Unity and Fragmentation in Four Novels by Virginia Woolf

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines four novels by Virginia Woolf – *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* – for the purposes of, firstly, establishing the specificity of literary language and, secondly, showing that such specificity is a form of access to basic structures of the human condition. I propose a reading of these novels on the basis of a theory of literary language articulated onto a fundamental anthropology.

My starting point is a discussion of the tension between a force of unification and one of disintegration in the four novels, because such a tension is a theme of these novels; it is also seen as the spring of the literary experience by theorists such as Paul Ricoeur and Wolfgang Iser, who are the sources of inspiration of this thesis; and most importantly, such a tension is an avatar of aporia, which I consider one of the characteristics of literary language.
I define literary language both negatively, along the lines of its demarcation from ordinary communicative language, and positively, in terms of performativity, figurality, fictionality and aporia: language in literature, rather than being a tool of communication, elicits a drift towards performativity of which the symptoms are figures of speech, referential irrelevance and contradictions. Such a theory of literary language is present in Woolf's four novels, thematically, as a reflection, rudimentary and fragmentary, on artistic practice; it is also present on a formal level, as the active principle of her literary practice.

To those strictly literary concerns, I add an existential depth: the specificity of literary language is seen as a mode of access to a fundamental dimension of our human condition. I discuss such a dimension, philosophically, under the name of 'fundamental anthropology' with the help of Emmanuel Lévinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein. I conclude my thesis by showing how, in the context of Woolf's work, theory of literary language and fundamental anthropology are articulated onto each other.

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INTRODUCTION

So much has been written about Virginia Woolf. And the sheer diversity of it is baffling: from her mysticism to her feminism, from her encounter with God[1] to her writing with her milk,[2] via the victim of sexual abuse, the mad woman, the modernist muse and so on. If we believe with Michel Foucault, that what is problematic tends to elicit discourse, excites 'la volonté de savoir' ('the will to power')[3] then Virginia Woolf must be a problematic writer. One cannot help thinking about the four questions people keep asking Hermione Lee: 'Is it true that she was sexually abused as a child? What was her madness and why did she kill herself? Was Leonard a good or a wicked husband? Wasn't she the most terrible snob?'[4] If, on the contrary, we believe, more traditionally, that what is problematic tends to be repressed, then some of her writing seems to belong to this category. *The Waves* for instance, as Gillian Beer has suggested. She talks of 'demurrals and exclusions' and 'the relative neglect of *The Waves* in recent criticism […] several [critics] skirt the problem that the book evidently presents to current thinking by leaving it out altogether.'[5]

One way or another, it is this problematic aspect of her work I am interested in. I would like to call it the 'strangeness' of her writing, in accordance with Joseph Hillis Miller's use of the term, when he points out that 'stressing literature's strangeness is a point of some importance, since much literary study has always had as one of its main functions covering

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[1] Louise A. Poresky, *The Elusive Self: Psyche and Spirit in Virginia Woolf's Work* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1981).
[2] Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987).
[3] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-1984), i, p. 20 (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3 vols, trans. by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981-1982).
[4] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), p. 3.
[5] Gillian Beer, 'The Waves: "The Life of Anybody"', in *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 74-91, (p. 80).

that strangeness over.'[1] What is so strange about Virginia Woolf's books, that has made them the focus of so much attention or the object of such cursory rejection?

How do I define strangeness? Firstly it is a strangeness of language: literature is, fundamentally, nothing but words. And it is a strangeness in the use of language, compared with what we could call our everyday use of language. I will rely on four concepts to circumscribe strangeness. It can be approached in terms of fictionality, performativity, figurality and aporia. I will explain them each in turn in the context of Virginia Woolf's work, and they all have a critical history.

I borrow the term of fictionality from Michael Riffaterre: 'fiction emphasises the fact of the fictionality of a story.'[2] I mean by fictionality elements in Virginia Woolf's novels that draw attention to the fact that the texts are not ordinary discourse about the world: elements, thematic or formal, like lack of verisimilitude or uniformity of tone that remind the reader that the words she is reading do not refer to the real world but are an invention. Wolfgang Iser talks of 'the literary text's disclosure of itself as fiction.'[3] Virginia Woolf had a quarrel with realism and realist writers found her books and characters unreal.[4] She was trying, in her own avowal, to 'insubstantise',[5] to abstract. The puzzling way we enter and leave the characters' consciousness in *Mrs Dalloway*; the symbolisation of the landscape in *To the Lighthouse*, the prosopopoeia in 'Time passes'; the same voice for six characters, male or female, child or adult, in *The Waves*; the intertextuality of *Between the Acts* are all 'indices of fictionality',[6] ways of detracting the reader from the world. There is 'a convention-governed contract between author and reader indicating that the textual world is to be viewed not as reality but

[1] Joseph Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 33.
[2] Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. xv.
[3] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 238.
[4] See for instance Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' in *The Captain's Death Bed* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950), pp. 90-111.
[5] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London: Triad Granada, 1978), p. 63.
[6] Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. xv.

as if it were reality.'[1] The world is made to indicate something else. The strangeness comes from the fact that we are reading about what seem to be real, plausible events, yet we know they are more or less than that, a direction is indicated, away from what they are. We know they are fictional.

It seems that the texts lead back to themselves as texts, as invented texts, as acts of writing; what Iser calls 'the performativity operation of the text as a form of happening.'[2] This is my second term: performativity. It seems that what the novels talk about, the world, is less important than what they 'are' as written texts. Moments of vision in Woolf's novels: the climax of Clarissa's party, when, after hearing about Septimus's death, she retires into a dark and empty room; Mrs. Ramsay's visions or Lily's; the moments of being in *The Waves*; Miss La Trobe's moment of inspiration or Old Flimsy's seeing the carp; all have in common that they are what they talk about: visions. And we could extend this idea to the entire novels: is *Mrs Dalloway*, as a book, anything else but an inspirational movement that finds its climax in the scene mentioned above? *Mrs Dalloway* talks about an instance of inspiration and is this instance of inspiration finding its incarnation in the text itself. Susan Dick suggests something similar about *The Waves*; Virginia Woolf makes:

> The moment of being and the scene that contains it the central unit of the narrative […] one aspect of the rhythm that replaces the plot is the continual shift of attention inward and outward which builds toward and then away from moments of being.[3]

The strangeness appears in the collapse of distinctions between form and theme but also between what we could deem the experience of the writer and that of the reader. We have in the text something which is alive that erases the usual positions of a reader reading a text

[1] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 251.
[2] Ibid., p. 250.
[3] Susan Dick, 'Literary realism in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 50-71, (p. 69).

about the experiences of a writer. This is the source of the difference of a literary text from an ordinary act of communication.

I have talked about the symbolisation of the landscape in *To the Lighthouse*, and of prosopopoeia in 'Time passes', and a close study of the language of the moments of vision in Virginia Woolf's novels would also concur: figurality seems an important feature of the texts. By figurality I mean, above all, the struggle of the texts with their referentiality: how words refer to this but mean that, or do not mean anything at all anymore. In every novel, there are instances of nearly perfectly abstract words: Rhoda's geometrical shapes in *The Waves*, or the 'dark wedge' in *To the Lighthouse*, 'here was a room; there another' in *Mrs Dalloway*. The 'poetry' of Virginia Woolf could also come under such a heading: the importance of the music of the words in *To the Lighthouse* or *Between the Acts*. We find in what I call figurality the corollary, on a more specifically linguistic level, of the fictionality and the performativity of the novels. Riffaterre clearly links figurative language and fictionality: 'chief among signs of fictionality are those stylistic traits, especially figures and tropes.'[4] Hillis Miller insists on the correlation between performativity and figurality: 'one sign that literary works use language in a performative rather purely constative way is the dependence of their creative power on figures of speech.'[5] The strangeness here is the lack of transparency of words: instead of leading us, through themselves, to the world, they immobilise us in their own opacity.

Finally there is the concept of aporia. Paul Ricoeur says of literature that it 'fait travailler les apories.' ('puts aporias to work.')[6] The indecision of figurative language, the hesitation between what a text means and what it does: the 'radical estrangement between the

[4] Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, p. 48.
[5] Joseph Hillis Miller, *On Literature*, p. 41.
[6] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 3 vols (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983-1985), iii, p. 374 (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, trans. By Kathleen Blamey, Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985-1988), iii, p. 261).

meaning and the performance of any text',[7] incompatibility between the real and the fictional: 'the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive',[8] all indicate a limit of language that finds its surest symptomatic expression in series of paradoxes. Fiction '[jalonne] les confins de l'éternité, [dépeint] des expériences limites.' ('[stakes] out the borderlines of eternity, [depicts] limit-experiences.')[9] Paradoxes pullulate in Virginia Woolf's work on both the thematic and formal levels and between them: sexes meet in their differences, one person can be two, structure and spontaneity in Lily's painting, command and inspiration in the books themselves, unity and fragmentation. The list is far from exhaustive.

In short, the texts are strange because, instead of representing an ordinary act of communication where someone says something about something else to someone else, they initiate the opening of a paradoxical space, which Iser calls the 'play-space of the text.'[10] It starts with language and what it refers to, with the saying something about something else: duplicity and multiplicity interfere. Where the word should disappear in its function as a means to grasp the thing, it becomes opaque, indicates several things, plays them against each other, complexifies instead of simplifying. Ambiguity and indecidibility proliferate. Iser describes the process in terms of 'to-and-fro movement […], kaleidoscopically iterating positions.'[11] And the contagion spreads to the other two instances of communication: an unstable space opens that swallows both writer and reader.

But there is a resistance. Disintegration never really takes place. Words still mean something; after all, Virginia Woolf's novels are stories and they can be interpreted. A fragile balance is kept between form and formlessness, the very act of writing seems to consist in such a tightrope walking and the act of reading too.

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[7] Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 298.
[8] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 252.
[9] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, iii, p. 388, (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, iii, p. 271).
[10] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 253.
[11] Ibid., p. 252.

The act of writing, composition, consists in a strategy of unification, a structuring of the heterogeneous, 'une synthèse de l'hétérogène'[12] according to a principle, be it plot or, in Virginia Woolf's case, rhythm. The act of reading is nothing but the fulfilment of such a strategy: the text being fleshed out, so to speak, in the act of com-prehension that is interpretation. As Iser has shown: 'the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence.'[13] Or 'the reader will strive […] to fit everything together in a consistent pattern.'[14] A force of unification is essential to literary activity, understood in its largest possible meaning as both composition and reception.

Unification is also a favourite theme of Virginia Woolf. Some of her main characters are 'unifiers': Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay, Bernard or Miss La Trobe. The party in *Mrs Dalloway*, the dinner episode in *To the Lighthouse*, the two common meals in *The Waves* and the theatre play in *Between the Acts* are all instances of reunion.

But more fundamentally, language itself, as the instrument of consciousness, is a force of unification. Its power of analysis and ordering, at the service of the subject, is a major theme of the texts: it is Mr. Ramsay's, the philosopher's, weapon; it is Dr. Bradshaw's means of oppression. What is brought to light here is the inherent danger in such a principle, if it is left to itself. Unification, interpretation become oppression; if unchecked, their essential violence resurfaces.

But in her work, the synthetic vision of consciousness and its ancillary analytic language is always in tension with another type of language and another type of vision. I have already mentioned those visions that seem so important to the novels; I even suggested that they could be all there is in them. What they all have in common is the passage from seeing to hearing to speaking (or writing), that is to say, they are all instances of inspiration. It is as if vision, in the phenomenological sense of distribution of a subject and an object as a world and

[12] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, ii, p. 18 (Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, ii, p. 8).
[13] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Becket* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 275.
[14] Ibid., p. 283.

in a world, was subverted, becoming the passive perception of a rhythm that, in turn, finds its expression in words. Instead of the subject as master, in control, we have a subject that dissolves in a moment of inspiration. Language itself takes on another function: rather than the props of philosophy, it becomes the rhythms and the sounds of poetry. Rather than analysis it becomes voices. The scene at the end of the first part of *To the Lighthouse*, when Mrs. Ramsay reads poetry is typical;[15] but the voices of *The Waves* or the spirits of 'Time passes' as well.

Unification is countered in another way in Virginia Woolf's novels. Certain characters live or think in terms of dissolution or disintegration. Septimus comes readily to mind; but Lily as well, in *To the Lighthouse*, with her 'explosive' way of thinking. Even the 'unifiers', Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay, seem to be made up of different selves, always on the point of falling apart.

On a more formal level, disintegration also plays a part in the literary activity. The integration that the novels achieve is never complete, there is a remainder: 'even while the reader is seeking a consistent pattern in the text, he is also uncovering other impulses which cannot be immediately integrated or will even resist final integration.'[16] At the heart of *Mrs Dalloway*, the climax takes shape around emptiness: 'here was a room; there another'. The very hiatus between the two groups of words, representing the secret, is understood as absence. The most important is missing. Lily's last stroke separates as much as it unites, and *The Waves* has been rejected because of lack of form.[17] So much has been written about Virginia Woolf's novels; interpretations follow one another, yet none is exhaustive.

We are back to where we started from: the strangeness of her novels, of which one symptom, among many, is the paradox of a tension between a force of unification and one of

[15] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Granada, 1977), pp. 108-114.
[16] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, p. 285.
[17] Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986).

disintegration. It is also the 'indeterminacy'[18] that spurs on interpretation. I have chosen this tension as a guide in my exploration of Virginia Woolf's work.

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The same tension also finds an echo in the form of this thesis. This work is balanced between philosophy and literature and/or between theory and practice. On the one hand, I elaborate a theoretical framework of philosophical inspiration; on the other, I practice a close reading of Woolf's texts. The ultimate aim of the former activity is a 'will to know', a comprehension of the phenomenon 'literature'. It implies an intention of control in its endeavour to regroup several texts under a unique general intellectual scheme. My close readings of Woolf's novels, on the contrary, suppose a certain abandonment, on my part, to the texts. Dissemination rather than control seems to be the end-result of such an activity. The same tension is also marked by the contrast between the styles of the respective sections: a tendency to lyricism in the readings contrasted with an effort of analysis in the chapters of theory.

I believe that the lack of final integration of this project is a necessary outcome and a reflection of its subject matter. It is also, on my part, a manner of giving the last word to literature, rather than to philosophy.

[18] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 3.

CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

I. Argument and philosophical sources

My work has two sides: a literary one and a philosophical one. The literary side is a theory of literary language. The philosophical one is a fundamental anthropology. They both ultimately come together as the two sides of the same coin in my reading of four novels by Woolf. The literary side is a theory of literary language; that is to say, an endeavour to circumscribe the specificity of the type of language used in literature. I try to define what others have called "literariness." I draw upon three main figures in this endeavour: Michael Riffaterre, Wolfgang Iser and Paul Ricoeur.

Riffaterre is a semiotician with a structuralist background. He is mainly interested in poetry, but his last book, *Fictional Truth*,[1] deals with the novel as well. His conception of literature can be summarised as follows: variations on a *leitmotif*: 'the text is in effect a variation or modulation of one structure.'[2] He postulates what he calls a matrix, of which we do not know anything apart from the fact that it has a binary structure. He explicitly refuses to engage in any philosophical speculation about it. He just considers it as unavailable, calling it 'repressed.'[3] In every piece of literature, such a matrix finds expression, first, as what he calls the model: an opposition that concretizes the binary rhythm of the matrix into a situation with two opposed values. The rest of the poem will be variations on this first level of opposition.[4] Riffaterre sees his work as a formulation of the complex forms those variations can take. He

[1] Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*.
[2] Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 6.
[3] Ibid., p. 19.
[4] 'The matrix is hypothetical, it is always actualized in successive variants, the form of these variants is governed by the first or primary actualization, the model. Matrix, model and text are variants of the same structure.' Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry,* p. 19 or 'The text in its complexity does no more than modulate the matrix. The matrix is thus the motor, the generator of the textual derivation, while the model determines the manner of that derivation.' Ibid., p. 21.

shows that this does not only apply to poetry but also to fiction. A key consideration is that according to such a conception of literature, and in a structuralist vein, literature does not refer to the outside world or rather that referentiality is an irrelevant side-effect.[5] Every piece of literature deploys itself along the lines of internal structural rules: '[Il] a sa logique propre.' ('[It] has its own logic.' My translation)[6] Those rules can be conceptualised in a theory of literature. Such a lack of referentiality, which Riffaterre calls fictionality, is marked in the piece of literature itself. For instance, in his discussion of the Victorian novel, in *Fictional Truth*, he draws our attention to the names of the characters (very often a program in themselves) as indices of fictionality.[7] What I find of interest for my work is the following: firstly, an unavailable matrix of a binary nature; secondly, the piece of literature as nothing but the multiple echo of such a matrix and finally, the non-referential dimension of literature and how it is marked in the piece of literature by indices of fictionality.

Wolfgang Iser comes from a phenomenological tradition. He continues the enterprise started by Roman Ingarden and his *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*[8] by applying a phenomenological method to the analysis of literature.[9] One aspect of the literary experience particularly interested him: reading. Iser is mostly known for his book *The Act of Reading*, where he analyses the role of the reader from such a phenomenological perspective. Later in his career deconstruction attracted him. Iser considers literature to be an experience centred around the piece of literature with, at one end of it, the writer and at the other, the reader. His method is phenomenological: he analyses this experience as the constitution of the literary

[5] 'Le référant n'est pas pertinant à l'analyse […] il n'y a aucun avantage pour le critique à comparer l'expression littéraire à la réalité.' Michael Riffaterre, *La production du texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979), p.19 ('What is referred to is not relevant for the analysis […] there is no advantage for the critic in comparing the literary expression with reality.' My translation) or 'Le texte est à lui même son propre système referentiel.' Ibid., p. 36 ('The text is its own referential system.' My translation).

[6] Riffaterre, *La production du texte*, p. 35.

[7] See Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth,* pp. 33-37.

[8] Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. by Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evenston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

[9] Iser acknowledges his debt in the preface to *The Act of Reading*: 'I remain, however, fully aware that it was Ingarden's elucidation of the concretization of literary works that first brought about the level of discussion which has enabled us to gain so many fresh insights – even if many of those run counter to his own ideas.' Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. xi.

work of art. He explicitly conceptualises the different stages of structuration of the literary work that constitute this experience from one end, the writer, to the other the reader: 'author, text, and reader are thought of as interconnected in a relationship that is an ongoing process of producing.'[10] It is this very phenomenological perspective that leads him towards deconstruction and what he calls the possibility of a fundamental anthropology.[11] Iser's work brings to light, in the literary experience, a structure of sense-producing that he understands as a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous.'[12] In the piece of literature different elements are brought together in a new whole that is meaningful.

At this juncture two moves are possible: one towards the outside, towards referentiality; the other towards the inside or structure. The first, towards the outside, of which Iser was aware but did not take, is to consider the sense-making structure of literature as part of a larger sense-producing apparatus: our task of taming the world. This is exactly where Ricoeur takes over Iser's work. The other move, towards the inside, leads Iser to ideas similar to the tenets of deconstruction. Iser notices that the integration dynamism of literature, its sense-making potential is limited. Something remains outside,[13] a something that is essential and contagious: 'an ever decentring movement.'[14] He traces its spreading, historically, in the development of modernity. Something at the core of the literary experience is at play, resisting resolution or conceptualisation,[15] that can only be detected in a proliferation of symptoms such as contradictions, pullulating tropes, meaninglessness. Iser understands such a 'play-space'[16] of literature in terms of performativity. The piece of literature here is not saying

[10] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 249.
[11] This program of literary anthropology is already present in *The Act of Reading*: 'The question arises as to the actual function of literature in the overall make-up of man.' Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. xi.
[12] This is an expression I borrow from Ricoeur, see Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, i, p. 11 (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, i, p. ix).
[13] 'In the last analysis difference can never be eradicated.' Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 242.
[14] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting,* p. 252.
[15] 'The duality of play defies conceptualization. It cannot be reduced phenomenologically by tracing it back to an underlying cause […] play precedes all its possible explanations.' Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 253.
[16] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 253.

anything anymore but is 'giving dynamic presence to the absence and otherness.'[17] Iser finds such performativity at play in authors like Beckett and Joyce.[18]

In his last books, Iser promises a fundamental anthropology based on the discovery of such a dimension,[19] yet repeatedly resorts to describing the aporetic 'play-space' of literature without being able to go further. In this respect, I would suggest, he can be aligned with deconstruction,[20] which is similarly interested with the play of meaning rather than its referentiality. What I find interesting in Iser's work is, firstly, a blind spot resisting conceptualisation at the centre of literature; secondly, that this blind spot is of importance for the human condition, holding a promise of a fundamental anthropology; thirdly, the idea, in consequence of the above, that literature concerns our condition without referring to the outside, that is to say, the world but by some sort of direct internal connection.[21] Fourthly, I am also interested in Iser's failure to both conceptualise the 'play-space' and elaborate his fundamental anthropology. I believe that the problem lies with his very method, his way of accessing literature.

Paul Ricoeur is, among the three people I am concerned with in the literary side of my work, the only one who is not a literary critic. Ricoeur is a philosopher who showed some interest in literature at a certain stage of the development of his philosophy. This literary detour took the shape of first, *La métaphore vive*[22] and above all, his monumental *Temps et récit.* In the former, the language of poetry is his main focus, in the latter, storytelling and

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[17] Ibid., p. 257.
[18] See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, chapters 6, 7, 8 and 10; also *Prospecting*, chapters 7 and 8.
[19] 'The question, however, that now arises is whether literature – in relation to history or society – reflects something special that neither philosophies of history nor sociological theories are able to capture.' Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 263 and 'The question of why such a mirror as literature should exist and how it enables us to find things out.' Ibid..
[20] We have a typical deconstructionist perspective in for instance: 'So we may say that difference is present in the aesthetic semblance as a simultaneous conceptualisation and inaccessibility of origins. But although representation downgrades difference to the level of semblance, it also needs this semblance in order to manifest itself.' Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 243.
[21] Iser talks of 'the articulation of misgivings relating to the ability of representation as a concept to capture what actually happens in art or literature.' Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 250.
[22] Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975) (Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. by Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978)).

therefore narrative types of literature, above all, the novel. Ricoeur's main philosophical concern is 'the taming of the world': how human beings transform a raw experience of life into a properly human one by the mediation of symbolic forms. He is interested in the transformation processes at play in our turning the world into our 'home', 'qui font du monde un monde habitable.' ('which make the world a habitable world.')[23] These transformation processes are of a linguistic character.

In *Temps et récit* (which is the book that is most relevant for my purpose) Ricoeur's focus, as the title indicates, is on time: how we human kind transform an aporetic, fragmentary experience of time, into 'our time', a properly human one.[24] His approach is dual. He looks at the transformation process from two angles: that of history and that of literature. Both perspectives finally meet in the third volume of *Temps et récit*. What they have both in common (and this is the spring of the transformational process) is what he calls 'mise en intrigue', putting into plot, or plotting that allows an integration of the heterogeneous:

> L'intrigue […] 'prend ensemble' et intègre dans une histoire entière et complète les événements multiples et dispersés et ainsi schématise la signification intelligible qui s'attache au récit pris comme un tout.' [the plot of narrative […] 'grasps together' and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematising the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole.][25]

In simpler terms, by telling a story one brings disparate elements into a new whole and this very process is sense-giving.

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[23] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, i, p. 13 (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, i, p. xi).

[24] 'Mon hypothèse de base, à savoir qu'il existe entre l'activité de raconter une histoire et le caractère temporel de l'expérience humaine une corrélation qui n'est pas purement accidentelle mais présente une forme de nécessité transculturelle […] le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé sur un mode narratif.' Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, i, p. 85 ('My basic hypothesis that between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but presents a transcultural form of necessity […] Time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode.' Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, i, p. 52); he is interested in 'la capacité de la fiction de re-figurer cette expérience temporelle en proie aux apories de la speculation philosophique.' Ricoeur, *Temps et récit,* i, p. 13 ('the capacity of poetic composition to re-figure this temporal experience, which is prey to the aporias of philosophical speculation.' Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, i, p. xi).

[25] Ibid., p. 12 (Ibid., p. x).

For Ricoeur, literature is part of the larger undertaking of taming the world. It is therefore eminently referential. Even poetry is seen in this light in *La métaphore vive*.[26] Ricoeur talks of his own 'ontological vehemence.'[27] Yet this taming remains open-ended. It remains so because there is no resolution of a fundamental aporia at the centre of our condition. If we take the experience of time, which is the theme of *Temps et récit*, a tension remains between the principle of unification of plotting and the fragmentary side of our experience of being 'thrown' into the world. Such an aporia, Ricoeur believes, in admirable philosophical humility is not conceptualisable and spells a limit to theory.[28] But, and this explains his detour via literature, such an aporia is made fruitful in literature. He says that literature 'fait travailler l'aporie.' ('[makes] […] aporia work for us.')[29] Literature without offering any resolution to aporia develops from it. Of course, in the referential context that is Ricoeur's, such a *travail* is understood in terms of practical moral philosophy in the spirit of, for instance, Martha Nussbaum's work on Henry James.[30] Literature, in her view, offers us ways of expanding our experience, putting us in situations we would never encounter in real life, enabling us thus to refine our moral sense.[31] Yet, at the same time, even though, in contrast to Iser, it is a path Ricoeur refused to take, literature points towards an unresolved

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[26] 'J'ai soutenu que la suspension de la fonction référentielle directe et descriptive n'est que l'envers, ou la condition négative, d'une fonction référentielle plus dissimulée du discours, qui est en quelque sorte liberée par la suspension de la valeur descriptive des énoncés. C'est ainsi que le discours poétique porte au langage des aspects, des qualités, des valeurs de la réalité qui n'ont pas d'accès au language directement descriptif.' Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, i, p. 13 ('I maintained that the suspension of this direct, descriptive referential function is only the reverse side, or the negative condition, of a more covered over referential function of discourse, which is, so to speak, liberated by the suspending of the descriptive value of statements. In this way poetic discourse brings to language aspects, qualities, and values of reality that lack access to language that is directly descriptive.' Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, i, pp. x-xi).

[27] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 301.

[28] 'Une théorie quelle qu'elle soit, accède à son expression la plus haute lorsque l'exploration du domaine où sa validité est vérifiée s'achève dans la reconnaissance des limites qui circonscrivent son domaine de validité.' Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, iii, p. 374 ('Any theory reaches its highest expression only when the exploration of the domain where its validity is verified is completed with a recognition of the limits that circumscribe this domain of validity.' Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, iii, p. 261).

[29] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, iii, p. 11 (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, iii, p. 4).

[30] See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[31] Compare: 'Notre analyse de l'acte de lecture nous a conduit à dire que la pratique du récit consiste en une expérience de pensée par laquelle nous nous exerçons a habiter des mondes étrangers à nous même.' Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, iii, p. 358 ('Our analysis of the act of reading leads us to say rather that the practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us.' Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* iii, p. 249).

aporia at the core of the human condition, an aporia that is expended in an echo-like structure in literature. What interests me here is, firstly, the idea of an aporetic core to the human condition that finds expression in literature; secondly, the description of one of the main forms such an aporia can take, that of a tension between a principle of unification and one of fragmentation. This form of the aporia has become my reading grid of Virginia Woolf's work and at the same time, my way of access to the blind spot at play in literature. Finally I am interested in Ricoeur's insight that such a blind spot is not conceptualisable.

It is time now to put together what I have gleaned from these three thinkers and look at the ways their ideas have influenced the theory of literary language I propose in the introduction to this thesis. All three find a black hole at the centre of literature. Riffaterre calls it matrix and refuses to conceptualise it. Ricoeur talks of an aporia and shows that, in the context of a discussion of time, eminent philosophers such as Kant, Husserl and Heidegger have failed to resolve it in theory and concludes that it is not conceptualisable.[32] Iser calls it 'play-space' and, trying to conceptualise it, ends up with what I consider an unsatisfactory description of it in the manner of deconstruction. The three of them agree on acknowledging the fact that such a blind spot is brought to our notice in literature by a certain number of linguistic symptoms such as contradiction, meaninglessness and tropes.[33] Two of them, Ricoeur and Iser, albeit in different ways, mark the fact that such an aporetic core has to do, fundamentally, with our human condition. Ricoeur looks at its outside implications, its importance from a world-making perspective. Iser looks towards the inside and sees it as the spring of a fundamental anthropology. In relation to this aspect, Iser and Riffaterre, consider literature as non-referential, as folded back upon itself, but according to two different

[32] See Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit*, iii, pp. 19-146 (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* iii, pp. 11-96).
[33] Riffaterre talks of 'ungrammaticalities' Riffaterre, *Semiotics of poetry*, p. 4; Iser of 'split-signifier' where 'the signifier denotes something but at the same time negates its denominative use.' Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 253 and of 'kaleidoscopically iterating positions.' Ibid., p. 252; finally Ricoeur underlines 'la résistance des mots dans leur emploi usuel.' Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, i, p. 11 (' the resistance of the words in their ordinary use.' Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, i, p. ix).

perspectives: Riffaterre as the unfolding of variations on a binary opposition; Iser as the collapsing of a complex structure into an aporetic space. Iser understands this process of collapsing and the self-referentiality that it implies as performativity. Riffaterre underlines in this context how the piece of literature marks its own fictionality.

We have here all the elements of the theory of literary language I formulate in the introduction. I distinguish literary language from ordinary communicative language in its foregrounding of performativity, of which the signs are aporia, fictionality and tropes. I underline the play-space that such a shift towards performativity opens up. I use one specific aporia, that emerging from a tension between a force of unification and one of fragmentation, because of its centrality for literature, to explore such an aporetic play-space in Woolf's work. I concentrate, in my reading of Woolf, on the moments of vision, personal or of a group, as the places in her work where such symptoms become acute. A close analysis of those moments not only confirms my theory of literary language but uncovers different elements such as 'relation to the other', 'birth of language', 'incarnation' and so on, that hint at a philosophy of life. Such a philosophy of life does not come out of the blue. My elaboration of a theory of literary language gives a tentative indication of what this might entail. Both Iser and Ricoeur suggest the link between literature and our human condition. We could say that I try to realise Iser's failed program of a fundamental anthropology.

Here, my first consideration is to ask why did Iser's program fail? Or rather, why do I have the impression that it failed? What is it I find disturbing in his solution? What is it I would do differently? Firstly, I find his 'style' disturbing: an endless turning over of the impossibility to 'say' the play-space of literature, yet in the same move an endeavour to say it. In short, his style has all the characteristics of that of deconstruction.[34] I was disappointed,

[34] Three 'deconstructions' coexist in my thesis and in my criticism of such a position. Firstly, the masters, of two types, and then the disciples. One type is deconstruction of Nietzschean inspiration and the names I allude to in this work are Foucault and Deleuze. I want to mark a distance from what I consider the inhuman or an-human vision of the world they promote: they consider the human sphere as a cramped and diminutive emanation of an infinitely bigger and more powerful realm that can best be summarised as a plural field of forces. The other type

expecting in accordance with his program, some sort of theory of the foundations or deep structures of the human condition instead. I was also perplexed: wouldn't one think that either you can say something and then say it or you can't and then you just don't? Secondly, I find disturbing the fact that, unintelligibly, the play-space of literature has become something of a dark realm, something almost solid, that you could locate, qualified in terms of the invisible, the hidden and the unconscious. It has acquired, and this is another rapprochement with deconstruction, a life of its own that is extra-linguistic, almost of the world. I need an account of a fundamental anthropology to support my theory of literary language; that is to say, I situate my discussion within the realm of language and for this reason, I need this account to be intra-linguistic. The main difficulty is or seems to be one of access. I have tried to figure out a philosophical scenario to circumscribe more clearly the origins of such a difficulty, hoping that this would show me possible ways out of it.

Iser works in a phenomenological tradition and approaches literature as an experience. The trouble with such an approach is that it implicitly imports a certain framework that leads to absurd statements when brought to its limits. The basic framework of any experience is somebody experiences something. This model when used by Iser in the context of his 'play-space' conception of literature, first becomes somebody experiences nothing and by contagion, the dark hole of the play-space swallowing up both writer and reader, nobody experiences nothing. Literature becomes nothing, experienced by nobody. The problem is one of access: Iser looks at a phenomenon from a certain perspective, ignoring the fact that the

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represents a more humanistic perspective, which I feel near to with a difference. The most famous representative of this form of deconstruction is undoubtedly Derrida. What I find problematic in such an approach is the 'style': 'philosophy as a kind of writing' in Rorty's words (Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays: 1972-1980*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 90), that relies heavily on etymologies, word play, allusions and so on; or that effectuates its self-negation or self-effacement in paradoxes. The end result is an impression of 'castles built in the air', or 'an engine that idles' or 'endless talk'. It is this style I try to circumnavigate with my 'Wittgensteinian' approach in this thesis. The third type of deconstruction are the disciples of both the Nietzschean and the humanistic trends. In this thesis they are represented by Woolf critics. I am here often in unpleasant company: I find that these critics often pick and mix indiscriminately from both the Nietzschean and the humanistic trends of deconstruction; that they use 'the sacred words and phrases' (Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 14) of their masters in a 'loose' manner, with, as a result, deliberate or not, obfuscation. They are often a good example of what Lovejoy calls 'the pathos of obscurity.' (Ibid., p. 11) But I must add that I am also in the position of the disciple that has come to the stage where he needs to go beyond his master's teaching: 'who loves well, punishes well.'

perspective in question has already informed what he can discover about the phenomenon he is interested in. Looking at literature from the perspective of an experience will not allow us to clearly see what is at stake in literature, and will lead to a type of discussion of literature (that is a type of literary criticism) that is in danger of becoming unintelligible. This danger is apparent in some proponents of deconstruction. It is in this context not surprising that Iser, towards the end of his career, felt attracted by it.[35]

To further understand the nature of the dead end Iser was confronted with and its connection to deconstruction, we need to have a look at two features of the history of philosophy. The first is the centrality of an 'ocular metaphor'[36] in philosophy's conception of knowledge; the other is what has been called 'the language-turn' in analytical philosophy. To look at literature as experience is both to import an 'ocular metaphor' into the discussion of literature and to transform what is a linguistic problem into one that seems to be solid, out there, in the world.

Richard Rorty has shown in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that, in Western philosophy, an 'ocular metaphor' has dominated philosophy's conception of mankind's relation to the world. Experience and knowledge have been understood in terms of seeing and the type of spatiality that accompanies it. It is attested by our vocabulary: speculation, insight, view, perspective, approach and so on. Such an 'ocular metaphor' has possibly been smuggled in, I want to suggest, in Iser's conception of literature as experience. Because of this, a dichotomy, which is purely linguistic (between what can be said and what cannot, here in Iser's term, between the play-space of literature and ordinary language) becomes translated

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[35] See Sidney Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columba University Press, 1989)*;* or in *Prospecting*, for a deconstructionist 'tone', for instance: 'Literature is not an explanation of origins, it is a staging of the constant deferment of explanation which makes the origin explode into its multifariousness.' Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 245; see also footnote 20 above.

[36] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 1980), p. 38.

into speculative and spatial terms: the visible versus the invisible, the hidden versus the patent or even what is dark versus what is in full light.[37]

Another feature constitutive of the framework of Iser's discussion of literature, which also plays an important role in explaining his failure to develop his program of a fundamental anthropology, can be illustrated by a brief discussion of 'the language-turn' that constituted analytical philosophy. Vincent Descombes has shown in *Grammaire d'objets en tous genres*[38] that what characterises analytical philosophers in the wake of Wittgenstein, is a focus on the language they use in an awareness that before we can talk about the world (if we can), we need to have a clear idea of the functioning of the tool we use for this, that is to say, language. In contrast, continental philosophers, in whose tradition Iser works, 'go straight to the things' (to use a phrase coined by Husserl to describe his program of phenomenology) forgetting the mediation of language. They end up discussing what they think are objective features of the world when in fact they are still 'in language.'[39] What bearing does this have on Iser's perspective? I want to suggest that Iser also projects a purely linguistic dilemma onto the world, objectifying thus the 'play-space' of language into some sort of hinterland difficult of access.

We have the means now, I think, to see more clearly the reasons of Iser's failure and the similarities between his approach and that of deconstruction. Iser, by considering literature as experience has imported, unawares, features constitutive of such a perspective. Such features, the ocular metaphor and the overlooking of language, have led to the objectivation of a linguistic dilemma sayable/unsayable and its projection unto the world in terms of a visible/invisible or hidden/patent dichotomy. The world is now divided between a visible territory accessible to the light of reason and a dark hinterland to which the access is impossible or difficult. We only now have to valorise positively the dark realm as something

[37] For instance when he writes that literature 'conjures up an image of the unseeable.' Iser. *Prospecting*, p. 243.
[38] Vincent Descombes, *Grammaire d'objets en tous genres* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983).
[39] See Descombes, *Grammaire d'objets en tous genres*, pp. 41-44.

essential and, negatively, the realm of the visible as some sort of totalitarian structuring that thrives on the smothering of the essential and we have the type of dichotomy that is typical of most Woolfian criticism of deconstructionist inspiration. What Iser shares with such a perspective, if not the valorisation, is an extra linguistic solidification into a visible and invisible territory of a purely linguistic dichotomy. This is the source of the type of difficulty both Iser and deconstructionist critics are faced with when they try to articulate the play-space of literature. They automatically take for granted that it can be talked about like anything else in the world, yet being the very verbality of language, language cannot achieve the distance necessary to talk about it and it remains unsayable. Hence the self-defeating strategy of deconstruction and the late Iser: to unsay what one says while saying it. Hence the feeling on the part of the reader of a wall the critics in question seem to have come up against.

This philosophical digression was necessary to determine how I should proceed in trying to conceptualise the fundamental anthropology supporting my theory of literary language. Such an anthropology has to be strictly intra-linguistic and its form of access understood in terms of sayable/unsayable only.

At first sight, the philosophical tradition does not seem to have much to offer me for this task: it seems to be an either/or situation. On the one hand, there are the intra-linguistic traditions: analytical philosophy and structuralism, but they are reductive. For analytical philosophy, the philosophical task consists in determining the linguistic and logical rules that have to be respected if one is to make a philosophical utterance that makes sense. Anthropology (fundamental or not) is far away. The structuralists, as we have seen in Riffaterre's case, are non-committal. They suspend their judgment when it comes to anything but the internal structural play of language. Both analytical philosophy and structuralism are too much in language for me. On the other hand, continental philosophers are not enough in language. They treat language as if it was a transparent medium giving them direct access to the world. They discuss humankind inhabiting the world, out there, in terms of history,

politics, sociology and they talk of literature in the same terms. Only deconstruction seems to be looking into the right direction, but then they are confronted with a problem of accessibility.

I have chosen two philosophers to help me resolve this difficulty: Emmanuel Lévinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who belong respectively to the continental and the analytical tradition, the two traditions in tension in my exposition of the difficulty in question. Belonging to two very different traditions, they share a certain marginality, albeit of a different type. Wittgenstein's marginality in the analytical tradition is due to his precursor role in a movement that came into existence on the basis of a certain reading of his work. What has been called the 'New Wittgensteinian'[40] reading of Wittgenstein has recently shown that there is more to Wittgenstein than what analytical philosophy has made of him. It is this other side of Wittgenstein that I am interested in, above all, for this work.

Lévinas's marginality is of a completely different type. He has written into continental philosophy, especially the phenomenological tradition, elements belonging to the world of Judaism. Even the French in which he writes is an idiom that has been informed in this manner. So they both belong to their respective traditions yet in an eccentric fashion. In my reading of Virginia Woolf, I bring their visions of the world together, in a manner which is both unconventional and I think daring. But before we discuss this, let us have a look at the visions of the world in question. Let me just say now, that it seems coherent to seek a solution to my problem by bridging the gap between the two traditions (analytical and continental) since the problem has been posed in terms of either/or and dissatisfaction with what both sides have to offer.

Lévinas's philosophical background is phenomenological. He 'discovered existence with Husserl and Heidegger';[41] Husserl for the method, Heidegger for the perspective. He has

[40] See Alice Crary and Rupert Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000).
[41] See Emmanuel Lévinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1982), for instance: 'Les études réunies sous le titre de *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* reflètent […] la

indeed inherited a hermeneutic perspective on existence from the latter: an interest for everyday life experiences that are analysed according to a phenomenological method and interpreted as revealing fundamental structures of our human condition.[42] Lévinas's starting point is a phenomenological and hermeneutic method of analysis applied to existence in order to conceptualise a fundamental anthropology. But what he then discovers, the fundamental structures of our condition which his analysis reveals, leads him to question this framework.

For Lévinas, the visible features of our existence: the fact that we are circumscribed by our identity in a community with tasks of transformation of the world, and the infinite complexity of such a plane, are 'lined' by a fundamental structure, invisible, that is the principle of the visible world. Lévinas understands such a fundamental structure as relation to the other. It is an *ur*-relation in the sense that it cannot be understood as the meeting of two people already constituted in their identity, but is what such a meeting presupposes; he writes about:

> Le paradoxe d'une relation, différente de toutes les autres relations de notre logique et de notre psychologie […] relation sans termes. [The paradox of a relationship that is different from all the other relationships of our logic and psychology […] a relationship without terms.][43]

We can already glimpse here the conceptualisation difficulties that arise for Lévinas and the limits of the phenomenological/hermeneutic framework. These difficulties are increased by the fact that Lévinas's discussion is couched in ethico-religious terms. The *ur*-relation to the other is a face to face demand. The other in her helplessness orders me to save her, to be there for her, reducing me to the role of hostage, in an impossible yet demanded substitution for the

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première rencontre avec la phénoménologie et attestent les espoirs des premières découvertes.' Lévinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p. 6 ('The studies reunited under the title *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger* reflect […] the first encounter with phenomenology and attest the hope of first discoveries.' My translation).

[42] See Emmanuel Lévinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1984), for instance, the sections on 'fatigue' or 'insomnia' (Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1978)).

[43] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: P.U.F., 1983), p.10 (Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1987), p. 32).

other.[44] And at the back of the other, there is the Law, the 'Thou shall not kill' of God. Behind the you the He:

> Cet infini, plus fort que le meurtre, nous résiste déjà dans son visage, est son visage, est l'expression originelle, est le premier mot: 'tu ne commetras pas de meurtre.' [This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder.']

Such a fundamental relation, with the appearance of the third person, becomes a demand for justice, hence the need for reason and the construction of the world. Lévinas indicates thus how the *ur*-relation is the principle of the visible world.[46] But this passage to the visible is not Lévinas's focus, and he is quite succinct about it. It is probably the weakest point of his vision, at least it is one dimension of it that has been often criticised.[47]

His focus remains the *ur*-relation and the possibility of its formulation. This is, I believe, Lévinas's most astonishing contribution to philosophy and it is also what I find of interest for my work. The phenomenological and hermeneutic framework and the language it had to offer, within which he had worked, proved increasingly inadequate for this task of formulation. As he himself says: he had worked up to and including *Totalité et infini* with the language of ontology.[48] He needed now another framework and another language: the framework in question is what he calls 'fundamental ethics' and his new language is an

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[44] 'La responsabilité pour autrui qui n'est pas l'accident arrivant à un Sujet, mais précède en lui l'Essence, n'a pas attendu la liberté où aurait été pris l'engagement pour autrui. Je n'ai rien fait et j'ai toujours été en cause: persecuté. L'ipséité, dans sa passivité sans *arché* de l'identité, est otage.' Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 145 ('Responsibility for the other is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation – persecuted. The ipseity, in the passivity without arche characteristic of identity, is a hostage.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1981), p.114).

[45] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), p. 217 (Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1969), p.199).

[46] See for instance: Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, pp. 200-206 (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, pp.157-162).

[47] See, for instance: Didier Franck, *L'un-pour-l'autre*, (Paris: P.U.F., 2008), chapters xix and xx.

[48] See Lévinas, 'Préface à l'édition allemande', *Totalité et infini*, pp. i-ii.

astonishing French suffused with Old Testament Hebrew structures.[49] Both the language and the framework appear in full bloom in *Autrement qu'être ou au delà de l'essence.*

The most remarkable feature of this shift is a foregrounding of linguistic concerns. Language becomes the locus of the *ur*-relation, where it is approached as 'dire'[50] in its opposition to the 'dit' of the world.[51] Phenomenological concepts such as the visible and the invisible remain valid but are confined to the discussion of the realm of justice and the construction of the world. The *ur*-relation inhabits now language, as 'dire', as the very verb of language, as its life. Lévinas talks of inspiration in its double meaning of birth of language and birth of life,[52] with the biblical echoes we know, in praise of Him behind the other.

Such a vision has obvious advantages for my work. I am looking for the possibility to develop a fundamental anthropology in a strictly intra-linguistic milieu. It has to be intra-linguistic because I not only want to avoid difficulties which I have associated with an extra-linguistic projection of an intra-linguistic problem, but above all because my work is about literature; I am trying to find a fundamental anthropology that would support a theory of literary language.

We see now how Lévinas offers me such a possibility with his distinction between 'dire' and 'dit'. The very concept of inspiration, so dear to Lévinas, in its fundamental ambiguity: birth of language and beginning of life, offers me a point of anchorage for a possible link; especially in the light of Virginia Woolf's moments of vision as instances of inspiration. Furthermore, I have encountered features of a possible anthropology in Virginia

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[49] The beauty and forcefulness, the alien quality of Lévinas's language is unfortunately lost in the English translation.

[50] 'Le Dire […] il est proximité de l'un à l'autre, engagement de l'approche, l'un pour l'autre.' Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 6 ('Saying […] is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other.' Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 5).

[51] 'Dans le language comme dit, tout se traduit devant nous.' Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 7 ('In language qua said everything is conveyed before us.' Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 6).

[52] 'Autrui qui m'arrache la parole avant d'apparaître.' Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 98 ('The other who forces me to speak before appearing to me.' Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 77)
and 'L'animation d'un corps par une âme ne fait qu'articuler l'un-pour-l'autre de la subjectivité.' Ibid., p. 99
('The animation of a body by a soul only articulates the one – for – the – other in subjectivity.' Ibid., p. 79).

Woolf's work, such as relationship, birth of language, incarnation that fit in with Lévinas's philosophy.

Lévinas, although in a revolutionary language, still talks about the *ur*-relation. The philosophical framework that he explodes in his discussion of the relation to the other as 'dire', he reintroduces, as a gesture in his thematising it as 'dit' in his philosophical discourse. And he is aware of the problem, which he solves in underlining the necessity to unsay what he says; he writes about a:

> Trahison au prix de laquelle tout se montre, même l'indicible et par laquelle est possible l'indiscrétion à l'égard de l'indicible qui est probablement la tâche même de la philosophie. [everything shows itself at the price of this betrayal, even the unsayable. In this betrayal the indiscretion with regard to the unsayable which is probably the very task of philosophy, becomes possible.][53]

We have a situation very similar to the case of Iser and deconstruction. Philosophy as theory imposes a certain objectifying perspective on the problem it examines. This is exactly where Wittgenstein makes a groundbreaking contribution. Wittgenstein in his dislike of theory does not only condemn it thematically but he actually undoes it as a gesture or framework. Philosophy is not a 'talking about' in Wittgenstein's work but a 'showing'; this allows a link with the concept of performativity developed in the discussion of literary language.

Wittgenstein has a peculiar position in the history of philosophy. He has attracted much attention from all sides. There are many Wittgensteins in existence. For the purpose of this work, I will concentrate on two main interpretations of his work: the traditional and what has been called the New Wittgensteinian interpretation. A central difference between the two interpretations is that the traditional insists on a break between the early and the late Wittgenstein, that is between the *Tractatus*[54] and the *Philosophical Investigations*,[55] whereas

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[53] Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être* , p. 8 (Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 7).
[54] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* trans. by P. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness (London: Routledge, 1961).

adepts of the New Wittgenstein see there 'a suggestion of significant continuity in Wittgenstein's thought.'[56]

The *Tractatus* articulates a 'picture theory' of language where the structures of language correspond to similar structures in reality. This correspondence guarantees the truth of an utterance; that is to say, its correctness. For Wittgenstein, language outside this correspondence is nonsense.[57] The traditional interpretation focuses on what can be said; that is to say, the territory of true propositions, as described by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. For the New Wittgenstein reading, it is what is *not* said that counts. They underline the passage towards the end of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein suggests that all that he has just said (that is to say The *Tractatus* itself) is nonsense, a ladder that can be thrown away once on board. They also emphasise his famous principle: 'what we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.'[58] Such an interpretation suggests that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was in fact staging a voice, that the philosophy of language deployed in the book was above all a way of bringing us to the limit of language in order to show us what lies beyond it, which is a matter of living rather than talking.[59]

When people talk about Wittgenstein's later philosophy, they generally mean the second book, after the *Tractatus*, which he himself published – the *Philosophical Investigations* – where he develops his language-game vision of language. According to this, there is no outside perspective on language; language can only be considered from within its limits. This implies that an overview is impossible; there is no theory of language as such, but only local descriptions of the functioning of language: how it functions within certain communities or contexts. It is the context that determines the rules that validate utterance in

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[55] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations,* trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 1978).
[56] Alice Crary, 'Introduction' in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. by Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-18, (p. 1).
[57] See A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 29-31.
[58] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 151.
[59] 'He has written a book which consists not in a line of argument […] but rather in a form of activity […] designed to lead us to a point at which we come to see that the appearance that the book is advancing metaphysical claims is an illusion.' Crary and Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, p. 13.

this context.[60] The traditional interpretation of Wittgenstein here underlines the break with the theory of the *Tractatus*: 'the *Investigations* is in many important ways a reaction to the *Tractatus*.'[61] A break that in fact is staged by Wittgenstein himself in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Philosophers who favour this interpretation have also underlined the relevance of Wittgenstein's context-determined description of meaning and have concretely continued his program by using it in different contexts to obtain a measure of clarity in distinguishing, in the contexts in question, between what can be said and what cannot; that is to say, between sense and non-sense. We could say that a great part of what we call analytical philosophy is a continuation of this program.

The New Wittgensteinian interpretation here again has followed a different track. Firstly, they underline Wittgenstein's dislike of theory: how his language-game vision of language, by underlining our immanence in language, has made an objective consideration of language as such impossible. But they also underline how such an immanence indicates a limit of language, which Wittgenstein calls 'life-form', that cannot be expressed but is associated with ethics and religion. They suggest a continuity, in this context, with the 'what we cannot talk about' of the *Tractatus* and its hints at the ethical and religious. They claim that in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein, not unlike his 'style' in the *Tractatus* but in a more complex manner, has staged voices: contrary but complementary positions such as Platonism and Nihilism, to show us a third way which, unlike the two positions in opposition, would not be theoretical but would foreground simplicity in a return to everyday life.[62]

I have a predilection for the New Wittgenstein interpretation. What I find of interest for my work is, firstly, the focus on what cannot be said in both the early and late

[60] See Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, pp. 67-77.
[61] Grayling, *Wittgenstein*, p. 67.
[62] 'The method of the *Tractatus* is similar in important respects to the method of Wittgenstein's later writings.' Crary and Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, p. 13 and 'The exchanges in Wittgenstein's later writings between different interlocutory voices should be understood as realizing his modes of philosophical criticism.' Crary and Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, p. 7.

Wittgenstein, and its suggestion of the religious and ethical.[63] Such an interpretation makes a possible rapprochement, on the plane of a fundamental anthropology, between Lévinas and Wittgenstein thinkable. Secondly, the emphasis on Wittgenstein's 'literary' style, enabling him to show rather than to talk about, represents a way out of theory. I can see there a possible link with what I called performativity on the plane of literary language. Finally, the foregrounding of simplicity understood as a third way between a set of opposite yet complementary theories could prove precious in my discussion of critical approaches to literature, where I am also trying to promote a third way out of a dilemma.

Wittgenstein has never written in any length about literature, but we know that he liked Tolstoy very much and occasionally refers to him, and he sometimes mentions poetry. He was also interested in other art forms especially music and architecture. Yet there is a thought of his about poetry, expressed in a letter to Paul Engelmann, that seems to bridge the gap, for me, at least, between the above aspects of his philosophy that interest me and a possible theory of literary language: 'If we do not try to express the inexpressible, nothing is lost. Rather the inexpressible is – inexpressibly – contained in what is expressed.'[64]

My intention is, of course, not to reconstruct a possible Wittgensteinian missing theory of literature. As was the case with Lévinas, I borrow from these thinkers elements that might help me solve my problem of the articulation of a theory of literary language and a fundamental anthropology. From Wittgenstein I ask, we remember, a form of access to this fundamental dimension that, on the one hand, does not present the difficulties of theory and on the other, is compatible with literature. This makes my reading of both Wittgenstein and

[63] One of Wittgenstein's letters to Von Ficker about the *Tractatus* is in this respect telling: 'My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were and I am convinced that this is the only rigorous way of drawing these limits. I have managed in my book to put everything firmly in place by being silent about it.' Cited in Cora Diamond, 'Introduction to "Having a rough story about what moral philosophy is"', in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. by John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 127-132, (p. 128).

[64] Cited in Allan Janik, *Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), p. 231.

Lévinas and my rapprochement of the two, as I said above, unconventional and daring but I hope not unacceptable.

We are now at the end of this philosophical journey. Literature shows us the most fundamental dimension of life by incarnating it. Literature takes us by the hand and guides us, which I have described as a drift towards performativity on the plane of literary language, towards the edge of language and tells us, see, there, that's life. I cannot say it, because I am it. As language I am inspiration, the first words and the first breath, the invention of a new world, the first position of an I, here, and a You, there, but in all simplicity, nothing hidden.[65]

In less lyrical words: we have described, on the level of a theory of literary language, a drift towards performativity, of which the symptoms were linguistic phenomena such as tropes, fictionality and aporia. On the level of a fundamental anthropology, such performativity is a mode of access, a showing by incarnating, of the fundamental dimension of human life that is inspiration. The two levels are the two complementary sides of the same event.

Of course the question remains: am I justified in believing that such a vision of literature informs Virginia Woolf's work? My thesis is a tentative answer to that question.

II. Literature review

Another consideration that prompted me to choose a tension between a force of unification and one of fragmentation as a reading grid of Woolf's work is a certain dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in Woolfian criticism. I would argue that most critical work done on the subject can be divided in two main tendencies. On the one hand, there are critics who

[65] 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity (one is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes).' Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §129.

underline unity in her work. They see in Virginia Woolf an experimental writer, dissatisfied with the traditional forms of the novel, who seeks new unifying principles in, for instance, a natural cycle, or poetical rhythms, just to mention a few suggestions, for her novels. On the other hand, the other main category of critics, and this corresponds roughly to the contemporary approach, tends to focus on fragmentation as the main feature of Virginia Woolf's work. They believe that her rejection of the traditional novel was, above all, a rejection of unity. The focus here is on how unity, in their eyes, is a governing principle of a certain type of ideology.

Such a dichotomy is, arguably, based on two fundamental philosophical positions: on the one hand, humanism; on the other deconstruction. It is these two positions, in their opposition and in their complementariness that define the critical landscape in Woolfian studies. Humanistic criticism underlines the social function of literature or its concrete connections to real life. This type of approach finds different applications. It ranges from philosophical discussions, such as those of Paul Ricoeur who sees literature as part of world producing[66] or Martha Nussbaum who treat it as prop of moral philosophy;[67] via psychoanalytic and sociological approaches to traditional historical and biographical studies. Such conceptions are world-orientated and, for me, they are too human: seeing in literature a tool among others to build or understand the world, they deny literature's specificity.

On the other hand, there are the structuralists and deconstructionists. The problem here, I would argue, is that they are *too inhuman*. From a neutral mechanistic game played according to fixed rules, literature evolves into a subversive playing with those rules, even at times a nihilistic fascination for nothingness. The following names in a chronological order

[66] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 3 vols (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983-85).
[67] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

can perhaps serve as a shorthand for this history: Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze. [68]

Readers might reproach me for not considering contemporary movements, the so-called 'new' movements: feminism, post-colonialism and gender studies. These approaches are indeed well represented among Woolfian criticism, and constitute its contemporary backbone. They can be put in either the one or the other category; very often they represent a mixture of humanism and deconstruction, a collusion of sociological pragmatism and Foucauldian vision of the world with a political charge. In the latter case, I would suggest the core of such theories remains inhuman fields of forces, or their linguistic equivalent crystallised in a power or political distribution, whose mechanisms are such new movements' main interest.[69]

I favour a 'third way'; an 'excluded third' which has been left out of the game of opposition and complementariness suggested above. Here again Wittgenstein will be useful to my purpose. I want to underline analogies between what he does in philosophy and what I am attempting to do in this thesis.

In philosophy, Wittgenstein tries to get us out of a trap. He understands this trap in terms of a dilemma, a set of contraries that are in their complementariness, equally unsatisfying.[70] We could call them Platonism and Nihilism or metaphysics and deconstruction. On the one hand, an anchoring of language in truth (facts or Ideas); on the other, the negation of such an anchorage and its consequence: an unending interpretative task. Yet, what characterises the different positions, in their very opposition, is their

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[68] See for instance: Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris: Editions du seuil, 1964) (Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evenston: Northwestern University Press, 1972)); Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) (Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1993)); Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993) (Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1997)).

[69] I am thinking here of, for instance: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990); or Donna J. Harraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[70] See Martin Stone, 'Wittgenstein on Deconstruction', in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. by Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 83-118.

complementariness. It can be expressed rather cursorily, on an argumentative level, by the fact that deconstruction functions as a negation of metaphysics, thus maintaining, in its rejection, the very structure it rejects. On a structural level, it could be argued, both positions work within the framework of experience. Metaphysics fills the different instances, a subject experiencing an object, whereas deconstruction functions with empty spaces: nobody experiences nothing. But the basic structure is the same. What Wittgenstein attempts is to get out of this dilemma by showing that it is not necessary, it has not exhausted the possibilities of understanding the workings of language. What he offers is a third way. It is characterised by a return to everyday life and simplicity. This is the language-game theory. The meaning of words is not guaranteed by any extra linguistic anchorage, nor are they meaningless, but meaning is a function of their use in a certain language-game; that is to say, community.

My discussion of literature here has common features with Wittgenstein's philosophical struggle. I am faced with an alternative that seems to exclude any other possibility, but leaves me dissatisfied. In my case, the two sides of the alternative are conceptions of literature. On the one hand, the humanistic approach focuses on the world and literature as representation of the world or as transformation of the world or as a manner of understanding it. On the other hand, we have deconstructionist critics, starting from the play space of the structuralists and ending with the *procedés* of Deleuze. The opponents are very similar to those Wittgenstein met on a philosophical level and share the same complementariness. I am trying to formulate a third way that would simply leave the dilemma behind. Such a solution would also foreground simplicity, performativity and a certain type of obviousness of life.

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But let us firstly have a look at the critical landscape of Woolfian studies in the light of this dichotomy between world-orientated critics and deconstructionists.

In very general terms, both these groups can be divided roughly into three main phases. The first phase (1950s and 1960s) is characterised by what we could call an academic perspective on Woolf; the second (1970s and 1980s) by a diversification of approaches and the third (1990s onwards) by post-structuralism. This represents a tentative ordering. In reality, categories are not so clearly cut, especially the chronological ones: we still find, for example, contemporary critics who share the academic perspective of the first phase.

As Alex Zwerdling puts it, the critics of the first phase tend to consider Virginia Woolf a 'lesser modernist'[71] and tend to deal with her whole work in one book. The perspective is definitely literary. They try to locate her in literary tradition in terms of genre (the psychological novel) or period (modernism) or influences. Here, Proust and Bergson are often mentioned.[72] They show a peculiar interest in 'technique' and tend to think that Virginia Woolf is important for her innovations in this respect. The discussion turns very often around the questions of 'internal monologue' and 'stream of consciousness.'[73] Another topic is her 'unifying techniques': 'natural cycles'[74] or poetical rhythms,[75] rather than plot. Another point of discussion is her 'transition techniques': the passage from character to character or place to place.[76] Her difference from the Edwardian novelists and essays such as 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' play an important role in this kind of discussion.[77] The style of such critics is characterised by attention to detail both historical and biographical. Here, the erudition of the scholar is essential. Maybe, the most characteristic feature of such a critical perspective is how literature is kept within the walls of the academy.

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[71] Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 1.
[72] Hafley, for instance, writes: 'Indeed, if many of Virginia Woolf's concepts are most satisfactorily representable in Bergsonistic terms, it is Proust […] who offered the most important single contribution to her work.' John Hafley, *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1963), p. 72.
[73] Guiguet, for instance: 'Virginia Woolf's treatment of the interior monologue […] is essentially different and far closer to Proust than to Joyce.' Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and her Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), p. 241; but see also Hafley, *The Glass Roof*, pp. 73-76.
[74] See Adrian Velicu, *Unifying Strategies in Virginia Woolf's Experimental Fiction* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1985), p. 5 and p. 6.
[75] Stella McNichols, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989).
[76] See Hafley, *The Glass Roof*, p. 58 and p. 67.
[77] Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and her Works*, pp. 238-240; Hafley, *The Glass Roof*, pp. 8-14.

This point is definitely where critics of the second group make an important contribution. They expand the strict literary framework of the critics of the previous generation by both looking at Woolf's work from different angles and on focusing on particular aspects of her work. According to Zwerdling again, this change was mainly due to the discovery of new material by Woolf: the diaries, essays, biographical sketches and so on.[78] I would personally add to this point of view a change of sensitivity on the part of the readership; above all, an increase of interest in feminist issues on the one hand; on the other, the influence of New Criticism and structuralism that led to a new focus on form. Zwerdling mentions two main tendencies in this phase, to which I would add a third. According to Zwerdling, there is on the one hand a trend towards the inside: psychological critics interested above all in how Woolf discovers an inner reality;[79] on the other hand, those that look towards the outside, (including his own study) see Virginia Woolf as a social reformer and this includes the first 'realist' feminist critics.[80] I would add a third group of critics: scholars, such as Fleishman and McLaurin[81] who show a certain interest in formalism.

I think it is necessary to have a more detailed look at these three tendencies among critics of the second phase. Psychological critics such as Naremore, Richter or Harper[82] tend to be 'soft' critics in the manner of Jean-Pierre Richard in the French tradition.[83] They tend to believe that an author creates a poetical world of a symbolic type 'à la Bachelard.'[84] They see

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[78] Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, pp. 1-2.
[79] Ibid., p. 4.
[80] Ibid., p. 4 and p. 6.
[81] Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975).
[82] James Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Howard Harper, *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
[83] What characterises such critics is an approach of the text without a pre-conceived scheme; they meet the text, rather, on its own term and let it dictate to them how it should be read. See, for instance: Jean-Pierre Richard, *Onze études sur la poésie moderne* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1964).
[84] '[Woolf's] is the preeminent example in English literature of what the French critic, Gaston Bachelard calls "the material imagination of water."' Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, p. 2; see also Harper, *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p. 1; Bachelard himself often refers to Woolf, for instance: Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries du repos* (Paris: José Corti, 1948), p. 89, p. 113, p. 118; see also

their task as one of mapping such a world, which implies some sort of passive floating from one symbolic nodal point to the other. They share the conception that the symbolic world constituting the work of Virginia Woolf is an expression of an 'inner reality'[85] that is not directly available to us. This inner reality is often seen as 'the water in us', a limitless, fluid and impersonal dimension of our human life. It is, according to them, the 'life' Virginia Woolf was trying 'to capture.'[86] It explains technical innovation as well: because it is a layer of our personalities that is not directly available to us, it requires a special language.[87] Most of the time, this language is considered poetical;[88] it foregrounds rhythm and symbolism. Virginia Woolf achieves thus a unity in her work that is denied us in the fragmentary nature of every-day life.[89]

What such critics have in common is a projection of life onto some sort of ineffable inner reality that has all the characteristics of a field of forces. We will see later that this will offer a point of anchorage to post-structuralist theories.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the realist critics. What they are interested in is how Virginia Woolf's characters deal with their fictional world and deduce from it how Virginia Woolf herself positions herself in relation to her environment. There are different sub-categories but what they all share is a political or social engagement dimension: Ruotolo underlines the anarchic potential of Woolf's work;[90] Zwerdling is interested in Woolf's

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Richter's talk of 'the geography' and 'the climate' of Woolf's novels, Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage,* p. vii.

[85] Harper, *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p. 1 ; Richter talks of 'internal reality and the essence of lived experience.' Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, p. vii.

[86] Richter talks in this respect of Woolf's 'complex and sophisticated method of conveying the many interrelated components of lived experience.' Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* , p. xii.

[87] 'Much of Mrs. Woolf's experimentation therefore grows out of an attempt to suggest a world she could never directly describe.' Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, pp. 245-246.

[88] Harper, *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p. 4.

[89] 'The notion of a single rhythm stringing together all the fragments […] making them "melt in another" and become "a harmonious whole" might be taken as an important guide to the motive behind her style.' Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, p. 242.

[90] 'Central to all her thinking is the revelation of interruption heralding change, and the growing expectation that society is on the verge of radical transformation.' Lucio P. Ruotolo, *The Interrupted Moment* (Standford: Standford University Press, 1986), p. 17.

characters as revealing for her own social engagement;[91] or finally and this constitutes the beginning of what will become a powerful trend, critics such as Showalter who insists on reading Woolf's work as a testimony to her feminist views.[92] The main problem, perhaps, with such a type of reading of Woolf is the difficulty such critics have to account for Woolf's literary concerns; why literature and the related questions of genre and form and technique were so central to her.

The third trend in this second phase could be called the formalists. We have traces of formalism in Naremore and his discussion of style.[93] Fleishman and McLaurin are more obvious candidates. What they all share is a focus on style: particular, formal features of Woolf's work such as repetition and symbolism.[94] They often refer to other art forms, such as music and above all painting. In this context they underline Woolf's close links to Roger Fry. They show particular interest in Lily's performance-painting in *To the Lighthouse*.[95] They all underline Woolf's dissatisfaction with the ordinary structures of language and her endeavours in making language 'signify' differently.[96] They all locate this difference in how language refers to the world and all seem to indicate some sort of drift towards performativity in Woolf's style. Fleishman sees the text as self-contained in anticipation of structuralism.[97] McLaurin underlines Woolf's use of characters as building blocks, or positions in the novel against psychological realism.[98]

I would like to mention one problem that all three trends in this second phase are faced with. We could call it the persistence of an invisible anthropological framework. There is a

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[91] 'She was as interested in the forces of "the real world" as in the responses of people whose lives were deeply affected by these forces.' Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* , p. 6.
[92] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 263-297.
[93] Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, pp. 240-248.
[94] 'She names image and symbol as the essential materials of her activity. It is with them, therefore, that this study will be most often occupied' Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf*, p.xi; McLaurin describes his book as: 'an investigation into the repetitive and visual aspects of Virginia Woolf's work.' Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*, p. viii.
[95] Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*, pp. 189-206.
[96] 'Virginia Woolf […] express[es] that dissatisfaction with language which haunts her works.' Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*, p. 7.
[97] See his discussion of Deleuze in his 'afterword', Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf*, pp. 223-225.
[98] 'She does not seek for psychological realism but for the establishment of a relation' Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*, p. 177.

clear distinction between the world of the novels and the real world where the fictional world is seen as expression of the world of experience of the author. This relation can be of an indirect nature as in Richter, where the fictional world is an imitation of the structures of experience in real life, offering thus a quasi-virtual experience of reality.[99] Yet, the basic dichotomy reality/fiction remains and it is bridged by imitation as expression. Such a framework implies an author who has an experience and consecutively wants to express it in the form of fiction and a reader who wants to read such fiction to participate vicariously in such an experience. It also implies diverse accompanying psychological effects such as the world of fiction is sought because it represents an escape from reality, or the world of fiction is distortedly autobiographical; and finally some sort of literary empiricism: nothing in the book that has not existed before in the author's experience. Even the formalists remain in a framework of referentiality, albeit of a different type, where literary language remains the tool at the service of an author who wants to express an experience with the ultimate aim of communicating it to a reader.

It is this type of anthropomorphism and psychologism that the third phase of criticism leaves behind. This phase is dominated by feminist and deconstructionist critics.[100] It seems at first sight difficult to imagine how feminist critics, abandoning a realist position, have become the champions of anti-anthropomorphism. Post-structuralism is the key to this evolution and explains how feminists of the third phase have in fact united traits of the three trends of the second phase, without importing their anthropological framework. Realist feminists see in Woolf's writing a form of social engagement in the name of women's liberation. Both the formalist and psychological critics underline Woolf's sense of the inadequacy of language.

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[99] 'The reader is no longer a passive spectator in a horizontal sequence of events. He is involved actively in the character's total environment – an envelopment in which all the senses, all central and peripheral feelings are called upon.' Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, p. x.

[100] Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Daniel Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (London: Routledge, 1990); Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987); Patricia Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Standford: Standford University Press, 1991); Sue Roe, *Writing and Gender* (Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

The psychological critics insist on the inadequacy of language to express an ineffable interior reality. Post-structuralism underlines the ideological charge of language and valorises positively the ineffable reality. The post-structuralist feminists can unite Woolf's formal concerns and her feminist engagement: they argue that she endeavours to create a new language for repressed feminity. The hidden realm of fluidity, the ineffable field of forces she tries to bring to words is the 'feminine other'; and the language she has at her disposal to do it, is the language of her fathers, the phallocentric language of Victorian England; hence the need to re-invent language or invent a new language.[101]

We have left the anthropological framework behind, because we are in the realm of the 'death of the author', 'after the word'[102] as Laurence (quoting George Steiner) says; the idea that language is a tool used by an author to express something is an illusion, and a bad one at that; the crystallisation of an ideology of exclusion and power in the name of the subject, white and male, and its order, the symbolic.[103] We have instead the semiotic, the Chora, the feminine fluidities of the 'universal amniotic fluid'[104] and its tentative expression in the performative rhythms of 'l'écriture féminine'.[105] The description corresponds more specifically to one version of post-structuralist feminism, that of the French feminists of the 1970s, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous (here in this discussion of Woolfian criticism represented by Minow-Pinkey).[106] But, whatever the version, the fundamental structure remains the same.

We have in the critics of that third phase of Woolfian criticism a world divided into two, with a good and a bad side. This fundamental dichotomy finds an echo on the most

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[101] See Laura Marcus, 'Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 209-244, (pp. 230-232).
[102] Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, p. 3.
[103] 'Woolf practices a deconstructive form of writing. She, like Nietsche and Derrida, is criticizing the logocentrism of Western thought and she unmasks men's claims to systematic knowledge […] "the intellectual will to power."' Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, pp. 216-217.
[104] Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language* , p. 49.
[105] Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, p. 32.
[106] Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*.

diverse levels, textual: poetry versus traditional philosophy; anthropological: sensitivity versus intellectualism; political: the left versus conservatism; and of course social: woman versus man and so on. We end up with a fixed set of opposites that reverses traditional conservative values. Language and its supposed construction of the world are always already on the wrong side, totalitarian in essence.[107] Wouldn't one want a more subtle and complex interplay between opposite forces, especially when one is looking for a reading grid to approach the work of Virginia Woolf?

Another shortcoming of such an approach, in my eyes, is the to-and-fro from life to text, and back to life. A to-and-fro that remains, it seems, unreflected in the authors I have read.[108] Are we in language or are we in life when discussing Woolf? Is there a difference or none? Where should we locate our discussion? These are questions that are not asked in those texts, which leads to the confusing application of textual categories to life and life-categories to the text.

There is a certain fascination for 'des expériences limites' as Georges Bataille,[109] one of the precursors of deconstruction, used to call them. Madness, silence, death and trauma, are central themes of the texts in question, as some of their titles indicate: *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language, The Reading of Silence.* We can see here a certain fascination for nothingness at play, which is typical of deconstruction, and reveals, in my view, the inhumanity of the post-structuralist project. As we have seen above, we have left the anthropological framework of traditional theory behind; unfortunately, we have lost human life in the process. We are dealing with fields of forces that ultimately lead to silence, death

[107] 'The relational structure of language necessarily spells the end of the feminine "truth", sentencing it to death.' Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, p. 32; 'Articulate paternal language which, by its very nature, represses an essential part of reality.' Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, p. 64; 'the prison house of language.' Laurence, *The Reading of Silence : Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, p. 3.
[108] See for instance: 'Death […] a base which shows through at each failing in the continuity of the writing.' Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, p. 45 or 'the anorexia comes out in an ascesis in the writing.' Ibid., p. 51.
[109] See on the concept of experience, Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), pp. 18-21 (Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 6-9).

and nothingness.[110] In this they seem to have turned Virginia Woolf inside out. In post-structuralist readings of Woolf, life is an expression of silence. In Woolf, silence is an expression of life.

This fascination for nothingness also has stylistic consequences in the work of these critics. They construct their reading around concepts such as silence, madness or death that remain eminently empty. They themselves talk about their eternally shifting meaning.[111] Isn't that the best way to allow 'endless talk'? And isn't that the best way to describe the style of deconstruction? Laurence talks of a 'new rhetoric' when describing the meta-language that post-structuralism has bequeathed us; a fitting description, in my eyes, even though she, unlike me, sees it as a positive qualification.

Another type of genre that is very present in Woolfian criticism is the biography.[112] We might explain this state of affairs by the fact that Woolf herself was interested in biography. She wrote one herself,[113] wrote about biographical writing and used to like reading biographies. Another reason for such a large number of biographies of Woolf might be the fact that, as Lee remarks, certain aspects of Woolf's life, madness, childhood abuse, trauma, her Bloomsbury connection, suicide and so on, seem to attract biographical curiosity.[114] Be that as it may, the different biographies of Woolf are different in style: we have the matter-of-fact biography of her nephew Quentin Bell; we have the literary-orientated *An Inner Life* by Briggs and *Virginia Woolf: A Literary Life* by Mepham; Lee's with her focus on Woolf's relationships with friends and family; or Gordon's psychological approach. With biographies

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[110] Ferrer talks of 'fragmentation into numerous drives.' Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, p. 63; Laurence of the 'pulse of the unconscious.' Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, p. 198.

[111] 'Devices of indirection.' Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, p. 36; 'techniques of indirection.' Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, p. 6; 'multiplying the forces at work in interpretation […] decentring.' Ibid., p. 10.

[112] Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1972); Lyndall Gordon, *A Writer's Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); John Mepham, *Virginia Woolf: A Literary Life* (London: McMillan, 1991); Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996); Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

[113] Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1940); in this context, we could also mention *Flush*, which is a biography of some sort, see Virgina Woolf, *Flush*, ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[114] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 3.

of Woolf in general, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether we are in fiction or in life: Woolf's life is romanced with the help of the novels and events in the novels are shored with material from her life. But maybe the most disturbing feature of such a biographical approach to writing is its reductionism. There is nothing in the novels that has not been in the author's life before.

Another form of criticism that is connected with biography is criticism of psychoanalytical bent.[115] Woolf tended to attract such criticism because of her 'traumas' and 'madness'. Here her art is seen as the indirect and unconscious expression of repressed elements of her life or as a way of indirectly dealing with these. These repressed elements can be the sexual abuse she experienced as a child,[116] death[117] or her femininity.[118] Psychoanalytical criticism often has a hybrid nature, combining biography and deconstruction and/or feminism. Even Woolf's formal literary innovations can be explained in this manner: they represent the distortion that censure imposes on expression; they are the result of 'dream work'. For Roe, for instance, the repressed autobiographical went into form. Art, for Virginia Woolf, was some sort of *Ersatz*-life, where she could reconstruct and live her femininity without the risks of real life. Her novels represent a compensation for a life she could not face.[119]

These are very general remarks attempting to characterise trends in recent Woolf criticism against which my own work is set. I intend to flesh them out *in situ*. In order to do so I will proceed thus: in each of the coming chapters, corresponding respectively to the four novels I have decided to discuss in this thesis, my reading of the novel is accompanied by an analysis of both a deconstructionist and a world-orientated reading of the same novel. I have chosen such 'readings' from among the works of the critics I discuss in very general terms

[115] Louise De Salvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work* (London: The Woman's Press, 1989); Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*; Roe, *Writing and Gender*.
[116] De Salvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work*.
[117] Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language.*
[118] Roe, *Writing and Gender*.
[119] Ibid., pp. 173-175.

here in this literature review: Ferrer, Bowlby and Laurence for deconstruction; Bradshaw, McLaurin, Naremore and Gordon for world-orientated criticism. My aim in doing this is, firstly, to show what I believe to be the limitations of both the humanistic and deconstructionist positions and the exclusion at work in their opposition; secondly, consequently and in contrast, I hope to emphasise thus the specificity of my own 'third way' approach. In very general terms, we could say that world-orientated critics tend to underline unity, whereas deconstructionists favour disintegration; my reading endeavours to maintain the tension.

On the side of world-orientated criticism, there is, with David Bradshaw, a representative of traditional academic criticism, a representative of the psychological approach with James Naremore, a formalist in Allen McLaurin and finally Lyndall Gordon, a biographer.[120] I have sought to show the limits of these different approaches by examining instances where they are unduly 'stretched', where they have to go against their grain. I discuss Gordon's biographical reading of *The Waves* and McLaurin's formalist perspective on *To the Lighthouse* when the latter novel lends itself 'naturally' to a biographical reading and the former to a formalist one; while Bradshaw, it can be argued, would have been more at ease with *Between the Acts*'s historical charge and intertextuality than with the 'psychology' of *Mrs Dalloway*, which, arguably, would have been Naremore's subject of predilection. By discussing these approaches in unpropitious circumstances, I try to bring to light a 'remainder', a dimension of literature that does not let itself be tamed and which plays a central role in my perspective.

With the deconstructionists, I seek, besides a confirmation of the different general points I have made in this literature review, to show the uniformity of the 'vision of the world' that informs their different readings. In spite of different agendas (Rachel Bowlby's

[120] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. xi-xlv; Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, pp. 219-239; McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*, pp. 177-206; Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life*, pp. 203-248.

reading of *Mrs Dalloway* is feminist, Daniel Ferrer's discussion of *To the Lighthouse* is influenced by psychoanalysis and Patricia Laurence's readings of *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* are of formalist inspiration),[121] they all share a similar 'map' of the world, which can be described as dichotomous and bi-polar, with one pole valorised at the expense of the other. I try to show the consequences of such a position for the critics' understanding of both literature and language. I also suggest that such a 'vision of the world' does not afford the best reading grid with which to approach Woolf's work. Here my choice of critics and the order in which they appear has been determined by the intention to bring to the surface, in a gradually more explicit manner, the 'map' implied by their interpretation of Woolf's novels.

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What is needed – and this is hopefully my work's contribution to the debate – is a fundamental humanism. Literature has access on its own terms, to the 'intrigue', as Levinas calls it, the original knot of human life. It is a celebration, a testimony of that life, in its most universal features beyond the local interests of this or that critical perspective. These features are: incarnation, responsibility, freedom where power can only be understood as collaboration in the name of a promise to bring about a just, a better world.

'What had she given?' asks Miss La Trobe before supplying her own answer: 'it was in the giving that the triumph was.'[122] Bernard's Sisyphean task, in *The Waves*, of having to tell a story for his interlocutor, knowing that there is no perfect story; but he 'will fight on.' Clarissa understands, seeing the old lady going to bed opposite, and thinking about Septimus's death, that she 'must go back'[123] to the people. And Lily, in *To the Lighthouse*, overcomes the local interests of the male and female and the auto-destructive system they

[121] Bowlby, Virginia Woolf: *Feminist Destinations*, pp. 80-98; Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, pp. 40-64; Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, pp. 170-213.
[122] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Granada, 1978), p. 151.
[123] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Granada, 1976), p. 164.

form, in an inspired artistic gesture. These, I want to argue, are the truly humanistic and universal lessons of Virginia Woolf, her truly emancipatory power.

CHAPTER TWO: *MRS DALLOWAY*: 'HERE WAS A ROOM; THERE ANOTHER'

I. A world-orientated critic

David Bradshaw's introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Mrs Dalloway*[1] is characterised by references to the outside of the novel. These references are historical, sociological, biographical, political and scholarly. At the beginning of the essay we have a summary of both the contents of the novel and, indirectly, of the method pursued by Bradshaw in his analysis: '*Mrs Dalloway* [...] which explore[s] [...] the social and psychological impact of war.'[2] It is a novel about the world at a certain time and place, seen from a certain perspective. This justifies the critic to discuss the novel on the basis of his knowledge of the certain place and time and his understanding of the perspective in question. A presupposition of a double nature underlies such an endeavour: firstly, that the reader might not have such knowledge or understanding, and secondly, that such knowledge and understanding will help her to make herself a clearer picture of what the novel is all about.

Privileged history

History has a privileged position in Bradshaw's reading of *Mrs Dalloway*. For instance, Woolf's vague allusion to Septimus's 'crosses', the fact that he had been decorated for bravery during the war, inspires Bradshaw to an erudite listing of the possible medals Septimus could have been awarded. As he says: 'A passing detail which should on no account be passed over, however, is the reference to Septimus's crosses.'[3] He muses:

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[1] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[2] Ibid., p. xi.
[3] Ibid., p. xiv.

> To be decorated with crosses in the context of the 1914-18 War can *only* mean that Septimus's bravery was acknowledged through the conferment on him of *two or more* of the following decorations: the French Croix de Guerre, the Italian Croce di Guerra, the Belgian Military Cross, the Belgian Croix de Guerre, or, if the crosses were British, as they are most likely to have been, the Military Cross and the Victoria Cross, his country's highest award for heroism in battle.[4]

As Bradshaw himself suggests, his reading of *Mrs Dalloway* implies a focus on and an interest in details. It also implies erudition of a certain type. The same type of exercise comes up again a page later. Here, the topic is shell-shock, a condition from which Septimus is supposed to suffer. Bradshaw lists a certain number of symptoms he gathers from a book written on the subject, which he quotes. He then gives us very precise figures on the magnitude of the phenomenon. Finally, he describes the reaction of the government then in power (1920) with the twist of a possible erudite discovery as regards the name of Septimus's doctor, Mr. Holmes:

> 'The symptoms [of shell-shock] were wildly diverse,' Wendy Holden has written, 'from total paralysis and blindness to loss of speech, vivid nightmares, hallucinations and memory loss. Some patients declined eventually into schizophrenia, chronic depression and even suicide.' There were some 200,000 cases of this kind of nervous breakdown during and after the war, and at the end of 1922 there were still 16,771 soldiers hospitalised with shattered nerves and around 50,000 neurasthenic and other types of war pensioner at large in Britain. Interestingly, when the government launched an official inquiry into shell-shock in 1920 under the chairmanship of Lord Southborough, it gathered evidence from, among others, a Dr. Holmes formerly Consultant Neurologist to the British Expeditionary Force.[5]

[4] Ibid., p. xv.
[5] Ibid., p. xvi.

What both discussions (the crosses and shell-shock) have in common, apart from the attention to details and the aforementioned need for erudition, is a listing procedure; a list of symptoms here, a list of crosses there.

Another similar example is Bradshaw's interest in the 'Lady Burton episode' in *Mrs Dalloway*. An important lady seeks the help of friends to polish up the style of a letter she intends to send to *The Times*, expressing her views on a eugenic scheme of emigration to Canada. Bradshaw's interest is both the scheme in question and the subtle editorial politics of *The Times* during this period:

> As Woolf must have been well aware, dispatching a letter to the editor of *The Times* (in the periods 1912-19 and 1922-41 it was Geoffrey Dawson) in June 1923 which advocated the emigration of eugenically sound men and women to Canada would have gone down famously. Canada experienced severe economic, political, and social difficulties in the early 1920s, and Canadian eugenicists were inclined to blame the mental deficiencies of immigrants in general and British immigrants in particular for 'the unrest which is disturbing Canada at the present moment'. The British government on the other hand, wanted to increase emigration to Canada in order to reduce unemployment and the pressures it was placing on the domestic economy and to repopulate the Empire and Dominions after the depredations of the war. When Charles Clarke, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, and the most eminent Canadian eugenicist of his day, gave the fourth Maudsley Lecture to the Medico-Psychological Association of Great Britain in London on 24 May 1923 he did not pull his punches. 'Wasting no time [...].' The following day, in the account of his lecture, *The Times* reported [...]. On 26 May 1923, *The Times* roundly endorsed Clarke's position [...].[6]

We have here the same focus on detail, the same impressive erudition and instead of lists we have a series of precise dates and real names.

[6] Ibid., p. xxvi.

The historical approach finds its emblem a few pages earlier when Clarissa's vague illness, 'she had grown very white since her illness'[7] is diagnosed by Bradshaw as the 'influenza pandemic of 1918-19 (of which the weak hearted and ghostly Clarissa is almost certainly a survivor).'[8]

Biographical connections

References to the outside are not only of a historical type. Bradshaw's reading of *Mrs Dalloway* also relies on biographical connections. He establishes links with, for instance, Woolf's own experience of madness and the psychiatric institutions of her time, at the time of her writing the novel: '*Mrs Dalloway* was written at a time when Woolf herself was both ill and misdiagnosed. She had suffered breakdowns in the past and had attempted suicide in 1913. During 1921 she was again unstable, suffering hallucinations.'[9] He also alludes to Woolf's love life:

> The writing of *Mrs Dalloway* coincided with the erotically charged build-up to Woolf's affair with Vita Sackville-West, and the relationship between Clarissa and Sally reflects the growing excitement Virginia felt in Vita's company. They had first met in 1922, but their affair only began in December 1925.[10]

Another type of 'biographical' reference is to the genesis of the novel. Alluding to both Woolf's diaries and notes she made, Bradshaw writes:

> The novel Woolf published in 1925 turned out to be very close to the one she first envisaged in 1922 [...] *Mrs Dalloway* had its most direct origins in a short story called 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' written in 1922 and published in July 1923 [...] Before the story's publication, on 6 October 1922, Woolf wrote two pages of notes [...].[11]

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[7] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Granada, 1976), p. 5.
[8] *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. by Bradshaw, p. xvii.
[9] Ibid., p. xix.
[10] Ibid., p. xxxvi.
[11] Ibid., p. xlii.

Here again in this type of biographical reference details are important, in the form of precise dates.

Scholarly references and a political consideration

There are scholarly references as well, to Greek mythology and/or to the subtleties of the English language, that could show that Septimus was gay, or produce a link between Clarissa and Septimus. In the first case:

> [Septimus] was unable to feel after Evans's death and it is possible that he then recoiled into heterosexuality [...] and marriage with Lucrezia as a reaction to his feelings of grief [...] Woolf encourages the reader to see things in this light by stressing the Greek tie between the two men [...] as Linda Dowling has written, in the days before the legalization of homosexuality, 'the "love that dare not speak its name" could be spoken of, to those who knew their ancient history, as paiderastia, Greek love' and Chris White adduces sources [...].[12]

In the second case, the creation of a link between the two main characters:

> The reference to taking doors off their hinges in the second and third lines of the novel most evidently relates to the preparations for Clarissa's party, but it may also be a cue to readers to ask themselves which character or characters [...] are 'unhinged' (as a verb meaning 'to unsettle, unbalance, disorder in mind, throw into confusion' (OED), unhinge had been in use since the early seventeenth century) in *Mrs Dalloway*.'[13]

As we can see, erudition on the part of the critic plays here again an important role. The essay ends with a sociological or political consideration. According to Bradshaw, *Mrs Dalloway* is both a witnessing and a promotion of social changes that took place in England after the First

[12] Ibid., p. xxxvii.
[13] Ibid., p. xix.

World War. He talks of 'the greater social and intellectual liberties, the comparative unrestrictedness, which the novel both registers and promotes.'[14]

The critical position could be sketched in the following manner: there is the text and, exterior to it, different spheres of knowledge in relation to which, implicitly or explicitly, the text has been written. The critic, who is an expert in the spheres of knowledge in question, has the task to retrace, explicitly this time, those relations for the reader. In contrast, in this thesis, I am trying to distance myself from a reading of literary texts that implies references to the outside of the text. In a structuralist vein, 'suspending' any outside of the text, I try to bring to light its 'rhythm'.

II. A structuralist critic

My means of access to *Mrs Dalloway* is a tension between a force of unification and one of fragmentation. Such a tension is at the same time one variation, albeit an important one, of a basic rhythm based on a binary opposition that governs the novel. My analysis consists in deploying, and thus revealing, other variations of this basic rhythm. Some of these variations I find on the level of the themes of the book; others concern more directly what we usually call the form. First, the thematic level: here the first variation is in direct relation with what I called above my 'means of access' to *Mrs Dalloway*; we have the theme of assemblage versus fragmentation that is echoed first in the distinction between the two main characters: Clarissa representing assemblage, Septimus fragmentation. It comes back as their respective 'activities' or 'being': Clarissa's party and Septimus's madness. It rebounds into the tension between identity and fragmented self, both within one character, in Clarissa or Peter, for instance, or across characters as is the case with Clarissa and Septimus. Another variation is

[14] Ibid., p. xli.

the opposition between life and death. Life itself becomes the occasion of another avatar: the love of life versus the fear of life. It also resurfaces on this thematic level as the opposition between terror and happiness. On this level, assemblage itself from within its opposition to fragmentation knows another tension between the metaphysical assemblage that Clarissa's vision produces and the physical one that is the result of her parties. On this level there is also the opposition of time and space, another variation of the basic rhythm, and the division of time itself into a unifying principle and a dissolving one.

As we can see on the level of the themes of the book, we encounter a rather complex reverberation of a fundamental binary structure. This complex reverberation finds its equivalent on the formal level. Here we have, for instance, the two plots corresponding to Clarissa's preparations for her party and that of Septimus's last day, two plots that constitute an inversed parallelism. On this level we also have the 'techniques' of place and scene both producing at the same time unity and fragmentation. On this level again, the novel itself as an instance of the unifying principle of narrative is in tension with the fragmentation effect of a multiplicity of sub-plots and characters. We could also include on this level the symbolism of the novel which, as is the case of that of the 'up-and-down movement', is another variation of our basic rhythm.

But all this is only a first phase characterised by a simple repetition of the basic binary rhythm. Now in a second phase we have repetition with a difference, a complexification of the basic rhythm leading to subtle imbroglios. For instance, Clarissa inherits some of Septimus's traits and Septimus some of Clarissa's: Clarissa is a fragmented person, and Septimus has visions. Some symbols, such as that of the tree or the bird, are associated with both characters. Clarissa overcomes isolation thanks to her parties, but Septimus fails to do so with 'universal love'. It is the same movement with a variation and the opposite result.

The same rhythm resurfaces on yet another plane, that of the novel itself. It culminates in a vision as a synthesis of the heterogeneous and is, as a piece of literature, such a synthesis

of the heterogeneous. It marks a rhythm between its closure as a book about a vision and its openness as an embodiment of such a vision, between thematisation and performance. Let us have a look at the detail of all this.

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I want to argue: there is a tension between order and chaos in *Mrs. Dalloway*, or rather between two forces, two movements: on the one hand, a dynamic process of fragmentation and, on the other, a unifying principle. In *Mrs Dalloway*, both these processes seem to be present, corresponding to the two main characters: Clarissa and Septimus, and to the two main lines of the plot: Clarissa standing for order, Septimus for chaos. To explain the nature of the tension at the centre of the novel, we have to examine the processes in question.

Integration

First Clarissa, the unifying principle: 'She must assemble'[15] says Clarissa Dalloway. What must she assemble? People, she says 'here was so-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; somebody else, say, in Mayfair; and she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it' (p. 109). That is the very point, 'the sense' (p. 106) of her parties. And it seems to work, as Mrs Hilbery murmurs during Clarissa's party:

> As the night grew later, as people went, one found old friends; quiet nooks and corners; and the loveliest views. Did they know, she asked, that they were surrounded by an enchanted garden? Lights and trees and wonderful gleaming lakes and the sky. Just a few fairy lamps, Clarissa had said, in the back garden! But she was a magician! It was a park. (p. 169)

[15] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Granada, 1976), p. 165; further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

She is a magician bringing old friends together again: Peter and Sally, old Miss Parry and Hugh, but also bringing the past back, the Bourton of their youth. She assembles past and present, people, old friends, and *what* old friends: Peter the thinker who believes in 'the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly in the light' (p. 71), who believes that 'we know everything' (p. 171); and Sally the passionate: 'what does the brain matter compared with the heart?' (p. 172). There seems to be a complementariness, the sense of a whole, some perfect community; hence the enchanted garden, the fairy lamps and the magician.

Is this all? Or is there a more fundamental fragmentation challenging the magician? Clarissa herself knows that she is made up of parts 'different' and 'incompatible' (p. 34): 'She felt very young; at the same unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on' (p. 9). Coming home, 'the hall of the house was cool as a vault […] she felt like a nun who has left the world' (p. 27). Peter Walsh speaks of her 'coldness', her 'woodenness' (p. 55) and goes as far as describing her with the words left him by his dream in the park, in terms of 'the death of her soul' (p. 54). Sally herself says: 'she lacked something. Lacked what was it?' (p. 167). A lack of which Clarissa herself seems to be aware: 'She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty, it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman or of women together' (p. 30). For her 'there was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room […] Narrower and narrower would her bed be' (p. 29). Yet she experiences moments of a different nature such as the one she calls 'the most exquisite moment of her whole life' (p. 33), when Sally kissed her on the lips in the park at Bourton; moments of extreme sensuality in direct contrast with the nun-like woodeness mentioned above:

> A tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the

> world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores. (p. 30)

This dichotomy at the very heart of her personality seems to be doubled and prolonged by another one: her love of life inscribed in her fear of life. Clarissa loves life. Already on the second page of the novel, this is underlined: 'for heaven only knows why one loves [life] so […] that was what she loved: life' (p. 2). And Peter mentions it too: 'and of course she enjoyed life immensely […] there was no bitterness in her [...] she enjoyed practically everything' (p. 70). And her love of life is the very reason for her parties. Peter thinks that her worldliness makes her organise them; it is because she is a snob that she does that type of thing. Her husband, Richard, believes that her parties just reveal her childishness; but as she says 'both were quite wrong. What she liked was simply life' (p. 108). Yet at the same time, 'she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day' (p. 9). When she learns, coming home, that her husband is dining out with Lady Bruton, and that she has not been invited, she shivers 'as a plant on the river bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers' (p. 28). She is afraid: 'she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence' (ibid.). But there is more to it than just the anxiety of growing old, losing one's good looks: 'there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one's parents giving it into one's hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear' (p. 164). It seems that life itself is the source of fear. Thus Clarissa is, at the same time, a nun and a *passionara*, she adores life and is terrorised by it.

Those are the incompatible parts she tries to assemble and compose 'for the world into one centre […] one woman' (p. 35), 'collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked

into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself' (p. 34). Once again, here, her parties seem to function as some sort of integrating principle. Clarissa can bring together the external world (past and present, people, friends) thanks to her parties, now we see that they seem to have the same effect on her personality: bringing it together, enabling some sort of focusing of its multiplicity onto one point, creating her identity for the world as Clarissa Dalloway.

But beside this inner fragmentation, she seems to experience another type of multiplication of personality, what she calls 'odd affinities':

> But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not here, here, here; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. […] So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out who completed them. (p. 135)

So to know her, we must seek out the people who complete her; there is a third level of assemblage. One character makes discreet yet recurrent appearances: the old lady living opposite Clarissa. The first time she appears, Clarissa is upset. She has just had a rather tense confrontation with Miss Kilman. No violent words have been exchanged, yet Clarissa could feel her malignity (she is compared to 'some prehistoric monster armoured for primeval warfare' (p. 112)) under the cover of religion. And she compares Miss Kilman's belief with Peter's love: two cruel, blind, and egoistical passions. This is when she notices, looking out of her window, in the building opposite, the old lady. It is her first appearance in the book but obviously not in Clarissa's life: 'then let her, as Clarissa had often seen her, gain her bedroom'(ibid.). This time, she feels some emotion: 'one respected that', 'there was something solemn in it', 'how extraordinary it was, strange, touching'. It is as if something was trying to seek expression, and Clarissa is lost for words. All she can say is that it has something to do with time:

> Big Ben struck the half hour. How extraordinary it was, strange, yes touching to see the old lady […] move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her. Down, down into the midst of ordinary things the finger fell, making the moment solemn. (p. 113)

And she also says that it is a mystery, the supreme mystery, a miracle: 'it was simply this: here was one room; there another' (p. 114). She also says that Peter's love or Miss Kilman's religion could not solve that mystery.

Short of solving it myself, I want to underline some elements. Firstly, time plays an important role: whenever the old lady appears, Big Ben strikes the hours. In fact, we also know that the novel, before it found its definitive title of *Mrs Dalloway*, was called *The Hours.*[16] The lady is old, and is forced by the sound 'to move, to go, but where?' (p. 113). One of Clarissa's moments of terror had to do with time 'she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life' (p. 28) and another expressed 'the incapacity […] this life, to be lived to the end' (p. 164). Big Ben, which is described elsewhere as 'his majesty, the law' (p. 114), here is described (or its sound rather) in terms of 'a finger' that falls 'into the midst of ordinary things' (p. 112). Secondly, distance yet proximity, physical distance and emotional proximity: 'here was one room, there another', is another feature of that supreme mystery.

The old lady reappears during the party, when the Bradshaws arrive and Clarissa learns about Septimus's death. She is shocked and thinks: 'in the middle of my party there is death' (p. 162), she isolates herself, goes into a room, empty and dark, leaving the party behind: 'the party's splendour fell to the floor, so strange it was to come in alone in her finery' (p. 163). She cannot help re-enacting Septimus's death:

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[16] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London: Granada, 1978), p. 68.

> Always her body went through it […] Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty pikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. (Ibid.)

Asking herself why he should have done it, she thinks that she understands him: 'there's an embrace in death' (ibid.) and she would grow old, she would go on living, would go on losing it, letting it fade, corrupt. It: 'that thing that mattered', closeness, rapture. The same terms are used to describe the most exceptional, exquisite moments of her life, moments when 'she could not resist yielding to the charm of a woman' (p. 30); moments of sensuality. Somehow, in dying, according to Clarissa, Septimus had managed to preserve it, whereas she, in growing old, is losing it: 'how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence' (p. 28). How with the years, her bed is getting 'narrower and narrower' (p. 29). Then the moment of terror as an echo of another experienced that morning, reading the note about Lady Bruton's invitation and her need to 'crouch [then] like a bird [near her husband] and gradually revive' (p. 164). 'She had escaped […] it was her disaster, […] she had schemed' (ibid.). Survival as cowardice: in her mind, at this stage, having survived is the compromise that has made her lose or sell her soul. She is, at this moment, considering herself in exactly the same terms as those Peter, or Sally used to describe her: 'the death of her soul', her worldliness. Is she just a snob? Even Miss Kilman's thoughts seem to be justified: 'her life was a tissue of vanity and deceit' (p. 114).

But 'odd, incredible; she had never been so happy' (p. 164): emotion again. 'No pleasure could equal […] this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank' (ibid.). A few pages before, Peter thinks that she has changed:

> But age had brushed her […]. There was a breath of tenderness […] her woodenness was all warmed through now […] as if she wished the whole world

> well, and must now, being on the very verge and rim of things, take her leave. (p. 154)

She walks to the window to find the sky of her youth, the romantic sky of Bourton, hoping to find in it 'something of her own' (p. 164). But 'how surprising', the sky is ashen pale and 'new to her' and the old lady, in the building opposite, is staring straight at her. The sky is not a mirror any more, ashen grey, it only suggests her grey hair, and ashes. But the mirror is the window opposite: the old lady going to bed, drawing the blind and switching off the light. Big Ben striking: and 'with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing room' (p. 165). At this moment, she understands, all comes together. The party that brings the external world together: past and present, the friends, people; the party that identifies her as Clarissa Dalloway. The moment that brings life and death together 'as the sun rose, as the day sank', acceptation of time that passes, the assembling of the people who complete her: the old lady she is and will be, and Septimus she was and still is, 'she felt somehow very like him […]. But she must go back. She must assemble' (ibid.).

This moment is properly speaking a vision, bringing the three levels of assemblage together in an ultimate assemblage. It is, we could say, metaphysical: whereas level one and two unite elements of the same category, belonging to the same world and are therefore logically possible (level one brings together elements of the external world: people, periods of time and so on, and level two does the same with psychological elements) level three consists in the integration of incompatible elements or elements that are not on the same plane: the inside with the outside, a plurality of people as one soul, life and death. This last level of assemblage seems to go beyond the two others, in the sense that it leaves the realm of our ordinary world by questioning its basic principles and categories. It is legitimate to ask whether it can still function as a unifying principle.

Disintegration

In my reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, I postulate the cohabitation of a unifying process and of a dismantling one. In following Clarissa through her day, I have unearthed a structure that has all the characteristics of a unifying process. It would seem natural to seek a parallel movement in the other direction around the other main character of the novel: Septimus, who is, moreover, one of Clarissa's 'odd affinities', or even the odd affinity *par excellence*.

At first sight, they don't seem to have a lot in common, apart from an interest in trees and a bird-like appearance. She says that she has affinities with trees (p. 135) and Septimus identifies with a tree (p. 22). We could follow the symbolic link further: the first time we encounter Septimus, he is standing, paralysed, near the Prime Minister's car, unable to pass it, aware of 'some horror [coming] to the surface', obsessed by the tree pattern on the window blind. We also learn that Clarissa's sister was killed by a falling tree.[17] As regards the bird aspect: Septimus is described as 'beak-nosed' (p. 15), and when Rezia first sees him in a restaurant in Italy, he 'made her think […] of a young hawk' (p. 130) and Clarissa has 'a touch of the bird about her' (p. 5); her 'little face [is] beaked like a bird's' (p. 11). It is also a symbolic bridge. Birds appear throughout the book in one form or the other: the sparrows speak to Septimus and Clarissa has to crouch birdlike near her husband when the terror comes over her. And of course, there is the 'What a lark! what a plunge' (p. 5) of the beginning of the book, with its range of allusions: the foretelling of Septimus's death, and the theme of upward and downward movements.

This theme suggests an inverse parallel between the two characters. Whereas Clarissa is mainly associated with upward movements, Septimus stands in connection to downward ones. For instance, when Clarissa sees the old lady for the first time in the book, she is climbing the

[17] The falling tree seems to be a poetical 'nodal point' in Woolf's work, see for instance: Virginia Woolf, 'Reading' in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950), pp. 140-165 and Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 26; for the tree as a source of terror and paralysis, see Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: A Harvest Book, 1985), p. 71.

stairs (p. 112). When Septimus is about to jump out of the window, he sees an old man coming down the stairs (p. 132). For Clarissa, life is to 'revive, send roaring up that immeasurable delight, rubbing stick to stick, one thing with another'. And when she needs to escape it is at the sky she looks: 'many a time had she gone, at Bourton, when they were all talking, to look at the sky' (p. 164). Whereas Septimus repeatedly sees himself 'falling down, down into the flames' (p. 30; p. 125). Sometimes in the morning, lying awake in his bed, he feels it 'falling, he was falling' (p. 78). And there is his death.

Furthermore if we look at Septimus's life as a whole (or rather what we learn about it from the book), there is obviously a process of dislocation: he is considered a promising young man, bright, with a future: Mr. Brewer, his superior at work, thinks 'very highly of Smith's abilities and [prophesises] that he [will], in ten or fifteen years, succeed to the leather armchair in the inner room' (p. 77). Septimus is admired for his courage at war, 'there in the trenches […] he developed manliness; he was promoted' (ibid.), and is married to a charming young lady, yet this bright young man falls into madness.

Madness epitomises the breaking up of someone's world. Paralleling the different levels of assemblage of Clarissa's world, we can note the complex dismantlement of Septimus's universe: of his social life, of his own identity and finally of reality itself. On a very concrete level, Septimus cannot work any more, cannot communicate with people; he even is alienated from his wife: she says that 'he had grown strange' (p. 60), that 'she could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her' (p. 22). Worse, when they talk together, the same words refer to different worlds: for instance, in the park scene, where Rezia asks him what the time is, his response is to invent an 'Ode to Time'. He sees other people as a threat in typical paranoiac tendencies, as leagued against him, as cruel beasts: 'once you stumble, […] human nature is on you' (p. 83). He keeps underlining their physicality and feels disgust towards and rejects them: he talks about 'lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities […] they have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to

increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs' (p. 80). This is, of course, accompanied by the falling apart of his personality: he cannot feel anything any more ('He could not feel' (p. 78), 'he did not feel' (p. 80)); he hears voices: he talks about 'the voices which rustled above his head' (p. 61); he believes himself to be dead 'lately taken from life to death' (p. 24) and that he has been called upon to deliver a message to the world: he sees himself as 'called forth […] to hear the truth' (p. 61), in fact he believes himself to have received the ultimate revelation, to know the secret of the world: 'the supreme secret […] universal love' (ibid.). He lives in a reality of his own that is double layered:

> Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head. Music down in the street, he muttered; but up here cannoned from rock to rock, divided, met in shocks of sound which rose in smooth columns (that music should be visible was a discovery) and became an anthem, an anthem twined round now by a shepherd boy's piping (That's an old man playing a penny whistle by the public house, he muttered) which, as the boy stood still came bubbling from his pipe, and then, as he climbed higher made its exquisite plaint as the traffic passed below. (p. 62)

We can see here how events from reality are imported and interpreted according to another system, yet oddly, simultaneously, keep their real value. It is as if Septimus was living on two parallel levels at the same time, both having the same status and value.

This inverse parallel between the overall structures of Clarissa's and Septimus's universes is doubled by striking similarities and contrasts, thus eliciting an imbroglio of positions rather than a clear cut symmetry. There is, for instance, Septimus's moment of happiness in the park:

> He had only to open his eyes […] he saw Regent's Park before him […] We welcome, the world seemed to say, we accept; we create; Beauty the world seemed to say […] Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round […] the flies rising and falling […] all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now. (p. 63)

This is thematically linked with Clarissa's vision during her party: all the ingredients are present: time, rising and falling movements, beauty, acceptance, creation, birds, calm among ordinary things but there is also a major difference: Septimus's isolation, his blindness to other people and especially to his wife, Rezia.

Another similarity with a difference comes to light: the logic in Septimus's madness. His inability to feel isolates him by precluding empathy: it makes the others lose their humanity; appear as beasts and bodies, as flesh, mortal flesh, hence his fear and disgust. Hence also his pseudo vision and its message: universal love, there is no death. It is a trick of the mind, a way of making life possible, more or less bearable. But it is no real solution; its main effect is to increase loneliness, the source of fear. He has now overcome his rejection and disgust of mankind in his vision of universal love, but as its oracle, as the 'chosen one' who receives the message, he is abstracted from humankind, becomes incomparable and therefore isolated. The mystery has been revealed to him. He knows everything, the meaning of the world, he says. Yet he is stuck in his prison, scratching the meaning of the world on its walls, as Sally says (p. 170).

For Clarissa too, terror is isolation: time passing and the bed getting narrower, the nun-like cloistered life. But her solution is a different one: crouching 'like a bird [near Richard, she would] slowly revive, send roaring up that immeasurable delight, rubbing stick to stick, one thing with another' (p. 164). The solution: company, empathy on the one hand; creation and assembling on the other: bringing people together, her parties. In contrast with Septimus's, it is a real solution: firstly, because it takes place in the real world; secondly because it, as the realisation of empathy, really brings people together and, by breaking down the walls of the prison, helps overcome isolation.

It is interesting to note in this context that both Peter and Sally have something of Septimus: the first shares his conviction of knowing everything, the second his experience of isolation. And both do not seem to understand the sense of Clarissa's parties, interpret them in

terms of her worldliness, her woodenness, vanity and self-satisfaction; in fact the very opposite of her real motivation.

A further complexification of the parallel between Clarissa and Septimus is brought out by the fact that Septimus, in the last scene – the suicide scene – seems to retrace his steps, abandon his solution and adopt Clarissa's. In this scene, Septimus slowly and gradually surfaces, leaves his madness behind:

> Why, then, rage and prophesy? Why fly scourged and outcast? Why be made to tremble and sob by the clouds? Why seek truths and deliver messages when Rezia sat sticking pins into the front of her dress and Mr. Peter was in Hull? (pp. 126-127)

He sees reality again: 'he began very cautiously to open his eyes, to see whether a gramophone was really there […] First he looked at the fashion papers on the lower shelf, then gradually at the gramophone […] none of those things moved. All were still; all were real' (ibid.). Above all, he sees his wife again: 'her sigh was tender and enchanting […] through his eyelashes he could see her blurred outline' (p. 125). Happiness comes back with feelings for her. Togetherness is underlined as refuge and collaboration, when they make the hat together '"she shall have a beautiful hat!" he murmured, taking up this and that […] now it was finished – that is to say the design; she must stitch it together. But she must be very, very, very careful, he said, to keep it just as he had made it' (p. 127). The overall structure of the scene is very much like those moments described by Clarissa, when she has to crouch near her husband to revive. But of course, tragically, instead of the consecutive soaring in delight we have 'up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness' (p. 163). Yet 'there is an embrace in death.' 'Has he taken his treasure along with himself?' Has he preserved the rapture, the closeness, the 'something that matters?' The last moments of his life and Rezia's words and attitude seem to suggest it:

> It seemed to her as she drank the sweet stuff that she was opening long windows, stepping out into some garden. But where? The clock was striking – one, two, three. How sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering; like Septimus himself […] She put on her hat, and ran through cornfields – Where could it have been? – on to some hill, near the sea, for there were ships, gulls, butterflies; they sat on a cliff […] 'he is dead' she said smiling. (p. 127)

The imagery suggests that she accompanies him, they having preserved, in death, their love and intimacy.

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I want to come back now to my means of access to *Mrs Dalloway*: the tension between a principle of fragmentation and one of unification. We do not have a simple opposition but rather the opposition of two structures that contain both principles in a different degree. Fragmentation and terror in Clarissa's life, her fear of death, she thinks 'that it [is] very, very dangerous to live even one day' (p. 9). Beauty and togetherness in Septimus's, even some sort of serenity.

On a formal level

Besides the thematic and symbolic links between the two sides of the novel, there are more structural ones: the chance meetings of characters belonging to different stories. To obtain a clear understanding of what is at stake here, we have to examine the novel from a formal point of view. Corresponding to the two main characters (Clarissa and Septimus), there are two different story lines, two different plots, that are independent (they could have made two different books, or have been told in alternative chapters, in the style of *The Wild Palms* by

Faulkner).[18] But they are formally connected. This takes place by the chance meetings of characters belonging to the different plots. For instance, Peter sees the Bradshaws' car and it is the occasion of some reflection 'a splendid achievement in its own way, after all, London, the season; civilisaton' (p. 50). He also sees Septimus and Rezia in Regent Park and misinterprets their attitude: 'and that's being young, Peter Walsh thought as he passed them. To be having an awful scene […] in the middle of the morning' (p. 64). The ambulance transporting Septimus's body passes him on the street, which starts some thoughts about the advantages of civilisation: 'One of the triumphs of civilization, Peter Walsh thought. It is one of the triumphs of civilization, as the light high bell of the ambulance sounded' (p. 134). At the beginning of the novel, Clarissa stands around the prime minister's car in the company of Septimus, without noticing him. The prime minister will appear later that day at the party.

Such a literary device could be called the 'place technique'. Meetings are arranged around a place: Regent Park, or Bond Street or Clarissa's party. Characters from the different stories 'bump' into each other at a certain place, by chance, and without recognising the implications, for the story or for us, readers, of their chance encounter. The effect is that of chance being included in the story and therefore domesticated. What seems chance to the characters makes sense on our (the reader's) level. This is an instance of taming of the heterogeneous which can be understood in terms of unifying process.

Yet, at the same time, the reflections that those encounters trigger, for instance, in Peter, throw the efficiency of this unifying principle into doubt. He has no real or explicit relationship to any of those characters and the fact that each time the reflection they provoke is miles away from the truth of the situation itself, might underline the fragility or the meaninglessness of the link.

Another stylistic device with a connecting effect consists in making different characters, who are involved in the two story lines, and usually located at different places, observe or see

[18] William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961).

the same object or scene. This device could be called the 'scene technique'. For instance, both Clarissa and Septimus see the plane. The sky seen both by Elizabeth and Septimus is the occasion of a passage, by the narrator, from one to the other:

> A puff of wind […] blew a thin black veil over the sun and over the strand. The faces faded; the omnibuses suddenly lost their glow […] calmly and competently, Elizabeth Dalloway mounted the Westminster omnibus. Going and coming, beckoning, signalling, so the light and shadow, which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting room […]. (p. 124)

Peter gives a coin to an old lady singing at a tube station, whom Septimus and Rezia had just seen a few minutes earlier. It is also worth noting that the object or scenes in question are related to or function as symbol. But once again this linking device is ambiguous: it does connect the two plots, yet, at the time, keeps them apart. As with the chance meetings, the link remains insubstantial.[19]

These scenes also constitute a link to other minor characters that do not play any significant role in the two main stories. Mr. Bowley, for instance, who comments on the plane or onlookers at Buckingham Palace. In fact, there is a scattering of characters: some are linked to the two main plots thanks to the place technique, for instance: the nurse in the park, the Scottish girl, the old singer, and the old lady in the park; others with the help of the scene technique: Mr. Bowley, the onlookers. There is even, at some stage, an enigmatic man, hardly characterised, who appears in the space of one paragraph to disappear forever. Some characters, like the old lady, are only observed at a distance. Around that multitude of figures, sometimes, micro-plots are arranged: for instance, Miss Kilman's appearance, or Elizabeth's excursion to the Strand or Miss Bruton's letter episode. All this might give one an impression

[19] Julia Briggs suggests that Woolf developed such 'techniques' to overcome what she thought the shortcomings of *Jacob's Room*: 'Through such moments of shared awareness, Woolf sought to smooth out what she had felt to be "jumps and jerks" in *Jacob's Room*, the too arbitrary transition from one consciousness to the other.' Julia Briggs, 'The Search for Form (ii): Revision and the Numbers of Time', in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 113-124, (p. 118).

of chaos, of a multiplicity which is not under control. There is a plurality of levels, only partially overlapping, and on each level, a plurality of components, often incompatible; there is no overall integration.

Finally, there is one dimension, both thematic and formal, that seems to hold the plurality of levels and elements together: time.[20] Firstly, on the formal level, Big Ben, prolonged by other clocks, strikes the time for major and minor characters alike, whose stories take place within one day. There is one time for them all. The insistence on the allusions to time and on the descriptions of Big Ben striking serves this purpose. It is beyond place and scene what unites all the different elements of the book. Secondly, on the thematic level: the importance of the time dimension in Clarissa's vision is essentially an act of acceptance of time that passes, and all which this implies, old age and ultimately death. Time is also present in the constant to-and-fro between the now of the story (London, a day in June) and the then of Bourton, remembered by Clarissa and Peter, a technique Virginia Woolf called her 'tunnelling process.'[21] Time is also present in a more symbolic fashion, in the appearances of old figures: the old lady living opposite Clarissa, but also the old singer, and the old lady in the park who explicitly reflects on age, or even the old man Septimus sees when he is about to commit suicide. Clarissa herself is often described, by others, or herself, as 'brushed by age', gone grey, changed. All the old friends from Bourton, who meet at Clarissa's party: Sally, Hugh, and so on, are all described in terms of how the years have marked them. When Clarissa sees Sally again after some years, she thinks: 'the lustre had left her' (p. 152). Sally thinks: 'was it Peter Walsh grown grey?' (p. 160). Time is lived as passivity, as aging, the falling apart of the body, therefore fragmentation. But there is another side to it, time as activity, the 'other clock': 'but here the other clock, the clock which always stuck two minutes after Big Ben, came shuffling in with its lap of odds and ends' (p. 114). Time as assembling

[20] On the formal structuring role of time in *Mrs Dalloway*, see Julia Briggs, 'The Search for Form (ii): Revision and the Numbers of Time', p. 117.
[21] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 66.

the future and the past around the present: anticipation as preparation for the party, remembrance as connection to the past and in this very process the creation of history and identity. The very tension we are looking for reappears there at the centre of the book.[22]

It is well known that the first title of the book was *The Hours*. Time is obviously central to the understanding of the novel, as a unifying principle which seems to gather all the bits and pieces of the novel, where all the other unifying principles (plot, theme, symbol, place and scene technique) fail, leaving a 'remainder'. Yet, as we have just seen, the very concept of time itself is two-sided, comprising as a unifying principle, its very opposite: fragmentation.

I want to come back now to a question I left in the air at the end of the section on the assembling process incarnated in the character of Clarissa. I showed that Clarissa's vision was made up of three different levels of unification, which I called the level of the external world, that of psychology, and finally, a level which is properly speaking metaphysical, bringing together elements that seem to be incompatible, whereas the two other levels assemble the homogeneous. The difficulty was to decide whether we can still talk of assemblage here. My thesis is that we have here, as in the novel in general, a rather peculiar type of assemblage, juxtaposing the heterogeneous in a tension, and therefore there is no resolution of differences. *Mrs Dalloway* is, simultaneously, an illustration, a discussion and an experience of a vision. The vision is the climax of a unifying principle, that is to say, what the assembling is and brings about. The theme of the novel is Clarissa preparing her party, the assembling process *par excellence*. We follow her through her day busy putting things together for her party. At the same time, we have the commentaries of the narrator, through all the characters, constituting the message of the book which is about assembling and fragmentation. But this is not all: the book itself, in a performing sense, is an assemblage; it is in fact, what it shows and

[22] We have here something very similar to what Ricoeur describes as the constitution of 'narrative identity' in *Oneself as Another*; see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

tells about, it is as an act, a unifying principle and the vision it brings about. Writing the book and the rewriting that reading is, is the experience of a vision. The question nonetheless remains: can we talk of unity in *Mrs. Dalloway*? Whatever level we consider: that of characters, form, themes or even the novel as an assemblage of those different levels, we are left with a remainder. We find, each time, unity; but we also find, accompanying it, in cohabitation, its opposite: fragmentation.

III. A post-stucturalist critic

It is this very dimension of fragmentation that is central to Rachel Bowlby's post-structuralist reading of *Mrs Dalloway*: 'Thinking Forward Through Mrs. Dalloway's Daughter.'[23] In a first approximation, her reading of *Mrs Dalloway* brings to the fore a fundamental duality, two opposite poles that recur throughout the novel in different forms: structural, on the level of form in shaping the novel; thematic, as 'subject' of the novel; or symbolic. She seems to be looking at the text from the inside, or, at least, from inside the literary tradition. It is the duality in question, and its avatars, that produce meaning. There is no recourse, at first sight, to the historical and sociological 'real-life' details, and the erudition that goes with it, that was characteristic of Bradshaw's essay.

Let us examine the duality Bowlby proposes as the basis of her exploration of *Mrs Dalloway*. In most general terms, it could be understood as one between instability and stability. This makes it all the more interesting for my project: unity and fragmentation are not far off. She begins with instability and finds it represented in Clarissa and her multiple identities. She talks of 'the lack of settlement or of fixed identity in Clarissa's life';[24]

[23] Rachel Bowlby, 'Thinking Forward Through Mrs. Dalloway's Daughter', in *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 80-98.
[24] Ibid., p. 89.

according to her, 'she is in reality anything but "composed", except in the sense of being put together from disparate parts.'[25] This 'lack of settlement' is then associated with corollary issues. Firstly the condition of woman, where woman is going and what she is: 'many of the issues about the destinations and definitions of feminism and feminity come to the fore in *Mrs Dalloway.*'[26] Secondly Woolf's 'equivocations'[27] about it: 'Woolf leaves open the question of where women are going as necessarily unanswerable';[28] 'she keeps open many lines as a response to what she always acknowledges as the impossibly complex network of determinations of women's difference.'[29] It is, according to Bowlby, Clarissa who in the novel represents this 'difference', this 'lack of settlement.'

But Clarissa has another side to her personality. As suggested above, Bowlby is interested in a duality at the core of the novel. She writes: 'Clarissa is both perfectly conventional in her role as lady and hostess and at the same time, a misfit.'[30] She is also 'like Mrs. Ramsay, to all appearances a model of maternal equilibrium',[31] the words 'lady', 'hostess' and 'model of maternal equilibrium' point towards what is the other pole of the duality. It will be fixed, of course, as opposed to unstable, and in Clarissa it will correspond, in opposition to a shifting identity, to a fixed one, as lady and hostess; as, in short, Mrs. Dalloway. The fixed pole is that of 'order and regularity',[32] the 'proportion' represented by Dr. Bradshaw, 'emblems of power [...] fully implicated in this novel with masculinity, institutionalised and imposing.'[33] At play in the novel, we have the tension between the feminine 'lack of settlement' and 'the dominant masculine order.'[34] This tension Bowlby shows finds an echo on a symbolic level. There is, for instance, the chiming of Big Ben

[25] Ibid., p. 93.
[26] Ibid., p. 81.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 93.
[31] Ibid., p. 93.
[32] Ibid., p. 89.
[33] Ibid., p. 90.
[34] Ibid., p. 97.

'associated with the authority of national and other institutions',[35] representing 'man-made', 'linear'[36] time and the 'daily proportions' of a Bradshaw. But 'in *Mrs Dalloway*, the imperial Big Ben time is undermined not only by the discontinuous temporalities of the various characters [...] but more literally by the belated chiming of other clocks which challenge or mock the precision of Big Ben's time keeping. The clock with a feminine name follows after: "Ah said St. Margaret's."'[37] And those different conceptions of time, the feminine and the masculine will resurface, as Bowlby suggests, as yet another avatar of our fundamental tension between instability and fixity, on a formal level this time, in different ways of considering narrative. She talks of 'the questions Woolf's texts raise about the representation of biographical development.'[38]

A politicised duality

Bowlby's reading of *Mrs Dalloway* seems indeed to chime with mine. At the core of the novel, according to such a reading, we have a fundamental tension, which is reverberated in different forms on both the thematic and formal levels. Furthermore, the tension in question, instability versus fixity, is very similar to my tension between a force of unification and one of fragmentation, which is the starting point of my thesis. Yet, I seek to demarcate my reading of *Mrs Dalloway* from Bowlby's, as I sought to do so from Bradshaw's historical criticism. What are the differences? Bowlby's essay does not operate the 'suspension of the world' I insist upon. It refers as much to the 'real' world as Bradshaw's, albeit in a different manner: it is politicised. Bowlby would, of course, be the first one to acknowledge it: she regrets in a note to her text: 'the awkwardness of Woolf's occasional refusal of a relationship between literature and politics.'[39] The structural analysis is founded on a *parti-pris*. The very duality at

[35] Ibid., p. 89.
[36] Ibid., p. 90.
[37] Ibid., p. 91.
[38] Ibid., p. 98.
[39] Ibid., p. 178, n. 7.

the core of the analysis is already the object of a political reading. One pole of the duality is valorised against the other: we have a Manichean dichotomy with a good side and a bad one. On the one hand, there is a feminine principle of plurality, characterised by openness; on the other, a masculine force of coercion, of which violence is the main feature. This *parti-pris* is projected on the novel itself: 'the novel treats with contempt those who are so simple as to fit in without a hitch with the imperial, patriarchal order.'[40] I have nothing to say about the politics of such a reading, but I deplore its literary consequences. Let us have a look at a rather long quotation to make the point. It is about the tension between the two poles of Clarissa's personality, the fixed one of Mrs Dalloway, and the unstable one of Clarissa:

> In Clarissa, the hostess is rather an outward *image* of feminity as a perfect integrity belied by its difficult composition [...] Only 'some call on her' *temporarily* co-ordinates what are otherwise incompatible separate parts into what will then *look like* 'her self'. The 'one centre, one diamond, one woman' is herself *effaced* as simply the 'meeting point' that irradiates and draws together other lives [...] this *effect of harmony*, itself dispersed across three approximations, occurs only when she is most deliberately constructed, by 'some effort' integrated into a *semblance of unity* [...] The 'call' [...] produces at the same time the *appearance of unity* which conceals multiplicity and 'she alone' apart from it, whose knowledge of [...] the heterogeneity of the *facade* inaugurates a further separation. (My emphasis)[41]

The words I have emphasised – 'image', and so on – all unequivocally underline the illusory nature of the pole of fixity. In Bowlby's reading, it is not taken seriously. In fact, we don't have a duality at all: we have the reality of the multifarious principle of feminine identity and the illusionary phantasm of masculine control. By positing the principle of multiplicity as a positive value, she erases the other pole, or at least upsets the balance in the duality to the extent that she loses its 'rhythm.' The point of my reading of Bowlby's reading of *Mrs Dalloway* is the loss in the latter of the tension between a pole of unity and one of

[40] Ibid., p. 94.
[41] Ibid., p. 96.

fragmentation in favour of fragmentation. It is such a tension that my reading, in contrast, conserves.

Thus, my reading of *Mrs Dalloway* is neither this nor that: neither world-orientated (I do not refer to anything outside the text); nor post-structuralist (it does not favour fragmentation for political reasons). I would happily welcome the label ‘structuralist’, for the time being. Yet my analysis of the three other novels in this work will gradually make it necessary to go beyond a structuralist position.

CHAPTER THREE: *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*: 'IT WAS TO BE A THING YOU COULD RUFFLE WITH YOUR BREATH; AND A THING YOU COULD NOT DISLODGE WITH A TEAM OF HORSES'

I. Deconstructing *To the Lighthouse*

I use Daniel Ferrer's reading of *To the Lighthouse*[1] to both develop a description of what I believe to be the main features of a deconstructionist perspective on literature and, at the same time, to distance myself from such a perspective. Echoing Rachel Bowlby's reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, Ferrer's starting point is a tension between stability and instability. Discussing Lily's practice as a painter which he conflates with Woolf's practice as a writer, he contends: 'the whole problem of artistic creation [...] is to find a compromise between stability and break up.'[2] Taking a biographical detour via Woolf's mother's death, Ferrer suggests that 'it is between this white expanse of the father's work and the invasive black of maternal mourning that art has to clear itself a space.'[3] Indeed: 'at the beginning of creation, there is a polarity of white and black, void and excess, light and dark.'[4] As in Bowlby, the duality in question is gendered. But here, because of the psychoanalytical slant of Ferrer's interpretation, and his occasional biographical references, the gender distinction is understood in terms of mother versus father. We have, on the one hand, 'the system of words ordered by the father',[5] 'articulate, paternal language'[6] and on the other, 'the maternal abyss',[7] 'a vast

[1] Daniel Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (London: Routledge, 1990).
[2] Ibid., p. 55.
[3] Ibid., p. 56.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., p. 57.
[6] Ibid., p. 64.
[7] Ibid., p. 45.

matrix.'[8] In Ferrer's reading, as in Bowlby's, the rigidity of the 'system' is in tension with the fluidity of the feminine. He writes about 'the universal amniotic fluid, ready to submerge the whole world',[9] of the 'maternal fluid',[10] 'an invasive, even corrosive fluid, as agent of disintegration of identity';[11] in a word, a polarity between the fluidity of a feminine principle and the rigidity of a masculine order. Another similarity between Ferrer's deconstructionist reading and Bowlby's is what I have called the valorisation of one pole against the other. Bowlby, by treating the feminine principle as real in opposition to the illusionary nature of the masculine system, ended up undoing the tension from which she had started. The same phenomenon takes place here. With the help of psychoanalysis, Ferrer shows that the masculine system is founded on the repression of the 'maternal abyss': 'a world of very early representations grouped around the archaic figure of the mother.'[12] He writes about 'articulate paternal language, which by its very nature, represses an essential part of reality.'[13] Associated with death, this 'essential part of reality' is considered by Ferrer as '[humanity's] deepest reality as opposed to the surface world of social conventions.'[14] Furthermore, the surface order is constantly under threat, made fragile, derealised, from underneath, by the 'resurgence of the lack',[15] by the return of the repressed. There is, on the one hand, real life; on the other, propaganda. I have discussed in my examination of Bowlby's essay what I find problematic from a literary critical point of view about the valorisation of one pole of the duality against the other. But beside the repetition of such a gesture, Ferrer's text brings to light new features of a typical deconstructionist discussion of literature that were not directly visible in Bowlby's interpretation.

[8] Ibid., p. 48.
[9] Ibid., p. 49.
[10] Ibid., p. 50.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 53.
[13] Ibid., p. 64.
[14] Ibid., p. 43.
[15] Ibid., p. 61.

The first feature is Ferrer's 'fascination for nothingness': a certain interest in 'des expériences limites', such as madness, trauma and trance that leads in a more or less direct line via death to 'the heart of silence.'[16] Madness appears in the title of the book and on the first page of the text: '*To the Lighthouse* does without a mad character [...] and yet hallucination is present [...] it may be noted immediately that Lily Briscoe, who takes Septimus's place as a subject of the hallucination is an artist.'[17] This is the occasion of a note that links artistic creation and madness: 'artistic creation appears as a sort of double of madness.'[18] The hallucination in question is linked to 'horror',[19] which in turn is understood as 'presence of the dead',[20] and 'mourning.'[21] According to Ferrer, death and its different avatars is 'omnipresent'[22] in Woolf: '[it] is not only represented throughout the work, it is the very base on which Virginia Woolf writes.'[23] Ferrer talks of Woolf's 'ascesis in the writing'[24] that finds its expression in *Between the Acts* as 'a complete absence.'[25] This fascination for nothingness is directly linked with the experience of writing or artistic practice in general for deconstruction.

The second feature of deconstruction that Ferrer's text makes explicit is a certain conception of art in general and literature in particular, he writes about 'the liquidity of [Woolf's] style',[26] 'a writing so fluid that it verges on transparency and effacement.'[27] He describes creation as a 'process of dissolution into non-differentiation',[28] which threatens 'the possibility of an autonomous articulate expression'[29] and that ultimately leads, on the part of

[16] Woolf, *Between the Acts*, p. 40.
[17] Ferrer, *The Madness of Language*, p. 46.
[18] Ibid., p. 157, note 1.
[19] Ibid., p. 41.
[20] Ibid., p. 43.
[21] Ibid., p. 45.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 51.
[25] Ibid., p. 64.
[26] Ibid., p. 51.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., p. 50.
[29] Ibid.

the author, to 'a disintegration of identity',[30] 'a diffraction of the subject.'[31] The author experiences '[a] second state [that] leads to a loss of consciousness of self and of external objects as distinct from self to plunge into a current.'[32]

Links become clear between the act of writing, the ultimate reality of the 'abyss' and the fascination for 'des expériences limites'. The conception of literature we thus obtain is one that undoes itself as language in its very act of expression: 'art of whatever kind must reach a point where the paternal language fails.'[33] Writing is 'a matter of standing out, of interrupting even if this means adding on a layer of discourse to reveal what is interrupted as a border making the contours of the gap';[34] it is 'the tottering of the syntax around this absence.'[35]

Those different features: the valorisation of the pole of instability, fascination for nothingness and a conception of the act of creation as a paradoxical negation of itself, when added together, give us another typical trait of deconstruction: the creation or projection of a 'hinterland'. There is 'out there' governing us all and coming to the surface in artistic creation, the ultimate reality, 'the beyond discourse',[36] which discourse cannot but suppress. It is called 'the unconscious',[37] understood in terms of a field of forces or 'drives',[38] and, in a typical localisation as 'deep' and 'hidden', 'the depths of the maternal body',[39] 'further and further' obliging one 'to dig ever deeper.'[40]

I want to mark a distance from two features of Ferrer's reading of *To the Lighthouse*. Firstly, and this also constituted the basis of my rejection of Bowlby's reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a certain political bias that had, from my perspective, the undesirable consequence, in literary terms, of upsetting the balance between the two forces, that of fragmentation and

[30] Ibid., p. 53.
[31] Ibid., p. 63.
[32] Ibid., p. 53.
[33] Ibid., p. 57.
[34] Ibid., p. 58.
[35] Ibid., p. 60.
[36] Ibid., p. 63.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., p. 53.
[39] Ibid., p. 49.
[40] Ibid., p. 48.

that of construction, which are at play in Woolf's work. Stability is read as a totalitarian system of an illusionary nature, instability as ultimate reality and free play of the unconscious. Now, after this discussion of Ferrer's text, we can formulate more precisely, I think, the nature of this undesirable consequence. It is double in the sense that it concerns both language and literature. According to such a deconstructionist perspective, language is always on the 'wrong side'. It is on the side of the system and by nature coercive or totalitarian. It is also, for that reason, illusionary. What really counts, what is real, cannot be found in language; it is 'beyond discourse'. As a system of repression, language automatically excludes it. The ultimate reality is buried deep and far. Digging it up, what literature is all about, has its price: the undoing of language, and at the same occasion of the writer. Language in literature in a process of auto-negation, of dissolution, lets material drives, the unconscious, surface. Ultimately, this self-effacement becomes the sign of absence, death and silence. We have here a nihilistic, or at least an inhuman conception of literature and a condemnation of language.

II. Reading as a balancing act

In my reading of *To the Lighthouse*, my first concern is to conserve the tension in question. We indeed find a system in *To the Lighthouse*, represented by the Ramsays, their marriage or the 'holy family'. It is constituted by a feminine principle, incarnated by Mrs. Ramsay and a masculine one, of which Mr. Ramsay is the representative. These two principles found a system in either their complementariness (chapter one) or in the sacrifice of one, the feminine principle, in the name of the other (chapters two and three). But what is of importance, against Ferrer's reading, is the fact that the system in *To the Lighthouse* in its double form of complementariness and sacrifice is not an exclusion of dissolution; on the contrary, it needs it in a dialectical mode and depends on it for its reproduction. The system is rather, in *To the*

Lighthouse, an exclusion of the tension between construction and dissolution, which is represented in the novel by Lily. We could say that Ferrer's reading, by undoing the tension, promotes the system that he simultaneously condemns.

My second concern is a focus on the moments of vision in *To the Lighthouse*. I try to show that such moments are instances of inspiration, in its double sense as both invention of language and birth of life. This suggests the intimate connections between literature, language and life, against a deconstructionist dissociation of language from literature and association of the latter with death and nothingness, connections which, I believe, are more akin to Woolf's celebration of life than the fascination for death that deconstructionist critics attribute to her.

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To find a tension between a unifying principle and a force of disintegration in *To the Lighthouse* seems, at first sight, less obvious than in *Mrs Dalloway*. If we look at how the novel is superficially organised, we find three chapters: triplicity rather than duality. If, in a first approximation, we look at the main themes of these three chapters, we have something like: family life ('The Window'), time ('Time Passes'), art ('The Lighthouse'). This does not seem to corroborate my thesis of a central juxtaposition of opposite forces. As regards the characters: instead of the rather clear cut parallel between Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*, we seem to have several main characters related to each other in a complex way. Is it vain to look, in *To the Lighthouse*, for a duality as clear cut as my opposition of a unifying force and a dismantling one? A closer look at the novel shows that the endeavour is, at least, worth trying. For example, chapter one, of which the theme is the family life of the Ramsays on a certain September day, culminating in an evening meal with guests, is built around the figure of Mrs. Ramsay who, like Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*, brings people together, or rather, holds a world together: the family life in question. Themes such as that of family as the

concrete result of the union of man and woman, that of love, and its suggestion of complementariness: a whole formed of distinct principles, are recurrent. It all takes place in a house or around it, on an island with the symbols associated: windows and doors, and the sea threatening the land. There is the inside and the outside; solidity versus dissolution. The day culminates in a dinner which has all the characteristics of a celebration of togetherness around its champion: Mrs. Ramsay. In short, it seems justified to look for an integration principle in 'The Window', even though we might have to qualify it. Similarly, it is quite evident that 'Time Passes' deals with destruction; its very form – dated events separated by huge temporal gaps – shows it. Thematically, the reporting, on the one hand, of the death of the family members, accompanied by a description of the falling apart of their holiday home, on the other, all tend to corroborate the suggestion, that, central to the novel, there is a principle of destruction at play. But the question of the place of the third chapter in the economy of the book comes readily to mind. If we have, as superficially suggested, a unifying principle in 'The Window' and its opposite, destruction, in 'Time Passes', what is the point of 'The Lighthouse'? Is my thesis of a duality in tension at the core of the novel an over-simplification? Should we talk of triplicity rather than duality? Only a close analysis of the three chapters in question can enable us to answer those questions.

'The Window', a principle of unification

Chapter one of *To the Lighthouse* is about the constitution of a world. It has a Russian doll structure of three levels: three levels fitting into each other. Each level has as its active principle a unifying process. They confirm each other and they all have common features, thereby constituting and solidifying the whole that the chapter is. These levels are: firstly, the family world of the Ramsays that represents the background of the chapter; the second could be called the social level: illustrated by the dinner episode; the third is more philosophical: the constitution of the world as reality; this is what I call the candle episode during dinner.

Let us have a look at each of these levels in turn, and see how they constitute the world of chapter one, how they are linked, and what features they all share. My hope, in doing so, is to show that chapter one is built around a unifying principle, but also to qualify the unifying principle in question.

I will start with what I call level one of the constitution of the world of the Ramsays: their family life. The Ramsays, husband and wife, form a system which is complementary: the masculine and the feminine principles joining to form the whole that married life, the couple, is supposed to be. In Gillian Beer's words, *To the Lighthouse* is the novel in which 'Virginia Woolf most acutely polarises the sexes.'[41] The masculine principle, incarnated in Mr. Ramsay the philosopher – represented in terms of abstract thinking, dryness and sharpness – constitutes the scaffold and the safety net, in short, the support on which or thanks to which the feminine principle can develop: dreams and emotions described in terms of warmth and softness. Or the other way round: only a reassured Mr. Ramsay can go back to his abstract thinking; there is a double dependence. The complementariness consists in their possibility of being who they are, only in the world they constitute as a couple. They are constituted as themselves, in their identity, in this world. There is a dimension of closure to the system: identity as a folding back upon oneself, a circle against other identities or a circle within a greater circle: their world. The island as the setting of the chapter, the house and its surroundings, the symbolic play on rooms, doors and windows, all reinforce the impression. Another feature of the system the Ramsays form is its violence. They need each other to exist and for their world to exist, so they force each other and themselves to play the roles on which the system depends. This is visible in how Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay treat each other; the 'Damn you' episode[42] is an example, but it is also apparent in how they treat other people. They are both seen as tyrannical, in Lily's words: '[Mr. Ramsay] is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is

[41] Gillian Beer, 'Hume, Stephen, and elegy in *To the Lighthouse'*, in *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 183-202, (p. 195).
[42] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Panther Books, 1977), p. 34; further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.

spoilt; he is a tyrant' (p. 28) and '[Mrs. Ramsay] was alarming too, in her way, high-handed' (p. 47). They call to order anybody, within their social circle, the children or for instance, Lily, when they seem to question, by their attitude, or with words, the system of love: the family. Part of the same feature is Mrs. Ramsay's propaganda: how she tries to pair off and marry everybody, and tries to convince people that family life is paradise on earth.

I have said that both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay force themselves into roles: the system implies self-violence on the part of its members, that is to say renunciation. Both he and she have had to amputate parts of their life to fit into their world. This is suggested by Bankes when he tells Lily about the episode of the Westmorland road, where he thought that his friendship with Ramsay had changed, because Ramsay himself, by marrying, had changed:

> Looking at the far sandhills, William Bankes thought of Ramsay: thought of a road in Westmorland, thought of Ramsay striding along a road by himself hung around with that solitude which seemed to be his natural air. But this was suddenly interrupted, William Bankes remembered […], by a hen, straddling her wings out in protection of a covey of little chicks, upon which, Ramsay, stopping, pointed his stick and said 'Pretty - pretty' an odd illumination in his heart […] but it seemed to [Bankes] as if their friendship had ceased, there on that stretch of road. After that, Ramsay had married. (p. 24)

All this suggests that he could have been a great man, if he had been true to his destiny, instead of marrying. Another episode, that of Mr. Ramsay trying to think further than a certain point, his failing to do so and his finding consolation, or an excuse, in his having a family, is suggestive of the sacrifices, fundamental ones, that family life implies; as he says: 'but the father of eight children has no choice' (p. 45). The 'geography' of the episode is here revealing: he takes a walk, while thinking, away from the house, beyond the hedge, between the two red pokers that constitute the gate, towards the sea. And there, on a promontory, he struggles with his thoughts, tries to reach a further point, raid the unknown, looking at the sea.

Renouncing, he turns round and walks back towards his home, with, on his lips, the excuse of having to bring up eight children.

The same happens on Mrs. Ramsay's side. At some stage, the children being in bed and the preparation for the dinner not having started yet, she finds herself alone, as if the system were momentarily suspended. She finds relief in not having to play a role that she, elsewhere, admits exhausts her. She can be, at last, herself; that is to say, nobody, just emotions, in 'a state of almost pure feeling'[43] that leads to a moment of inspiration: a vision where she identifies with the last light stroke of the lighthouse. When she learns, later, while taking a walk with her husband, that he was observing her then, when she had her vision, she feels embarrassed and dares not look at the lighthouse again:

> They had reached the gap between the two clumps of red-hot pokers, and there was the lighthouse again, but she would not let herself look at it. Had she known that he was looking at her, she thought, she would not have let herself sit there thinking. She disliked anything that reminded her that she had been sitting thinking. (p. 64)

What is conveyed here is the potential disturbing effect of such moments on the cohesion of the couple, and the unspoken pressure and the guilt accompanying it, of family life as a system. But this is also exactly where, for both of them, doubts come into play: they both feel, more or less consciously, a diminishing of their life in this process of the constitution of a world: Mr. Ramsay in his nostalgia for a different life, a freer one, and his feeling he could have done more with his mind; Mrs. Ramsay, in her exhaustion, the impression she has, at times, that the whole play drains her of her energy. 'Play' is the right word here, because those doubts lead to a questioning of the entire system, its apprehension as, maybe, just an illusion, something ephemeral, of no solidity, an island being eaten up by the sea. This is suggested, for instance, when she perceives the sound of the waves as:

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[43] James Naremore, 'A World Without a Self: The Novels of Virginia Woolf', in *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments,* 4 vols, ed. by Eleanor McNees (Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 1994), iv, pp. 340-353, (p. 349).

> A ghostly roll of drums remorselessly [beating] the measure of life, [making] one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and [warning] her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow. (p. 20)

Those doubts recur throughout the chapter, either as more or less conscious impressions on the part of, mainly, Mrs. Ramsay, or as suggested by the narrator, as, for instance, at the beginning of the dinner party, when there is no social cohesion, but just pretence and violence on the part of the guests.

These doubts, as regards not just the solidity but also the very reality of the system, also find their expression in another way. The couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, are also seen from the outside by other characters, mainly the guests Lily Briscoe and William Bankes. These two characters have, in fact, quite a lot in common that entitle them to suggest a different vision of what family life, or rather the Ramsay family is. They are both outsiders, and we have to understand this term in several ways: firstly, they both have their lodgings in town and not at the Ramsays' house; secondly, neither of them have children, Lily is single and Bankes a widower; thirdly, both value their work, or what they call their work, painting in Lily's case, biology in Bankes's, more than social life; that is to say, they are both, in their respective ways, loners, and they like it. Mrs. Ramsay literally does not understand them, considering them, negatively only, in terms of what, in her eyes, they do not have – a family or love – and therefore she tries to marry one with the other. Ironically, in the book, they do form some sort of couple, but in direct contrast to the Ramsays. They are not dependent on each other, let each other be and this is suggested, in several passages, by their just standing one beside the other, for instance: 'William Bankes stood beside her' (p. 22) or 'they both smiled, standing there' (p. 24). But this is not the only way, by, so to say, standing in contrast, that they shed light and at the same time, doubts, on the sort of relationship the Ramsays represent. Lily in her very being rebels against the system the Ramsays impose. There is the

episode during the dinner when Lily 'experiments'; does not behave like a 'nice girl', and lets Charles Tansley feel uncomfortable instead of starting a conversation with him. This behaviour is immediately condemned by Mrs. Ramsay, and Lily is forced to comply: 'as the glance in [Mrs. Ramsay's] eyes said it, […], Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment – what happens if one is not nice to that young man there – and be nice' (p. 86). But, more significantly, the very way Lily thinks stands in complete and direct opposition to the Ramsays. Whereas the Ramsays' world is structured in a centripetal fashion, cohesion being its main feature, Lily thinks in an explosive way. The very word is associated, in the text, with her centrifugal way of perceiving the world: 'All of this danced up and down […] in Lily's mind, […] until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity' (p. 28). Lily and Bankes share another feature: they are both fascinated by the Ramsays and the world they represent, especially by Mrs. Ramsay. In the same manner as, on the Ramsays' side, in spite of their conviction of the solidity of their world, there are doubts; here, in spite of their stance as outsiders, and their belief in the value of their position, there is, for both Lily and Bankes, the fascination for the system of love, and the doubts as regards their own life attached to it. They both are 'in love' (p. 26) with Mrs. Ramsay; those are Lily's terms, and she associates this fascination with the blindness of love, its illusions. She even compels herself not to look at them (the Ramsays, in an episode, where she sees them arm in arm, as symbolising marriage) to avoid being taken in, blinded by her feelings for Mrs. Ramsay in particular:

> [Lily] kept looking down, purposely, for only so could she keep steady, staying with the Ramsays. Directly one looked up and saw them, what she called "being in love" flooded them. They became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe which is the world seen through the eyes of love. (p. 46)

It is interesting to note that the Ramsays seem to have elicited the same ambiguous response from critics: as Jane Lilienfeld remarks, you have, on the one hand, the critics who

'assume the Ramsays' marriage is the eternal union of the masculine and feminine principle';[44] on the other, others, like Jane Lilienfeld herself, who underline 'the prison represented by the Ramsays' relation […] debilitating to both parties.'[45]

Mrs. Ramsay explicitly promotes love by talking about the value of married life and tries to marry people to each other (which she manages in the novel, in the persons of Paul and Minta). She also promotes it implicitly by making people fall in love with her, and with what she stands for or represents. She is ultimately the centre of the system. She is both the house and the island on which it stands. Geoffrey Hartman suggests that: 'she is the natural centre, the sun, and however confused relationships get, all come back to her and are resolved into simplicity by her word or presence.'[46] And, even though she relies on the masculine contribution, her part of the work is more essential; hence her exhaustion, which is underlined repeatedly. In short, she stands for her belief in the solidity of her world, that is to say, in the possibility of man, civilisation, love, the possibility of stopping the sea from eating up the island. She stands for a love that is stronger than death, she has this 'frightening power for mystical marriage, that refusal to sustain the separateness of things.'[47]

This is confirmed by both the 'geography' and symbolism of the chapter. The world of the novel, in geographical terms, is made up of the island as the main setting, the house as its centre (not in reality the centre of the island, but for us readers, it is the centre of the world the island represents), the hedge with the gate as a sort of outer limit between the inside, the house and family life, and the outside, the cliffs and the sea. Further away, at sea, another island, smaller, also with a house on it but a special type of house, the lighthouse. The first point worth noting is that, in parallel with the Russian doll structure, the landscape of *To the*

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[44] Jane Lilienfeld, 'Where the Spear Plants Grew: The Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*' in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), pp. 148-169, (p. 148).
[45] Ibid., p. 149.
[46] Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'Virginia's Web', in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 71-84, (p. 82).
[47] Ibid., p. 83.

Lighthouse is constituted as a series of boxes separated by thresholds, each with an inside and an outside. This explains why doors and windows are so important in the novel,[48] but the outer hedge, the cliffs, have the same function, as does the sea itself, if we see it as a threshold between the two islands. The image of concentric circles or of a Russian doll structure dominates the book. Such images are typical of the structure of consciousness.[49] Furthermore, every spatial orientation, concretely, when connected to the movements of the characters, abstractly, when it is related to the thoughts or impressions of the characters, can be described according to this small 'map' of the setting; one moves either towards the centre or towards the periphery, either a centripetal or a centrifugal movement. Such a distinction corresponds to the very way in which the two main characters, Mrs. Ramsay, on the one hand, and Lily, on the other, think. Such a 'geography' is part of the symbolism of the novel. Other symbols are less directly linked to the setting, such as light, flowers and trees, for instance, that are all associated with Mrs. Ramsay; or the brooch Minta loses, the fruit bowl on the dinner table or the goat's skull in the nursery.

The episode of the brooch has a rite-of-passage touch to it: four children leave the house, and two adults and two children come back to it. Andrew and Nancy, both on their own, go and play with the sea, or the sea's creatures; whereas Minta and Paul stay together, kiss and pledge mutual love to each other; they sign the contract of love, entering the system and adopting its distribution of roles: the feminine and the masculine distinction and complementariness. Two remarks are worth making here. First, Minta and Paul's engagement is Mrs. Ramsay's doing, the direct result of her propaganda. Second, the children, very often, resist the system, and that they are either coerced into it or won into it.

[48] Doors closed Mrs. Ramsay insists: every individual a room, but windows open she says: so that every individual has access to the outside; Mr. Ramsay has the habit of banging doors.
[49] See, for instance, George Poulet, *Les métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris: Plon, 1961).

The nursery scene illustrates this perfectly.[50] This episode is a small scale replica of the whole chapter. An old goat's skull, symbolising the negative or destructive element in the novel – the sea that dissolves the land or time that passes and ultimately death – hangs on the wall in the nursery. Cam, Mrs. Ramsay's youngest daughter, is afraid of it and wants it removed, but James, her youngest son, wants to keep it there. Mrs. Ramsay manages to pacify them both, to keep the family united, and to vanquish the forces of dissolution. She does it with a typical gesture of self denial: she takes her shawl off her shoulders, even though it is a windy night, and wraps it 'round and round and round' the skull; the insistence on the circular dimension of the process is deliberate, marking the circularity of the system. Simultaneously, another feature of the system is suggested by the shawl 'only' covering the skull: for Cam, hypnotised or mystified by her mother, the skull and all that it is supposed to represent, does not exist any more, because it has become invisible. But we readers know, and (maybe more significantly) Mrs. Ramsay also knows that it is there still, hidden maybe, but underneath the shawl and that, in the end, nothing has changed. The quality of illusion or mystification of the system, and the weight on Mrs. Ramsay's shoulders, of having to carry this world and its possible fragility is suggested here.

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I will turn to levels two and three of the constitution of the world of 'The Window': the dinner party as culmination of the day and the candle episode as culmination of the dinner party. Firstly, the dinner party: Mrs. Ramsay is the queen of the evening, walking down the stairs 'like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them, and descends among them, and acknowledges their tributes silently, and accepts their devotion

[50] For a 'psychoanalytical' interpretation of this scene and of the 'dinner party', see: Suzanne Raitt, *Virginia Woolf's 'To the Lighthouse'* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) and Mary Jacobus, '"The Third Stroke": Reading Woolf with Freud', in *Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 102-120. *To the Lighthouse* tends to attract psychoanalytical readings; perhaps because of its autobiographical content.

and their prostration before her' (p. 78). She is the centre of the event, as she is the centre of the Ramsays' world. At first, the element of responsibility, of strenuous effort that weighs Mrs. Ramsay down, is underlined. The party does not take off as expected, it does not coalesce; people are playing the social game, but unconvincingly. Mr. Ramsay is 'sitting […] all in a heap' (ibid.), and this shows his subordinate role, and the subordinate role of the masculine principle suggested above in the creation and upkeep of the system; but he is sitting at the other end of the table, which indicates that, in spite of everything, he is complementary and essential. There is tension in the air, especially in Charles Tansley's attitude. Mrs. Ramsay feels it all, but does not find the strength to overcome this state of affairs. She is described from the outside (Lily sees her) as drawn, old, ugly. Dissolution seems to have the upper hand: 'Lily Briscoe watched her drifting into that strange no-man's land where to follow people is impossible […] how old she looks, how worn she looks, Lily thought' (p. 79). But, by an admirable feat, she manages to stabilise the situation: she finds in herself the energy to unify the fragments. She is the '"unifier" type.'[51] From the very beginning, the party is seen as a unifying process: everybody in their room, doing their own thing, have to give up this activity and come down in the dining room and sit at Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's table; once again, a centripetal movement is underlined. Now, Mrs. Ramsay manages to save the situation through pity. Her pity for Tansley and her pity for Bankes is, ironically, the expression of her misunderstanding of those people's real situation, as Lily suggests: 'and it was not true, Lily thought; it was one of those misjudgements of hers that seemed to be instinctive and to arise from some need of her own' (p. 80). Nevertheless, it does the trick, liberating some energy in her in an auto-suggestive way, which is underlined later, when she praises her marriage herself and is flattered by the praises as if they had come from someone else: 'she felt as if somebody had been praising her husband to her and their marriage, and she glowed all over without realising that it was she herself who had praised him' (p. 98). Once this is achieved,

[51] Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, p. 84.

she grows, by the minute, more beautiful and more powerful as Lily tells us: 'all her beauty opened again in her' (p. 94). She charms people into ease (Bankes, for instance) or compels others (such as Lily) into obedience. At first, ironically, the reader is made aware of the superficiality and lack of sincerity of the event: while we are shown the surface attitude of the characters, their respect of the codes of behaviour of the system, we are, simultaneously, given their inner thoughts, which do not correspond to what they show. In this way, again, the illusion of the system is underlined: how artificial it is, how very much like a shawl on a goat's skull.

It is also worth noting at this stage – when dissolution and fragmentation are threatening – how Mrs. Ramsay plays games with time: how, in a discussion with Bankes about people they both knew in the past, she neutralises the future, the unknown, the uncontrolled dimension of time. She toys with remembrances and finds satisfaction in the fact that the future of this past is in fact already past, and therefore controlled:

> So now, Mrs. Ramsay thought, she could return to that dream land, that unreal but fascinating place, the Mannings' drawing-room at Marlow twenty years ago; where one moved about without haste or anxiety, for there was no future to worry about. She knew what had happened to them, what to her, it was like reading a book again. (p. 87)[52]

At the very moment when the evening, in spite of all her efforts, was on the verge of falling apart, the 'magician', or the 'great priestess' resorts to her last trick.[53] We are now in the third box, or third circle; what I call – after the level of family life and that of society – the level of reality. Mrs. Ramsay asks her children to bring the candles, they are put on the table and lighted and all the faces of the guests round the table become visible around a bowl of fruit beautifully arranged by one of Mrs. Ramsay's daughters. All are united around the table

[52] Compare: 'It is only when we look at the past and take from it the element of uncertainty that we can enjoy peace' Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 19-29, (p. 27).

[53] I call her magician in an echo of Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway* and priestess is the word used by Woolf herself in the episode of Paul's and Minta's engagement.

by visibility, in two distinctive senses: an active and a passive one. They are all seen, they appear in the same world, and they all see each other and the bowl of fruit at the centre of the table (the bowl of fruit is described as a trophy from the bottom of the ocean). The ocean is also present, rippling the dark window panes that represent the border with the outside, the threshold:

> But looking together united them […] the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light and composed […] into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by the panes of glass […] Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island, had their common cause against the fluidity out there. (p. 91)

We have a dichotomy: dark on the outside, rippled by the sea, liquid; bright on the inside reflecting the candle light; the island and the sea, but this time in terms of light and visibility. As Ruth Miller suggests: 'Virginia Woolf often heightened the contrast between the enclosure and the outside world by setting a brightly lit room against a night sky. Light is essential to the sense of security within the enclosure […] The brightly lit enclosure is a symbol of man's solidarity, and the light represents the rationality which enables him to triumph over confusion.'[54]

We see here how the visible world is conquered against the invisible, or light against darkness. There is a conception in this scene of how opposites exclude each other, yet, at the same time, call each other into being; how incompatible forces, paradoxically, cohabit. The threshold, represented here by the windows, is the seat of this paradoxical coexistence.

But another element in this scene deserves discussion. This visible world comes into existence between a subject and an object, the guests and the bowl of fruit; but also between

[54] Ruth C. Miller, *Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988) p. 79; this is a quasi-phenomenological description of how the world that is to say consciousness, in its distribution between subject and object, comes into existence. We have here, as with the images of boxes or concentric circles, a structure that is essential to our understanding of consciousness and the apparition of the phenomenal world; see, for instance: Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, ed. by S. Strasser (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950).

the subjects, and here it is not only a question of one seeing the other, but it implies a sort of tacit contract. Mrs. Ramsay thinks about a common cause: here, all the guests are leagued against the forces of darkness. The guests have to play the game, and outsiders are a threat. And it is typical of Lily to rebel. Whenever the social pressure rises, Lily automatically, unawares, reacts against it, opposing a centrifugal movement to the centripetal force of community. The tension is even heightened when Mrs. Ramsay, becoming the high priestess of love around her certitude that Paul and Minta are now engaged, sees both Lily and Charles as outsiders, put out by the glow of – respectively – Minta and Paul. It is typical that the beauty of the latter is conceived in terms of light, and that Lily is described as inconspicuous; to be an outsider in a world of light and visibility is to be inconspicuous: 'how inconspicuous she felt herself by Paul's side! He glowing, burning; she aloof, satirical; he, bound for adventure; she, moored to the shore; he, launched, incautious; she, solitary, left out' (p. 94).

Mrs. Ramsay's reflection on love brought about by the circumstances – Paul's using 'we' for the first time – is very revealing for our understanding of the whole chapter. Mrs. Ramsay conceives of love as double-sided: on the one hand, as linked with death, dead serious and real; on the other as an illusion, a game we play to each other or with each other to cover the seriousness of life. This ambiguity, which we have already encountered, appears on all the levels of the system. In Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay's family life, in their doubts and insights; on the level of reality, in an essential paradox between the incompatible forces of order and chaos, light and darkness; on the social level between the surface, the codes of behaviour and what the guests really felt or thought. 'Such [is] the complexity of things' (p. 95) as Lily puts it, painfully experiencing the ambiguity of love herself: you are 'made to feel violently two opposite things at the same time' (ibid.). The island seems to be threatened from all sides.

Yet light and visibility have not said their last word. Both the dinner party and the candle episode come to a climax in a vision on the part of Mrs. Ramsay. She stops talking, listens and observes while the men talk, doing the foundation work we talked about above,

this networking, criss-crossing, 'this admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence' (p. 98): the scaffold Mrs. Ramsay needs to make her feminine contribution. In an echo of her first vision where she identifies with the third stroke of the lighthouse, she becomes light itself in an orgy of visibility, so to speak; in a vision of hyper-visibility. She sees through the guests, having direct access to their inner-being. She shines in the remotest corners and there dislodges darkness, she even goes underwater where she surprises and makes visible the very flow of water, and its shyest inhabitant, the trout; in a paroxysm of clarity, she sees here and there, unifies all the perspectives in a panoptic vision. It is striking that the vision, somehow, seems to resolve all the ambiguities we encountered above, as Morris Beja suggests: visions 'have a unifying role in [Virginia Woolf's] novels.'[55] For instance, the social ambiguity, the distinction between what the guests showed in their social behaviour and what they really felt, is overcome in her penetrating vision of their inner being. The reality ambiguity: the conflict between inside and outside, light and darkness or land and water is also resolved in this instance of a light searching the remotest corners of darkness and illuminating the water world. She even manages to catch a glimpse of the secret of life, its very living essence the trout, but there, on the last plane of ambiguity that of love, or life, the paradox instead of finding a solution is accentuated. 'Will it last? Can it last? How long will it last? It can't last.' Coming to the very core of life, standing still there, she finds time, time that passes, the very flow of life, what life is made of and what life dies of, what *gives* life and what *takes* life. We are here at the centre of the book, but also of the centre of Virginia Woolf's art: time as the paradoxical tension between a force of construction and a force of destruction. Beja again: 'side by side with her intense realisation that the present moment is fleeting is an even more intense desire to hold it back somehow, to preserve it, to make it permanent.'[56]

[55] Morris Beja, 'Virginia Woolf: Matches Struck In the Dark', in *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols, ed. by Eleanor McNees (Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 1994), iv, pp. 311-339, (p. 314).
[56] Ibid., p. 316.

The next scene, that of the fruit bowl, in a symbolic fashion, recapitulates this very problematic.[57] The fruit bowl beautifully arranged by one of the daughters, man-made, art, a trophy from the bottom of the sea, wrenched from the darkness of life, standing in the middle of the table, around which, in their awareness of it, the guests, in their common cause, unite, this centre of the human world, this vision, which Mrs. Ramsay would like to last forever, does not last. Someone takes a piece of fruit and destroys its wholeness, its unity, its beauty. It is destroyed by a human being who is weak, fallible, who needs to eat because he lives, and we have here all the echoes of the forbidden fruit. It would have not lasted anyway, because fruit rot, they are made of the very stuff of life: flesh that is weak and dies. Here, the paradox is restated in full: human beings try to create the eternal out of the ephemeral. They build *in* time, and *with* time what they want to last forever.

The last scene of the dinner party recapitulates the paradox in a literary context. A poem is recited, and Mrs. Ramsay, in her state of acute sensitivity, hears it as if it were a service in a cathedral, without understanding the words. But she is moved by its music. She is looking outside, and the words seem to be floating on water, and although she does not understand them, they seem to be about what she has felt this very evening during the dinner party. Isn't that the vision or the fruit bowl put into words? Isn't poetry the 'place' *par excellence* of the paradox we encountered above? Virginia Woolf seems to confirm here my suggestion that such a paradox is central to her work.

At the end of the dinner party, which represents the culmination of a principle of integration, Mrs. Ramsay leaves the room and goes upstairs, alone, to think about Paul and Minta's engagement. Virginia Woolf insists, in her description of Mrs. Ramsay's move, on her passing the threshold and on its consequences: suddenly, the vision and the completeness of the scene become past. She also insists on the disintegration that sets in, people left without a common cause, all go their own ways:

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[57] For a 'Freudian' perspective, see: Jacobus, '"The Third Stroke": Reading Woolf with Freud', pp. 115-118; and note 50 above.

> It was necessary now to carry everything a step further. With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, the past […] And directly she went a sort of disintegration set in, they […] went different ways. (p. 103)

Time challenges again the 'unifier'. We saw how, by remembering the past, she neutralises the future. She resorts to a similar trick at this juncture. Thinking about Paul and Minta's engagement, she imagines how the here and now of its happening (that is to say, Mrs. Ramsay's house and what it contains) but also the people associated with it in this summer holiday and of course herself, will all be remembered by the future married couple. How the very fact that they are a couple will always remind them of the circumstances of their engagement. And Mrs. Ramsay finds relief in the thought that, in this way, she and her world will go on living once they have disappeared. How the cut that the past introduces, just illustrated by the disintegration that set in when she left the dining room, how this falling apart, which time brings about, can be overcome in a conception of time as a stream. This suggests a new avatar of the distinction between Lily's centrifugal and explosive way of apprehending life and Mrs. Ramsay's efforts of integration. Lily, when she looks at the world accentuates the distance between the elements; Mrs. Ramsay tries to melt them in one flow. In other words, Lily stresses the discontinuity, Mrs. Ramsay continuity.

The chapter ends with a scene that resumes the theme of complementariness of the masculine and feminine principles in forming the system and shows how, beyond the doubts, and threat of illusion, such a system can be a real solution, bringing peace and happiness in spite of time that passes. Mrs. Ramsay lets some of her children, and Paul and Minta, go to the beach to watch the waves, but does not accompany them. She feels held back by something which she cannot name. Some unconscious desire is in the process of surfacing. She enters the drawing room where her husband is reading and, sitting opposite him, starts

knitting. A book of poetry lies on the table beside her and she takes it up; without giving the whole process much attention, she starts reading. At this moment, she realises that this is what she was looking for. The poem told at the end of the dinner party, and the feelings associated with it, were still lingering in her mind. In the scene that follows, we have a description of how she reads poetry, contrasted with how her husband reads a novel. She reads backwards, without understanding the words, picking a few lines here, a few lines there, and lets herself float on the music of the words. He, in contrast, analyses his novel; he puts one thing here, one thing there, judges it: 'the lovers are fiddlestick.' She loses herself in her reading, he comes out of it stronger. We have here the very complementariness of the system they both constitute as a couple and the very sense of the system is questioned on this occasion: why marry? She asks herself. And the answer, in a wave of happiness, imposes itself on her in a third, and last, moment of vision: we marry, we come together in a system, to conquer chaos, to fight against the forces of darkness. It is an affirmation of life against death but, as we have seen above, and as Mrs. Ramsay also knows, in her moments of vision, life, like love, paradoxically contains the 'seeds of death.'

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Before I go on to discuss the second chapter of *To the Lighthouse,* I would like to conclude my commentary on chapter one with a few words about Mrs. Ramsay's visions. She has altogether three moments of vision in chapter one. The first one occurs as she is alone, sitting at the window of the drawing room, during a respite in the hectic day. The second happens during the dinner party, as she is surrounded by her family and guests. The last takes place in the presence of her husband only, at the end of the day. But the three instances of vision, in spite of different circumstances, all share common features and, above all, a common structure. Certain elements, of a symbolic nature, appear each time: trees, flowers, water, with a special focus on the latter's movements: its stream, flow or ripple. These elements are all

present in the rest of the chapter, on other occasions, and they derive their value from these other occurrences: the tree is obviously a symbol of stability, as is apparent from the two scenes where Mrs. Ramsay is sitting in her bedroom, looking at the trees outside her window. The water and its movements are associated with the sea, ambiguously suggesting life and death; the energy of life and chaos. Flowers are important to Mrs. Ramsay: her garden flowers and their suggestion of fragile beauty. But other recurrent features of her visions are, I believe, even more significant: light, for instance, is essential to the three moments of vision. In the first one, she identifies with the light of the lighthouse; in the second, she becomes a searching light illuminating the darkest nooks; in the last one, the words of poetry are described as lights lightening up the dark of her mind. Her visions are moments of hyper-luminosity and its corollary hyper-visibility, linked with consciousness. But consciousness is control; it is luminosity and visibility at the service of the world. Consciousness is order, identity of the person who sees in her relation to and in distinction from the object seen. But here, it is as if visibility trespasses on its own limits; as if light was outbidding itself, and in doing so, verging on its opposite, blindness or darkness. Another feature is the presence in the three cases of words; in the last two visions, poetry plays an obvious role, but in the first one, as well, maybe less clearly, words appear. She talks about the usual phrases that come, at such moments, and she ends up, quite involuntarily, saying ‘we are in the hands of God’ (p. 61). It is as if, in each case, the visions needed words, calling them, or borrowing them, depending on the circumstances; Mrs. Ramsay’s visions are moments of inspiration. As for the structure of those moments, the movement is always similar: it starts by a process of concentration, an increase of density, a transformation into something heavy and angular, the ‘dark wedge’ of the first vision, and then the penetration, by the dark object, thanks to its weight and shape, under the surface of people, appearances – ‘the apparitions’, as Woolf calls them – or through the surface of water, as in the second vision; and once there under the surface, there is a movement in the other direction: expansion accompanied by a lightening up, an increase of

visibility pushed to its very limits where the distinction between who sees and what is seen disappears: the subject becomes the object. Mrs. Ramsay becomes what she sees: luminous 'waves of pure lemon', and this very disappearance of limits is the moment when words come, words important for their music. In fewer words, a concentration followed by an expansion with loss of distinction that becomes music.[58]

A dialectic

The first chapter of *To the Lighthouse* is organised around a principle of unification, represented by Mrs. Ramsay. She is the active centre; she holds it together, of a world that can be described in terms of concentric circles: couple, family, household, community, symbolised by and set in a house on an island. She constitutes, as a person, a centripetal principle. It also seems natural, now, when I start looking for the opposite principle, a force of dissolution, to turn towards the second chapter, 'Time passes'. Indeed, with its description of the falling apart of the Ramsays' holiday home and its listing of the family members who died in the interval, it seems to be the representation *par excellence* of such a force of disintegration. But we have a third chapter, which looks like the day after the night. Chapter two starts with the Ramsay family going to bed and ends ten years later, with the same people, or rather those who are still alive, waking up in the same house. Chapter three is about an excursion to the lighthouse undertaken by Mr. Ramsay and his two youngest children, Cam and James, which has all the features of a successful mourning process, enabling them to leave the past behind and go on in life. If this is so, the paradoxical tension I claim to be central to Virginia Woolf's work would be resolved. *To the Lighthouse* would go further than *Mrs Dalloway* and overcome the paradox. Unity would have the last word and fragmentation would be *aufgehoben* in a dialectical movement.

[58] See, for instance, for the first vision: Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 60-61.

But is this really the pattern of the book? This is certainly one aspect, and I will have to look at it in more detail. Triplicity itself could come to my help: the character of Lily, in her constant opposition to the system of love, which I have underlined in chapter one, might be the clue to another reading of the book. I believe that the system of love, the couple or marriage, as promoted by the Ramsays, integrates or even needs the negative moment of death to perpetuate itself. The system needs the sacrifice of one of its members to continue. More specifically, the patriarchal system represented by Mr. Ramsay needs the sacrifice of the feminine principle to perpetuate itself. The result, at the end of the novel, from the system's point of view, is a resolution of the paradox. At what cost is a question that we will have to examine.

But Lily refuses to adopt the system, and therefore rejects the solution the system has to offer. She constantly countered the centripetal force the Ramsays tried to impose upon her, by some instinctive centrifugal attitude. Now, she opposes the dialectical resolution of the paradox by an affirmation of a tension. As the figure of the artist, she and metonymically her painting embody the very tension which I believe is at the centre of Virginia Woolf's work.

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I am going to deal with chapters two and three not as representing opposite forces but as forming two moments of the same movement, of which the horizon is the perpetuating of the system. Chapters two and three constitute a falling apart of the system; the feminine and the masculine principles both, so to speak, go their own way, accentuating their idiosyncrasy. There is, on the masculine side, voluntarism, conquest, military-like, with as a result, an increase of the self; on the feminine side, loss of the self and passivity, eventually death. Such positions correspond to Mr. Ramsay's alphabet thinking and Mrs. Ramsay's visions, or the straight line versus the cyclical movement. The system, represented by the house and the island, is the conjunction of those two movements: if you add a cyclical impulse to an arrow-

like movement, you obtain a circle. In the couple, both tendencies influence each other, symbolically, creating, by this double influence, the circular surface of the system. Chapters two and three represent respectively, the feminine and the masculine principle detached from the other, realising, so to say, its potential, developing for itself. The cyclical movement of the feminine principle becoming, in chapter two, the cycle of nature, death and rebirth, the movements of the sea. The arrow-like, conquering energy of the masculine principle finds, in chapter three, its symbolic representation in the boat excursion to the lighthouse. In both cases, the common ground, the house in chapter two, and the island in chapter three, is left behind. The empty house is reclaimed by nature; the island becomes a tiny point on the surface of the ocean for the excursion trio, as they reach the lighthouse. Furthermore, the same energy that was destroying the house saves it, in the guise of an old woman preparing it for the next generation. The journey to the lighthouse is for James and Cam a rite of passage: making a man out of the former, in the image of his father, and a woman out of Cam, both ready for the complementariness of married life. It is as if we had come to the end of a cycle of the system, and were ready for the beginning of a new one, death included.

‘**Time passes’**

Chapter two starts, one night, with the Ramsay family and friends going to bed and ends with a morning ten years later in the same house. It is represented as a ten years long night. And this long night is made up of innumerable nights, and days, sunny and rainy days, winter and summer, year in year out: a natural cyclic pattern is underlined from the onset. It is adequately called ‘Time passes’. It ultimately describes the effects of time that passes on the Ramsays’ empty holiday home, how, year after year, it deteriorates, nature slowly taking over the house. The description, itself in fragments, is interrupted by brief statements, with a gossip ring to them, telling us about the death of some of the Ramsay family members, above all Mrs. Ramsay’s. This is done in a shockingly brief manner: the reader is told, without any

preparation, in a matter-of-fact way, that: ‘Mrs Ramsay [had] died rather suddenly the night before’ (p. 120). I believe that this statement, in spite of its brevity and matter of factness, is the central element around which the whole chapter is organised. The latter being ultimately a symbolic and thematic development of Mrs. Ramsay’s death.

The house is representative of the system: Mrs. Ramsay’s windows, Mr. Ramsay’s doors, her dressing room, his study, the guests and the hosts, the servants and the masters, the children and the parents; it articulates dualities into complementariness and establishes a balance between opposing forces. In chapter two, it is this very symbol of togetherness that is attacked by the natural cycle. Nature destroys the house, but by doing so perpetuates itself; it is the feminine principle gone out of control. Mrs. Ramsay, while reflecting on the relationship between Paul and Minta, realised the ambiguity of love; she saw that it was the driving force behind the system, but at the same time, contained the ‘seeds of death’. She is constantly aware, in her relationship with her family, of this dark side, hence her exhaustion, that comes from trying to hide it from her husband and children. Hence her visions as well, which represent an acknowledgement, even a re-enactment of death. Mrs. Ramsay not only knows that death is there, always threatening, but, so to speak, she has it in her. She is on the side of death because she is on the side of nature. Mrs. Ramsay is associated with flowers and trees and she loves her garden. She is also associated with the sea and its movements, and water in general. She is confronted with the ambivalence of those elements; she is on the threshold between life and death, a paradox summarised in the expression she uses to describe love: ‘the seeds of death’ (p. 93).

If we look at the description of the deterioration of the Ramsays’ home, three aspects are striking: firstly, the falling apart of the house is one side of the coin, of which the other is the thriving of the natural world. The house from the centre of the system becomes a place open to the cycles of nature: meteorological, vegetal, animal, even imaginary lovers find in it their hiding place. The end of one function is the beginning of the other. Destruction is only

apparent; it is, rather, a remodelling of the same matter. Secondly, Mrs. Ramsay still seems to inhabit the house, or rather she seems to come back in the guise of either the natural elements that conquer the house, or the light of the moon or of the lighthouse. Thirdly, the blindness and aimlessness of the natural processes are constantly underlined. Mrs. Ramsay (in contrast with her husband's eagle eyes) is short-sighted and, in Mr. Ramsay's opinion, women are characterised by vagueness and the inability to orientate themselves. Chapter two, in expanding on Mrs. Ramsay's death, is in fact, developing symbolically the idea of the feminine principle as a natural force, freed from the restraints imposed on it by the masculine mind.

Such an interpretation is supported by the fact that the only guardian of the empty house is an old lady, half blind, who lurches, as if she was at sea, aimlessly, through the house, whom life has not treated well (maternity, we are told, was the trial). Yet, in spite of all, she mumbles old love songs. We find here again all the aforementioned characteristics of feminity.[59] When, after ten years of desertion, a letter arrives announcing that the Ramsays are planning to come back, Mrs. McNab, with the help of a friend, another old lady, re-conquers the house from nature. The transition seems to take place seamlessly, as if the cleaning process was fundamentally the same natural energy invested in a different function. There does not seem to be any fundamental distinction between the work of the old ladies and that of the natural forces that previously reigned over the house; the cleaning process is even described in terms of childbirth. Maternity seems to be a central theme of the chapter: it was the source of old McNab's trials in life, and the only man who helps with the cleaning of the house, is her friend's son. We also learn, in the same matter of fact manner, that Prue died in child birth. This underlines the 'presence' of Mrs. Ramsay in the chapter: she, the mother of eight, the mother figure *par excellence*, who wanted to always have a baby. It is worth noting

[59] One is also reminded of the other old lady figures in *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, which have a similar function.

here that, when she was alive, Mrs. Ramsay would always talk to old McNab, whereas Mr. Ramsay would simply ignore her.

Chapter two is not the destructive chapter it seems to be, but rather the matriarchal moment of the system, and its identification with natural cycles, where death is not the opposite of life, but part of it. The appearance of a warship, anchored off the island, and the echoes of bombs falling seem to confirm such an interpretation: they are the only genuinely destructive elements of this chapter and they are man (as opposed to woman)-made. We know how Mr. Ramsay valorises qualities – such as courage – that would make a good soldier, and the excursion in chapter three is described in military terms. Furthermore, we learn that Andrew was killed at war.[60]

'The lighthouse'

In chapter three, we have the patriarchal moment of the system. The feminine principle liberated from the masculine becomes natural cycle; the masculine without feminine interference becomes an arrow like conquering movement. This is exactly what chapter three relates: the boat trip to the lighthouse with the three protagonists, Mr. Ramsay, James and Cam. As the house in chapter two was a nearly all-woman affair, here the boat is a man's world, or rather a father-and-son occasion: the duo James and his father being mirrored in McAlistair and his son, Cam being the odd one out. And they are received, at the lighthouse, by two men, who are probably father and son.

The expedition is described in voluntaristic terms. Lily, seeing the little group depart, thinks of a military troop with at its head Mr. Ramsay as leader or guide: 'he had all the appearance of a leader [...] he led the way with his firm military tread' (p. 145). She also reflects on his features: tense because he keeps all his energies constantly focused on his aim.

[60] Woolf explicitly linked militarism and a patriarchal vision of the world, see for instance: Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1938).

These are remarks that echo his trial to think ‘R’ in chapter one, or his way of reading at the end of the same. The important dimension is that, for Mr. Ramsay, confrontation with the unknown means a challenge, and his reaction to it, a fight or a conquest. The end result is either, if he fails to go further, a status quo or, if he succeeds, an extension of the self. This stands in direct contrast to his wife’s attitude to the unknown: she would have a ‘vision’, the structure of which always implies a loss of the self. It also worth remarking here that, for Mrs. Ramsay, death; and, for Mr. Ramsay, some sort of rebirth (he leaves the island, in the eyes of Lily at least, an old man, and he jumps on the rocks at the lighthouse like a young man) are inscribed in the logic of their being.

For each participant, the excursion to the lighthouse represents a rite of passage; that is to say, they do not arrive at the lighthouse the same as they left the island. The trip is highly symbolic: the boat, under male control, traces a line across the sea to the lighthouse, associated with Mrs. Ramsay; nature, which is on the feminine side in this novel, represented by the sea and the wind, is tamed in the service of man’s will. Furthermore, there is the play with the symbolism itself, especially that of the lighthouse. It is illustrated by the fact that, in this episode, for all three protagonists, the trip to the lighthouse represents a passage from symbolic to factual language. This is totally coherent in so far as, for all of them, the excursion means leaving the past behind; that is to say, Mrs. Ramsay, and all she stands for: the feminine principle and its symbolic language; adopting in the process the masculine principle and Mr. Ramsay’s matter-of-fact philosophical idiom.

Let us have a look at the details of the transformation of each of the participants: first, Mr. Ramsay. When we first encounter him in chapter three, he is ‘furiously’ mourning, passing from rage to drama and he is desperately looking for some sympathetic feminine recipient to pour his grief into. In short, Mr. Ramsay is in a state of emotional turmoil. This is further underlined when the boat comes to a stand-still, by his irritability and his lyricism: he keeps reciting lines of verse suggesting heroic death at sea. The point here is that the sea, in

both his irritability towards it (he cannot conquer it because of lack of wind) and his lyricism (its function in the poem), is charged with symbolic value. Towards the end of the passage, when once again the wind drops and the boat stands still, against all expectations, he remains calm. When old McAlistair shows him the place where a boat had sunk and sailors died in a storm, instead of shouting a line of poetry, which both Cam and James were dreadfully expecting, he just says 'ah' and thinks:

> But why make a fuss about that? Naturally men are drowned in a storm, but it is a perfectly straightforward affair, and the depths of the sea [...] are only water after all. (p. 189)

Lyricism, emotion, symbolism are left behind, matter of factness has returned; he is the lonely philosopher he was meant to be. Mrs. Ramsay is dead and buried. The process has a touch of rebirth in it: he is seen leaving as an old man; it is a young man who jumps on the rocks at the lighthouse. During the trip, he and old McAlistair (and they are both over seventy) proudly talk about their perfect health.

A transformation is also apparent in James. He leaves the island reluctantly, forced by his father to take this trip. It might seem surprising, since, we remember, the novel opens with James dreaming to go there, but the context is quite different. Firstly, there is the challenge his father represents to him, now: they are, so to speak, on the same level, and they fight for supremacy. Secondly, he senses that such a trip could bring about a considerable change in his personality. This is, in fact, what happens. James leaves the island a boy; when he gets to the lighthouse, he is a man, a replica of his father. The change is expressed by the transformation of the value of his symbolic world. Leaving the island, the lighthouse, for him, is still a symbol of the mother: the soft, hazy light that soothes him to sleep; midway through the trip, it acquires an ambivalent status: on the one side the soft light, on the other, some phallic yet matter-of-fact thing, the only value that will remain by the time James reaches the lighthouse:

> The lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening. Now –
> James looked at the lighthouse. He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see that it was barred with black and white. (p. 172)

The trip will have been a rite of passage for him because his father gave him a task: to sail the boat. To fulfil it, voluntary and masculine qualities are required: complete focus on the aim to be reached and complete investment of one's energies to reach it, which James manages very well. He has passed the test, so to speak, and he knows it, when his father praises him.

As for Cam, she becomes a woman in the system's understanding of the word. She is also forced to come along, and like James (with whom she made a tacit pact of silence) she also resists; but in a different way: whereas we have between James and his father a combat for supremacy and recognition, Cam reacts in a 'feminine' way, she passively rejects communication and isolates herself. Two elements are worth remarking: firstly, that it was exactly her mother's way of resisting her father. Secondly, that in doing so, she turns towards the sea, dangling her hand in it, playing with the water. We have to consider her position as the odd one out: she is the only woman on a boat that represents some sort of hyper-masculine world, a double father-and-son structure. She also undergoes a transformation. On the one hand, she leaves behind the world of the mother and her own childhood, which is suggested by her seeing the island as a green leaf disappearing in the sea:

> She gazed back over the sea, at the island. But the leaf was losing its sharpness. It was very small; it was very distant. (p. 176)

On the other hand, her resistance to her father slowly turns into admiration and love, and a sense of excitement for the adventure which, she thinks, he makes possible. And this in spite of the humiliation she experiences when she cannot answer his questions about the points of the compass. Perhaps it is even because of it: she is made to think that only under the guidance of a man can she leave the island; that is to say, the house and her boring woman

role. The fact that, at some stage, she takes her hand out of the water because she finds playing with it boring might be an indication of such a state of affairs. The point is that, in the same way that James was made into a man, produced by the system in order to continue it, Cam is made a woman, according to the role distribution and definition of the system; a woman who will need to find a man to guide her through life, who will have her role determined, on the periphery of the system (Cam is sitting on the prow of the boat, whereas the men are in it), as a mother and child bearer (Cam knows very well, as she observes her father enjoying McAlistair's story of the storm, that his vision of the world consists in men fighting the elements and woman staying at home looking after the children). Maybe there is even a perverted double subjugation at work here: Cam is made to think that only a man can make her life exciting, getting her out of the predetermined role patriarchal society has in store for her, when, in fact, it is this very man, or this very relationship that will impose on her the role in question.

The excursion episode is ambiguous: on the one hand, we have a healthy mourning process; for our three protagonists, it is vital for life to go on, to be able to overcome the loss of their wife and mother, and the trip to the lighthouse clearly symbolises such a successful mourning process. Yet, on the other hand, we cannot help thinking that it is accompanied by a not-so-healthy repression: repression of death of course, but also, at the same time, of all that Mrs. Ramsay stands for: emotions, life, and ultimately the feminine principle. Furthermore, this act of repression has features that remind one of sacrifice: Mrs. Ramsay is a scapegoat figure carrying, but also realising death, in dying for the sake of the continuity of the system. The feminine principle, it is suggested, is sacrificed in the name of the perpetuation of the male world. The description, during the trip, of young McAlistair's fishing and how he treats the fish, creatures from the sea, might be of significance in this respect: one he mutilates to bait his hook, and throws alive back to sea, the others slowly suffocate in a little water at the

bottom of the boat. Is that the picture of woman's position in the patriarchal world of Mr. Ramsay?

Unity and fragmentation

Yet, in *To the Lighthouse*, the system does not have the last word. It and its mode of perpetuation are, of course, central to the novel; however, *To the Lighthouse* also embodies a critical distance from it, in the person of Lily Briscoe. The system has two ways of arranging the cohabitation of the feminine and the masculine principles: either it seeks to balance them in complementariness or it affirms one at the cost of the other. In both cases, the aim is to neutralise their incompatibility, and therefore the potential force of fragmentation such an incompatibility would imply and, thus, ultimately, to defuse the paradox of a tension between a unifying and a dissolving force, to get rid of what, in it, 'jars on the nerves' (p. 178) to use Lily's words. In chapter one, we have an instance of balancing of the feminine and the masculine principle. In chapters two and three, we have seen how the system perpetuates itself as the masculine principle in a sacrifice of the feminine.

At both stages, Lily embodies resistance. Lily counters the centripetal force of the Ramsays' world with a centrifugal attitude. She does it instinctively: the first time, as she perceives the Ramsays arm in arm, symbolising the perfect harmony of married life, her mode of thinking, as a reaction, becomes literally explosive. The same phenomenon repeats itself during the dinner party, as she feels compelled by Mrs. Ramsay to be a 'nice girl'. Furthermore, her very physical appearance seems to make her badly equipped for the system of love: as a woman she lacks the 'glow' that makes Mrs. Ramsay and Minta such a source of sympathy and attraction for men. She is thin, inconspicuous (as Mrs. Ramsay remarks), she even has Chinese eyes that underline her 'strangeness', the status of an outsider that sticks to her personality throughout the novel. In chapter one, she remains strangely inadequate for married life, in spite of Mrs. Ramsay's plans to marry her off to William Bankes. She tends to

confuse sex roles: she feels more attracted to Mrs. Ramsay herself than to men, and her work (she uses this word to describe her painting activity) comes before any consideration of a family.

In chapter three, where she reappears for the first time after Mrs. Ramsay's death, her inability to play the role of a woman, as defined by the system, is made clear in the very first scene: she cannot possibly give Mr. Ramsay the feminine sympathy he is craving for, in his state of melodramatic mourning, even though she would like to. It is worth remarking that this impossibility proves of some help to Mr. Ramsay. Instead of adopting the attitude he expected from her, she ends up, rather ridiculously, speaking about his boots, a theme he picks up enthusiastically, forgetting his show of mourning: 'Instead, Mr. Ramsay smiled. His pall, his draperies, his infirmities fell from him' (p. 144). On her side too, this diversion enables her to bring to the surface feelings she genuinely has for him but that were somehow blocked by the rigid role distribution.

But in this chapter, her resistance takes a new form. In chapter three, the system itself reaches a new stage, that of its perpetuation as patriarchal system thanks to the sacrifice of the feminine principle. Here too, Lily counters such a development. And she does so by keeping both principles: the feminine and the masculine in a paradoxical tension. She even embodies them in her very being, and expresses the tension in question in her perception of her environment and, ultimately, in what she makes of it (i.e. her painting).

Her very geographical position is revealing: she stands, with her easel, between the empty house, a symbol of the dead Mrs. Ramsay, and the group constituted by Mr. Ramsay and his children on their way to the lighthouse. Throughout the chapter, she constantly reverts from one to the other. She stands between the dead and the living: she imagines, in an uncanny parallelism, Mrs. Ramsay leading the children who died, Prue and Andrew, down to the shore, in a mirror-like reflection of the little troop that are actually on their way to the lighthouse.

But not only is her geographical position described in this paradoxical fashion. Essential to Lily is what she calls her work: painting. This very insistence, on the part of a woman, on an activity of that type as essentially fulfilling, rather than on her role as a mother, is, from the point of view of the patriarchal system, quite a challenge: it blurs the traditional gender delimitations, suggesting a new category that partakes of both the feminine and the masculine principles, or one that is precariously balanced between the two. This ambiguity is further stressed by the description of Lily's act of painting: it implies both the voluntary masculine and passive feminine attitudes. Indeed, the painting process consists of a paradoxical mingling of, on the one side, a will to power described in military terms and, on the other, a losing of oneself in a vision. This suggests both Mr. Ramsay's attitude and Mrs. Ramsay's visions. The result of such a process, the painting itself, reflects the paradox: 'it was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses' (p. 159); it is grey and red, colours associated with, respectively, Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay. The tension is brought to a climax in Lily's vision, which corresponds to both her giving the finishing touch to her painting and the end of the novel: both Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Ramsay are symbolically 'present', she as returned from the dead, he, in spite of the distance, just at the moment when he sets foot on the lighthouse, in a highly emotional moment when Lily succeeds in finishing her painting with a final stroke, a line dividing, yet at the same time uniting masses of grey and red.

We were looking for a paradoxical tension between a unifying and a dissolving principle. Lily is the very locus of such a tension in *To the Lighthouse*. She embodies both the masculine and the feminine principles, uniting them in their incompatibility: the very incompatibility, which the system in one way or the other, complementariness or sacrifice, was trying to neutralise. In her, both the feminine and the masculine principles come together in a unifying force and simultaneously oppose each other in a power of fragmentation. We could say that Lily, by maintaining the tension between the feminine and the masculine

principles, maintains the tension between the unifying and the dissolving forces, rendering its dialectical resolution, as in the system, impossible. It is as if we had, in Lily, a redoubling, or a repetition of a fundamental paradox, on two different levels: that of the sexes (for want of a better term), and that of the constitution of the world. But both are a reflection and a repetition of a structure that is at the centre of the novel itself, its very constitutive matrix. I believe that Lily's painting, mirroring the novel in which it is inscribed, in its constitution around a tension, is the very symbol of such a fundamental creative paradox.

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I want to make a last remark that connects, in terms of structure, *Mrs Dalloway* with *To the Lighthouse*. In both books, we have the same basic dichotomy, but with a difference. In both texts, we have an opposition between an insider and an outsider of the system, where the insider represents the force of cohesion and the outsider that of fragmentation; In *Mrs Dalloway,* respectively Clarissa and Septimus, in *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. But there is a difference: in the former text, the representative of the force of fragmentation dies, and his function is taken over by the survivor, both the force of cohesion and that of fragmentation coexisting in Clarissa. In the latter novel, it is Lily, the outsider, who survives and becomes the embodiment of the tension. Two points deserve a mention in this context: firstly, the usual category of identity is suspended; we have in the survivor, in both cases, an uncanny mingling of personalities, and a 'presence' of the dead. Secondly, exactly as in *Mrs Dalloway*, where the terms insider and outsider, representative of the force of cohesion, or of that of fragmentation, have to be qualified because they can never be applied without remainder to the characters, who are too complex, mixing categories, so to say; characters in *To the Lighthouse* are similarly equivocal. At some stage, Lily reflects on how Mrs. Ramsay, in her own way, creates; how she does (but on a different level) essentially the same thing as Lily herself. Mrs. Ramsay is aware of the dark side of life and she is precariously balanced

between cohesion and fragmentation. Of course, being in the service of the system, she tends to repress the latter in the name of the former. But there is an exception to this tendency: her visions. And this is exactly what she has in common with Lily: they both have visions; Mr. Ramsay, tellingly, has not.

III. A reading from within an anthropological framework

If I consider Ferrer's reading of *To the Lighthouse* to be verging on nihilism and deplore its 'inhumanity', I reproach Allen McLaurin's reading of the same novel[61] for being 'too human' because it imports an implicit anthropological framework and the type of unity such a framework implies. McLaurin's reading of *To the Lighthouse* is a formalist approach to a literary text. His focus is on instances of relation, repetition and rhythm. On the very first page of his essay, he demarcates his approach from a traditional world-orientated perspective by affirming that '[Woolf] does not seek for psychological realism, but for the establishment of a relation.'[62] This relation is immediately defined as 'an antithetical one.'[63] It is, in fact, constituted by the tension between Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay, both representing a different type of repetition characterised, on the one hand, by the fluidity of rhythm and on the other by the abstractness of separated objects. Mrs. Ramsay, because of her short-sightedness, 'sees importance in immediate things [...] this enables her to get inside the repetition, and thus transform it into a rhythm.'[64] Mr. Ramsay, in opposition, who is long-sighted, 'cannot become part of a rhythm. He sees things from the outside, where the hateful aspect of repetition is most in evidence';[65] he 'is working logically on the problem of the way in which we

[61] Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
[62] Ibid., p. 177.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., p. 178.
[65] Ibid., p. 179.

understand the world.'[66] There is, according to McLaurin, at the core of the novel, forming its formal principle, an antithesis between 'impressionism' represented by Mrs. Ramsay, and logic, incarnated by Mr. Ramsay:

> Mr. Ramsay cannot see objects that are close to him, for his gaze is set upon distant things, such as abstract ideas [...] Mrs. Ramsay's impressionist view is set against his over-theoretical, abstract vision.[67]

There is, so far, no doubt, a striking similarity with my own reading of *To the Lighthouse*: a formal approach that explicitly avoids direct reference to the outside of the novel, in which both Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay are considered the representatives of opposed structural principles in tension. Furthermore, Lily, in McLaurin's interpretation, is seen as embodying the meeting of both principles: 'here [Lily] tries to combine the short sight of Mrs. Ramsay and the long sight of Mr. Ramsay',[68] or:

> Many critics have championed Mrs. Ramsay's vision, some have excused Mr. Ramsay's, but few have seen that the two are complementary and that Lily achieves a successful aesthetic fusion of impressionism and logic in her post-impressionist vision.[69]

Lily is a painter and as the terms impressionist and post-impressionist (to describe respectively Mrs. Ramsay and Lily) suggest, McLaurin's discussion of *To the Lighthouse* is founded on a comparison between literature and painting. He insists on the need for literature to renew its language by modelling it on that of modern painting: 'painting, we often feel, is nearer to sensation than literature; it has an immediate, almost physiological impact. Literary interpretation of visual art often obstructs this non-verbal appreciation of form and colour.'[70]

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[66] Ibid., p. 180.
[67] Ibid., p. 181.
[68] Ibid., p. 185.
[69] Ibid., p. 184.
[70] Ibid., p. 189.

He underlines the influence of modern art theories in general, and of Roger Fry's in particular, on Woolf when writing *To the Lighthouse*; as he writes:

> [Fry] felt that in the past, literature in England had been so dominant that it had pushed painting in a literary direction. The co-operation between himself and Virginia Woolf turns out to be, in a sense, an attempt to reverse the process, and this is particularly evident in *To the Lighthouse.*[71]

According to McLaurin, what Woolf is after is 'that "jar on the nerves" which a painter can more adequately convey than an artist in words.'[72] In this respect, abstraction is important: 'it follows that a thoughtful artist like Lily Briscoe would not be portrayed as a representational painter.'[73] She sees things in terms of 'form and geometry';[74] 'there is a careful selection and abstraction here.'[75] This is another feature of McLaurin's reading that is of special interest to me. I insist, in my consideration of Woolf's work, on the need for a conceptualisation of a different function of language in literature and how this is intimately linked with abstraction.

Yet, in spite of these numerous similarities, there is a fundamental difference between McLaurin's reading of *To the Lighthouse* and mine. McLaurin works within an anthropological framework: for him, *To the Lighthouse* still represents Woolf's attempt to render the world, inner and outer, with the help of words. Language is still understood as a tool – in both its designative and expressive function – to represent reality. Referentiality is thus reintroduced through the backdoor. The passage quoted above: 'painting, we often feel, is nearer to sensation than literature'[76] is telling in this respect. The purpose of a 'new language' of literature, and of its abstraction, is to allow literature to capture 'sensation'. Rather than to suspend referentiality, it refines it. McLaurin himself talks of 'the complex

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., p. 185.
[73] Ibid., p. 191.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., p. 192.
[76] Ibid., p. 189.

relationship between art and external reality.'[77] His formalism is, in fact, an elucidation of this complex relationship, a sort of second degree *mimesis*. For example, discussing the autobiographical dimension of *To the Lighthouse*, in spite of his having insisted on the lack of 'psychological realism' of the novel, he writes:

> The equivalent problem for Virginia Woolf herself was the transmutation of her knowledge of her mother and father into the characters of Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay. The careful balancing which we can see in their portrayal gives them a formal significance which is more generally valid than a straight autobiography or biography would be.[78]

Formal construction in the novel is a detour taken in the name of truthfulness, or correspondence to reality. McLaurin's examination of Woolf's use of colour is also telling: 'colour is used to convey something which can be described as an emotional equivalence, a subtle relation which is not logical.'[79] With the allusion to Woolf's parents, we have what is generally called the designative use of language, how language relates to 'objects' in the world, and even though it is of a complex nature here, it is still to be understood in referential terms. Now, with McLaurin's discussion of colours in *To the Lighthouse*, we have an example of the expressive use of language, how language articulates inner states or feeling but the referential framework remains. It is inner reality rather than outer reality that is represented.[80]

McLaurin's formalist reading of *To the Lighthouse* takes for granted that the novel represents the tentative rendering by an author of her experience of life in order to communicate it to a reader. This is what I mean by 'anthropological framework': a piece of literature is nothing but an act of communication, albeit of a more complex nature than an ordinary one, whereby a sender tries to communicate a message with content to a receiver. Unity, based on the category of identity and its logic of non-contradiction and excluded third,

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[77] Ibid., p. 196.
[78] Ibid., p. 192.
[79] Ibid., pp. 193/194.
[80] For a discussion of both the designative and expressive functions of language, see for instance: Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-), i, pp. 215-247.

underlies such a framework. Because of this implicit conceptual background, McLaurin, in his reading of *To the Lighthouse*, undoes the tension which I endeavour to keep alive in what I called my 'structuralist' approach of Woolf's work.

CHAPTER FOUR: *THE WAVES*: 'VERY LITTLE IS LEFT OUTSIDE'

I. A deconstructionist interpretation of *The Waves*

Patricia Laurence, in her reading of *The Waves*,[1] is interested in 'blank spaces (emotional, bodily, textual, thematic, structural)',[2] which she links with both silence and rhythm. She writes of 'the conjunction of space with silence and rhythm.'[3] Such a conjunction is possible because 'space and rhythm are metaphors for silence.'[4] The essence of such a triangular metaphorical relation is the creation of 'meaning for the reader that is beyond words.'[5] According to Laurence, Woolf's style is characterised by 'punctuation, metaphors, and rhythms of silence',[6] and such silence or 'blankness is often a metaphor for hidden or secret aspects of life and culture.'[7] It represents 'women's lives in the fiction of men',[8] that is to say, 'women's silences.'[9] Woolf's style allows her thus 'to capture something about the pulses of the mind and life that is beyond words.'[10]

We recognise here a familiar *topos* of deconstruction: a feminine realm of rhythms, hidden and repressed, beyond language, that corresponds to an essential dimension of life. It is indeed, unsurprisingly, conceptualised in opposition to the masculine realm of language, characterised by confidence in language and 'static'[11] categories. Laurence stresses that

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[1] Patricia O. Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991).
[2] Ibid., p. 172.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., p. 173.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., p. 174.
[10] Ibid., p. 176.
[11] Ibid., p. 186.

'unlike Joyce, Woolf is drawn to issues of narrative and thematic silence, distrusting language in a way that Joyce did not';[12] she 'defies […] Ferdinand de Saussure's linear nature of the signifier.'[13]

We have here the usual dichotomy, gendered and valorised, as was the case in Bowlby's reading of *Mrs Dalloway* and Ferrer's reading of *To the Lighthouse*. But an added ingredient makes Laurence's deconstructionist reading of *The Waves* of special interest for my endeavour to show how my perspective on Woolf is different from either an approach based on deconstruction, or more traditional world-orientated criticism. She uses the dichotomy that founds her reading of *The Waves*, a feminine rhythmical world versus male static linguistic categories, to distinguish between two types of approaches of literature. She is interested in 'the metaphors of the critics':[14] on the one hand, 'a structuralist analysis';[15] on the other, 'deconstruction.'[16]

Laurence contrasts the abstraction and rigidity of alternate structuralist categories, their fixity, that is all masculine, with the rhythm proper of Woolf's text, that she understands as texture, evincing the feminine trope of knitting and sewing. As she writes:

> We cannot rest with binary oppositions based on formal investigation as stucturalists advise […] Woolf is, after all, a writer who writes rhythmically, and, consequently, she takes the above conceptual strands and weaves them, creating a texture unique among modern writers.[17]

Laurence understands this idea of texture as a metaphor for both Woolf's style and her own critical reading of Woolf. Both are linked to a movement of deconstruction: a lightening of the heavy rigid structure of masculinity. On the one hand, she understands Woolf's rhythm, the alternation of opposites as deconstruction of these opposites into '*différance*', the two

[12] Ibid., p. 182.
[13] Ibid., p. 180.
[14] Ibid., p. 185.
[15] Ibid., p. 187.
[16] Ibid., p. 188.
[17] Ibid., p. 187.

positions are dissolved in the play of '*différance*': 'Woolf's style turns on the above mentioned differences, but "turn" is the crucial term just as "différance" is the structure that deconstructs structuralism.'[18] On the other hand, Laurence clearly sees her own step towards deconstruction, the collapse of opposite categories, as progress in Woolfian criticism because it is better adapted for reading her, since it corresponds to the very structure of her work. She underlines:

> Deconstruction's perspective, which informs the spirit of this book with its philosophical concern with language and its hypothesis of heterogeneity, provides a rhythmic quality, one of lightness and play that becomes the working principle for reading Woolf. [19]

She adds, 'now is the moment in Woolf criticism for the collapse of contrary categories into a third vision of alternation as a principle of her style.'[20]

I am particularly interested in this general discussion of Woolfian criticism in Laurence because it helps make my position clearer. I have used the term structuralist so far to describe my position, even though I have underlined the fact it will have to be qualified. I would definitely agree with Laurence that such a position is characterised by an insistence on opposition and tension. I would also agree with her that deconstruction's main feature is the undoing of such a tension. Where I disagree with Laurence is in attributing this latter feature to Woolf's 'style' in *The Waves*.

Laurence's reading of *The Waves* corroborates her own critical position. She understands the novel as a 'gigantic cosmic conversation'[21] made up of 'songs for the poetic ear […] reverberating in a seashell'[22] where 'the rhythms of nature prevail.'[23] Her insistence on the natural and on rhythm is associated with the unconscious that replaces reason: 'this

[18] Ibid., p. 188.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., p. 192.
[21] Ibid., p. 193.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 196.

rhythm […] is developed in response to loss. Reason is no longer a handle on the world for Woolf'[24] and 'we experience gaps in *The Waves* that represent the pulses of the unconscious.'[25] Even Bernard 'views life intermittently from the cosmic perspective of nature'[26] and speaks from literally 'outside the self.'[27] Woolf's writing in *The Waves*, according to Laurence, represents the endeavour to 'aesthetically capture this same pulsative function […] [she] admits the unconscious in the narration.'[28]

In a word, Laurence perceives what I call, in my reading of *The Waves*, the all-encompassing 'wave-pattern', but does not emphasise that it is itself of an ambiguous nature, that the very tension that it seems to engulf reappears as its very principle. For this reason, and in accordance with her critique of the critics alluded to above, she only has eyes for 'deconstruction' in *The Waves*, and thus neglects what I have called the 'resistance' in the novel. In this respect, Laurence's undue fascination for Rhoda in her reading is symptomatic. But what gets lost in such a reading is the very oscillation, which I believe is the prime mover of *The Waves*.

II. A philosophical reading of *The Waves*

The tension between unity and fragmentation which I have chosen to guide my exploration of the work of Virginia Woolf is one aporia among many others, but of a special interest for a critical approach. Such a tension between coherence and heterogeneity is the very principle, the spring, of the literary experience; a principle that has to be understood in its dynamism as, in Ricoeur's words, a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous'.[29] In Virginia Woolf, it is also a theme.

[24] Ibid., p. 194.
[25] Ibid., p. 198.
[26] Ibid., p. 197.
[27] Ibid., p. 195.
[28] Ibid., p. 199.
[29] Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, ii, p. 18 (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, ii, p. 8).

We have seen how the two main characters in *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa and Septimus, are built around, respectively, the pole of unification and that of dissolution; the very novel and its central scene, the party, constitute an instance of integration of the disparate. In *To the Lighthouse*, we have underlined an opposition between a centripetal and a centrifugal force, the former incarnated in the Ramsays' family life, the latter represented by Lily's resistance. In *The Waves*, a central theme, among others, that may suggest a tension between fragmentation and unity, is the to-and-fro between the isolation of the characters, and their sense of belonging that the reunions seem to afford them. But in *The Waves*, an added dimension is of interest for my purpose: the very 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' that literary experience is, is thematised as such in the character of Bernard, the writer, and his compulsion to make 'phrases' or tell stories.

This tension seems to be everywhere in the novel: between the natural or elemental world of the interludes and the human world of the characters; between their isolation and their sense of belonging in the two episodes where they meet; between the 'story' told by the narrator, and Bernard's version of it that concludes the book.

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I will proceed in the following manner: I will separate Bernard's epilogue from the rest, which, for clarity's sake, I will call part two, and analyse it as a relatively independent section of the novel. I will begin with the rest, which I call part one, the interludes and the voices of the six characters. This analysis itself will be divided in three moments: firstly a discussion of the interludes; secondly, a discussion of the voices taken individually; and thirdly, an analysis of the two reunions where the six characters (seven including Percival in the first meeting) meet. I justify this tripartite division in seeing in the three moments, layers that constitute the whole of part one. I see in it the elemental world of the interludes as the chaotic and all-encompassing background on which the voices, first, each separately, then as a group in their

reunion, will attempt to bring order to their lives. I will have to attest, on both the level of the individual characters and that of the reunions, to what extent this tentative overcoming of chaos succeeds. This will be analysed in terms of fragmentation and unity, a move that is clearly and abundantly justified by the text itself, where chaos and order are understood in terms of respectively fragmentation and unity. Central to the discussion of part two will be its relative independence from the rest of the text, as the same 'story' retold. The question will be whether it achieves the unification part one did not achieve (unity and fragmentation being again central to this discussion).

The intervals

The first point worth noting about the intervals is that they both begin and end the novel. The first interval describes the dawn of a day on the sea; the last, waves falling after the description of dusk of the penultimate one. This means that the stories of the seven characters are set within the larger framework of the intervals; as they begin before their stories and end after the end of those stories. Moreover, the very beginning and end in question are of a peculiar type: they have to be understood as part of natural elemental cycles, the seasons, day and night, the elemental cycle of matter. In such a conception, beginning and end follow each other perpetually, without loss in a cycle that eternally makes one the condition of the other to the point of identification. The stories are inscribed within the cycles of the intervals; the lives of the six characters develop as part of perpetual natural cycles.

Another feature of the intervals, in echo of the 'Time passes' section in *To the Lighthouse,* is their impersonality. It is supposed to be the world seen by nobody, or the world seen when nobody is there. What is striking is the fact that when Virginia Woolf tries to describe the world as if nobody saw it, anthropomorphic figures start to pullulate. The sun becomes a girl, who by making visible as light, also sees what she brings to light: 'the girl […] now bared her brows and with wide-opened eyes drove a straight pathway over the

waves';[30] the waves become warriors, 'the waves drummed on the shore, like turbaned warriors' (p. 51). It is a puzzling phenomenon that when Virginia Woolf tries to eradicate the direct presence of humanity, it comes back indirectly. Something happens to her language, which I believe accentuates its strangeness. Language is brought to a limit, the symptom of which is a pullulating of tropes and the effect is one of uncanny dehumanisation.

This effect is underlined by the type of figures used. Waves are seen as warriors, or arrows, the rays of the sun in terms of lances or blades, 'the sun laid broader blades upon the house' (p. 19); words like 'strike', 'hit' are typical of the descriptions, '[the sun] struck upon the hard sand' (p. 99), which conveys a sense of aggression and violence on the part of the elements. Furthermore, all the intervals follow some sort of crescendo: we begin with the elemental world (sea, sky and earth); then comes the vegetal world, followed by the animal reign and finally the human sphere. But the violence we noticed on the elemental level is reiterated on all the others: a flower opening is an explosion, 'as the light increased a bud here and there split asunder and shook out flowers, green veined and quivering, as if the effort of opening had set them rocking, and pealing a faint carillon' (p. 20); birds have inhuman soulless eyes and they mechanically follow their instincts in their savage preying on snails:

> The birds sang in the hot sunshine, each alone […] Their round eyes bulged with brightness […] they descended, dry-beaked, ruthless, abrupt […] They spied a snail and tapped the shell against a stone. They tapped furiously, methodically until the shell broke and something slimy oozed from the crack. (p. 73)

Even the human world seen in the intervals transpires dehumanisation. The boat is a carcass on the beach, 'the ribs of the eaten-out boat', and the boot, black as soot, is empty, 'or the boot without laces stuck, black as iron, in the sand' (p. 99).[31] The items 'looked at' in the

[30] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Granada, 1977), p. 49; further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.
[31] On this, see Julia Briggs, 'Like a shell on a sandhill: Woolf's images of emptiness', in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 141-151.

house are either under- or over-exposed, either melting into insubstantiality, 'everything became softly amorphous, as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid' (p. 20) or 'fanatically existent': 'whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence' (p. 74).

I believe that this inhuman dimension of the world of the intervals gives us the clue to its 'negativity', or, in other words, to its perception by the characters of the novel as threatening and as the source of the possible disintegration of their lives. As in 'Time passes', such a world is not, in itself, negative; it can even be seen in terms of fertility and abundance. It is only in human terms, in terms of its effects on human life, that it is seen as destructive. Such an elemental world dismantles one figure to rebuild another with the same elements, but seen from the human point of view, of course, it represents a threat.

One essential feature of this world is its fluidity and repetition, the emblem of which is the wave. The unity or the order of the human world will be understood in the possibility to oppose this elemental world. The essential question that all characters ask, in a sort of desperate urgency, is whether we can impose order on this elemental chaos, whether we can create something that will escape destruction.

The voices

The second level of the analysis of part one consists in examining each character individually and his or her way of coping with life. I want to make a remark as regards the word 'character' used to describe the different 'figures' (a term Virginia Woolf seems to favour) of *The Waves*. I myself used the term 'voice' in the introduction to the present chapter, and I think it is more adequate. 'Characters' do not act in *The Waves*, and if we see them act, it is only through the mediation of, or represented in, one of the figures' consciousness. They only talk, but here again in a rather peculiar fashion. Their speeches are not embedded in a common setting; they are not an action among other actions in a story. Each speech is

fundamentally isolated against the backdrop of an impalpable, abstract no-man's land. The figures do not communicate in the ordinary sense of the term; there is no dialogue. We pass from one to the other thanks to different principles of contiguity: for instance, one of the figures thinks of or mentions the name of another, and this will enable the passage to this other's speech; or a 'character' sees another; or they both look at the same scene, and so on. We came across the same 'technique' in *Mrs Dalloway* and in *To the Lighthouse*, but in those novels, the transitions are backed up by the story that functions as a context or setting, whereas here, the speeches rise and fall out of nothing. Each is unique, incomparable, cut from the others, yet one follows the other in what seems to be an infinite iterability. In short, they seem to imitate, or maybe better have, the structure of the motion of the waves. The speeches of the voices, in their inscription in a neutral, inhuman background, their total isolation and their iterability are also seen as one dimension of the elemental world described by the intervals. There is a quasi-identification of the human dimension of language with elemental forces.

Yet, the voices are not altogether swallowed up by those inhuman neutral forces. We can still follow the speeches in some sort of chronological order. They constitute, albeit in a rather loose way, a biography: the story of someone.[32] The voices have a profile, certain characteristics. Those characteristics are abstract, however, caricatural even, or emblematic; but they can be listed. The voices form certain figures made up primarily of their ways to react to the elemental world of forces in which they are submerged. My intention now, is to go through the different figures, and to examine succinctly their resources of reaction.

But before taking them individually, constituting subgroups sheds a relative light on their way of coping with the elemental world. For instance, there is a difference between the men's attitude and that of the women: the former tend to counter the world more energetically or frankly, verging sometimes on complete rejection, and in a manner we could call

[32] As Julia Briggs underlines, Woolf considered *The Life of Anybody* as a possible title for the embryo of a book that eventually became *The Waves*, see Julia Briggs, *An Inner Life*, (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 242.

intellectual, be it Bernard's 'phrases', Neville's aestheticism or Louis's determination. The women, on the contrary, tend to accommodate natural forces by taming them, or by using them: for instance, Susan's animality or maternal instinct, or Jinny's physicality. Rhoda is like the other two feminine voices, nearer this natural world than her male counterparts, but is nevertheless an exception: she is the only figure who does not seem to have a strategy to oppose to it. If we group the figures according to the virulence of the threat of destruction which this world represents, and this roughly corresponds, in an inverse proportion, to the figures' degree of adaptation to everyday normal life, then we can group Louis and Rhoda as those who experience such a threat with most intensity, and therefore are the less adapted to normal social life. Neville and Susan mark a middle position. Finally, there are Bernard and Jinny, who are more of 'this world', finding in it at least a relative happiness. However none is completely adapted to normal life; they cannot live complacently, blindly pursuing their everyday interests, and are haunted, in different manners and degrees, by the sense of being precariously balanced 'over an abyss.'[33] They all feel that the dispersion of the elemental world is constitutive of, installed at, the very core of their being. For this reason, they all develop, in their different manners, strategies of control; such strategies all share traits of unification and of imposing of order on an elemental world that is experienced as a dissolving force and a threat of fragmentation.

Let us start with Bernard, who is, with Jinny, one of the most 'normal' figures. He is the one who speaks first and the most; he is also the voice who has the last 'human' word. This is not really surprising, since his own personal unification strategy is to tell stories. Bernard has quite a well-adapted personality, he is a *bon vivant*, likes the 'chorus', as he calls it: the boys and their sport and the drinking that goes with it, 'that is the joy of intercourse' (p. 79). He is, with Susan, the only character that marries; he has a family and the routine of everyday life possesses its charm for him. Yet something jars: he is lackadaisical, always late,

[33] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p. 36.

loses or forgets things, and is rather unkempt. He mentions: ‘my Byronic untidiness’ (p. 61) and ‘in my case something remains floating, unattached’ (p. 52). Moreover, he has ‘absences’, he drifts away, sometimes in a pleasant way, ‘having dropped off satisfied like a child from the breast’ (p. 76); but also sometimes, such moments are of a painful nature, ‘then as if all the luminosity of the atmosphere were withdrawn I see to the bare bottom. I see what habit covers’ (p. 124). They always, good or bad, involve loss of identity, ‘I am not, at this moment, myself’ (p. 77), the entering of an impersonal region where he becomes ‘a stream that reflects’ its surroundings, ‘the surface of my mind slips along like a pale-grey stream reflecting what passes’ (p. 76); flux, liquidity, floating, ‘like one carried beneath the surface of a stream’ (ibid.) but also lack of light seem to characterise such states. He suggests visions of a threatening kind, he talks of ‘the drumming of fury’: ‘I have been traversing the sunless territory of non-identity […] I have heard […] this drumming of insensate fury’ (p. 78), something deeply buried; and silence which he hates: ‘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’ (p. 89). Silence is the clue to what I call his strategy, his way out of such states is words, phrases and stories. It serves two purposes: firstly, with stories you impose sequence upon experience: you order it, and thereby humanise it. What was passively suffered becomes, in an active rearrangement, meaningful:

> Let me talk […] I must open the little trap-door and let out these linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens, so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another. (p. 33)

Secondly, thanks to them, he reintegrates the human sphere, knows ‘the joys of intercourse’, composes himself as a man among other men, and actively shapes his identity: ‘but I only come into existence when the plumber, or the horse dealer, or whoever it may be, says something which sets me alight’ (p. 89). We encounter here for the first time with Bernard, but the same distinction will be relevant for all the other voices, a dichotomy between two

worlds or spheres of experience. On the one hand, a region characterised by its silence, darkness and formlessness. Fluidity is systematically underlined. It is inhuman and experienced as threatening. In short, it has all the major traits of what we deemed the elemental world. On the other hand, we have the human world of everyday life, its network of relationships and its symbolic systems; above all, language as a tool of communication. As is the case with Bernard, all characters, in a way or another, cannot remain on the surface of this ordinary world. A sinking takes place, a losing of this common horizon deprives them of the security of a simple, seamless identity, of the comforts of inhabiting, as a human being, an all human world; and language, that is supposed to be at their service, loses its power of coherence.

Jinny, like Bernard, is relatively well-adapted but being a woman, her angle of attack is of a different sort. The feminine voices tend to accommodate the elemental world rather than to counter it. Jinny's attitude can be defined as physicality. She lives in her body; her very intelligence and imagination are of the body: 'but my imagination is the bodies. I can imagine nothing beyond the circle cast by my body' (p. 86). She revels in dancing and parties and the plays of seduction that accompany them:

> We are swept now into this large figure, it holds us together; we cannot step outside its sinuous, its hesitating, its abrupt, its perfectly encircling walls. Our bodies, his hard, mine flowing, are pressed together within its body, it holds us together, and then lengthening out, in smooth, in sinuous folds, rolls us between it, on and on. (p. 69)

The pleasures of sexuality are ecstasy to her. But such a life and pleasures are deliberately associated with savages hunting in the jungle and the cruelty of the animal reign:

> He follows. I am pursued through the forest […] Now I hear crash and rending of boughs and the crack of antlers as if the beasts of the forest were all hunting, all rearing high and plunging down among the thorns. One has pierced me. One is driven deep within me. (p. 119)

Her lack of reflection is also underlined:

> But we who live in the body see with the body's imagination […] I cannot take these facts into some cave and, shading my eyes, grade their yellows, blues, umbers into one substance […] I drop all these facts […] as a monkey drops nuts from its naked paws. I cannot tell you if life is this or that. (p. 118)[34]

Finally, the dimension of risk in her life is suggested: she bets everything on her body, but the body in its very constitution is part of the elemental world, 'I am going to push out into the heterogeneous crowd. I am going to be buffeted; to be flung up and flung down, among men, like a ship on the sea' (p. 119), 'here is my risk, here is my adventure' (p. 70). Jinny takes the risk of time that passes, and at times the awareness of that risk comes to the surface of her willful life. Then, all the autosuggestion she is able to summon is of no avail against the horror she experiences. She sees herself as a little animal panting among crowds, armies of dead corpses:

> I am in the heart of life. But look – there is my body in that looking glass. How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer part of the procession. Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent. Great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards. Millions have died […] little animal that I am, sucking my flanks in and out with fear, I stand here, palpitating, trembling. (p. 130)

A general remark imposes itself: all characters deploy a strategy against the dissolution brought about by the elements, but none succeeds. It is easy to see why the undertaking is doomed to fail: the strategy itself is brought about by the elemental world, as part of this elemental world; it is just a reaction to it and a reaction, of which the very stuff is constituted by this world. What is brought home and forcibly, is a dimension that governs the entire economy of *The Waves*: the fact that human life is just a wave among other waves, human life

[34] Woolf often underlines the incompatibility of the 'surfaces' of beauty and the 'depths' of reflection: 'But after all, we are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker of buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream, resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks.' Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth*, p. 20.

is part of a bigger whole, one that encompasses it, and made of the same stuff; that is to say, the same elemental forces as this whole. The characters are all, in their respective way, aware of this state of affairs: Bernard, in his occasional doubts as regards the existence of the true story, or the possibility of stories in general; Jinny as we have just seen, in her temporary lack of faith in the life of the body.

We have Neville and Susan now, in what I call the middle position. Neville's inability to adapt is linked with his feeling of exclusion from normal society as a homosexual. His sinking away from the common surface is a corollary of his difficulty to found an acceptable identity within the structure of society. His reaction could be interpreted in terms of aesthetism. He rejects society with disgust, especially for its most prosaic manifestations, common life and working-class people, 'but I cannot read in the presence of horse-dealers and plumbers' (p. 47), 'I cannot endure that there should be shop-girls. Their titter, their gossip, offends me, breaks into my stillness, and nudges me, in moments of purest exultation, to remember our degradation' (p. 58) and he seeks refuge in a world of, above all, linguistic beauty: ancient languages, Latin poets and old traditions, 'here we are masters of tranquility and order; inheritors of proud tradition' (ibid.). A longing for perfection that finds another object, once he has assumed his homosexuality, then he finds solace in relationships:

> But to sit with you, alone with you, here in London, in the fire lit room, you there, I here, is all […] There can be no doubt, I thought, pushing aside the newspaper, that our mean lives, unsightly as they are, put on splendor and have meaning only under the eyes of love. (p. 120)

Here a peculiar feature of those relationships is of interest, the lovers are interchangeable, but the ideal of love lasts:

> But if one day you do not come after breakfast, if one day I see you in some looking glass perhaps looking after another, if the telephone buzzes and buzzes in your empty room, I shall then, after unspeakable anguish, I shall then […] seek another, find another, you. (p. 122)

It is as if Neville had made his own peculiar compromise with time: dividing love between a perishable aspect and an eternal one. This turns out to be an illusory strategy. Neville's cynicism is nothing but the symptom of the awareness that he has lost the battle.

Susan's attitude can be best understood as animality. She is often, in the novel, associated with animals or animal behaviour: 'mine are the flocks of birds, and this young hare who leaps' (p. 65), 'I return, like a cat or fox returning, whose fur is grey with rime, whose pads are hardened by coarse earth' (p. 67). Her own brand of inadaptability finds expression in her rejection of the regimented life of the modern world. She is ill at ease with language and suspicious of the subtleties of culture ('I do not understand phrases' (p. 89)). Her world is nature, her father's farm and the simple life she has there. She finds joy in walks at dawn in the countryside, but this proximity with nature has its dark side: her inarticulateness; she is governed by passions, she only knows love or hatred, 'the only sayings I understand are cries of love, hate, rage and pain' (p. 88). This aspect of her personality comes to full light in her maternal instinct; its bestiality is underlined, 'I shall be sullen, storm-tinted and all one purple. I shall be debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity' (p. 89). It gives her 'a natural happiness' (p. 88) that leaves a bitter taste, eventually experienced as a limitation of her freedom:

> I am fenced in, planted here like one of my own trees […] I am sick of natural happiness […] Life stands round me like a glass round the imprisoned reed. (p. 129)

As in the case of Jinny, the natural forces she believes she has tamed prove the stronger and end up reducing her to slavery. Bitterness and a compulsive possessiveness are the result.

With Rhoda and Louis, we have figures who share the intensity of their awareness of 'the outside', as Rhoda calls it: the realm of elemental forces that begins at the edge of the world, outside the human sphere. Their proximity is thematised in the novel itself, where they are called conspirators: 'Listen, Rhoda, (for we are conspirators)' (p. 96) and, exceptionally,

two passages between square brackets stand out as quasi-dialogues between Rhoda and Louis. It is as if they could uncannily communicate by telepathy. The reader is left with a paradoxical sense of proximity and distance between the two characters. We also learn that they had, or tried to have, an intimate relationship. But both their position in society as a result of the virulence of the threat of the underworld, and their respective ways of reacting to it, are completely different.

Louis's first contribution in the novel is about the noise of the waves breaking on the shore: 'I hear something stamping, said Louis. A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps' (p. 6). Louis experiences it as the stampede of wild beasts, an image that will become emblematic of the power of the waves and the forces of the elemental world. In it are concentrated suggestions of savageness, ponderousness and invincibility. Louis is also constantly associated with vegetal images, plants and especially their roots, sinking deep into the earth: 'I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world' (p. 8). Very early on in the novel, and more so than for the others, with the exception of Rhoda, Louis's being is constructed around a dichotomy: a surface world of appearance and another, deeper down, curiously split between extreme values of joy and suffering. On the surface, Louis feels he is nobody. Because of his status as an immigrant (he is originally from Australia), he is haunted by the fact that he does not speak with the right accent; he is not rooted in the same tradition as the others. Hence his tendency to imitate them:

> I will not conjugate the verb, said Louis, until Bernard has said it. My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent. I will wait and copy Bernard. He is English. (p. 13)

He is convinced his currency, so to speak, has no value on the market, so he tries to acquire the others'. But by behaving thus, he lands himself nowhere: he is not himself any more and cannot be the others either, 'and I have no firm ground to which I go […] I am the ghost of

Louis, an ephemeral passer-by' (p. 45). It is worth noting that such a tendency to imitate, spurred on by essential homelessness, is also shared by Rhoda:

> For I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces […] They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it. (p. 29)

Such a tendency will develop in Louis by transforming him into, and here we are still talking about his surface life, the most integrated, at least professionally, of the figures. Louis goes into business and becomes a high-ranking businessman. But scenes where he insists on the importance of his function, where his signing innumerable letters becomes an exercise in autosuggestion and propping up of the self, all suggest the fragility of the construction:

> I have signed my name, said Louis, already twenty times. I, and again I, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands, my name. Clear cut and unequivocal am I too […] But now I am compact; now I am gathered together this fine morning. (p. 112)

Deeper down (and here I come back to the second layer of his personality) he is still the same fragile person: 'the youngest, most naked' (p. 65), as he says himself. It is worth noting the proximity with Rhoda, who in fact uses exactly the same terms to describe herself: 'for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all' (p. 71). Louis most intensely experiences life as disorder and disintegration; survival for him signifies trying to impose order and unity on this fundamental chaos, 'I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair' (p. 63). Hence his dream of a 'reason', a ring of steel that would reduce life to order: 'yes, I will reduce you to order' (p. 64). Once again, like his two male colleagues, such a strategy is intellectual; for Louis, only poetry can produce such an effect.

Rhoda, in many respects, is exceptional. She is the only character who does not seem to have developed a strategy against elemental dissolution. Like Louis, she is acutely aware of it; and from the very beginning, she does not seem to be able to play the human game. She

does not coalesce into an identity. Scenes in school, where she fails to make sense of the conventional sign system of maths, hint at her exclusion from the symbolic structure of the human world:

> But I cannot write. I see only figures […] The figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone […] the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it. I begin to draw a figure and the world is looped in it, and I myself am outside the loop; which I now join – so – and seal up, and make entire. The world is entire, and I am outside of it. (p. 15)

She repeatedly sees the world as closing back upon itself, leaving her, homeless, outside of it. Images of homelessness and exclusion are central to understanding this figure. She is afraid of contact: 'the door opens, the tiger leaps. The door opens; terror rushes in; terror upon terror, pursuing me' (p. 71); she says she has 'no face' (p. 22), and is disgusted by her fellows: 'the human face is hideous' (p. 107), 'we cluster like maggots on the back of something that will carry us on' (p. 109). It is striking that many of these features are shared by Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*; and like Septimus, she will eventually commit suicide by throwing herself down, not a window this time, but a cliff. She tries to adapt, like Louis, by imitating, but she resents it; unlike Louis, she sees through the game and cannot convince herself that it is meaningful. Rhoda lives a life of loneliness and suffering, to which she will herself put an end.

Yet, and maybe because of such a life, she has moments of alleviation and vision, maybe the most remarkable among such moments in the entire book. All characters, in one way or the other, have visionary experiences, but Rhoda seems to go 'further'. Extremes meet in Rhoda: absolute dejection is the occasion of beautiful visions. Typically, when she learns about Percival's death, after erring through London like a lost soul, she has such a moment. The occasion is a concert, music, which makes her 'see' 'a square delicately stood on an oblong':

> Like and like and like – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? Now that lightning has gashed the tree and the flowering has fallen and Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing. 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. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (p. 110)

What I find remarkable is the complete abstractness of such a description and especially its allusion to geometrical figures. It does not mean anything in the traditional sense. It does not refer to anything any more. It is completely 'unvisual'. All we can draw from it are suggestions of balance, repetition with a difference, and fragility. Rhoda calls it the 'thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing' (ibid.). For Rhoda, the experience is felt as one of nearly perfect completeness, of lightness and transparency, and above all of belonging. It gives her, however temporarily, a 'lodgement' as she says, a home. Lines of poetry appear: 'wander no more' (ibid.) is heard to confirm it.

It is the moment to compare Rhoda's experience with the moments of peace the other characters have. I have, above all, underlined the failure of their strategies in my analysis, and I have my reasons for doing so, but we would have a wrong picture of their endeavour if we were to ignore the moments of happiness it affords them. All figures have such moments, albeit in very different forms. We have already mentioned Bernard's absences, how some of them are experienced as positive; he talks of 'dropping off satisfied like a child from its mother's breast' (p. 76), of 'enormous peace' (p. 78) and asks whether this is happiness; at such times he is reluctant to 'resume the weight of identity'. Such moments afford him a view to the bottom. Jinny has her moments of ecstasy. They are physical, yet somehow seem to allow her to transcend her condition by concentrating it. Neville is moved by scenes of intense beauty, and reaches perfection, or forgetfulness, in moments of intimacy with his lovers.

Susan, in her early morning walks, feels she is the landscape she loves, loses herself and becomes field and sky and bird, ‘at this hour, this still early hour, I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees’ (p. 65). Louis, strangely enough, does not seem to be able to let loose, and what I called his determination precludes such moments of peace. However, he repeatedly has visions of ‘women carrying pitchers to the Nile’ (ibid.), an odd sense of having lived a long time: ‘I seem already to have lived many thousand years’ (p. 45). Those visions are associated with his deep-rootedness that finds at least one positive expression: the scene in the garden, when, as a child, he hid behind the hedge (p. 8).

What all these experiences – physical or intellectual – seem to share is a transcending of this very dichotomy between the physical and the intellectual, or between the temporal and the eternal. They seem to be poised between the two realms, balancing, integrating temporarily the two, and hence affording the six characters moments of peace and happiness. But as the words ‘temporarily’ and ‘moment’ indicate, such experiences represent the very moment when the wave breaks, when surge becomes fall, and are thus reintegrated within the larger scheme of the ground swell of matter. They do not afford the figures any definitive escape; they even seem to accentuate their embeddedness in the natural world.

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I would like to come back to the motive of unity versus fragmentation in the light of what we have just seen about these six figures. All characters react against the felt presence of a material world experienced as dissolving, destructive, and they all adopt some strategy that has, in one way or another, characteristics of a unifying process. It is obvious in Bernard’s case of story telling: the very sequencing, ordering and selecting that such an activity implies suggests a regrouping of the fragmentary around a subject (we know that Bernard builds his identity in this way) and a meaning. The unifying dimension of language is at stake here. With Louis as well, unification is a clear feature of his reaction. The ring of steel and his

desire to reduce the world to order are telling enough. But even his escape in business bears the marks of a unifying process. He talks about bringing the different parts of the world together thanks to commerce:

> My shoulder is to the wheel; I roll the dark before me, spreading commerce where there was chaos in the far parts of the world […] from chaos making order. (p. 113)

In Neville's case, his longing for the perfection he finds in Latin poets and ancient languages is of the same kind. Latin is *par excellence* the language of order and clarity. What he seeks in the intimacy with his lovers is order or unity of a different type: it is the unity or solidity of a moment that will last forever. This is also the hunting ground of Jinny. Unity for Susan is possessiveness: she gathers things, the barn is full, her children are hers, and she assembles things in the animal unity of possession. Once again, Rhoda is the exception; the only unity she achieves is her visions, the ephemeral balancing act of 'a square upon an oblong'. We have seen that such moments seem to transcend the opposition between unity and fragmentation, the distinction between the human world and its outside, the elemental world of forces. But, at the same time, in spite of all, it is nothing but a moment of the latter, albeit an exceptional one, the moment the wave breaks, and thus cannot break the spell. There seems to be no escape. Unity gives in to chaos, solidity melts into fluidity.

The reunions

With the third level of analysis, I want, above all, to answer one question: do the reunions achieve something the characters on their own could not? This something, as we have seen, can be understood in terms of escape: can the characters as a group break the spell of the elemental world? But it can also be understood in terms of unity: can their coming together produce a 'world' that would be immune to the destructive flux of matter? To answer these questions, I will examine the two instances of reunion which we find in the book: the meeting

with Percival before he sets off to India, and the second meeting, years later, around the place left empty by Percival's death. Let us review, firstly, what we have discovered about similar occasions in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. In both books, similar types of reunions are of paramount importance: in *Mrs Dalloway*, the party constitutes the background or context of Clarissa's vision which is the very core of the novel. In *To the Lighthouse*, the dinner party plays a similar function in part one of the novel. Apart from being the support of central moments of vision, such reunions also have a more trivial function in bringing together the bits and pieces of the novel: this function is clearly marked in *Mrs Dalloway*, where characters meet at the party who belong to different strands of the plot. But the integrating function of the dinner episode in *To the Lighthouse*, though less spectacular, should not be neglected. Not only does it bring together the numerous and very different characters and enables an alleviation of the various tensions between them; but it also, more essentially, represents the paroxysm of the centripetal force that we discovered at work in part one of the novel.

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Both reunions in *The Waves* have a similar ground structure, which is dynamic. They consist in up and down movements, which we could call tentative visions, and culminate in a vision proper, a climax, followed by an anticlimax, a fall. The low moments of the curve are associated with fragmentation: distance and incomprehension between the figures because of the affirming of their personalities in an egoistical manner; the high moments are represented by a variety of images that all suggest completeness, immutability, order and unity. We have recognised the movement of the sea. Such reunions are also part of the fundamental field of forces that permeates the novel, of which the pervasive image is the wave.

Let us start with the first reunion in a London restaurant, around the presence of Percival. The curve consists here in five peaks and the corresponding 'lows'. Both the series

of peaks, the tentative visions and the final completed vision, and the series of lows follow a pattern of intensification. The waves increase in relation to the hollowing of their furrows. It all begins with our characters waiting nervously, especially Neville, for Percival to come. They all sit there at their 'festival': 'Now is our festival' (p. 82), experiencing the lack of solidity of the world around them because of Percival's absence, 'but without Percival there is no solidity' (ibid.). They see themselves as hollow phantoms, mere silhouettes, 'the normal is abolished' (p. 80). With the arrival of Percival, we have the rise of the wave: Neville, Bernard and Louis respectively underline the order, love and light that Percival's presence affords. Then follows a scattering of the characters: each recalls moments of the past that specially marked him or her. It is interesting to note here that we have some sort of summary of what comes before this first meeting that parallels the novel itself, in its lack of real sequence. It is also worth noting that the events recalled remain on the factual level, they are not reflected by the characters. Another wave crest follows; now it is Bernard's turn: he underlines the here and now of the meeting, how they all have come from different parts for the reunion, 'we have come together (from the North, from the South, from Susan's farm, from Louis' house of business) to make one thing' (p. 85). The symbol of this 'one thing' is the red carnation on the table in their middle, a thing seven-sided, to which they all contribute:

> 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. (Ibid.)

The correspondence of the scene with the dinner party in *To the Lighthouse* is obvious. There, as well, the unity of the group was symbolised by an emblematic object, situated in their middle, on the table. Even its fragility, the fact that it will not last, 'not enduring' (ibid.) in Bernard's terms, finds an echo from book to book. Here, it is worth asking of what the red carnation is a symbol. Love comes readily to mind, but love seems too narrow a concept, 'too

small, too particular a name' (ibid.) as Bernard remarks. What else? Percival? But Percival is also a symbol, and not a character. As Bernard says, 'he is conventional, he is a hero' (p. 82), that is to say, nobody. Both Percival and the flower are symbols mirroring each other, that function as foci of reunion. In Virginia Woolf's work, it is as if we were sent from one symbol to another in our quest for meaning, but we never seem to reach anything definitive or ultimate, no solid ground. An endless mirroring she thematises in one of her short stories: 'The fascination of the Pool', where voices are heard on top of other voices in an infinite layering.[35]

In the unfolding of the first reunion, the moment of vision we have just described is followed by a new falling apart of our six figures: each starts describing his or her own personality. The intensification is marked here by the fact that reflexivity is added to the interventions of the characters: they seem to have a very lucid idea of who they are. This lucidity, even now at a moment of distance between them, is a result of the dynamism of the reunion itself. The next move is slow in coming: a moment of intensification takes place; the characters' sensitivity is heightened. Rhoda sees colours:

> Look, said Rhoda; listen. Look how the light becomes richer, second by second, and bloom and ripeness lie everywhere; and our eyes, as they range round this room with all its tables, seem to push through curtains of colour, red, orange, umber and queer ambiguous tints. (p. 90)

Jinny talks of spreading membranes of nerves, 'yes, said Jinny, our senses have widened. Membranes, webs of nerves that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float around us like filaments' (p. 91), all the background noises fuse into one steel blue ring of sound for Louis, 'all separate sounds […] are churned into one sound, steel blue, circular' (ibid.), and Bernard imagines Percival in India as a godlike figure, 'he rides on; the multitude cluster round him as if he were – what indeed he is – a god' (p. 92). This mounting of the

[35] Virginia Woolf, 'The Fascination of the Pool', in *The Complete shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), pp. 226-227.

tension leads straight to our third peak, now put into words by Rhoda. She sees Percival as a stone that falls into the water and they, the figures, as minnows assembling around the falling object:

> He is like a stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm. Like minnows, we who had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came. (Ibid.)

I can only hint at the complexity of the image of the falling stone, knowing what destiny has in store for Rhoda, the water element, the recurrence of fish in an emblematic way. But one aspect seems to me worth insisting on: Rhoda suggests the formation of a sphere, a world around the mysterious object, a grouping process, the bringing into gravitation and light of dark, distant provinces: 'The world that had been shriveled, rounds itself; remote provinces are fetched up out of darkness' (ibid.).

But, once again, it is interrupted, this time by Louis: they are still too egoistical, bent on affirming themselves; meeting in its essential dimension is not possible, 'Something has been left out from fear. Something has been altered from vanity' (ibid.). The hollow that has been initiated by such a remark is characterised by another instance of intensification: all the characters in their isolation have access to some deeper level; they see 'the bottom'. It is still interpreted in their own idiosyncratic way; that is to say, Neville sees it in terms of love, Susan in terms of hatred and love, and so on. But, in spite of the differences, they all associate the deeper level with water movements: flux and a black stream.

An extraordinary phenomenon interrupts the movement of this section: a sort of theatrical aside, a bracketed, quasi-dialogue between Rhoda and Louis. We know that they are conspirators, and the term reappears in this section of the text: 'we who are conspirators' (p. 95). They share some sense of the distress implied in the human condition, that there is no escape from death. This is exactly what comes to light in the aside. Rhoda has a vision in

which, in her uncanny abstract language, she sees a white triangle, a column, a falling fountain against the backdrop of a roaring sea:

> Yes between your shoulders, over your heads, to a landscape […] I see a shape […] it is a triangle; now it is upright – a column; now a fountain, falling […] Behind it roars the sea. (p. 93)

The 'dialogue' between her and Louis that follows seems to be inspired by this vision: like a prophecy it forebodes decay, 'and while it passes, Louis, we are aware of downfalling, we forebode decay' (p. 95), they see their companions as savages ('they are savage; they are ruthless' (p. 94)), hounds on a scent, governed by passions that are associated with the waves of the sea. Paradoxically, the others at the same moment are blindly optimistic: 'how proudly we sit, said Jinny […] With infinite time before us, said Neville' (p. 95). Thanks to her visionary aptitude, Rhoda, when the others focus on the circle they constitute as individuals, sees beyond. This is expressed by her peculiar way of not looking at people but between them, or behind their shoulders, at some abstract landscape suggesting paradoxically both distress and happiness, life and death.

We have come now to the end of the section and to the final vision. All characters, together, participate in it in their own way. The major symbol is again that of a sphere, 'now, once more […] the circle in our blood […] closes in a ring. Something is made […] that globes itself here (p. 98), which is big enough to contain what all the characters, in their own idiosyncratic way, consider to be the summit of happiness: Rhoda's abstract landscape, Neville's shared life with his lovers, Susan's nature, Jinny's passion and even Bernard's stories. The vision ends on a note of complete optimism that Bernard articulates in terms of human subjugation of the world and its transformation into an enlightened straight road:

> We too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illuminated and everlasting road. (Ibid.)

A naïve dream that is instantly reduced to nothing by the wave breaking: Percival leaves and the 'horror', the 'agony' (p. 99), in Neville's words, begins.

We were wondering whether our characters as a group could reach a unity, permanence, construct a world immune to devastation, which is denied them as independent subjects. After this analysis of the first reunion, we are forced to conclude that this is not the case. The violence and irony of the last phase of the reunion, the abrupt passage from complete conviction of power to absolute wretchedness, speaks volumes. Furthermore, the very movement underlying the dynamism of the first reunion is that of the wave, emblematic as it is of the forces of the elemental world. Virginia Woolf brings home the sense that humankind is doomed, that there is no escape. Devastation will have the last word. Does the second meeting suggest a different outcome?

The section that deals with the second meeting has a wave pattern very similar to that of the first reunion, with ups and downs corresponding respectively to moments of selflessness and moments of egotism.[36] A difference, and an added difficulty here, is the ambiguous value of the moments of selflessness. In the first reunion, the crest of the wave was experienced as unequivocally positive; whereas in the second, such moments are ambivalent: at times, they are seen as the threatening engulfment in the chaotic elemental underworld, at others as 'time conquered'; that is to say, as escape from this very underworld. Sometimes these different values even cut across the figures in their experiencing the same events.

Another difference is the role Percival plays. The first reunion takes place around Percival's presence; here, it is around his absence. This absence is briefly alluded to twice: the first time, explicitly, as a cause of sadness when they first meet; it is brought up by Neville: 'honestly now, openly and directly as befits old friends meeting with difficulty, what do we

[36] For Woolf egotism has a disintegrating effect on both personality and community. Reflecting on her father's life, she contends: 'From it all I gathered one obstinate and enduring conception; that nothing is so much to be dreaded as egotism. Nothing so cruelly hurts the person himself; nothing so wounds those who are forced into contact with it.' Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, pp. 146-147.

feel on meeting? Sorrow. The door will not open; he will not come' (p. 142). The second time, it is suggested by Bernard, in a more obscure way, in his thinking about monarchy: the image of a king whose horse tripped up on a molehill starts a reflection upon the frailty of mankind, 'it is true, and I know for a fact, said Bernard, as we walk down this avenue, that a king, riding, fell over a molehill here' (p. 153). We know that this is the way Percival died and we also know that he was hailed as captain, hero, god; the denomination of king would be just as adequate.

The protagonists, now middle-aged, meet for the second time. At first there are tensions, the constant emphasis on age and habit suggests that they are set in their ways, 'and we are laden. Being now middle-aged, loads are on us' (p. 142), and find it difficult to look upon life from another person's point of view. Competition is in the air: all believing that they know or have experienced what life is really about, 'we battle together like beasts fighting in a field' (p. 145). The conflicts, especially the one between Neville and Susan, take a quasi-political form: we have, for instance, traditional solidity, represented by Susan, opposing intellectual modernity, incarnated in Neville. Only Rhoda, who is not 'embedded' (p. 150) in any way of life, who has no habit, or face, sees through them and gives us a clue as to what is happening but she also sees beyond them, beyond the human world to that of darkness, to which they are all condemned:

> But I see the side of a cup like a mountain and only parts of antlers, and the brightness on the side of that jug like a crack in darkness with wonder and terror. Your voices sound like trees creaking in a forest. So with your faces and their prominences and hollows […] Behind you is a white crescent of foam, and fishermen on the verge of the world. (p. 151)

Yet – and this is the first appearance of the ambiguity I have mentioned above – she is also the one who perceives, at the same moment, the possibility of their coming together and of their creating a human sphere: 'and I could fancy that we might blow so vast a bubble that the

sun might set and rise in it' (ibid.). But wine and a good meal blunt the anxieties and egotism, and bring about with digestion, silence. We have here the first rise of the wave, the first reaching of the region of selflessness, but it is of a peculiar kind. Silence is perceived by Bernard and Neville negatively, as a threatening abyss, the erasure of time and personality: 'as silence falls I am dissolved utterly and become featureless' (p. 152); whereas Jinny and Susan seem to consider it positively as the staying of time: 'as if the miracle had happened, said Jinny, and life were stayed here and now' (ibid.). Bernard's reaction is to 'fight back' (ibid.) and Neville admonishes them to oppose the 'imbecility' (ibid.) of chaos. Somehow it works; they come back to themselves, pay and leave the restaurant. The wave breaks. The hollow, so to speak, is testified by another quasi-dialogue between Louis and Rhoda. One of those bracketed passages where Rhoda and Louis as outsiders seem to conspire. Here again, they see through the others: how they repress, in this case, silence, that stands for the region beyond the human world, in their self-affirmation and the affirmation of time as humanised time, a principle of order:

> Yet, Louis, said Rhoda, how short a time silence lasts […] They are saying to themselves, said Louis, It is time, I am still vigorous, they are saying, My face shall be cut against the black of infinite space. They do not finish their sentences. It is time, they keep saying. (p. 153)

It is interesting to note that resuming their identities is, for the other characters, associated with recovering time. In this section, loss of the self is intimately linked with loss of time, in its positive or negative signification: as respectively time conquered, or loss of structuring principle in our lives.

Leaving the restaurant, they find themselves in 'streaming darkness' (ibid.). The experience of the night outside the restaurant initiates the second wave: Bernard first experiences the dissolution of his self negatively. A reflection on history and monarchy (they are in Hampton Court) makes him realise the frailty and vanity of human life. This is where

the allusion to Percival plays its role: Bernard imagines how a king once fell to death from his horse and reflects on the incongruity of the institution of monarchy. It is a trick of the mind to convince one of the solidity of the human reign, when in fact, a molehill can be its undoing. The allusion to Percival is, of course, absolutely to the point; they believed in him during the first reunion, he was their king, affording them hope in the solidity of human endeavours. Yet he also met his death, ridiculously, by tripping over a molehill. It is worth noting here that this passage by Bernard is nearly word-for-word, the contradiction of his last speech, full of optimism, concluding the first reunion. In the latter, he affirms: 'we too, as we put on our hats and push open the door, stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illumined and everlasting road' (p. 98); now: 'but with that streaming darkness in my eyes I have lost my grip […] how can we do battle against this flood; what has permanence? Our lives too stream away, down the unlighted avenues, past the strip of time, unidentified' (p. 153). It is also worth remarking upon the emphasis on time in the allusion to history, but also more directly in 'I try to recover the sense of time' (ibid.) as human time, an ordering principle, opposed to 'time not our time' of Eliot's ground swell.[37] Time also plays an important part in Neville's and Louis's contribution that follows: here human time is seen losing its solidity, its chronology. For Neville, in his vision of King Williams, the past of the nation mixes with the present moment and for Louis, his own past, and that of the others, mix with the present in his perceiving their actual walking together, hand-in-hand, as a moment of their common infancy:

> While we advance down this avenue, said Louis, I leaning slightly upon Jinny, Bernard arm-in-arm with Neville and Susan with her hand in mine, it is difficult not to weep, calling ourselves little children, praying that God may keep us safe while we sleep. It is sweet to sing together, clasping hands, afraid of the dark, while Miss Curry plays the harmonium. (p. 154)

[37] T.S. Eliot, 'Four Quartets', in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 185.

To the loss of time as a linear principle is added the increasing proximity of the characters: Susan, like Louis, insists on their hand contact; Jinny on the triumph over time: 'time's fangs have ceased their devouring' (ibid.). The moment is crowned by another of Rhoda's visions, the same abstract expressions occur: 'the square stood upon the oblong' (ibid.), the conviction of having found a 'dwelling place' (ibid.), but is added a sense of transcendence, 'the walls of the minds have become transparent' (ibid.), it is a 'disembodied' moment. It is as if the limitation of the here and now were overcome. The climax is reached with Bernard's allusion to the same red carnation as the one symbolically created during the first reunion, but this time a six-sided flower, to which they all contribute, associated here with an illumination against yew trees:

> The flower, said Bernard, the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives. A mysterious illumination, said Louis, visible against those yew trees. (p. 155)

A disembodied moment, here and now conquered, death vanquished? This is the moment when Bernard suggests that they behold the flower, 'let it blaze' (ibid.). Does such a suggestion imply trying to possess the flower? To master the moment? Be it what may, according to what we can call now the familiar pattern, the climax is followed by its opposite, the wave breaks.

The anti-climax is described as Neville and Jinny, on the one side, and Susan and Bernard on the other disappear as couples in the groves. Louis and Rhoda who are left behind comment that they follow 'the tide of the soul' (ibid.), their instincts (the groves have been repeatedly associated before with the obscenity of lovers). Their disappearance is described in terms of engulfment in darkness ('the dark has closed over their bodies' [ibid.]), and similar figures of speech suggesting the liquid world of the sea. But the wave rises again. Rhoda and Louis, in a moment of total spiritual intimacy which is, at the same time, a moment of

physical distance, share a vision which is paradoxically made impossible by the distance in question: Louis talks of everything being alive, asks ‘where is death tonight?’ (p. 156), he speaks of an incantation fusing ‘all the splinters into the blue tide’, which ‘drawing into the shore, fertile with innumerable fish, breaks at our feet’ (ibid.). Rhoda for her part marks the division with conditional if-sentences that break into ‘thus we are divided’ (ibid.). A division reiterated by Louis who nevertheless rises with the next wave again. We have here an incredibly concentrated fusion of opposites: at the core of unity, division, the rise of the wave is its fall. The last image, that of a net full of fish, brings this very intimacy of contraries home. Here, in a last rising movement of the wave, Louis says ‘the net is raised higher and higher. It comes to the top of the water. The water is broken by silver, by quivering little fish. Now leaping, now lashing. They are laid on the shore. Life tumbles its catch on the grass’ (ibid.). The upward movement is evident, the breaking of the surface of the water, in an image of animated matter, by quivering fish, leaping, lashing, with an insistence on the principle of life in them, all this suggests how life lives in death, how the dark fluid underworld is the habitat of life, how chaos and order oppose each other in an entangled reciprocity. The wave breaks again, the anti-climax is brought about by the others reappearing, gradually regaining their identity in the eyes of Louis and Rhoda. This re-identification takes place in stages; the others are seen as creatures emerging from the sea, in a continuation of the sea-world images, then as emblematic figures of the human condition, and finally as who they are: Jinny, Bernard and so on. On Louis’s and Rhoda’s side, this gradual recognition of their companions implies solidification in their own identity, felt as limitation and humiliation. Louis talks of the return of the ‘illusion’, of the ‘insanity of personal existence’ (ibid.); Rhoda of ‘the antics of the individual’ (p. 151). The others realise that they have destroyed something, now, with their return, and then, when they left. But they are exhausted and somehow glad to return to normality, to recover the ‘must, must, must. Must go, must sleep, must wake, must get up –

sober, merciful words which we pretend to revile, which we press tight to our hearts, without which we would be undone' (p. 158).

On the basis of this analysis, I want to make a more general point: in the work of Virginia Woolf, there seems to be a dialectic between loss of the self as destruction or threatening experience and loss of the self as access to vision. The latter seems to imply the former. Dispossession, some sort of 'dark moment of the soul', seems to be the obliged passage to the type of receptivity that allows for visions; hence, perhaps, the fact that Rhoda for whom the threat of the underworld is so virulent, is also the figure who has the most intense visions. Such an interpretation is confirmed by our analysis of Mrs. Ramsay's moments of vision in *To the Lighthouse*. We remember that a preparatory process of concentration, condensation into some dark ponderous matter was a prerequisite to a second moment of expansion and lightness. We even insisted on the identification of the two processes: as if a centripetal force of concentration was paradoxically exactly contemporary with an opposite centrifugal force of expansion. We have there what we could call a horizontal equivalent of the vertical wave movement at work in *The Waves*. In Virginia Woolf's work we seldom have clear cut antinomies but paradoxical intimacies, of which the double-value of the underworld is one instance.

Our analysis of the second reunion has not brought to light any change in the fundamental economy of the novel, that of an all-encompassing background of elemental forces that has always already reduced to nothing human endeavours. States of visions are reached, which seem to be even more intense than those we find in the first reunion, but they are nothing but a moment of paradoxical balance between the rise and fall of the wave, its crest, without endurance or solidity. Moreover, as such, they are part of the wave, what comes, but also what goes with it. They do not seem to have any force of their own or independence. We have to conclude that a basic wave structure governs *The Waves*. On a textual level, this seems to imply that the novel itself is nothing but the development of such a

basic pattern in a multilayered complexity: this complexity being in principle reducible to its fundamental matrix. On the thematic level, this means that human life is governed by elemental forces.

As a conclusion to this first part of my analysis, I would like to underline that, firstly, my working hypothesis of a tension between fragmentation and unity seems to be inadequate. It was well adapted to analyse *Mrs Dalloway*. It proved more difficult to use in *To the Lighthouse*, where it was brought to its limit. In *The Waves* it seems to break down completely. I suggested in the introduction that the literary experience comprises both a synthesis of the heterogeneous and a force of fragmentation, and that the very tension between the two constituted it. I have now, with *The Waves*, to accept, it seems, that the tension is reabsorbed into one of its elements: the force of fragmentation.

Secondly, and consequently, the very conception of literature I want to promote with this thesis is jeopardised. The motivations for the choice of my working hypothesis was the confrontation of conceptions of literature, corresponding to two critical approaches: on the one hand, there was deconstruction, and a vision of literature as fascination for nothingness; on the other, a more traditional approach I call humanistic, that defines literature as participating in the transformation of a raw, primitive experience of being-in-the-world into an articulate, symbolically mediated, properly human one. If we take our conclusion seriously, it seems that we have to admit that deconstruction was right. At least, as far as Virginia Woolf is concerned, the fascination of nothingness vanquishes any attempt at ordering, making sense of our condition. A book such as *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language* by Ferrer seems to have the last say in Woolfian criticism.

Bernard's summing up

Let us list the questions we hope the analysis of Bernard's summing up will answer. The first one is whether this section will afford a breakthrough in the economy of the novel; in more

precise terms, will Bernard's summing up constitute a breaking free from the ubiquitous wave pattern? Secondly, Bernard's story being, among other things, a reflection on narrativity, on the possibility of telling stories, and what story-telling implies, will the analysis shed light on the novel as a whole? The third question concerns the tension between a principle of unification and one of fragmentation, which is the very hypothesis of this work. Will Bernard's contribution balance the bias towards fragmentation we noticed in the first part of the book?

Bernard's summing up has a complex structure. A temporal one to start with: the occasion of the story is Bernard's meeting and dining with a person he hardly knows ('since we do not know each other (though I met you once, I think, on board a ship going to Africa)' (p. 160)). This dinner *en tête à tête* represents the present of this section of the novel. To this person, Bernard tells the 'story' of his life, and this implies digging-up some of his past. Bernard remembers events in his life, from his first memories to the present, in a chronological order, roughly parallel to that of the rest of the book, ending his story at the present moment; that is to say, the dinner conversation with the unknown person that we are witnessing. The story of his life – the series of past events Bernard tells us about – is constantly interrupted by returns to the present moment in the form of comments on the possibility or impossibility of undertaking this task of story-telling. We could say that for Bernard, telling his story is the occasion of a reflection on narrativity, shared with the unknown person. In this first phase, the story is about the past, the reflection on it takes place in the present. In the last few pages of the book, the story catches up with the present, and therefore the gap between reflection and what is reflected upon disappears. Bernard goes through things and reflects upon them at the same time.

But this section is not only structured in temporal terms: there is a thematic organisation as well. Bernard carries out a reflection on life in parallel with one on narrativity. His discussion of life is centered around problems of identity: the self and its experience, its

position in the world and its relation to others. His discussion of narrativity deals with the very possibility of telling stories and what this implies. The two topics are intimately linked, and it will be my task to show the links.[38] The second phase of the section, the return to the present, is interesting in that it brings to the surface new themes, or rather aspects of old ones that have led a hidden life: the importance of some sort of Sisyphean task in the novel, and the question of the other person as origin and end of such a task.

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Bernard's telling or trying to tell the story of his life is the occasion for him of a reflection on identity and the self. For Bernard there are two realms: that of everyday life, an intersubjective human sphere in which the self can develop and that of the outside, a no-man's land where one is condemned to wander a shadow without a self. The two realms have no fixed value attached to them; everyday life is sometimes valued in a positive light and, sometimes it is the opposite. The same change applies to the outside. Bernard sees life as a constant oscillation between the two realms. His summing-up is an exemplification of such a to-and-fro movement.

The world of everyday life is the 'public sphere', where one is enmeshed in a network of relationships: one has a wife and friends, a job and therefore a certain position in society. It is the realm of identity and the solid self; one is someone among others. It also implies regularity: 'Tuesday follows Monday; then comes Wednesday' (p. 174) as Bernard repeatedly says and it is often described in terms of a well-oiled mechanism or a clock:

> The mind grows rings; the identity becomes robust; pain is absorbed in growth. Opening and shutting, shutting and opening […] until the whole being seems to expand in and out like the mainspring of a clock. (Ibid.)

[38] On narrative identity, see Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 20-33; and also Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

For Bernard, it is very often the source of happiness, domestic and social; he talks about the protection against the outside it affords: ‘outside the undifferentiated forces roar; inside we are very private, very explicit, have a sense indeed, that it is here, in this little room, that we make whatever day of the week it may be’ (p. 172) and the clear prospect it implies: ‘standing by the window looking at a sky clear like the inside of a blue stone, Heaven be praised, I said […] For the space of the prospect and its clarity seemed to offer no impediment whatsoever’ (p. 178). It is also seen in terms of the ‘chorus’, the simple social pleasures of a simple man, such as eating, drinking and having fun with one’s friends: ‘the sound of the chorus came across the water and I felt leap up that old impulse, which has moved me all my life, to be thrown up and down on the roar of other people’s voice, singing the same song; to be tossed up and down on the roar of almost senseless merriment’ (p. 188). Ultimately, Bernard loves ‘the joy of intercourse’ (p. 79). At times, though, it is also perceived from its ‘bad side’: it is seen as the incarnation of an obligation that implies a tremendous effort. ‘Must, must, must’ are words that recur in Bernard’s mouth, especially at times when such an effort seems to be beyond his strength: ‘we must find our coats. We must go. Must, must, must – detestable word’ (p. 198). At other times it is considered as stultifying, limiting one’s scope. Bernard asks himself whether there is more to life than just this begetting of children and work: ‘was there no sword, nothing with which to batter down these walls, this protection, this begetting of children and living behind curtains, and becoming daily more involved and committed’ (p. 180). The double value of the public sphere makes no doubt.

The same double value is found on the other side: the outside. This is the realm of selflessness, where one drifts away on a featureless flux. It is constantly associated with fluidity or water, sometimes as the sea, sometimes as a river or stream: ‘there is always deep below […] a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights’ (p. 173), or:

> I could not recover myself from that endless throwing away, dissipation, flooding forth without our willing it and rushing soundlessly away out there under the arches of the bridge, round some clump of trees or an island, out where sea birds sit on stakes, over the roughened water to become waves in the sea. (p. 188)

The lack of distinction of this milieu is important: limits are absent from it, and we end up with something resembling a field of forces. It corresponds to the elemental world of the wave pattern which dominates the book. It is also characterised by double value. In a passage, for instance, where it is compared with the earth during a solar eclipse, it has all the features of the 'land of the dead':

> The scene beneath me withered. It was like the eclipse when the sun went out and left the earth, flourishing in full summer foliage, withered, brittle, false […] The woods had vanished; the earth was a waste of shadow. No sound broke the silence of the wintry landscape. (p. 192)[39]

It is repeatedly associated with a feeling of horror and fear. At times, however, it seems to afford Bernard some sort of liberation from the burden of being someone. He floats on this stream in a sort of weightless state, just observing the world around him in an impersonal way: 'to see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realize their beauty in itself – how strange!' (p. 178). When this occurs, the outside is a source of happiness and even vision.

But seeing these two realms in their static opposition would be to miss the point. Bernard, in his 'theory' of life, insists on the unavoidable and constant dynamism that links the two. It is the endless passage from one to the other that constitutes life and his summing up exemplifies this. If we look at Bernard's story we can pinpoint events that have induced a change of value and thus have reset his life in motion. The death of Percival is treated as such: in the midst of domestic bliss crashes the news of Percival's death, 'into this crashed death –

[39] For further variation on this theme see Woolf's experience of a real eclipse on a Yorkshire moor: Virginia Woolf, 'The Sun and the Fish', in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950), pp. 193-199.

Percival's' (ibid.). A change of value is thus operated; everyday life from summit of achievement becomes meaningless and the outside from non-existent or repressed allows Bernard a glimpse 'behind the scene' (p. 180). The double value of the two realms functions like an electrical system: by changing value from positive to negative, it restarts the process of passage from the one to the other, and this without end. What counts is the very dynamism of the process, the passage from one realm to the other, the oscillation. Such an oscillation of course is an avatar of the wave pattern, and it bodes ill for Bernard's summing-up representing a breaking free from it.

Another feature of this oscillating movement is its making possible moments of harmony, ephemeral, but balanced between the two realms, that are a source of happiness and inspiration for Bernard. For instance, after the eclipse, the world comes back but not the self; we have the uncanny intermediary state of a world seen and described without a self:

> So the landscape returned to me; so I saw the fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me, but now with a difference; I saw but was not seen […] Thin as a ghost, leaving no trace where I trod, perceiving merely, I walked alone in a new world, never trodden; brushing new flowers, unable to speak save in a child's words of one syllable; without shelter from phrases […] But how describe the world seen without a self? (p. 194) [40]

We have, as was the case with Rhoda, all the elements of a moment of vision. Bernard mentions the fact that such moments are inspirational, and make possible (or are at least the corollary of) a new type of language: 'the little language lovers or children speak.' With a 'little language', the focus moves from 'life' to 'how to impart life'. Bernard tells the story of his life, and such a telling is the occasion of some sort of 'theory' of life and its exemplification, but it is also the occasion of some sort of 'theory' of literature and its

[40] It is interesting to note that for Woolf, cinema, combining 'the exactitude of reality' with 'power of suggestion' allows one such a 'selfless' perspective on reality: '[Objects] have become […] more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life […] we behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it.' Virginia Woolf, 'Cinema', in *The Captain's Death Bed*, p. 167.

exemplification. Bernard constantly comments on the possibility of the task (telling his story) at hand. It is worth noting that he tries to tell a story, he does not give up immediately on the basis of some decision, already taken, that story telling is impossible. Even after encountering enormous difficulties, he tries to resume his narration, in spite of all. The first difficulty consists in the fact that what Bernard sees as a synchronous whole, his life, has to be presented to the other person in the chronological order of a story: 'but unfortunately, what I see (this globe, full of figures) you do not see […] But in order to make, to give you my life, I must tell you a story' (p. 161). Between what is seen and what is told, a loss or a transformation occurs. This is made clear by Bernard's insistence on elements indicating the successive structure of narrative, 'in the beginning, there was […] Then […] And so […] Then' (p. 162).

The second type of problem has to do with 'portrait painting' or character creation. He tries to depict, in a true-to-life fashion, the personality of his friends: Percival to start with, then Louis, and so on. But in each case, Bernard stops short because his phrases just miss or, worse, kill the real person that should be described. In Percival's case, Bernard gives up and wishes he had music at his disposal to bring home the personality of his friend:

> But there should be music, some wild carol. Through the window should come a hunting song from some rapid unapprehended life […] What is startling, what is unexpected, what we cannot account for, what turns symmetry to nonsense – that comes suddenly to my mind thinking of him. The little apparatus of observation is unhinged. (p. 164)

In the case of Louis, Bernard has the feeling that he just dies in his hands like a fish taken out of water: 'but look – his eye turns white as he lies in the palm of my hand […] I return him to the pool where he will acquire lustre' (p. 165). What is made clear here is that words cannot capture life.

Another difficulty is the expression of feelings associated with upsetting experiences such as death or love. Bernard, by trying to describe how he felt when he first fell in love or when he learned about Percival's death, is forced to comment on the impossibility to put into words, in the consecutive form of a story, the experiences he had on those occasions. There again, allusions are made to other types of forms or languages. Music comes again, animal sounds such as barking or grunting also appear as possibilities:

> Here again there should be music […] a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, pealing song to replace these flagging, foolish transcripts – how much too deliberate, how much too reasonable! – which attempt to describe the flying moment of first love […] But what is the use of painfully elaborating these consecutive sentences when what one needs is nothing consecutive but a bark, a groan? (p. 169)

or:

> But for pain words are lacking. There should be cries, cracks, fissures, whiteness passing over chintz covers, interference with the sense of time, of space; the sense also of extreme fixity in passing objects; and sounds very remote and then very close. (p. 178)

In other words, normal language, in its normal communication function, will not do. It is deemed too 'reasonable', too 'logical', and too 'deliberate'. It imposes a pattern on life that eviscerates it.

Another difficulty arises when Bernard tries to describe his relationship to the other characters in *The Waves*. The ordinary category of identity, which is enshrined in language, does not seem to be adequate. He is the others at the same time as he is himself; he is man and woman; they all form one complete being: 'what I call my life, it is not one life that I look upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs' (p. 187); 'for this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman' (p. 190); 'we saw for a moment laid out

among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget' (p. 187). How to express such a complexity? Here again, Bernard suggests music, a symphony, many layered: 'again like music. What a symphony with its concord and its discord, and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath' (p. 173).

Normal language in its function of communication, someone saying something about something to someone else, and the categories this implies, such as identity, information, a distinction between message and contents of the message, and so on, is not adequate to capture life. There is a link with Bernard's 'psychology', his theory of the self. Such a language is the language of the public sphere, therefore can only capture this aspect of life. But, for Bernard, life is more complex: it has an outside, and what is essential takes place in a to-and-fro movement between the two loci of life. Thus another type of language is needed, one that could express the complexity of life in this very oscillation, but also one that would be up to the moments of vision. Such moments have an inspirational nature; that is to say, they require or call for words and Bernard sees as his task to find them. We find again the need for 'a little language', as Bernard puts it. We can see here, negatively, what such a language could look like: it should not usher in the clear-cut delimitations that normal language implies; it should be able to express multi-layered complexity; it should resemble both music and elemental sounds; it should not be one-dimensional in its consecutiveness; its relation to the concepts of beginning and end has to be qualified; it should not be too logical or reasonable; and it should not force a mould on life. This is a 'negative theory' of literature and the positive implications of such a vision of literature need to be made explicit.

But in spite of all, Bernard does not give up trying to tell a story:

> But to return. Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance […] Let us pretend we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is dispatched – love for instance – we can go on, in an orderly manner, to the next. (p. 170)

This would be difficult to understand, if we did not take into account that Bernard's summing-up is not only a discussion of the possibility and impossibility of narrativity, but also, as we have said above, an exemplification of it. The same oscillation between the two realms that constitutes life is found on the level of language. Literature for Bernard is found somewhere between the impossibility to speak that corresponds to the realm of the outside and the well-oiled mechanism of language in the public sphere. Bernard, in his summing up, tells his story, tells us about life, even though he knows that his task is impossible and therefore doomed to fail. Yet, it is in the very process, the trying and the oscillation that ensues, which is the very oscillation of life, where moments of balance are reached, that allow or call forth, 'a little language', which is literature. Two remarks here: firstly, at such moments, the distinction between words and life disappears. Both language and life constitute the inspirational moment. Language as life and life as language is language in its performativity: there is no difference between what it is and what it talks about. Secondly, between the fascination for nothingness that the outside produces and the silence it leads to on the one hand, and, on the other, the humanistic ordering and construction of the world in the confidence of having language as a tool at one's disposal, there is a third way, another language neither condemned to silence and inhumanity nor representative of the power of self-confident humanity, and the other language awaits discovery.

At the end of the meal, when Bernard's interlocutor is about to leave, past and present meet. This last phase is also governed by the same oscillation: Bernard passes from a state of aloofness to the here-and-now of the situation, which is accompanied by belief or doubt in the power of words. However, there is a difference, and an interesting one: here, the oscillation is seen in more humanistic terms: story telling is a task of construction of the world and its opposite is consent to dissolution. Life consists in some Sisyphean endeavour of having to build up a world that will inevitably fall to pieces, compelling us to start again from scratch and so indefinitely. This adds a moral dimension to the process of story telling. The

explanation for it is also given in this phase of the section: it is the dialogue situation. Bernard makes it clear that it is his interlocutor who draws the story from him. The very task of narrativity, of an ordering and construction of the world is felt by Bernard as a responsibility the other imposes on him. He feels compelled to fight against dissolution and chaos in the name of humanity. The other pins him down in the very disorder of matter, the here and now of his incarnation, forcing him thus to put together the bits and pieces, to integrate the heterogeneous:

> It is strange […] that the face of a person […] this mask from which peep two eyes, has power […] to pinion me down among all those other faces, to shut me in a hot room […] [to send] me staggering among peelings and crumblings and old scraps of meat […] under your gaze with that compulsion on me, I begin to perceive this, that and the other […] there is a gradual coming together, running into one, acceleration and unification […] I regain the sense of the complexity and the reality and the struggle, for which I thank you. (p. 198) [41]

This is felt as a burden, but also as a chance. The very book ends on this tone with Bernard promising to fight against death: 'against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death' (p. 200).

On the basis of this analysis of Bernard's summing up, I want to answer the three questions from which I started: does this section constitute a fundamental break from the general economy of the book, in other words, is the wave-pattern vanquished? In all the phases of this section, one is confronted with an oscillating movement corresponding to the wave-pattern of the previous section. The section stays throughout, thematically and textually, governed by this pattern. In Bernard's account, moments of balance are reached; but this is nothing new: Rhoda, for instance, also experiences such moments or the reunions enable such visions. They are moments in the larger framework of the wave-pattern, produced by the

[41] This one of the 'traces' of a philosophy of life in Woolf that suggests a link with Lévinas: words such as 'face' and 'compulsion' are telling in this respect.

oscillation itself; therefore they do not represent any transcendence from it. However, we also saw that such a pattern could be interpreted in humanistic terms. Wouldn't that be some sort of victory over the elemental forces? But the very ambiguity of the phenomenon does not allow any breakthrough. It creates another oscillation, this time between the two readings of the pattern itself, bringing back the selfsame pattern. One is forced to conclude that there is no going beyond the wave-pattern in *The Waves*.

The second question was whether Bernard's discussion of narrativity sheds any light on the literary project that the *The Waves* represents. Bernard's looking for another type of language might be the very thought behind the enterprise of *The Waves.* Virginia Woolf, of her own avowal, was looking for a new form, a new way of writing in *The Waves*.[42] Perhaps the book that falls from Bernard's hands at the end of the novel, and that will be swept by the cleaning woman in the morning, among other bits and pieces ('my book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor, it lies under the table, to be swept up by the charwoman' (p. 199)) is the very novel one has between one's hands reading this. *The Waves* is not a story in the traditional sense of the term.

This leads us to our third question, that of the tension between integration and dissolution in the novel. This tension was lost on the level of the composition of the novel, in the sense that the wave-pattern representing elemental forces is the governing principle of the whole book, thus confirming the victory of the force of fragmentation over that of unification. Yet, the discussion of the last phase of Bernard's contribution has shown ambiguity at play in this pattern: there seems, alongside a materialist reading, to be room for a humanistic one. The very tension between chaos and order is iterated at a deeper level.

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[42] 'Why not invent a new kind of play […] prose yet poetry; a novel and a play.' Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London: Granada, 1978), p. 107; Woolf imagining the future of literature suggests: 'And it is possible that there will be among the so-called novels one which we shall scarcely know how to christen. It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry […] It will be dramatic and yet not a play.' Virginia Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), pp. 11-23, (p. 18).

Finally, what has Bernard's summing-up added to our exploration of Virginia Woolf's conception of literary language? He has suggested a 'negative theory' of literature. We know what literature is not, rather than what it is. Would it be possible now, going back to the parsimonious indications Virginia Woolf gives us in *The Waves*, to reconstruct her vision of literature? I think so, and this is the aim of my conclusion to this chapter on *The Waves*.

Conclusion

Woolf talks about literature in terms of language. Her vision of literature is a conception of literary language. The alternative between humanism and nihilism which we encountered on the level of composition of the novel can be articulated on a linguistic plane: do we really have to choose between Ricoeur's 'ontological vehemence',[43] the conception that language, and poetic language as well, is our tool *par excellence* to tame the world and, say, Deleuze's vision of the text as machine? Modern pragmatism has already answered the question by suggesting a third possibility. Inspired by the late Wittgenstein's language game theory, Rorty, for instance,[44] suggests that we can have a meaningful language without reference to the world. The meaning of an expression is what the community using it has decided it to mean. Pragmatists scrap referentiality but keep meaning. Virginia Woolf goes beyond that, she speaks of a language without meaning as we will shortly see. Does she thus condemn the language of her novels to nothingness or nonsense?

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There is an embryo of a theory of literary language in *The Waves*. Her allusions to it are scarce, but her practice of it abundant. She talks about an 'unvisual' (p. 104) language, one 'that does not point' (p. 105) to things, that does not refer. It is abstract, 'the little language'

[43] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 301.
[44] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays: 1972-1980*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982).

(p. 161; p. 199) lovers or children would use. Such a language is split between 'the thing and what lies beneath the semblance of the thing' (p. 110), it is 'unattached to any line of reason' (p. 127) and meaningless. It is not much; Woolf is parsimonious with such remarks. She does not, properly speaking, theorise language in *The Waves,* but uses it. Yet, I believe we can make sense of these fragments of theory, and use our conclusions to shed light on the practice.

Examples of such language are the abstract expressions I have repeatedly underlined: Rhoda's 'square upon an oblong' and landscape, Bernard's 'woman coming across a wall of water', but also Clarissa's 'here was a room; there another' in *Mrs Dalloway* or 'the dark wedge' of *To the Lighthouse*. The list is not exhaustive. What these expressions all share is their link with moments of vision; very often, they represent the climax of such moments. What they also share is the suspension of referentiality they operate, and, in their abstraction and meaninglessness, an essential strangeness. Strangeness, as suggested in the introduction to this work, is an essential characteristic of Virginia Woolf's work. It is also a key concept of my project: I defined it in terms of fictionality, figurality, performativity and aporia.[45] I will use the same categories to make sense of the fragmented 'theory of literary language' found in *The Waves*.

A preliminary remark: I think it is necessary to extend the concept of strangeness from the expressions we picked as examples to the whole texts. These expressions appear in moments of vision, and very often constitute their most important part, the crest of the wave, so to speak. Moments of vision in Virginia Woolf's work are not just moments among others, but constitute the very centre of her novels. The wave movement, in its crescendo, which constitutes the underlying dynamism of the reunion scenes, for example, in *The Waves,* can be found in both *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse.* Visions can be strung like beads on a

[45] To refresh our memory, I will briefly resituate the four concepts: by fictionality I mean the tendency a literary text has to mark the fact that it is an invention with an emphasis on its lack of referentiality. By figurality, I understand the characteristic of literary texts to contain, more than an everyday conversation would, figures of speech and tropes. By performativity, I suggest that literary language 'is' before it 'talks about': its very presence as an instance of language has more weight than its message. Finally, aporia is a term I use to indicate the different types of paradoxes, formal or thematic, that seem to unavoidably appear in literature.

thread, with peaks and hollows, culminating in a final climax. The point is that Virginia Woolf's novels are essentially such a thread or movement; and that, therefore, the language used to express the moments of vision is not fundamentally different from that of the 'preparation' for them, that the novels represent.

Her 'unvisual language' can easily be translated in term of fictionality and lack of referentiality. This is clearly confirmed by her conception of a language that 'does not point to things'. The split between the thing and the appearance of the thing is obviously an allusion to symbolism, with the reserve that the thing arrived at will also be, in the same manner, split between its appearance and another thing, and thus *ad infinitum*. We have seen, while discussing the symbolism of the red carnation on the reunion table, that symbols in Virginia Woolf imply a *mise en abîme*. Both fictionality and symbolism together contribute to opening what Iser calls 'a play space', a dynamic, yet endless, process where meaning cannot attach. This gives us the third type of feature Woolf ascribes to literary language: meaninglessness and abstraction. I link them with the concept of performativity, understood as what an instance of language 'is', rather than what it communicates. Purely performative language is meaningless. It just 'is' without conveying any message; something that could be termed pure poetry. This corresponds to the 'little language' of children or lovers in the sense that it is nothing but what it is here and now in its context, meaningless and without reason to anybody else but the children or lovers in question. The three concepts are intimately linked. They are, basically, the same phenomenon, that of strangeness, approached from different angles, and separated somewhat artificially for the sake of the analysis.

The fourth concept, that of aporia, requires the consideration of the result of my analysis of *The Waves*; that is to say, the idea that the whole novel can be reduced to its title. It is as if the complex structure of the novel, its myriads of different layers could be folded back into a single pattern, that of the wave. This is what Riffaterre calls the matrix of a piece

of literature.[46] In *The Waves*, the matrix seems to be a wave-pattern. What could we oppose in binary terms? A wave is a movement up and a movement down; the movement up of one is the movement down of another, another but the same in their iterability. The movement up contains the movement down and vice versa in a paradoxical identification. And between the two, in the two, where exactly? the moment it reaches its climax, the moment it breaks, which is a repetition in a concentrated form of the same paradox. I underlined in the first chapter of this thesis the importance of this paradoxical structure in *Mrs Dalloway*. It is structurally similar to the opposition and complementariness of the centrifugal/centripetal forces of *To the Lighthouse.* Taken together, they constitute an movement towards a limit, 'the edge of the world', to use one of Rhoda's expressions, that paradoxically sends one back into the world; such a paradoxical structure is the very movement at the core of Mrs. Ramsay's visions. It is also a translation in horizontal terms of what the pattern of the wave is in a vertical dimension. This is where the fourth concept, aporia, is to be found. The tension between a force of unification and one of fragmentation that finds expression on the level of composition of a literary text is but a reflection of a deeper tension at the very core of language.

In *The Waves*, Woolf discovers an aporetic tension as the vital principle of language. She hints at the existential depth of such a tension by referring to ideas such as the responsibility for the other and the task of world construction. There is a philosophy of life behind the theory of literature.

III. A biographical reading of *The Waves*

My reading of *The Waves* constitutes a balancing act between two positions. On the one hand, there is Laurence's deconstructionist reading and its emphasis on disintegration. On the other

[46] Riffaterre believes that a poem is nothing but the deployment, according to certain principles, which his critical work spells out, of a fundamental matrix that can be understood in term of a binary opposition.

hand, there looms the danger of an integrating reading of *The Waves*. Lyndall Gordon's interpretation of the novel in her biography of Woolf is just such an endeavor. With Gordon's *A Writer's Life*[47], we have a case of world-orientated criticism *par excellence*. It is biographical, and therefore by definition so orientated. Its fundamental tenet is what we could call 'literary empiricism': nothing in the books that has not been previously in the author's life.

In the case that concerns us here, Gordon's reading of *The Waves*, Percival, for instance, is Thoby, Virginia Woolf's brother: 'Percival can be seen as a memorial to Thoby Stephen'[48], and Neville and Louis, Percival's friends are 'just as in real life […] Thoby's friends Lytton and Leonard.'[49] Another example is Rhoda's play with petals in a bowl of water. It is interpreted as a transcription of the little Virginia's fondness of sailing toy boats on the pond of a park: 'Rhoda, the dreamer, rocks her bowl of water, the vessel of her imagination; the petals she floats in it are dreams voyaging out. She has an obvious affinity with Virginia Woolf, who often recalled sailing boats on the pond in Kensington Gardens.'[50] I could multiply examples, and they all indicate in the same direction: whatever is found in the novel corresponds in one way or the other to an aspect of Woolf's life. Even the general 'meaning' of the novel is understood along these lines, the basic point is that it represents Woolf's struggle with her middle-age crisis: 'her sudden gloom at the age of 44 is seen in *The Waves* to mark the onset of middle age',[51] or 'Virginia Woolf had to write the book in order to understand and overcome her depression.'[52] How does that work? *The Waves* by its study of the lifespan, enabled Woolf to understand her depression, the normality or necessity of such a phenomenon when one reaches middle-age: 'she had to see how [depression] fitted into the

[47] Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
[48] Ibid., p. 208.
[49] Ibid., p. 209.
[50] Ibid., p. 207.
[51] Ibid., p. 205.
[52] Ibid.

pattern of the lifespan.'[53] It could (or the writing of it could), in this way, function as an anti-depressant of some sort.

In this respect, according to Gordon, *The Waves* is a very simple book: 'for the unprepared reader the first hundred pages can be as baffling as an unknown code. But once the code is cracked the whole experiment has a brilliant simplicity.'[54] One of the corollaries of such a reading is that Woolf's writing in *The Waves* is really at its best when her characters have reached the same age as their writer; that is to say, middle-age and its crisis: 'it was only in the fifth cross-section, when the six come to maturity – the particular challenge for the author herself at the time of writing – that she became wholly original.'[55]

Another corollary, in contrast with my reading of the novel, is an interpretation of *The Waves*, on Gordon's part, as a gesture of conquest. Woolf is supposed to have gained control over life in general and her life in particular with the writing of *The Waves*. For instance, through the character of Rhoda, she 'makes what was unconscious […] conscious',[56] 'she can cap […] careless surrender to nature […] with the mind's complementary will to order.'[57] Through Bernard, who 'is Virginia Woolf's spokesman',[58] she can 'define our lifespan against the infinite timescale of nature.'[59] His summing up, in Gordon's eyes, has all the characteristic of a grand philosophical finale:

> As chronicler, Bernard lives on beyond his generation. In the last stage, where he courts immortality, he uses his senses not to glut identity but to overcome it […] he rides the wave's crest as though he were riding the rhythm of the universe, transcending time […] the finale is resounding […] *The Waves* takes this stand against the middle-age depression in which it was conceived.[60]

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., p. 206.
[55] Ibid., p. 207.
[56] Ibid., p. 214.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., p. 235.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., pp. 242-243.

What such an interpretation implies is a 'mind-over-matter' vision of the world. The belief in mankind's ability to understand, in a very cerebral way, what life, their life, is all about. Does that correspond to the vision of the world underlying *The Waves*? Furthermore, Gordon seems to imply that the writing process for Bernard gives him a hold on life, is a way of managing it rather than being carried along by it. Is this what Bernard's endeavours amount to?[61] I have argued that the whole economy of the novel is governed by a structure of oscillation between the omnipresence of the wave pattern and the characters' (Bernard included) reaction against it. I also suggest how this very oscillation finds an echo in the wave pattern itself. In a word, here again, I endeavour, in my reading, to preserve the tension I believe is central to Woolf's work, against both a deconstructionist reading that favours a principle of dissolution and, as here, Gordon's suggestion of the victory of a principle of control.

I want to finish my discussion of Gordon's reading of *The Waves* by examining what she does with elements from the novel that play an important role in my interpretation of it: a 'little language', Rhoda's 'square upon an oblong', Bernard's 'solar eclipse' experience and his 'interlocutor' in the summing up part of the book. All these elements are central in the tentative definition of literary language and formulation of a 'philosophy of life' or 'fundamental anthropology' underpinning the novel, that are my main concerns in my reading of *The Waves*. What she makes of a 'little language' is typical; for her it is, in very concrete and practical terms, the language that the six characters have developed among themselves thanks to years of intimacy, a language made up of gestures, tacit understandings, and sympathy:

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[61] Julia Briggs for instance offers a very different interpretation: 'Though Bernard begins by offering to explain "the meaning of my life", his attempt at doing so reveals that it cannot be done, bringing only a profound exhaustion with existing forms of order: "how tired I am of stories… how I distrust neat designs of life."' Julia Briggs, 'The Search for Form (i): Fry, Formalism and Fiction', in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 96-112, (p. 109).

> Bernard describes how the six have developed a private 'little language' as an alternative to public discourse. As a group they explore the effect of intimacy on language: they seem to hear one another's unvoiced intent with confident accuracy. From childhood they have known what to make of small gestures and casual words […] they are skilled in this voiceless language of sympathy.[62]

Rhoda's vision of a 'square upon an oblong' is linked to precision and Hampton Court, and through Wren's palace to architecture. Gordon concludes from the episode that Woolf was striving for the precision of architecture in novel writing

> [Rhoda] realises, as she listens to the quartet, that Percival's gift had been social order, an ideal order like that of musicians or mathematicians, who place a square upon an oblong 'very accurately', and by their accuracy, make 'a perfect dwelling place.' The structure of the quartet is linked, later, with Hampton Court […] whose windows form squares upon oblong. Both music and architecture epitomise Virginia Woolf's own determination to make the form of the novel as precise as the great arts.[63]

Bernard's experience of the world seen by nobody is depression: 'Bernard's depression is one of the unknown modes of being. There are no words for a world without a self, seen with impersonal clarity. All language can register is the slow return to the oblivion we call health.'[64]

Finally, there is Bernard's interlocutor. Gordon makes a 'specimen reader' of him: 'he is a specimen reader, and, since this is a phantom dinner party, a reader of the future.'[65] What these interpretations have in common is a 'downshift': they all rely on a down-to-earth reference to a concrete equivalent of the literary construct. They bring the text back to the world so to speak. In contrast, in my reading, the very same elements are indexes of strangeness, upsetting such referentiality.

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[62] Gordon, *A Writer's Life*, p. 238.
[63] Ibid., pp. 213-214.
[64] Ibid., p. 218.
[65] Ibid., p. 235.

CHAPTER FIVE: *BETWEEN THE ACTS*: 'UNITY –DISPERITY'

I. *Between the Acts* and Deconstruction

Patricia Laurence's reading of *Between the Acts*[1] is very similar to her reading of *The Waves*; the same with a difference. In her reading of *Between the Acts*, she similarly insists on rhythm and silence: silence representing the rupture that is necessary for rhythm to exist. As in *The Waves*, 'Woolf's punctuation, metaphors and rhythms of silence'[2] is understood as her mode of access to a repressed feminine world of emotion. Laurence writes: 'Woolf's style is one of rhythmic alternation […] and of keeping the silences and gaps of life as part of the female rhythm.'[3] This female rhythm is linked with the unconscious and its pulsations:

> Woolf, in touch with the concept of the unconscious […] structures its cuts into her novels lexically, syntactically, metaphorically and thematically […] she relates the cuts and wounds to the feminine.[4]

The point here is to find expression for emotions where words fail: 'Woolf find[s] a rhythm – a gap – rather than a word for an emotion.'[5]

This represents the core of Laurence's reading of both *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, the difference being what this basic rhythm is associated with and its surface quality, so to speak. We saw that in *The Waves*, Laurence links it to the rhythm of nature and underlines its quality of harmony. In her reading of *Between the Acts,* she links it to war. There she

[1] Patricia O. Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991).
[2] Ibid., p. 173.
[3] Ibid., p. 192.
[4] Ibid., p. 198.
[5] Ibid., p. 199.

understands such fundamental rhythms in terms of 'the contrapuntal music'[6] of art characterised by the 'disjunctions of interruptions'[7] and 'the disharmony of the war.'[8] Such 'modern music'[9] is considered by Laurence as Woolf's response to a world where language and reason have been engulfed by the absurdity of war:

> This rhythm of seeming interruptions is developed in response to loss. Reason is no longer a handle on the world for Woolf in the late 30s in war torn England and language bereft of stable referents […] does not resonate in the same way.[10]

According to Laurence, Woolf was 'casting about for another force to organise the world […] Woolf holds onto the world with music […] *Between the Acts* is organised according to a rhythm, a modern music to compensate for other kinds of loss that relate to the meaning of words.'[11] Where *The Waves* was 'a cosmic conversation' for 'human voices'[12], *Between the Acts* incorporates other sounds as well:

> *Between the Acts* increases the variables in the field of sounds of the novel. It voices silent thoughts (unspoken thoughts and unfinished lines of poetry) and the sounds of nature (cows coughing) and of machines (the "zoom" of the planes, the gramophone's tick-tick) as part of its musical composition.[13]

Laurence suggests that this corresponds to a new narrative method that thus '[extends] the borders of the field of sound and thought and narration'[14] and it can '[capture] sensations of sounds before swelling into thoughts and words.'[15]

Laurence explicitly associates such a method with Derrida's language as *rature:* 'somehow language in this novel is "sous-rature", as Derrida might claim'[16] and she mentions

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[6] Ibid., p. 203.
[7] Ibid., p. 180.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., p. 194.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 183.
[13] Ibid., p. 193.
[14] Ibid., p. 203.
[15] Ibid., p. 206.

'deconstruction' twice on the same page: firstly, in the context of Woolf's deconstruction of the church's rhetoric, 'Woolf targets the profession of the clergy and deconstructs its ineffectual rhetoric'[17]; second, in her idea that art in *Between the Acts* 'is deconstructed by nature.'[18]

Such a method implies, on the part of the writer, a vision of the world where we are 'framed by silence': 'the novel suggest[s] the growth of talk, human talk, from the silent prelude of the novel. In fact, the novel […] is framed by silence.'[19] Laurence insists that all comes from and goes back to silence, that the human order is surrounded, born in, underlain by something larger and not mastered but repressed. It is this repressed that keeps coming back as the very 'style' of Woolf's writing:

> Woolf's style […] takes yet another form: the pulsing movements from the conscious to the unconscious. It is in the splits and gaps that the unconscious is admitted. The lexicon introduces unknown aspects […] into the text and represents the psychological spaces of the repressed – fear, shocks and disasters of life.[20]

Both Lacan[21] and Woolf's mother's death [22] are referred to in this context.

A political dimension to Laurence's reading of *Between the Acts* is not absent: in a typical deconstructionist vein, 'Woolf's punctuation, metaphors and rhythms of silence'[23] gives voice to all the 'voiceless' of history, forgotten 'on the margins of society: women, the obscure, the mad.'[24] Laurence concludes her essay by underlining the importance of 'repetition' for understanding Woolf's writing: 'Woolf's new music is grounded in the

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[16] Ibid., p. 207.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 208.
[19] Ibid., p. 204.
[20] Ibid., p. 200.
[21] Ibid., p. 198.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 173.
[24] Ibid., p. 209.

repetition of verbal elements',[25] but adds that it is a Nietzschean repetition that she has in mind and not a Platonic one: there is no 'true' archetype that guarantees the validity of the copy but 'a world based on difference', 'a "disparité de fonds"', a world of 'simulacra and phantasms.'[26]

To sum up, the critic should not look for unity in Woolf; any affirmation of an unifying principle in her work misses the 'difference' as the principle of Woolf's style, a rhythm of alternation that deconstructs opposites. It will be clear by now that my strategy in reading *Between the Acts* is to avoid deconstructing opposites, and to keep unity and fragmentation in tension until the very end, 'the gramophone gurgled Unity – Dispersity. It gurgled Un… dis… and ceased',[27] as in the novel itself.[28]

II. Un… dis…

With my reading of *Between the Acts*, I want to examine the following questions. Firstly, there is the question of the tension between a force of unification and one of fragmentation. Such a tension seems to be as central, or even more so, to the economy of *Between the Acts* as it was in the three other novels we have discussed. All the ingredients are present: a family reunion and lunch as in *To the Lighthouse*; a public event, here a pageant, uniting people in the manner of Clarissa's party; a pageant that is, at the same time, an artistic gesture, in the manner of Lily's painting or Bernard's summing up, confronted with an integration of

[25] Ibid., p. 210.
[26] Ibid., p. 210.
[27] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Granada, 1978), p. 146; further references are to this edition and are given after quotations in the text.
[28] Gillian Beer also emphasizes tension and 'undecidability' in her reading of *Between the Acts*: '*Between the Acts* comes to no conclusions, but it includes several endings: among them the end of the village play, the dispersal of the audience, and the end of the day and coming of night with which scene the book itself comes to a close without closure: "The curtain rose. They spoke." […] Opposites exist alongside, and cancel each other's meaning.' Gillian Beer, '*Between the Acts*: Resisting the End' in *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 127-148, (p.130).

opposites. The book itself is explicit as regard this problematic of reunion versus fragmentation; it constantly thematises it in, for instance, among other things, the insistence on the tune 'we are dispersed.'

The second question is that of literary language. *The Waves* represents a tentative elaboration of such a language. Does *Between the Acts* continue and concretise the endeavours of the *The Waves*? *The Waves* mostly consists in the before and after of the moment of vision. Most of its language is 'normal' language preparing its upheaval. The real instances of such a 'new' language of literature are very few. Has such an upheaval spread in *Between the Acts*? Has literary language gained ground? The answer seems to be a negative one. There are very few personal moments of vision in *Between the Acts*, apart from the one Miss La Trobe experiences in the pub at the end of the novel. All the others are systematically interrupted. Yet there is a vision of a new type: a 'social' vision, the experience of the pageant, which goes beyond the group visions of the dinner parties in *The Waves*. But such a moment is undermined by ambiguity. In fact, ambiguity, achieved by ironical juxtaposition and interruption is systematic in *Between the Acts*. In this novel, the normal does not prepare the exceptional, but on the contrary prevents the vision from happening and normal language in the guise of the conventional seems to threaten to swallow up literary language.

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I will proceed in the following way: I will analyse as separate units, on the one hand, the scene of family life that culminates in the lunch episode and, on the other, the pageant proper. Those two parts of the book can be contrasted along the line of a private/public dichotomy: in the first, we have a family *huis-clos*; in the other, a public social event. A separation also makes their comparison possible, and there is a lot to learn from such a comparison. Both are types of reunion but where one fails the other apparently succeeds. The family reunion has all the features of a dead end: unbearable silence, stultifying paralysis under the bell jar of

conventions, whereas the pageant makes a vision possible. A separate analysis of those two parts offers another advantage: in the private section, the scene is set, the conceptual mapping of the novel which forms the backdrop thanks to which the events of the pageant and what happens in it makes sense.

There are six main characters in the family section: Old Oliver and his sister Lucy representing the older generation; Old Oliver's son, Giles and his wife Isa and two guests, Mrs. Manresa and William Dodge. Around those main characters gravitate a host of others but they are, I believe, in the general economy of the book, or at least of this section of the book, of secondary importance. The main characters form couples in conventional terms: brother/sister, wife/husband and old friends. Those couples form, on an archetypal level, syntheses of opposites: Old Oliver the sceptical empiricist and his religious sister; Giles the violent man of action and Isa the poetic dreamer; Mrs. Manresa the sensual 'wild child of nature' and Dodge the frustrated homosexual in hiding. This explains why, during the action of the novel, the couples dissolve and reform differently: Isa and Dodge, 'the conspirators', around their secretive parallel life. In the same manner as Dodge hides his homosexuality, Isa conceals her poetical tendencies, pathetically writing her poems in 'account books' in order to avoid awakening her husband's suspicion. Mrs. Manresa and Giles meet around the body and its need of action and sensuality. The exception is the older generation, Old Oliver and Lucy. But they are 'out of the race' as it is suggested. Two remarks about this shifting of characters on the novel's board: firstly, they are typical or archetypical rather than real, they represent clear-cut tendencies or philosophical options in life in the manner of the characters of *The Waves*. Secondly, the six different options can be reduced to two basic elements: a spiritual one and a material one. Those two fundamental options clash in *Between the Acts*. But what are they options on?

The characters all share a certain uneasiness with regard to conventions: they do not really believe in them; however, they play the game which results in their feeling trapped and

stifled by them. In the novel, the Olivers are repeatedly contrasted with the old indigenous families of the region. They have only been here for a few centuries; they are new settlers:

> The Olivers, who had bought the place something over a century ago, had no connection with the Warings, the Elveys, the Mannerings or the Burnets; the old families who had all inter-married, and lay in their deaths intertwisted, like the ivy roots, beneath the churchyard wall. (p. 9)

And Mrs. Manresa is a *nouveau riche*:

> Also it was said her diamonds and rubies had been dug out of the earth with his own hands by her husband who was not Ralph Manresa. Ralph, a Jew, got up to look the very spit and image of the landed gentry, supplied from directing city companies – that was certain – tons of money. (p. 33)

Dodge is rootless because of his homosexuality. The indigenous are at ease in their traditions and conventions, whereas, for our six characters, they are like garments that are too big or too small. But conventions in *Between the Acts* are only the cover of animality; its verso, so to speak. If one theme dominates the book, then it is animality: from the opening scene to the final one, human beings are systematically associated with animals. And to show the recto/verso relationship, inversely animals are linked to the human world. The distinction between the animal or natural level and one that could be called human or civilised disappears in *Between the Acts*.

This is the clue to the predicament of the six characters in the novel. If you believe in conventions, like the members of the old ancestral families, you are not less of an animal, but you live in a Sartrean *mauvaise foi*, an ideological fog that makes you believe you are above animality. Lack of belief in conventions lets animality transpire and affirm itself and with it, its infinite core, silence and nothingness. This is the six characters predicament: they are vaguely aware of their animal side, their material side that condemns them to death, because conventions do not fulfil their office. Thus they all react, in their own characteristic way, to

the pressure of matter. We have here exactly the same pattern as in *The Waves*, where we also have six characters reacting, according to different strategies, to their sense of being engulfed in the material world of which the wave pattern is the emblem.

Animality

We could call *Between the Acts* Virginia Woolf's zoo. Animality (or the natural side of humankind) is omnipresent in the novel. All the main characters, and the others too, are in one way or the other associated with animals. Old Oliver and his dog: he is even identified with 'a terrible peaked eyeless monster' (p. 13) in the episode where he frightens little George, his grandson. Lucy, in accordance with her role as a Christ-like figure in the novel, is fascinated by birds, especially swallows, but also, with their hint at the Holy Spirit, doves. Appropriately, she is also associated with fish, especially the carps of the pond. Isa, in her poetical fantasies, is a swan in her imagined love for the gentlemen farmer ('she came in like a swan swimming its way' (p. 8)), and a poor little donkey when she considers her fate. Giles incarnates the violence he witnesses when he crushes a snake trying to swallow a toad. This scene is central to the book, not only in very concrete terms – the fact that it represents the middle point of the story in story time – but it is also central thematically, representing some paroxysm of animality, turning, because of this very reason, into something more than animality, or showing what animality covers: the emptiness of death. Dodge is a toad, maybe the very one Giles kills, and finally, Mrs. Manresa in her all-sensual being is a 'wild child of nature' (p. 36), underlying as often as she can the fact that she rejects intellectual life and lives (in) her body. Other characters, secondary ones, are also linked to animals; as an unexhaustive list of examples: Bond the cowman, with the reflection of flowing water in his eyes (p. 24); the old crippled lady seen as some sort of dinosaur, 'an uncouth, nocturnal animal, now nearly extinct' (p. 71); Cobbet of Cobbs Corner, who prefers plants to human beings; the cook and her cat; even Miss La Trobe barks.

The first and the last scene express this theme. The book opens on a discussion of a cesspool, emblematic of the shared animality of humankind, where the participants are identified with animals: the gentlemen farmer's wife is a goose; Isa has her hair in pigtails, and sees herself and the gentlemen farmer, in a love fantasy, as swans floating downstream. Moreover, to underline the identity between the human and animal realm, Virginia Woolf resorts to the inverse trick of humanising animals: in this first scene, we have a cow that coughs and a bird that chuckles over his dinner of snails and worms. In the last scene, a basic human relationship, love, is identified with the savage fighting and mating of foxes. But between the first and last, there are several scenes or episodes underlining the lack of distinction between nature and the pseudo-civilised world of man. This is a list that does not pretend to be exhaustive: Lucy's interest in pre-historic England, 'mammoths in Piccadilly' (p. 26). The description of the empty barn that looks like a temple, where people are going to have their tea during the interval; this meeting point of civilisation is the centre of a flourishing animal life:

> The barn was empty. Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. (p. 76)

Another scene is Giles's violent killing of the snake swallowing a toad, leaving him with slimy blood on his nice white canvas shoes (p. 75). But even the pageant is saved twice by nature, cows bellowing first, then the rain. The play is in fact saturated by naturalness, what with its outdoor setting, swallows and trees, the landscape, the weather, all participating in the show; but even the moments of interrupted vision are animalistic: the starlings in the tree, or the carp in the pond.

A layered ontology

This discussion of animality and conventions has confronted us with what I call the ontology of the novel. There is an implicit mapping of the world that serves as a backdrop to the events of the novel. This background has a structure in layers; one covering the other, but all together forming the world in both its visible and invisible dimensions. Conventions cover animality in a movement of *mauvaise foi*: hiding it from consciousness, yet positing it in reality; animality being so to speak the verso of the conventional world. In its turn, animality covers something else, what Virginia Woolf calls the 'empty heart of silence.' The novel has an empty centre like the house, Pointz Hall. There is a painting of a lady in a yellow dress, in the dining room, and this portrait draws one into the empty heart of silence. It does so through the curve of the yellow dress and glades of greenery, in an up and down movement:

> In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. (p. 31)

Yellow is the colour systematically associated with the wildness of the animal world in *Between the Acts*: the hound's eyes are yellow (p. 18), yellow butterflies dwell in the hollow of the garden, where the pond is; yellow woodpeckers fly through the landscape in a wave like flight.

We have here a symbolic knot: the colour yellow, animality, a dark nook in nature, water in the form of waves or stagnant water and a dead lady. A knot that is confirmed by the ghost that walks through *Between the Acts*: a lady is supposed to have drowned (a lovelorn suicide) in the pond and her ghost half ironically creeps up in conversations at diverse points in the novel, for instance: 'they saw a white lady walking under a tree. No one would cross the terrace after dark. If a cat sneezed, "there's the ghost"' (p. 28). The pond is in the darkest hollow in the garden (there is no sun in winter) and is described in terms of stagnant water that covers mud, representing a concentrated form of nature, with all the connotations that

mud has: death, grave, matter. Connotations confirmed, once again ironically by the fact that a bone has been found in the mud; not a lady's bone, but a sheep's: 'ten years since the pool had been dredged and a thigh bone recovered. Alas, it was a sheep's, not a lady's' (p. 36). This description of a symbolic knot shows the recto/verso relation between animality and this strange region Virginia Woolf calls the heart of silence. Under conventions, we have animality, and under animality we have silence. Another scene seems to confirm this intimacy between animality and the silence of death: Giles's killing of the snake. It represents a sort of paroxysm of animality, animality transcending itself into monstrosity: 'an inverted birth'; that is to say, death, but death multiplied because the snake, devouring the toad to fulfil life's needs, chokes on it and it is killed, at the same time as its prey, by Giles's violent action. Here, death is not the death we know in the world, but goes beyond into some unknown territory.

There is a last layer to the ontology of the novel. Starting from the heart of silence, we then have animality, then convention; but beyond conventions there is still another layer, spirituality. It is represented in the novel, above all, by Lucy and her religious attitude and Isa's poetical fantasy. Spirituality seems an option for people who are not at ease in conventions, who do not believe in them and thus feel the pressure of animality and the threat of the unknown. Such a dimension of spirituality is eminently ambiguous in *Between the Acts*, seen sometimes as escapism, and sometimes as possible access to happiness.

The main characters

What all the characters have in common is a lack of belief in conventions: somehow, conventions do not fulfil for them their ideological function of covering up. Animality pierces through, and through animality the pressure of silence. Thus, each in his/her way tries to cope with the pressure. There seems to be two main options: the spiritual one and the material one.

Characters like Lucy, Isa and Dodge have adopted the former, the other three Old Oliver, Mrs. Manresa and Giles the latter.

Lucy is a Christ-like figure. Very much like Dostoyevski's 'idiot',[29] she is considered by her entourage condescendingly as a simple minded, dotty grandma. Her brother does not understand her: 'why, in Lucy's skull, shaped so much like his own, there existed a prayable being?' (p. 22), Mrs. Manresa looks down on her, and she gets on Giles's nerves. Young people wink at each other in her presence, 'as if old Swithin had left a wake of laughter behind her' (p. 24). She functions as a scapegoat, especially for Giles in his frustration: 'it was Aunt Lucy, waving her hand at him as he came in, who made him change. He hung his grievances on her, as one hangs a coat on a hook, instinctively. Aunt Lucy, foolish' (p. 38); her brother never seems to miss an opportunity to hurt her in her religious convictions. She is fascinated by birds, especially swallows and their faithfulness to their breeding place. She is also fascinated by the fish in the pond, especially the great carp that comes to the surface so very seldom. She is interested in history, or one aspect of history above all: pre-history; she does not seem to get over the thought that human beings are the remote descendents of monster-like pre-historical creatures. She seems to be haunted by the theory of evolution. She is described as light, swift and a dreamer. She skips mentally from one thing to the other in the same way as she saunters from place-to-place in the novel. All these features are developed systematically as the unfolding of a Christ-like figure: they contain all the traditional symbols associated with Christ in our culture: the fish, birds, a childish simple-mindedness; her swiftness is that of a spirit versus the weight of matter:

> Was it that she had no body? Up in the clouds, like an air-ball, her mind touched ground every now and again with a shock of surprise. (p. 87)

She is even perceived as walking on water. William Dodge, the lost soul, during their little visit of the house, imagines going down on his knees in front of her and has the impression

[29] See Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Idiot*, trans. by Alan Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

that she has saved him: ‘but you’ve healed me’ (p. 57). Of course, she is religious. She keeps fingering her golden cross. Her difficulty with ‘evolution’ seems to find its explanation here as well; and her role as scapegoat too. She is the novel’s representative of spirituality in its purest form.

But spirituality of that kind, as answer to the pressure of matter, has an ambiguous status. There is no doubt that she is a rather sympathetic character and her spirituality seems to allow access to visionary moments, even though the most important moment of that type she experiences in the novel is interrupted. However, it is worth noting that we see her, most of the time, from the outside, through what other characters tell us about her. A good example of such a situation is when she watches, completely engrossed, the swallows in their flight, murmuring words about how they return every year to the same breeding place. She seems to be in a trance-like state, yet we do not really know whether she has a vision or is just stupidly staring at the birds, thus the ambiguity as regard the value of her type of spirituality is maintained throughout.

Still there are indications, although subtle ones, that seem to invalidate such a religious attitude: she seems, when questioned in her belief by her brother, not only not to counter him (which could be considered, anyway, as another Christian theme element) but to doubt her own position in the name of the weight of conventions, my brother, being my brother and a man must know better. At times, when talking with other people, she even quotes him as an authority. She is ‘tacking’ between conventions and her spiritual realm, relying on either the one or the other, depending on circumstances. Her type of spirituality seldom enters into conflict with the establishment, being coextensive with and finding concrete realisation in the church; when it does, her status as an old lady, half dotty, blunts what could appear as the revolutionary edge of such a spirituality. Furthermore, when confronted with the weight of reality, for instance, the unbearable weight of the presence of others that comes to the surface in the silence, the not-knowing-what-to-say of the after-lunch coffee on the terrace, she flees.

She is not able to withstand silence, and escapes. Even silence as a theme of discussion seems to unhinge her. For these reasons, spirituality in the form of religion as an answer to the pressure of the material world does not seem to be adequate in *Between the Acts*.

Another spiritual reaction to materiality is Isa's. Isa not only does not believe in conventions, but she also dies in them. For her, conventions not only do not fulfil their function of obfuscation of animality, but, in addition, imprison her into a role. Convention, for her, means, above all, playing the role of wife and mother. Her reaction to both the prison of this role and the pressure of matter is poetry: poetry, or the writing of poetry, after religion, is the second spiritual reaction incarnated by the characters in *Between the Acts*. But if, with Lucy and her religious attitude, there were hints of escapism and ambiguity as regard the adequacy of such a reaction, in Isa's case her poetical aspirations are ruthlessly depicted as illusory. She plays at hide and seek with herself and others: writing her poems in account books so that her husband does not discover her secret activity; day-dreaming in verse about a love-affair with a gentleman farmer. Her life has come to a dead end, but she seems to maintain the status quo so that she can poeticise her role as a victim. She is the 'little donkey' (p. 114) of her own poems. Her situation is truly a sad one, even her poetry is no good. Self-indulgent, escapist, it has the ring of teenage diary pathos.

Yet, there is ambiguity again. She has her moments of enlightenment if not of vision; she visits what we could call the *ur*-scene of suicide in a poem about drowning, and she has a vision of life that corresponds to Virginia Woolf's deep ontology in three phases: 'Love. Hate. Peace. Three emotions made the ply of human life' (p. 70), the movement up, the movement down, and the moment of balance, of vision, poised between the two. She also participates, albeit unconsciously and involuntarily, in what is one of the most beautiful passages in Woolf, where Isa's poeticising is constantly interrupted by the triviality of her role as a wife at home:

> She returned to her eyes in the looking glass. 'In love', she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he

> said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating – she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn in Croydon. Faster, faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away…
>
> 'Where we know not, where we go not, neither know nor care', she hummed. 'Flying, rushing through the ambient, incandescent, summer silent…'
>
> The rhyme was 'air'. She put down her brush. She took up the telephone.
>
> 'Three, four eight, Pyecombe', she said.
>
> 'Mrs Oliver speaking…What fish have you this morning? Cod? Halibut? Sole? Plaice?'
>
> 'There to lose what binds us here', she murmured. 'soles. Filleted. In time for lunch please,' she said aloud. 'With a feather, a blue feather…flying mounting through the air…there to lose what binds us…' The words weren't worth writing in the book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected. 'Abortive' was the word that expressed her. (pp. 15-16)

Beauty and intensity is achieved here through the tension and even contradiction between lyricism and everyday-life.[30] This is the peculiarity of *Between the Acts*. Ambiguity and the co-presence of opposites is omnipresent in Virginia Woolf. One of those ambiguities even affords the guiding thread of this thesis. But in no other book is this feature brought as far as in *Between the Acts*. Everything is double-sided: people divided between a conventional self and a hidden one, between animality and humanity; the world of the novel between reality and play; language between poetry and prose, and so on. The final effect achieved is one of intensity and beauty through irony, of which the example just described is a paragon.

The third 'spiritual' character is William Dodge. To be more precise, his spirituality consists in his desire for spirituality. He is a lost soul, his repression of homosexuality and his adopting the pseudo-conventional life of a professional and married man has ruined him:

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[30] For an interesting discussion of the 'language' of *Between the Acts*, see: Gillian Beer, *The Common Ground*, pp. 131-136.

> At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water […] When I looked up the world was dirty […] so I married; but my child's not my child […] I'm a half-man […] a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass. (p. 57)

He is an unhappy, empty hulk, wandering in no-man's land. He is 'seeking for hidden faces' (p. 86) as Isa suggests, his own hidden face and those of others like him, leading a secret life. He finds it in Isa, another hiding and dying under conventions. But, above all, he finds hope of liberation in Lucy. She shows him the house, and they thus escape, playing 'truants', from the pressure of the group. The little exploration trip, with its childish connotations, and Lucy's openness and simplicity, is a revelation for Dodge; his moment of vision, so to speak.

We can order the three 'spiritual' characters in terms of success of their strategy in coping with reality. Escapism increases from Lucy to Dodge and in parallel the characters' sense of deadlock. But even in the best of cases, Lucy's, spirituality, Virginia Woolf seems to suggest, implies a lie and obfuscation and therefore is essentially of the same kind as conventions. These characters have simply replaced one set of conventions by another, more specific or idiosyncratic maybe; they have invented their own world instead of taking the one they were born in, yet the result is the same: a covering up of mankind's predicament.

But Woolf suggests there is another way of dealing with reality: the 'materialistic' way, and the three characters left, Old Oliver, Giles and Mrs. Manresa are all representatives of this approach. Old Oliver is a commonsensical, down to earth empiricist: he does not believe in any hidden and mysterious force governing our lives or in the meaning of the world; hence his teasing antagonism to his sister. He avows that he simply does not understand her. He does not believe in poetry either: yes, poets are 'the legislators of mankind' (p. 87), but what is poetry compared to his son's unhappiness? 'a great harvest the mind has reaped; but for all this, compared with his son, he did not care one damn' (ibid.). His strategy is stoicism, cynicism, and a certain military attitude. You have to face life like a man and fight through it. There is no room for 'cry-babies' (his reproach to his grandson);

emotionality, he seems to deplore in his son or dreamers like his sister. Conventions have to be accepted as just part of the play. Animality, you can tame, like he has tamed his dog and 'savages' (p. 17) in his colonial past. New generations, his son and grandson, are not up to the job any more. He believes that they show symptoms of the crumbling of a certain order of the world. In short, there is the suggestion of a growing unease in his attitude. Old-age is slowly undermining his stoical edifice. He cannot keep up conventions, as for instance when he falls asleep during coffee or when he, considering Mrs. Manresa's charms, cynically concludes that he is 'out of the race.'

Giles's approach is also materialistic. You go down into the world and you move it, transform it, act in it: he is a man of action. However, because of conventions and a city job, he feels confined to sitting around, small-talking away from real life. He wanted to be a farmer, but ended up, because of his responsibilities – a house, wife and children – a clerk in an office. He feels trapped and dead inside:

> Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things pressed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water. (p. 38)

The imminent war becomes the focus of his frustration. Men go and fight for their country, whereas he spends his time drinking tea with old ladies: 'as for himself, one thing followed another; and so he sat, with old fogies, looking at views' (p. 43). In the novel, acts of violence, his killing the snake; resentment, especially towards Dodge and Lucy; or sexuality, his fling with Mrs. Manresa in the greenhouse; all represent ways, for him, of letting off steam. Although he adopts a completely different strategy, he is as much trapped as his wife in the conventional world.

Mrs. Manresa, 'the wild child of nature', is the sensuous one in the novel. She plays with her body and enjoys its pleasures. She systematically rejects intellectual things: '"quite beyond me!" cried Mrs. Manresa, shaking her head, "much too clever!"' (p. 44). She is at ease

in society, especially that of men. She is highly sexed and flirtatious. In a word, her strategy seems to accept life as it is, naturally, and make the best out of it. There is nothing beyond the body, so we might as well enjoy it. Yet, the novel suggests that this 'naturalness' is put on; Mrs. Manresa plays 'the wild child of nature', therefore it is anything but natural, a social role like any other and therefore conventional.

The three materialist characters cannot be reproached with escapism; they all face, or want to face, the reality of our human condition. However, they all fail to come to terms with it. In Old Oliver's crumbling stoicism, the limits of his voluntaristic approach to life appear in a growing unease at what is revealing itself in animality: its untameable dimension of silence. Giles's frustrated action makes him violent: his gesture of killing toad and snake is the echo of the violence of this inverted birth. Giles's violence is an affirmation of the monstrosity of life he hopes to master in his desire for a life of action. Mrs. Manresa's assumed naturalness is the sign of the impossibility of accepting the human condition.

What all characters share, spiritual and material ones, in their various strategies, is an endeavour to neutralise what is unacceptable in life, the horror of the silence of life, 'its heart of darkness', and they all, in their own way, fail.

Unity versus fragmentation and the question of literary language

In this section of *Between the Acts*, the centre is a family lunch. It is the occasion for all the characters to come together, the family members proper, plus the two guests, Mrs. Manresa and Dodge. It is a typical Woolfian locus: a family (in the sense of an extended family; that is to say, plus guests) unite around a meal. It is the equivalent of the dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, but also, even though they are not 'family' properly speaking, of the characters' reunions in *The Waves*. The difference between *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* is that in the former book, the dinner party is the occasion of a personal vision, Mrs. Ramsay's;

whereas in *The Waves*, we have a group vision. What type of vision is the family lunch in *Between the Acts* conducive to?

A striking feature of *Between the Acts* is the (near) lack of individual visions. In *Mrs Dalloway*, for instance, there are only individual visions, sometimes experienced as the result of isolation, sometimes as the climax of a gathering. *To the Lighthouse* is similar in this respect. For the first time, in *The Waves*, there is the case of, besides individual visions, several individuals having, so to speak, a common vision. In *Between the Acts*, this new type of vision is paramount, and individual vision is on the wane.

This change is quite important for the discussion of the unity/fragmentation theme. According to the old form, a vision could only be achieved by an individual separated, concretely or psychologically, from her fellows: I have in mind Mrs. Ramsay's first vision, where her concrete separation from her family – a sort of respite in her everyday life role – seems to be the condition of her visionary moment. The example of Clarissa's party is also telling: she is among people; in fact, the gathering itself is partly the cause of the vision, but at the crucial moment, she seeks isolation, as if only alone can she experience such intensity. In short, according to such a scheme, vision implies fragmentation. For the first time, in *The Waves*, at the dinner parties, there is a different structure: the gathering is not only conducive to a vision, which is, ultimately a personal experience, but the group is the condition of the vision, in the strong sense. The type of vision experienced by the six protagonists of *The Waves* can only occur as a group vision. Unity seems to be implied by vision.

The lunch episode in *Between the Acts* elicits the conditions of a vision: all the main characters are gathered around the dinner table at the heart of the house. There is even the 'typical' object at the centre of the table: flowers, a bouquet arranged by Candish the butler. He is a paradox in himself, his love of flowers 'queerly' juxtaposed with a gambling and drinking problem (p. 30). The bouquet echoes the ambiguity: variegated roses, so

conventional, with yellow flowers and greenery, heart shaped, suggesting animality and the painting that is found in the same room, leading to the heart of silence.

In fact, two paintings can be found in the dining room. Besides that of the lady in yellow, *not* an ancestor, as the family underlines several times, there is the portrait of an ancestor, a picture that is talk-producing: 'he was a talk producer, that ancestor. But the lady was a picture' (p. 31). Anecdotes are associated with it; they are about how this ancestor wanted both his favourite horse and dog to be pictured along with himself. Apart from another ironical echo of the animal theme, there is the contrast between a picture that leads to silence and another that conditions small-talk.

Thus the stage is set. The lunch episode will be played as a tension between silence and animality on the one hand, and conventions on the other, between the fragmentation of silence and the false unity of conventions. There are one or two excursions into silence: they talk about the picture of the lady, for instance, which is the occasion for Lucy to show her fundamental impatience with the topic; Mrs. Manresa's vulgarity also reminds them of the threat of animality. Yet, somehow conventions have the upper hand, and in the 'joys of society' they all end up celebrating Manresa as their 'thorough good sort': 'now she was on the rails again. Now she was a thorough good sort again. And they were delighted; now they could follow in her wake and leave the silver and dun shades that led to the heart of silence' (p. 41). These conventions are a cover-up: the false sense of unity, the illusion of community. But conventions have another side, which is at times acutely felt by the six protagonists. They appear to them as a straightjacket, and in the process, at the same time, they reveal themselves as illusionary; thus exposing the characters, rather than protecting them. This is exactly what happens in the episode when they have coffee on the terrace. Digestion and the heat creates a context in which the people present sink, so to speak, in their bodies, experiencing the increasing weight of their materiality. Falling asleep and giving up trying to talk would be the natural reaction, yet this is made impossible by the presence of the others. The illusion of a

community has to be kept up, hence small talk, even though we have nothing to say and every word is an effort, hence also the necessity of fighting sleep. The whole slowly and inevitably turns into an unbearable *huit-clos*, 'l'enfer c'est les autres':[31] 'their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough' (p. 51). They cannot find anything to say, yet they feel they must speak, yawns are suppressed and the general unease increases. Isa, unable to manage the situation anymore, drops a cup on purpose; Lucy flees by suggesting a visit of the house to Dodge and Old Oliver gives up the fight and falls asleep:

> A match-box fell – Bartholomew's. His fingers had loosed it; he had dropped it. He gave up the game; he couldn't be bothered. With his head on one side, his hand dangling above the dog's head he slept. (p. 53)

Thus the tension comes to an end.

It is worth noting that the very conventions have brought to their surface the materiality of our lives that they were supposed to hide. But this is in accordance with the logic of the situation. Since conventions constitute a cover-up, they, in fact, acknowledge, albeit in an ideological fashion, the very thing they are supposed to hide. In terms of unity versus fragmentation: the false unity of conventions leads to fragmentation, the isolation of each individual within the group.

As far as visions are concerned, the lunch episode does not bring about any, it is a dead end. Instead of allowing people to see life while living, to see while feeling, to be in matter and outside matter in a vision of matter, which are all definitions of the moment of vision in Virginia Woolf, the lunch party just plants people blindly in their body, it leads to an affirmation of matter without escape: death and the silence of death.

Literary language, since it is in Virginia Woolf's work ultimately linked to moments of vision, is conspicuously absent from the lunch episode. The latter represents the reign of gossip, everyday language and its structures that literature annihilates. This episode also

[31] Jean Paul Sartre, *Huis clos suivi de Les mouches* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 93.

represents the reign of silence as deadlock, which is the other side of gossip, as the coffee on the terrace suggests. Beyond communication and silence, which are like the two sides of the same coin, there is the territory of literature.

The pageant

The pageant adds a new character. In fact, it adds a host of new characters, the whole community that represents the background of the events of the novel: people from the village or surroundings as actors or audience. But they remain all rather or relatively undifferentiated or, like the priest, have a peripheral function. Only one comes out of the lot as a 'main' character, and this is Miss La Trobe: the writer and producer or the pageant. However, although she can be considered a main character, she remains on the outskirts of the group formed by the six other main characters. It is interesting to note that *Between the Acts* reproduces the structure we find in *The Waves*: six main characters plus one with a special status. Here, Miss La Trobe is an 'outcast'. She never mixes with either the family group or anybody else in the novel. She is even conspicuously absent at the end of the play when Mr. Streatfield, the priest, wants to thank her. She is not altogether English; people speak of 'Russian' origin (p. 46) and her name suggests a French background. She is 'not altogether a lady' (ibid.) either: lesbian, with a masculine appearance, both body and style; she is stout and thick-necked, wears black clothes and big boots. She has bad habits as well: smoking and drinking at the pub, disturbing the conventional gender partitions. She uses rude language and is 'bossy' (p. 50) (her nickname). For most of the book she remains in the hollow of the garden, by the pond, which has been transformed into the changing room, invisible and unavailable to the audience, directing the play from there.

This series of features could appear whimsical; but, as was the case with Lucy, the Christ-like figure, there is, here too, a logic. These features are the unfolding of an artist matrix in Virginia Woolf. I have in mind Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, or Bernard in

The Waves. What is characteristic of such figures in Virginia Woolf is their duality or ambiguity: neither this nor that, neither man nor woman. Lily is in love with Mrs. Ramsay and integrates both a masculine and a feminine attitude in her creative act. Bernard repeatedly says that he is between the sexes, or both at the same time.[32] Another feature is their position half in and half out of society: they participate in the world because of their profession, social status and friendships. Yet, at the same time, they all have access to another domain, which is their source of inspiration as artists. Because of that, they all represent a threat to the establishment: they all tend, willingly or not, to have a dissolving effect on the world of conventions. Lily is characterised by resistance and a centrifugal way of thinking, Bernard has drifting tendencies. For this reason, they also cannot find complete happiness in what society has to offer: Lily cannot see herself leading the 'normal' life a woman was expected to have in those days: marriage and sacrifice for the family. Bernard looks upon his role as 'bread earner' with scepticism. Another feature is the all-importance of their art, or rather of the moment of creation. Renouncing such a dimension of life would constitute for them some sort of death in life. However, it is less a voluntary decision than a vocation: they all feel called by such an event.

Miss La Trobe, in her own peculiar way, is a new avatar of this artist figure. Her bi-gendered personality, the failure of her professional and love life, her peripheral position in society and the way her art is a matter of life and death to her, are all incarnations of the features described above. She also brings in new idiosyncratic dimensions which we did not have in either Lily or Bernard, most strikingly her dictator-aspect.

We know that the action of the novel is supposed to take place a few months before the breaking out of World War II. We also know that the novel was written 'between the bombs' in 1940.[33] The book is full of this war, hinted at by squadrons of planes flying over

[32] For the artist as an 'androgynous' figure, see Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1929), pp. 146-150.
[33] See, for instance, Woolf's diary entry of May 29th 1940, Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, pp. 316-317.

the stage and interrupting the priest's speech, for instance. It is also present in the theme of animality and contributes through this very theme to the irony and pessimism of the novel. But the war is also present in the figure of the dictator: Mussolini is mentioned *verbatim* at least twice, and small talk among the audience about historical events sometimes broaches the subject of dictatorship and people's reaction to it.

Miss La Trobe gathers some features of the dictator: her looks, black clothes and big boots, but also her bossy, violent attitude. Several times, she is associated in her role of director with that of military personae: the captain, the general. And above all, she has the characteristic of the master: she takes the decision (here of course it is the trivial case of whether to play outdoors or not, still what matters is the structure) facing the anguish and the responsibility for the decision, in the name of the people, freeing them thus of that weight: 'someone must lead. Then too they could put the blame on her' (p. 50). The same structure reappears in the novel, during the interval, when people dare not start with their tea, and Mrs. Manresa, then, takes it upon herself to be the first:

> 'It's all my eye about democracy', she concluded. So did Mrs. Parker, taking her mug too. The people looked to them. They led; the rest followed. (p. 78)

The political background of the book is antidemocratic: people as sheep or cows (the animal theme) who need a strong leader. This is one of the ways in which the theme of animality contributes to the pessimism of the novel, historical events (Nazi-Germany and Fascist-Italy) suggest that people are not mature enough to lead an independent life.

It is interesting to note that Virginia Woolf, with such a dictator hint in her artist figure, is very much a modernist. The clue to such a tendency is to be found in the type of experience artistic inspiration was for the modernists. It was, epiphanies or visions, always a direct access to a domain perceived as true and universal, albeit not provable or sharable as such. The work of art was a reconstitution of the conditions of the vision, rather than an

imparting of it. For this reason, the artist, thanks to this exceptional access to the essential, could be seen as guide-figure who could possibly lead people.[34] There is certainly some of that in Miss La Trobe, who wants to make people see. She has had the vision, she has seen and by writing the play and performing it, she tries to reconstitute the conditions of such a vision: make people feel so that they can see. This implies her role as a leader.

Yet, at the same time, and this is also a new feature of the artist in Miss La Trobe, there is a sacrificial side to her. Her art seems to relegate her to a life of loneliness and unhappiness. Drink and forgetfulness seem to be the only bearable alternatives to the intensity of creation. Such a feature was already present in an underdeveloped form in both Lily and Bernard; their lack of adaptation to the world was its sign. However, they are not exiled as Miss La Trobe is, in her world. She is also, in a strange parallel with Lucy, a Christ-like figure, who sacrifices her life to make people see, to save them. It is worth noting that Miss La Trobe, the bossy dictator, ends up incarnating some suggestion of Christ, whereas Lucy, the Dostoyevskian idiot, on the verge of a revelation, tells this very Miss La Trobe that she felt, while watching the play, that she could have been Cleopatra, the feminine dictator *par excellence*: 'you've made me feel I could have played…Cleopatra!' (p. 112). We are in the midst of Woolfian aporias.

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The theme of unity versus fragmentation is central to understanding the pageant. Indeed the gathering of the audience is described as a unification process; very often with the help of images of water flowing, suggesting an organic type of unity: 'the audience was assembling.

[34] About this see for instance: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 456-493; for an illuminating discussion of Woolf's 'formal' literary innovation and its links with modernism, see Julia Briggs, 'The Search for Form (i): Fry, Formalism and Fiction' and 'The Search for Form (ii): Revision and the Numbers of Time', in *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 96-124; see also for a more historical discussion: NTakei Da Silva, *Modernism and Virginia Woolf* (Windsor: Windsor Publications, 1990).

They came streaming along the paths and spreading across the lawn' (p. 58). In parallel, when there is an interval or a break, and at the end of the play, people leaving are seen as involved in a process of fragmentation. Such processes, as an essential structure of the event of the play, are explicitly thematised. There is, for instance, the recurrent apparition of the line of a song: 'dispersed are we' (p. 75). The insistence on this dimension – the line in question can appear up to six times on one single page – leaves no doubt as regards the importance of the theme. Yet it is a surface structure of the play. The first indication that the question of fragmentation versus unity constitutes just the first layer in a more complex phenomenon is the fact that the very concepts of unity and fragmentation are more than just the physical and concrete gathering or leaving of the audience. We have passages where the audience, all there, sitting in front of the stage, is perceived by Miss La Trobe as 'slipping its noose' (p. 91), as falling apart in a process of fragmentation. The two scenes just before the 'intervention' of nature are examples of such a state of affairs. Unity is more than just the being there together of the audience. It is part of a more fundamental event.

In Miss La Trobe's eyes, this event is what the pageant is supposed to achieve and how it can be achieved: first make them feel and then see, make them feel, so that they see. A vision is intended by Miss La Trobe, and a vision that can only be achieved through feelings. The physical unity of the audience's presence has to be continued or concentrated in a unity of emotion. What becomes clear, at this stage, is that to achieve such a unity, the simple presence of the audience is not sufficient: they have to be gathered around something, this something being the play, in its emotion-creating function. To achieve such emotional unity, people have to be manipulated. For Miss La Trobe, the producing of this play implies bringing the audience where she wants them to be, so that a vision can happen. There are allusions to Miss La Trobe as a witch, a trickster, a magician. But such hints at manipulation also bring back to mind La Trobe's dictatorial side. The perfomativity of the process is paramount. It is, of course, called a performance, being theatre. What the play is about is less

important than the play as happening. This is why there is no perfect play, which would be a play without an audience, according to La Trobe: 'O to write a play without an audience – *the* play' (p. 130). But she needs the audience; a vision can only take place as part of a complex event implying audience, actors and producer. This performative aspect of the play is furthermore underlined by the vain attempts in the novel, by different members of the audience, to answer the question: 'what was the play about?' This question haunts the novel, without getting any definite answer, as if to suggest that maybe it is the wrong question. Rather than a 'what' question, we should think in terms of 'how'; not what is the play about, but 'how' it makes us feel and see.

This is the question I would like to answer now, looking at the detail of the unfolding of the play. The first thing to underline is the complexity of the task. The passage that constitutes the play in the novel is of a nearly inextricable complexity, mingling different levels: we pass from the play proper to the real life of the audience, but also to the real life of the actors; anecdotes or details of the biography are given in the audience's 'who's who' game of trying to guess who is playing the role. We also pass from the external life of the members of the audience to their inner life, especially in the case of the main characters: their thoughts, feelings and so on. We navigate between real life and the play, but also from the play to plays within the play: the play itself has a complex structure.[35] The play itself is linearly organised with intervals, breaks, unwanted blocks, allowing the level of reality to resurface. All those levels are intimately linked according to what we could call factual links: the actor is recognised as so and so, who is the policeman for instance, which might be the occasion of a digression on one episode of the policeman's life. But links are also what we could call psychological: events on the stage trigger thoughts or feelings in the members of the audience, which we then follow. But above all, links are structural or symbolic, brought

[35] For a discussion of the 'intertextuality' of *Between the Acts* (and the importance of Shakespeare in this respect), see Gillian Beer, *The Common Ground*, pp. 134-135.

about by the narrative itself: the very themes of the plays in the play echo themes of the play, that are also paramount to the novel as such. Animality, for example, rebounds from one layer to the other without end. What is created thus is a polyphony, a multi-layered symphony with the different aspects of the novel: characters and their outer and inner life, themes, the play and the plays-within-the-play, and so on, all caught up in an incredibly rich and complex structure. We know Virginia Woolf's fascination for the symphony model as an ideal form for literature; we encountered it in *The Waves*. In *Between the Acts*, music is repeatedly alluded to as such an ideal. It is even represented in the final moment of the play where, after the megaphonic voice, music brings about the climax, the vision, moving the audience, even Mrs. Manresa, to tears. Woolf repeatedly suggests that only such a symphonic structure, because of its complexity and the play it makes possible – this shuttling we have just described between its different elements – can properly speaking hint at the complexity of life.

Considered from this perspective, *Between the Acts* is her most achieved book. What is characteristic in *Between the Acts* is this very fluid multilayered structure. It is a book that is, nearly, as complex as life itself. It is, for this very reason, difficult to interpret: meaning does not adhere. Elements on all levels constantly change their value, become their very opposite: a house of mirrors, the book itself is a *mise en abîme*.

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The pageant has no proper beginning: the passage from life to play is blurred. People are there, sitting; machine-like noises come from the bushes: is this the ticking of time? is it part of the play, a technical problem? 'Was it, or was it not, the play?' (p. 59). In other words, the audience cannot really define what is happening, nor can the reader. The consequence is that we cannot really distinguish between fiction and reality. The same difficulty resurfaces at the end: in a parallel move, the end of the play disappears in lack of distinction in a fundamental questioning of limits.

The novel keeps creating limits in order to annihilate them. Its complex structure is made up of different categories that are melted and mixed. Miss La Trobe, it is suggested, is a witch boiling everything to a mass in her big cauldron:

> Ah, but she was not merely a twitcher of individual strings; she was one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a recreated world. (p. 112)

In the novel, the pageant is a reflection of the reality of the little community and itself contains plays, which are a reflection of reality and the pageant itself; the actors are members of that community who at some stage mix with the audience, in their costume, as the real people they are. There are scenes where the audience imitates the play, for instance, Dodge and Isa during the break (pp. 85-86). Real life is seen as stifled by the show of convention. The play itself does not seem to have any clear-cut beginning or end; it blurringly slides out of reality and into it again. The next play Miss La Trobe imagines in a moment of vision is, in fact, played at the very end of the novel, which is the beginning of this new play, by actors that are in fact real life characters: Isa and Giles. All this is a novel; that is to say, literature with its ambiguous relation, as fiction, to reality. In short, *Between the Acts* represents an almost unthinkable act of blurring of distinctions, and most emphatically that between reality and fiction; categories appear to immediately disappear in a frenetic dance. The mirror scene of the play and the ensuing chaos is its expression.

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After the beginning which is no beginning, England, represented by a little girl, comes on the stage. Two aspects are worth underlining here: firstly, the reflexivity of the play. The pageant takes place in the heart of England, in front of an audience made up of old indigenous families and is about England, its history and growth to the present time. There is a dimension of unhealthy narcissism here: England celebrating itself. But, at the same time, distance is

achieved: people look at themselves; narcissism is possible, because of the distance it marks in proximity; reflection implies seeing, which in turn implies distance. Moreover, the narcissist contemplation is organised by Miss La Trobe with her foreign name, her Russian origins and outcast status. This is one aspect of her manipulative stance: she uses self-love to introduce strangeness into the heart of England, that is to say, the heart of the audience. She works by infiltrating the enemy.

Secondly, the play is allegorical, people representing abstract ideas (here a nation, later reason and so on). We follow England as a person getting older, from a little girl to a teenager, and then a young woman; the temporal and therefore historical structure of the pageant is thus marked in very concrete terms. This structure is paramount for the ultimate effect of the play: to make people feel and see. History and age create a distance: the audience sees itself as young, or as belonging to another age: England is looking at itself, but it is an England of long ago. Miss La Trobe slowly bridges this gap by making the play move forward in historical time, and the gap is ultimately closed when we reach, for the climax, the present time; when England sees England now.

The very vision is achieved by a play on distance and proximity.[36] The audience, at first, sees but does not feel, assisting to the unfolding of their own history. Then, in the 'experience that went wrong', Miss La Trobe exposes her audience by not showing anything; she lets them wait indefinitely, which creates an atmosphere very similar to the coffee scene. People feel awkward – they are reduced to the now and then of their being, in an inescapable, stifling presence to themselves and each other:

> She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality. But something was going wrong with the experiment: 'Reality too strong', she muttered. (p. 130)

[36] What is achieved in *Between the Acts* thanks to a temporal structure is created in *The Voyage Out* through spatial distance. The novel's setting 'overseas' serves, ultimately, the same 'estrangement' aim; See Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, ed. by Jane Wheare (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

At this moment, they feel without seeing. They are reduced to the compactness of their material existence. It is only in the last scenes, after the upheaval of the mirror scene, that in some sort of dialectical movement, they both feel and see.

The very art of Virginia Woolf is summarised here: literature as a repetition with a difference. Reality is represented with a trembling, a sort of halo added to life that makes us perceive the transcendent in the immanent. This is the gist of Isa's vision of the three moments of life, suggesting Virginia Woolf's fundamental ontology; she speaks of love and hate, and peace. Life is love and hate, up and down to use the mapping of *The Waves*, and sometimes, in the midst of life, a pause, the moment the wave breaks, a vision. It is a moment of balance, of peace, outside time yet *in* time, a moment of inspiration that calls for another language. The hate and love of life: feeling. The moment of inspiration: feeling and seeing. The play's dynamism, its historical and temporal movement, could be analysed in terms of wave-pattern. It is characterised by ups and downs: moments of unity, followed by fragmentation. Throughout the play, there are moments when Miss La Trobe perceives that she has the audience under a spell; such moments are defined by unity. There are others, for instance, breaks and intervals or blocks, when Miss La Trobe sees them concretely flowing away, or symbolically, slipping their noose.

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The chorus enters, villagers at a certain distance from the stage representing and singing about the power of humanity over nature. It is doubly ironic: firstly, in relation to the omnipresent theme of animality, constantly emphasising the blurring of limits between the human and animal realms. Secondly, and this occurs throughout the play, the voices of the chorus can hardly be heard because of the wind: 'the wind blew away the connecting words of their chant' (p. 62). Just words, half meaningless fragments, can be grasped. Nature disturbs the very praise of man's hegemony. In this context, it is worth mentioning the recurrence of

instances of bad communication in the novel, suggesting literary language and its suspension of natural communication.

A comical mixture of Chaucerian pilgrims in their homage to saints alongside the tumbling of girls in hay follows. The characteristic feature of style in *Between the Acts* is ironic contrast. There is not one single domain which is left standing for itself. Everything is systematically posited and deposited in irony; even the most fundamental Woolfian concepts. The character who articulates her fundamental ontology in the novel, Isa, is also a bad poet and escapist. The ghost of the dead lady, the representative of the heart of silence in the novel, is a servant's fantasy. The artist is a dictator. The old chapel has become a kitchen and humanity is bestial.

Such irony lends the book its atmosphere of profound pessimism; as if the world was ultimately god-forsaken, the most essential in the end trivial. Art, for Virginia Woolf, is ultimately a repetition with a difference, the representation of the world plus the halo of transcendence; if this repetition or representation is understood in ironical terms, it is nothing else but parody. The halo itself is trivialised, transcendence is suggested and negated, what is added is then subtracted and we end up with the world or life as it is. It is the only novel among the four analysed in this thesis where, in the end, the transcendent is absent. Hence the pessimism, but also the realism of the novel: it has the simplicity or complexity and the ambiguity of life.

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Music is played on the gramophone, some blaring tune, praising the conquering boldness of mankind, a tune that will recur constantly during the play: 'a pompous march tune brayed. "Firm, elatant, bold and blatant," etc.' (p. 117). The tune is interrupted by some technical problem and the gramophone starts ticking again. The same incident occurred when the play started, and will occur again repeatedly. The ticking of the gramophone, accompanied by

some chuff-chuff locomotive sound is the clock of the novel. In *Between the Acts*, in different manners, we are constantly reminded of time. It is conveyed concretely by diverse clocks, either real ones like that of the church, or fictional ones like clocks that are part of the scenery of the play, in a way comparable to Big Ben marking the rhythm in *Mrs Dalloway*. But time is also kept constantly present in the audience's as well as the readers' mind by the ticking of the gramophone. It triggers, among the audience, for three of the main characters, a reflection on time. It is interesting to note that the three have a very different conception of time that suits their overall vision of life: for Lucy there is the eternal time of religion, for Isa who is dreaming about the gentlemen farmer, the future orientated time of desire and for Old Oliver, the passing of time of the empiricist (p. 64).

Time marked by the ticking of the gramophone is, in the economy of the play, historical time, but beyond that, playing thus its role in the economy of the novel, is 'time our time', that of incarnation. It is linked with the theme of animality, but also beyond it, with death and the heart of silence. In the dining room painting, the yellow of animality through the green shades of the vegetal world leads us to the heart of silence, echoing the layered ontology of the novel. The ticking in *Between the Acts* is the ticking of the time of incarnation, that is to say, of life and death. In this respect, it is worth noting that in *Between the Acts*, contrary to the three other novels I have analysed, nobody dies. Yet death is present. There is the ghost; there is the silence of the picture that reincarnates itself in all the silences of the novel: the unbearable atmosphere over coffee, or the moment of the experiment in the play, but also in all the breaks, intervals, interruption that threaten the unity, the spell of illusion. Such moments are, for Miss La Trobe, death, agony. But death reaffirms itself in all the weaknesses of the body in the novel: Mrs. Manresa's self-indulgence, Giles's attraction to her, his violent gesture, the fascination he exerts on Dodge, the priest's tobacco stained fingers and so on. As Cobbet of Cobbs Corner says: it's 'the old game of woman following man in the east as well as in the west' (p. 83). It is also, perhaps, Bond's common wisdom.

Death is also suggested by the pond, stagnant water over mud; and the suicide *ur*-scene by drowning: the lady is supposed to have drowned and Isa, at the moment of illumination, re-visits such an *ur*-scene. When Miss La Trobe has the vision that starts her new play, the only uninterrupted personal vision in the book, she, so to speak, drowns, is covered by a green sea and the words, the first words of the play come up to the surface from the mud of the pond. This corresponds to the typical Woolfian complex symbolic knot that presides over the description of the moment of inspiration; repeating with a difference Mrs. Ramsay's visions, for instance, where a death-like condensation is followed by expansion.

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Elizabeth I comes on stage. This starts the 'who's who' game on the part of the audience. Such a game underlines the porosity of the frontier between play and reality. It also props the irony; the great Elizabeth is Eliza the tobacconist: 'from behind the bushes issued Queen Elizabeth – Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco' (p. 64). Moreover, her costume brings the point home: the grandiloquent beauty of it is achieved with the most trivial paraphernalia: cleaning mops and so on. It shows the transfigurative power of art but also suggests parody in a *double entendre*. The same vein is continued when her speech, 'Shakespeare sang for me' is echoed by a cow mowing. Nothing is sacred. This scene is followed by the appearance on the stage of the village idiot. He is, it is suggested, the only person who is not haunted by dichotomy: playing his own role as an idiot, 'there was no need to dress him up. There he came, acting his part to perfection' (p. 66). He suggests a lack of conventional repression that frightens a decent old lady in the audience: he could do 'something dreadful' (p. 67). It is also quite ironic: in the period of time represented in the novel, we have, as reader, actually witnessed or they were suggestively imparted to us, quite a series of such 'dreadful' acts: masturbation, copulation, hatred, violence and rape.

The first play in the play is a parody of Elizabethan drama. The plot is confusing. The plays in the play, as well as the pageant itself, are bad theatre. We are reminded at the end that it was just a village play and that the means were modest. Beyond such a reasonable explanation, there is, in what immediately follows, a hint at a deeper reason. The lack of coherence of the Elizabethan play starts in Isa a reflection on plot:

> Did the plot matter? […] The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot […] Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing. (p. 69)

As usual in Virginia Woolf, her novels are always, in one way or the other, about literature. Isa comes to the conclusion that plot has only the importance of the means to an end; emotions are what counts. There is, in Isa's words, a theory of art, very similar to the one professed by Miss La Trobe. Such a theory is immediately deconstructed: 'but what was happening' (ibid.), someone, maybe even Isa, asks.

The tea interval

With the tea interval, the tune 'dispersed are we' (p. 74) is heard for the first time. The audience, actually dispersing, sings along with it; and Miss La Trobe has her second fit. She observes them flowing and streaming away, wondering whether she has made them see (ibid.). And then the song and music peters out on 'we' (ibid.); a most important pronoun in *Between the Acts*. The book is actually about the possibility of a 'we'. Not just the physical gathering of people, as we have suggested, but the possibility of the higher unity of a common emotion and vision. This is what Miss La Trobe is after and lives for. And the absence or failure of it means, for her, as indicated in this passage of the novel, agony.

During the tea interval, the six main characters are again the direct focus of attention. The general trend is one of consolidation of their idiosyncratic attitude under the sign of sexuality. Old Oliver cynically acknowledges that he and his sister, because of their age, are

cut off from the sexual game. He reflects disenchanted, on the vanity of poetry and religion in the face of inexorable death. Lucy, beyond sexuality, contemplates in a trance-like state the swallows. The younger ones form new couples: in the form for Giles and Mrs. Manresa of a sexual encounter, paralleled by Isa and Dodge's platonic one. The tea interval, in this respect, is sexually charged: there are plays of seduction and power between the protagonists, sexual innuendoes and sexual imagery. For instance, the allusion to prehistoric humming birds, quivering 'at the mouth of scarlet trumpets' (p. 82), which are quite the opposite of Lucy's swallows; or Old Oliver describing Mrs. Manresa's plump curves and 'her cornucopia running over' (p. 89). It is the most carnal passage of the novel. Even our spiritual characters are corrupted: Lucy is the one who imagines the humming birds; Dodge is reduced to masturbating physicality in the presence of Giles. Isa is queerly projected into a 'handsome' masculine being by Dodge's desire: thick-necked and broad-backed.

People are called back to the play by music. At first it sounds as if someone was practising scales, it then turns into a nursery rhyme, to become finally music. Unity forms again and it is in terms of unity, emotion and vision that music is understood. It is also understood in terms of manipulation: it is the trick Miss La Trobe uses to bring them back under her thumb.

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On stage, reason personified makes a diatribe on the power of humanity to shape their life and the world. It is a glorification of humanity based on the ideas of the Enlightenment. It is deeply ironic after the 'lust' scenes of the tea break. One is given a sense of the ideology of humanism: the difference between how we see ourselves, or rather how we talk about ourselves, and what we really are. This links to the question of conventions as cover-up. We play hide-and-seek with ourselves. And it is exactly this *mauvaise foi* that Miss La Trobe wants to shatter. By not wanting to face our animality, by excluding it, we also exclude the

possibility of vision. Vision is only possible via, implies a passage through, animality and death.

Such a praise of civilisation and reason also ironically or tragically contrasts with the historical situation of the novel. Its events are supposed to take place a few months before World War II and it was actually written during the war. For many European intellectuals, World War II meant the end of civilisation and proved the values of Enlightenment to be illusionary.[37] The point is brought home with the second play in the play, which is about good manners hiding base and vile instincts. It is a parody, this time of classical drama. *Between the Acts* is also a history of English literature. It is intertextually structured. This is another way of opening-up the world of the novel, and the final effect is once again one of annihilation of limits. *Between the Acts* is full of echoes of other pieces of literature, and is itself reflected in those other pieces.

At the end of the second play in the play, someone in the audience shouts 'all that fuss about nothing' (p. 102), which makes Miss La Trobe enthusiastic. This person is described, from her point of view, as a voice: 'the voice had seen' (ibid.). Those circumstances might seem odd at first; what seems a negative comment is interpreted by Miss La Trobe as a positive sign, and a member of the audience is reduced to a voice first, and then to 'it'. The inessentiality of the message is thus underlined: performativity is what counts. If the whole story comes to nothing, it does not matter; it is just a means to something else, as Isa suggested in her thoughts about plots, and this something else is emotion, the happening itself of the play. Throughout the novel, it is suggested that not only 'what questions' are the wrong ones but 'who questions' as well. At the end of the play, when the priest wants to thank the author, Miss La Trobe hides. The whole question of the death of the author is suggested here, but also of the death of the audience; at least the death of the audience as identified individuals. The very process at the core of the representation, which Miss La Trobe

[37] For example: Leonard Woolf, *Downhill All the Way: An Autobiography of the Years 1919-1939* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967).

endeavours to put into motion – the process of unification that is the condition of both emotion and vision – implies the overcoming of fragmentation, which is, in social terms, individuality as identity. So it is not really surprising that someone who sees, is not someone, but a neutral voice. Thus, the theme of the voice will reappear later on, after the group vision. There the narrator explicitly refers to the other voice, the neutral voice, which is 'nobody's.'[38]

Modern theorists of literature have often come across such a neutral voice. Maurice Blanchot is an example.[39] It seems that inspiration uses the particular presence of an identifiable author to incarnate itself, but remains larger, more universal and impersonal than the particular presence in question; even tearing it apart, so to speak, literature being the place where the universal and the particular meet in a clash, tension and opposition. I do not think that such theories are very far away from Virginia Woolf's own literary experience.[40]

The first intervention of nature follows. The chorus's song about the power of mankind over nature is, with the usual ironic twist, blown away and thus made inaudible by the wind. The audience just sees opening mouths in another instance of thwarted communication. Miss La Trobe feels the people escaping her, the illusion failing. For her, as we know, this means agony, paralysis, death:

> Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralysed. Her power had left her. Beads of perspiration broke on her forehead. Illusion had failed. 'This is death', she murmured, 'death.' (p. 103)

She literally cannot breathe any more, is panic stricken. Just at this moment, when everything seems lost, the cows start a concert of melancholic mooing, which refocuses people's attention.

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[38] At the same time as the writing of *Between the Acts*, Woolf was also sketching her unfinished 'History of English literature' published posthumously under the title 'Anon', in which she discusses the 'singing instinct' and its impersonality; see Virginia Woolf, 'Anon', in *'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays*, ed. by Brenda R. Silver, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 25, No ¾, Virginia Woolf Issue (Autumn-winter, 1979), pp. 356-441.

[39] Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 556-582.

[40] See note 38, above.

Providence at play, the intimacy of the natural and human worlds, are suggested, but it is also linked with the thematic of decision making and the master. Miss La Trobe took the decision to perform the pageant outside. The decision is itself trivial, but the structure is not. The question of a leader who takes a decision and thus the responsibility for it, in the name of others, unburdening them, but making them followers at the same time, is present in the background. For Miss La Trobe, there was the folly of the risk, the blindness of the act and this is exactly what saves her now. What is suggested is that the artist is someone like you and me, inhabiting the trivial world of everyday life, yet dwelling blindly and fatedly, at the same time, in another dimension. It is another instance of the universality of the neutral voice meeting in the artist the identity of the personal. It is the same complex phenomenon that finds its expression in terms of decision, fate, and providence.

But these high-flown concepts of Providence, fate, and so on, are simultaneously deconstructed in the irony of the saving occurrence of cows ridiculously bellowing. Furthermore, when the cows stop and lower their heads, so does the audience: ‘suddenly the cows stopped; lowered their heads, and began browsing. Simultaneously the audience lowered their heads and read their programmes’ (p. 104). Decision making is also a matter of a dictator manipulating idiots.

At this stage of the pageant, the process set in motion by Miss La Trobe starts to have some effects. People feel ‘not quite themselves’ (p. 110). For instance, Lucy, not respecting conventions, approaches Miss La Trobe in the changing rooms, that is to say, the hollow. This is another instance of problematic communication. This time, the problem is not a message that cannot be received; it is rather one that cannot be formulated. Lucy cannot express in satisfactorily fashion what she feels or thinks. She ends up bluntly saying to Miss La Trobe that the play made her feel like she could have played Cleopatra. She formulates it in such a way, though, that we are made to understand that this feeling is a gift from Miss La Trobe. Beside the paradox consisting in Lucy, the Christ-like figure in *Between the Acts* turning into

Cleopatra, I want to draw attention to the idea of a gift. This is exactly how Miss La Trobe sees the point of the performance herself later in the novel, although she adds immediately that she is more interested in the group than in individual persons: 'she was not merely a twitcher of individual strings' (p. 112). The gift in question in the case of Lucy is a half vision, the impression that she is more than what she is: the Cleopatra role is clearly contrasted with her everyday habitual life. Miss La Trobe, later in the novel, once the play is finished, reflects: 'you have taken my gift' (p. 151); but immediately wonders about what she has given and concludes that it is in fact nothing: the play, once finished, is like a cloud welling into other clouds, a failure. However, she believes that the giving is the important aspect, its performance rather than its result: 'but what had she given? A cloud that melted into other clouds on the horizon. It was in the giving that the triumph was' (ibid.). In the performativity of the vision, a space is opened, a freedom is experienced ephemerally.

The encounter with Lucy starts a reflection on the part of Miss La Trobe. She sees herself as a witch boiling fragments of humanity ('wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron') and 'recreating a world from this mass' (p. 112). The theme of unity and fragmentation is obviously central here. She seems to understand her performance as a passage from fragmentation to unity. But this is just half the story: she actually spends a lot of energy doing just the opposite, breaking up the false unity of conventions. In *Between the Acts*, there is, in fact, a double parallel movement: the passage of the unity of everyday life to a fragmented state out of which a new unity is constructed. This is exactly what happens during the performance. The play of distance and proximity, emotion and vision, feeling and seeing can also be unfolded in terms of destruction and reconstruction; with the 'reality experience' and the 'mirror scene' playing the role of a deconstructive moment.

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Another tune shepherds the audience into the Victorian time. The proximity to the present time is marked by the fact that some members of the audience still remember the period; it constitutes their real, concrete past. An allegorical figure represents the Victorian era: a constable, with hints at patriarchy, colonialism, religion as condescending charity and obsessional purity in sexual matters. All this in an ironic tone: 'a very fine figure of a man he was […] his truncheon extended; his waterproof pendant' (p. 120). It is followed by the third play in the play this time a parody of the Victorian novel. The play ironises conventions, showing thus how they work, the bad faith implied and the mechanisms of obfuscation of a certain human reality, the carnal that returns in a perverted form. The audience, living according to conventions not very far removed from the ones ironised on stage, is disturbed. This effect takes different forms: downright rejection ('it was cheap and nasty') or musing, half nostalgic and half questioning ('why had it perished?' (p. 126)). This is Miss La Trobe's destabilising at work. People start questioning their direct past, but also themselves, and the rule of convention. People are made to think 'how my mind wanders' (p. 127). The effect culminates in Lucy's statement that Victorians did not exist; they are the same people with different clothes, which annihilates the very temporal difference between them and us:

> 'The Victorians', Mrs Swithin mused. 'I don't believe' she said with her odd little smile, 'that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.' (Ibid.)

The deconstruction of the audience is brought further by the next scene: 'the experiment that went wrong.' According to the program, the next sequence is about 'ourselves' (p. 128), the present time. But nothing happens, the stage is empty. There is only the maddening tick-tick of the gramophone; people start to get fidgety; they feel ill at ease. They look for a possible explanation of the circumstances; they glance at the program or do not know where to look or what to say. We witness a slow mounting up of the pressure, a gradual exposure of the audience that reminds one of the coffee episode. The waiting ripens

the audience. Conventions are brought to their limit, presence is reduced to here and now, they feel short of social coverage. Their naked humanity, their condition incarnate is brought to the surface, indeed time is ticking. Indeed 'they were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended […] in limbo' (p. 129).

The reader is given an explanation by the narrator: Miss La Trobe wanted to 'try ten minutes of present time' (p. 130), she wanted 'to douche them with present time reality' (ibid.) but something went wrong with the experiment, 'reality is too strong' (ibid.). It is in the play between distance and proximity that the meaning of the episode can be found. The audience feels too much and therefore cannot see. They live rather than live and observe their life at the same time. Art is the tension between the two. Yet, Miss La Trobe's very failure participates in her success, although she is not aware of this fact. This moment of exposure is one stage in the process of deconstruction, of fragmentation that is necessary for the final reconstruction. We have seen how Miss La Trobe takes one type of unity apart to rebuild another. This scene, as the quotation 'they were […] in limbo' suggests, is part of this process.

In this respect, a comparison with the coffee episode in part one is instructive. Both scenes are moments of exposure, but the coffee episode is a dead end, whereas here it is part of an unfolding process. The very difference between art and life is brought home: life is blind whereas art sees. The same basic emotions once folded back upon themselves in a blind, immediacy, once separated from themselves in the distance created by art; involvement versus peace. Miss La Trobe is not aware of this. On the contrary, she suffers as much as the audience: 'she felt what they felt' (ibid.). With the lack of distance, their involvement in life, they are escaping her, the illusion of art is failing, the distance disappearing: 'death, death, death' (p. 131).

Again the elements save the day, not cows this time but a shower: 'Tears, Tears. Tears' (ibid.). The tears shed on account of human pain according to Isa, a 'universal rain.'

Here, the *deus ex machina*, associated with the mythological symbolism of rain and Isa's interpretation of the event, all concur in suggesting an act of divine Providence. Religion is very present in *Between the Acts*. This is quite uncommon for Virginia Woolf; it is practically absent from the three other books we have analysed (apart from a clear rejection of it in the figure of Miss Killman in *Mrs Dalloway*). But in *Between the Acts*, its value is not so clear-cut. Like everything else in the novel, it is ambiguous. We find it represented in the novel by characters such as Lucy and the priest, or we find it hinted at in events like the one we are discussing now. But both the characters and events are double sided: is Lucy a dotty old grandma or an enlightened being? Is the priest just another manipulator, interested, above all, in how much today's play will contribute to the new electric lights for his church or a spiritual guide? Natural intervention hesitates between the dumb bellowing of cows and universal rain.

The intervention in question, whatever its value, brings the process further: now the 'other' voice can speak, the voice that is no-one's. It marks the stage where individuality is left behind, in the process of the play. It is associated with the shower, 'the voice that wept for human pain' (ibid.), and thus with a celestial origin. It is also associated with the nursery rhymes. It is nobody's voice, coming from above, in utter simplicity and childishness, to redeem human pain in an obviously Christian vein. Isa thinks of sacrifice and death: 'the little twist of sound could have the whole of her' (ibid.). Even the word 'altar' creeps up: 'rain soaked is the altar' (p. 132).

Yet, as always, ambiguity is present. Part of the above is Isa's interpretation of the events. It is not clear where her thoughts end and where the narrator's contribution starts. And Isa is the dreamer, the escapist *par excellence*, in the novel: she keeps poeticising, romanticising the events of her life. Thus, here as readers, we do not really know whether we are confronted with a vision or an illusion. Even the most moving, supernatural passages of *Between the Acts* are undermined by ambiguity; the book throughout, remains a ridge, a blade always hesitating between interpretations.

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The next scene starts with a picture of England the audience can understand and approve of because it is flattering: England as a source of civilisation. This is the first phase of the major scene of fragmentation. Miss La Trobe thus manages, in a feat of manipulation, to have the audience open up to her, or the play, in order to strike better. The structure of the scene is one of increasing chaos. First, the world of sounds fall apart, then the visible world. It represents the paroxysm of the annihilation of limits that is found throughout the novel. First one tune follows the other, then bits of tunes rapidly follow each other, 'nothing ends', creating a cacophony. The emphasis is laid on the disintegrating effect of the event: 'snapped', 'broke', 'jagged', 'disrupt'. With actual words imitating the cacophony, the jarring sounds: 'what a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult; and not plain', or 'jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peak and spy?' or 'what a cackle, what a rattle, what a raffle' (p. 133). It is quite extraordinary how the effect described is in fact created by the text itself. This is Virginia Woolf's poetry; that is to say, the performativity of her language, the fact that it loses the distinction between form and content.

The audience is 'smashed into atoms', 'shred into splinters' (ibid.), fragmentation is everywhere. But it is not finished yet. What has started on the level of sound now reaches the visible. Actors come on stage with mirrors, anything that reflects and start dancing and jumping, with the mirrors held in the direction of the audience. People catch glimpses of themselves in dancing fragments. The cacophony is doubled by visual chaos. Virginia Woolf's language in a rapid succession of verbs gives us a textual equivalent of the process: 'out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping' or 'mopping, mowing, whisking, frisking, the looking glasses darted, flashed, exposed' (ibid.). The effect is one of exposure but with a difference from the previous scene: here it is, at the same time, 'fun',

'people in the back rows stood up to see the fun' (ibid.). It is art and not life; there the distance is added to the experience.

But chaos still increases, nature joins in: cows start bellowing and dogs barking. Any distinction between the animal and human worlds becomes meaningless. All the actors from the previous scenes appear in their costumes and start shouting their respective roles. It is the end of history, all ages meet, and it is also the end of any endeavour at coherent communication. We have reached a summit of chaos. It all comes to an abrupt end with an incident. People now see their fragmented reflection and feel awkward. They are disturbed in their oneness, their identity. They start talking to avoid the 'inquisitive insulting eye' (p. 135), some want to go, to escape. It is the moment Miss La Trobe chooses for the 'megaphonic speech'. 'A voice unknown' articulates a moral discourse: in simple words, it tells us to face the reality of our being. This means facing our weakness, our animality and finite condition. It also means avowing our covering-up game of conventions. It asks in a utopian strain how we, fragments, can hope to ever bring about civilisation and ends with a question about the goodness of mankind. In this speech, politics is present in its suggestion of utopia, there is religion in its call for humility, ethics in its discussion of goodness and conventions. But above, all there is pessimism: goodness, utopia and humility seem far away, yet there is a little hope.

The last moment of the play is an incarnation of this hope. Music is played. It has the richness of a 'symphony.' Woolf cherishes this concept: a model for literature. It can accommodate different strands, integrate a multiplicity of layers without reducing them. All these features are suggested now in this last piece of music. It is the concluding message of the pageant: in spite of appearances, the overwhelming nastiness of mankind, there is still hope. The complexity of life, like that of music, can maybe accommodate contrary strands: there is also a place for goodness in spite of the actual evil. And the very emotion of the audience (even Mrs. Manresa cries, who remained unmoved throughout the play) is the

incarnation of such goodness. Isn't it a sign from above, that the animals that we are can feel? Isn't that the very tension, contradiction, which *Between the Acts* stands for? That matter can be moved? 'Is this us, are we both this and the fragments?' (p. 137). This is the actual vision.

At this moment, there is a sort of anti-climax, as the Reverend appears on stage. The poor man seems 'a simplified absurdity after the show' and puts an end to it with an author-thanking ceremony where the author does not appear. People leave, accompanied by the tune 'dispersed are we' played on the gramophone. It gurgles to an end: 'unity-disparity. It gurgled: un … dis … And ceased' (p. 146), maintaining the tension to the very end.

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I want to end this chapter with a discussion of literary language in *Between the Acts*. I will proceed in two stages: firstly, by analysing the last pages of the novel, in which we have a description of Miss La Trobe's vision; secondly, by looking back upon the pageant as a statement about literature.

La Trobe's vision

At the end of the play, Miss La Trobe hides in the hollow until everybody has left. She is busy packing-up when she experiences the first intimation of a vision. A flock of starlings land on a tree behind her. She talks of a 'bird-buzzing tree', of a 'rhapsody of a tree', and on it, 'birds syllabing discordantly life' (p. 152). This is an instance of the symphony theme: an event that can, because of its complexity and plural nature, express the complexity of life. The language used is extremely condensed and relies on new coinages; compound words abound. Above all, in the same manner as the cacophony scene, words try to reproduce the experience, not by talking about it, but by *becoming* it. It is as if the conditions, or rather the proportions of the experience were reproduced, making, in language, a repetition of the experience possible, which is not a thematising of it.

But the vision is interrupted: the birds fly away and Miss La Trobe is left with an intimation of a vision only. Yet the same phenomenon reproduces itself: while thinking about how all this, the pageant, the suffering and the joy, is for nothing, she can feel 'something rising to the surface'. She 'sees' two figures, at midnight, in a rough landscape, in a sort of prologue to a play: 'the curtain would rise' and the figures 'would talk' (ibid.) but she cannot hear the 'first words.' Another interruption, here self-inflicted, so to speak: she cannot go further, it is not ripe. What is worth noting though, is, firstly, that she suggests that growing darkness and obliteration of the view are factors favourable to such an experience; secondly, the vision occurs as a movement coming from the depths to the surface, reminding one of the episode when Lucy spots the great carp in the pond.

The same vision occurs again a moment later and this time comes to its end. This is Miss La Trobe's vision proper and the only successful personal vision in *Between the Acts*. The circumstances are important. She feels exhausted, on the verge of 'breaking the law.' She needs oblivion and seeks it at the pub and in drink. There, isolated, feeling the drink and the smoke, the smoke literally obscuring the surroundings, she drowses and nods. She is half awake, half conscious, she feels 'green waters rise over her' and listens:

> Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning – wonderful words. (p. 153)

And she sees, 'there was the high ground at midnight; there the rock and two scarcely perceptible figures' and 'suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words' (p. 154).

This proto-scene given to her in the vision is the beginning of a new play: it is the scene on which the curtain will rise and the first words will be the first words of the play. This first scene of the play is also the last scene of the book. Late at night, once Old Oliver and Lucy have gone to bed, Giles and Isa are left alone for the first time. It is dark, the scene has

been prepared by allusions to a rough landscape and prehistory, and the couple in a love and hate relationship, compared to a fox and a vixen, are going to fight and make love:

> Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. (p. 158)

We leave Isa and Giles standing:

> Against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was before roads were made or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (Ibid.)

In an ultimate intersection of life and art, the last scene of life is the first scene of art, but the last scene of life is the last scene of a book and the first scene of the play is what will always be beyond art; that is to say, life.

Literary language

What comes up in the vision are words; it is not a play, a book or a poem, but just words. It is language that comes first, the experience of language is essential. These words are meaningless and beautiful. We came across meaninglessness in *The Waves* where it is associated with what Woolf calls a 'little language'. Beauty, in parallel, can be associated with the opacity of language: the phenomenon that, instead of effacing itself in its referential function, language attracts attention to itself. Such language is given in a vision, which implies some sort of death[41] and rebirth. It is then associated with a neutral voice – no one's voice – and it consists in the first words, the beginning of language. These first words are not given in *Between the Acts*. All there is, is 'they spoke'. Literary language is language made

[41] The sinking into the mud and the drowning in green waters here but a condensation into a 'dark wedge' in *To the Lighthouse*, or the entering into a dark deserted room in *Mrs Dalloway*, an eclipse of the sun in *The Waves*.

verb, ‘to speak’; it is what speaks in language. The first words always come too early or too late. This is why Miss La Trobe considers her play a failure; this is also why, performing this one, she is already hoping for the next one; this is why the first words are not given. Literary language is language as event. Language as event, given in a vision, meaningless and performative: this is what the last pages of *Between the Acts* have to say about literary language.

The pageant as a statement about literary language

The analysis of the pageant has shown that performativity is one of its most important features. It is intimately linked with the question of unity versus fragmentation. Unity is achieved as the gathering of an audience, actors, and producer around the performance of a play. But it is more than physical presence that is aimed at. This is just the first stage of a process which aims at producing a vision through emotion. The word ‘process’ is the whole program: the concrete gathering of people around the play and its continuation in a further emotional unity, climaxing in a vision, is something that happens, ephemeral, an event. It is a performance in the fundamental sense of pure performativity. Woolf’s interest in theatre as a theme in *Between the Acts* is self-evident in this light. Theatre possesses the dimension of performativity as its essential feature. This dimension is also reflected in Miss La Trobe’s and Isa’s suggestions that once the play is finished, it is a failure, it was for nothing, a cloud disappearing in other clouds. ‘What have I given?’ asks Miss La Trobe. She answers herself by affirming that the giving is what counts. This suggests the ‘what question’ that haunts the performance. Such a question gets no definitive answer; underlining that it is the *wrong* question.

Another feature of the pageant is its meaninglessness. The ‘what question’ is the reverse of a question about the meaning of the play, which similarly cannot be answered.

'What does it mean?' This is another question that haunts the novel. Both meaning and content are challenged by pure performativity.

Self-reflexivity is also a feature of the pageant. Miss La Trobe never lets the audience forget that it is a theatre play which they are enjoying. In fact, with the 'experiment that went wrong', she inadvertently allows self-reflexivity to disappear, and this threatens to destroy the performance. Self-referentiality guarantees the distance that is necessary in art; the 'see' added to the 'feel.' This is achieved in the pageant by constantly marking the distinction between reality and play: the 'who's who' game of the audience is a sign of it. The audience keeps seeing, through the role, the real person: Queen Elizabeth is Eliza the tobacconist, betrayed by her swarthy, muscular arms, for instance; thus the play remains a play, there is no realistic illusion. The effect is also achieved through the 'modest means' of the performance, trivial everyday utensils and paraphernalia are used for the costumes and scenery. They are thus transfigured, made beautiful, yet are recognisable as what they are, as several remarks by the audience attest. Such a 'beauty' is self-referential.

Mise en abîme is another feature of the pageant. It is found, for instance, in the difference between reality and the play, as well as in the indefinite multiplication of this difference: a stage outdoors on which a scenery representing an outdoor landscape is put up, with real swallows flying over it; actors in their costumes, being their real selves, among the audience; plays in the play; the 'mirror scene', where reality is reflected on stage, and so on.

The pageant is, and this is the last feature, haunted by contradiction. It came to the fore in the discussion of the unity/fragmentation theme; but other clashes of contraries are significant: distance/proximity; a neutral voice speaking through a particular author; fiction/reality; and so on. Furthermore, the very irony that pervades the performance is based on an aporetic principle.

The results of both the analysis of Miss La Trobe's vision and the discussion of the pageant, if put together, suggest the following idea of literary language: it is language as

event, given in a vision, performative and self-referential that opens up an endless space of play in innumerable aporias.

The four concepts at the basis of the theory of literary language I presented in the introduction to this thesis are present. But they are accompanied by other elements. Some of those elements I have encountered very early in this work. They were what put me on the scent, so to speak, of the theory in question. I am thinking about the phenomenon of vision which I first came across in *Mrs Dalloway*. The same phenomenon reappeared in *To the Lighthouse,* associated with inspiration and a paradoxical movement away and from. This movement was translated into an up-and-down movement, the pattern of the wave, in *The Waves*. In this novel, a humanistic dimension was added to it, in the form of a Sisyphean task. In *Between the Acts*, there is another new addition, that of the beginning of language. All this shows that for Virginia Woolf, a theory of literary language is anchored in, or forms the superstructure, of a larger domain. This larger domain is a philosophy of life, or to be more precise, a fundamental anthropology. It will be my task, in the conclusion of this work, to articulate such a fundamental anthropology.

III. Eyes for unity

Once again, if my insistence on tension at the core of *Between the Acts* is set against Laurence's deconstructionist reading, it also marks a distance from its opposite, a reading emphasising unity, such as James Naremore's. His reading of *Between the Acts*[42] starts with a confrontation with the negative assessments of the novel by other critics. The latter's general drift is a reproach of lack of coherence: 'vacancy and pointlessness', or its being 'an

[42] James Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

impressionistic hodgepodge.'[43] Naremore acknowledges 'the book's somewhat disjointed quality',[44] yet endeavours to show that in spite of appearance, unity, coherence and harmony are central features of *Between the Acts*. He does so from the outside and from the inside.

From the outside, Naremore contextualises *Between the Acts* within Woolf's work by showing that it comprises typical Woolfian characteristics. It is like her other novels born of her 'anxiety over discontinuity and fragmentation';[45] indeed:

> The great problem that animates this novel, as indeed all Mrs. Woolf's novels is whether to deny or accept the terrible sense of separation between things.[46]

It is governed, like her other books, by a male/female dialectic: '*Between the Acts* is built on that attempt at a masculine-feminine dialectic which is so much part of Mrs. Woolf's fiction.'[47] Because of this, the traits attributed to the representatives of both sexes are typical: 'the male-female roles are characterised here as in Mrs Woolf's other novels.'[48] Finally, there is 'symmetry'. Her books are 'obviously symmetrical';[49] by this, Naremore means their structural and temporal deployment. But *Between the Acts* is 'slightly disordered':

> The first, very short, scene, a little over a page and a half, describes a conversation during a summer's night. All the rest of the narrative is devoted to the following day, as if the author were deliberately avoiding an easy symmetry.[50]

We have here a case of 'the same with a difference', marking continuity rather than discontinuity. For Naremore, then, it is the author behind the book that assures, from the outside so to speak, because of the continuity in her career, the coherence of *Between the Acts.*

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[43] Ibid., p. 220.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., p. 230.
[46] Ibid., p. 234.
[47] Ibid., p. 233.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 236.
[50] Ibid.

The author also contributes from within to the unity of the novel. According to Naremore, 'the two characters who come nearest to representing Mrs. Woolf's own values are both "unifiers."'[51] The two characters in question are, according to Naremore, Lucy Swithin and Miss La Trobe. The latter is explicitly said to be the author's speaker:

> That 'megaphonic, anonymous' voice, speaking to the audience at first in clipped sentences and then in doggerel, is pretty clearly the voice of Miss La Trobe, and it is not difficult to hear Virginia Woolf speaking too.[52]

What is the 'voice' promoting? 'What the gramophone affirms is harmony and unity, and it does this largely through the power of art which unites the audience'[53] and behind the voice, there is 'Mrs. Woolf herself'[54] who 'has more in common with Lucy Swithin and Miss La Trobe, with Isa the dreamy wife' but, 'it is clear that the harmony she seeks is incomplete without Giles and Old Oliver, that some kind of androgynous synthesis is necessary.'[55]

Both Woolf's technique and themes in *Between the Acts*, according to Naremore, contribute to unity and harmony. Her literary experiments, her striving for a new 'method'[56] in *Between the Acts* consists in two main techniques: the 'orts and fragments' one and the 'stream of consciousness applied from the outside'. About the first, Naremore writes: 'this peppering of fragmentary quotations throughout the scenes is perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the novel'[57] that finds expression in 'the sort of mixture found everywhere – lines of poetry, orders to the grocer, comment on the weather, quotes from newspaper etc.'[58] Naremore characterises the second thus: 'the form of the inner life, with all its random play of associations and images is here shown to be the form of life itself.'[59] Naremore goes on to

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[51] Ibid., p. 237.
[52] Ibid., pp. 234/235.
[53] Ibid., p. 235.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid., p. 220.
[57] Ibid., p. 224.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., p. 228.

show that the point of those technical innovations is not art for art's sake, but a mimesis of increased efficiency: they enable Woolf to 'point to the apparent aimlessness and the disconnected quality of life.'[60] Yet, at the same time, this 'revealing' is a 'creating': 'Mrs. Woolf's art is aimed at creating and revealing a world.'[61] Here Naremore identifies Woolf's art with La Trobe's: 'Mrs. Woolf's artistry […] has something in common with Miss La Trobe's':[62]

> Built upon orts and fragments itself, the pageant is not only an interpretation of history but also a means by which harmony is created. It merges people, brings fragments together and makes them 'all one stream.'[63]

According to Naremore, 'art then if we may take La Trobe as a type of the artist, has an affirmative end, it bridges gaps, holds things together, merges people and its greatest enemy is the "awful space between the acts."'[64] We know that Naremore believes that this is also Woolf's position: 'the book is about unfilled spaces, more specifically it is about the anxiety that grows from an effort to discover continuity and unity in life.'[65]

This continuity sought on the formal level finds its confirmation on the thematic level in Naremore's reading: *Between the Acts*, like all of Woolf's novels, at rock bottom, is about the 'male/female dialectic', that is to say, love: 'the important historical events are not wars but loves.'[66] Naremore underlines that the last scene of *Between the Acts* 'is to be in some way a first act, or at least a repetition of all acts between men and women. In this sense, it will determine the continuity of life.'[67] This repetition finds an echo in the plays within the play, where 'to underscore the sense of historical continuity, three sets of male/female relationships are established within the story proper, each representing a different period of history but each

[60] Ibid., p. 224.
[61] Ibid., p. 236.
[62] Ibid., p. 229.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., p. 234.
[66] Ibid., p. 233.
[67] Ibid., p. 232.

fundamentally the same.'[68] It seems that, for Naremore, the theme of love conceived in this way assures not only within the novel itself but also as a unifying principle in Woolf's career, the continuity that seems at first sight to be absent. Indeed, this is how Naremore concludes his essay:

> But a kind of stream is implied, nevertheless, in the orts and fragments that represent the substance of most of the individual scenes. It is Mrs Swithin's view of history that the novel ultimately supports: history understood not as a cycle or even a significant progression, but as a framework for the constant play of what Isa describes as love, hate, and peace. Only the surface of our lives change; nature as the villagers tell us 'is always the same, summer, winter, and spring.' This view, of course, can be deduced from all of Mrs. Woolf's novels.[69]

Where deconstruction only had eyes for discontinuity, a world-orientated critic insists on continuity. In both cases the end result is the same: the very tension at the heart of Woolf's writing is obfuscated.

[68] Ibid., p. 233.
[69] Ibid., p. 238.

CONCLUSION

I want to do two things in this conclusion. Firstly, I have repeatedly mentioned a fundamental anthropology underlying Virginia Woolf's practice of literary language. It is my aim in this conclusion to try to articulate this fundamental anthropology in philosophical terms. Secondly, I want to describe how the theory of literature that has been drafted in the preceding chapters could be articulated onto such a fundamental anthropology.

My way of accessing Woolf's work has been through a tension between a force of unification and one of disintegration. We have seen that this is one aporia among many others in her work. I have used the concept of aporia and three others: performativity, figurality and fictionality to conceptualise Virginia Woolf's use of literary language. A key word that has emerged from such theorising is 'strangeness'. Virginia Woolf's use of language in the four novels I have studied is 'strange' in the sense that it demarcates itself from ordinary communicative use of language. My endeavours have thus a formalistic ring to them: my 'strangeness' seems very similar to Shklovsky's 'defamiliarisation'[1] or Jakobson's 'literariness'.[2]

However, there is a fundamental difference. I don't want to stop there. Such structural features of the work of literature are one side of the coin, of which the other is what I call – after Iser – a fundamental anthropology. In the same manner as I have conceptualised Virginia Woolf's use of literary language, I will have to conceptualise such a fundamental anthropology. It is not explicitly theorised in her work, but forms the backdrop of her literary practice.

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[1] Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Modern Literary Theory*, ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 19.

[2] 'The object of literary science is not literature but literariness, which is to say what makes a given work a literary work.' Cited in Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics* (Indianapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 70.

In the same way as there were the embryos of a literary theory in Lily's struggle with painting and Bernard's reflections on writing or Miss La Trobe's torments as a playwright, we have traces of philosophising about life in Virginia Woolf's work. I have listed such traces as we went along: they are the distance/proximity structure of Clarissa's relation to the old lady in *Mrs Dalloway*; the Sisyphean task of the construction of the world demanded by Bernard's interlocutor, or Rhoda's and Louis's visions in *The Waves*; the paradoxical death/birth of the visions or Lily's painting as event in *To the Lighthouse*; an *ur*-relation as the birth of language in *Between the Acts*. There is also the layered ontology that we have brought to light in *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*; or the visions as inspiration. With the help of such elements, I want to try to reconstruct and formulate explicitly the fundamental anthropology forming the backdrop of our four novels.

To do so, I will enlist two philosophers: Emmanuel Lévinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein, for the reasons outlined in the first chapter of this thesis. I borrow from these two philosophers parts of their philosophy, elements of their thought, which I combine in order to formulate the vision of life behind Virginia Woolf's work.

Both Lévinas and Wittgenstein would certainly disapprove of such a rapprochement. Lévinas would reproach me for using what he calls ontological language, the language of consciousness, spatial and temporal, to describe an event that is beyond it.[3] Wittgenstein would reproach me for making a metaphysician of him, making his *Philosophical Investigations* a traditional philosophical enterprise, implying a view of language from the outside, when all his efforts are directed towards the development of a method implying our absolute intra-linguistic position. Even talking of an outer limit, under such terms, is

[3] Writing a preface to the German translation of *Totalité et infini* in 1987, that is to say 17 years after the first publication of the book in 1971, Lévinas, looking back on the work done, acknowledges that it is, for the first time, with *Autrement qu'être*, that he manages to break loose from the language of ontology: '*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* évite déjà le langage ontologique […] auquel *Totalité et infini* ne cesse de recourir.' Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), p. ii ('*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* already avoids the ontological language […] to which *Totality and Infinity* resorts.' My translation).

problematic.[4] Such a rapprochement serves a strategic purpose: it is a very general sketch, functioning as a basis from which to begin investigations. It is the gradual clarification of both points of view from this basis that will enable us to see what they can add to each other, fusing on a point which is essential for my work: language as life. Lévinas gives the idea of language as life, Wittgenstein the mode of access to it.

I borrow from Lévinas a central structure of his thought: the distinction between 'dire' and 'dit'. Adopting such a structure has several consequences. First, it puts language in a central position. Second, it allows a vision of the world as dichotomy, in layers, a before and an after, or a surface and what is behind it or since we are positioned in language: a sayable and an unsayable.

The 'dit' is the world as talked about, thematised: 'le dit où tout se thématise - où tout se montre dans le thème.' ('The said in which everything is thematised, in which everything shows itself in a theme.')[5] In the phenomenological terms that are Lévinas's, the 'dit' is a system where subject and object have emerged in interdependence, in a mirror like reflection. It is the realm of consciousness and presence; its time is the present. It is also understood in terms of mastery and isolation: the subject having the overview in its ivory tower.

If the 'dit' is the sayable then the 'dire' is the unsayable, it is the layer underneath or before, from which consciousness and the world emerge: 'le dit - l'apparaître - se lève dans le dire.' ('the said, the appearing, arises in the saying.')[6] If the 'dit' was language as thematising, the 'dire' is language in its performativity: 'c'est l'extreme tension du language.' ('It is the extreme tension of language.')[7] Lévinas understands such performative language as *ur-*

[4] 'The limit of language is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence without simply repeating the sentence.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. von Wright and trans. by Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1980), p. 10 or 'This running against the walls of our cage [the boundaries of language] is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, ed. by Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 296.
[5] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 231 (Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1981), p.183).
[6] Ibid., p. 59 (Ibid., p. 46).
[7] Ibid., p. 182 (Ibid., p. 143).

relation,[8] a relation before there is anything to relate, a relation that creates the related terms, that is to say, you and me: 'le dire est communication certes, mais en tant que condition de toute communication.' ('Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication.')[9] It is thus inspiration in its biblical sense as birth of life, as well as the first words of language.[10] Such an *ur*-relation Lévinas calls fundamental ethics. Ethics here should not be understood as a set of moral rules to guide your life but as responsibility of the one for the other in such a fundamental relation. The perspective from Lévinas's standpoint can be summarised as follows: a position in language, which is layered in a sayable world and an unsayable performative. The latter, lining the former, should be understood as *ur*-relation and inspiration.

This is helpful to formulate the fundamental anthropology behind Virginia Woolf's work. In the elements we have listed as fragments of a fundamental anthropology, we have repeatedly encountered relations between people: the relation in *Mrs Dalloway* between Clarissa and the old lady, a relation implying paradoxically distance and proximity at the same time; it closes on an empty space, a secret which is the core of a revelation. The last scene of *Between the Acts,* which is the first scene of a play in Miss La Trobe's vision, is also an *ur*-relation understood as birth of language, the birth of language between the couple but also as literature. We can interpret the highest point of *The Waves*, the moment Louis and Rhoda are left alone by the other four characters, as such an *ur*-relation. All the ingredients are present: proximity in distance, inspirational vision that is both event in the book and book as event. The very structures of the visions can be considered as well. I suggested, in *To the*

[8] 'Avant propos des langues - il est proximité de l'un a l'autre, engagement de l'approche, l'un pour l'autre.' Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 6 ('A foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other.' Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 50).
[9] Ibid., p. 61 (Ibid., p. 48).
[10] As Lévinas underlines: 'l'animation d'un corps par une âme ne fait qu'articuler l'un pour l'autre de la subjectivité.' Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* , p. 92 ('The animation of a body by a soul only articulates the one-for-the-other in subjectivity.' Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 79) or 'Autrui qui m'arrache la parole avant d'apparaître.' Ibid., p. 98 ('The other who forces me to speak before appearing to me.' Ibid., p. 77).

Lighthouse, that they imply a paradoxical amalgam of a centrifugal and centripetal movement, or a simultaneous death and birth or condensation and expansion. It is always as if one dimension of the vision annihilated the other, leaving the protagonist unchanged, as if nothing had happened. In *The Waves*, the same contradictory movement is translated into the wave-pattern, with the moment the wave breaks, or the moment of vision, in time and not in time, where the up-movement is also the down-movement, representing a concentrated form of this very pattern.

Such paradoxes are echoed in the lining relation between 'dire' and 'dit'. We never leave the 'dit', the world of consciousness. The 'dire' never becomes present; it is always there, though, feeding into consciousness, making it possible, the very moving of its movement, the very living of its life. This is the paradoxical movement Virginia Woolf's visions try to approach. This is also why they, from thematic, become performative. A vision in Virginia Woolf is not only a writing about a vision but a vision as writing. The way literature approaches the 'dire' is by becoming 'dire'.

This explains literature's link with inspiration. The description of a paradoxical relation (for instance the tension distance/proximity in the old lady scene in *Mrs Dalloway*) becomes a movement of vision in the book and the inspirational core of the book. It is as if literature seized thematically upon a paradoxical event in life, thus turning this thematised event into a channel through which to approach life in its paradox by incarnating such a paradox.

Lévinas's philosophy locates life in language, the drama or 'intrigue'[11] of life plays in language understood as *ur*-relation, responsibility for the other. With literature we are also located in language and we have maybe the only instance of language that goes against the grain, against our habits of thinking, that is to say, against thematisation, away from the 'dit'

[11] Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 7 (Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 6).

towards what makes it emerge, what lines it, the 'dire.' I believe this is the very definition of literature. This is what makes literary language different from any other instance of language.

Bernard's Sisyphean task of telling a story and of building a world, a task he feels imposed on him by the presence of his interlocutor, can also be understood in the light of Lévinas's idea of responsibility. It is a face to face with the other, which puts him here in the world, incarnated with a promise and a task of construction, a 'you must save me' by constructing a world in which 'we' can live, a home.

Wittgenstein's contribution is a matter of access and formulation. Lévinas conceptualises such a dimension of the 'dire'. He explicitly considers philosophy as the place where the 'dire' is said, therefore is betrayed, and, for this reason, needs to be unsaid.[12] Philosophy's task is the articulation of these three movements. This is certainly what makes Lévinas such a fashionable figure in deconstructionst circles: 'the saying of the unsayable that must be unsaid in the very saying of it' is a commonplace of the contemporary cultural landscape.

But is such a task (*pace* Lévinas) possible? I think it is not. Literature is the only linguistic locus where the 'dire' says itself, because it is thus not said, but remains 'dire' in its performativity, which is the performativity of literature.

This is where Wittgenstein comes in. Structurally speaking, Wittgenstein has a vision of the world very similar to Lévinas. We are located in language from the very beginning, and language is a layered locus. Corresponding to Lévinas's 'dit', there is the world, not seen in this case, in the phenomenological terms of consciousness or visibility but in the linguistic

[12] See for instance: '*Autrement qu'être* qui dés le début est recherché ici et qui dés sa traduction devant nous se trahi dans le dit dominant le dire qui l'énonce [...] en le subordonnant a l'ontologie. Trahison au prix de laquelle tout se montre, même l'indicible et par laquelle est possible l'indiscretion a l'égard de l'indicible qui est probablement la tâche même de la philosophie.' Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 8 ('We have been seeking the *Otherwise than Being* from the beginning, and as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it […] by subordinating it to ontology. Everything shows itself at the price of this betrayal, even the unsayable. In this betrayal the indiscretion with regard to the unsayable which is probably the very task of philosophy, becomes possible.' Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 7); or 'D'où la nécessité de dédire tout ce qui vient alterer la nudité du signe, d'écarter tout ce qui se dit dans le dire pur de la proximité.' Ibid., p. 182 ('Thus there is need to unsay all that come to alter the nakedness of signs, to set aside all that is said in the pure saying proper to proximity.' Ibid., p. 198, n. 7).

dimension of language games. Words find their meaning in how people use them and people use them according to the rules of the games they are playing.[13] Such a world doesn't have the immutability or the solidity of the phenomenological world, it can and does change. It is not the bubble of consciousness but the 'we' bubble of a linguistic community. But the basic structure, in very general terms and for the purpose of my work, is similar: that of a bubble with an edge, an external surface, a lining, as I have called it.

This lining Lévinas calls 'dire' with the ethical charge we now know. Wittgenstein calls it 'form of life.'[14] It is also ethically charged and has religious ramifications but, and here is the major distinction, it cannot be addressed philosophically: it 'has to be accepted, [is] the given.'[15] Philosophy's task is an ordering of the bubble, the outer edge is not conceptualisable.[16] It is a matter of life or living rather, another rapprochement with Lévinas. But if it is unsayable, it is so for Wittgenstein in a different manner from Lévinas's conception of the unsayable. And it is maybe these two philosophers' conceptions of philosophy's task in regard to this unsayable that make them posit it in slightly different terms. For Wittgenstein nothing lies buried or hidden, the 'dire' is ubiquitous, it is in plain view, visible with every word, accompanying every gesture, forming the very surface of the world. The form of life is the very visibility of the visible, 'since everything is open to view.'[17] This is what I am trying

[13] 'In the *Investigations*, it is that the meaning of an expression is the use to which it can be put in one or another of the many and various language-games constituting language.' A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 73 or more simply: 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1978), § 43.
[14] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 19.
[15] Ibid., p. 226e.
[16] One of Wittgenstein's letters to Von Ficker about the *Tractatus* is in this respect telling: 'My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were and I am convinced that this is the only rigorous way of drawing these limits. I have managed in my book to put everything firmly in place by being silent about it.' Cited in Cora Diamond, 'Introduction to "Having a rough story about what moral philosophy is"', in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. by John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 127-132, (p. 128).
[17] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 126.

to express with the idea of the 'dire' as the lining of life. It is absolutely open and simple. Yet, there is nothing to say about it.[18]

This is linked with Wittgenstein's conception of the task of philosophy as bringing words back to their everyday use.[19] Language for Wittgenstein has no outside. Any philosophical discussion that pretends to consider language from the outside (that is to say, in Wittgensteinan terms, to found language practices) is confused.[20] Such a confusion also characterises Lévinas's attempt, inasmuch as he works from within a phenomenological tradition.[21] But – and this is what I contend here – his distinction between 'dire' and 'dit', because of its absolute intra-linguistic relevance, can be regarded as Wittgensteinian.[22] We never leave language and it is absolutely compatible with the idea that there is no outside to language, or that one cannot adopt an extra-linguistic stance. This not only allows us to bridge the gap between the two philosophers in refining both their views, but also makes the formulation of a different theory of literature possible. Literature is not the attempt to say the unsayable. Nor is it the attempt to copy life. Nor is it an attempt to shape life. Literature is a

[18] We remember what he wrote to Paul Engelmann about Georg Trakl: 'If we do not try to express the inexpressible, nothing is lost. Rather the inexpressible is – inexpressibly – contained in what is expressed.' Cited in Allan Janik, *Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), p. 231.

[19] 'What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their normal use in language.' *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 265.

[20] 'I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language.' *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 296.

[21] Lévinas's 'dire' becomes the invisible, the hidden, the buried that philosophy has to bring to light thus betraying it in its 'dit', and thus having to unsay itself. This play of saying and unsaying, of darkness and light is definitely un-Wittgensteinian.

[22] Compare: 'perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.' Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 16 with Lévinas's definition of the dire as 'la significance même de la signification.' Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 6 ('the very signifyingness of signification.' Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 5), as 'énigme don't il detient le secret.' Ibid., p. 11 ('the enigma whose secret it keeps.' Ibid., p. 10) and as the foundation of any meaningful communication: 'le logos thématisant, le dire disant un dit du monologue et du dialogue et de l'échange d'informations - avec toute la charge de culturel et d'historique qu'il porte - procède de ce dire pré-originel.' Ibid., p. 182 ('the thematizing logos, the saying stating a said in monologue and dialogue and in the exchange of information, with all the cultural and historical dimensions it bears, proceeds from this pre-original saying.' Ibid., p. 198, n. 6).

testimony or celebration of life. Because of the way its language works, it becomes 'dire' and at the same time, shows the 'dire', it can reveal the visible, let life be in all simplicity.[23]

To conclude, I want to articulate theory of literary language and philosophy of life onto each other. Literary language is characterised by a making strange. The special workings of literature seem to be best understood as disinterest for the world and a turning, self-reflexive, towards itself. Such self-reflexivity is an interest on the part of literature for its own happening. It foregrounds performativity. Literary language is less a comment on the world than a celebration of its own vitality. What counts is not what it is about but the fact that it 'is'. This is achieved thanks to fictionality. Literature marks the fact that it is not about the world but an invention, fiction. Phenomena like an increase of tropes and insoluble contradictions appear on the stage as symptoms of strangeness.

There are fragments of such a theory and plenty of practice of it in Woolf. Corresponding to the workings of literary language, there is a philosophy of life in Virginia Woolf's work, hinted at in very much the same way as the above structures of literary language. It is a conception of the world that can be best summarised as a bubble, of a linguistic nature, without properly speaking an outside, but lined by the very performativity of this linguistic world. It is on this outside surface that the most important takes place; it is the source of energy of the world, its vital principle. But by definition, being the outer envelope of language, its very origin, it is unavailable in language, at least in language in its ordinary function.

Theory of literary language and philosophy of life are like the two sides of the same coin. They are complementary. The drift towards strangeness of literary language, with its characteristic features of figurality, aporia and fictionality, is a foregrounding of the performativity of language. But such foregrounding of performativity is not only thematically

[23] It is, arguably, what Wittgenstein suggests by the following remark: 'I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition in language is the existence of language itself.' *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 295.

achieved. It is not only language talking about its performativity, or literature talking about literature. It is also achieved by language literally becoming nothing but its own movement, by becoming 'dire' in Lévinas's terms. In literature, language coincides with its very vitality. No other type of language can achieve this because of its thematising structure. By talking about it, one has already put at a distance what one wants to talk about; one has solidified it in an instance of the 'dit'. This is how we communicate, and it serves the purpose of communication but it also blocks access to life.

Virginia Woolf's battle horse was life, the rendering of life in literature. Her rejection of the Edwardian novel was based on the argument that life was absent from these books. Her technical innovations can also be understood in this light;[24] above all what she has herself called moments of vision. I have myself insisted on this dimension of her work. I have repeatedly contended that the works I have studied here are not only organised around visions, but are visions in different phases of preparation, occurrence and achievement. Such visions contain, in a concentrated form, the very complementariness of a theory of literary language and philosophy of life I seek to formulate. Such visions are moments of inspiration. Inspiration in a double sense: emergence of language and birth of life. Moments of vision in Virginia Woolf are a celebration of language as life; this both thematically and performatively. It is not only what the novels talk about, but also what they create as a writing or reading experience that counts.

The very drift towards performativity that characterised the moment of vision described in the novels is repeated in the literary experience. We, as readers are moved, inspired. It is as if the different instances in an act of communication, the writer as sender, the text as message, the reader as receiver, were all melting in their own respective performativity which are one as the performativity of language. We take part in a collapsing of all

[24] We remember the penultimate paragraph of 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown': 'but the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.' Virginia Woolf, *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950), p. 111.

distinctions, which is not the opening of a neutral play space in deconstructionist terms, but the way literature accesses language as inspiration; that is to say, life.

It becomes impossible to distinguish between the character's, the writer's and the reader's moments of vision. The language here on the page is nobody's and everybody's, it is the first words of language, the first gestures of life, inspiration, language as life, 'dire'. And only literature as a form of language can achieve this. But is this to equate literature and life? I do not think so, because there is still a difference, and a major one. This difference will emphasise all the more the specificity of literature.

In *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf herself distinguishes between feeling and seeing; the pageant achieves a tension between the two. This is literature's achievement. Life is blind. All is there but invisible. Life as inspiration takes place with every word we utter, and every breath we take, but we are unaware of it. We are engrossed in the world. Theory sees, philosophy achieves the distance necessary for an objective consideration of its subject matter. But this is the very move that kills: theory organises dead matter. Philosophy does not feel. Only literature can articulate both: it hesitates between talking about and being. It remains a vision in the phenomenological sense of the term, implying thematising distance but it is also a vision understood as experience, implying the immediacy of life. It is as if seeing and feeling were kept in a paradoxical tension, undecidable. Is that a new avatar of the tension between unity and fragmentation from which we started? Life as chaos, theory as system and literature hesitating between the two? But isn't that the very mystery of life? A tension between matter and spirit? Isn't our unending temporal struggle to impose order on chaos, the translation as world of our 'psychism', an *ur*-relation, one in two and two in one, matter moved, a body animated, you and me, life, 'dire'?

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