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“In My Own Voice”:
Virginia Woolf’s Use of Language

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
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I will go on adventuring, changing, opening my mind and my eyes, refusing to be stamped and stereotyped. The thing is to free one's self: to let it find its own dimensions, not be impeded.

- Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*

ABSTRACT

The collective work of Virginia Woolf is usually seen as an exemplar of literary modernism and a forerunner of later twentieth-century feminist thought. Instead of looking at Woolf's work solely for the literary and political innovations it displays, however, this thesis traces Woolf's use of language, and considers Woolf's novels, essays and diaries as her expression of a revolution in the paradigm of reality. Woolf's focus on a subjective rather than objective reality engenders her literary and political innovations and provokes her linguistic and epistemological investigations into the nature of language and the identity of the speaking subject. Observing that conventional representational language-use reflects an authoritarian belief in the stability and objectivity of an absolute world and enacts patriarchal tendencies to objectify people, Woolf displays a use of language which recognises and respects other people as subjects. Woolf's awareness of the arbitrary and relative nature of the relation between language and reality parallels Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory of structuralism and marks a significant disjunction between Woolf and the majority of her predecessors and even her contemporaries. Anticipating Jacques Derrida in recognising that language can never, in itself, sanction any single or final reference to the world, Woolf goes on to explore language's potential as a medium of communication beyond direct representation. Woolf uses language to induce a process of consciousness in the reader which will allow her or him to apprehend the writer's subjective vision of the world. Thus Woolf conveys her thoughts, feelings and experiences as a subject in her own voice.

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INTRODUCTION: IN *MY OWN VOICE*

I was originally inspired to study Virginia Woolf after reading about Einstein's work in quantum physics, and I also thought of Darwin on evolution and Freud on the unconscious. I believed that it was only after these scientists had laid the factual basis for a new view of the world that writers could come along and embody such philosophies in their books. I saw the literary movement of modernism as engendered by the results thrown up by recent scientific experiments and theories. Writers, being, in the main, progressive thinkers, could then use the concepts that had arisen from science, and so flesh out the new paradigm, the new world view, in literature. I saw Woolf herself as one of these progressive writers, embodying in her works new concepts - such as relativity, evolution and the unconscious - from the models that science provided, and hence shunned by a conservative canon and misread by uninformed critics who did not understand or accept the Einsteinian paradigm but preferred the Cartesian world view. And Woolf's position, I felt, was common to other modernist writers - D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster - who similarly saw that life was not what the Victorians believed it to be. I felt my search for links between the science and literature of the modernist period to be a further exploration of the dramatic break between the thought and literature of the nineteenth century and of the twentieth century, and so a further definition of 'modernist' literature.

And yet it seems that the more I search, the difference between 'Victorian' and 'modernist' literature, conceived of in the terms of one literary movement following another, is slightly superficial and spurious. Definitions of modernism become tautological: a work is 'modernist' if it contains features common to other 'modernist' works - features which can be found in works from any number of literary periods. Is Hardy a modernist? Is Sterne? Is Aeschylus? While there was certainly a literary phenomenon that took place sometime in the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on similarities between the writers of the period is often at the cost of suppressing the individual innovation and vision of each writer. No doubt in an overall view these individual perceptions are linked somehow, and create a picture of a social movement across the arts. But to begin with such a

definition limits how we approach these writers, or indeed any writer. Virginia Woolf deserves far more than this; her work asks for a far more open and responsive approach. One wants, as Lily Briscoe says of Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, “fifty pairs of eyes to see with . . . Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (224). Simply to view Woolf through modernist eyes, and to seek those elements we expect to find is to limit the relevance of Woolf’s work. Similarly, simply to view her through feminist eyes also radically limits our understanding of the work of such a multifaceted writer, cutting off our sympathies for other positions that Woolf occupies.

Admitting that I have but one pair of eyes, I seek to look at Woolf from a linguistic point of view: not to identify each linguistic technique she uses and analyse its value, but instead to investigate the relationship between language and reality that Woolf describes throughout her *œuvre*. Agreeing with Pamela Caughie that critics “need to keep in mind that what we are describing is not Virginia Woolf’s process or form itself but our own readings or metaphors that enable us to see that process or form” (22), I find that the best way to view Woolf’s particular use of language is to see it in terms of a revolution in the paradigm of reality, along the lines of Thomas Kuhn’s description of conceptual revolutions in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. To view Woolf in this way looks beyond a shared literary movement and interprets her within a wide and interdependent linguistic, philosophical and cultural movement: a movement, I believe, more dependent on personal realisation than any common or dominating influences. Woolf’s linguistic innovation, her reformation of literary standards, her view of the relationship between the sexes (that much-vaunted androgyny), her view of sexual politics, and her view of international politics are all engendered by her perception of reality, her implicit metaphysical world view. Woolf holds a perception of reality that is radically different from her social, political and literary predecessors, and even, it appears, different from her intellectual cohort. Woolf sees the world not in a positivistic way, where things have a self-evident identity and hence meaning in themselves, but relatively, where the categories into which we divide reality, and the identity and hence meaning we confer, are arbitrary and pragmatic rather than actual and absolute. From this approach, boundaries can be fluid, and a change of

identity or meaning depends only on a change of perspective or a change of context. Language becomes the tool and the medium for dividing up reality. This is where my interest finally arrived, for I feel that tracing Woolf's use of language - 'use' in a wide sense, meaning how she explores and enacts to their full potential the communicative functions and effects she finds in language - throughout her works, linking it in to her subject-matter and back out to her metaphysical paradigm, provides a helpful perspective from which to approach many other literary and political aspects of her work. I remain suspicious, however, that to uphold a view of Woolf as a relativist rather than a positivist is little more helpful and less superficial than to see her as a modernist rather than an Edwardian. I hope rather, as Woolf herself does, not to assert definitions and identities, but instead to provide a reading as a conceptual framework for understanding Virginia Woolf's use of language.

Several themes run through this thesis as frameworks through which to interpret Woolf's work. Firstly, the term 'subject' recurs, along with two associated terms, 'subjectivity' and 'subject-position'. I use these terms to distinguish the person under discussion as a thinking, feeling entity with a personal experience of the world, and thus, an individual point of view. Throughout Woolf's work, the character's status as a subject becomes of paramount importance; all too often in society or in a personal relationship, Woolf suggests, people are treated as human objects, as if they had no thoughts, feelings, experiences or points of view unique to themselves - as if, being superficially in the same social group as those around them, they automatically accept the views of those around them. Recognising other people's subjectivity is not so much knowing the exact nature of their feelings as recognising simply that they have the capacity to feel - and recognising that this is a realm to which others do not have automatic access. To respect another's subject-position, similarly, is to recognise that another's experience and point of view may be different from one's own, and to respect that difference.

For Woolf, language becomes a medium through which to express this difference and so assert one's status as a subject. The second set of terms used in my discussion, then, centre on speech: such words as 'voice', 'expression' and 'communication'. In her diary Woolf records the satisfaction of expressing herself "in my own voice" (*A Writer's*

Diary [AWD] 47) by finally throwing off the constraints of a conventional literary discourse that hindered her from expressing her own particular thoughts and feelings in her own way. Throughout her writing, public and personal, Woolf acknowledges the horrifying experience of being silent, or worse, silenced. For Woolf herself, the ability to write was vital to her well-being, and she dreaded the times when doctors prevented her from working, as part of a rest 'cure' after periods of mental breakdown. She also recognised a debt of gratitude to the Hogarth Press, for the establishment of the Press gave her control over the formal expression of her own work: "I'm the only woman in England free to write what I like. The others must be thinking of series and editors" (AWD 83). No longer would she, as a writer, be silenced by the barrier of publication. But the need to convey one's experience and point of view to others, the need to establish access between essentially separate subjective minds, still remained. "Communication is health; communication is happiness" says Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* (101), and Woolf shares this sentiment.

The third set of terms that runs throughout my discussion centres on writing. With the meaning of the root-word 'scribe' in mind, such words as 'described', with its connotations of a sketching out in language, 'prescribed', implying both being given a linguistic course to follow and being already written on, and 'circumscribed', connoting being limited and bounded by language, become significant. With a person unable to be known conclusively because of the lack of complete and automatic access to her or his mind, a writer can at best sketch out a subject, giving an impression rather than a definition. Woolf tackles the issue of knowing others and describing them in language in *Jacob's Room*, while Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* faces society's prescription of her position in society; Katharine Hilbery initially faces life circumscribed by her family and social convention in *Night and Day*.

Finally, my thesis hinges on the tension between two different interpretations of the word 'authority'. Conventional language-use prescribes the subject with an authoritative discourse in two complementary senses: the *right* way to use language is the *only* way to use language, and the right and only way is according to the prescribed social codes - so-

cial codes that require, in many cases, the renunciation of one's status as a subject. Woolf identifies and criticises social tendencies to objectify other people by asserting an authority over them which overrides individual difference and appropriates personal experience. In response, she promotes language's potential to provide a means to reassert oneself as a subjective agent, an agent capable of exercising an authority over one's own life by articulating one's life-experience in one's own voice.

The chapters of this thesis alternate between, on the one hand, theoretical discussions which articulate Woolf's point of view by drawing together comments predominantly from her essays and diaries, and, on the other, textual analyses, which show how Woolf demonstrates these observations, criticisms and ideas in practice. Chapter One gives an overview of the constraints of conventional language-use, and describes Woolf's attempts to express herself in her own voice, challenging as she does so assumptions about language and reality, and bringing upon herself scorn and ridicule from those who did not understand or felt threatened by her non-conformity. Consequently, Chapter Two addresses Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, which describes a young woman's experience of being effectively silenced because her expressions do not conform to her society's expectations of language-use. Furthermore, Rachel Vinrace loses her 'voice', her status as a subject and ultimately her life, when her patriarchal community objectifies her in terms of her sexuality and her fiancé rejects her music which has been her medium of expressing herself and her view of the world.

I have also paired up Woolf's novels in these alternate chapters where they complement each other in certain aspects. To a great extent, I find that the first novel of each pair I identify investigates particular issues of constraint on a narrative level, while the second novel puts into practice, on a linguistic level, Woolf's solution of liberation. Hence, where Rachel Vinrace dies, unable to express herself and convince others of her status as a subject, Katharine Hilbery and Ralph Denham from *Night and Day* create a personal discourse which overcomes the fixed social code of language-use to form a relationship based on respecting each other as a subject.

The chapters also trace a linear progression through Woolf's *œuvre*. I deal with the

novels in a predominantly chronological order because I perceive a progression in Woolf's works as she moves from identifying aspects of linguistic, literary and socio-political constraint to describing and embodying in her works the means for liberation. This structure, then, gives the reader a framework for the questions about language and communication that Woolf's works implicitly ask and answer. Hence, where Chapter Two leaves off with Katharine and Ralph seeking to communicate outside of linguistic and social codes of convention, Chapter Three picks up the underlying question 'how can language function outside of these accepted codes?' and investigates Woolf's ideas about the signifying relation between language and reality. Woolf explores the communicative potential of figurative language, such as metaphor, which doesn't presume to define an objective reality, but instead evokes subjective impressions of reality.

In turn, Chapter Four picks up the 'metaphor' metaphor and applies it to a discussion of Jacob Flanders' signifying role in society, where the initial question of 'what does Jacob mean?' becomes 'how does Jacob mean?'. *Jacob's Room* seeks to protect Jacob's status as a complex and private subject by evading a conclusive definition of him in language - since definition would limit and so objectify him - while making the reader uneasy about the assumption that any person could be defined conclusively. *Jacob's Room* is paired with *Orlando*, for the latter work advances Orlando as a complex and unlimited subject by the very assertion and proliferation of definition. The multiplication and contradiction in the identity of such a substantial and larger-than-life character make a farce of any expectations we hold of discovering a single, final meaning in either language or life. But without such a single, transcendent meaning, how can we interpret, and communicate, our impressions of language and life? Chapter Four leaves the reader rhetorically poised on the brink of meaninglessness.

Chapter Five, however, describes Woolf's solution to the search for meaning and communication. The single, final meaning is indeed a wild goose after which we may chase, for attaining meaning, Woolf suggests, is a matter of holding suspended in our minds multiple and often contradictory impressions in order to 'see life whole', to comprehend any element of life as a complex and multifaceted globe composed of our myriad

impressions. This too, she suggests, is the way to make sense of a linguistic object, a text, and thus the way to communicate through language. She promotes the reader's ability to have an authority over a text; Woolf respects the readers' role in arranging the various elements in order to realise a text as whole in their minds, just as she makes real her own experiences by arranging the various elements to make sense of her life.

Chapter Six looks at the ability of four of Woolf's characters - Septimus Warren Smith and Clarissa Dalloway from *Mrs Dalloway*, and Rhoda and Bernard from *The Waves* - to author themselves and their lives: to shape their identities and assert themselves as subjective agents in the world. Septimus and Clarissa negotiate conventional definitions of what counts as a valid self and a valid expression of that self. Rhoda and Bernard shape themselves through language; each has a subjectivity, a consciousness, that must answer the question 'who am I?' by creating an identity and establishing relations with the world. Furthermore, as Woolf shows the boundaries between characters to be arbitrary - since Bernard can use language to overcome the barrier between subject and object by forging an intersubjective communication - outside of the narrative, Woolf uses the rhythm of language to dissolve the boundaries between reader and writer. In doing so, she distributes the agency of the speaking subject between character, author and reader, and confuses the notion of the true author of the text.

Widening the focus to international society and politics, Chapter Seven explores Woolf's vision of a 'linguistic community'. Against Ferdinand de Saussure's use of this term to describe the speaker's social group which accepts, and so fixes, only certain uses of language, excluding other expressions and invalidating those speakers who don't conform, Woolf envisions "a system that did not shut out" (AWD 189). The essay *Three Guineas* records Woolf's concern with the parallels between European fascism and England's patriarchal society, where the proponents of each set out to homogenise society by means of an authoritative structured discourse. In contrast, *The Years* and *Between the Acts* present communities of speaking subjects, in which each subject contributes to a heterogeneous communal expression. Thus Woolf describes a discourse in which all subjects have an authority over life and an ability to express themselves in their own voice.

CHAPTER ONE - "SUBJECT AND OBJECT AND THE NATURE OF REALITY"¹:

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE TYRANT OF CONVENTION

... as the current answers don't do, one has to grope for a new one

- Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*

In her 1922 diary Virginia Woolf writes, "I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice; and that interests me so that I feel I can go ahead without praise" (AWD 47). Woolf wrote this after finishing *Jacob's Room*, the first full-length fictional work in which she practises the innovative literary style which distinguishes her as a modernist writer. Yet being able to express oneself in one's "own voice", without need for the praise of others, without fear of the censure of others, is a vital issue for Woolf within and without her fiction: it is an issue that runs throughout her novels, engages her attention in many of her essays, and concerns her, as we can see, in her private diary. Much of Woolf's genius as a writer and thinker, her literary and linguistic innovation and her value for succeeding readers lie not simply in the subjects she deals with and the specific techniques she uses in her works, but in the entire relationship she understands between language and reality, and the linguistic, literary and political implications of this relationship for speakers and writers.

Many readers understand Woolf as a writer rejecting Edwardian literary conventions to create works that have become exemplars of modernist literature. Certainly we can trace Woolf's progress from her first novels *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, which sustain the traditional chapter and plot structures of Victorian fiction, in which the "two and thirty chapters" ^{'Modern Fiction'} (MF 188) end in the heroine's death and marriage respectively, through the modernist watershed of the works from the early twenties, *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway*, with their experimental narrative techniques, through the unparalleled innovation in character depicted in *Orlando* and *The Waves*, and beyond, to the almost postmodernity of the "orts, scraps, and fragments" of *Between the Acts* (xix). The view of 'Woolf as modernist' pic-

¹ The phrase is from *To the Lighthouse* (28).

tures her as a member of a revolutionary group of writers re-formulating the prevailing literary standards. Yet beyond this straightforward model of Woolf's literary contribution lies a more complex and personal quest to interrogate the constraints that linguistic - not just literary - conformity places on people. Her works overcome the limitations of conventional language-use, exploring and enacting language's capacity for personal expression and communication beyond the traditional linguistic bounds of representation. In doing this, Woolf challenges more than literary standards; her writing engages with a whole range of linguistic, phenomenological, epistemological and political assumptions about language, reality and self-expression that have relevance far beyond the realm of literary modernism.

"In my own voice", then, refers not just to Woolf's particular writing style or literary techniques, nor to the content of her works; it also gestures towards the whole different paradigm² of reality within which Virginia Woolf uses language. The contemporary paradigm, as prescribed by her community, was not simply a set of standards that governed literary expression, such as Woolf discusses in *A Room of One's Own*. Nor was Woolf's investigation of the position of women in society, the authority of the patriarchal system, and the political implications of these structures - her subject in *Three Guineas* - the primary factor that made her an outsider as a thinker and writer. Rather, it is the paradigm of reality that she developed for herself, within which she viewed the world, and from which she wrote - the vision of which she struggled throughout her life to articulate in the face of patriarchal opposition, social hostility, literary misunderstanding and political blindness - that underlies her innovative literature, her feminist observations and her pacifist convictions. Woolf's works do not simply record the constraints on expression and argue for change. As her diary notes, she found her own voice in which to articulate her view of the world, creating a literature that did not shut out, but instead disrupted conventional signification and value relations by opening itself up to fluid signification and personal communication.

Many of Woolf's essays investigate the constraints that literary conventions place on writers. In the famous essay 'Modern Fiction', Woolf describes a tension between her own

² I use 'paradigm' in its philosophical context, where it means "a central overall way of regarding phenomena" (Flew *Dictionary of Philosophy*) as opposed to its more common, though related, meaning of model or pattern.

view of fiction and the novels of her contemporaries, identifying the source of her dissatisfaction as the “tyrant” of convention. Of her contemporaries she writes, “the writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole” in line with prevailing literary conventions (188). For, she goes on to say, “if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style” (189): works would not simply repeat the conventional model, but could instead more closely embody the writer’s own vision of life. However, the central problem, as Woolf identifies it in ‘Modern Fiction’, remained: the “problem before the novelist at present”, Woolf states,

is to contrive a means of being free to set down what he chooses. He has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer ‘this’ but ‘that’: out of ‘that’ alone he must construct his work At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is on something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors. (192)

Here, in these last words, Woolf identifies her position as a writer and thinker: she faces the need to create a new literary form with which to express her vision and experience of life. But, as she notes in her diary, “if one writes only for one’s own pleasure” without thought of convention, then “the convention of writing is destroyed: therefore one does not write at all” (AWD 135). Woolf recognises that for communication to take place between writer and reader, the writer must negotiate this tension between individuality and incomprehensibility.

‘Modern Fiction’ describes particular contemporary novelists as “materialists” (185), and in her diary Woolf records a comment which reveals her concern with the epistemological assumptions behind their literary style. In response to Arnold Bennett’s criticism of character in *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf draws a distinction between the conventional realism of her counterparts, and a more elusive “true reality”: “I daresay its [sic] true, however, that I haven’t that ‘reality’ gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality - its

cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality?" (AWD 57). Proponents of literary realism make the implicit assumption that the true nature of reality can be known since life consists of objective elements, both material and abstract. Woolf, however, distrusts such assumptions about reality, here admitting that she wilfully insubstantiates the elements - such as character - in her own works as if to dispel the idea of a defined, objective reality. In 'Modern Fiction' she argues, "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (189), rejecting the idea of an objective reality of gig-lamps and emphasising instead the subject's experience of reality as an indistinct and luminous halo of impressions enveloping her or his consciousness. Woolf asks in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', "what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?" (97). In questioning the nature of reality and seeking the arbiters of reality, Woolf challenges the positivist notion that reality is a given and unproblematic series of elements with self-evident identities. Writing of the reality of literary characters in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', for example, Woolf stresses the impossibility of saying anything objective, anything beyond opinion, in attempting to describe what constitutes the essential character of the eponymous Mrs Brown:

You see one thing in character, and I another. You say it means this, and I that. And when it comes to writing, each makes a further selection on principles of his own. Thus Mrs. Brown can be treated in an infinite variety of ways . . . (97)

For Woolf, the reality of Mrs Brown does not lie in her being rendered substantial and "lifelike" (98) by describing external details. Instead, she focuses on a description of character from the inside - a description of the character as a subject rather than an object - which allows the reader to experience the character's subject-position, since such a technique "has the power to make you think not merely of [the character] itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes" (98). Never having considered "human nature" from this subjective viewpoint, the Edwardians "have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business" (103-4). But though the conventions of these novelists serve to bridge the gulf between text and

reader by offering the reader a familiar literary form, Woolf asserts that she is of a different generation to her literary predecessors, a generation with different business for whom “those conventions are ruin, those tools are death” (104). Woolf pictures herself as one of a new generation of writers who must reject Edwardian literary conventions and conceive their own literary forms and techniques in order to convey their own particular vision of life.

Woolf contends that the novel has been traditionally used to express, and perceived to express, ‘cheap’ literary realism, material details rather than subjective impressions: “the bulk and not the essence of life”. Yet, Woolf concludes, “any such verdict” that this must always be the case “must be based upon the supposition that ‘the novel’ has a certain character which is now fixed and cannot be altered, [and] that ‘life’ has a certain limit which can be defined” (‘Phases of Fiction’ 144). Believing that life does not have a certain limit which can be defined, over the course of her literary career Woolf challenges any notion that the character of the novel cannot be altered. In her diary she repeatedly explores the idea of new forms for prose fiction, and indeed re-conceives of the form of the novel so radically that she considers at one stage getting rid of the name ‘novel’ altogether: “I will invent a new name for my books to supplant ‘novel’. A new --- by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?” (AWD 80). After completing *To the Lighthouse* Woolf writes, “Why not invent a new kind of play Away from facts; free; yet concentrated; prose yet poetry; a novel and a play” (AWD 104).

As Woolf sees it, the traditional form of the novel involves implicit assumptions about the limitations of prose language. In ‘The Narrow Bridge of Art’ Woolf envisions “an unnamed variety of the novel” (22) that will come to embrace attributes of form and effect previously reserved to drama and poetry. The work will embrace the emotive quality of poetry, and give “the outline rather than the detail” (18); without resorting to “loads of details, bushels of fact” (22), the novel “will express the feelings and ideas of the characters closely and vividly” (18). Instead of merely chronicling social relations, as the novel has done in the past, this new prose work will take on the larger, more abstract and personal themes traditionally addressed by poetry: “the relations of man to nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams” (19). But it will also retain the flexibility and elasticity of prose by incorporating

the heterogeneity and contradiction inherent in life to give “the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life” (19), taking the mould “of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things - the modern mind” (19-20). Furthermore, this new prose work will include drama’s ability to evoke emotion and to stimulate an empathic response, by dramatising “some of those influences which play so large a part in life, yet have so far escaped the novelist”:

the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotions bred in us by crowds, the obscure terrors and hatreds which come so irrationally in certain places or from certain people, the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine. (23)

Rather than transcribe a static and common reality, then, Woolf envisions that this new literary form will have the ability to convey personal, “obscure” and irrational emotions that are beyond the reach of conventional prose.

However, in order to achieve communication through an innovative use of language, Woolf must negotiate the expectations of other language-users. Woolf’s understanding of language presents striking parallels to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s description of the structure and functioning of linguistic systems in his *Course in General Linguistics*. In particular, two of Saussure’s postulates - the arbitrary nature of thought-sound divisions and the universal adoption of the resulting signs - make explicit both the flexibility and the limitations of language that Woolf implicitly addresses. Like Woolf, Saussure rejects any positivistic assumptions about language - any assumption that language names an absolute reality in a one-to-one correspondence between words and concepts - for this notion incorrectly “assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words” (65). Rather, he contends, thought is only a “shapeless and indistinct mass” (111) in which there are “no pre-existing ideas” (112). Thought is made meaningful by the application of a linguistic structure which defines, divides and orders the subject’s experience of reality into signified concepts which, with the addition of a sound or word as a signifier, become signs. Yet signs alone do not convey meaning. Where ‘signification’ constructs a relationship between language and reality, linguistic ‘value’ determines the conceptual relations between the signs themselves.

Language is a system in which there are no positive terms, Saussure contends (and Woolf demonstrates), but only oppositions and relations between terms. English, for example, sets up a notion of identity based on a mutual exclusivity of sex difference, and encodes this opposition between female and male by its lack of any accepted third-person pronoun that overrides this distinction. "The entire mechanism of language is based on oppositions of this kind", Saussure states, asserting that "whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it" (121). Thus Saussure describes language as an interdependent system of meaning with no intrinsic relation to reality: language constructs what is an essentially relative system, which is to say that language is not a system of inherent meanings, but rather a system of meaningful relations. Woolf, too, as I go on to show, views language, and life, as structures of relative significance rather than absolute meaning.

However, both Saussure and Woolf recognise that for communication to take place through language, the signs representing a personal mental reality must be shared within the 'linguistic community' - a group of speakers who share a common language. Hence, the initially arbitrary construction of signs becomes fixed and universalised by its common usage. Since language "exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community" (Saussure 14), this social contract has the power to fix and make real the conceptual divisions, and the relations between them, conceived by the community:

Linguistic signs, though basically psychological, are not abstractions; associations which bear the stamp of collective approval - and which added together constitute language - are realities . . . (15)

Initially arbitrary and abstract divisions between sounds and thoughts become conceptual "realities" once they are invested with value within the linguistic system and gain collective approval. Thus, language constructs and embodies a paradigm of reality (in line with Thomas Kuhn's discussion of paradigms in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*): a metaphysical framework through which society makes sense of its collective experience of the world and interprets new experiences. Viewing language thus as paradigmatic - as imposing an arbitrary, though shared, conceptual structure through which we make sense of thought - Woolf displays a concern with this fixing stage in the linguistic process. She finds that

some language-users assume that language corresponds unproblematically to a stable, universal and objective reality, and therefore they see truth as the accuracy of correspondence between words and this assumedly transcendent world. In turn, instead of holding language up to scrutiny as an arbitrary system of interpretation, they believe that conventionally-used language is as fixed and self-evident as the seemingly universal and objective reality to which it corresponds.

Furthermore, the process of social sanction, as Saussure describes it, not only fixes signification, but it also excludes any potential alternative signification:

Whether we try to find the meaning of the Latin word *arbor* or the word that Latin uses to designate the concept tree, it is clear that only the associations sanctioned by that language appear to us to conform to reality, and we disregard whatever others might be imagined. (66-7)

Language becomes real to the extent that the linguistic community disregards any experience of reality, any subjective thought or feeling in a particular context, that does not apparently conform to the conventional associations sanctioned by language. Indeed, Saussure identifies an important distinction between language (*langue*) and speaking (*parole*), stressing that the system of language itself is quite different to the individual speech acts that articulate it: "Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual Speaking, on the contrary, is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual" (14). The essentially social nature of the linguistic system, then, precludes any personal expression that deviates from social norms.

Throughout her work, Woolf demonstrates her awareness of the fact that where language constructs and embodies a social paradigm of reality, it also prescribes individual speakers with this interpretative framework. Similarly, linguist Henry Lee Smith, Jr. recognises that language is a system, "in fact the most important system", through which a society reflects and transmits its culture (90). Defining culture as "the sum total of the learned, shared and transmitted, patterned and systematized ways man goes about meeting the problems raised by his environment . . . all of his attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and values" (89), Smith sees language as society's primary means of enculturating and socialising the

individual speaker into the pre-existing social group. Language becomes a process of initiation by which the speaker's inclusion in the social group depends not simply on learning the language itself; the speaker's inclusion is contingent upon assuming the attitudes, beliefs and values of the group that language embodies.

Moreover, this prescribing process is inevitable, for language cannot avoid embodying collective assumptions about the nature of the world. Thomas Kuhn poses and rejects the possibility of a neutral language, a language of "pure percepts" uninfluenced by any paradigmatic assumptions. Attempts to eliminate all non-logical and non-perceptual terms from a particular discourse all met with the same failure, he says, for the "result is a language that - like those employed in the sciences - embodies a host of expectations about nature and fails to function the moment these expectations are violated" (127). Kuhn explains that as a paradigm of reality is established by the community to make sense of its world, the community forms a judgement about the nature of reality. Any use of language, then, that does not subscribe to social beliefs and assumptions about reality "fails to function" as communication because it does not conform to the expectations engendered by the prevailing paradigm. Furthermore, if the prevailing paradigm is strongly established or particularly dominating such an anomalous expression won't just seem meaningless - meaningless because it can't be interpreted by conventional means - but it will be marginalised or rejected as invalid. And, as Woolf goes on to show, a so-judged invalid expression casts doubt on the authority of the speaker.

According to Saussure, Smith and Kuhn, then, using language necessarily involves accepting the prevailing assumptions about the nature of the world that society has encoded into the linguistic system. For an individual speaker's expression to function as meaningful communication, it must conform to the common discourse of the community. Yet the very fact of a social, shared discourse prevents the individual speaker from using language in a way different from conventional language-use and hinders the speaker from expressing ideas and views that dissent from the prevailing paradigm of reality. In that language has a dual function in communication, a linguistic system thus sets up two constraints: the constraint of expression, that is, the obstacles to what the speaker can conceive and articulate; and the

constraint of reception, that is the positive or negative response of the speaker's community which indicates how, or whether, the speaker's message has been received.

Woolf confronts the constraint of expression in many instances, finding often that the only terms available are inadequate to express particular points of view, or that they carry unwelcome connotations. Throughout *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf calls for new words, or makes up her own terms in order to discuss women from their own viewpoint rather than from a patriarchal point of view. If "Chloe like[s] Olivia" in a novel (*A Room of One's Own* [AROO] 108), the novelist must struggle to convey the relation of woman to woman, to capture "those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves . . . when women are alone, unlit by the capricious or coloured light of the other sex" (110). Woolf contends that "the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence" before a woman could adequately describe her experience of life (113). Woolf argues in this essay that female writers face extreme difficulty in expressing themselves in their own voices because all they have at their disposal is a literary (and linguistic) system "made by men out of their own needs for their own uses", and "since freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of the art, such a lack of tradition, such a scarcity and inadequacy of tools, must have told enormously upon the writing of women" (100). To remedy this situation, Woolf calls for female writers to cease attempting to use the "man's sentence" (99-100) and to develop a form of literature and a use of language with which they can express themselves freely, without the constraint of needing to define themselves, and assert the validity of their expression, in opposition to patriarchal society. In the author's notes to *Three Guineas*, Woolf explains her political motives behind her use of the term "educated men's daughters" (157):

Our ideology is still so inveterately anthropocentric that it has been necessary to coin this clumsy term . . . to describe the class whose fathers have been educated at public schools and universities. Obviously, if the term 'bourgeois' fits her brother, it is grossly incorrect to use it of one who differs so profoundly in the two prime characteristics of the bourgeoisie - capital and environment. (369)

Woolf argues that such women need to assert their own points of view by defining themselves in terms that articulate and so make real their status of political inequality. Here Woolf uses language to identify individual subjects and their concerns, resisting the universalising implications of a common label. In other cases, however, Woolf advocates getting rid of words that unnecessarily define and divide people. The word “feminist”, Woolf believes, “has done much harm in its day” because it sets men and women in opposition to each other instead of emphasising their similar goals and so encouraging them to work together for a common political cause (302). In both situations Woolf feels constrained by the limits of the available terms, and has to reconstruct elements of the linguistic system in order to get her own point across.

Woolf’s major literary and linguistic innovation, however, lies in her re-evaluation of the use of prose language. She overcomes “this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner” by giving up the “false, unreal, merely conventional” (AWD 139) representational narrative techniques of the realists which assume an objective reality, and developing ways - not primarily representative - of using prose language as a medium for communication, which reflect her own perception of a reality of subjective experiences. Edward Bishop explains Woolf’s perception of the relation between language and reality:

The quality she called ‘life’ or the ‘essential thing’ refused to be fixed by a phrase, but it could be arrested, briefly, by a net of words: words that evoke as well as indicate, that conspire to produce their own luminous halo, rendering (by inducing) a process of consciousness rather than a concrete picture. (38)

In order to communicate more closely with the reader, Woolf uses language to induce the reader to identify with the subjective impressions and experiences described in the work, and thus she “lead[s] the reader to the point where he or she can apprehend the writer’s vision” (Bishop 16).

In particular, four techniques serve to facilitate communication, whether between writer and reader, character and reader, or between characters themselves. The first is phatic communication. Phatic expressions are usually defined as meaningless social exchanges -

small-talk, in other words - but I want to extend this definition to cover any sort of language that derives its import not from the denotative meanings of the words but instead from the communicative function that the words provide. In this way, phatic communication becomes any use of language that serves primarily not to convey information but to affirm the personal relation between the speakers. In *Orlando*, for example, the narrator describes a phatic exchange between Orlando and Shelmardine:

... it would really profit little to write down what they said, for they knew each other so well that they could say anything, which is tantamount to saying nothing, or saying such stupid, prosy things as how to cook an omelette, or where to buy the best boots in London, things which have no lustre taken from their setting, yet are positively of amazing beauty within it. For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do ... (165)

Because the speakers invest their discourse with personal significance, rather than relying on the mundane, public meanings of the words - since no social terms can ever contain the personal feelings motivating the expression - phatic communication achieves a close relation between speakers. Indeed, Woolf often depicts phatic exchanges between couples - such as Katharine Hilbery and Ralph Denham, Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, and Mrs and Mr Ramsay - for whom this private and intimate use of language can express and confirm feelings that remain otherwise unexpressed.

Metaphor, and figurative language in general, is Woolf's second technique. Since all linguistic structures are paradigmatic, being a framework of interpretation for reality, even literal language is metaphoric to an extent in that it uses (albeit collective) subjective concepts to stand for the reality being communicated. 'Love', for example, is a word and a concept we apply to an actual mental experience. Language is always at a remove from the reality described. Metaphor, however, does away with the pretence of direct and objective reference and heightens the communicative potential of language by its full use of evocation, asking the reader to respond to the language, rather than simply decode the meaning, and thus be more fully involved in the communication process. Furthermore, metaphor func-

tions by conveying a subjective impression without presuming to define any objective referent. Thus it helps to orientate the reader towards the writer's vision of reality without presuming to define an objective reality. Woolf uses metaphor to enable the reader to see what she sees when she cannot describe her intentions in a more direct and conventional fashion. The metaphors and anecdotes she uses in discussing language and literature - the luminous halo, and Mrs Brown, for instance - help the reader to grasp her point on subjects where conventional models of conception are unavailable or inappropriate.

A semiotic use of language, the third technique Woolf displays, can be thought of as the poetic side of phatic expression. Described by Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, after Julia Kristeva's use of the term³, as belonging to "the musical, rhythmic, non-sense effects of language, the ones evident in poetry or in the echolalias of children" (331), the semiotic disposition of language recurs again and again in Woolf's works as inarticulate or broken phrases, nursery rhymes, singing, flights of poetic language or incomprehensible nonsense. The old woman on the street in *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, sings "ee um fah um so, foo swee too eem oo" (88), for the moment not meaning anything except that she is taking part in life. Speaking for the sake of listening to the sound of their own voice, characters confirm their very existence by this ability to 'give voice' to some sound. Language used in this way can also let others know that one is there, as when Mrs Ramsay soothes her daughter Cam to sleep in *To the Lighthouse*. Having wound her shawl around the pig's skull that her son James insists on having in the room, Mrs Ramsay comforts her daughter by saying

how lovely it looked now; how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird's nest;
it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and
flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes
Mrs Ramsay went on saying still more monotonously, and more rhythmically

³ I am aware that Julia Kristeva presents a comprehensive and complex body of work, the implications of which - her psychoanalytic focus, for example - go far beyond the bounds of this thesis. While in no way do I claim to incorporate or apply the full import of her work, I wish to use her term 'semiotic' for two reasons: primarily because it names particular incidences of Woolf's language more appropriately than any other term; and secondarily because it gestures toward a perception of self and language - a sense of fluid ego boundaries, in psychoanalytic terms - that I think Woolf and Kristeva share. In Chapter Six I use the term to name one of Bernard's uses of language, and though I don't apply the term with its full psychoanalytic implications, the potential to fully apply Kristeva's linguistic and psychoanalytic theories is there. Indeed, many critics have discovered the similarities between Woolf and Kristeva. Jean Wyatt discusses *Mrs Dalloway* with reference to Kristeva; other critics have explicated *The Waves* using Kristeva's work.

and more nonsensically, how she must shut her eyes and go to sleep and dream of mountains and valleys and stars falling and parrots and antelopes and gardens and everything lovely . . . until she sat upright and saw that Cam was asleep.

(132)

Semiotic language communicates on a level of sound and rhythm below conventional symbolic representation.

Not entirely distinct from language's semiotic disposition, rhythm is the fourth technique of Woolf's that I identify. Referring to *The Waves*, Richter describes Woolf's language as "articulated feeling" (134), and Woolf's own words confirm this description. In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf discusses the effect of rhythm she hoped to achieve in *To the Lighthouse*, revealing her perception of how language functions in articulating thought:

Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to get it; and in writing (such is my belief) one has to recapture this, and set it working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it. (quoted in Richter 216)

Where a sight or an emotion creates a wave in the mind of the writer before the application of language that would - in line with Saussure's description - structure it into conventional terms, Woolf embodies this initial rhythm in her own words as she writes. As the reader reads, then, the rhythm of the words, rather than the meanings, creates the same wave in her or his mind, and so conveys the same emotion that Woolf originally felt. Thus rhythm becomes a means of using language to achieve the same 'wave-length' between reader and writer, engendering communication beyond the constraint of conventional terms and concepts.

Where Woolf did manage to express herself 'in her own voice' by using language in the ways outlined above, she faced the consequences of offering an anomalous linguistic product within the conventional system. In 'A Mark on the Wall', Woolf writes of the hold that convention has over the members of a community, and the impossibility of advancing

anything that deviates from conventional expectations: she recalls

a whole class of things indeed which, as a child, one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation There was a rule for everything. The rule for tablecloths at that particular period was that they should be made of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them Tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths. (44)

Just as “[t]ablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths”, Woolf finds that any use of language that deviates from conventional language-use - a conventional language-use that embodies the prevailing paradigm of reality - does not constitute a real expression.

Even within her own community of friends, the intellectual and seemingly innovative thinkers of the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf found that an expression had to conform to certain conventions. Though they challenged traditional ideas about religion, morality, social behaviour, politics, art and literature, the group still maintained its own paradigm of what they considered real and true and rejected any expression that did not conform by invalidating the authority of the speaker. Gerald Brenan reminisces of the Bloomsbury Group:

though they thought of themselves as new brooms and innovators, they quickly found that they were playing the part of a literary establishment. What I chiefly got from them was their respect for the truth. Yet this - they gave the word a capital letter - was defined in a narrow and exclusive way so that anyone who held views that could not be justified rationally was regarded as a wilful cultivator of illusions and therefore as a person *who could not be taken seriously*.

(quoted in Poole 61, my italics)

Specifically, debate within the group, though ostensibly calling for the expression of a personal opinion, still required this expression to conform to prescribed rules of logic and rationality, and to conform to the group's assumptions about the relation between language and reality, and the function of an expression:

Words, in the world of G.E. Moore especially, were logical counters in a world of public logical discourse, and must have a clear and precise, not merely a per-

sonal, meaning. ‘What exactly do you *mean by that?*’ [a Bloomsbury interrogative initiated by Moore] is a demand for a publicly available and checkable meaning” (Poole 66, original italics)

Words in the world of Virginia Woolf, however, are not logical counters with singular and self-evident meanings, but are a means to give voice to personal experiences and subjective visions of life. Poole notes that the interrogative was not used by the group to assist communication by encouraging further explanation, but “as a warning not to speak in terms that the group will not accept . . . ‘What exactly do you *mean by that?*’ *meant*: conform to our verbal conventions, or prepare to be ridiculed” (66-7, original italics). As Poole describes it, Woolf faced a linguistic community that not only did not understand her use of language, but actively discouraged her attempts at expressing herself in her own voice.

Furthermore, Woolf was articulating an epistemological paradigm that differed from that of her contemporaries in its relativistic, rather than empiric, ideas about perception, knowledge and identity. Poole states,

It was the essence of Virginia’s genius that what she had to say, to show, was not capable of being further verbally reduced from the expression she had already given it . . . It might take fifteen pages to describe a mark on the wall. The Moorean attitude had no patience with such descriptions. Its question was, so to speak, ‘Is it a stain or is it a nail?’ Virginia was trying to draw attention, however, not to what the mark in fact empirically *was*, so much as to the process of human vision which allows such enormous and radical imprecisions. (67, Poole’s italics)

Poole recognises Woolf’s concern with the process of forming subjective impressions and points of view in contrast to empirical assumptions about an unproblematic and self-evident reality.

Just as Woolf herself suffered because of her unconventional use of language, Woolf’s work also suffered for not conforming to conventional expectations. Some critics were confused by her attempt to alter the paradigm of reality. In 1950, D.S. Savage wrote, “Truth, the absolute, forms in every integrated work of art the invisible centre around which

everything in it coheres and in relation to which it becomes a communicator of value" (13); the passage suggests that he recognised the function and importance of a paradigm of reality in the creation of a work of art. However, Savage went on to contend that "in Virginia Woolf we see the elementary bewilderment of a mind incapable of formulating a clear view of her world of experience consequent upon inability to establish foundations in belief of whatever order" (19). Though he demonstrates an awareness of the concept of a paradigm in art within which everything coheres and becomes meaningful, Savage nevertheless also believes that there is only one such valid paradigm - for him it is Christianity - and he cannot make sense of, let alone confer value on, a work that embodies an alternative paradigm.

Writing in 1976, James Naremore provides a slightly more recent example of the same vein of literary criticism, in this case highlighting Woolf's use of language, which he finds objectionable. Focusing his discussion on Woolf's use of lyrical language, Naremore suggests that "lyrical" and "rhythmic" equal "poetic" (14), and in turn, "poetic" equals (in addition to "feminine") "mannered" and "ornamental" (17). "Mannered" and "ornamental" are representative of "literary convention" (19), and "literary convention", used in this way, contrives a picture "based wholly on fancy" (19). For Naremore, to be "based wholly on fancy" in this way means that Woolf's language is "detached from experience", and so he concludes that the "charm" of Woolf's work "seems false, its authority invalid, and its beauty sterile" (19). Naremore fails to recognise his own implicit assumptions about language and literature. Where he expects that language should be "put to the scrupulous service of presenting life", he makes two assumptions of the writer: he assumes that 'life' is a universally similar experience, and he assumes that any use of language which does not 'present life' cannot function as literary expression.

Woolf herself is quite explicit about the need to interpret and evaluate literary works from within the paradigms they create. She anticipates Kuhn's observations about anomalies being seen as meaningless or marginalised: novelists are already so far apart, she writes in 'Phases of Fiction', "that they scarcely communicate, and to one novelist the work of another is quite genuinely unintelligible or quite genuinely negligible" (144). In the essay 'How Should One Read a Book?', she stresses the need for the reader to appreciate the dif-

ferences between works, saying “it is necessary to approach every writer differently in order to get from him all he can give us” (392-3). Woolf suggests the reader become an “accomplice” to the writer, following the inclinations of the work and renouncing any initial prejudices in order to maximise his or her chance of understanding:

if we remember, as we turn to the bookcase, that each of these books was written by a pen which, consciously or unconsciously, tried to trace out a design, avoiding this, accepting that, adventuring the other; if we try to follow the writer in his experiment from the first word to the last, without imposing our design upon him, then we shall have a good chance of getting hold of the right end of the string. (390)

Woolf argued that this approach to reading was especially relevant when reading the works of the modernists themselves - works which required a greater effort of comprehension from readers of traditional literature. Of her contemporaries, she says: “wherever there is life in them they will be casting their net out over some unknown abyss to snare new shapes, and we must throw our imaginations after them if we are to accept with understanding the strange gifts they bring back to us” (‘Hours in a Library’ 29-30).

Woolf reconceptualises reality, creating in her works “new shapes” after which we, as readers, must “throw our imaginations” in order to fully understand her voice. With the advent of deconstruction as a literary and linguistic tool of inquiry, we can now begin to appreciate the import of Woolf’s use of language. Such an approach parallels Woolf’s own investigations into the production and reception of literary and linguistic expression, for she seeks no definitive literary form or incontrovertible meaning in language, emphasising only the goal of communication: “Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers; that brings us closer to the novelist’s intention if we are readers” (MF 192). As one critic notes with regard to *A Room of One’s Own*, for example, Woolf prescribes no ‘woman’s sentence’, but only asserts the desire for women to be able to express themselves in their own voices. With regard to Woolf’s work, Pamela Caughie describes literature as a dynamic process which offers “possibilities, not fixed positions” and “functions, not appropriate forms” (6). Caughie, like Woolf, focuses on the

speaker's motivation behind an expression and the reader's response to that expression, for each remains open to the potential for communication beyond fixed social codes of denotative meaning.

Certainly some readers have responded to Woolf in terms of the rhetoric of her work. Toril Moi contends that "remaining detached from the narrative strategies of *Room* is equivalent to not reading it at all" (5), arguing that what the work *does* for the reader goes over and above what it simply states. Clare Hanson concurs, explaining that the "very method of *A Room of One's Own*, with its shifting viewpoints and sudden juxtapositions, encourages us to see 'truth' as varying and unstable, and value as dependent on point of view" (116). Woolf enacts her vision of reality in her texts, deconstructing the certainty of any one fixed point of view by her use of language. Thus Woolf provokes the reader's awareness of the implications behind different constructions of reality and different uses of language. Victoria Middleton writes of Woolf's "re-cognition" which entails "becoming conscious of how we know, what we know, and *where* we know: where we stand in relation to the dominant culture" (415, original italics). Middleton describes how Woolf's observations on language and her use of language, in "exposing the relativity of supposed absolutes and endorsing pluralism of meaning" (406), enact a political position of resisting the "imperial appropriation of knowledge, the assumption of mastery over and total certitude about the world" (412) that conventional language-use assumes. Woolf deconstructs any one speaker or group of speakers' claim to an authority over language and reality by promoting the authority of every speaker to use language to express themselves and their experience of life in their own voice.

In the chapter that follows we see Woolf exploring and enacting different uses of language and the implications of these uses for speakers. She begins, in *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, to depict the effects of the tyrant of convention on speakers who want to escape the social codes by which society defines them, speakers who seek, like Woolf, to express themselves in their own voices.

CHAPTER TWO - "SOME LITTLE LANGUAGE SUCH AS LOVERS USE"¹:
 ESCAPING THE TYRANT OF CONVENTION

"You could draw circles round the whole lot of them, and
 they'd never stray outside."

("You can kill a hen by doing that"), Hewet murmured.

- Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*.

In her first two novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), Woolf explores the consequences of a dominant social discourse for the members of a linguistic community. She suggests that the common voice and point of view adopted by the community override the individual voice of the speaking subject, threatening the subject with the rejection of her or his point of view, and even the loss of her or his status as a subject. Finding that social convention doesn't allow her to use language to express her personal feelings, Rachel Vinrace gives voice to her thoughts through music. Yet her identity as a woman in a patriarchal society constrains Rachel to her community's definition of her as an object in terms of her sexual capacity. Unable to assert her point of view, and so occupy a position as a subject within her community, Rachel dies. *Night and Day*, however, offers a more optimistic picture of the speaker's ability to use language to assert her or his position as a subject. Katharine Hilbery liberates herself from her socially-prescribed life to forge a discourse free from the constraint of conventional language and social assumptions.

From childhood, Rachel Vinrace learns that her society won't allow her to voice her personal feelings. Her aunts have rebuffed her early attempts to discuss her experiences and emotions, as Rachel remembers when a mention of broom reminds her of her mother's funeral and a subsequent exchange with her aunt:

She saw her Aunt Lucy arranging flowers in the drawing room.

"Aunt Lucy," she volunteered, "I don't like the smell of broom; it reminds me of funerals."

¹ See footnote 1 on page 28.

“Nonsense, Rachel,” Aunt Lucy replied; “don’t say such foolish things, dear. I always think it a particularly cheerful plant.” (29)

As Rachel tries to convey the impression that broom has on her - that it evokes memories of her mother’s death - Lucy Vinrace rejects her niece’s response as “nonsense”, insisting that the words don’t mean anything literally, while also disregarding Rachel’s point of view because it differs from her own. Lucy silences Rachel - “don’t say such foolish things” - accepting neither the form nor the intent of Rachel’s attempt to express herself. Rachel’s investigations into the feelings of others are similarly discouraged:

“Are you f-f-fond of Aunt Eleanor, Aunt Lucy?” to which her aunt replied, with her nervous hen-like twitter of a laugh, “My dear child, what questions you do ask!”

“How fond? Very fond?” Rachel pursued.

“I can’t say I’ve ever thought ‘how,’” said Miss Vinrace. “If one cares one doesn’t think ‘how,’ Rachel.”. (30)

Again, Lucy’s reply not only sends the message that personal feelings are irrelevant, but she underlines her response with the implication that society doesn’t accept either the development or the expression of these subjective viewpoints: “If one cares” for other people, Lucy implies, this is simply a given state of affairs, and not a situation that requires personal analysis by considering “how”. Furthermore, Lucy’s words are also a warning not to pursue this kind of investigation: “If one cares” to mind one’s manners, to remain socially-acceptable, one doesn’t question the nature of the relationship or the sincerity of one’s feelings. Rachel, therefore, concludes that language is not a medium for personal expression and communication, and she turns away from speech and to her music as a permissible means of expressing herself:

Her efforts to come to an understanding had only hurt her aunt’s feelings, and the conclusion must be that it is better not to try. To feel anything strongly was to create an abyss between oneself and others who feel strongly but perhaps differently. It was far better to play the piano and forget all the rest It appeared that nobody ever said a thing they meant, or ever talked of a feeling they

felt, but that was what music was for. (30)

Noting and respecting her aunt's point of view - something that Lucy Vinrace will not do for her niece - Rachel comes to see the expression of one's own point of view as a divisive act rather than an opening for intersubjective communication - communication, that is, in which each speaker recognises the other's point of view and her or his status as a subject. Rachel accepts society as a rather arbitrary and strange system of behaviour, but as long as she is able to give voice to her feelings through her music, she feels otherwise unconstrained by social convention.

However, Rachel finds that she cannot continue to evade convention, but must accept the conventions of the social system in order to assume an adult status. Rachel's 'voyage out', then, is a 'coming out': an introduction and induction into adult society. Echoing the title of the novel, Rachel's father asks for help in bringing Rachel out, to "mak[e] a woman of her" (85), in order to prepare her for the role of political hostess that he envisages for her. In addition, her aunt, Helen Ambrose, takes it upon herself to 'enlighten' Rachel - which in Rachel's case means teaching her the physical facts of life, even down to the basic notion "that men desired women" (96). As Rachel's status as a child has been 'protected' by her total ignorance of sexual relations, her sudden awareness of such matters marks her initiation into adult society. Having told Rachel about sex, Helen tantalises her by concluding, "So now you can go ahead and be a person on your own account":

The vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergable ... flashed into Rachel's mind, and she became excited at the thought of living.

"I can be m-m-myself," she stammered, "in spite of you, in spite of the Dalloways, and Mr. Pepper, and Father, and my Aunts, in spite of these?" She swept her hand across a whole page of statesmen and soldiers. (83)

"In spite of them all", her aunt reassures her. Rachel interprets being "a person on your own account" as being an autonomous subject, unconstrained by other people. But, ironically, it is because of "them all" that Rachel's adult status represents not liberation, but the limitation of her self to the social conventions of this patriarchal society of "statesmen and soldiers"

pheld by her family and community.

Although Rachel's awareness of the potential of her own sexuality marks her initiation into adulthood, her new sexual status simultaneously constrains her opportunity for autonomy. In actuality, Helen counsels a self-imposed form of the censorship to prevent sexual impropriety that was previously administered by her father and aunts. From those around her, primarily Helen, Rachel learns of the social conception of female sexuality that now applies to her: a construction of women as passive and objectified. Helen disregards any notion of female desire and agency in sexual relations, telling Rachel, "Men will want to kiss you, just as they'll want to marry you. The pity is to get things out of proportion. It's like noticing the noises people make when they eat, or men spitting; or, in short, any small thing that gets on one's nerves" (79). Helen's words imply that sexual relations are something men desire but women find trivial and take no pleasure in, indeed that women find distasteful, while at the same time, she implies that sex - and this construction of sexuality - is unavoidable, being "the most natural thing in the world" (79). The absence of female desire that Helen describes, and the lack of any control that a woman has over her experiences, constitute female sexuality as a state of inevitable powerlessness, exploitation and objectification. Indeed, the model of sexuality that springs to Rachel's mind while her aunt is talking is prostitution:

"... what are those women in Piccadilly?"

"In Piccadilly? They are prostitutes," said Helen.

"It *is* terrifying - it *is* disgusting," Rachel asserted, as if she included Helen in her hatred.

"It is," said Helen. (79)

But Rachel's choice of model is not surprising. The construction Helen describes *is* 'terrifying and disgusting' for Rachel, and she is justified in including Helen in her hatred, for Helen - Rachel's confidante and supposed ally - promotes this patriarchal construction, offering Rachel no alternative: "you must take things as they are; and if you want friendship with men you must run risks" (80). When Rachel realises that these 'risks' are unsolicited sexual attentions - "So that's why I can't walk alone!" (80) - she internalises this construc-

tion of women as sexually passive and men as sexually aggressive: "men are brutes! I hate men!" (80). Thus Rachel becomes enculturated with the social construction of female sexuality. Furthermore, her accession to adulthood is contingent on accepting and fulfilling this construction, for as Helen intimates, Rachel's awareness of sexual relations - and hence the potential for her to have a role in such a relation - is what liberates her from her status as a child. The only way Rachel can gain adulthood and hence autonomy, the only means she is offered, is, paradoxically, to renounce power over herself.

Thus far in Rachel's life, social convention has prescribed that she can't use language to express her thoughts and emotions, while the language that describes her - the terms 'woman' and 'sexuality' - constricts her to a patriarchal construction of her self because of the socially-held conceptions of these terms. Upon meeting Terence Hewet, however, Rachel feels that she may not need to assume (both take on and take for granted) the patriarchal role that is prescribed for her. She feels that Terence sees life as she does, since he finds social convention rather contemptible and sympathises with her position as a young woman in a patriarchal society. Indeed, Terence counts himself as different from the majority of middle-class professional men, wondering at "the masculine conception of life" (221). After asking Rachel to describe a typical day, Terence recognises the "curious silent unrepresented life" of women, where:

until a few years ago no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all. There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life. Of course we're always writing about women - abusing them, or jeering at them, or worshipping them; but it's never come from women themselves. (225)

Terence wants "to write a novel about Silence" to express "the things people don't say" (229) and so give a voice to those who are hindered from speaking. Rachel, however, challenges Terence's plans as a novelist, implying that language is incapable of directly conveying the reality beyond conventional forms: "Why do you write novels? You ought to write music. Music . . . goes straight for things. It says all there is to say at once. With writing it seems to me there's so much . . . scratching on the matchbox" (220). But Terence counters

this objection by suggesting to Rachel that what he wants to do in writing novels

is very much what you want to do when you play the piano, I expect . . . We want to find out what's behind things, don't we? - Look at the lights down there . . . scattered about anyhow. Things I feel come to me like lights. . . . I want to combine them. . . . Have you ever seen fireworks that make figures? . . . I want to make figures. (232, first two ellipses added)

Terence wants to use language to construct a personal world view by arranging his impressions into an order that makes sense to him, just as Rachel uses music to express her perception of the reality that dwells "in what one saw and felt, but did not talk about" (30). The couple develop an intimacy based on the mutual recognition of a reality of thought and feeling beyond prescribed social conventions.

While Rachel and Terence are on the voyage up-river, however, Woolf shows that despite their dislike of conventional social roles the couple prove unable to pursue their intimacy without formalising their relationship. When Rachel and Terence are alone in the jungle, Terence initiates a catechism that examines and articulates their feelings, ending in a declaration of love: "You like being with me?" . . . "Yes, with you" . . . "We are happy together" . . . "Very happy" . . . "We love each other" . . . "We love each other" (289). Discussing the exchange later, Terence reveals that he equates this mutual declaration of love to a proposal and acceptance of marriage - an equation Rachel questions with confusion, though not opposition: "Am I in love - is this being in love - are we to marry each other?" (299). Terence treats her questions as rhetorical; though assuring Rachel that she remains free, he makes it clear that he assumes she has consented:

"To you, time will make no difference, or marriage or -" . . .

"Marriage?" Rachel repeated.

. . . "Yes, marriage." (299)

Rachel 'loses her voice' at this point, for where she earlier used language simply to express her feelings - that she liked Terence - she now finds that her words have contracted her to marriage. But even though Rachel is initially confused about the nature of her feelings for Terence, asking "Am I in love?", she comes to accept that her words and her actions have

identified and confirmed her inner feelings: "Yes, I'm in love. There's no doubt; I'm in love with you" (300).

Where Rachel questions this automatic equation of 'love' with 'marriage', Terence has previously even consciously resisted it, seeing marriage as ending "the adventure of intimacy" between two people who merely "tak[e] up their parts" (257), take up, that is, the roles prescribed for them by society. Yet the couple find themselves repeating, almost automatically - even as if it were beyond their control - the conventional pattern of a romantic relationship. Even to them their behaviour seems unreal:

"What's happened?" [Terence] began. "Why did I ask you to marry me?

How did it happen?"

"Did you ask me to marry you?" she wondered. (301)

Woolf reveals the power that convention has over the couple: without any available pattern that would allow Rachel and Terence to develop and enjoy their relationship outside of the social roles that neither wish to adopt, the couple are compelled to follow and repeat the patriarchal constructions of male and female adulthood and the conventional relationship between them.

Terence has little difficulty in making the adjustment to a conventional male role, lapsing into the traditional patriarchal position. As the narrator comments, "The book called Silence would now not be the same book that it would have been" (310), because Terence has lost his ability to understand other points of view; where Terence had earlier sympathised with the social position of women, he now feels set in opposition to them. Engaged, he finds that the world appears different, having "more solidity, more coherence, more importance, greater depth" than it did before (310), in contrast to Rachel, who sees herself and her fiancé as "patches of light" in opposition to a world "composed entirely of vast blocks of matter" (312). The imagery implies that becoming engaged has consolidated Terence's position in the world, while Rachel still desires to be fluid and mobile, and free from a state of objectivity. Significantly, Terence's view of Rachel herself has also changed. He ceases to relate to her as an individual subject, now viewing her as merely a representative of 'women' (310), which reinforces the threat to Rachel's status as a subject. Crucially, he invalidates

Rachel's self-expression in her music - now divesting it of value and making it subordinate to his own writing - effectively rendering Rachel speechless: he interrupts Rachel's Beethoven sonata to tell her, "I've no objection to nice simple tunes - indeed, I find them very helpful to my literary composition, but that kind of thing is merely like an unfortunate old dog going round on its hind legs in the rain" (311). He appropriates Rachel's voice in other ways, too; Terence being "far more highly skilled in the art of narrative than Rachel was", and Rachel's life-experiences being mostly "of a curiously child-like and humorous kind", Rachel's contribution to their conversations drops out to the point where "it generally fell to her lot to listen and ask questions" (318). When Terence examines and critiques Rachel's physical appearance at this point, the incident echoes back to early on in their relationship when he first viewed her body as attractive; as Rachel began to explain what her music meant to her, Terence noted that she "became less desirable as her brain began to work" (220). When Terence rejects Rachel's point of view and disregards her existence as a thinking, feeling entity, he treats her as an object, objectifying Rachel in the same way that society has done.

Rachel herself later discovers other negative repercussions of her declaration of feelings for Terence. Once expressed in the terms of 'love' and 'marriage', Rachel and Terence's relationship ceases to remain personal: "this wish of theirs was revealed to other people, and in the process became slightly strange to themselves. Apparently it was not anything unusual that had happened; it was that they had become engaged to marry each other" (309). Instead of being respected as a subjective experience, Rachel's feelings are treated as public property. While reading engagement congratulations, for example, she finds that other people view her relationship in merely conventional terms: "It was strange, considering how very different these people were, that they used almost the same sentences when they wrote" (313). She becomes frustrated when she realises that her community uses language to identify a social form rather than to express a subjective reality, resenting what she considers to be an insincere appropriation of her experience: "That any one of these people had ever felt what she felt, or could ever feel it, or had even the right to pretend for a single second they were capable of feeling it, appalled her . . . if they didn't feel a thing why did they

go and pretend to?" (313). Rachel even retracts her admission of 'love' in order to deny that her experience in any way relates to other people's assumptions: "I never fell in love, if falling in love is what people say it is, and it's the world that tells the lies and I tell the truth" (313). The need to assert the "truth" of her feelings over the "lies" of the community's appropriation of her actions becomes very important for Rachel, for the translation of her subjective feelings into language, and thus, into socially-held concepts, casts the reality of her own personal experience into doubt. When her community disregards the essential privacy of her feelings - by assuming that they can know what she feels, or could feel it themselves - Rachel is threatened with the loss of her very existence as a subject. T.E. Apter observes:

When one's individual reality becomes submerged by others' reality and others' purposes, then one's own impressions cease to matter, and one's self ceases to exist. Repeatedly Rachel is threatened by this alienation. The social fact of her forthcoming marriage, as opposed to the personal reality of her feelings, is an important impediment to her ability to survive the marriage. (12)

In other words, when Rachel's own feelings and point of view are denied by her fiancé and her community, her subjective self "ceases to exist".

Woolf connects this death of Rachel's metaphysical self with the physical death of the protagonist. Rachel realises she has a headache - the first intimation of her fatal illness - while listening to Terence reading Milton's *Comus*. Woolf has Terence read the invocation of Sabrina, protector of virgins, who saves 'the Lady' from enthrallment and potential despoliation by the debauched Comus. As Rachel listens she focuses on words "such as 'curb' and 'Lochrine' and 'Brute,' which brought unpleasant sights before her eyes, independently of their meaning" (348). Rachel responds to the language of the play by making personal associations between the words and her own situation. Rather than simply presenting their denotative meanings, these words suggest to Rachel that her own position is essentially the same as Milton's 'Lady', for they remind her of her earlier judgement, "men are brutes!" (80), and of the curbed and imprisoned state ('Lochrine' might be 'lock her in') imposed on her own sexuality: "Woolf thus invites us to read Rachel's illness in terms of a rescue, a semi-divine intervention taking her from the dangers represented by Terence and

sexuality" (Hanson 34).

Hanson goes on to suggest that Rachel's death is both an *escape* from the sexual objectification foisted on her by Terence and her community, and the final *result* of such an objectification, for the text implies that death may be the ultimate state of objectification. Upon her death, Terence feels "They now had what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they had lived It seemed to him that their complete union and happiness filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely". "It seemed to him": this climax is very much Terence's subjective experience. Rachel's death, for Terence, "was nothing It was happiness, it was perfect happiness". Terence's transcendent experience occurs not only without Rachel's live presence, but hence, without her consent. It is not "They" that "possessed what could never be taken from them" (376), but Terence alone, and his metaphoric action is nothing more transcendent than necrophilic rape.

The tension between Terence's earlier explicit views about women, society and personal relationships and the implicit judgements he assumes more and more towards the end of the novel indicates the impossibility of Rachel's quest to assert her status as an individual subject, rather than a social object, within this society. In revealing the unconscious hypocrisy of Terence's reversal of opinion, Woolf invites her readers to extend their critical focus to the whole community within the novel - and English society outside of the novel - who ostensibly offer others support, sympathy and respect but ultimately end up simply going through the motions, lapsing back into the forms of convention which are empty of sincerity and true understanding. And so Woolf describes Rachel Vinrace's ultimate loss of voice. Death may be the final escape, but it also becomes the final objectification.

As Woolf's first novel exposes the problems inherent in conventional language-use and the effects for the speakers, she leaves us with a question: must the price of liberation from language be ultimate silence? In *Night and Day*, Woolf's second novel, she suggests that self-expression and communication may yet be possible. The protagonist, Katharine Hilbery, enters already prescribed by her family and her society. Yet during the course of the novel, she gains her own voice in a relationship that liberates her from the objectifying

constraints from which Rachel Vinrace suffered. Katharine and Ralph find “some little language such as lovers use”, a language of broken and inarticulate phrases with which to establish an intersubjective relationship: a relationship in which each communicant recognises the other as a subject.

Like Rachel Vinrace, Katharine Hilbery experiences the silencing of her own voice, but unlike Rachel, Katharine accepts her position without alarm, being resigned to accept the conventional role society offers her. Katharine’s silence is “both natural to her and imposed upon her” by the necessities of her domestic position (47): having to “counsel and help and generally sustain her mother” in her endeavours (46). Katharine risks being objectified, like Rachel, by her society, where her position as a subject is limited to her social function: “It was understood that she was helping her mother to produce a great book. She was known to manage the household. She was certainly beautiful. That accounted for her satisfactorily” (47). Yet Katharine shows little desire to assert her own voice. Indeed, she has “no aptitude” for linguistic expression:

She did not like phrases. She even had some natural antipathy to that process of self-examination, that perpetual effort to understand one’s own feeling, and express it beautifully, fitly, or energetically in language; . . . She was, on the contrary, inclined to be silent; she shrank from expressing herself even in talk, let alone in writing. (46)

Where Rachel pursues music as an extra-linguistic means of expressing her thoughts and feelings, Katharine escapes from her conventional role by secretly studying mathematics. For Katharine, “cut out all the way round” as she is by her literary family (her grandfather is a famous poet and her father engages in part-time research of the Romantic poets, while her mother writes a biography), mathematics allows her “complete emancipation from her present surroundings” (48) and the opportunity to express herself - to assert her own voice - outside of the boundaries prescribed by her family and society. Katharine feels that “mathematics were directly opposed to literature” (48) in two respects: ^{her choice of subject} \wedge is both in challenge to, and the complete opposite of, language. Firstly, in pursuing her chosen area of study, Katharine sees herself as deviating from “the tradition of her family” (48), and so, in this small meas-

ure, challenging their control over her. Secondly, she prefers “the exactitude, the star-like impersonality, of figures to the confusion, agitation, and vagueness of the finest prose” (48). Patrick J. Whiteley describes the impersonal quality of mathematics and music by identifying how “the relationship between [the] parts is not causal but formal and logical, internal to the work itself and not in accordance with an exterior model” (149). Mathematics is exact and impersonal because, unlike language, it does not pretend to express what can only ever be subjective experience, but states instead the relations within a fixed and logical system. Each thought or expression can be formulated in the available terms of the discourse without confusion or misrepresentation. While Rachel suffers from the way language translates her feelings into social concepts, Katharine studies mathematics as a discourse that is beyond the potential of language to manipulate and appropriate her thoughts and responses.

Like Rachel Vinrace, Katharine finds the language of personal relationships fraught with underlying implications. Katharine is concerned that, while the fact of her engagement to William Rodney prescribes that she is ‘in love’ with him, she doesn’t experience any sensation corresponding to this concept. In contrast to Rachel, who initially feels emotion but has no experience of patterns of expression, Katharine is fully aware of the motions that one must go through, but fails to experience the emotion; as Katharine reads William’s love-letter, she

could see in what direction her feelings ought to flow, supposing they revealed themselves. She would come to feel a humorous sort of tenderness for him, a zealous care for his susceptibilities, and, after all she considered, thinking of her father and mother, what is love? (113)

As Katharine finds that the sensation of ‘love’ is beyond her experience, all that seems open to her is the social convention of tenderness and care. ‘Love’ remains a social concept rather than a felt experience, its social manifestations “something of a pageant to her” because “she did not return the feeling” (113). Aware, like Rachel, of a linguistic disjunction between personal vision and social form, and concluding, like Rachel, that the two are irreconcilable, Katharine gives up her vision. Indeed, it is William, rather than Katharine, who intimates

that there is no 'romance' in their relationship. When Katherine queries his use of the term, he looks to language rather than his own emotion, replying, "I've never come across a definition that satisfied me" (306). Katharine apprehends the concept William is trying to name but for her it remains extra-linguistic: she describes it as "a desire, an echo, a sound; she could drape it in colour, see it in form, hear it in music, but not in words"; she is "teased by desires so incoherent, so incommunicable" (307). All she is sure of is that she does not feel this - earlier hesitantly referred to as "love" (260) - for William.

William believes that fixed codes of language can sufficiently convey the speaker's intent. In writing his play, William's theory is "that every mood has its metre", but as Katharine discovers while she listens to him reading his work, literary form alone cannot contain the emotion that the writer desires to express. As the "lines flowed on, sometimes long and sometimes short, but always delivered with the same lilt of voice, which seemed to nail each line firmly on to the same spot in the hearer's brain", Katharine feels "a sense of chill stupor" overcome her; she hears the words and can presumably uncode the meaning they are supposed to convey, but she feels no emotional response (149).

In wooing Katharine, William composes her a sonnet. In significant contrast, Ralph Denham finds he cannot express his feelings towards Katharine in conventional forms. Desperately trying to address the effect she has on him, he attempts to write a poem to her, and Woolf describes this process of articulation in a revealing way. Ralph initially experiences a pulse or stress which "heaped his thoughts into waves to which words fitted themselves" (517); the passage parallels Saussure's description of how language breaks up thought:

Visualize the air in contact with a sheet of water; if the atmospheric pressure changes, the surface will be broken up into a series of divisions, waves; the waves resemble the union or coupling of thought with phonic substance. (112)

In order to use language conventionally, Ralph finds he must construct his thoughts into concepts that are represented by existing words, rather than using language - as Woolf herself goes on to do - as a medium to express his own personal thought. But the available terms fail to match up to Ralph's feelings, and his poem proves to be an inadequate expres-

sion, for it “lacked several words in each line” (517). Ralph finds that language cannot express and communicate his subjective feelings, because he finds a disjunction between felt emotion and the available forms of linguistic representation.

Indeed, from the very start of their relationship Katharine and Ralph refuse to engage in conventional discourse. In fact, the two are silently antagonistic towards each other: Katharine perceives Ralph as a “strange young man” who “probably disliked” conventional social discourse - tea-party chit-chat, in this instance (11) - while for his part, Ralph rejects possible smalltalk and controls “his desire to say something abrupt and explosive which would shock [Katharine] into life” (14). Ralph challenges Katharine’s complacency about other social conventions, too. Ralph’s dissatisfaction with the financial worries and informal social practices of his own family makes him aware and resentful of the assurity of Katharine’s social position. Thus “roused . . . to show her the limitations of her lot” (20), Ralph provokes Katharine into seeing herself as circumscribed by her social position. Shown around the museum-like room containing “relics” (15) of Katharine’s predecessors, as Katharine takes up her duties as a hostess “automatically” (19), Ralph remarks to her, “You’re cut out all the way round” (18):

“You’ll never know anything at first hand,” he began, almost savagely.
“It’s all been done for you. You’ll never know the pleasure of buying things after saving up for them, or reading books for the first time, or making discoveries And this kind of thing” - he nodded towards the other room, where they could hear bursts of cultivated laughter - “must take up a lot of time Do you do anything yourself?” (20)

In suggesting that Katharine does nothing herself, Ralph provokes Katharine into becoming aware of her status as a subject by challenging her to think for herself and to assert her own point of view as an individual person rather than merely a spokesperson for her family.

Once assured of her acquaintance, Ralph offers Katharine a relationship - a friendship - that would respect her status as a subject by encouraging her to see life in her own way and pursue her own interests, rather than to play a socially-prescribed role. Katharine initially criticises Ralph for thinking her “mysterious” and “romantic” (407), but she comes to realise

that when Ralph figures her beyond her practical everyday existence, he liberates her from the circumscription that she, as well as her family and society, has come to place on her life. Katharine secretly desires a discourse - a form of communication, a relationship, a social structure - which leaves her free from obligations, practical concerns and vested interests; free, that is, from the fixed and limiting position, and the accompanying expectations, that society exacts from her. However, she believes that the only way to achieve this state is to avoid personal contact altogether:

Don't you see that if you have no relations with people it's easier to be honest with them . . . One needn't cajole them; one's under no obligation to them. Surely you must have found with your own family that it's impossible to discuss what matters to you most because you're herded together, because you're in a conspiracy, because the position is false - . . . (360)

Thus far in her life, Katharine has found that all relations with other people demand the compromise or sacrifice of individual values and ambitions to the needs of the group - whether this is obligation and duty to family, or the need to keep the peace with one's partner. Remaining sceptical, therefore, Katharine nevertheless accepts Ralph's offer of a friendship free from emotional obligation and thus free from manipulation: a relationship open to change, in which the participants remain "at liberty to break or to alter at any moment" (361); a relationship that encourages unconstrained expression, in which each person "must be able to say whatever they wish to say" (361).

In this fluid and, to them, unprecedented friendship, Katharine and Ralph strive *not* to define their relationship. "I'm not in love with Ralph Denham" Katharine asserts later in the novel (512), for in her mind, love equates to marriage, and marriage requires that she assume the social role she has taken pains to avoid in her developing friendship with Ralph. Mrs Hilbery reassures her daughter that "[n]ames aren't everything; it's what we feel that's everything" (511), implying that the couple can validly construct a marriage on the terms they have set forth, since there are "different ways" of being in love (512). For Katharine and Ralph, 'love' no longer equates to any sort of pre-defined and fixed social unit - such as the state of 'engagement' that Rachel and Terence found themselves in - but instead de-

scribes a fluid and amorphous personal understanding that embraces a multiplicity of unknown and undefined relations between two people.

The language the couple use to forge and describe their relationship must needs accommodate this abstraction and lack of definition, and so function beyond available forms. Indeed, exchanges between Katharine and Ralph are characterised by the inadequacy of language to convey their thoughts and feelings. Their discourse is marked by "silence or . . . inarticulate expressions" (503), looks "that seemed to ask what [Katharine] could not put into words" (409), and "the sort of nonsense one talks to oneself" (450), where "one word spoke more than a sentence" (537). Their final recognition of mutual love takes place almost beyond language itself: "The explanation was a short one. The sounds were inarticulate; no one could have understood the meaning save themselves" (523). This private and intimate 'little language' that the lovers come to use can be described as phatic communication. The single words that speak more than a sentence and conversations with private meanings mark a use of language that occurs again and again throughout Woolf's works; Septimus and Rezia in *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, share private jokes between themselves. Instead of having to use language as if it defined and identified pre-existing and socially-determined thoughts and feelings - as do the characters in *The Voyage Out* - in *Night and Day* Woolf demonstrates a use of language that establishes a personal communication and avoids the need for the speaker to conform to a social discourse that would objectify her or him. As Ralph and Katharine break away from "the unity of phrases fashioned by the old believers" (539), they each find their own voice in which to express their feelings - a possibility denied to Rachel Vinrace by her community - and so confirm and validate each speaker's subjectivity. When Katharine's "broken statement" of her vision of life makes Ralph see the world from her point of view, feeling that "he had stepped over the threshold into the faintly lit vastness of another mind" (536), Katharine uses language to affirm her status as a subject.

Though Katharine and Ralph thus establish a relationship respecting each other's subject-position and subordinating neither to the unwelcome assumptions of society, the problem of language remains. When Katharine and Ralph establish a new order in life - a new relationship to each other, and between themselves and the world - they find that language

can no longer accommodate their world-view. As Ralph enumerates the people shared in his and Katharine's history, he finds it not possible "to link them together in any way that should explain the queer combination which he could perceive in them" (538). But though Ralph's statements are disjointed, Katharine follows the track of his thought:

She felt him trying to piece together in a laborious and elementary fashion fragments of belief, unsoldered and separate, lacking the unity of phrases fashioned by the old believers. Together they groped in this difficult region, where the unfinished, the unfulfilled, the unwritten, the unreturned came together in their ghostly way and wore the semblance of the complete and the satisfactory. (539)

Katharine and Ralph's situation within the novel is much like Woolf's situation as a writer. Perceiving life outside of the model prescribed by her community, Woolf seeks a way to use language that will express and communicate her vision. *Night and Day* simply describes the characters using language to express themselves. With the creation of *Jacob's Room* (1922), however, Woolf, like Katharine and Ralph, rejects the "unity of phrases fashioned by the old believers" and begins to use the language of the novel to embody her perception of reality in her own voice.

CHAPTER THREE - TAKING "THAT DANGEROUS LEAP"¹ BETWEEN WORDS AND MEANING

How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question.

- Virginia Woolf, 'Craftsmanship'

The Voyage Out and *Night and Day* reveal the first indications of what Makiko Minow-Pinkney calls Woolf's "fundamental dissatisfaction with representation" (24), for both novels picture reality as some elusive and unassailable realm necessarily beyond language. From these novels on, Woolf develops ways to use language as a means of communication which avoids the primacy of the rigidly representational 'sound-image plus concept equals sign' posited by Saussure's structuralism. Investigating language at the level of representation, as Woolf repeatedly does in her essays as well as throughout her novels, two issues become relevant. Firstly, Woolf addresses the problem of reference - that is, the essential absence of any final presence in language - finding that direct reference instead gives way to an infinite interplay of signification. Secondly, Woolf addresses the problem of expression: how can writers and speakers use, with any certainty of communication, a language that does not vouchsafe direct and consistent reference? Woolf anticipates Jacques Derrida by drawing attention to the awareness that language cannot sanction its own referent. Yet Woolf offers a positive rather than a negative response to the fractured relationship between language and reality. That language can only be an endless play of signification lacking final reference does not, for Woolf, indicate the loss or absence of meaning; rather, she admits the constant free play of language and embraces rather than eschews it by advancing the use of rhetorical strategies, such as figurative language, in communication. Exploring the evocative potential of prose language rather than relying solely on its conventional denotative function, Woolf extends the possibility of

¹ The quotation is from Woolf's essay, 'On Not Knowing Greek' (48).

subjective expression and communication, while simultaneously liberating the subject of the discourse from objectification.

Woolf completed *Night and Day* aware of the problem of language - that all too often we cannot express ourselves satisfactorily - dramatising this frustration even in the apparently ideal relationship of Katharine and Ralph. Writing to Katharine, Ralph feels "the inadequacy of the words, and the need of writing under them and over them others which, after all, did no better" (519). Since none of the words that Ralph chooses can adequately name, and so convey, the sentiments he wishes to express, his feelings remain beyond representation in language. In *Orlando*, Woolf describes a similar problem with the limitations of denotative representation. Orlando finds that reality proves unable to be directly translated into language, for no terms will contain his experience of the colours of nature. Trying to avoid using metaphor in his poem, Orlando says in desperation, "Why not simply say what one means and leave it?":

So then he tried saying the grass is green and the sky is blue . . . "The sky is blue," he said, "the grass is green." Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky was like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing the embraces of hairy satyrs from enchanted woods. "Upon my word," he said . . . "I don't see that one's more true than another. Both are utterly false." (61-2)

Orlando turns to metaphor to convey his impressions of nature, but he rejects this as a "false" use of language because it does not directly represent reality. Yet comparing figurative language to non-figurative language, he finds that the latter has just as little self-evident relation to reality as figurative language does.

Thus Woolf observes that neither figurative nor denotative language can directly or finally make reality present in some self-evident sign. More recently, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has advanced a similar recognition. By understanding Derrida and the process of linguistic deconstruction he describes, we can apply his concepts of language to Woolf's work and not only further understand Woolf's own implicit investigations into language, but also see how Woolf goes about addressing the flexibilities and

imitations of language that Derrida describes. Orlando, like Ralph Denham, discovers that neither phrase he wishes to use forms the essential centre of his intended expression. Derrida describes this elusive centre in language as the "point at which the substitution of contents, elements or terms is no longer possible" (Derrida *Structure, Sign, and Play* 248). Derrida contends that in language as a whole "the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences", outside an infinite number of sign substitutions" (249). This essential lack of presence is not surprising, though, for language is necessarily symbolic: "When we cannot take hold of or know the thing . . . then we signify, we go through the detour of signs". The linguistic sign becomes a "deferred presence", a representation of the thing itself. Yet the thing itself, the original or transcendental signified, faces a further remove in that "the signified concept never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself" (Derrida, cited in Butler *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology* 62); that is, just as the thing itself is not present or self-evident in its representative sign, neither is the signified concept present or self-evident in its representative signifier. The signified concept, what the word represents or means, can never be present in itself in some form beyond language, beyond further linguistic signs. Each definition, each explanation, each clarification of meaning only brings to bear more signifiers, and never meaning or reality itself, which remains necessarily beyond language. Derrida pictures an endless chain of signifiers that can never bridge the gap between representation and reality. According to Butler, Derrida concludes that language "always pretends or aims to make things present to us, but always fails to do so" (Butler 62).

However, (language not making any claims on its own account) Saussure's structuralist theory of language, at least, never posited the kind of immediate presence that Derrida seems to demand; indeed, in believing that language "always pretends to make things present to us", Derrida exhibits a pre-structuralist, rather than a post-structuralist, expectation of language. For, reasserting the notion of value - the notion meaning from usage and context to which Woolf also ascribes - Saussure states that:

to consider a term as simply the union of a certain sound with a certain concept

is grossly misleading. To define it in this way would isolate the term from its system; it would mean that one can start from the terms and construct the system by adding them together when, on the contrary, it is from the interdependent whole that one must start and through analysis obtain its elements. (113)

Thus Saussure emphasises that “values remain entirely relative” (113); in that language is a closed system without any self-evident, self-sanctioned link to anything outside of itself, meaning has to be interdependent. In response to this interdependence, this “systematic play of differences” (Derrida, quoted in Butler 62), Derrida asserts the notion of linguistic and textual ‘free play’ where, as Butler describes it, “the ‘full’ meaning of any word, phrase or text will never simply stop and declare itself, for there will always be a further nuance to pursue” as well as a further deferral of presence or meaning (Butler 62). Like Orlando, who, perceiving language as an obstacle to conveying “what one means”, “despaired of being able to solve the problem of what poetry is and what truth is and fell into a deep dejection” (*Orlando* 61-2), Derrida describes an aporia of expression, where language cannot be used with any justification, and final truth can never be revealed.

Christopher Butler summarises the deconstructionist position:

Where we expect the literal we find the metaphorical; where we expect realism we find literary convention, where we expect something to be made present to us, we find that it is perpetually put off or deferred. (66)

There will always be, in other words, an unbridgeable gap between word and meaning, between the signifier and the signified, between language and reality.

The work of Virginia Woolf, however, suggests that our inability to bridge this gap is contingent upon our approach to language and our expectations of the nature of the signifying relationship between language and reality. If we revise our expectations of how language functions, Woolf implies, then we open ourselves up to alternative means of expression and communication. In the essay ‘On Not Knowing Greek’, Woolf describes her understanding of the relationship between words and meaning when she writes that to understand the work of Aeschylus,

it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. It is neces-

sary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words . . . For words, when opposed to such a blast of meaning, must give out, must be blown astray, and only by collecting in companies convey the meaning which each one separately is too weak to express. Connecting them in a rapid flight of the mind we know instantly and instinctively what they mean, but could not decant that meaning afresh into any other words. There is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means. (48-9)

In line with Saussure's theory of language as an interdependent structure, Woolf states here that only by connecting words "in a rapid flight of the mind" can "we know instantly and instinctively what they mean". This last phrase indicates two things. Firstly, we can know "instantly" what words mean because we attach meaning to words as part of Saussure's notion of a 'linguistic community' where certain linguistic associations are conceptual "realities" available to both reader and writer. Yet more importantly for Woolf, we make this association "instinctively", that is, intuitively, rather than by any rational determination. That "dangerous leap" is a leap of faith "without the support of words", for Woolf recognises, as does Derrida, that words cannot sanction their own meaning in some way that is beyond the 'play' of the text: any confirmation of meaning must still be mediated through language. Hence she writes with regard to poetic language that "we cannot know exactly what it means", for no meaning can ever be final, absolute or ultimate outside of some context. Furthermore, we cannot "decant that meaning afresh into any other words" in that we cannot reduce poetic language to any final and certain essence or unsubstitutable centre. But where deconstruction leaves the reader with an infinite regress, and so a constant deferral, of final meaning, Woolf goes on to demonstrate how meaning can yet be engendered by this constant play of signification.

Woolf makes no essential distinction between the language of poetry and the language of prose, seeing in each literary form the constant play of signification and the potential to convey meaning through evocation; like Derrida, she understands that 'free play' inheres in all language. Referring to the extremely prosaic statement 'Do not lean out of

the window' in the essay 'Craftsmanship', Woolf writes: "At the first reading the useful meaning, the surface meaning, is conveyed; but soon, as we sit looking at the words, they shuffle, they change" (127). Language cannot be essentially divided into prose language and poetic language, then, for each function is merely a different use of language. "What, then", Woolf continues, "is the proper use of words? Not, so we have said, to make a useful statement; for a useful statement is a statement that can mean only one thing. And it is in the nature of words to mean many things" (128), "not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities" (127). Given that life itself offers myriad meanings and interpretations, "the proper use of words", according to Woolf is, not to assert a single and authoritative "statement" about reality, but to reflect the "thousand possibilities" that life offers. Woolf goes on to state that words "hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is in their nature to change"; they change, she continues, "because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that" (131). In this way, Woolf finds language, with its 'free play' of signification, singularly appropriate for conveying a "varying", "unknown and uncircumscribed" reality ('Modern Fiction' 189).

For Woolf, language functions by stimulating impressions in the reader by evoking a subjective arrangement of elements and the relations between those elements - by evoking a perception of reality rather than by presenting a direct, one-to-one, representative code. Woolf uses language as a *medium* for communication rather than the communication itself. Edward Bishop also describes Woolf's language as a medium: what is actually transmitted by language "is not a 'message' but signals, a 'blueprint' from which the bearer reconstructs the message" (76):

if we think in terms of sending blueprints rather than the thing itself we will not expect the communication to be flawless; partial communication, multiple readings of a single text, become the norm rather than errors requiring explanation. (76-7)

As such, there can be no universal method to correctly express all ideas, just as there can be no automatic procedure for interpreting each expression. If we view language as Woolf

does - as a medium or stimulus for communication - then figurative language becomes not an avoidance of direct reference, but the most effective means of expression and communication.

Woolf makes use of figurative language - primarily, metaphor - in her essays as well as her prose fiction to facilitate communication and to best negotiate the problematic relation between language and reality. Bishop contends that Woolf's use of metaphor expresses "her sense of the complex and problematic relation between the world and the word" (71), and hence metaphor "is for Woolf the most appropriate instrument for exploring, or participating in, reality" (74). He describes Woolf's practice of using metaphor to overcome the limits of representation - in other words, the lack of 'presence' in language - when he states:

in her essays she attempts to do what she describes Aeschylus as doing, to launch the reader toward a meaning beyond language . . . if she is successful, the meaning, heretofore inaccessible to language, will now have been brought (both created and described) within its province. (74)

Metaphor induces the reader to view the world from the same perspective as the writer - to take the same impression from the object, scene or action - without the writer presuming to definitively describe the referent, thereby leaving it open to further possible significance. Metaphor thus encourages the reader to take an active role in the communication process, as Woolf notes in 'How Should One Read A Book?':

The representation is often at a very far remove from the thing represented, so that we have to use all our energies of mind to grasp the relation between, for example, the song of a nightingale and the images and ideas which that song stirs in the mind. (395-6)

The reader and writer become 'of one mind' by taking the same impression from language, while the actual relation between metaphoric signifier and the signified remains implicit, with the referent not so much undecided as undefined.

Furthermore, Woolf uses not only the familiar noun metaphors - such as 'oceans of drama' ('On Not Knowing Greek' [ONKG] 45) - but also verb metaphors, which further

liberate the referent. For example, she states that Aeschylus makes his dramas tremendous “by stretching every phrase to the utmost, by sending them floating forth in metaphors, by bidding them rise up and stalk eyeless and majestic through the scene” (ONKG 48). Here Woolf presents the referent to us: “every phrase”. But what *is* a phrase that it can be stretched, float, rise up and finally stalk, “eyeless and majestic”, through a scene? By describing the referent in terms of what it does rather than what it is, Woolf both conveys the impression she herself receives and provokes readers into re-evaluating their assumptions about the nature of reality: by the “bold and running use of metaphor”, Woolf, like Aeschylus, “will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which, taken into [the writer’s] mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make it splendid” (ONKG 49). Metaphor becomes a means of facilitating communication between writer and reader while preserving the integrity of the written subject.

The Voyage Out and *Night and Day* describe how each protagonist becomes wary of society’s tendency to use language to define and prescribe each woman’s self, feelings and behaviour, objectifying them as it does so. In ‘Craftsmanship’, Woolf articulates this issue at a linguistic level, stating that explicit meaning and definitive reference not only restrict but deaden the potential function of language. Referring to contemporary poets, novelists and critics, she writes

... we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die. (129)

In *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf extends her observation that the definition of words ‘kills’ them by applying it to society’s tendency to define people. As his society defines Jacob Flanders, pinning him down to a single, socially-derived meaning, he too dies. However, *Jacob’s Room* marks a significant change in Woolf’s conception of the novel. Her first full-length, formally-experimental work, it differs from *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* in that in it Woolf uses the language of the text to re-enact the strategies taking place

in the narrative. Thus *Jacob's Room* becomes a linguistic, not just a narrative, investigation into the relationship between language and reality. *Orlando* continues this investigation; but where the earlier novel is (deadly) serious, *Orlando* offers a farcical perspective on linguistic representation. In 'Craftsmanship', Woolf writes of the possible implied meanings of words:

The moment we single out and emphasize the suggestions . . . they become unreal; and we, too, become unreal - specialists, word mongers, phrase finders, not readers. In reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated . . . (129)

In *Orlando*, Woolf demonstrates how the moment we single out the 'meaning' of a person, as in language, each suggestion becomes unreal, and we end up seeking after something that can never be made present to us, something that we can never hope to find.

CHAPTER FOUR - "PIGEON-HOLES ARE NOT THEN VERY USEFUL"¹:
 USING LANGUAGE TO LIBERATE THE SUBJECT

I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how
 it is worse perhaps to be locked in.

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, Makiko Minow-Pinkney says of Woolf's short story 'An Unwritten Novel' (1920) that it "dramatises the problem of writing, the impossibility of closing the gap between the subject who writes and the object written about" (26). Two years later in *Jacob's Room*, however, Woolf finds it imperative to close this gap between subject and object. William R. Handley identifies the challenge Woolf faces. In *Jacob's Room*, he says, Woolf addresses on a narrative level "the ways in which a militarized society robs human beings of bodies and voices for its own violent ends", while balancing this, on a linguistic level, with the awareness that "no representation of the human subject can avoid even the most seemingly innocuous appropriation that, for political reasons, Woolf's narrator so meticulously distrusts" (110). Woolf recognises the problematic nature of "representing the other's status as a subject without treating him or her as an object" (Handley 110), for it is this very process of objectification that she wishes to critique in the social system. According to Handley,

Where the war dehumanizes and leaves vacancies, the narrator wants to give a life and body to Jacob; but where the war appropriates, the narrator is distanced and even powerless if she is not to reinscribe war's treatment of human beings as objects. (111)

Woolf creates a tension in the work by advancing Jacob Flanders as defined and objectified within a patriarchal, militaristic society, while seeking to present him as a subject within the text. Woolf's project, then, comes down to the issue of signification: what, or rather, how, does Jacob signify within the text and within his society, and how can Woolf

¹ The quotation is from *The Waves* (229).

make a politically-responsible distinction between the two functions?

Minow-Pinkney identifies indirect linguistic signification as the strategy by which Woolf protects Jacob's subjectivity within the text. The novel's major concern, she states, is a sign which remains elusive and enigmatic. The impossibility of reaching a final truth precipitates a suspicion of signification itself, and dissolves the complacent signifier-signified equivalence of Edwardian realism. (26)

Thus according to Minow-Pinkney, *Jacob's Room* confounds structuralist conceptions about signification. Certainly Woolf leaves much of the action - notably, the death of the protagonist - and import of the novel implicit or unstated rather than directly reporting it. In reworking the text Woolf even deliberately cut out this kind of direct information. Alex Zwerdling, for instance, identifies significant changes between the holograph and the published version of the romantically-tense grape-picking scene between Jacob and Clara Durrant, where Woolf deliberately excises what are already minimised hints of Jacob's feelings towards Clara. Likewise, Kate Flint draws attention to the published version of the scene where Betty Flanders, remembering her rejection of Mr Floyd's marriage proposal, strokes the cat he had given to the family: "she smiled, thinking how she had had him gelded, and how she did not like red hair in men" (*Jacob's Room* 17). The link between Betty's consecutive thoughts - that in rejecting Mr Floyd, she has symbolically (and not entirely regretfully) 'gelded' the red-haired minister - remains solely implied by their juxtaposition in the published text, while the connection is explicitly spelt out in the manuscript version (Flint 367).

As she elides explanations within particular scenes, Woolf also elides much about her protagonist. Rather than providing an exposé or a literary portrait of a particular young man, *Jacob's Room* instead offers an enigma: who is Jacob Flanders? Many critics have taken this as the point of the novel: that, despite finishing the novel, we don't really 'know' Jacob highlights how little we know of anyone, and questions whether - and how - we could know anyone conclusively, and indeed, the text discusses these issues at some length. The narrator admits that "It is no use trying to sum people up", suggesting instead "One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" (25). The

narrator implies that the real nature of a person resides beyond the signifiers of "what is said" and "what is done", and that we must follow these as "hints" rather than expecting them to be conclusive in themselves. Even though Jacob's thoughts, words and actions can be recorded, the narrator admits that :

there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself. Moreover, part of this is not Jacob but Richard Bonamy - the room; the market carts; the hour; the very moment of history. Then consider the effect of sex - how between man and woman it hangs wavy, tremulous, so that here's a valley, there's a peak, when in truth, perhaps, all's as flat as my hand. (67)

By stating that even "the exact words get the wrong accent on them" (67), the narrator completes this deconstruction of signification, where nothing - neither Jacob, the narrator's commentary, nor language itself - is any longer neutral, reliable or self-evident. The narrator's observation that "Nobody sees anyone as he is They see a whole - they see all sorts of things - they see themselves" (25) recognises that there can be no privileged or final position from which to take a conclusive point of view. As such there can be no definitive interpretation of either text or person. Reviewing each character's differing interpretation of Jacob, the narrator concludes that there are as many views as viewers:

It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case, life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, beings shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us - why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him. (66)

We are surprised to feel we know someone as real and solid, the narrator suggests, because all too often we realise this 'knowing' is not knowing at all.

As Minow-Pinkney points out, "If the subject of the novel is 'What is Jacob?', it is also the impossibility of articulating, let alone successfully fulfilling this concern in the available literary forms" (27). Furthermore, the novel demonstrates a concern not only with the limitations of the available literary forms, but also with the implications of answering the question 'What is Jacob?' under the available epistemological assumptions. According to Woolf in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', contemporary literary forms prescribe that characters are identified by their physical environments, and so the Edwardian novelists make a practice of giving their readers "a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there" (106). Within this convention, readers are led to believe that they 'know' a character because they recognise objects that are traditionally associated with the life of a particular type of character. Without these fixed codes of definition, Woolf contends, the reading public won't find the character substantial and real; rather, they will see her or him as a "mere figment" of the writer's imagination (107).

Yet for Woolf, describing a character's lack of definition is vital because by embodying the feeling that we cannot ever conclusively and completely know, and thus sum up, another person, such a technique protects the subject from being appropriated as an object in the text. William Handley identifies *Jacob's Room* as a response to conventional Edwardian character-drawing practices, where Woolf takes into account the political implications of Edwardian epistemology. Woolf develops her specific aesthetic project, "her need to 'get at' reality differently from the Edwardian novelists", Handley contends, precisely *because* the other novelists' "treatment of human beings as objectlike is homologous to their uses and abuses by socially hegemonic authority" (111). The text asks more than who, or what, is Jacob?; it challenges the assumptions behind the very phrasing of the question: how do we know, and what do we do with that knowledge? By repeatedly depicting Jacob as immediate, "real" and "solid" while simultaneously exposing him as a "shadow", Woolf implies that Jacob cannot be ultimately accounted for simply by chronicling such apparently definitive information as facts, dialogue and behaviour. Jacob's 'room' becomes a double-edged metaphor for Jacob himself. Ostensibly in line with Edwardian convention, Woolf depicts the eponymous character in terms of his position in

society, offering passages of detailed description of Jacob's environment, both physical and social. The vehicle of the metaphor, the room itself, 'contains' Jacob, revealing aspects of his character in its contents. However, unlike the Edwardian novels, Woolf's text emphasises the disjunction between Jacob's subjective existence and his environment. Woolf repeatedly shows that Jacob is not 'in' Jacob's room: neither his room in Neville's Court, nor finally, and pointedly, his rooms in London.² Woolf implies that in the same way as Jacob cannot be ultimately defined by his outward characteristics, he also cannot be ultimately defined in language. Jacob remains an absent narrative and linguistic presence throughout the novel.

Woolf's depiction of Jacob as an absent presence becomes inextricably bound to issues of political expediency beyond the text. Throughout the novel Jacob is juxtaposed with objects exposed as hollow, but with fixed and monolithic facades. Fanny Elmer visits the British Museum to remind herself of Jacob by viewing the statue of Ulysses, her idea of Jacob being "more statuesque, noble, and eyeless than ever" (167); Florinda too thinks Jacob is "like one of those statues" at the Museum (74). In Greece though, Jacob himself finds that the real statues are unfinished at the back: "the side of the figure which is turned away from view is left in the rough" (144). That Fanny sees Jacob as a Greek statue (or, to be accurate, that she sees a Greek statue as Jacob) invites the reader to likewise identify Jacob with the statues he sees in Greece. Where the back part of the statue is unfinished, indeterminate, Woolf implies that Jacob too is a social facade constructed from undefined raw material. The description of the young men at Cambridge similarly evokes the image of incorporeal, unformed existence that is clothed, solidified - and ultimately objectified - by a social form:

Look, as they pass into service, how airily the gowns blow out, as though nothing dense and corporeal were within. What sculptured faces, what certainty, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns. In what orderly procession they advance. (26)

As William Handley points out, the "sculptured faces" and "great boots" that "march" into

² At the end of the novel, of course, Jacob is not in his room because he has been killed in the war.

“service” testify to the increasing objectification of these young men as they advance towards acceding to their places in this militarised society. Throughout the novel authority is portrayed as monolithic and object-like - massive, solid, inflexible and uniform, as well as stonelike - from the “smoothly sculptured . . . impassive policeman at Ludgate circus” (151), to the disembodied voices and “hollow-looking” heads of the parliamentarians, which is the best approximation the living can make to the envied “fixed marble eyes” and “air of immortal quiescence” of the statues of past legislators. In fact the current politicians fail dismally to live up to these standards of objectivity, displaying the weaknesses of being human:

some were troubled with dyspepsia; one had at that very moment cracked the glass of spectacles; another spoke in Glasgow tomorrow; altogether they looked too red, fat, pale or lean, to be dealing, as the marble heads had dealt, with the course of history. (169)

Implying that living is a weakness when dealing with “the course of history”, the text links the physically object-like state of authority-figures to an assumed moral and political objectivity. Furthermore, as the patriarchal leaders strive to objectify themselves, they also exact an objectification of the other members of society: an objectification which, as Handley points out, becomes a commodification. From the prostitute Jacob encounters to the university-educated young men who become soldiers, each person has an “exchange value” in society. Increasingly objectified as he grows up and assumes the mantle of patriarchy, Jacob’s own life is finally “exchanged for national preservation” (Handley 116) in the war.

Alex Zwerdling describes *Jacob’s Room* as a ‘satiric elegy’, and the paradox of the opposition between critical satire and the sympathetic lament of elegy is politically significant. If Jacob is not to be objectified by Woolf - and by the reader - he cannot stand entirely as the object of an elegy. Zwerdling contends that Woolf “had an instinctive distrust for reverence of any kind, treating it as a fundamentally dishonest mental habit that made symbols out of flesh-and-blood human beings” (73). Jacob cannot be entirely passive in his fate, for to be solely a victim renders him powerless in the society within the novel, and

merely subordinated to Woolf's message on the level of the text itself; either way, Woolf would be repeating the same processes of objectification and commodification that she sets out to criticise. And indeed, "Woolf is interested not in fixing human beings but in unhinging them, in demonstrating how individuals are constantly impinged upon by social forces that shape their internal reality" (Handley 112), since she depicts the way in which Jacob, in acceding to the patriarchal order as a subject, is complicit in his own fate. Woolf shows that Jacob is not helplessly commodified by the militaristic ideology of his patriarchal society; instead, he inherits and accepts its tenets. Jacob gains his own validity and social standing - his own 'meaning' - by accepting the privileges of a tradition that upholds the concepts of the past over ideological and social innovation. Jacob is "impressionable", says the narrator, but "the word is contradicted by the composure with which he hollowed his hand to screen a match. He was young man of substance" (30); Jacob enjoys the consolidation that comes with accession to the patriarchal order. He may deplore the shallow and conventional Plumers, for example, and desire freedom from such convention and lack of feeling, but the support that the established order offers proves stronger than his youthful desire for an independent identity:

The Plumers will try to prevent him from making it. Wells and Shaw and the serious sixpenny weeklies will sit on its head. Every time he lunches out on Sunday - at dinner parties and tea parties - there will be this same shock - horror - discomfort - then pleasure, for he draws into him at every step as he walks such certainty, such reassurance from all sides . . . (30)

Life may be "damnable difficult", but, as Jacob finds at university, "after all, not so difficult if on the next staircase, in the next large room, there are two, three, five young men" who all share a common ideology (38). Jacob gains reinforcement and sense of complacency from his conformity.

Much of the novel's poignancy comes from Jacob's awareness of the determined nature of his existence - his awareness of the prescriptive ideology of the society in which he lives - juxtaposed against his failure to act independently. "But it's the way we're brought up" Jacob laments, bemoaning a disjunction between the illusion sustained by so-

ciety of Greece as an ideal civilisation and his own experience of the country: “. . . it seemed to him very distasteful. Something ought to be done about it. And from being moderately depressed he became like a man about to be executed” (133). The text remains ambiguous as to whether Jacob finds the current state of civilisation distasteful, since it fails to live up to the Greek ideal - and therefore that he advocates that something ought to be done about society - or whether Jacob is simply lamenting the fact that he has been brought up with a positive illusion in the first place. Given that Jacob has, despite possible misgivings, adopted the tenets of his Western society, the simile ‘like a man about to be executed’ proves prophetic. Though Jacob recognises society’s inability to address social and political problems innovatively and effectively, he is ultimately unable to extract himself from the system he condemns:

That respectability and evening parties where one has to dress, and wretched slums at the back of Gray’s Inn - something solid, immovable, and grotesque - is at the back of it, Jacob thought probable. But then there was the British Empire which was beginning to puzzle him; nor was he altogether in favour of giving Home Rule to Ireland. What did the *Daily Mail* say about that? (134)

Able to vaguely apprehend a negative relation between the state of the ruling class and the state of the ruled, Jacob nevertheless fails to render this apprehension explicit, and instead turns to conventional opinion to inform his own view. Thus, while ostensibly an elegy for Jacob as a representative of the young men killed in World War One, objectified and commodified by a militaristic society, Woolf’s satire is also directed at her protagonist, for, as a member of the patriarchy, Jacob is complicit in his own fate by following and repeating the social ideologies that lead to war.

Woolf creates a tension in *Jacob’s Room* by defining the protagonist on a narrative level, while suggesting that he is not contained, at a linguistic level, by such a definition. *Orlando* also investigates the issue of the self’s representation in language. In *Orlando*, however, Woolf describes a character who confounds conventional signification not by seeking to evade definition, but by proliferating definitions. As *Orlando*’s textual ambiguity mirrors Orlando’s sexual ambiguity, the novel challenges structuralist assumptions

about how we use language by destabilising the socially-constructed conceptual categories with which we identify a person and disrupting the notion of the mutual exclusivity of these categories.

From the very opening of the novel, the text challenges any implicit assumptions about the relation between signifier and signified. As numerous critics have noted, the immediate assertion of Orlando's sex - "He - for there could be no doubt of his sex . . ." (*Orlando* 3) - simultaneously casts into doubt the grounds for such an assertion. The text repeats this doubt when Orlando undergoes his second week-long sleep and wakes up physically female. The novel comfortably accommodates the confusion of pronouns - slipping easily from "he was a woman" to "their future . . . their identity", before the narrative voice reminds itself that "in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his', and 'she' for 'he'" (87) - but this laissez faire application of signifiers creates a suspicion about the nature of the signified and the process of signification. The pronoun with which we refer to Orlando becomes a matter of context, referring to biological sex as distinct from essential being, its use tautological rather than transcendent.

Rather than avoiding direct reference, as the text of *Jacob's Room* does, *Orlando* exposes language's essential lack of reference by direct and repeated assertion. When the trumpets heralding Orlando's physical change of sex peal "Truth! Truth! Truth!" (87), they expose positivistic assumptions that meaning is self-evident. The secret is revealed - Orlando, previously a man, is now a woman - but the very process of asserting this revelation as a "Truth" confounds our notion of what such a truth might signify. The text states the truth directly, yet its import remains obscure. In the short story 'The Mark on the Wall', Woolf questions the epistemological assumptions we make in equating naming or material definition with knowledge: if she were to ascertain what the mark on the wall really is, Woolf writes, "what should I gain? - Knowledge? Matter for further speculation?" (46).³ Similarly, with the play of signification in *Orlando*, the text points towards a meaning, a "knowledge", that it does not supply. The repetition of "Truth" renders the word and the concept effectively meaningless, in the way that repeating any word many

³ Minow-Pinkney's chapter on *Jacob's Room* drew my attention to this passage and its significance.

times causes it to lose its meaning. The truth of Orlando's sex loses its significance at the very point we discover this truth.

The text further confounds its own assertion of the truth by creating an unstable and changing relation between the signifiers of sexual identity - biological sex, clothing and gendered behaviour - and the self which they supposedly signify. When Orlando no longer fits the mutually-exclusive conceptual categories that language provides, by multiplying his and her modes of existence - being at different times both male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, feminine and masculine - the character confounds structuralist linguistic signification. The passage discussing the relation of clothes to sex begins, significantly enough, with the withdrawal of a previous assertion of truth: "what was said a short time ago about their [sic] being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true" (120). Instead, the narrator asserts that the difference between the sexes is "one of great profundity" (121). And yet, this profound difference is not a difference *between* human beings, but *within* human beings, for "[d]ifferent though the sexes are, they intermix" (121). 'The sexes', then, does not refer to men and women - for these are no longer mutually exclusive - but rather aspects of an individual person that are 'male' or 'female'. Yet such a definition becomes tautological since it implies that what we understand as essentially 'male' or essentially 'female' comes down to an arbitrary linguistic definition rather than language simply naming actual and extrinsic empirical distinctions. The statement that it "was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (121) indicates that here Woolf premises the sexual identity of "Orlando herself" (allowing for the contingency of pronouns) beyond gendered clothing and behaviour, and even beyond biological sex. Since, as Minnow-Pinkney notes, the nature of this "change" is never specified or clarified, "the word and fact of 'change' itself . . . loses its obviousness" (129): beyond any observable sexual identity, *from* what and *to* what did Orlando change? Even the suggestion of a "psychic form of sexual identity" (Bowlby 54) does not end the search for Orlando's final or true sexual identity which the text provokes. Bowlby states:

The clothes offer an image which resembles that of a man or a woman; a wom-

an's clothes may either express a woman, or hide a man; a 'woman' may be only the temporary appearance or inclination of a 'human being' who vacillates from one identity to the other - and vice versa in both cases. The surface/reality structure of the argument leaves no ground at all for choosing a perspective from which to judge accurately. (55)

Since all of these signifying elements can alternate - if even Orlando's "psychic" sexual identity can "change", dictating the adoption of the heretofore opposite biological sex - then as far as the text allows us to understand, there *is* no final or true sexual identity. The very effect of the text is to destabilise any perspective or ground "from which to judge accurately".

The issue the text investigates, then, is not whether sexual identity is essential or constructed, but the significance of any linguistic relation between the signified - identity - and its signifiers - clothing and biology - when the signifiers are multiple, contradictory and contingent. Such an observation leads us to an identification between language and the self. Christy L. Burns articulates this link when she suggests that "notions of the self are intricately linked to writing for Woolf, . . . the essence of a word functions just like the essence of a person, clothed in social conventions and full of indeterminacy" (357). Since, as Saussure contends, there are no positive terms in language, each signifying element of sexual identity that the text offers - clothing, behaviour, biology - does not signify of itself, but only in its difference to another aspect: 'woman' being, to take an infamous example, 'not man'. The notion of any coherent and self-evident relation between signifying element and signified identity breaks down with the repeated alternation of the signifier, for without the mutual exclusiveness of signs, meaning collapses. Toril Moi paraphrases Derrida in observing that

[t]here is no final element, no fundamental unit, no *transcendental signified* that is meaningful *in itself* and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference. The free play of signifiers will never yield a final, unified meaning that in turn might ground and explain all the others. (9, Moi's italics)

The “reality” of Orlando’s alternating identity will never stop and declare itself, for though we keep peeling back the layers of signifiers, we never arrive at any *signified* that does not function as another signifier. Ruth Porritt describes how Derrida’s ‘deconstruction of the self’ takes Saussure’s notion that “the unity of the signified/signifier relationship in the signs of words composes the identity of things” (Porritt 325), and extends it by contending that “the so-called signifier can rebound and make a portion of the so-called signified into a signifier” (325). *Orlando* demonstrates this when the protagonist’s change of sex renders the biological sex asserted in the opening line of the text as merely a *signifier* rather than the *signified* sexual identity. “If the process is repeated” Porritt continues, “the signified suffers a kind of geometric reduction and is gradually replaced by the signifier” (325), so that “every so-called signified is ultimately only a signifier” (326): a signifier gesturing towards some transcendent identity that remains perpetually beyond language. As Derrida has observed, we end up with an endless chain of signifiers that can never make the thing we attempt to name present beyond the name itself. With the tension between the superficial narrative definition and the thematic evasion of definition in *Jacob’s Room*, and the plurality of definition in *Orlando*, each novel leaves us without a final meaning or ultimate truth and with only an endless chain of signs.

Orlando ends with a wild goose chase, where the goose after which Orlando flings her nets becomes a fish, and the nets of words yield only more words. Summed up in these images, *Orlando* can be read as making a farce of our expectations of a single, final meaning or identity. Despite showing that the ‘truth’ of the linguistic sign is not self-evident, and demonstrating how linguistic presence gives way instead to a constant deferral of meaning in an endless chain of signifiers, Woolf offers us a substantial and vivid protagonist, and an articulate and meaningful novel in which critics continue to find a range of relevant and engaging issues. There would seem to be a tension, then, between the theoretical limitations of language and what language, in practice, can deliver to the reader. Woolf’s image of the wild goose - gesturing towards some elusive, transcendental reality at the same time as it represents nothing at all - suggests that the search for a single, incontrovertible ‘truth’ or ‘presence’ in either language or life is actually a wild goose

chase in pursuit of a red herring.

Turning to *To the Lighthouse*, however, we can see that in this novel Woolf offers her readers a model for explaining how we, as readers, do indeed find meaning and a conceptual presence in language and life. By using language as an evocation of a subjective reality rather than the representation of an objective reality, and recognising the reader in the communication process, Woolf suggests that we need to alter our expectations of language, and revise our assumptions about the 'true' nature of reality as consisting of monolithic and self-evident elements. There is no single essential and transcendent reality, Woolf suggests. Instead, the elements we single out - such as a person, or a novel - are complex and many-faceted, and their meaning changes as our point of view changes. Reality, then, can never be reduced to any static uniform essence, but must be appreciated in all its fluidity and heterogeneity.

CHAPTER FIVE - "TO SEE LIFE WHOLE"¹: WOOLF'S VISION OF LIFE AND TEXTUAL DESIGN

Chapters Three and Four describe how Woolf uses language - fully aware of the potentially endless 'free play' of signification - to evoke impressions from the reader rather than to pin down or define any essential meaning or truth in either language or life. However, accepting the deferral of meaning raises further issues about the possibility of coming to any interpretation at all of the linguistic product, as Christopher Butler points out: "if there is no stopping place we literally never arrive at a certain interpretation . . . if we thus refuse to stop, what are the 'rules' for the play of meaning thus discerned?" (62). Woolf herself articulates a parallel problem in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Comparing William Banks to Mr Ramsay, for example, the artist Lily Briscoe feels ambivalent about each man. Her attempts to reconcile the "undeniable, everlasting, contradictory" (29) impressions that assail her when she thinks of the two men initially leave her wondering, like Butler, about the possibility of ever coming to any conclusion and the rules for interpretation under such conditions: "How did one judge people, think of them? How did one add up this and that and conclude that it was liking one felt, or disliking? And to those words, what meaning attached, after all?" (29). However, playing over her thoughts, Lily eventually comes to find that in her mind all the contradictory impressions "danced up and down, like a company of nats, each separate, but all marvellously controlled in an invisible elastic net" (30), coexistent, and resisting any ultimate reconciliation. The model of comprehension by which Woolf describes Lily's experience is the same model that she applies to life outside of her fiction, and the same model she applies to a text itself, where finding the 'truth' of life or language is not a matter of pursuing some singular and self-evident final meaning, as *Orlando* shows, by peeling back successive 'false' signifiers in order to reveal the 'true' essence. Turning from a linear model of signification - the endless chain of signifiers, none of which yield a final presence - to a spherical model, Woolf suggests that finding meaning in language is a matter of keeping in play the various aspects and contradictory points of view, so that, given these

¹ The phrase recurs throughout *Howards End* by E.M. Forster.

myriad impressions, we can project in our minds a virtual, three-dimensional conception of the subject under consideration, whether it be a person, a novel or an aspect of life itself. Woolf describes a text, then, not as the definition and transcription of a static and objective reality, nor the continual deferral of meaning by a series of signifiers, but as an “invisible elastic net”, capable of holding in suspension every fleeting and contradictory impression, and thus allowing the reader to see life whole.

Woolf offers us a vision of life whereby the ‘truth’ of reality comes down to our subjective experience of life. In ‘Modern Fiction’ Woolf specifically connects her vision of life to her proposal for fiction, advancing a design which accommodates her vision by keeping every impression ‘in play’, refusing to reduce them to any definitive essence or conclusive summing up. Characteristically, she focuses not outwards on some external, objective and linear reality - pictured as a series of gig lamps - but inwards, on the subject’s consciousness, the “luminous halo” of life as we experience it. “Look within”, she bids us, and examine “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day”:

The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old . . . (189)

The “innumerable atoms” here, like Lily’s “company of gnats”, form a shape from the mixed impressions that make up our experience of life. Diffuse and contradictory, life cannot be reconciled to one monolithic perspective or objective conclusion, and Woolf advocates that this recognition should be reflected in fiction.

Throughout her *œuvre*, Woolf uses the image of a globe - the “luminous halo” is one variation - to suggest life apprehended whole. In her novels, characters often perceive life in terms of a complete, rounded and diffuse shape: in *Night and Day*, for instance, Katharine has a vision of life as a globe, while in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay focuses on a sonnet as the medium by which she apprehends “the essence sucked out of life and held rounded” in front of her (139). Equally, Woolf applies the idea of a network of implicit connections to her work itself. In her diary she chronicles the process of conceiving the “vague yet elabo-

rate design” that becomes *The Waves* - vague because she desires not to define or circumscribe life, and elaborate because she desires the form of the novel to embody the interconnectedness of life: “whenever I make a mark I have to think of its relation to a dozen others” (AWD 146). Throughout her work, Woolf presents experiences and impressions without rendering them into any singular object-form, leaving them “unknown and uncircumscribed”, seemingly “disconnected and incoherent” (‘Modern Fiction’ 189-90) - as in her depiction of Jacob Flanders - because she wishes to safeguard the integrity of the subject by making it irreducible to any uniform meaning or appropriable function. Woolf presents the various contradictory views of Jacob Flanders, finally concluding that they cannot be resolved and thus “over him we hang vibrating” (*Jacob's Room* 67), trying to pick up and sustain all these different points of view. As Mark Hussey says, Woolf “felt that the truth of fiction was so many-sided that only a continuous permutation of perspectives could comprehend it” (xviii). In work after work Woolf demonstrates the ability of the writer to accommodate various and even opposing points of view. In the landmark short story ‘Kew Gardens’, for instance, Woolf describes the gardens as they are experienced from several diverse perspectives: we get the points of view of four different couples, each remembering past experiences in the gardens, as well as the perspective of a snail with its own concerns. Similarly, Lily apprehends the complexity of Mrs Ramsay’s character, reflecting that “[o]ne wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with . . . Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (*To the Lighthouse* 224). Orlando, in the same sense, has over two thousand selves to be comprehended. Yet Woolf does not limit her vision merely to fiction; she also extends her ‘many-sided’ view to non-fiction texts. Edward Bishop comments how Woolf’s essays take the reader “all around her subject, giving it an almost three-dimensional quality” (69).

Woolf’s vision of life and her textual design avoid the linearity of conventional models of logic. She states in her diary that the more complex a vision, the more it understands, “the less it is able to sum up and make linear” (AWD 247). Instead of a system of comprehension where each element is linked to only two others in a series, connected by some consistent and external rule, then, Woolf offers the concept of a network of connections; we can

imagine a diffuse sphere of points, where each point is connected to many others. Understanding how the whole fits together, that is, understanding the relations between each connected point, can never be linear because for each connection we trace in one direction, other links will go off in other directions. We can never, logically, begin at the beginning, trace directly through to the end, and so arrive at the meaning; our journeys may be circular, or we may come across the same element in different contexts. And yet, playing over these multiple connections we also open ourselves up to the possibility of a moment of being: a moment when, with all the different elements held in suspension in our mind, we grasp the whole in a flash of revelation which makes the concept seem present to us. Woolf recalls one such moment of being in 'A Sketch of the Past':

I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower When I said about the flower "That is the whole," I felt that I had made a discovery. (71)

From the physical signifiers of leaves, flower and earth, suddenly Woolf perceives a "whole", a conceptual 'presence', whereby the 'meaning' of the plant is revealed: made plain and immediate. Woolf suggests that we can indeed apprehend transient and contradictory impressions as a conceptual 'presence', and thereby halt the potentially endless deferral of meaning in life.

In 'A Sketch of the Past' Woolf writes of the "sudden violent shock" of different experiences, or "exceptional moments", throughout her life (71); the difference between finding despair or satisfaction in these moments depended on Woolf's ability to comprehend the experience as a whole, as she describes above, and so find meaning in it. Moreover, Woolf suggests that it is her ability to receive these moments of being that makes her a writer. As the shock of the moment "is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it", Woolf uses language to make sense of her experience by recording her observations and impressions and so creating, in a text, the conceptual 'whole' that she seeks. She writes:

I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from the enemy behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a reve-

lation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. (72)

Arranging the elements of her experience in such a way that they make sense left Woolf “thus able to deal with sensation. I was not powerless” (72); she discovers a sense of satisfaction and agency by arranging and so creating the world according to her experience of it. Woolf uses language, then, not to make real communally-sanctioned linguistic associations, but to make real her own life-experience. In doing so she gains an authority over her life: a sense of herself as a subjective agent discovering, shaping and naming her experience of the world from her own perspective and in her own voice.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf presents examples of two different models of comprehension: on the one hand offering Mr Ramsay’s linear logic, while on the other hand Lily Briscoe’s painting becomes an analogy for Woolf’s own moments of vision. Woolf contrasts her comprehensive vision with a linear conception of life in describing Mr Ramsay’s inability to ‘see things whole’ and the sense of dissatisfaction that this brings. As Mr Ramsay attempts to “arrive at a perfectly clear understanding of the problem which now engaged his splendid mind”, the narrator comments that

if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. (39-40)

At Q, however, Mr Ramsay can no longer sustain any meaning. On the linguistic level, the narrator’s metaphor for thought breaks down into a meaningless and ridiculous series of signifiers: “If Q then is Q - R - R is then - what is R?” (40). Similarly, on the narrative level, Mr Ramsay confronts not only his mental limitations - his inability to reach Z, an apparently ultimate state of philosophical understanding - but his underlying sense of personal failure: that his marriage and children have somehow prevented him from achieving this

philosophical goal. Unable to reach the final Z in the chain of signifying letters, and thus unable to realise the transcendent understanding that would presumably allow him to solve any and every problem in the world, Mr Ramsay likewise cannot realise a sense of completeness and satisfaction in his domestic life: he fails to appreciate his wife and children, and constantly demands sympathy and reassurance from those around him. Identifying a distinction between the two types of thinkers - a distinction that Woolf sets up throughout her works - Mr Ramsay recognises that he has not the ability to see life whole:

The geranium in the urn became startlingly visible and, displayed among its leaves, he could see, without wishing it, that old, that obvious distinction between the two classes of men; on the one hand the steady goers of superhuman strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order, twenty-six letters in all, from start to finish; on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash - the way of genius. (41)

The mention of the geranium echoes back to Woolf's moment of being with the flower in 'A Sketch of the Past', highlighting the contrast between her own comprehensive vision of life and the linearity of conventional logic. By her critical depiction of Mr Ramsay, Woolf suggests that conventional logicians, with their conception of life as a linear series of signifiers, cannot successfully address the multiplicity and contradiction of reality and thus remain constantly unsatisfied in their attempts to find any real meaning in life.

Within the novel, Mr Ramsay, Lily and Woolf herself all seek the same goal: to make real and present the person of Mrs Ramsay. In the "Time Passes" section of the novel, Mrs Ramsay dies, leaving different members of the family to experience her loss in different ways. Mr Ramsay, for example,

stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty. (146-47)

In line with Mr Ramsay's view of an objective reality, he feels his wife's death as the lack of a physical object. Lily, too, suffers from the absence of Mrs Ramsay, but in a different

way: for Lily, Mrs Ramsay possessed the ability to make things whole - hence meaningful and real - and without Mrs Ramsay as a guide, Lily can no longer comprehend the world. She struggles even to understand her own emotions, finding language inadequate to express her confused and nameless feelings: "For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs Ramsay dead? Nothing, nothing - nothing that she could express at all" (165). For Lily, no words can "contract her feelings" (165) and organise her thoughts - as Saussure suggests that language should - into some recognisable concept of pain or loss so that she can formulate a coherent understanding and expression of her experience. Furthermore, unable to order her thoughts and make sense of her emotions, Lily also finds herself unable to order and make sense of her environment:

The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it, anything might happen, and whatever did happen . . . was a question, as if the link that usually bound things together had been cut, and they floated up here, down there, off, anyhow. (166)

Without any conceptual framework to provide some meaningful relation between environmental objects, and between the subject Lily and these objects, Lily remains separate from an "aimless", "chaotic" and "unreal" world (166), and without agency.

Like Woolf, however, Lily recognises the need to assign some sort of meaning to her experiences in order to make sense of them. Mr Ramsay's distantly-heard words, "Alone" and "Perished", for instance, become vague symbols to Lily, "like everything else this strange morning" (167), unrelated to each other, but potentially significant. Lily feels the need to connect these elements of her experience and to realise this potential, to make a whole statement out of her disjunct perceptions:

If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things . . . Perished. Alone. The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together? (167)

Lily seeks a way to join "the parts" to make a meaningful whole and so find a "truth" in her experience. However, though she initially thinks in terms of a linguistic representation,

hoping to write out her perceptions “in some sentence”, Lily remains suspicious of structuralism’s claim that language can directly represent thought and feeling:

Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. “About life, about death; about Mrs Ramsay” - no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low For how could one express in words the emotions of the body? express the emptiness there? It was one’s body feeling, not one’s mind. (202)

Lily’s impression of the relationship between language and thought here - that words break up thought into usable parts - echoes Saussure. Yet Lily rejects this ‘dismembering’ process of linguistic representation, seeing it as a violent rendering of her original thought or emotion into empty and impersonal signifiers, and instead seeks to make something whole and integrated of her disjoint perceptions and memories.

Lily’s painting, like Woolf’s writing, becomes a way to realise the vision that she holds, a way both to comprehend the concept and make it real. With her painting, Lily “herself tried to make of the moment something permanent” (183), desiring to realise, by comprehending the concept of, Mrs Ramsay’s presence - a presence she desperately craves: “‘Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!’ she cried, feeling the old horror come back - to want and want and not to have” (229). What Lily seeks beyond the signifier of Mrs Ramsay’s name and beyond the signifier of her painting is “that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything” (217); Lily seeks to recover, that is, her experience of Mrs Ramsay as a conceptual presence. In the process of creating the painting, Lily achieves her goal. As someone in the house throws “an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step” (229), Lily paints this shape, investing her picture with all her impressions of Mrs Ramsay as her mind runs over the myriad experiences of Mrs Ramsay’s life. The shape vaguely represents James and his mother sitting on the step, reading together, yet for Lily it signifies the whole concept of Mrs Ramsay - multi-faceted, contradictory and incapable of summation. Once Lily comes to comprehend this whole, she attains her desire for the older woman’s presence: Lily sees Mrs Ramsay as she “sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her knitting needles

and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat” (10). Thinking ambivalently of Mr Ramsay, Lily invests the picture with her feelings for him, too. The painting thus becomes a personal expression of Lily’s emotion, signifying by making her myriad and contradictory feelings and thoughts about the whole experience of living with the Ramsay family and their guests on Skye. It does not matter that the picture would be hung in the attics” (237) or destroyed. In the very process of creating the painting Lily has achieved her ‘closure’, making whole and complete - and so, permanent and stable - the relationship with Mrs Ramsay that was severed by the older woman’s death, thus allowing her to attain the object of her desire and state finally and satisfiedly, “I have had my vision” (237).²

In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf depicts how we can arrange the elements we experience life to make meaningful and present wholes. In a similar way, Woolf contends in many of her essays, a reader arranges the elements in a text to make the text a meaningful and present whole. In ‘On Re-reading Novels’ she states that “the ‘book itself’ is not the form which you see, but emotion which you feel” (130), gesturing as she does so away from a search for ‘presence’ in linguistic form and towards the experience of the reader. As we would, Woolf contends, “something is built up which is not the story itself” (‘Phases of Fiction’ 143). Hence, as well as acknowledging the immediate impressions that we receive during the reading process itself, Woolf also focuses on what has come to be termed ‘retrospective patterning’ - what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls “closure”: the ability “to re-experience the entire work, not now as a succession of events, but as an integral design” (156). The impression we receive from the book *after* reading, when “one can think of the book as a whole” is different “and gives one a different emotion, from the book received presently in several different parts” (Woolf ‘How Should One Read A Book?’ [HSORB] 197). Upon finishing a book, Woolf says, we are left with a multiplicity of details and im-

The novel allows Woolf, too, to have her vision. After finishing *To the Lighthouse* Woolf noted in her diary,

I used to think of him [her father] and mother daily; but writing the *lighthouse* laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true - that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; and the writing of them was a necessary act.) (AWD 138)

Just as after several decades, Woolf, like Lily, achieves a sense of closure in the relationships ended by death by embodying the memory of her parents in her novel so they could take on “a wholeness not theirs in life” (FL 295).

sions, “and we have to create, to combine, to put these incongruous things together” (ORB 394). We must, in other words, take the signifiers we are given and arrange the impressions they evoke into a coherent and meaningful shape. And so, as Mark Hussey concludes, while the actual process of reading is linear, “in the mind of the reader the book assume a new shape that may overcome the linearity of language” (xvii) - overcome, that is, the continual deferral of meaning and of conceptual presence.

The task of constructing a coherent shape depends not only on the skill of the writer, but also on the expectations and the experience of the reader. A writer of merit, Woolf contends in *Phases of Fiction*, exerts a certain control over the reader, so that when we are reading by a writer we feel that “we are being compelled to accept an order and to arrange the elements of the novel . . . in certain relations at the novelist’s bidding” (143). Yet other writers of equal merit convey their artistic design less assertively. Appraising Russian literature, Woolf admits many works are “vague and inconclusive” (*Modern Fiction* 193) in that at the end of the story readers are left with the feeling that they have overrun their signals, “or it is as if a tune had stopped short without the expected chords to close it” (*The Russian Point of View* [RPV] 223). But rather than locate the source of this short-coming solely in the work itself, Woolf turns to the readers, insisting that they must take up the responsibility of their part in the textual relationship. When we say a story is inconclusive, Woolf states, we proceed to frame a criticism based upon the assumption that stories ought to conclude in a way that we recognise”:

In so doing, we raise the question of our fitness as readers. Where the tune is familiar and the end emphatic - lovers united, villains discomfited, intrigues exposed - as it is in most Victorian fiction, we can scarcely go wrong, but where the tune is unfamiliar and the end a note of interrogation or merely the information that they went on talking³ . . . we need a very daring and alert sense of literature to make us hear the tune, and in particular those last notes which complete the harmony. Probably we have to read a great many stories before we feel, and the feeling is essential to our satisfaction, that we hold the parts to-

As, for example, in *Between the Acts*.

gether . . . (RPV 223)

ie, in work without a conventional plot-structure or an overt, single theme - such as
lf's own work - the reader must be alert to each element of the text so that she or he rec-
es how these elements fit together to conclude the text and shape a complete, and thus
actory, textual whole.

As is the case with many of Woolf's essays, her critical appraisals of other works and
rs reflect her own work. Here, she stresses that the Russian point of view is quite dif-
t from conventional Victorian literature. In Russian literature, she says, each element is
"not separately . . . but streaked, involved, inextricably confused" (227) with other
ents:

The old divisions melt into each other. Men are at the same time villains and
saints; their acts are at once beautiful and despicable. We love and we hate at the
same time. There is none of that precise division between good and bad to
which we are used. (227)

Woolf admires these Russian writers, and that her own works avoid familiar tunes,
natic endings and "that precise division between good and bad" suggests that Woolf
is this Russian point of view where, as James Ramsay says in *To the Lighthouse*,
"nothing was simply one thing" (286). Many elements of Woolf's novels are not 'simply
thing', but remain ambiguous, gesturing simultaneously towards several different
things and significances. With regard to *The Waves*, Woolf notes affirmingly that she
nately used the symbols she had prepared "not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coher-
t, but simply as images, never making them work out; only suggest" (AWD 169). Such
wer of suggestion opens the reader to a host of possible interpretations of the text, and
ed, this is Woolf's intention: not to prescribe a set response, but simply to provoke re-
se. Replying to Roger Fry's confession that the "symbolic meaning" of *To the Light-*
e escaped him, Woolf writes:

I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the
book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to
this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that other people would make it

the deposit for their own emotions . . . (*qtd in Burns 358, original italics*)

Woolf refuses for her work to dictate any single, universal meaning to the reader, preferring instead that it hold a personal significance for each reader. She advocates that each reader must arrange the elements presented by the text for her or himself, and thus realise the meaning of work in her or his own way. The reader is no longer a passive recipient, but an active creator of the text. And so, while Woolf uses language to confirm her own subjectivity, she also encourages the reader to repeat this process by apprehending the text as a series of impressions to be ordered and understood according to her or his own response. To the extent that the work is made real - created, put together and realised in the mind - by the act of reading, the reader can be said to 'author' it for her or himself. In this way Woolf achieves an intersubjective relationship between author and reader: while the reader recognises Woolf's voice and her subject-position, Woolf also recognises the reader as an active subject in the textual relationship.

Woolf's recognition of the reader as a subject opens the door to the whole issue of the distinction between speaking subjects through the text and outside the text: the distinctions between human beings when they are communicating through the medium of language. Patricia Ondek Laurence notes of Woolf that "[l]ocating the speaking subject in any of the various voices of a literary text proves to be difficult" because Woolf "deconstructs the distinctions" between author, different forms of narrator, and characters (22). Furthermore, Hanna Richter advances the relationship Woolf makes possible between the reader and writer contending that "if a reader is made to see and feel through the very eyes and mind of a character, and that character resembles the author, he may be said to experience that author well" (238). In using language as a medium for intersubjective communication, Woolf raises questions about the distinct identity of a speaking subject. If 'I' am not limited to my own perspective, but can experience life from another subject-position, then what distinguishes me from that other? As the characters in *The Waves* ask, then, 'who am I?'

CHAPTER SIX - "I SING MYSELF"¹: CREATING AND RELATING SELF AND OTHER

The screen-making habit . . . is so universal that probably it preserves our sanity. If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies we might perhaps dissolve utterly; separateness would be impossible. But the screens are in the excess; not the sympathy.

- Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*

In testifying to the way in which the search for a 'true' or 'essential' self in language encounters an endless deferral of the signified, *Jacob's Room* and *Orlando* foreshadow Derrida's conclusion, as Ruth Porritt phrases it, that "maybe the 'self' is not a unified, singular and identifiable entity, but only a phenomenon created by human language" (324). Woolf does not go so far as to suggest that language creates the self *ex nihilo*, for her works retain the notion of the presence of a controlling subjectivity - whether Orlando's true self or Mrs Ramsay's "wedge-shaped core of darkness" (*To the Lighthouse* 72). Woolf does, however, challenge traditional assumptions that the self is a unified, singular and identifiable entity by using language not to name a static and knowable identity but to depict the self as fluid, multiple and unbounded, limited only by subject's preconceptions of his or her own identity. Woolf demonstrates the potential to create a conception of the self, to shape a self and to engender relations with other subjects in language: through language of the text in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and in the subject's own voice in *The Waves* (1931). How Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith conceive of themselves depends on the elements they choose to compose their identity - elements they identify not only with, but as, themselves - and the conceptual relationship between what they thus perceive as 'self' and what they perceive as 'other': the arrangement between themselves, their environment and other subjects. Two of the characters in *The Waves*, Rhoda and Bernard, use language more directly as a means to

¹ The phrase is from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*.

perceive themselves. Jean Wyatt describes how the subject can use language to produce a self: "I create myself as an independent entity by forming a sentence around the subject 'I'; I am therefore in continuous production, generated by my statements" (120). "I sing myself", then: creating by articulating a conception of myself and so, through language, making myself a reality. But, as Wyatt continues, the creation of a self through language separates the subject from other people, bringing with it the potential for objectification: "When I establish my position as a subject, I differentiate myself from the objects I talk about: each generates not only 'I,' the speaker, but 'them,' the objects that language requires I treat as separate from myself" (120). At stake in the creation of a self, therefore, is the ability to maintain a sense of one's own subjectivity, a sense of oneself as a subject, while managing to effect relations with others by recognising them also as subjects.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith demonstrates how the breakdown of conventionally-accepted boundaries between self and other can threaten one's claim to agency, identity and even existence. The trauma that Septimus experienced in the War demanded a self-imposed objectivity: when his friend and officer, Evans, was killed, "far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, [Septimus] congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him" (94). Yet this lack of feeling is more than an immediate coping strategy on Septimus' part - it is also an approach to situations sanctioned by society and rewarded by the military; while the War is teaching Septimus not to feel, he develops the "manliness" that his employer has desired of him, and wins promotion in the army as well as upon returning to his job (94). The juxtaposition of these points implies that - as in the cases of Rachel Vinrace and Jacob Flanders - society equates successful citizenship with a lack of subjectivity.

Septimus' experience in the War has shattered the conceptual framework he has about the world and his place in it. Where Septimus volunteered to defend a naive conception of England "which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square" (94), he has instead had to confront violence, hatred, destruction and death on a vast scale. And when Septimus can no longer sustain the concepts and ideals of his patriarchal society - such as the glory of war, and the essential decency of

ivilisation - he is left without any framework through which to interpret life: "It might be possible, Septimus thought . . . it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning" (96). He must instead form his own conclusions about the nature of the world. Given his wartime experiences, the 'message' he comes to understand is strictly logical: "For the truth is", Septimus thinks,

that human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grimaces. (97)

From what Septimus has seen, the kindness, faith and charity generated by righteous wartime fervour is a false gesture of humanity, created only to serve the military's animalistic aggression; society is an ultimately self-centred movement without concern for its casualties.

Septimus himself is one of those casualties. He enters the novel, five years after the end of the War, displaying a schizophrenic conception of the world: he offers unconventional emotional responses to everyday stimuli and bizarre conceptual associations between incidents and ideas, which constitute apparently nonsensical interpretations of himself and his environment. However, Dr Holmes, whom the Smiths first consult about Septimus' mental distress, contends that there is nothing wrong with him: "he brushed it all aside - headaches, sleeplessness, fears, dreams - nerve symptoms and nothing more, he said" (99). Holmes' judgement has two implications: firstly, that there is nothing wrong with an inability to feel; secondly, and more crucially, that Septimus does not know his own mind. Rather than being assured that his own voice expresses the truth of his state of mind, Septimus finds instead that he must "take Dr Holmes's word for it - there was nothing whatever the matter with him" (100). When Holmes negates Septimus' point of view in this way, he calls into question the reality of Septimus' inner experience - which recalls the situation of Rachel Vinrace - effectively rejecting Septimus' ability to have a point of view. Significantly, Septimus begins to consider suicide and to hallucinate only after Holmes' series of visits. After Holmes negates Septimus' mental distress, and Rezia supports the doctor, unable to understand her husband, Septimus feels that he has been "deserted", and imagines

that the "whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes" (100). And only then does Septimus first experience an auditory hallucination: "a great revelation took place. A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him" (101). In linking these incidents - Holmes' visits and Septimus' thoughts of suicide and hallucinations - Woolf implies that Holmes' attitude towards Septimus, perhaps as much as, if not more than, the trauma of war, is the cause of the young man's distress.

Sir William Bradshaw, the Harley Street specialist whom the Smiths consult next, contradicts Holmes' diagnosis of Septimus, yet his judgement has the same effect: to deny the validity of Septimus' voice and subject-position. After only "two or three minutes", Sir William decides that Septimus is suffering a "complete physical and nervous breakdown" (104), and Septimus' thoughts of suicide - the 'logical' final step in the objectification that society seems to ask of him - serve only to confirm Sir William's diagnosis and his judgement: Septimus cannot be allowed authority over himself. Writing about Woolf's own suicide attempt in 1913, Roger Poole explains the contemporary implications of such an act:

to have offered to commit suicide, or threaten it, was regarded as virtually a criminal act, after which the patient's own view of his own destiny could no longer be consulted. He or she became the moral equivalent of a prisoner. Decisions would now be taken on behalf of such people by 'competent authorities'.
(144)

After invalidating such people's expression of their position in the world by judging them not fit to be consulted, these 'competent authorities' also divest people of the final, and perhaps only, expression of authority over themselves: whether to live or die. Instead, within the novel Sir William preaches an extremely ironic self-sacrifice to society. According to Sir William, the choice to continue living is not "his own affair" as Septimus contends (106), but a duty to others - to one's family, to one's job, to social ideals: "honour; courage" (110) enforced by external authorities. When Septimus attempts to express himself, and so reassert the validity of himself as a subject - "'I - I -' Septimus stammered" - he only further disempowers himself in Sir William's eyes: "'Try to think as little about yourself as possible,' said Sir William kindly. Really, he was not fit to be about" (107). Sir William's re-

sponse to patients like Septimus is to “shut people up” (110), dictating six months of “silence and rest” without the opportunity for communication or the support of friends (107): an enforced physical and verbal incarceration which makes it impossible for any dissenters to Sir William’s authoritarian and elitist “sense of proportion” (110) to assert their own voices. Promoting his totalitarian ideal, “Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion” (108). Sir William’s project effectively rejects any viewpoint that threatens the authority of his own social and political position, silencing the challenge of any people to whom “life has given no such bounty” as his own social power and privilege (110), or converting such people by impressing his own authority on them, and so denying the possibility of difference between individual subjects.

Septimus, however, reasserts his voice and his status as a subject. Rezia and Septimus re-establish their own private discourse of gossip and jokes that no one else – such as Sir William Bradshaw – need understand, and in helping Rezia to create a hat Septimus is able to confirm himself as a subjective agent, distinct from the object he creates, where earlier he had experienced a physical identification with the trees in the park. Significantly, at this point Septimus realises that he no longer hallucinates: “As for the visions, the faces, the voices of the dead, where were they? . . . ‘Evans!’ he cried. There was no answer” (156). Rezia, too, finally comes to understand her husband. In keeping his writings, feeling that “[s]ome were very beautiful” (158), she accepts Septimus’ self-expression as valid, refusing to silence him by burning the papers, and she also vows not to be separated from him, respecting Septimus’ need for communication and thus refusing to treat him as an object. However, Septimus realises that though Rezia can “triumph” over Holmes and Bradshaw (158), she cannot ultimately prevent their judgement of him. He throws himself out of the window thinking he “did not want to die” (160), but feeling that suicide is the only way to protect the integrity of his self. Septimus’ story has parallels with that of Rachel Vinrace, which invites us to read her death as a suicide as well. In both cases, Woolf describes the unsupportability of existing in a society that refuses to recognise or respect another’s voice,

and thus her or his status as a subject.

In a positive contrast to Septimus Smith, Clarissa Dalloway circumvents society's tendency to invalidate non-conformist expressions by offering her party as a contribution to the patriarchal discourse. Though Peter and Richard laugh at her efforts - Peter thinking she is a snob, and Richard believing she is foolish to indulge in the excitement - Clarissa's party remains an acceptable statement in terms of conventional social intercourse. However, Clarissa subverts this ostensibly patriarchal display of authority and elitism by using the gathering to express her own conception of life and to promote communication between people:

what did it mean to her, this thing called life? Oh, it was very queer. Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and 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. (131)

'Bringing people together' by means of her party, Clarissa confirms her agency by arranging her world as she understands it, an agency that would otherwise be threatened by her social and political passivity. Moreover, by bringing people together in a social situation Clarissa overtly encourages other people to assert their voices, and thus to recognise each other, as she does, as subjects and respect different points of view.

Clarissa in fact offers a radical message to society since she reconceptualises the paradigm of reality by understanding definitions and boundaries of the self as arbitrary and fluid. Clarissa has a double-vision of her identity, for she sees herself, on the one hand, as composed and unified, while at the same time she feels essentially diffuse: that her self is composed from elements beyond her physical body. In front of the mirror, Clarissa confirms her sense of a unified self by pursing her lips: "It was to give her face point. That was her self - pointed; dart-like; definite" (42). Yet this self that she composes in response to situations which require her to present herself as a unified entity and exert agency in the world - in this case, to host the evening's gathering - is assembled, with effort, from many diverse and contradictory parts of which "she alone knew how different, how incompatible" (42).

The whole body she views in the mirror, then, is a false signifier for Clarissa's subjective self. Indeed, she experiences a disjunction between her sense of her self and "this body she wore" (15), having "the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown" in the physical shell that signifies merely her social definition: "this being Mrs Richard Dalloway" (15). Thus, "with all its capacities" her body seems "nothing - nothing at all" to Clarissa because, there being "no more marrying, no more having of children now" (15), she no longer identifies her existence in terms of an either sexual or maternal physical function.

Clarissa overcomes her potential objectification in society when she reformulates her understanding of self and other and the relationship between them. Perceiving that her subjectivity is not confined to the physical roles involved with being a wife and mother, Clarissa resists any fixed, definitive conception of her self that seeks to limit it by equating it to any functional role - "she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that" (13) - because she identifies herself with elements beyond her physical existence: "she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met" (13). This conception of self explains to Clarissa the dissatisfied feeling of "not knowing people; not being known":

For how could they know each other? . . . 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. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to . . . (163)

These "odd affinities" with other people demonstrate Clarissa's ability to empathise with other people and other points of view. For despite her own privileged social position and lifestyle, Clarissa, in contrast to Sir William Bradshaw, will not exact a conformity and an objectivity of others. Her ostensibly disinterested and apolitical life - involved as she is with no causes, and despising Miss Kilman's religiousness, and Peter Walsh's state of love - expresses her intention to respect the autonomy and difference of other people. Rallying against "Love and religion", Clarissa rhetorically challenges, "Had she ever tried to convert

nyone herself? Did she not wish everybody merely to be themselves?" (136). Even in her relationship with her husband, Richard, Clarissa refuses to assume that she knows everything about him, recognising and respecting the integrity of his subjectivity:

there is a dignity in people; a solitude, even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect, thought Clarissa, watching him open the door; for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one's husband, without losing one's independence, one's self-respect - something, after all, priceless. (129)

Clarissa sets independence and self-respect beyond price - beyond the fees which support Sir William's privileged lifestyle, beyond society's commodification of people like Jacob Flanders - seeing as paramount the need to preserve the integrity of others by understanding them as subjects and refusing to define, limit or appropriate them by assuming that they could be conclusively known.

Clarissa seeks a relation that will bridge the gap between self and other, encouraging sympathetic communication and the recognition of others' subject-positions while respecting the difference between subjects. In this way, Clarissa achieves an identification with Septimus Smith without knowing him, without even meeting him, and despite their vast differences. Hearing of Septimus' suicide, she understands his death as a defiance of the patriarchal order and an attempt at unconventional communication, because such communication is, in part, the very thing she has striven to achieve with her party:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (197)

Septimus' death, to Clarissa, is an attempt to communicate the self that is obscured in conventional discourse, a defiant attempt to preserve the integrity (both the completeness and the worth) of the self from corruption by forces that wish to invalidate, objectify and exploit it.

s she imagines Septimus saying “Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that”, she feels it herself (197), for she realises that the upholders of the patriarchal state men such as her guest, Sir William Bradshaw - make non-conforming discourses like Septimus’ untenable. And it is Clarissa’s ability to feel *like Septimus* that (in one respect) vindicates his death. In that Clarissa “felt somehow very like him” (198), she allows Septimus the sympathetic communication with another that he was denied in life. She also “felt glad he had done it” (198) - recognising both that he has protected his integrity of self (though at the expense of his body), and the very real nature of the threat to this integrity. Septimus has had his message received. For her part, Clarissa remains in the social world, open to misinterpretation; the final image of her at the top of the stairs, as a unified self contained in her physical presence and capable of summation, is false to her own experience and conception of her self. Yet Clarissa maintains her unified self - it confirms her sense of agency and her validity in the patriarchal paradigm - while balancing this concept against her vision of a diffuse and varied identity conceived beyond social definition and limitation.

Woolf’s project in *Mrs Dalloway* is an imperative and heartfelt exposure of the social forces that reject and invalidate a subject’s voice and point of view and, in consequence, threaten her or his very existence. In her diary she writes of the novel: “I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense” (AWD 57). In her depiction of these issues, Woolf reveals social attitudes that she herself confronted: attitudes about what constituted insanity, about what constituted a valid expression, about the value of self-expression and sympathetic communication, and about the need to recognise and respect the subject-position of others. Indeed, the incidents and themes of the novel became very personal. In her diary Woolf questions, “Am I writing *The Hours*² from deep emotion? Of course the mad part tries me so much . . .” (57); she later comments on the “mad scene” in the park: “I find I write it by clinging as tight to fact as I can” (61).

In *The Waves*, however, Woolf abandons the constraints of a socio-political context for her experiences and perceptions of the relationship between self and language for a more

² The original title for *Mrs Dalloway*.

abstract linguistic setting. At the conception of the novel Woolf determines not to have a conventional protagonist but instead merely an unnamed subjectivity: “who is she? I am very anxious that she should have no name. I don’t want a Lavinia or a Penelope: I want ‘she’” (AWD 143). She also seeks to ease the limitation of plot and setting: “I shall do away with exact place and time. Anything may be out of the window - a ship - a desert - London” (AWD 143). Woolf indicates from the outset her concern with engendering subjectivity rather than describing a textual object in the novel: she writes, “I am not trying to tell a story” but rather describe, she implies, a “mind thinking” (AWD 142-3). Furthermore, issues of intersubjectivity concern Woolf throughout the process of writing. She examines the relationship between author and character in the novel, asking herself “Who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker?” (AWD 146). The notion of being either ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ another’s mind concerns the characters within the novel as well. Instead of struggling to construct a self in opposition to external social forces as in *Mrs Dalloway*, two of the characters in *The Waves* - Rhoda and Bernard - are primarily constrained by their own conceptions of self and other as they create themselves - and hence the possibility for intersubjective identification - through language “by forming a sentence around the subject ‘I’” (Wyatt 120).

Throughout her life, Rhoda feels separated from the rest of the world and even lacks an identification with her own body. As Rhoda struggles to gain a sense of agency in her relationship with the world, she also struggles to gain a sense of agency over her physical self. In childhood Rhoda first experiences exclusion from a conventional signifying system:

Now the terror is beginning. Now taking her lump of chalk [the teacher] draws figures, six, seven, eight, and then a cross and then a line on the blackboard. What is the answer? The others look; they look with understanding. Louis writes; Susan writes; Neville writes; Jinny writes; even Bernard has begun to write. But I cannot write. I see only figures. (17)

When Rhoda “cannot write” she cannot express her arrangement of the elements presented to her: she has no agency over the simple arithmetic problems. Furthermore, unable to understand the mathematics lesson, Rhoda remains unable to share the discourse in which her peers participate. The figures relate to each other in a way she cannot intuit, and as such

they “mean nothing” (17) - or rather, she cannot hand in an answer as the others have done. or indeed, eventually the figures do mean something to Rhoda: they represent her exclusion from her peer group, and by extension, her exclusion from the whole conceptual framework in which her friends function. “[L]eft alone to find an answer”, she does so:

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, crying, “Oh save me from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!” (17)³

Excluded from any conceptual framework that would confer some meaning, Rhoda - like Septimus - perceives no meaning in the world, and no meaning in herself. Throughout her life she remains unable to apprehend any signifying relations between separate elements, and discovers, as Septimus does, that a world without meaning is chaotic and frightening:

I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do - I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. (111)

Constantly assaulted by unaccountable sensations, and unable to create even her own signifying system that would allow her to organise and understand the world in some way, Rhoda suffers an extreme lack of agency.

Rhoda's conception of herself reflects this lack of subjective agency, for she cannot construct any coherent identity that would allow her to exert physical agency in the world. Furthermore, the presence of other subjects subsumes and disperses Rhoda's sense of herself as a subject; alone, she can convince herself that she is “mistress of my fleet of ships”, but in the presence of other people she feels: “I am broken into separate pieces; I am no longer one” (91). Interaction with others requires Rhoda to assume a symbolic self, a linguistic subject-position, in opposition to others, and she has no faith in her ability to do this: “I am not composed enough . . . to make even one sentence. What I say is perpetually con-

³ We can read Rhoda's plight in two ways: conventionally, we can understand that the world is entire and Rhoda is outside the *world*, but we can also read that Rhoda is outside the *entirety* that the world possesses.

dicted. Each time the door opens I am interrupted . . . I am to be broken. I am to be derided all my life" (91-2). When words are challenged, Rhoda's fragile sense of self is challenged, "broken", and "derided". Simply conversing with others causes Rhoda to be violated by the incomprehensible linguistic order in which she cannot assert any valid response: "I must take his hand; I must answer. But what answer shall I give? . . . A million arrows pierce me. Scorn and ridicule pierce me" (90). Any reply she offers will be "lies", for it "does not represent any construction of life in which she believes."

Unable to create a sense of herself as a subject through language, Rhoda also cannot conceive of a physical identity with her own body. At school, the homogeneous social group elides the fact of her difference to others, as she thinks: "here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity" (27). Feeling she is "nobody", Rhoda cannot even deny this challenge to her physical existence, nor can she alone assure herself of her individual identity, by seeing herself whole in a mirror as Clarissa Dalloway does. Rhoda knows that the mirror reflects her own body, yet she feels reluctant to identify this image of her physical self with her consciousness: "That is my face . . . in the looking-glass behind Susan's shoulder - that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face" (35-6). Where Rhoda sees Susan and hears her say "say, Yes; they say, No; they bring their fists down with a bang on the table", she doubts her own power to assert such control in the physical world (91). Like Clarissa, Rhoda often feels disjunct from "this clumsy, this ill-fitting body" (90), for at times the split between her body and her consciousness grows frighteningly wide:

Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body. (36-7)

Threatened with the loss of controlled interaction between body and consciousness, Rhoda is also threatened with the total loss of self:

I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell . . . Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my

body over the grey cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed. (54-5)⁴

identity fails Rhoda in that she fails to identify with anything. Where Orlando embraces a multiplicity of physical signifiers, each of which the character identifies, at different times, with his and her true self, Rhoda retreats from all such signifiers and suffers the geometric reduction of the self described earlier. 'Self' has no referent for Rhoda, for there is nothing - neither her speech nor her body - that she will identify as herself beyond seeing it as an object from which she feels disjunct and must retreat. Significantly, Rhoda speaks of herself as being committed to life in the passive voice. Moreover, feeling "all palpable forms of life have failed me" (135), her death, though suicide, is also passive. Leaving Bernard to relate her leap to her death⁵, Rhoda gives up this final opportunity to assert any authority over her life.

In complete contrast to Rhoda, Bernard represents the epitome of Woolf's 'double vision' of reality. Narrating the final section of *The Waves*, Bernard constantly oscillates between a structured and deconstructed view of language and life, using linear narrative to construct a linguistic reality composed of static, distinct and self-evident physical entities, while reconstructing, in his own voice, the reality of a fluid and unbounded conception of himself and his life. He begins the section intending to "sum up" and "explain . . . the meaning of my life" to some unspecified interlocutor, but while he himself apprehends the "illusion" of his life as something that "adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed", he recognises of his interlocutor that "unfortunately, what I see (this globe, full of figures) you do not see" (204). Bernard faces Woolf's problem: how use language to convey a personal vision of life that is ultimately extra-linguistic, to another? Bernard attempts to construct a narrative of his life, but he recognises that the multiple linguistic constructions do not reveal any essential 'truth' about the world: "in order to make you un-

⁴ This passage in *The Waves* echoes an experience that Woolf describes in 'A Sketch of the Past' (78). Such personal parallels with Rhoda - including the fact of Woolf's eventual suicide - suggest that Rhoda, to an extent, embodies aspects of Woolf's own identity.

⁵ In the essay 'On Not Knowing Greek' Woolf writes of a "dangerous leap through the air" from words to meaning in discussing the interpretation of language. Rhoda's distress with using language, and her inability to find meaning in herself and her environment suggest that her method of suicide can be pictured as a dangerous leap from the signifiers she confronts, towards a meaning she falls short of attaining.

derstand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story - and there are so many, and so many - stories of childhood, stories of school, love, marriage, death and so on; and none of them are true" (204). He longs instead for a semiotic form of expression with which to express his impressions of life, "some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement" (204).

Throughout this final section of the novel, Bernard constantly oscillates between using language to construct an objective, distinct and linear reality and using language to give voice to the amorphous impressions that flicker across his consciousness. Again and again Bernard asserts the illusion of a structured reality - "Let us pretend that we can make out a plain, and logical story, so that when one matter is despatched - love for instance - we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next" (215) - while remaining aware of the suppressed, but ever-present, semiotic realm of the speaker's subjective apprehension of life:

it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it, even when we arrive punctually at the appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights - elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing . . .
(219)

Any narrative that attempts to describe life's "orderly and military progress" will be merely "a convenience, a lie", for what the subject *experiences* of life is "a rushing stream of broken dreams" and disarticulated impressions. Yet Bernard sees no fundamental conflict between symbolic and semiotic expressions; like Clarissa's double vision of her self, Bernard sees each use of language pragmatically, different merely for different purposes, where neither offers a more 'essential' or 'true' relation to reality than the other. For Bernard, different uses of language and different views of reality can co-exist unproblematically:

After all, one cannot find fault with the biographic style if one begins letters "Dear Sir," ends them "yours faithfully"; one cannot despise these phrases laid like Roman roads across the tumult of our lives, since they compel us to walk in step like civilized people with the slow and measured tread of policemen though

one may be humming any nonsense under one's breath at the same time - "Hark, hark, the dogs do bark," "Come away, come away, death," "Let me not to the marriage of true minds," and so on. (223)

Bernard recognises that while "the biographic style" allows one to assert a unified identity and so "walk in step" with other members of society, this perspective does not invalidate an alternative view of phatic expression - here, speaking just to hear the sound of one's own voice - and a fluid subjectivity that dwells on whimsical linguistic rhythms. Just as Bernard desires to escape the structural - "Pigeon-holes are not then very useful" (229) - he cannot live exclusively in the semiotic, for in the semiotic he cannot construct any structure in his life: "if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning?" (229). Only in realising the two perspectives simultaneously can Bernard reassure himself that "we are not to be confined" while he affirms his position in the conventional world: "That is, I shaved and washed; did not wake my wife, and had breakfast; put on my hat, and went out to earn my living" (230). This constant oscillation of vision - between a structural and deconstructed view of reality, between the symbolic and semiotic dispositions of language - this "shattering and piecing together" becomes Bernard's - and Woolf's - "absorbing pursuit" in life (232).

Bernard's approach to language is repeated in his approach to his conception of himself. For Bernard, language becomes a means of distinguishing himself as a subjective agent. He 'sings himself', confirming his existence by giving voice to all he experiences and so authoring his own conception of himself. Rather than using language to define a limited self, then, Bernard articulates a multiplicity of concepts with which he identifies:

The complexity of things becomes more close . . . here at college, where the stir and pressure of life are so extreme, where the excitement of mere living becomes daily more urgent. Every hour something new is uncovered in the great bran pie⁶. What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that . . . I am not one and simple, but complex and many. (64)

⁶ Woolf echoes this phrase in conversation in *A Writer's Diary* where she continues: "Yes, I'm twenty people" (34-5). Like Rhoda, then, Bernard also embodies aspects of Woolf's sense of self, suggesting two things: firstly, that Woolf's sense of self is multiple and contradictory in that she can identify with two vastly different characters; and secondly, that, as Harvena Richter contended in Chapter Five, if in any way the reader identifies with these characters, she or he will be identifying with the author as well.

thus as he conceives, so he conceives himself. Unlike Rhoda, who identifies with nothing, Bernard identifies with everything. Bernard's conception of himself remains fluid, open to include new experiences, while at the same he refuses to see any construction as an essential definition of himself: "I am only superficially represented by what I was saying tonight" (5). Unlike Rhoda, then, Bernard does not suffer disintegration when his words are contradicted, because he does not feel that the whole of his self needs to be bound up in the truth of one expression. And indeed, he premises his very identity on this heterogeneity: "Underneath, and, at the moment when I am most disparate, I am also integrated" (65).

Bernard is not challenged by the presence of other subjects, as Rhoda is; instead, he finds other people necessary to confirm his own existence. Rather than construct himself as completely distinct from others, Bernard always constitutes himself by his relation to something else. Just as Saussure contends that there are no positive terms in language and meaning takes place through the interdependence of terms within the system, in the character of Bernard, Woolf demonstrates that the same can be said of identity. Bernard cannot assume an identity without constructing it in relation to someone else, just as he cannot continue his stories when the others stop listening and drift away. As Patricia Waugh states, "It is the relational connection of being not simply an 'I' but also a 'you' in the eyes of others which stabilises the shifter . . . , which thus *reassures* Bernard of his identity" (11). In Bernard, Woolf overcomes the gap between self and other. Bernard retains his sense of himself as a subject with authority over himself and agency in the world, and while he also recognises others as different subjects, at the same time, he recognises the potential for interaction and connection between himself and others. Waugh continues, "Woolf has accepted and fictionally embodied the recognition that differentiation is not necessarily separateness, distance and alienation from others, but a form of *connection* to others" (11). Bernard also questions the meaning of the difference between self and other. In school, he states that he

unaware of these profound distinctions. My fingers slip over the keyboard without knowing which is black and which white. Archie makes easily a hundred; I by a fluke make sometimes fifteen. But what is the difference between

us? (41)

Bernard uses language to dissolve the distinction between self and other so that other people are not a “separating wall” as Louis and Neville feel (57), but stories to tell and minds to embrace. Indeed, Bernard is constructed by his very relations with others. Reflecting on his life, Bernard cannot separate his ‘own’ experience from his experience of others: he thinks “it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am - Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs” (237). Thus Woolf has Bernard suggest that the distinction between self and other is an arbitrary barrier. Just as the subject can use language to construct a unified self “by forming a sentence around the subject ‘I’” (Wyatt 120), she or he can also use language to overcome the distinction between self and other. Bernard demonstrates the potential for an intersubjective identity by interrogating the assumptions behind the question, ‘Who am I?’:

I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt “I am you.” This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome. (248)

“Who am I?”, like ‘who is Jacob?’ - the search for an essential self beyond language - becomes an impossible question to answer because it is the wrong question to ask, in that it presupposes an answer that cannot be fulfilled in language. Bernard can use language to express himself as a subject, giving voice to the thoughts and feelings that flicker across his mind, but he can also use language to identify with others by voicing, and so experiencing, their lives: “As I talked I felt ‘I am you.’” There is no exclusive difference, then, between what is Bernard’s self and what is other, for Bernard can create an intersubjective relation through language that dissolves the barrier of exclusion between subject and object.

In *The Waves*, Woolf too seeks a way to dissolve the barrier between reading subject and textual object, that is, to admit the reader into the merging subject relationship, described

earlier, between author and character. The idea of the sea in the background gained importance as Woolf sought a “solvent” (149), a technique which would dissolve the disjunctions between what she felt was a rather disconnected “litter of fragments” (154) of prose and so allow the reader to absorb the novel as a whole. In her 1930 diary, Woolf records: “*The Waves* is I think resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in and out, in the rhythm of the waves” (AWD 159). Later she considers, “[s]uppose I could run all the scenes together more? - by rhythms chiefly. So as to avoid those cuts; so as to make the blood run like a torrent from end to end” (AWD 163). The rhythmic language and structure of *The Waves* acts as a mantra, enabling the ‘I’ of the reader to identify with the repeated ‘I’ of the speaking subject - whether author, narrator or character - on a subconscious level. Readers respond to the sounds of the words and the rhythms of the language, experiencing the text beyond conventional narrative and linguistic meanings. Thus, as Bernard talks of himself and the five others, telling their stories throughout the novel and feeling, “There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt ‘I am you.’” (248), so the reader can repeat this process. Woolf’s achievement, in her own words, “a saturated unchopped completeness; changes of scene, of mind, of person, done without spilling a drop” (AWD 164), becomes possible because the language of the novel allows the reader to identify with each character and so overcome the divisions of scene, mind and person, within and without the novel. Using language to evoke a process of consciousness, Woolf involves the reader in the novel by inducing her or him to see and experience life as the characters experience it, where she has previously embodied her own response to life in the language of the text. ‘Rhythm’ thus becomes a key notion that enables the reader to inhabit the subjectivities of the narrator and characters: it is the means to finally unite not just the novel within itself, but to elide the boundaries between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the novel and ultimately, to elide the boundaries between the reader and the writer. Thus Woolf achieves universal intersubjectivity: she uses language to encourage the writer, reader and characters to inhabit other subject positions, dissolving the arbitrary subject/object boundaries between writer, narrator, character and reader.

CHAPTER SEVEN - “‘I’ REJECTED: ‘WE’ SUBSTITUTED”¹:
WOOLF’S VISION OF THE LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY

What a symphony with its concord and its discord, and its tunes on top and its complicated base underneath, then grew up! Each played his own tune, fiddle, flute, trumpet, drum or whatever the instrument might be.

- Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

In dissolving the boundaries between writer, character and reader, Woolf brings us back to the issue of authority. Instead of a uniform, publicly-sanctioned discourse, Woolf offers her readers phatic and semiotic expressions, using metaphor and rhythm to achieve a personal, intersubjective communication that requires the reader’s interaction just as much as the writer’s articulation. Who, then, has authority over this expression? In her two final novels, Woolf rejects the notion of a single speaking subject and an authoritative discourse. She reformulates Saussure’s notion of a homogeneous linguistic community by promoting a heterogeneous community of speaking subjects, each of which has an authority over her or his own voice. These novels show language not as a single discourse naming a transcendent reality, to which the validity of each expression must be compared; instead, the collective voices of the community constitute their own heterogeneous reality. Woolf promotes a heterogeneous use of language, for she sees language as a medium for connecting people by communication and not dividing people by definitions. Throughout her work she rejects any need for exclusion or assimilation, and condemns invalidation and objectification; she encourages the preservation of individual difference and the respect of others’ subjectivity, elicits sympathetic identification and demonstrates communication, communion and her sense of the community of humankind.

Yet alongside Woolf’s positive vision and her own literary achievements lies her recognition of the negative potential of society. While she promotes the ideals of respect-

¹ The phrase is from *A Writer’s Diary* (289).

ing difference and sympathetic identification, she remains all too aware that wider society still functions within a paradigm that asserts an authority over thought and behaviour as well as over language and expression. Furthermore, Woolf observes that the drive for authority fosters an ideological desire for the subjugation, objectification and appropriation of other people, which in turn increases the very real threat of aggression, conflict and, ultimately, war. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf describes a similarity between the patriarchal household and the fascist state, identifying in both the insistence on conformity, the subjugation and objectification of its members, and the upholding of authoritarian rule: "the public and private worlds are inseparably connected; . . . the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (TG 364). Woolf's response to the question put to her, "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" (153) therefore interrogates the structure and assumptions of patriarchal society before she addresses contemporary international relations. Thus drawing the connection between domestic social codes of practice and international political codes of practice, Woolf completes the pattern she has traced through her entire *oeuvre*: our use of language not only transmits, but prescribes for us, our cultural assumptions and values - how we conceive of our own identity, and the respect we afford to other people and different points of view - these assumptions and values in turn determine how we comprehend and address domestic situations and international crises.

In *Three Guineas* Woolf links European fascism and British patriarchy to underlying social attitudes towards expression and communication. Adopting her correspondent's suggestion that the threat of war should be addressed by citizens pledging "to protect culture and intellectual liberty" (TG 277), Woolf states that the daughters of educated men² "can only help . . . to defend culture and intellectual liberty by defending our own culture and our own intellectual liberty" (282). The means to do this, Woolf decides, "largely consist in reading and writing our own tongue" (283), for she defines 'culture' as "the disinterested pursuit of reading and writing the English language", and 'intellectual liberty'

² Woolf's term for the socio-economic group to which she felt she belonged. The phrase takes on political implications: as this group is the one most excluded from real power in her society, Woolf argues, it is particularly ironic that her correspondent addresses such a major question to one of its members. Woolf founds the essay's argument on this irony.

as “the right to say or write what you think in your own words, and in your own way” (286). The ideal of expressing oneself in one’s own words and in one’s own way becomes Woolf’s manifesto in *Three Guineas*, connecting the threat of war back to the themes of language-use that she has explored throughout her earlier works.

In the essay Woolf refuses to join her correspondent’s society, the goal of which is the prevention of war, since she believes that the daughters of educated men can only help to defend liberty and prevent war through the protection and respect of difference. Given that “a society is a conglomeration of people joined together for certain aims” (306), Woolf argues that the common perspective adopted by any such society will override the individual voice. In response to her correspondent’s solicitation, therefore, Woolf observes that “if we sign this form which implies a promise to become active members of your society, it would seem that we must lose that difference and therefore sacrifice that help” (306), fearing that even a society for the prevention of war cannot avoid reasserting the pressures to conform that have underpinned conflict in the first place. Thus, “it seems both wrong for us rationally and impossible for us emotionally to fill up your form and join your society. For by so doing we should merge our identity in yours; follow and repeat and score still deeper the old worn ruts” (308). In merging her identity with others’, the daughter of an educated man would lose her difference by assimilating herself into the patriarchal system, which would mean she too would follow and repeat a social structure that not only leads to war, but, Woolf implies, renders war inevitable.

In order to prevent this subsumption of identity that would lead to traditional problems being addressed by traditional answers, Woolf proposes a seemingly oxymoronic “Outsiders Society”. Each member of Woolf’s Outsiders Society will, of her or his own accord, refuse to support the war either directly through physical assistance or indirectly by inciting others to fight; will not attempt to dissuade others from fighting, respecting liberty of opinion; will reject patriotism, disavowing any symbolic, patriarchal relation to England that makes her or him different from so-called ‘foreigners’, doing “her³ best to make this a fact, not by forced fraternity, but by human sympathy” (312). Denying any

³ Woolf uses the female pronoun because she imagines that the members will be predominantly, though not exclusively, women.

notion of national superiority, the Outsider will eschew “national self-praise”, refraining from any display that encourages “the desire to impose ‘our’ civilization or ‘our’ dominion upon other people” (314), thus rejecting cultural or political imperialism. Any personal, rather than symbolic, connection that the Outsider feels to her country, any

love of England dropped into a child’s ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world. (313)

Thus, with the notion of the ‘Outsiders Society’, Woolf expresses her vision of a new social order: an “anonymous and elastic” (310) society, resisting conformity and authoritarianism by promoting intersubjective relations between people.

At the conclusion of *Three Guineas* Woolf states that “a common interest unites us; it is one world, one life” (365). The ‘us’ she refers to here can indicate herself and her correspondent, whose concern with the protection of national liberty Woolf shows to be intimately connected to her own concern with the protection of personal liberty. But ‘us’ also refers to all parties in the growing international crisis, united by a shared humanity and a shared global environment. Woolf’s dream of “a unity that rubs out divisions as if they were chalk marks only”⁴, of “the capacity of the human spirit to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity” (TG 365) could not be realised outside of this essay in time to prevent the immediate international conflict of World War II that Woolf faced and in response to which she wrote. Indeed, her vision of a sympathetic unity has yet to be realised in any universal form. Yet within her own writing, Woolf does realise the manifesto she formulated with regard to the Outsiders’ Society: “we can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods” (366). In *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, Woolf continues to advance the literary techniques that she has developed over the course of her career. Indeed, her

⁴ Woolf’s mention of chalk marks here echoes back to Terence Hewet’s comment in *The Voyage Out* that one can kill a hen by placing it in a chalk circle, suggesting that the effects of such divisive chalk marks can be fatal.

two final novels draw together the linguistic insights that she has gained to describe her vision of a linguistic community that embraces all speakers in a heterogeneous and intersubjective discourse as they create a communal voice.

The Years embodies the breakdown of an authoritarian discourse at the same time as it describes the breakdown of an authoritarian social structure. The novel follows the Pargiter family from 1880 to the “present day” of the 1930s, chronicling this middle-class London family’s break away from the socially-prescribed construction of the nuclear family to form a familial community which consists of extended family, partners and friends. As the fixed and defined social relationships break down, the family members become free to set up personal relationships determined not by formal convention but by sympathetic intimacy. The characters in the novel establish a shared discourse, as in the original notion of a linguistic community, but it is not a discourse of homogeneous language-use; rather, it is based on a respect and understanding of each member’s own voice, each member’s particular way of expressing her or himself. Sara Pargiter’s description of a meeting, for example, is characteristic of her usual pattern of speech: “There were pigeons cooing Take two coos, Taffy. Take two coos . . . Tak . . . And then a wing darkened the air, and in came Kitty clothed in starlight; and sat on a chair” (163, first ellipsis only added). Yet, despite her sister’s fanciful description, Maggie Pargiter comprehends the blend of literal and metaphorical, and so not only understands the facts of Sara’s narrative, but gains Sara’s own impression of her experience. The characters are linked not by any imposed similarity but instead by common memories and experiences. When Eleanor Pargiter is introduced to Nicholas Pomjalovsky, for instance, she instantly perceives him as a foreigner, thinking he “was clearly not English” (245), and feeling that she has interrupted his conversation. But in the end her initial impression of their dissimilarity gives way to the fact that she not only pieces his broken English together into a complete sentence, but suddenly understands the nature of the conversation:

She had no idea what they were talking about. Then suddenly, as she bent to warm her hands over the fire words floated together in her mind and made one intelligible sentence. It seemed to her that what he had said was, “We cannot

make laws and religions that fit because we do not know ourselves.”

“How odd that you should say that!” she said, smiling at him, “because I’ve so often thought it myself!” (246)

During the evening Eleanor and Nicholas overcome the barrier of language and disrupted conversations to establish a friendship based on common ideas and tempered by the experience of surviving a bombing raid. Indeed, throughout the novel, communication between characters depends less on their often inarticulate and unfinished expressions as their willingness to offer a sympathetic and understanding response.

Just as the characters themselves avoid the dominance of any single discourse, Woolf’s textual design also avoids the dominance of any authoritarian point of view. The novel allows each character to express his or her position as a subject within the text. Eleanor’s niece Peggy refuses to assume the object-like, listener’s role in which a party guest casts her, insisting that he recognise her subject-position:

“I’m tired,” she apologised. “I’ve been up all night,” she explained.

“I’m a doctor -”

The fire went out of his face when she said “I.” That’s done it - now he’ll go, she thought. He can’t be “you” - he must be “I.” She smiled. For up he got and off he went. (316)

By articulating her own “I”, as well as revealing her professional status as a doctor, Peggy asserts her validity as a subject. While Peggy overtly establishes her subject-position within the narrative, however, Woolf covertly provides a subject-position for the other characters in the novel. We hear Colonel Pargiter’s thoughts as he visits his mistress; we follow Rose, his youngest daughter, as she sneaks out in the evening to buy her toy ducks; we enter their cousin Kitty’s consciousness as she has tea with her working-class student friend; we follow the old housekeeper Crosby home to her retirement lodgings and hear her inner commentary. In this way, the text resists a single narrative viewpoint, instead distributing narrative agency - the ability to speak for themselves - among these multiple protagonists.

Objects, phrases and conversations recur in different contexts throughout the novel,

drawing links diachronically and synchronically between people. When Rose visits her cousins Sara and Maggie in 1910, for example, she recognises the crimson-and-gilt chair from the sisters' childhood home, and the sense of a shared past helps the three women re-establish their relationship. As the chair reappears throughout the text, so too does a walrus with a brush in its back; it ends up with Crosby in 1913, reminding her of the Pargiter family. The same dialogue occurs when Maggie wakes Sara in 1914 as when she wakes her in the final scene. The sound of the pigeons carries through the novel from 1880 to the dawn of the final scene. As we read of the pigeon's calls, the sounds echo in our own mind at the same time as they are heard or articulated by a character, or the narrator; moreover, they also remind us that we have heard the sounds before (though it is hard to identify the speaker), giving us access to a kind of collective unconscious. Heard and repeated by the narrator and different characters, the repetition confuses, positively, our recognition of any original or distinct voice within the novel.

Eleanor ponders the repetitions and connections of words, scenes and impressions that she perceives, deciding that they reveal some greater order in life:

Does everything then come over again a little differently? she thought. If so, is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half remembered, half foreseen? . . . a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible? The thought gave her extreme pleasure: that there was a pattern. But who makes it? Who thinks it? (323)

It pleases Eleanor to think that life may be describing some greater pattern, for the existence of a pattern suggests that life has meaning - that it fits together in some consistent way that will ultimately make sense - rather than being a random and meaningless series of incidents, and she seeks some ultimate 'author' for this pattern of recurring themes.

Eleanor's thoughts echo Woolf's own consideration in 'A Sketch of the Past', but unlike her character, Woolf seeks no authoritative voice, focusing instead on the community of speakers:

it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of this work of art. *Hamlet* or a Bee-

thoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

(72)

The modernist lack of distinction between the dancer and the dance becomes for Woolf a lack of distinction between the artist and the art - between, more specifically, the speaker and the spoken.

The multiple speakers *in* the text of *The Years* give way to the multiple speakers *of* the text of *Between the Acts*. In 1938, Woolf records in her diary her initial ideas for a work that was to become *Between the Acts*:

Why not *Poyntzet Hall*: a centre: all literature discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour: and anything that comes into my head; but 'I' rejected: 'We' substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? 'We' . . . the composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays - a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole - the present state of my mind? (AWD 289-90, ellipses in original)

With 'I' rejected and 'We' substituted, Woolf continues to challenge the authority of any one speaker or discourse to assert any uniform, dominant or exclusive agency over language; she rejects the notion of an authentic, original or single voice, replacing it with the concept of a heterogeneous, communally-authored expression. Whether Miss La Trobe or Woolf herself, each 'author' elicits the voices of others within and without her respective work, thus eliding a distinction between artistic product, artist and audience.

The village pageant embraces a multiplicity of contributing voices. Despite authoring the play, Miss La Trobe in fact draws on a succession of past dramatic traditions - an Elizabethan play, an Augustan comedy of manners, a Victorian picnic scene - while also alluding to other historical periods and traditions. Furthermore, as the director, Miss La Trobe needs the villagers themselves to give voice to the parts. She herself remains hidden from the audience; she issues directions but refuses to come forward at the end to acknowledge applause, as if refusing to become the dominant focus for the credit of the pro-

duction. Thus Woolf confuses the notion of the pageant's originating author or 'voice'.

She also confuses an absolute distinction between the actor and the assumed role. Eliza Clark, for example, 'is' Queen Elizabeth to the extent that the narrator questions her real identity: "From behind the bushes issued Queen Elizabeth - Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco. Could she be Mrs Clark of the village shop?" (52). In contrast, Albert, the 'village idiot', takes part without apparently assuming a different role; "[t]here was no need to dress him up" for he acts "his part to perfection" as he is (53). The audience also contributes to the production. Mrs Manresa becomes involved rather over-enthusiastically, which nevertheless adds to the scene's effect: "she trolloped out the words of the song with an abandonment which, if vulgar, was a great help to the Elizabethan age. For the ruff had become unpinned and great Eliza had forgotten her lines. But the audience laughed so loud that it did not matter" (53). All the members of the whole audience become the actors as well as the acted in the final scene of 'present time', when the cast hold up mirrors to reflect the audience's own images back at them. And just as one actor can play many parts - "Did I not perceive Mr. Hardcastle here", the Reverend Streatfield notes, "at one time a Viking? And in Lady Harridan . . . a Canterbury pilgrim?" (114) - the pageant elicits other parts from those in the audience. The event evokes from Lucy Swithin an aspect of herself beyond her everyday role; she seeks out Miss La Trobe to tell her excitedly, "What a small part I've had to play! But you've made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!" (92). The play resonates beyond the physical production itself.

Indeed, Woolf shows that a contribution to the pageant needn't be in terms of a pre-scripted role at all. As a pause in proceedings threatens to break the connection between players and audience by destroying the illusion created by the play other 'voices' contribute:

suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion. (84-5)

The bellowing cows integrate the environment into the production itself, blurring the boundary between the artistic product and real life. Flying across the stage in the Victorian scene, some swallows also confuse a distinction between art and reality. In the final scene of 'present time', a sudden shower of rain also contributes to the play:

Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears.

'O that our human pain could here have ending!' Isa murmured. Looking up she received two great blots of rain full in her face. They trickled down her cheeks as if they were her own tears. But they were all people's tears, weeping for all people. Hands were raised. Here and there a parasol opened.

The rain was sudden and universal. (107)

Like the cows and the swallows, the rain becomes integrated into the production as it encourages the audience to respond to this natural element as if it were included in the design of the play. As Isa interprets the rain as a signifier for contemporary human pain, she becomes, in effect, another actor in the play as the raindrops trickle down her cheeks "as if they were her own tears". In a sense she authors her own narrative, creating meaning from a meteorological phenomenon.

Thus, although Miss La Trobe authors the pageant, she doesn't assert an authority over the production, using her role instead to facilitate the voices of others - she creates a heterogeneous, communal linguistic product rather than prescribing a single homogeneous and authoritative discourse to which all speakers must conform. Like Miss La Trobe, Woolf, too, elicits other voices in the text, so denying any exclusive and authoritative control over the text itself. Gillian Beer identifies echoes and misquotations from works outside Woolf's text - those of Shakespeare, Keats, Whitman, Milton, Shelley, Eliot and more - and contends that this indicates how "single works are not autonomous. In memory they are shards scattered, or shared, among a community" (xix). Just as any work is created in some relation to other voices and works, Beer suggests that some works will continue to exist in more than their material form; the author's voice will echo in the voice of future speakers. Indeed, in the essay 'Craftsmanship' Woolf herself make the same observation, implying that since words gather their meanings from the way they are used every day, the

works in which they are used are, in a sense, communally-authored:

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations - naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today - that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages . . . Royal words mate with commoners. English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro words, if they have a fancy. (129-31)

As each writer or speaker who uses a word adds to it his or her own meaning, later language users must negotiate this accumulated significance, for words can never be used without the multiple connotations with which they have been already imbued by previous texts. Just as we cannot hold a single word distinct from the echoes and memories of past associations, Woolf demonstrates that we cannot hold a 'single' work, such as *Between the Acts*, distinct from the traditions of literature and language-use behind it. Pamela Caughie makes a similar claim about the lack of any original or autonomous discourse with regard to *The Years*: "The recitations and banalities counter claims to either an authentic or an authoritarian voice - that is, to any voice (or any culture) completely in possession of itself" (104). Just as we have no authoritative claim over the possession and use of words, we have no final control over the meanings of words. Since words are "many-sided, flashing this way then that", it is thus that they can "mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they are unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pike staff to the next" ('Craftsmanship' 131-2). Because of this multiplication of speakers and significance, then, the authentic source of any utterance becomes confused; who originally spoke, and what she or he really meant becomes less relevant than the effect of such echoes and associations for current speakers. While we read, we recreate the text in our own minds, bringing our own associations and memories to bear on our conception of and response to the text. As Harvena Richter points out, the reader "contributes spontaneously from his own fund of knowledge and memory-association to the image thus presented and thereby offers a unique and wholly individual element to the work" (241). Woolf uses the

allusions to writers outside the work and the multiplicity of voices within the work, then, to disperse the authority of the text among the subjects within and without the novel.

Like *The Years*, *Between the Acts* evokes communal links synchronically between the characters present, who metonymically represent the whole of England in 1939, as well as diachronically, between past and present groups of people. Re-inscribing and affirming the links between the present community and the traditions and history of England, in *Between the Acts* Woolf provides a further sense of community and relations across geographical boundaries by invoking a common past, for the text implies that everyone present on this June afternoon is constituted by common elements in history. While some members of the audience simply remember the Victorian age as a past time, Lucy Swithin identifies more closely with it, eliding any distinction between the Victorians as a people and her contemporary community: “‘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.’” (104). Her brother Bart Oliver, on the other hand, identifies with the eighteenth century, where “*reason holds sway*” (75, italics original). Beyond the pageant, the text evokes a still earlier relation between peoples, reaching back through the “Norman? Saxon?” arch mentioned by Mrs Manresa (27), along the tracks, still visible, made “by the Britons; by the Romans” (5), past the Barn reminiscent of a Greek temple (18); and back into the prehistoric swamps “when the entire continent, not then, [Lucy] understood, divided by a channel, was all one” (8). It is this suggestion of the entire continent as ‘all one’ that makes Woolf’s evocation of a common ancestry and a common process of civilisation contrast poignantly with the contemporary division and imminent conflict between Britain and Germany. The final scene of the novel re-inscribes the primeval past, suggesting that humanity cannot ever hold itself distinct from its common roots in prehistory.

Woolf’s final novel suggests that life cannot be made distinct from art; it suggests repetition but also resurrection; it suggests the lack of a conclusion, the lack of a solution, but at the same time the possibility of a new play, a new expression, and new life,⁵ both for the individual and for the community. Woolf shows us the potential to see our own lives

⁵ Respectively, Miss La Trobe’s play, conceived in the pub; the conversation which will become an argument between Isa and Giles; and the child that may result from their embrace after the argument.

as part of a greater work of art and so encourages us to author our own stories in our own voices. Rather than accept the meaning prescribed for us, she encourages us to create our own arrangement of the elements that constitute our lives, and so to find our own meanings. Woolf's 'pattern of life' presents a concept of reality as variations of the themes of humanity, where everything comes over again, only a little differently. For example, Eleanor considers the relationship between the homosexual Nicholas and her cousin Sara: "if this love-making differs from the old, still it has its charm; it was "love," different from the old love, perhaps, but worse, was it? . . . they were aware of each other; they live in each other; what else is love, she asked, listening to their laughter" (323). The relationship between Nicholas and Sara differs from the relationship between Rachel Vinrace and Terence Hewet in *The Voyage Out*, but each may be described as "love". Woolf suggests that our conceptual apparatus and use of language must needs accommodate the similarity and the difference of succeeding generations of thought and experience. We must not impose rules and traditions that fix and define the form rather than the intent of our thought and experience; rather, we must use and understand language so that each person can express what life, in all its myriad impressions, means to him or her. We must use the new dawn at the close of *The Years* and the possible new life of *Between the Acts* as a symbol of cyclicity - change and yet continuity - and refrain from imposing the forms of the past which lead to hostility and conflict. We must use language to facilitate an all-embracing and intersubjective humanity, and not to define and destroy our individuality by imposing some authoritarian and homogeneous structure on life and meaning.

Virginia Woolf urges us to ensure that this new dawn, this new life, this new play, is not the last - to ensure, in other words the continuity of life - by respecting and embracing each voice, each speaker. That Woolf committed suicide suggests perhaps that she despaired of her society's ability to change, to embody a new paradigm of reality which could comprehend and respect the different points of view within a common humanity. The Second World War symbolised for her instead the repetition of an authoritarianism that demanded the subjugation, unification and objectification of individual members of society, and though the European fascist states were perceived as the aggressor nations in

the military conflict, Woolf recognised the same social ideals in her own patriarchal society. Yet in expressing herself in her own voice over the long and varied course of her writing career, Woolf gives her readers the chance to understand her own point of view, her own experiences and her own responses to life. In doing so, she not only asserts her own place as a subject, but she also impresses her voice on the lives of her readers, thus constituting, in part, their own lives. Whatever we take from Woolf, then, she will have achieved her goal - we needn't agree with her to be provoked and influenced by her; we needn't understand absolutely everything she says before we feel that she is indeed expressing herself as a subject. To the extent that we read her works, become involved in her novels, sympathise with her characters, are stimulated by her essays, respond to her use of language - to the extent that we see life, for even a moment, from her point of view - we will have gone some of the way towards realising Woolf's vision of reality and understanding her own voice.

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