁷⁶ which necessarily ensues from it. This line of thinking is entrusted, in The Years, to the character of Kitty:

'Damn these women!' she said to herself. ... She would have liked to fleece them of their clothes, of their jewels, of their intrigues, of their gossip. (247)

This kind of false consciousness, which results in pretence, is thus seen by the author as producing nothing but estrangement and difference, that is 'a split in the middle' conducive only to hierarchy and its abuses. (397) Significantly, the women Kitty is cursing are the very embodiment of internalised patriarchy as their reaction to the Suffrage Movement suggests. Living within a patriarchal system can only produce this split in women's identity, 'both victims and upholders of the status quo.'²⁷⁷

In the terms of this new model, there is no given, only possibilities, manifested in the texts by an overall feeling of ambivalence, a refusal of totality.²⁷⁸ This new vision of reality is enabled by an aesthetic feminist model of representation, which can be seen as post-modern space where identity is no longer defined but deconstructed. In the words

²⁷⁴ See Gillian Beer's point, p. 16.

²⁷⁵ See Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism, p. 100.

²⁷⁶ See p. 369 in TY.

²⁷⁷ See Rachel Blau DuPlessis, p. 39.

²⁷⁸ See Laura Marcus, p. 172.

of Virginia Woolf: 'we are the thing itself.' Between the Acts embodies this new model, with the participation of the audience in the performance pointing towards the non-dogmatic or anti-doctrinal character of a play that does not enforce a fixed and given view of the world. Significantly, 'the most prominent participant ... is an anonymous voice which emerges from the audience as a whole ... It develops a synthetic identity formed from the response of divergent perspectives to a common experience.'²⁷⁹ Indeed, this is 'the voice that was no one's voice.' (133)

In terms of narratology, this aesthetics privileges 'showing' instead of 'telling'. This is clear from the author's choice of using drama in her last work; a text which, as Harvena Richter notes, also abounds in instances of symbolic action like no other novel before.²⁸⁰ This 'showing' is used to such an extent that, as Avrom Fleishman shows, 'the frame story and the pageant [are reduced] to a common plane of mimesis.'²⁸¹ This technique, which erases boundaries between content and form, reinforces this new direction; what can be seen as the detachment of the narrative voice enables a more open-ended text where interpretations are invited as interplay. Really, what is dramatised is 'not the spoken voice of the character or the conventional narrator but the inner voice whose exact nature resists definition yet attempts, through language and rhythm, to articulate feeling.'²⁸² Appropriately, in the children's song²⁸³ at the end of The Years, 'not a word was recognisable.' yet Eleanor finds it 'beautiful' (408), since like Mrs Hilbury, she has faith in her vision. The narratology of these works, which can be seen as increasingly 'choric',²⁸⁴ thus produces an aesthetic theory which functions politically. As Jane Marcus remarks

²⁷⁹ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 208.

²⁸⁰ See p. 60-1.

²⁸¹ See p. 213.

²⁸² See Harvena Richter, p. 129.

²⁸³ Sue Roe, however, understands the song as 'the piercing warnings of further discord, disharmony, impending crisis', p. 139.

²⁸⁴ See Laura Marcus, p. 151.

Elevating the role of the chorus in the modern novel to its position in Greek drama as Virginia Woolf did was the aesthetic equivalent of revolutionary political act, a socialist's demonstration of faith in the people.²⁸⁵

The new language required for this new view of the world is thus only approximated in these last two works, but it always stems from 'a passionate urge to speak to the absolute fact that besides age, besides death, there is life.'²⁸⁶

It is in this sense that these texts establish a powerful politics of form as exemplified by the use of the concept of framing, which stands as a general metonymy for this aesthetics. The last sentences of The Years -- ' "And now?" she asked / The sun had risen' -- and of Between the Acts -- 'Then the curtain rose. They spoke.' -- are significant in that respect. The traditional sense of closure is endlessly deferred by these texts. Instead they point towards a new beginning, which opens up meaning and thus provide new possibilities of being for the self. As Patricia Oudek Laurence emphasises, 'in doing so [Virginia Woolf] questions the borders and frames of words, plays, a play within a play, the novel, and fiction, in general.'²⁸⁷ Appropriately, these last two texts echo the final advocacy of A Room of One's Own: 'I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals.' (106)

12. The politics of form: some very singular books²⁸⁸

To finally understand to what extent Virginia Woolf fulfilled her intention to write 'some very singular books', it is useful here to consider the early story 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn',²⁸⁹ written in August 1906 together with 'Anon', an essay that she was

²⁸⁵ See p. 38.

²⁸⁶ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 200-1.

²⁸⁷ See p. 204.

²⁸⁸ D, Monday 16 November, 1931, vol. 4, (1983), p. 53.

²⁸⁹ This title was supplied by Susan M. Squier and Louise A. DeSalvo, who published the undated, untitled holograph draft in Twentieth Century Literature, 25:3/4 (Fall/Winter 1979), pp. 237-69. The story was subsequently printed in The Complete Shorter Fiction, edited by Susan Dick. The quotations and page references are from the latter text. See Susan Dick's notes to the text, p. 295-6.

writing at the same time as Between the Acts.²⁹⁰ These two pieces thus represent the two poles of the author's career.

Thematically they deal with the same theme, that is, history and literature. 'The Journal' features, the historian Miss Rosamond Merridew, who has 'exchanged a husband and a family and a house in which [she] may grow old for certain fragments of yellow parchments.' (33) 'Anon', on the other hand, was to be the first chapter of a projected critical history of English literature on which Virginia Woolf was working when she died in 1941.²⁹¹ It traces the anonymous voice of Anon back to a communal time before the written word. Considering their dates it is relevant to find out what they reveal about the author's project.

The 'Journal' is built for about a third of its length on Miss Merridew's visit to a house 'where the owners are likely to possess exquisite manuscript.' (36) Her intuition reveals fruitful when the owner, John Martyn, accepts to let her read his family papers. The remainder of the story is taken up by the journal of Mistress Joan Martyn, his ancestor, 'kept by her at Martyn's Hall, in the county of Norfolk the year or our Lord 1480.' (41) Thus the narrative voice change from that of Miss Rosamond, directly to that of Joan Martyn. The journal itself is constituted of seven clearly marked chapters plus a few 'Last Pages', which close the text. It describes the everyday life from the point of view of a young woman, which she feels herself as limited: 'For, truly, there is nothing in the pale of my days that needs telling; and the record grows wearisome.' (61)

The journal clearly records her feeling of entrapment. She has to 'be thankful that there were stout gates between [her] and the world' (45) not only because of the dangerous times, particularly for women, but also because she has to be kept for marriage: 'was not Jane Moryson carried off on the eve of her wedding only last year?'

²⁹⁰ 'Anon', which exists only as a manuscript was edited and printed out by Brenda Silver in 'Twentieth-Century Literature: a scholarly and critical journal', Autumn 1979. The references are to this edition.

²⁹¹ See Virginia Woolf: A to Z, p. 6.

(47) Marriage is thus linked to property in the story, as Louise DeSalvo underlines, and it establishes the relationship between the sexes.²⁹² Indeed

No other event in the life of a woman can mean so great a change; for from fleeting shadow like and unconsidered in her father's house, marriage suddenly forms her to a substantial body, with weight which people must see and make way for. (51)

Thus the journal functions both as a critique of patriarchy as a territorial system and as a retrieving of the supposedly unimportant domestic life of women, both through Joan Martyn and Rosamond Merridew.

The format of 'Anon' is quite different. It takes the shape of a collage of quotations from historians or critics, of folk songs and descriptions of ancient rituals, and of extracts from plays and poems. The narrative tells the tale of 'Anon... sometimes man; sometimes woman. He is the common voice singing out of doors.' (382) Importantly, 'He had no name. He had no place' and 'he used the outsiders privilege to mock the solemn, to comment upon the established.' (383) As such he creates the life of the community, 'the common belief' (384) that the narrative celebrates. However 'the first blow has been aimed at Anon when the author's name is attached to the book. The individual emerges.' (385) With the emergence of the printed word, the old language of the community is suppressed, and even worse 'There is a barrier between the sayable and the unsayable.' (389) At the time of Spencer, for instance, the people 'have no serviceable language.' (395) In the final instance 'the playwright is replaced by the man who writes a book. The audience is replaced by the reader. Anon is dead.' (398) That is to say, the communal life and its anonymous language are replaced by the patriarchal language of order and hierarchy, which defines everything by its name. However, 'we

²⁹² See Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work, p. 269.

can still become anonymous and forget something that we have learnt when we read the plays to which no one has troubled to set a name' (398).²⁹³

The two pieces thus function in different ways and aim for something quite different, so that they clarify the notion that the author's frame of reference enlarged all along her career. The 'Journal' very clearly belongs to the beginning of Virginia Woolf's career, when her main concern was to rediscover women's hidden lives and retrieve their values. It is an attack on patriarchy in the same way that Mrs Dalloway or To the Lighthouse. It is actually thematically very much like these novels. Mistress Joan's future is to take on the duty of 'a great honour and great burden' by getting married in the same way as Clarissa Dalloway takes on the burden of organising a social life befitting the office of her husband (50). Like in To the Lighthouse, Joan's mother is a very much central to the story, in that she concurs with the patriarchal system and persuades her daughter of the good of marriage. Louise DeSalvo finds that this story 'presages many of the central concerns of Woolf's later works.'²⁹⁴ Indeed, she sees in Joan Shakespeare's other sister, referring to A Room of One's Own, since despite writing, Joan does not die or go mad and is even encouraged by her family. However it is quite clear from the story that Joan stops writing as she is going to get married and writing is not part of the duties of a wife. Indeed, the marriage is not described precisely because it puts an end to the writing and the narrative alike. Thus, despite the technique of turning the diary into the text itself, 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' is very much a traditional story, which ends in marriage; that is to say a romance plot.

On the other hand, both structurally and thematically, 'Anon' belongs to the end of the author's career. As mentioned it was written at the same time as Between the Acts,

²⁹³ Michael Tratner underlines that 'many writers of the early twentieth-century ... treat[ed] the move from individualism to collectivism as in some way a return to the Middle Ages', p. 7 in Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995).

²⁹⁴ See p. 63 of her essay 'Shakespeare's *Other* Sister' in New Feminists Essays on Virginia Woolf, edited by Jane Marcus, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

and as Nora Eisenberg does, can be seen as a companion piece to the novel.²⁹⁵ Indeed both deal with the search and the attempt to embody a 'little language' as a way 'to cure modern words and woes, patriarchal words and woes.'²⁹⁶ The main and most important difference between these two texts is that the first hinges on sexual differences and enhances them whereas 'Anon' precisely advocates anonymity as the way to a communal society where gender divisions no longer matter anymore than class divisions. The little language of 'Anon', which is 'brief, intimate, colloquial' (388), is also the language of Miss La Trobe's pageant. Like this later text, it manages to embody an all-encompassing discourse, in which even 'silence "figures" itself'.²⁹⁷ Indeed Patricia Ondek Laurence further explains how

The unspoken thoughts of Isa, Giles, and Mrs Manresa – along with the sounds of war, history, and literature as presented by Mrs la Trobe's pageant and the lines of poetry running through Isa's mind – create new chords of meaning and a blending of voices and sounds that is more complex than, for example, The Voyage Out, where Woolf holds to a single voice and mind. ²⁹⁸

By contrast, the journal of Joan Martyn is written in a style which is not an attempt at a new language, only an attempt at a different point of view. Like Virginia Woolf, Joan Martyn is still in search of a voice: 'But figures are slippery things!' (57)

Thus 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' and 'Anon' indicate the extent to which Virginia Woolf's position changed, both as a woman and as a writer. She moves away from a desire to expose and repair the injustice done to women in a patriarchal system to a more fundamental attempt at constructing meaning and the self outside a binary

²⁹⁵ See her essay 'Virginia Woolf's Last Words on Words: Between the Acts and "Anon"' in New Feminists Essays on Virginia Woolf, p. 253.

²⁹⁶ Nora Eisenberg, p. 253.

²⁹⁷ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 4.

²⁹⁸ See Patricia Ondek Laurence, p. 179.

essentialist system. In that sense, '[her] later novels ... are structured around moments when single voices disappear and we can glimpse the experience of the mass.'²⁹⁹

This third section described the idiosyncrasy of Virginia Woolf's production during the 30s. It traces her particular politics of form from Night and Day which describes the pattern of representation she is aiming for but does not yet realise it, through different stages of relationships and attempts at description, to The Years and Between the Acts where this pattern is actually realised within the narrative structure of the texts. James Naremore, for instance, finds that her last novel in particular, 'is, in fact, a successful experiment, which contains some of Mrs Woolf's best writing.'³⁰⁰ The strength of her achievement is thus reflected in the fusion of her aesthetics with her politics into a significant form. In other words, Virginia Woolf can be seen to move away in these works from the notion of novel to the notion of text.³⁰¹ Indeed this new shape enables the representation of a third way, outside the binary essentialist model. Structurally it is 'intergeneric' in Rachel Blau DuPlessis's word,³⁰² so that it allows the multiple, 'choric' character of life to be represented,³⁰³ as opposed to reinforcing the chosen point of view of the omniscient narrator. Avrom Fleishman, for example, finds one of the scenes in The Years to be 'one of the most beautiful chapters in all Woolf's writings, at the peak of the epiphanic style' yet he underlines that she manages at the same time to remain inconclusive.³⁰⁴ The extent of her success can be judged by his feeling that this text is 'based on several impulses generating their own structural forms'. Thus, formally, The Years is not a continuous narrative, but a collection of vignettes, with each section

²⁹⁹ See Michael Tratner, p. 3.

³⁰⁰ See p. 220.

³⁰¹ See Ralph Freedman, for instance, p. 6.

³⁰² See p. 163.

³⁰³ This is Mikhail Bakhtin's term.

³⁰⁴ See p. 184.

functioning as a short story with a culminating point of epiphany for one of the characters.³⁰⁵

Virginia Woolf thus used literature as a powerful response to a compelling external reality. This also indicates her involvement in her historical context, with such a powerful pamphlet as Three Guineas, undermining claims of her upper-middle class idleness as a member of the elitist Bloomsbury. As Alex Zwerdling points out 'She wrote about class and money with exceptional frankness at a time when these subjects were increasingly felt to be indecent.'³⁰⁶ Over time, the relation of Virginia Woolf to her material undergoes a change. While it started as a catharsis with such texts as Jacob's Room and To the Lighthouse, it also became more and more outward-looking in order to respond to the urges thrown upon her by her surroundings in the only valid method in her eyes. Indeed, the anger of To the Lighthouse has been transmuted into political strength, in accordance with her wish as expressed in A Room of One's Own. There, talking of Charlotte Brontë, she explains how 'anger was tampering with [her] integrity':

We feel the influence of fear in [the portrait of Mr Rochester]; just as we constantly feel an acidity which is the result of oppression, a buried suffering smouldering beneath her passion, a rancour which contracts those books, splendid as they are, with a spasm of pain. (68)

In spite of her suicide, Virginia Woolf did overcome her pain in her fiction, bearing testimony not only to an extraordinary personality, but also highlighting her contribution to literature as one of the major figure among modernist women writers.³⁰⁷ In her texts of the 30s she managed to capture, however briefly, the modern moment. As Harvena Richter points out the final chapter of The Years is also the longest, so that 'the moment of now is expanded.' Similarly, in Between the Acts she finds that 'the multi-levelled

³⁰⁵ See Avrom Fleishman, p. 178.

³⁰⁶ See Virginia Woolf and the Real World, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), p. 88.

³⁰⁷ Maggie Humm considers A Room of One's Own as 'the first modern work of feminist criticism both in its form ... and in its content.' p. 2 introduction to A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism, (New York, London ...: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994).

aspects of the moment find their voice.³⁰⁸ The balance between the aesthetic and the political achieved in the works written during the last decade of her life is what marks her success. It creates an idiosyncratic shape, by which each element enhances and reinforces the other. As William Handley underlines 'Most importantly the novels' political content and aesthetic form clarify and strengthen each other, both in significance and in effect.'³⁰⁹ Although The Years is largely autobiographical, the author manages there to subsume the personal into the political. Importantly, these texts strike a hopeful note for the future, not only of women, but also of society at large.³¹⁰ Their formal achievement create a space in which to rethink meaning itself; to imagine and begin to tell a new relationship between subject and object, individual and society. This study demonstrated that this new dialectic between the inner and the outer, the aesthetic and the political, and vision and fact is the mark not only of a truly great writer, but also of an undeniably modern feminist.

³⁰⁸ See p. 172 and 143, respectively.

³⁰⁹ See Virginia Woolf: The Politics of Narration, p. 2.

³¹⁰ See James Naremore, among others, p. 261 in his essay 'Nature and History in The Years'.

CONCLUSION

This study of Virginia Woolf's poetics demonstrated that her attitude towards representation was always challenging and informed by her desire to capture the feeling of what it is to be alive, the reality of a human condition shaped by society. The fact that she took gender into account explains what this work sees, in the production of the 20s, as a feminist aesthetics, in which the representation of life is informed by the sex of the beholder. Once the different aspects of this new aesthetics had been established, it became fully embodied in The Waves. The later part of her career, though, saw her perfecting her concept of representation into a politics of form, whereby her feminism can be understood in a wider sense. What can be described as a change of balance between aesthetics and politics is informed by an ever increasing urge to respond to a reality made more and more threatening by the politics of gender and dominance, which she understood as the basis of society and history.

Although this work considers the organicity of Virginia Woolf's fiction, this notion is understood as a set of common concerns and as a similarity of direction in the endeavour running through the body of her work. Thus it does not imply a totalizing vision, because her main achievement is to create an idiosyncratic form, which is by nature deconstructed. As Perry Meisel recognises, to insist on any influence on the author is to infer a stability between self and author which is undoubtedly dispelled by each of her texts.¹ Similarly, to assign one formulaic shape to her treatment of representation is to miss her point. The difficulty encountered when trying to do so, precisely underlines the quality of her achievement. In terms of narratology, the authorial stance is either as minimal as possible as in The Waves or multiple and shifting as in Orlando. Plot, which is the instrument of the omniscient narrator, has all but disappeared. In its place has emerged a structure, which by merging content and form effectively creates a feeling of reality, as opposed to merely representing a reality outside

¹ See p. 243 in The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1980).

its system. In its non-referentiality and continuing process the structure thus created through the medium of language is akin to the concept of significant form, which stands at the centre of modern painting, as identified by Roger Fry. Yet, in terms of influence, this process is clearly not an appropriation of this visual arts concept merely transposed to the realm of literature. Once more, Virginia Woolf's aesthetics escapes definition both as a medium and as the object it creates. The deconstructive character observed in her fiction operates as a response to the notion of essentialism that underlies a literary tradition based on realism. The imitative nature of this tradition is deemed by Virginia Woolf to be a distorting and inadequate tool in the pursuit of reality. It implies an outer world amenable to proper understanding and definition. Crucially, this position is characterised by the author as concurrent with a masculine understanding of the world.

Virginia Woolf sees essentialism, manifested in a unified understanding of the self, as the underlying concept of a patriarchal system based on a principle of division. Its view of the world being drawn on sets of oppositions, notably between the sexes, it compels the author and her critic alike to adopt a gendered discourse. Within this economy, the masculine element is associated with realism and tradition, and thus patriarchy and essentialism, while the feminine element becomes associated with modernism and a non-essentialist feminism. This study highlighted this understanding with the notion of the frame. In her fiction, it functions as a marker of these sets of oppositions both at a thematic and at a structural level. By the same token, it can also be transgressed, thus diffusing the strict boundaries erected by an essentialist binary system. This is precisely the dynamic of Virginia Woolf's textual practice: her political use of form through language and the visual arts enables her to propose a new view on reality. In this new space, human relations are no longer polarised in terms of gender, since 'it is fatal to be a man or woman simple; one must be womanly-manly or manly-womanly.'² Such a model was tentatively offered with Orlando and Shelmerdine. What can be described as a continuum of personality does not impose a specific shape either on human relations or on artistic creation unlike the prescriptive order of patriarchy. Rather,

² See p. 97 in ROO.

it opens-up possibilities, offers alternative means of being and seeing the world. The only recommendation for the individual is to be true to the multiplicity of one's self and experience.

This study sees Virginia Woolf's greatest achievement as the elaboration of an idiosyncratic politics of form. It constitutes a new language to tell the new stories of a world forever changing. The author's own position was and remains an example of this new way of being. At once an insider and an outsider, she produced literary works which are at the same time decidedly singular yet also part of an overall project. In the same way that there is no definitive understanding of her text but only different readings of it, her politics does not bear a label as her loathing of any 'fashionable and hideous jargon of the moment' indicates.³ Thus what this study sees as an obvious and active interest in the politics of gender, translated in her fiction by a politics of form, remains non-theoretical. Thanks to this non-dogmatic approach, it is able to envisage an all-inclusive view of the world, which respects individual reality and celebrates differences. The author's last work intimates that in the end all is but 'Orts, scraps and fragments'⁴ and presumably, if one wants to capture the diverse character of reality, in a representation or creation of any kind, one should attempt to embody this elusive pattern.

This study made intermittent references to contemporary feminist theories, notably that of Julia Kristeva. Indeed, one of the most powerful characteristics of Virginia Woolf's politics of form is that it anticipates some fundamental aspects of these later theories. The deconstructive character of her particular representation unsettles the central position of the narrator to the text, and thus of the self to reality and ultimately of essentialist values to society. By doing so, it provides a pattern, albeit in a different idiom, for such thinking as Julia Kristeva's understanding of the relation of the semiotic to the symbolic. Virginia Woolf's concept of a new self can be seen as prefiguring Julia Kristeva's advocacy:

³ See p. 260 in 3G.

⁴ See p. 157 in BTA.

In the third attitude, which I strongly advocate -- which I imagine? -- the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*. What can 'identity', even 'sexual identity', mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged? ⁵

Texts like The Years and Between the Acts clearly constitute landmarks on the road towards this 'third attitude' and by so doing, carry on being relevant to contemporary debates. Significantly, Virginia Woolf's last text can be seen as semiotic or in Bakhtin's word, carnivalesque, with its multiplicity of meaning and representation, that is, its intertextual character. The author's reference to the novel as 'a cannibal ... which has devoured so many forms of art'⁶ underlines her modernity, in prefiguring Bakhtin's understanding of the novel as 'constantly rethinking itself and receiving voices of difference.'⁷ This interdisciplinary aspect can also liken it to the ideal shape of representation described by Roger Fry, whereby 'the literary element and the plastic element enter into a very intimate combination, so to speak, a sort of chemical combination.'⁸ From that point of view, Virginia Woolf's aesthetics not only opens-up the boundaries of meaning, but also the limitations of literature as a medium. As Patricia Ondek Laurence points out 'her interest in the music, art, and "architecting" of words reflects a now-fashionable interdisciplinary and structural approach to writing and art.'⁹ Virginia Woolf's insistence that we should carry on 'finding new words and creating new methods'¹⁰ makes her as important a figure on the eve of a new century as she was in the elaboration of a new era.

⁵ 'Another generation is another space', p. 209 in The Kristeva Reader, (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1986).

⁶ See p. 18 in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' in Granite and Rainbow, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958).

⁷ See William Handley, p. 11 in see Virginia Woolf: The Politics of Narration, Stanford honors essays in Humanities, Number XXXI, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁸ See p. 388 in A Roger Fry Reader edited by Christopher Reed, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁹ See p. 7.

¹⁰ See p. 268 in 3G.

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