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Reflecting Woolf: Virginia Woolf's Feminist Politics and Modernist Aesthetics

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Précis

Aucune étude de la vie et de l'oeuvre de Virgina Woolf n'est possible sans faire face à de nombreuses contradictions. Woolf est reconue pour ses contributions innovatrices à la littérature moderne. Mais il ne faut pas oublier qu elle est née en 1882, et que le dix-neuvième siècle joue un role important pour elle. Le premier chapitre explore cette double sensibilité. Le deuxième chapitre examine la pensée esthétique de Woolf. Elle ne veut rien savoir du réalisme de ses ancêtres, et préfère l'art abstret dont la forme révèle une réalité plus "profonde" que la description objective. Bien qu'elle prétend se révolter contre les conventions littéraires du passé, sa conception d'une hierarchie de réalités dont une est la plus profonde ne s'accorde pas bien avec une sensibilité révolutionaire, féministe, et marxiste. Le dernier chapitre est une étude detaillée des contradictions qui se trouve dans les écrits féministes de Woolf.

Abstract

No study of Virginia Woolf can do justice to the complexity of her life and work without taking into account the numerous contradictions present in her thought. Though Woolf is recognized as a revolutionary contributor to the development of modernism, it is also important to remember that she was born in 1882 and that the nineteenth century also left its mark on her. The first chapter will examine this double sensibility. The second chapter will trace the development of Woolf's modernist aesthetic. She was obviously rebelling against the realism valued by her Victorian and Edwardian predecessors when she conceived of a literary style capable of abstracting from purely formal elements a more "profound reality" than that captured by objective and representational descriptions. Despite this revolutionary tendency, she constructs a hierarchy of "realities" that is somewhat elitist in its mysticism and runs counter to the revolutionary feminist and Marxist thought evident in so much of her work. The last chapter will examine the contradictions that riddle Woolf's feminist writings.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf was a prolific writer whose generic range spanned from novels to critical essays and biographies. She also lectured, was actively engaged in various social causes, and co-owned the Hogarth Press. Yet according to Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew and biographer, she was also a woman so incapacitated by mental illness that she spent her best days in bed and her worse in mental institutions. This thesis will argue that most encounters with Woolf's life and work, as well as with the body of criticism that has been growing at an alarming rate over the last few decades, must involve a negotiation of what appear, at times, to be polar opposites. The answer is not to uncover the "true" Woolf buried under a heap of gossip and misconstruction, but rather to understand that contradiction and paradox constitute the very essence of her life, her work, and the legacy she has left for posterity. I will focus on the ways in which these contradictions converge to form the psyche of the artist and, more specifically, of the female artist. The following passage from To The Lighthouse catches the female artist's consciousness in action: "[Lily Briscoe] had been looking at the table-cloth, and it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody, and she had felt an enormous exultation" (3). Seated at the dinner table with a man Mrs. Ramsay had once wanted her to marry, Lily is juggling with two opposing forces: at the very moment that she is so overwhelmingly infused with artistic inspiration that she can uproot a tree and move it (not to mention refute marriage and the entire heterosexist structure of her society), she can also engage in polite conversation with the gentlemen arrayed around the

dinner-table. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, a critic who will play a prominent role in the development of my argument, suggests that ruptures executed on a narrative level by twentieth-century women writers represent or sometimes even create disruptions in the often sexist patterns of society. The way in which Lily Briscoe weaves her artistic inspiration into a social situation fraught with heterosexist connotations is an example of the revolutionary potential of the female artist.

The first chapter will begin by positing that Woolf's upbringing during the closing years of the Victorian era set into motion the double dynamic that was to animate her life and work. Like Lily Briscoe, all daughters of Victorian England had to negotiate a truce between the suffocating tablecloth of proper social interaction, and any artistic inclinations they might have had. Contrary to what might be expected from a woman who has become an emblem of feminist writing, Woolf does not automatically reject her Victorian past. It is well known that much of her early training as a writer occurred in the library of her father, Leslie Stephen, an important name in the literary world of the late 1800s. Furthermore, Woolf often shows a fascination with the social and moral codes of her upbringing. In The Years, she juxtaposes a Victorian impulse towards creating community through ceremonies to a modern consciousness that no longer wants to be yoked to communal rituals. Thus, the calm surface of Victorian propriety, though always preserved, is rippled and sometimes even ruptured by the disturbance broiling underneath.

Woolf constructs a modernist aesthetic on the same kind of doubled dynamic evident in the juxtaposition of a calm surface and the upheaval that threatens to erupt underneath. That she is rebelling against her Victorian and Edwardian predecessors as she does so is evident in "Modern Fiction", which proposes a new narrative technique that

abandons the surface descriptions of realism for a truer, more spiritual reality. She is influenced here by the Post-Impressionist critics' development of the term "significant form", which suggests that the arrangement of formal elements on the surface of the canvas, rather than merely "representing" reality, reveal a truth deciphered intellectually or emotionally by the viewer. Though this new aesthetic pretends to do away with the restrictive artistic beliefs of Woolf's predecessors, her own aesthetic pronunciations are haunted by a further contradiction. Her appeal to a "true reality" reveals a metaphysical tendency which, to the twentieth-century reader, appears to be contradictory to the radical and revolutionary position Woolf wants to adopt. Thus, Woolf's modernism becomes problematic for socialist critics such as Lukasc who claim that the extreme abstraction of her works is socially irresponsible. The task of the second chapter will be to understand Woolf's complex position in the tangled debates that oppose (sometimes without much justification) politics and aesthetics.

Woolf's feminism also has its detractors, and this is again due to the fact that her feminist vision is structured on a set of contradictions. In A Room of One's Own, Woolf's materialist feminism is sometimes troubled by a metaphysical tendency that threatens to break the anti-essentialist headway Woolf is attempting to make. But Woolf's definition of the "broken sentence", structured by a female psychology that is constantly divided between her domestic duties and her artistic impulse, sugests that contradiction is the impetus behind a female aesthetic. The sentence describing Lily Briscoe is a perfect embodiment of the "broken sentence". Lily's thoughts jump from the tablecloth to her painting and to marriage. The breathlessness of this sentence, embracing in a single line of thought what appear to be disconnected elements, demonstrates that the

psyche of the female artist is often structured on opposing forces. Rather than being destructive, this disjointed state is perfectly embodied in the "broken sentence".

Chapter I

Bodies, Motion and Space: Woolf's Physics of Social Interaction.

"the space which a quarter of an hour before had been deemed barely sufficient for five couple, was now endeavored to be made quite enough for ten." Jane Austen, Emma. (224)

"In the basements of the long avenues of the residential quarters servant girls in cap and apron prepared tea. Deviously ascending from the basement the silver tea-pot was placed on the table, and virgins and spinsters [...] measured out one, two, three, four spoonfuls of tea." Virginia Woolf, The Years. (5)

In order to understand the effects of a heterosexist society such as Lili Briscoe's upon the development of a modern female aesthetic, it is useful to begin with an exploration of Woolf's own relationship to Victorian social forms. Literary history records both a Woolf who rebelled against the traditions of her ancestors, and one who gratefully incorporated their mores as well as their narrative strategies into her own aesthetic vision. Her indebtedness to nineteenth-century literary forms has been noted by Janis M. Paul, who claims that like her predecessors, Woolf promotes in her fiction communal cohesion. Other critics, such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, demonstrate how, on the contrary, Woolf wants more than anything to liberate herself and her narrative forms from the heterosexist imperatives that are the structuring principles of both the community so lavishly praised by Paul and the narrative paradigms produced by such a society. Yet even DuPlessis acknowledges Woolf's indebtedness to the nineteenth century and particularly to Jane Austen. It will be my contention that, as daughters of the English middle-class, both Austen and Woolf's socioeconomic positions were not only unstable,

but often contradictory: though both lived in relatively privileged circumstances, they were acutely aware of the fact that, having missed out on the formal education that is the strong-suit of the middle-class, their options and resources were much more limited than those of their brothers. This lack of stability induced a sensitivity to the behaviors, values, and hierarchies that structure society. Austen, often dubbed the novelist of manners, is concerned with more than just the superficialities of polite behavior. Her novels explore the ways in which class and social mores structure the most intimate of social relationships. Likewise, Woolf, in an autobiographical sketch entitled "Am I A Snob?", demonstrates a sensitivity and willingness to engage with issues of class, and to think through the ways in which these affect interpersonal relationships. Paul, then, is right to say that Woolf is still preoccupied with issues that were important to her predecessors. However, more often than not, Woolf's examination of English society engenders a desire to restructure and not merely replicate the social conventions of her predecessors. Indeed, unlike Austen, Woolf is unable to maintain a consistent or sustained belief in community. This dialogue between Woolf and the social forms of the nineteenth century is most evident in The Years, a novel which follows the Pargiter family from its Victorian incarnation in 1880, to "The Present Day", circa 1937. In the Victorian section of the novel, Woolf shows how domestic relationships and formal conventions were already manifesting signs of distress that threatened to erode their calm surfaces. Indeed, as the novel moves closer and closer to the twentieth century, the nucleus of the family that had held individuals together disintegrates and the novel focuses on the lives of individual and often unmarried or in some way marginalized characters. In Three Guineas, an essay known as the companion text to The Years, Woolf

is very explicit about her mistrust of the Victorian conception of domesticity. The death of the Pargiter mother, which closes the first and most Victorian of The Years' chapters, seems to enact a morbid version of the Oedipal story that supposedly crystallizes the roles of the middle class family. Is Woolf "burying" the mother in order to introduce a post-Oedipal resolution and therefore accept the heterosexist conventions that structured nineteenth-century society? Or is she burying Victorian values in order to move onto a more liberating life style? The answer depends on whether one views Woolf as a traditional neo-Victorian, or as a progressive modern feminist. This chapter will argue that a simplistic choice between two seemingly opposite options is never an adequate way of understanding Woolf's work. In true Woolfian fashion, the presentation of the mother's death remains quite ambiguous, embracing neither a patriarchal drive towards a post-oedipal rejection of the mother, nor a matriarchal desire to resurrect the repressed maternal. Woolf's ambivalent relationship towards the Oedipal crisis is revelatory of her oscillating relationship to the nineteenth century. Though Woolf's novels include an examination of social structures symptomatic of her indebtedness to the Victorians, she cannot maintain a sustained belief in communal cohesion.

Janis M. Paul demonstrates an awareness of Woolf's complex relationship to the structures of social form. She takes issue with a critical tradition that is often confined to debating whether Woolf ought to be honored as the "patron saint of inner vision and consciousness", or condemned as a mere "disembodied, neurasthenic nymph" (Paul, 3). Much of Woolf's fiction, whose narrative style rejects the societal concerns of Victorian novels and escapes into the solitary world of interior reflection and imagination, justifies both these epithets. Yet a more nuanced understanding of her work and life also reveals

that her career as a writer began in the library of her father, Leslie Stephen, whose literary reputation would seem to be at complete odds with the modernist aesthetic associated with Woolf. Paul argues that, despite the "mist of consciousness" behind which Woolf hid the facts of her novels (36), she never fully renounced the legacy of a Victorian heritage that placed a high premium on external facts and that privileged society over the individual (9). The era's heightened emphasis on traditional social forms was aimed at consolidating a society whose class and value systems were quickly slipping out of place. (13). Hence, character came to be equated with public behavior, social manners, and external appearances (13). The Victorian artist was, in turn, responsible for maintaining moral standards and therefore using his work as a point of communal cohesion. Editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, essayist, and philosopher, Leslie Stephen embodied the very essence of such an aesthetic. He produced work that was factual and, in tandem with history, worked in the service of society (Paul 17). In order to redeem what Woolf feels to be a lack of connection between the individual and his/her surroundings, she turns to the very traditions her Victorian predecessors had scrambled to hold onto in order to restore their society to some sense of community. Though Woolf views and represents reality as fragmented and ambiguous, this rather modernist impulse is always calling out for its remedy. Her novels, Paul claims, often close with "summation scenes" such as deaths, gatherings and weddings, in which Woolf seeks a sense of completion and order (42). The experimental leanings of her style signify nothing more that an "ironic questioning of the genres she chose to follow" (Paul 41).

A more radical critical tradition (though quite orthodox in the context of Woolf criticism) claims that Woolf embraces the disintegration of the social fabric as a

liberating force. To say that the turn of the century also marks a turn in Woolf's lifestyle and in the progress of her career may seem too symmetrical and perhaps even too reductive an approach. However, Leslie Stephen died in 1904, closing the curtain on the Victorian chapter of Woolf's life. It was shortly after her father's death that she and her sister Vanessa moved out of Hyde Park Gate and into the now infamous Bloomsbury section of London. They became founding members of the group that, with its coterie of free thinkers, immersed them in an environment of intellectual freedom that nurtured their artistic careers (Bell 94-96). While post-impressionist critics such as Roger Fry would later join their circle and impart to them the new aesthetic that worked against linear and realistic representation, in its early days, it was the sexual freedom of Bloomsbury that was most liberating for the Stephen sisters. Woolf's encounters with various openly homosexual men, the most memorable of which was Lytton Strachey, certainly opened a path to ways of imagining human relationships that had nothing to do with the strictly imposed codes that structured Victorian society. From these biographical facts, critics such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis conjure a Woolf who, in rewriting the romantic endings of nineteenth-century novels, dismantled the male-female complement that was not only the nucleus of the Victorian household, but also the linchpin of an entire ideological structure.

It would be reductive to argue that either one of these critical traditions is more accurate than the other. A far more complex and interesting approach would be to examine the gamut of shades and textures that constitute the nature of Woolf's relationship to the Victorians. Winifred Holtby's 1932 biography of Woolf contains a chapter entitled "Virginia Woolf is Not Jane Austen", which might be an interesting

point of departure for examining Woolf's relationship with the forms, both literary and social, of the nineteenth century. Though Austen was not a Victorian proper, her avid concern for social form foreshadows what Paul identifies as a Victorian belief in "public behavior". A quick comparison of the legacies left to posterity by each of the authors yields a strong contrast between the two women: whereas Woolf is remembered for a militant engagement with feminism, Austen is often type-cast as the country-side gossip who liked pretty stories with their happy endings in what would, in late twentieth-century feminist criticism, come to be known as a restrictive "heterosexist imperative". Yet a more careful analysis of such perceptions will reveal them to be mere charicatures, capturing the full essence of neither Woolf nor Austen. Holtby herself recognizes the similarities that become a spring-board for the contrast she goes on to draw. As a fledgling writer, Woolf was an apprentice of Austen's. In Night and Day, for instance, Woolf's second novel, Holtby discerns "a plot completely characteristic of the English domestic comedy of well-bred, well-to-do people behaving suitably within the conventions of their social code" (85). Woolf admired Austen's perfect integrity in crafting a novel and even shared many of the values championed in her predecessor's work (Holtby 87). Woolf's examination of her predecessors' conventions, though much more critical than Austen's, parallel the latter's concern for social codes. Their common concern with proper behavior and social codes finds its source in their shared middle-class Englih background. Pride and Prejudice's Bennet sisters represent the pressing issues of class and gender with which Austen was so preoccupied and which Woolf would later integrate into her own work. Mr. Bennet having entailed his property to the nearest male relative, his daughters face an uncertain future. Marriage or complete

destitution seem to be their only options. Such a possibility also haunted Jane Austen who, though by no means down-trodden, walked that middle-class tightrope of financial insecurity. This sense of socioeconomic instability made her acutely responsive to the questions of class and social codes which, Holtby suggests, Woolf inherited. The Bennet sisters and Austen, as well as the Pargiter daughters and Woolf, fall into that class which Three Guineas refers to as "the daughters of educated men": though borne into middle class families, they receive little of the benefits enjoyed by their brothers (9-11). Woolf trenchantly argues that part of the money spent on educating England's middle-class sons rightfully belongs to, and in fact was stolen from, funds that should have gone towards educating their sisters. This ambivalent and therefore insecure socioeconomic position of middle class women is an element of female psychology which DuPlessis identifies as one of the forces responsible for producing the "broken sentence". She explains that "[i]n the social and cultural arena, there is a constant repositioning [of women] between dominant and muted, hegemonic and oppositional, central and colonial" (DuPlessis 38).

Woolf certainly displays both sides of this particular coin. Despite the often anti-hegemonic leanings she exhibits in Three Guineas and countless other works, her reputation for snobbery is something that she admits to quite openly. This elitist impulse, though seemingly contradictory to her leftist aspirations, also springs from her awkward socioeconomic position, and also leads her to undertake a careful examination of the intricate structures of class in England. Whereas Woolf suffers from what she calls her "dress complex" in an autobiographical sketch titled "Am I a Snob?", she notes that "the aristocrat is freer, more natural, more eccentric than we are" (208). This self-consciousness gives her an Austenian sensitivity to the intricately taxonomized

categories of class and rank. Echoing Holtby, DuPlessis notes that Night and Day and The Voyage Out, modeled on such nineteenth-century classics as Emma, Pride and Prejudice, and Jane Eyre, demonstrate the fact that Woolf owes her "acute reading of social cues, motives, and character" to these predecessors, all of which were written by the daughters of the middle-class.

Though Emma Woodhouse, "clever, handsome, and rich" (Emma 1) can hardly be said to be in the same predicament as the Bennet sisters or the Pargiter women, Austen's thoughtful preoccupation with the mechanisms of social relationships in Emma offers an especially striking example of some of the sources for Woolf's thoughtful cogitation into the structures of human interaction. The center-piece of Austen's novel (starting at page 222 of 400 pages) is the planning of a dance which engages the characters in intricate discussions of space and the dancers' ability to move comfortably within it. The dance never actually takes place, and Austen denies her readers a prefiguring emblem of the wedding they know to expect at the end of the novel. Austen replaces the expected event with its cogitative blueprint, a narrative move which shows that Austen, too, is fully capable of "breaking the sequence", at least temporarily. In step with the narrative as a whole, which concerns itself with the constant deferral of Emma's marriage, the absence of the dance puts on hold the socially expected sequence. This fissure in the expected development of Austen's story becomes a locus of experimentation. Here, Austen's characters can think about the management of space, and all the various permutations of individuals possible within it. This substitution of decisive events for tentative cogitation also reveals the depth of Austen's interest in social propriety. Her concern takes place on a deep cognitive level, and is not merely restricted to anecdotal details or

superficial behavior. Though her field of analysis is often confined to the domestic and excludes the more global political concerns of the Napoleonic Wars, feminist criticism has taught us not to turn our noses up at this "feminine sphere". The way in which family members or prospective spouses interact, and the hierarchies that structure the domestic sphere in which they do so, are just as revelatory of the ideology that implements power relations as any geopolitical crisis. What, in the end, is ideology but a force or a series of injunctions that structure imperialistic, political, but also domestic, relationships through the establishment of different gradations of power? Austen's characters' meticulous planning of the dance allows them to speak in a language that literalizes this force responsible for animating human relationships. The dance is, after all, a courtship ritual before anything else. Its choreography dictates an intricate pattern that organizes movement in relation to gender and foreshadows the ideologically premised behavior between men and women in society.

"Am I Snob?" contains Woolf's most explicit and thoughtful engagement with these questions of social organization. It begins as a light, tongue-in-cheek account of Woolf's frivolous encounters with the upper class, but ends by asking questions similar to Austen's about the meaning of social class and its codes and whether these engender or intrude upon genuine human interaction. Underneath the self-directed humor, this piece reveals itself to be an astute analysis of the intricate gradations that constitute class in England. Woolf recounts, for instance, Lady Sibyl Colefaxe's countless invitations to meet various intellectuals such as Paul Valéry and Arnold Bennett. Woolf's self-consciousness arises not because she is intimidated by the prowess of these great intellects, but because of what she calls her "dress complex" (210-211): she has nothing

to wear. Later, when she and Lady Colefax become more intimate, she is "promoted from tea to meat" (212). This mocking choice of diction indicates Woolf's acute awareness of the intricate social calculations that deem a specific gustative event suitable for a specific level of intimacy.

As the memoir progresses, Woolf develops an uneasy feeling that this form of regimented interaction lacks any sense of genuine connection. Woolf confesses that even she has, on occasion, succumbed to the sometimes insensitive frivolities of high society. When Sibyl's husband dies, Woolf feels "genuine sympathy", but also a prying, gossipy, almost voyeuristic curiosity: she wants to know how the rich and famous grieve. The four- page letter she receives from Sibyl in response to her card seems a genuine expression of Lady Colefax's deep grief, and touches Woolf immensely--until, that is, she learns that Sibyl has been going out every night since her husband's death, and that she sent the same letter to anyone she was even vaguely familiar with. Obstinately, Woolf pursues the friendship, and visits Sibyl as her house is being auctioned off. Woolf tries to console her devastated friend by telling her how much she had enjoyed meeting people such as Arnold Bennet in that house, and this seems to do the trick: Sibyl cheers up. When Woolf asks her whether she had known Henry James, Lady Colefax has fully resumed her gregarious personality. As they drive away from the auctioned-off property that had, only moments before, caused so much grief, and as Sibyl is chatting away about dear old "H.J", Woolf ends her memoir with this statement: "she was trying to impress me with the fact that she had known Henry James" (220). The irony of this last remark is that Woolf, having mingled with England's literati since infancy, is anything but impressed. Rather, these concluding words resonate with the disturbing feeling that

"society" seems, here, to be nothing more than a series of superficial, self-aggrandizing connections.

The deeply reflective mood of this piece testifies to Woolf's engagement with the mechanics of social interaction. The male/female nucleus often forms the core of social organization, especially in Victorian England, where a gendered cosmogony divides the world into private and public spheres. Of course, by the end of Austen's novel, Emma has chosen her mate and order is restored. Though Austen had proposed the space left empty by the dance as a locus of discussion, this space is, in the end, filled by the wedding that closes the novel. Like Austen, though more overtly critical of her society's heterosexist assumptions, Woolf is interested in the dynamics between male and female and the ways in which the heterosexual couple so often becomes the center around which many forms of social interaction are organized. The "virgins and spinsters" who dole out the sugar in the opening page of The Years are defined only in terms of their marital status. And the exactitude with which these women measure out "one, two, three, four" spoonfuls of tea keeps the beat as meticulously as any Austenian dancer. Tea-drinking seems to be, in Woolf, a ceremony which, like the dance, sets the perimeters and delineates the space within which individuals can interact. Like Jane Austen's literal representation of the choreography that belies any public behavior or social interaction, Woolf is interested in representing individuals as they arrange themselves in groups, both to critique the patriarchal status-quo and to imagine new configurations. Just as she strives, in a Room of One's Own, towards reconciliation with the warped cadence of the "broken sentence", she breaks the sequence or choreography of the old dance and invents a new one.

For, despite the similarities, Holtby warns, "the England of 1918 was not the England of 1818" (83). The differences between Woolf and Austen's work are inevitable in the face of rapid historical change . Holtby characterizes Austen's world as one where political events were kept at bay by slow communication and social isolation (83). Austen could, therefore, raise "a delayed proposal or an invitation to a ball" (84) to universal proportions, while keeping her parochial world intact from the more global matter of the Napoleonic wars. Though Austen's poignant satire often ridiculed certain social ills such as snobbery or lack of sensitivity, ultimately, she never "criticized the framework" (89).

Woolf's life, on the other hand, was too much affected not only by the war, but also by such rebellious figures as suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, who shook the very foundations of society. Holtby argues that Woolf "is, in spite of her respect for classical tradition, a rebel against tradition" (88). Ultimately, she feels most at home with the more experimental forms that will follow the rather traditional Night and Day (88). Woolf's own work attests to Holtby's intuition that the technologies of the twentieth century created an intimate proximity with events too shocking to ignore. Three Guineas, Woolf's infamous invective against patriarchal structures, opens in epistolary form. Woolf is answering the letter of a gentleman who has requested her female perspective on preventing the impending Second World War. Dissatisfied with the poetic or theological pundits of the past who waver in their philosophical stance towards war, Woolf turns to photography, a more modern and direct source of information. Newspaper accounts of the Spanish Civil War are accompanied by viscerally disturbing pictures: "This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's; it is so

mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig" (TG 20). The dehumanizing force of war is quite evident in Woolf's description of the photographs: the bodies have become so featureless that the most basic traits are erased.

The unprecedented intimacy these photographs provide between a middle-class Woolf sitting in a London boudoir and the maimed bodies in Spain, shatters national, class, and gender barriers. Thus assaulted by disturbing images, how could Woolf really forge her career in Austen's image and become the next novelist to decipher which manners and personality traits are most conducive to a healthy community? Obviously, the issue now exceeds the parochial confines of Austen's world. It is quite true that Woolf's work often proliferates with tea parties, luncheons, and dinners, but Woolf's use of these gatherings is not as simple as Paul suggests. I do not think that Woolf is ever able to find complete reconciliation between the individual and society. The violence which shatters the equanimity of Austen's world is about to explode with unprecedented force in the devastating horrors of the Second World War. Paul argues that a collective effort to respect social codes of behavior can mend a society torn by rapid historical change. But how genuine is such an attempt? And is covering over the fissures with a varnished exterior a tenable solution? As Woolf's observations on her relationship with Lady Colefax suggest, she was very weary of the ceremonious nature through which English society was held together and sought to dismantle the often dishonest pretensions of its rituals.

It is evident in Three Guineas that Woolf is weary of the officious, ceremonious nature of a society too concerned with class and proper behavior. She argues that such a social climate institutes hierarchies that are not only conducive to war, but also

detrimental to the private sphere. Her "letter" concludes that it is impossible for men and women to fight under the tutelage of the same society, even when their aims are similar. Woolf cites the example of Dorothy and William Wordsworth's harmonious sibling relationship only to emphasize her assertion that such intimacy is impossible to maintain in the persisting social climate of gender segregation (TG 189-191). Woolf argues that "the very word 'society' sets tolling in memory the dismal bells of a harsh music: shall not, shall not, shall not. [...] And though it is possible, and to the optimistic credible, that a new society may ring a carillon of splendid harmony, and your letter heralds it, that day is far distant" (190-191). The legal system, which so discriminately disfavors women, creates an irredeemable fissure between the two genders. It takes the companionate brother of private life and turns him into a power monger: "daubed in red and gold, decorated like a savage with feathers he goes through mystic rites and enjoys the dubious pleasures of power and dominion while we, 'his' women, are locked in the private house without share in the many societies of which his society is composed" (191). The elaborate costuming and ritualistic nature of the methods through which such violent and destructive power is gained sounds here like the somber complement to the redemptive potential of "public behavior" so effusively championed by Paul. Indeed, the point of Three Guineas is that the costumes and ceremonies that serve to distinguish rank reiterate the hierarchical values that lead to war. The crux of Woolf's argument in this polemic essay is that the attitude that promotes war, though epitomized in public institutions, also penetrates the domestic sphere and the simplest of interpersonal relationships.

In "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf remembers how confining the circumstances of her own upbringing had been. She notes that Hyde Park Gate "in 1900 was a complete

model of Victorian society" (147). Her memoir's account of the closing years of the nineteenth century bear witness to the fact that she was acutely aware of the ritualized pattern of interaction that governed the Victorian household . She recalls how such rigid demands on her behavior had an effect on her career as a writer:

> the Victorian manner is perhaps -- I am not sure -- a disadvantage in writing. When I read my old *Literary Supplement* articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their side-long approach, to tea-table training. I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar? (150).

The ceremonious nature of this tea-drinking scene, perfected through the ritual repetition of training, also permeates Woolf's writing in the form of a too rigid and affected style. The dynamic of the relationship between the young hostess and the young blustering guest suggests the romantic end towards which this ritual is striving. Woolf demonstrates an awareness of what DuPlessis' analysis later exposes: there is correlation between social form and narrative style. The broken sentence and broken sequence of her novels embody Woolf's need to break with both. Though the pages of The Years do proliferate in luncheons, dinners, and parties, these are temporary encounters not meant to celebrate or commemorate the characters' sense of community. The structure of this novel brings together only to dissipate. The movement that runs through it is a continual alternation between forming a community and dissipating its members.

The first chapter develops an especially potent demonstration of this simultaneous cohesion and dissipation. Even as Woolf narrates these configurations patterned on Victorian rituals, the staging of these scenes is always strained by a double dynamic.

Great pains are taken to maintain a surface of equanimity: the "public behavior" of each character unfolds according to the proper script. But a disturbance is always broiling underneath and ruptures the calm surface. The following scene, taken from the opening pages of The Years, holds the two opposing forces in such a tight equipoise that the passage threatens to break underneath the pressure. The fissure on the surface of the diurnal ritual first makes itself known as the illness of the mother is revealed. Her absence from the dinner table creates a gap in the circularity of the family gathering and her confinement to the sickroom above looms heavily over a ritual that is straining to unfold in accordance with the usual script. When Crosby, the maid, comes in to announce that Mrs. Pargiter has taken a turn for the worse, the disruption of the scene is complete and the family, paralyzed with panic, is captured in a deadening pose:

> The Colonel, who had just helped himself to cutlets, held his knife and fork in his hand. They all held their knives suspended. Nobody liked to go on eating.
>
> "Well, let's get on with our dinner," said the Colonel, abruptly attacking his cutlet. He had lost his geniality. (30)

The scene is a tableau of the traditional family, with the father at its center the point of the compass around which the other family members arrange themselves. The Pargiter children await his cues, and act accordingly. Of course, the Woolfian narrator makes a sharp incision into the canvas of this apparently serene tableau of domesticity, so that the image of the peaceful family is skewed with a tone of irony. The passage is, in fact, a parodic enactment of the ritualized dinner scene: held captive in this pose, the characters are conveyed in a tableau-like representation of family unity. The tension that has belied

the domestic ceremony all along rises to a climax which, illustrated by the image of the knives held in mid-air, tears into the surface veneer of the canvas.

More than the knives, however, what is especially trenchant, disturbing, and disjunctive about this passage is the emotional coldness of the characters' behavior and of the narrative tone. The fact that they "didn't *like* to go on" suggests that not eating while their mother is dying is a matter of pure form rather than a genuine reaction of concern. When the Colonel finally suggests that they ought, in fact, to get on with their dinner, the family is released from its spell. The threat that has been pushing at the seams of the calm dinner-table scene appears to have been dispelled. Though the climactic tension seems to have dissipated, the narration will not allow for such a smooth glossing-over of the seams it has already created. The image of the Colonel "attacking" his cutlets reiterates the disruptive violence that has animated this scene. The narrator's comment that the Colonel had "lost his geniality", meant as a lament and call for the fatherly charisma that would propel the family into a happy version of this morbid scene, has the opposite effect. Ironically misplaced in the midst of such a grave situation, it reiterates the cold and metallic violence earlier conveyed through the image of the suspended knives. This last stab at the domestic tableau tears into its veneer and effects an irreparable skew on its equanimity.

Mrs. Pargiter, however, does not die, and the crisis is revealed to have been a false alarm. Woolf's deferral of the mother's death seems to echo the feminist campaign launched to rescue the maternal from its banishment to the margins of a culture structured on such patriarchal discourses as the Oedipal crisis. Patricia Cramer's analysis of the novel in " 'Loving in the War Years': The War Images in The Years'" suggests just such

a parallel. Cramer claims that Woolf was greatly influenced by the anthropologist Jane Harrison, whose interest in matriarchal lore lead her to theorize that patriarchy was instituted when Greek warrior cultures conquered more peaceful goddess cults. The Years, according to Cramer, addresses the cultural configurations that emerge from the fact

> that this shift from matriarchy to patriarchy is recorded in myths about the rise of the hero by means of his murder of the goddess; that goddess figures represent women's prepatriarchal grandeur and remaining buried potential; and that twentieth-century women's movement presages the decline of our present age--the age of the hero (Cramer 204).

Though Harrison's theories addressed Classical culture, the death of the goddess and the ensuing burial of female potential is reiterated in many subsequent culture-founding myths. The pre-Oedipal rejection of the mother in favor of the symbolic order of the father certainly perpetuates such a paradigm.

DuPlessis and Cramer are right to suggest a correlation between the organization of social institutions and dominant cultural narratives. Both try to fit Woolf's work within the confines of a feminist reworking of the Oedipal myth. However, to impose upon The Years the spectral return of the buried mother is, once again, to impose a contemporary, ideologically closed reading upon a fiction that is much more flexible than that and operates on the subtleties of paradox rather than the all-or-nothing statements of ideology. By the end of the first chapter, Rose Pargiter does die, thus gesturing, once again, at a traditional device of both the nineteenth-century novel and the oedipal story. A careful reading of the scene depicting the mother's funeral reveals that while Woolf upsets and

destabilizes the expected sequence of both these narratives, she does not replace it with the alternate expected sequence favored by DuPlessis and Cramer.

The mother's funeral constitutes the only official ceremony, as well as the most "climactic" or plot-inducing event of the entire narrative. It therefore embodies, in condensed form, the two elements of nineteenth-century tradition that Woolf struggles with: the ceremonious nature of social interaction, and the narrative structures that accompany it. The "1880" chapter, closing as it does with the burial of Mrs. Pargiter, could, by nineteenth-century standards, constitute a novel all on its own. The funeral, despite its sober tone, still works to reinforce communal bonds through commemoration. Yet Mrs. Pargiter's funeral seems to flail as it strives to perform this role. The oddest element of this scene is that it is rendered through the consciousness of Delia Pargiter who, throughout the chapter, has demonstrated intense hostility towards her mother and seems here unable to focus on the grave purpose of the ceremony. What does Woolf's choice of this peculiar point of view reveal about the symbolic resonance of the mother's death? Does it mean, despite Paul's argument to the contrary, that no ceremony can ever fill the fissures that are continually appearing between the individual and society?

It might be useful to quote the funeral scene at length, for only such a panoramic view can capture the pattern of the group as it alternates between cohesion and dissipation:

> There was a pause; people kept on arriving and took up their positions, some a little higher, some a little lower [...]. Some of the women were crying; but not the men; the men had one pose; the women another, she observed. Then it all began again. The splendid gust of music blew through them-- 'Man that is born of

> woman': the ceremony had renewed itself; once more they were grouped together, united. The family pressed a little closer to the graveside and looked fixedly at the coffin which lay with its polish and its brass handles there in the earth to be buried forever. It looked too new to be buried for ever. She stared down into the grave. There lay her mother; in that coffin--the woman she had loved and hated so. Her eyes dazzled. She was afraid that she might faint; but she must look; she must feel; it was the last chance that was left her. Earth dropped on the coffin; three pebbles fell on the hard shiny surface; and as they dropped she was possessed by a sense of something everlasting; of life mixing with death, of death becoming life. For as she looked she heard the sparrow's chirp quicker and quicker; she heard wheels in the distance sound louder and louder; life came closer and closer... (Years 68).

The configuration of the mourners keeps changing. From time to time the ceremony succeeds in uniting them, but its rhythm appears to be choppy and unstable. Phrases such as "then it all began again" which introduces the renewal of the ceremony suggests that the unifying power of the ritual is not stable, but ebbs and flows. The short independent clauses, separated by semi-columns and jumping from one thought to the next, give the scene a choppy pace that reinforces the disconectedness it is attempting to convey.

Delia's attention is divided between the somber ceremony and the lively city beyond. This lack of concentration infects the group, since it is rendered through Delia's point of view. Like Delia's consciousness, its cohesion is destabilized. Rather than seeing a mass of people, Delia sees separate entities and focuses on the behaviors that distinguish them from one another: some stand higher, others stand lower; the women

cry, whereas the men do not. Delia's startled reaction to the shiny coffin being buried forever, and her observation that something so new should not suffer the doom of the old or worn, reveals her susceptibility to the violently disjunctive effects of paradox. The poignancy with which she perceives the contradiction results from a state of mind that is divided.

Delia's subsequent injunction to herself that she must look and feel is of a different valance all together than the social imperatives that dictate the niceties of a public behavior often at odds with genuine feeling. It is an honest attempt on her part to connect not only the divided parts of her own consciousness, but perhaps to join herself to the community of grief straining to establish itself through the ceremony. To ascertain whether she succeeds in bringing unity to this fragmentation is to take a simplistic approach to the matter, for it is through these images and experiences of paradox and division that Delia understands the violent cleavage resulting from loss. She can then reach some form of transcendental consolation. As she looks at the unseemly pebbles hitting the polished coffin, she is overtaken by a metaphysical exaltation that, quite indecorously, verges on ecstasy. The paradox of the shiny coffin had generated her musings and now embodies the fragmentation she perceives in herself and her surroundings.

Delia's ambivalent feelings towards her mother are, of course, a further example of her divided consciousness. To use Rachel Blau DuPlessis' analytical terms, Delia is oscillating between a pre-oedipal attachment to and a later rejection of the maternal figure. This indecisive stance is the companion to the ambivalent position of women (if they are white and economically privileged) as inheritors of and rebels against social

codes (DuPlessis 37-38). Though Delia does oscillate somewhat between love and hate for her mother, ultimately it is the older woman's death that releases her into an ecstatic joy and communion with life. It is difficult to tell whether Rose Pargiter's burial does, indeed, reenact the paradigmatic elimination of matriarchal power, which, according to Cramer, will be resurrected later in the novel.

The funeral might also represent the ritual interment of a mother who, in collusion with patriarchal forces, helped maintain the Victorian social codes which Woolf, as well as Delia and so many late nineteenth-century daughters of educated men, found so confining. After the death of the Pargiter parents, Abercorn Terrace is not only sold but divided into separate apartments. The fate of the estate parallels the fragmentation of twentieth-century life. Many second generation Pargiters--Martin, Rose, Eleanor, and their cousin Sara-- lead single lives in apartments. The death of their parents signals a disintegration of the nucleus that had held the Victorian family together. This generational turn-over is accompanied by a narrative shift whereby the plot loses hold on what little linearity it had to begin with, and disintegrates into a series of individual threads spun from the interior lives, thoughts, and memories of the characters. The parallel between a disintegration of ritualized communal bonds and a new narrative strategy will be explored further in the next two chapters.

Liberating as it might be to watch the tight and restrictive nucleus of the Victorian family lose its hold upon its members, the fragmentation also threatens complete alienation. Contemporary critics, however, have attempted to rescue the characters of The Years from falling into such a dark abyss. A popular approach to the novel suggests that it is structured upon a gradual erosion of the patriarchal family, followed by a

reorganization of characters in various combinations of friendly, sororal, and fraternal ties that defy the romantic imperative that had structured nineteenth-century society. DuPlessis, for instance, argues that the story of romance is "expanded emotionally and structurally by posing pre-Oedipal alternatives" (61). This statement echoes Cramer's claim that The Years resurrects a powerful matriarchy as a corrective to patriarchal cultural dominance. Indeed, the radically altered structure of the female twentieth-century novel as read by DuPlessis deconstructs in one fell swoop both the structure of the traditional novel and the heterosexist social structures it supports.

Likewise calling for a reconsideration of the laws that structure human relations, Marion Shaw focuses on the recurring figure of Antigone in The Years as a trope for the marginal and almost 'outlaw' position of many of the characters with which the text sympathizes. Shaw reads this intertextual gesture as a desire on Woolf's part to suggest the possibility of two distinct and perhaps gendered law codes. Creon, who has forbidden his niece Antigone to bury her bother, represents authority and the supremacy of masculine order (Shaw 43-44). Antigone, who disobeys her uncle, enacts a rebellion against his patriarchal injunctions. Furthermore, she destabilizes the heterosexual imperative underpinning his masculinist order by focusing her affection on a sibling rather than a lover (Shaw 44). This transfer of affection relocates the site of emotional and narrative tension away from the romantic couple and the social and legal codes that give it legitimization. Antigone, like many of The Years' characters, "criticizes the narrow system of economically based love" (DuPlessis 172) which is the starting point of Creon's ordered society.

Shaw, as well as DuPlessis, Cramer, and Stephen Barber, identify Nicholas, a Jewish homosexual, as the nucleus around which The Years' radical marginality becomes mobilized. All these critics cite the "1917" chapter where a group of friends are forced to abandon their dinner, and seek shelter in the cellar during an air raid attack. It is at this point that Nicholas and Eleanor, a Pargiter daughter who has defied the mores of her upbringing by remaining unmarried, meet. Much ado is made in the criticism not only about the formation of this antiromantic and therefore oppositional couple, but also about the setting of the scene. The underground location recalls the burial theme outlined by Cramer, as well as by Antigone's story.

The characters huddled in the obscurity of the cellar and drinking to the "New world" do, indeed, represent something rebellious and liberatory, but Woolf shows herself to be more ambivalent and less utopian than the above mentioned critics. Though the cellar does isolate the characters in a cocoon of interaction free from the still heterosexist values of society, this very pocket of liberated thinking is itself ensconced within a larger framework: the lugubrious background of the war. This imprisoning framework is narratively rendered by opening and closing paragraphs that echo one another. The chapter begins, as do the others, with a panoramic view of London:

> A very cold winter's night, so silent that the air seemed frozen, and, since there was no moon, congealed to the stillness of glass spread over England. Ponds and ditches were frozen; the puddles made glazed eyes in the roads, and on the pavement the frost had raised slippery knobs. Darkness pressed on the windows [...] No light shone, save when a searchlight rayed round the sky [...] (TY 214).

The pathetic fallacy that spreads an icy paralysis over all of England reinforces the somber mood of a country at war. The "glazed eyes" that stare up from the road are, on one level, a metaphoric description of frozen puddles, but they also vividly bring to mind an image of the war's mounting death toll.

Yet this chapter comes to life in the very next line as the narrative jolts the reader out of this mute and somber description and into a direct report of Eleanor's thoughts as she is making her way to Renny and Maggie's for that infamous subterranean dinner: "If that is the river", said Eleanor, pausing in the dark street outside the station, "Westminster must be there" (215). This sudden liveliness increases as the evening unfolds into a successful dinner party. It reaches its crescendo when Eleanor, exuberant from her stimulating conversation with Nicholas, thinks to herself: "When, she wanted to ask him, when will this new world come? When shall we be free? When shall we live adventurously, wholly, not like cripples in a cave?" (TY 227). The narrator's move from direct discourse to free indirect discourse enacts a narrative dissolution of barriers that echoes Eleanor's sense of lively and free interaction with Nicholas.

This sudden jolt of life is, however, once again buried as the chapter closes and the dinner party comes to an end. The narrator again focuses on Eleanor's consciousness as she attempts to make her way home:

> Sara had already vanished. Eleanor looked at [Nicholas]. Was he angry? Was he unhappy? She did not know. But here a great form loomed up through the darkness. [...] Inside silent people sat huddled up; they looked cadaverous and unreal in the blue light. 'Good night', she said, shaking hands with Nicholas. She looked back and saw him still standing on the pavement. He still held his hat in

his hand. He looked tall, impressive, and solitary standing there alone, while the searchlights wheeled across the sky.

This closing scene is almost an exact repetition of the opening paragraph, so that the "1917" chapter reads like anagram. The joyful spirit of the dinner scene, already tempered by a gloomy introduction, is altogether obliterated by its conclusion. The same cold gloominess persists, and the horrors of the war impose themselves upon Eleanor's consciousness in the form of the omnibus passengers who look "cadaverous" or "unreal" and echo the "glazed eyes" of the opening description. The lugubrious turn her mind has taken is also projected onto the landscape, metamorphosing an omnibus into abstract and threatening shapes. This transformation, which occurs on a cognitive and linguistic level, also shatters the previously celebrated bond between Eleanor and Nicholas's marginal positions in society. For even Nicholas, solitary and illuminated only by the foreboding searchlights, seems to be enshrouded by this gloominess. There is no response to Eleanor's greeting.

Thus, not only is the sequence of the heterosexist story so favored by the Victorians forever destabilized in Woolf's fiction, but any kind of social interaction seems riddled with inconsistencies, oscillating between an ecstatic desire to join the communal circle and the discomforting realization that such complete union is never entirely possible. It is, perhaps, Woolf's too easy acceptance of this irredeemable fissure that incites attacks of exaggerated aloofness, selfishness, and irresponsibility with regards to social matters. Though the next chapter will endeavor to acquit Woolf of such accusations, it is true that her perception of disintegrating social bonds leads her to

construct narrative techniques which, rather than emphasize social cohesion, embody the fragmentation of society.

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Chapter II

Deconstructing the "Strange Dark Bar": The Influence of Formalist Art Criticism on Woolf's Fragmentation of Subjectivity and Narrative Structure.

The fragmentation which Woolf represents in works such as The Years has lead many critics to align her with post-structuralist trends that did not really emerge until well after her death. As Michelle Barrett suggests, this reputation is both supported and refuted by Woolf's work. Barrett argues that Woolf is "a very attractive author to post-structuralist literary critics" because of her systematic destabilization of "unitary and uncontradictory identity" (45). At the same time, Woolf possesses a "strongly mystical streak" that contradicts her tendency towards fragmentation because it presupposes the universal and unquestioned existence of such concepts as "truth" and "freedom" (46). This transcendental inclination is particularly evident in Woolf's involvement with Roger Fry and Clive Bell, two art critics intrigued by the abstract and non-representational nature of Post-Impressionist art. Since mimesis was no longer the fundamental function of art, form replaced subject matter as the object of study for the post-impressionist art critic. Indeed, Fry and Bell coined the term "significant form", which speaks of an artwork's ability to convey meaning through its particular combination of line, shape, and other formal qualities (Vijay Kapur 15). The significant form of a painting may not offer an accurate representation of an object, but the structure of its surface details reveals a "deeper truth". The viewer extracts from it emotional, intellectual, or even political meaning (Kapur 15). The influence exerted on Woolf by these two critics helped shape Woolf's important contributions to the development of a modernist aesthetic whose privileging of form over subject matter is, to this day, critiqued for being socially

irresponsible. In "Modern Fiction", Woolf expresses a distaste for literary realism, and asks that her contemporaries represent a "deeper reality" than that of surface detail. This implied hierarchy of "realities" and the belief that there is an ultimate one do run counter to a post-structuralist tendency against such universalizing assertions. Furthermore, how does Woolf reconcile the avid political engagement she demonstrates in works such as Three Guineas and an "art for art's sake" mentality that ignores the social significance of art and focuses only on its formal qualities? Georg Lukács suggests that such an aesthetic practice gets lost in abstraction and mysticism and cannot engage in effective social criticism. Though this chapter will go on to argue that such a polarization of aesthetic form and politics is culturally constructed and that neither Woolf nor Fry viewed the two as opposites, the question is nonetheless a valid one, for Fry's influence on Woolf does get her tangled up in a net of essentialized and mystified terminology that problematizes the social critique she undertakes elsewhere, as well the impulse towards fragmentation that makes her so appealing to post-structuralist critics.

It is, perhaps, only her attempt at defining her aesthetic strategy that gets Woolf into trouble. Her actual execution of it in her fiction remains true to her impulse towards fragmentation. In breaking the linearity of realist narrative, Woolf fragments a Victorian world view that operated on an unquestioned belief in objective observation of facts. Woolf replaces this concern for surface details with a stream-of-consciousness technique that taps into the deeper truth attained in the visual arts through significant form. It captures a more private and subjective reality. Though such an inward turn does tend towards aloofness and therefore social irresponsibility, for Woolf it represents a deeper way of connecting than the superficialities of "public behavior" that had been so

important to her predecessors. Even the most formalist of her narrative concerns always seek to recreate some pattern that, though abstracted, mimics the rhythm of human life, emotion, and interaction. Again, the metaphor of Jane Austen's dance becomes useful here: Woolf is interested in the management of space and the organization of individuals within it. Like the Post-Impressionist critics who placed a premium on the formal qualities of painting, she shows an interest in the configuration of solid objects in space. Whether these objects are inanimate, or whether they are the bodies of the dancers, they respect certain rules of decorum. Dancers move to the rhythm of the music and the choreography, whereas objects organize themselves on the canvas according to rules of balance. Woolf translates this choreography, rhythm, and balance into a literary structuring principle. In the end, the argument of this chapter will be that her interest in aesthetic form and her desire to radicalize it are inseparable from a commitment to fragmenting the heterosexist ideology that held Victorian society together.

Rose Pargiter's funeral in The Years' first chapter begins to draw the curtain on the Victorian era and calls for an aesthetic that will speak for the new world. For Woolf, this revolution in representation will come most prominently in an exploration of her generation's consciousness. Delia's thoughts, which furtively move from her mother's coffin to the bustling sounds of the city, speak for a nascent generation whose vision and attention find themselves disjointed from the landscape of their predecessors. Her distracted mind echoes a similar disjuncture in her surroundings. Delia is sensitive to the differences between individuals instead of focusing on the unity of this communal event. The ceremony which, in a Victorian context, might have brought some kind of redemptive closure to the trauma of loss can no longer provide such cohesion. Delia's

distracted state of mind signals the disintegration of the unitary subject, which in turn causes a correlative fragmentation of the world and the narrative techniques which represent it.

The earliest critics of Woolf's work recognize the urgency with which she searched for a literary form that would do justice to the rapidly changing and fragmented social climate. In a 1960 analysis of modern novels, for instance, David Daiches confidently states that "[i]n Virginia Woolf more than in any other English novelist the writer of fiction faces squarely the problem of the breakdown of a public sense of significance and its consequences for the novel"(11). Similarly, John Batchelor traces the domino effect of this process of fragmentation that seizes not only the individual consciousness, but spreads to the surrounding world of Woolf's novels. Woolf's observation that "[i]n or about December, 1910, human character changed" (qtd. Batchelor 29) betrays a sense that the individual is a volatile entity easily affected by the flow of history. The actual sequence of cause and effect is difficult to determine: whether a fragmented world permeated individual consciousness and destroyed any sense of stable subjectivity, or whether it was a new mode of perception that projected this fragmentation onto the world, cannot really be ascertained. What matters is that Woolf perceives this flux in both the world and "human character" and attempts to find a literary form suitable to it. Betchelor argues that the Victorian and Edwardian definition of reality as observable fact is no longer viable in such an unstable world. Consequently, the entire relationship between life and art has to be altered. The idea of a stable, observable, and autonomous object existing somewhere "out there" and waiting for the artist to merely reproduce it is revealed to have been a myth from the beginning (Batchelor 33).

Woolf's belief that the stable character ought to be replaced by a more fluid conception of subjectivity is powerfully expressed in A Room of One's Own, which demonstrates the contentious nature of a too authoritative use of the pronoun "I": "It was a strange dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter "I". One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. [...] Back was one always hailed to the letter "I"" (A Room 107-108). Anne Fernald's analysis of this passage points to the "happy accident of English [which] allows Woolf to compare "I" to a great tree" (Fernald 175). By that same accident, the letter "I" acts as an embodiment of the linearity that Woolf is attempting to evade. Mary Seton casts her gaze beyond the tree in order to view the landscape. Similarly, Woolf's attack on this "straight dark bar" which symbolizes the unity of the subject and of that subject's point of view, seeks to capture the fragmentation of the world, which is obfuscated by the presumptuous omniscience and stability of "I" and its linear narrative. Fernald suggests that Woolf deflects attention from the prominence of her own "I" by replacing it with a fictive narrator. This disguise occurs as an unsettling shift or break in the essay, for Woolf begins to speak as herself and has to introduce her replacement a few pages into the essay: "Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Charmichael or by any name you please" (9). Woolf's "I" speaks of the third-person object to whom she will give over the role of first-person subject. This move gestures at replacing the "I" with a third-person pronoun, but in fact what it does is much more destabilizing than that, for even when the narrative switches over to the other voice, this voice still refers to itself as "I". The unsettling multiplicity of "I" is compounded by the fact that Woolf will not settle on a name for her fictive narrator, but allows her audience to chose from a wide array of personalities.

While fragmenting the narrative "I" in such a manner, Woolf also fragments the omniscient tone of linear forms of narrative. This broken "I" mimics a narrative rupture that suits not only a female consciousness, but also a general perception that the stable forms of the past do not represent reality as it is in the present. Thus, Woolf's rejection of a unified subjectivity and the subsequent disruption of narrative forms embody both a feminist and a modernist sensibility.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests that many twentieth-century novels written by women replace the single subjectivity around which earlier novels were constructed with a multivocal "choral protagonist". This divided and multiplied subjectivity is one of the strategies conducive to the rewriting of the heterosexist novel. It destabilizes in a single gesture the world, individual consciousness, and narrative style. The traditional novel, DuPlessis argues, begins with as a "quest plot" which foregrounds the psychological and intellectual development of a single character, whose eventual maturity coincides with the formation of a couple and the proscribed romantic ending. Austen's Emma, for instance, follows this linear development. Though the Miss Woodhouse we encounter at the beginning of the novel has matured into the Mrs. Knightley of the conclusion, this change follows a linear and logical development. The unity of Emma's subjectivity cannot be said to have been affected. Woolf, like many other twentieth-century writers, introduces the group or choral protagonist as a way of diffusing the narrative focus away from a single subjectivity and of extending the realm of emotional tension beyond the restrictive polarity of the romantic couple (DuPlessis 48). This strategy not only displaces the authority of the traditional omniscient narrator but divides and multiplies the subjectivity that controls point of view, so that this literary method also undergoes a process of

fragmentation. This is where Woolf's aesthetic innovation, as abstract as it may be, crosses paths with her political engagement, for it is within this reconfiguration of narrative structure that she opens up a space, like that left empty by Austen's missing dance, for a renegotiation of social structures. Rather than bridging the narrative breach, as Austen does when she ends her novel with Emma's wedding, Woolf reorganizes the fragments of this "broken sequence". Woolf's fragmentation of the "great dark bar" is a correlative to her intuition that the line of representation must be broken in order to truthfully capture the modern world. Just as a "broken" sentence is needed to record female psychology, so will a broken line of representation be called upon to capture the instabilities and constant flux of Woolf's vision.

Woolf's demand that literature loosen its ties to the fixed solidity and superficiality of objective reality calls to mind the aesthetic theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, who commented extensively on Post-Impressionist painting. Vijay Kapur suggests that Woolf recognized and admired the Post-Impressionist sensibility capable of translating "surface description" into the processes of the deepest regions of the mind, or even into the turbulence of social change. These painters demonstrated a willingness to explore configurations of form that were not necessarily direct imitations of natural objects. In order to do justice to this new aesthetic, Fry and Bell developed their theories around the concept of "significant form". The manifestation of significant form occurs when some emotion can be extracted from the painting's "organic complex of expressive elements" (Kapur 15). In such a light, art can be transformed into a powerful medium expressing a reality that lies beneath the "photographic representation" favored by English novels of the past (Kapur 15). Fry and Bell were also enthusiastic about the

tendency in Post-Impressionist works to privilege form over subject matter. Kapur characterizes Woolf's departure from mimetic representation as a "Post-Impressionistic tendency to consider a harmonious combination of lines and colors as communicative of" an invisible reality (Kapur 15). The importance no longer lies in the ability of a work to render a phenomenon faithfully. Rather, a certain effect created by the organization of forms in space, on the canvas, or on the page, contains the "true reality".

Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" is often cited as her most explicit articulation of her interest in Roger Fry's aesthetic theories. This short story is not only devoid of plot, character development, and all other devises of realist and linear narrative, but it literalizes the very act of extracting "significant form" from the surface appearance of an object. A young woman notices a spot on the wall. Though she wonders, initially, what that spot might be, her contemplation of it eventually leads her to a series of seemingly disconnected thoughts about people, literature, and the war. In the middle of the narrative, she wonders again whether she should take a closer look at the spot, and concludes: "I can think sitting still as well as standing up. And what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits [...]" (MW 86). Clearly, apprehension or knowledge that comes from objective observation of facts is not of primary importance here. What matters more than the actual object represented by the mark on the wall is the psychological and intellectual vistas its shape, or the mere fact of its presence, opens up for its viewer. This story, then, is a perfect illustration of Woolf's literary uses of "significant form". Panthea Read Broughton argues that Woolf's relationship to Fry's theories is evident not just in "The Mark on the Wall", but in a series of stories written between 1917 and 1921. They work as a kind of experimental ground

where Woolf can test the literary and linguistic possibilities of Fry's theories on the visual arts (Broughton 38). Woolf is working with Fry's rejection of mimesis because of its purely "literary" method of representation which values art only for its construction of meaning and ethical dilemmas (Broughton 39-40). Fry defended the Post-Impressionists because they evaded such a narrow definition of the relationship between art and the natural world, replacing the "literary" with purely formal concerns (Broughton 40-41). He notes that these literary associations should be purged from art, since the "correspondence between life and art is not at all constant and requires much correction before it can be trusted" (qtd. Broughton 44).

Fry's proposal that the field of aesthetics should seriously reconsider its privileging of the "literary", mimetic, and associative method of representation parallels Woolf's own sense that reality can no longer be captured by the factual and realist modes espoused by her Victorian predecessors. In "Modern Fiction", Woolf expresses a desire to break free from the representational shackles of the past. In their stead, she delineates the aesthetic vision which she believes will capture the true "reality" of a contemporary world. "Materialist" is the epithet she reserves for those writers of the past who hold onto simplistic or outmoded conceptions of reality and its relationship to art. She declares that Edwardians such as Bennett are "concerned not with the spirit but with the body",[1] and therefore end up recording "unimportant things" (Modern Fiction 151). Her invective is aimed at the kind of representation which confines itself to reproducing the objective appearance of things. Woolf wants to reach beyond the surface and seize another kind of

[1] It is interesting to note that Arnold Bennett had written an unfavorable review of Orlando, and that Woolf is somewhat notorious for harboring vindictiveness and jealousy against her fellow artists. Panthea Read Broughton, for instance, suggests that Woolf was initially jealous of Fry's relationship with her sister, and therefore closed to his theories. It is quite a leap to make such a connection

reality. In contrast to the materialists, she praises writers like James Joyce for their "spirituality". She expresses her vision of this new aesthetic in the following manner: "[l]et us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (Modern Fiction 155). The 'atoms' which she describes here are a perfect analogy for the kind of reality which she thinks that fiction ought to capture. Atoms constitute matter, but are somehow more elusive than the concrete manifestation of bodies and objects. Woolf is looking for a method of capturing reality in the state of flux it is in while being constituted, rather than the hard, linear surface of an actual or actualized object. Woolf rejects the solid line which creates a definitive delineation of space and chooses a line that is somehow broken, or that has not yet attained its linearity. She warns that her predecessors, accustomed perhaps to more linear modes of narration, will find this "disconnected" method quite incomprehensible.

John Mepham argues that Woolf's modernism of the 1920s is one influenced by Formalist ideas. She expresses "self-consciousness about the categories and conventions of art", and is interested in "the artificial, conventional nature of the rules by which fiction is constructed (Mepham 91). Like the Formalist critics who examine the relationship between various physical elements of a work of art, Woolf shows an interest in thinking about the process of fiction-making. This self-consciousness makes the reader aware of the constructed nature of narrative. By breaking the art form down and examining its component "atoms", Woolf is disrupting the seamless verisimilitude of

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between this unsavory personality trait, and a serious development in her professional thought. This is especially true given the civil

realist art. While composing Mrs. Dalloway in 1922, Woolf hits upon the "tunneling process"--her particular version of stream-of-consciousness-- as a way to transpose significant form from a visual to a literary medium. As early as 1920, the critic R. Brimley Johnson relates this technique to the rejection of the "old reality", and describes it as a search for "that reality which is behind the material, the things that matter, spiritual things, ultimate truth" (qtd. Minow-Pinkey 1). Stream of consciousness would, therefore, appear to be the perfect outlet for Woolf's rebellion against the Edwardian generation of "materialistic" writers.

However, there is a paradox in Woolf's vision that needs to be examined more carefully. Woolf contradicts herself as she juxtaposes a metaphysical belief in something transcendental and universally true to her vision of a world perpetually in flux. The mystifying tone of the true reality which Woolf is desperately in search of is at odds with a feminist enterprise that seeks to destabilize falsely naturalized concepts such as the subject or, more precisely, the feminine subject. As the definition of a "significant form" capable of capturing this true reality makes clear, a concern for form seems to instigate these metaphysical musings. In addition to Woolf's universalizing and essentializing tendencies, her search for a literary significant form runs counter to a radical critical perspective (such as the feminism she evinces in so much of her work) often suspicious of a privileging of the formal aspects of art. The danger is, perhaps, that such a strategy obfuscates the ideological underpinnings and power mechanisms that structure art. Barrett notes this distaste for aesthetic questions not only in the work of contemporary feminists, but in many forms of radical criticism. Though Barrett does not pretend to do away with

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encounter with Bennett which Woolf narrates in "Am I a Snob?" (211-212).

the problems of attempting to incorporate the abstract nature of aesthetic apprehension with a more "productive" ideological analysis, she at least suggests that it might be worthwhile to take some time in order to open up a space where a discussion of aesthetic value might be possible, even in the midst of the ideological inclinations of current radical criticism. What is interesting and telling for our present purpose is that her argument about aesthetics and culture is accompanied by a reading of Woolf that detects in her work just such a paradox between effective political engagement and detached aesthetic abstraction.

Barrett's conclusion is that, important as it might be to deconstruct a text in order to extract its ideology, a work of art cannot be reduced to its content. It is also composed of elements that exceed this frantic search for a meaning that, once found, can be dissected for the purposes of social and political criticism. For instance, Barrett asks what it is that incites Cezanne to record "in his diary that he feels his eyes bleeding as he looks at what he is painting", or what makes even the most philistine consumers of art claim that their "hair stands on end" when listening to piece of music. What is the source of this visceral and, obviously, non-ideological, response? Barrett suggests that such sensations belong to an "aesthetic mode" of apprehension. The next obvious step might be for Barrett to define the very word "aesthetic". But such a task proves to be impossible. Rather than providing a definitive answer, Barrett rightly restricts her argument to asking a few questions that engender a tentative, yet thought-provoking discussion of the matter. There is, first and foremost, the question of where, physically speaking, this aesthetic quality might be located: is it a faculty or mode of perception belonging to the human brain, or is it an element of the work of art itself? At this point,

the most contentious questions from a relativist and post-structuralist point of view arise. Is the aesthetic composed of universal elements that, regardless of place, time, and ideological context, can be said to constitute a *good* work of art? Is it at all justifiable to claim that a "Rembrandt is better that an Angelica Kaufmann" (Barrett 75), or that, conversely, "the limerick that I compose on the back of my cigarette packet [is] indistinguishable from a Shakespeare play in terms of value" (Barrett 76)?

The terms that Barrett wishes to negotiate in this discussion are similar to the ones that structure Formalist art criticism, as well as Woolf's aesthetic vision. Woolf's assessment of Fry's Vision and Design, a collection of his essays on art, highlights just such an attempt to define this unquantifiable and contentious aesthetic quality. Woolf quotes from one of Fry's letters written in response to praise and/or criticism[2] by the poet Robert Bridges. Woolf is attempting to ascertain from Fry's own pen what it is that he means by the "aesthetic emotion", though she admits that such a question will only yield vague and tentative answers. Fry's letter is, indeed, struggling to define the terminology of his theories:

> I very early became convinced that our emotions before works of art were of many kinds and that we failed as a rule to distinguish the nature of the mixture and I set to work by introspection to discover what the different elements of these compound emotions might be and to try to get at the most constant unchanging and therefore I suppose fundamental emotion. I found that this "constant" had almost always to do with the contemplation of form [...]. I therefore assume that the contemplation of form is a peculiarly important spiritual exercise [...]. My

analyses of form lines, sequences, rhythms, &c. are merely aids for the uninitiated to attain the contemplation of form--they do not *explain* (qtd. Roger Fry 184).

Though not as self-consciously guarded in his definition of the aesthetic feeling as Barrett is in hers, Fry very clearly senses the paradox he is struggling with here. Emotion is the first element that leaps into his minds as he tries (clumsily and yet enthusiastically, as the run-on sentences seem to indicate) to define the terms of his theory on aesthetic appreciation. Yet Fry himself appears to be overwhelmed and perhaps even a little bit embarrassed by the almost illogical vagueness and lavish subjectivity of such a suggestion. He quickly attempts to impose order onto this tangle of affective responses by applying to his aesthetic theory a quasi-scientific process of dissection and classification. But again, as he scrambles to find "the most constant and unchanging" and, therefore, the "most fundamental emotion", he falls pray to metaphysical jargon. This diction reiterates not only the blurring of linear and reasoned argumentation which characterized his initial appeal to emotion, but also a kind of transcendental assumption that there is a hierarchy of emotions. His appeal is sentimental and almost romantic. It presupposes the stable and unified subject that post-structuralist criticism has been at such great pains to deconstruct.

Fry wants to give the vague category of aesthetic feeling a more concrete and logical structure by associating it with the solid presence of form. Jacqueline V. Falkenheim argues that "the process of reacting to external appearances was extremely important to him, but these reactions had to be fitted within an intellectual scaffolding that turns them into a self-contained artistic structure" (Falkenheim 95). Therefore, in

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[2] The originating letter has, according to Woolf, been lost, so that the tone of its engagement with Fry's analysis cannot really be

"Essay on Aesthetics", Fry elaborates a list of criteria which, while formal and objectively present in the space of the canvas, are noteworthy because of their ability to respond to the human need for emotional stimulation. Rhythm of line, for instance, has an affinity to muscular activity, mass appeals to our gravitational orientation, and space on the canvas reproduces "the fundamental relationship we feel between ourselves and everything around us" (Falkenheim 96). Fry's endeavor, then, is to combine a relatively objective study of form and an analysis of human response which often leads him into the pitfalls of mystical or sentimental metaphysics. These two seemingly opposite sides of the art critic's range of concerns are equally easy targets for post-structuralist critiques aimed at artists who evade social concerns by seeking shelter in the purity of aesthetic transcendence.

Woolf's experiments in transposing Fry's theories from the canvas to the page are also structured by this paradox. As Barrett observes, Woolf's inclination to fragment the assumption of a stable subjectivity is often accompanied by a paradoxically mystical and metaphysical thrust. This contradiction is evident in A Room of One's Own which, despite Woolf's materialist feminist approach, also invokes such reified concepts as "integrity" and "truth" in writing (Barrett 45). The greatest paradox of all is that some detractors of modernism accuse both its impulse to fragment reality and its metaphysical tendecies of social irresponsibility. Georg Lukács's memorable argument against the modernist tendency to "personalize" history and its inefficacy in combating social ills is aimed at aspects of the modernist aesthetic that constitute Woolf and Fry's visions. Lukács' main complaint against modernism is that it creates a world completely detached

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determined (RF 184).

from any historical perspective, thus confusing "what is necessarily a subjective experience with reality as such" (51). Though Virginia Woolf does not figure as a focal part of his discussion, he does accord her a parenthetical aside, noting that "(Virginia Woolf is an extreme example of this [modernist aloofness])" (51). Lukács later suggests that modernism achieves this detachment from reality by reducing character to a "shadowy blur", by subsuming its prominence to "rigid and superficial stylization", or by surrendering to "mystical irrationalism" (58-59). Any combination of these criticisms could be applied directly to a Woolfian aesthetic that wages a modernist war against her "materialist predecessors". Her multiplication of the "I" and the subsequent destabilization of subjectivity can certainly result in a "blurring" of character. Likewise, Woolf's submission to "abstraction" and irrationality is the outcome of her dedication to the formalists' "significant form".

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I explain how the inevitably mystical tone of Woolf's interest in the aesthetic qualities of art need not mean an exclusion of political engagement. Woolf's desire to look at and record reality from a different angle provides the kind of refreshing vision necessary for any kind of philosophical or political change. At the very least, it destabilizes any preconceived notions of reality and the natural. These concepts are often hailed as yardsticks of objective analysis, but are themselves ideological constructions. The defenders of Post-Impressionism, as well as Woolf's incorporation of their theories into her literary vision, propose to revolutionize the very conception of reality and its relationship to art. The negotiation of the terms that define reality and its representation suggests that "realism" may not be the natural

companion to political activism and that in fact Lukács's accusations operate on a series of assumptions whose sociohistorical and ideological context he takes for granted.

In the letter that struggles to come to terms with a definition of the aesthetic feeling, Fry seems to be sure of at least one thing: the spiritual nature of the aesthetic apprehension has nothing to do with morality. Conversely, there are "spiritual functions that are not moral" (qtd. Roger Fry 183-184). Such comments might incite a volley of criticisms similar to those lodged by Lukács against the modernists. Indeed, Fry seems to be delving here into an unquantifiable and abstracted notion of the "spiritual" that has nothing much to do with social or interpersonal ethics. Yet Woolf's biography of Fry goes on, almost directly after quoting this letter, to discuss his engagement with various political issues. She describes, first of all, Fry's disgust with the "herd" mentality which has taken possession of Europeans after the Great War. This mentality expresses itself in an insurgence of Nationalism and a "vast mass of emotional unreason" that lead individuals to follow brutish politicians blindly (Roger Fry 186). It is, of course, immensely ironic that Fry should be accusing the masses of irrationalism when his own theories on the aesthetic rely on such mystifying concepts as "the truest emotion" and an undefined concept of spirituality. Woolf seems unaware of the paradox when she states that his "theories multiplied, and with the help of science and the help of psychology he tried to fortify the individual against the herd" (188). We will see shortly how Woolf's apparent lack of concern for this contradiction is, perhaps, due to the fact that her own thought is built on the same paradox. For, now, it might be interesting to examine the possibility that, for Woolf and Fry, it is, perhaps, not quite the paradox it appears to be to the late twentieth-century reader. The science and psychology that Fry is reading at the

time are identified by Woolf as "The Behaviorists" (186). This particular school of thought sought to deal with human psychology in a way similar to Fry's methodology in defining the aesthetic feeling. Just as Fry translated aesthetic emotion into the more concrete phenomena of formal components, the Behaviorists understood human psychology to be an observable, classifiable, and quantifiable set of behaviors.

Barrett's analysis of the very same topic might, because of its chronological distance, appear to us a clearer and more reasoned version of Fry's clumsy attempts at defining the aesthetic. Yet even she maintains that there is an element of the artistic process of creation and apprehension that will forever remain vague, unquantifiable, and lingering in some undefined place between the formal qualities of the work of art and human psychology. Barrett cites the case of art critic Max Raphael as an example of the kind of analysis that takes this aesthetic quality into account. Raphael, born in 1889 (Barrett 77), is a rough contemporary of Fry and Woolf. Raphael's theories of art share Fry's belief that art can be scientifically assessed through an understanding of form. He suggests that the best analysis of a work of art is descriptive, a methodology achieved through a "conceptual reconstitution" of the work by the viewer. The elements to take into consideration are the constitution of the work as a whole, the constitution of its individual forms, and the relationship between all of these elements (80). Raphael, like Fry, uses scientific terms to describe his methodology. He insists that his work is "empirical", and that mathematics will one day aid him in a more precise articulation of his results (Barrett 88). Yet Raphael, Barrett claims, is also prone to "ideological readings rather than formal analysis", such as the idiosyncratic idea that da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* "embodies an idealistic conception of Reason in sensory

qualities, which are most fully expressed in the shoulder line" (qtd. Barrett 88). Such comments lead him to interpretive observations "entirely devoid of qualitative justification let alone scientifically validated" (Barrett 88). Barrett acknowledges that Raphael's theories may seem "innocent" to us. His blindness to the fact that his definitions of beauty and aesthetic value are ideological constructions and not a given certainly prevents us from taking him as seriously as we otherwise might. That, however, is no reason to deny the usefulness of Raphael's theories, which offer an interesting perspective on "the way in which meaning is connected on the one hand to aesthetic form, and on the other to the senses" (Barrett 92).

This relationship between the work of art, its form, and the senses of the observer, is precisely what Fry, too, is trying to understand. Woolf shares this interest when she develops the tunneling process that will capture a more mystical reality than that perceived by the objective senses. And without the hindsight and post-structuralist savvy available to a critic such as Barrett, Woolf and Fry deem it a perfectly reasonable enterprise to arrive at a definition of the aesthetic through a quasi-scientific methodology. Despite the falsity with which much of Fry's work resonates to late twentieth-century readers, he nonetheless opens up a space where theories of art can be discussed. He creates an experimental ground that Woolf's own work will have much in common with. The similarities between Fry and Woolf do not stop at merely formal concerns. Fry continues the letter from which the above citations were taken: "Indeed I should be inclined to deny to morals (proper) any spiritual quality--they are rather the mechanism of life--the rules by which life in groups can be rendered tolerable [...] there are spiritual functions that are not moral" (Roger Fry 184). Here, then, is the reason for Fry's rejection

of "morals": they do not express any kind of true emotion, but merely help to oil the mechanism of social interaction and perhaps even incite the "herd mentality" he finds so intolerable. Such a careful consideration of the workings of social behavior and the fussy distinction between true spirituality and the ceremonious ritual or "herd mentality" of morals, is reminiscent of Woolf's own thoughts on the matter. Her analysis of her relationship with Lady Colefax reveals a sensitivity just as finely tuned as Fry's to the distinction between superficial interaction and a more genuine sense of interpersonal bonds.

The final section of this chapter will explore the ways in which Woolf incorporates elements from Fry's aesthetic theory to get at the "new reality" of human interaction and to thus refute Lukács's argument that her modernist aesthetic is devoid of sociological significance. Woolf's understanding of what constitutes reality, and her reconfiguration of the relationship between reality and art, parallels her desire to understand and, dissatisfied with the status-quo, reconfigure social structures. Indeed, the flippancy with which "The Mark on the Wall" disregards the representational quality of a random spot on the wall and the intensity with which the character allows this shape to ignite memories and philosophical musings, is reminiscent of Austen's tactic in replacing the actual occurrence of a dance with an intellectual and abstracted contemplation of the various ways in which bodies might fill the space of the room. Just as Woolf had very carefully studied the minutia of public behavior, she is interested in the details and intricacies of the patterns according to which fiction is built. Despite socialist claims to the contrary, the two--social and artistic form--are never mutually exclusive, but, rather, inextricably dependent upon one another.

In fact, some aspects of Woolf's modernist style allow her to elaborate an aesthetic capable of expressing not only a generational dissatisfaction with her Victorian and Edwardian predecessors, but also an engagement with feminist issues. Minow-Pinkney notes that the stream-of-consciousness technique is, at least at its inception, a feminine mode of narration. Johnson's 1920 discussion of the term occurs in an article that traces it as a distinctly "feminine trend" (Minow-Pinkney 1). As a phrase, "stream of consciousness" is used for the first time in a literary context by May Sinclair in an essay on Dorothy Richardson (Minow-Pinkney 1). Thus, Minow-Pinkney argues, Woolf's challenge is against a generation of writers, but also against a too masculine view of reality (5). Woolf's destabilization of the "I" and of subjectivity enacts a generational, as well as a gendered rebellion. Indeed, the happy accident of the English language noted by Fernald also allows us to view the "I" as phallic. Such a reading is, perhaps, the most simplistic and literal of them all, but it is justifiable given the context in which Woolf's rejection of "I" occurs. A Room records its narrator's frustrating library search, which turns up either complete silence on the topic "women and fiction" or gross misrepresentations of women by men who speak with uncurbed authority. The fragmented and multiplied "I", rather than reducing character to a "shadowy blur", questions the stability of an authoritative voice that has been so detrimental to the representation of women. Furthermore, as we saw in DuPlessis' analysis of the choral protagonist, this rejection of a too authoritatively unified subjectivity parallels a restructuring of narrative forms that write "beyond the ending" of nineteenth-century heterosexist novels. Thus, Minow-Pinkney is right to say that "[f]or Woolf, the feminist

and modernist aesthetics converge, at least initially, in this attempt to challenge phallocentrism." (5)

The introduction to Unmanning Modernism reveals a critical tradition that constructs a modernism bifurcated along lines of gender[3]. On the one hand, mainstream modernism is identified as an elitist and masculine aesthetic that sought to create "high art" as a defense against the rise of a feminized mass culture (Harrison and Peterson ix). This faction of modernism was constituted by male writers who experimented with style, but ignored the political and ideological connotations nascent in even the most abstract of forms. On the other hand, Harrison and Peterson detect a "feminine" modernism whose domestic and sentimental tone, epitomized by Dorothy Richardson's stream of consciousness, New Critics such as TS Eliot saw as obscene (x). The accusations against modernism, therefore, take issue with a style that is at once too feminine--an emotional or psychological abandon with no context or structuring principle-- and too masculine -- too vigorously concerned with a rigorous control of style, without much attention paid to content or underpinning ideology. Both of these complaints against modernism structure Woolf's development of the "tunneling process". Like Fry who tried to justify "emotion" by fitting it into formal structure and physical shapes, Woolf uses her formal concerns to shape her more metaphysical musings on the fluid and unquantifiable contents of consciousness.

The meeting place of the "masculine" (formal) and "feminine" (socio-psychological) sides of modernism is clearly illustrated in Mrs. Dalloway. Genevieve

[3] Recent titles such as Unmanning Modernism and Erin G. Carleston's Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity certainly suggest that these preconceptions about modernism are beeing rectified, and that women, too, are recognized for having contributed to the aesthetic innovations of high modernism.

Sanchez Morgan argues that Clarissa as a hostess figure becomes, for Woolf, a trope for the female artist. The hostess' ability to arrange people in interesting ways parallels the quest of the artist to arrange forms on the canvas or on the page, and thus unites mainstream and domestic modernism (Morgan 90-91). Mrs. Dalloway strikes a balance between the "details of the domestic realm" on the one hand, and the "rigors of a modernist aesthetic" on the other (Morgan 96-97). Morgan's conflation of the hostess and the artist figures also shows that formal considerations and an engagement with social matters are not, as some critics might suggest, mutually exclusive. In a world where surface appearances and "public behavior" can no longer be trusted, relationships simply happen on a different plane, becoming, for Woolf, an expression of "significant form".

Woolf's "tunneling process", articulated in conjunction with the composition of Mrs. Dalloway, does fragment consciousness and reality in the way demonstrated through Delia Pargiter's wandering mind. Woolf uses this method as way to "tell the past by installments" (qtd Mepham 95). The tunneling process thus turns consciousness inward, and shatters the unity of the present moment with memories which subsequently transform the actual landscape. The fragmentation that seizes the individual consciousness has a rippling effect and extends to the surrounding world. The tunnel opened up by this method does have a disjunctive effect as it separates the individual from his/her actual surroundings and as it fragments a stable conception of time and place.

However, this tunneling process, as can be witnessed in "The Mark on the Wall", often happens through a process of association. It is through the contemplation of or chance encounter with an actual object in space or event in time that these musings are

triggered. Richard Dalloway, feeling apathetic and lethargic one moment as he watches his friend discuss the price of a necklace with a jeweler, all of a sudden seizes upon a memory of having given Clarissa a bracelet: "She never wore it. It pained him to remember that she never wore it. And as a single spider's thread after wavering here and there attaches itself to the point of a leaf, so Richard's mind, recovering from its lethargy, set now on his wife, Clarissa" (230). Though Richard's attention seems to be completely detached from the present situation, his mind weaves a circuitous path from the present to the past, and, finally, to an attachment that seems to transcend time all together. The context of buying jewelry reminds him of the bracelet he had once bought Clarissa. The deep and painful emotion that this memory stirs in him leads Woolf to an elegant description of his relationship with Clarissa. In A Room, Woolf describes the intricate structure of fiction by comparing it to a spider's web[4]. Both fiction and relationships are complex and fragile structures. Spun from some invisible internal source, they are more genuine than the "public behavior" of social mores, and more representative of the true reality than any "materialist" rendering. Furthermore, the spider's web has all the beauty of the most carefully executed work of art, but is non-representational. Woolf abstracts from its network-like structure Mr. Dalloway's memories and his thoughts on his interpersonal relationships. The tunneling process releases a flood of feelings and thoughts in the same way that significant form reveals the psychological or deep meaning of a work of art.

Perhaps most interesting of all in Woolf's attempts at finding a formal expression for her understanding of social and interpersonal communication is her configuration of

[4] The next chapter will explore Woolf's use of this analogy in describing fiction.

the relationship between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith. Even more so than the thin threads of consciousness that connect Richard to his wife, the attachment between Clarissa and Septimus is abstracted, intangible, and contingent upon the formal design of the work. In a diary entry of 1922, Woolf states that she wants to juxtapose Clarissa's sane perception of the truth to Septimus' insane perception of it. She goes on to say that "[t]he pace is to be given by the gradual increase of S's insanity on the one side; by the approach of the party on the other" (qt Mepham 94). Since Clarissa and Septimus never actually meet, it would seem that their interaction occurs only within this formal juxtaposition. It is almost as if Woolf is trying to negotiate the spatial arrangement of two objects on the Post-Impressionist canvas, rather than the relationship between two human characters in a literary novel. This technique seems rather cold and detached and might even justify Lukács's accusation that Woolf presents "an extreme example" of modernist aloofness.

However, Woolf is trying, once again, to shift her angle of perception. She wants to convey a configuration of human interaction leaden with "significant form". This means not only that she will consider form before content, but that the configuration of the form will lead to a contemplation of a "deeper truth" than that conveyed by observable reality. DuPlessis' reading of this unconventional relationship sheds some light on the ways in which Woolf uses the juxtaposition of Clarissa and Septimus to construct a "significant form". Clarissa, the Tory hostess, and her unlikely double, the shell-shocked and working class war veteran Septimus, are cited by DuPlessis as a further example of the kind of relationship which is not based on economic and heterosexist models of social organization. Not only does their connection shift the narrative focus

and emotional center of the novel away from the traditional romantic couple, but the fact that they never meet acts as a further destabilization of traditional social forms (DuPlessis 57). They are connected through the "tunneling process" that seeks an inner, rather than a superficial or "public alliance" between individuals. This connection is rendered not through ritualized social forms, but through a "tunnel or cave *behind* the surface of manners on which they may never meet or talk seriously" (DuPlessis 60 my italics). Indeed, Woolf herself suggests that these caves, despite the fact that they turn individual consciousness inward and away from social surroundings, "shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment" (qtd. Mepham 94). In contrast to this genuine, though somewhat abstract and impalpable sense of connection, a "materialist" or realistic representation of the convergence of these two characters through some kind of actual, physical interaction, is grossly inadequate.

Despite the fact that Woolf's search for the deeper reality will always be permeated with a discomforting metaphysical tone, her search for a network of connection deeper and more genuine than that of formalized interaction does, as DuPlessis suggests, have much redeeming potential. The rhythm through which Clarissa and Septimus are joined (the rising intensity of her party and the increased cacophony of his insanity) reaches a crescendo at Clarissa's party, when she hears of Septimus' suicide. When she finds a moment of solitude, Clarissa ponders:

> He had killed himself--but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed; her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him,

> blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud, in his brain, and then a suffocation of darkness (276).

Clarissa's reconstitution of the fall is so powerful that she can physically feel the violence of an event she has not experienced. Batchelor argues that this knowledge is mystical and intuitive, and that some ethereal connection is produced between the two strangers. Septimus communicates with Clarissa, "whose own sensory apparatus seems, perhaps, to become abnormally acute" (Batchelor 90). Clarissa's sense-perception is heightened the very process that also destabilizes the unity of her subjectivity. The tunneling process allows her to meet and tap into a reality that is not hers. The fragmented and multiplied self she has created by incorporating into her present state memories of her past self opens her up to the incorporation of still more subjectivities. Empathy slips into the fissures produced by Woolf's disjunctive narrative practice.

The title of the novel, foregrounding as it does a single character, gestures at the "portraiture" effect achieved in Jane Austen's Emma. However, the stable and unified subjectivity necessary for such an endeavor is impossible in Woolf's world. Batchelor's perception that, for Woolf, "character is dissipated into shreds" (79) suggests the modern impossibility of framing subjectivity within the stable and defining perimeters of portraiture. Indeed, Woolf's title is misleading, for Clarissa's is not the predominant consciousness of the narrative. She shares the stage with other characters such as her husband, her daughter, and her ex-lover Peter Walsh, who also create tunnels for the reader to follow. Thus, Mrs. Dalloway makes use of the choral protagonist which DuPlessis associates with a fragmentation of narrative voice, social codes, and individual subjectivity. When Clarissa goes so far as to incorporate Septimus's experience into her

own consciousness and even into her own body, the fragmentation of the stable and unitary subject is complete. The "tunneling process" that is Woolf's literary appropriation of "significant form" does not necessarily lead her characters to an aloof detachment from social responsibility. Rather, Woolf's modernist aesthetic corresponds to a political tactic that seeks to destabilize the "I" that stands for an authoritarian phallocentrism and an Edwardian narrative style too obsessed with linear representation.

The next chapter will examine in more detail the ambivalent stance of recent criticism towards Woolf's feminism. As Minow-Pinkney suggests, Woolf's feminism is linked to a modernist aesthetic whose allegiances are divided between a too transcendental and escapist contemplation of form, and a post-structuralist tendency to question the stability of identity and narrative forms. Thus, Woolf's feminism is problematic because it is structured by the same contradictions that belie her modernist aesthetic.

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Chapter III

Reflecting Woolf: Contemporary Feminist Reflections on Virginia Woolf

It is a commonplace to say that Virginia Woolf's writings anticipate many of contemporary feminism's most trenchant debates. Woolf's investigation of the material conditions most propitious to the formation of the writer certainly point to a correlation between bodily nourishment and the intellectual liberty necessary for artistic creation. Recent readings of Woolf, such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis's Writing Beyond the Ending, and Karen Kaivola's All Contraries Confounded: The Lyrical Fiction of Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, and Marguerite Duras follow a popular trend in contemporary feminist criticism. Influenced by writers such as Hélène Cixous who argues for the development of an écriture féminine, and Kristeva who urges the destabilization of the symbolic order through a reintroduction of semiotic and maternal drives, DuPlessis and Kaivola argue that Woolf's work embodies a revolutionary potential that is psychosexually determined. These critics conflate Woolf's rather Marxist emphasis on material conditions with the correlation between text and body put forth by Kristeva and Cixous. Woolf does conclude, through her insightful reading of Charlotte Brontë and her elaborate creation of Judith Shakespeare, that the material deprivation and social condemnation suffered by women has affected their writing, so that their sentence embodies something feminine. Yet DuPlessis's and Kaivola's too easy celebration of this "broken", feminine sentence does not do justice to the entirety of Woolf's thought. Indeed, A Room's derision of Brontë's awkward prose and its conclusion that the androgynous mind, unencumbered by the brusque facts of gender is the one most amenable to aesthetic integrity, poses some

problems for contemporary feminists. Woolf's suggestion that gender should all but be excised from the equation runs counter to Kaivola and DuPlessis's insistence on gender specificity and their celebration of a narrative style that embodies the marginal position of women. Kaivola and DuPlessis suggest that the "broken" or "lyrical" sentence so prominent in Woolf's writing and the reshuffling of syntax that it implies mimics and perhaps even effects a parallel repositioning of societal roles. How is one, then, to reconcile the contradiction between this appropriation of Woolf for the revolutionary ends of feminist critics, and Woolf's own distaste for the very "broken" sentence these critics use as their primary weapon? What's more, how can one explain the coexistence of these two contradictory factors within Woolf's own body of work? It will be my contention that critics who see these two factors as mutually exclusive also misread Woolf. They question Woolf's feminisim and take a stance that is almost oppositional to that advocated by Kaivola and DuPlessis. Yet both factions tend not to place enough emphasis on the fact that Woolf works in the world of fiction, a medium not very amenable to the unified outlook necessary for political debate. A look at Anne Fernald's insightful commentary in "Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, and the Essay", will, rather than explain away the contradiction, show the inevitability of its presence. Fernald argues that it is the very nature of the essay to test out various hypotheses as a way of answering a question. This refusal to settle for the one authoritative solution is, indeed, quite useful for a feminist critique often aimed at a patriarchal structure which insists upon a logic of linear progression towards one true meaning, or one true apex of power. Gilbert and Gubar read androgyny in Orlando as a playful acceptance of ambiguity in both the body and the text. This indeterminacy is refreshing and goes a long way towards

demonstrating that neither politics nor aesthetics ever ceases to be important for Woolf, even though her thoughts on the relationship between the two are sometimes inconsistent.

The probing questions which A Room of One's Own raises about the material conditions most conducive to artistic development betray a preoccupation with the relationship between the artist and the world. How is the artist, in that moment of creation, interacting with the surrounding environment? Even when the relationship between life and art is not a strictly mimetic one and even when an art movement's driving force is to flout the limiting conventions of such a one-to-one correlation, the artist who needs to eat and who is therefore very much dependent upon the material world, must be contended with. Though it would be preposterous to distill the entire history of art criticism into a "conclusion" about --or even a "synopsis" of-- this relationship between art and life, it is somewhat more manageable to attempt an understanding of Woolf's position on the matter. Such questions of aesthetic practice, though not always exclusive to the complications specific to the female artist, launch the feminist argument of A Room of One's Own:

> What were the conditions in which women lived? I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that it is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible. [...] But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in. (47)

It is somewhat paradoxical that the woman known in the annals of literary criticism as the "neurasthenic nymph" (Janis M. Paul 3) who could not deal with the concreteness of the real world and therefore escaped into the abstract structures of her modernist fiction, should also be remembered as a feminist who argued urgently for the improvement of material conditions for women. Yet the discrepancies that riddle Woolf's reputation are, perhaps, well merited, for her work often deploys paradox after paradox. The beautifully delicate and fragile quality of the spider's web illustrates for Woolf both the ethereal, quasi-transcendent quality of fiction, and its susceptibility to intrusions from the outside. A work of prose makes its appearance on the page as a mysterious network of threads. Its light and translucent nature imbues it with an ethereality that allows it to hover somewhere above the mundane and concrete world. This fragility, however, also renders fiction susceptible to the brusque intrusions from the very material world it proposes to transcend. If fiction is, indeed, comparable to a spider's web, its substance is delicate to the point of being flimsy. Any tear in the web is a manifestation of fiction's vulnerability to intrusion from the outside world. This compound of characteristics also structures the argument of A Room as a whole. On the one hand, Woolf pleads for the integrity and transcendence of art. On the other hand, she devises a sentence that shows the marks inflicted by women's adverse material conditions. Woolf's detractors tend to focus on her transcendental tendencies, claiming that they help her evade social responsibilities (Showalter in Moi 2-3) . The faction of feminist critics such as DuPlessis and Kaivola, however, tend to create to a connection between the body and the sentence that is sometimes too forceful.

This image of the torn web inaugurates Woolf's elaboration of a social critique which leads her to conclude that women writers, living as they must in the clutches of repression, produce writing that is in one way or another skewed and torn. The rhythm of the syntax responds to and bends under the restrictive intrusions from a misogynist reality. These disruptions imprint themselves upon and shape the sentence. It is impossible for Woolf to isolate the artistic mind--and especially the female artistic mind--within a cocoon of ethereality. Woolf launches into an account of the diurnal context, or the "material conditions", that surround the development of her argument. As Anne Fernald astutely points out, this anecdote helps Woolf flesh out her topic and is not a merely incidental autobiographical reference. Indeed, the river by which she sits in order to think becomes an intricate analogy for the creative mind whose interaction with material conditions she strives to delineate throughout her essay. She therefore takes great pains in describing it: "The river reflected whatever it chose of sky and bridge and burning tree, and when the undergraduate had oared his boat through the reflections they closed again, completely, as if he had never been." (9)

The water's reflective property punningly mimics the work performed in the kind of contemplation Woolf claims to have undertaken during the fleshing out of her argument. Through this metaphor, Woolf depicts a mind which, possessing the water's mirror-like quality, is intensely receptive to the outside world. This fierce sensitivity allows for the creation of a tableau that seems to be a placid replica of the outside world. At the same time, and almost paradoxically, this state of acute receptivity also renders the mind susceptible to the kind of schism performed upon the heretofore-placid water by the passing boat. Woolf reassures us that this schism is immediately repaired and the surface

returned to its placid integrity. The sentence, however, trails to an end that destabilizes the certainty of this reparation. The phrase "as though it had never been" is almost melancholy in tone. It pronounces and therefore raises the specter of an intrusion only to suggest the tenuous nature of its existence. Yet Woolf will go on to argue that no impression from the material world can disappear without a trace and that anything passing through the mind can potentially leave an indelible mark.[5] The analogy offers an understanding of the mind as intensely sensitive to external stimuli, but also as precariously fragile. It is precisely these characteristics that constitute the artist in the process of creation

The argument of A Room seems to be that hypersensitivity to exterior conditions, as well the fragility that follows, are of special significance to the female artist. Material conditions are, for women, absent in the form of resources, and overabundant in the form of restrictions. Later in the essay, Woolf suggests that, difficult as it may be for a man to wrench a work of genius from his mind "whole and entire", the task is much more difficult for a woman. This discrepancy is true not only because it is much more unlikely that she will have a room and money of her own, but also because of social censure that works to reinforce stereotyped gender assignation: "The world said with a guffaw: Write? What's the good of your writing?" (58-59). The correlation between a hostile and misogynist culture and the resultant violence rendered on the female mind is powerfully evoked by the conclusion of the narrator's meditative retreat by the river. Excited at finally having caught something at the end of the line she has cast in the waters of thought, Mary Beton can no longer sit still, and, in her state of agitation, crosses the

[5] The fact that a male undergraduate oars his boat across the placid waters of Woolf's mind is, as we shall see later, of no small

exclusive turf reserved for the Fellows and Scholars of the university. When the beadle comes out to reprimand her, her thought disappears, and she bemoans the fact that "in protection of their turf, which has been rolled for 300 years in succession they had sent my little fish into hiding" (10). The beadle enacts upon Woolf's reflective mind the same kind of rupture the undergraduate's boat had inflicted on the surface of the water. In both cases, "reflection" is not only interrupted but skewed so that it can no longer reproduce an exact representation of the outside world. Thus, Woolf sustains the analogy between water and the mind to show that what disappears without a trace ("as though it had never been"), carries with it not only the sad nostalgia of irrecoverable loss, but also a rent in place of what is violently torn away.

The spectral existence of this mark and its implications for feminist scholarship are evident in A Room's invocation of Judith Shakespeare. Minow-Pinkney suggests that Woolf must rely on fiction when she mounts a defense of women's writing, for she understands that facts are the sole property of men (6). In fact, it is during the course of Mary Beton's library research on the topic "women and fiction" when she comes across not only gaping wholes in the place of female writers, but also violent appropriations and gross representations of feminine identity by men, that the fictive bardess makes her appearance: "Let me imagine, since the facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say." (52) Despite Woolf's attempts at reclaiming for women a place in literary history, she cannot sustain her optimism. The violent death that Judith Shakespeare suffers extends Woolf's theoretical propositions regarding the fate of the female artist to a literal level. Incapable

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significance for the development of Woolf's anecdote.

of finding work in the London theaters, Judith Shakespeare demonstrates just how violently women are excised from a patriarchally constructed literary field. When Nick Green, an actor-manager, takes pity on her, it is not to introduce her to the world of drama. Rather, the "help" he offers merely perpetuates the misogynist paradigm that affixes only sexual value on women. Judith Shakespeare is left pregnant, and commits suicide. Her end enacts the fate that awaits the female artist in general: vulnerability resulting from her female body, social stigmatization, obscurity, and, finally, self-inflicted erasure.

Woolf's acknowledgment that material conditions leave concrete scars on human as well as textual bodies is reinforced as she dwells quite elaborately on the juxtaposition of the pauper's luncheon proffered at the women's college and the copious dinner served at the men's college. Michelle Barrett observes that the discrepancy is perhaps an exaggeration on Woolf's part (45). Nevertheless, this overstatement serves Woolf's essay well. It provides her with vivid imagery through which to literalize and therefore increase the impact of her point that material conditions do leave their mark on the artistic psyche. It is, perhaps, somewhat facetious to say that Woolf's point here is the commonplace dictum that "you are what you eat". But in one sense, this is precisely what Woolf is trying to argue here. Not only is her description of the meals a literalization of her materialist approach to feminist critique, but it acts as a sort of corporal manifestation as well. By concentrating on the food that sustains the body, Woolf foregrounds the body as an integral component of the artistic process. And since the body is the primary (or, at least, most obvious) site of gendered inscription, Woolf's "broken sentence" mimics the starved female body. Thus, a definite relationship between the body and the text can be

traced in Woolf's argument. More precisely, a correlation emerges between gender and text, one based solidly on "money and food and the houses we live in".

Often, Woolf suggests that the broken sentence is a handicap rather than the revolutionary aesthetic contemporary critics credit it for. Mary Beton concludes that "it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered, by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her mind and sanity to a certainty." (56) Having described how the female mind, as well as the female body, is torn and skewed under the pressure of misogynist material conditions, Woolf shows how the female sentence follows suite. It is at this point that A Room elaborates a conception of the "broken sentence". This fragmented syntactical organization mimics the "thwarting and hindering" that a woman's body and mind are insidiously subjected to. Much like Judith Shakespeare's violated and maimed body, much like the female artist's divided and insane mind, this sentence enacts violence and division. It bears the scar of all that which, for women, has been excised by patriarchy. The words arrange themselves on the page according to a pattern that is continually disrupted, and the sentence follows a choreography marked by the breaks affected by the intrusion of material conditions. In her analyses of social conventions, Woolf found that she had to reinvent the choreography of Austen's dance. The "broken sentence" is the formal embodiment of this social reconfiguration. Its warped procession across the page declares that nothing can be made to disappear smoothly. The surface of the mind cannot close again, after it has been rent asunder by a rude intrusion from the outside, in order to restore itself to the ideal state of quiescent reflection.

Are the narratives that emerge out of such reduced material conditions to be celebrated as a uniquely feminine aesthetic? Woolf herself seems slightly uneasy with her discovery that her female predecessors "broke" the narrative and aesthetic integrity that was so precious to her. Despite Woolf's many apprehensions about this intruded-upon syntax, her efforts to show the traces of gender on the text have been hailed by contemporary critics as the elaboration of a new and powerful aesthetic that will fit, at long last, the needs of women. The next part of this chapter will endeavor to trace the history of this appropriation (at times, one might be tempted to say misappropriation) of A Room's argument by feminist critics of the last two decades. It will be my contention that these contemporary texts become the juncture at which Woolf's arguments about women and fiction meet (a bit forcefully at times) French feminists who articulate theories of an écriture féminine. DuPlessis' Writing Beyond the Ending and Kaivola's All Contraries Confounded, for instance, incorporate into their readings of Woolf psychoanalytic and Lacanian paradigms such as the Oedipal complex that are also at the crux of arguments made by theorists such as Cixous and Kristeva. Since DuPlessis and Kaivola make such a link between Woolf and these French feminists, it might be interesting for our purposes to take a closer look at what they have to say. Furthermore, the arguments made by some feminists such as Judith Butler against Kristeva will help me argue that it is somewhat problematic to read Woolf through her.

There is no denying that many of the points brought up by Helene Cixous in the "Laugh of the Medusa", a seminal text for French feminism, parallel some of the concerns Woolf expresses in her own essay. Cixous opens her article with an injunction for women to find their place in writing, "from which they have been driven away as

violently as from their bodies [...] Woman must put herself into the text--as into the world and into history--by her own movement" (875). Here, Cixous not only echoes Woolf's frustrations at the exclusion of women from literary history, but also begins a discussion of the relationship between the body and the text that raises so many questions for Woolf. In Cixous' work, this correlation between body and text is based on the idea that writing is somehow driven by sexual desire. Since the libido of women differs from that of men, their texts must be marked by this gender specificity:

> Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals [...] Her libido is cosmic [...] Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours (889).

The ease with which Cixous slips from talking about the multiplicity of the female body to articulating the presence of a similar multiplicity in the female text, suggests that the two move in sync with one another. Much more forcefully than Woolf, Cixous argues here for an acknowledgment of the fact that bodily functions, needs, and desires imprint themselves upon the text[6].

Cixous's emphasis on libido parallels some of the pronunciations another French theorist, Julia Kristeva, makes in her articulation of a "poetic language". This new and revolutionary discourse is to overturn the too rigid structures of the symbolic order,

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[5] Woolf's allusions to the female body revolove around her Marxist materialist concerns for the effects of material conditions on the creative mind, and not around the psychosexual paradigms explored by Cixous and Kristeva. We will see below how contemporary feminists perform a too hasty collapse of the two positions.

[6] The nature of the originating letter has, according to Woolf, been lost, so that the tone of its engagement with Fry's analysis cannot really be determined (RF 184).

infusing the linear logic of its language with the more primitive, semiotic drives. To call Kristeva a feminist is a much debated issue, for she rarely speaks of female artists. Nonetheless, her theory is suffused with questions of gender, and seems to call for a kind of feminization of art. The psychoanalytic opposition between a mother aligned with the emotive or bodily, and a father aligned with logic and signification, forms the vital nucleus of Kristeva's argument. Quite in line with psychoanalytic thought, Kristeva suggests that the acquisition of language, the primary mode of acculturation, relies on the Oedipal rejection of the mother in favor of the father. This transfer of allegiances entails, at the same time, a suppression of the instinctual drives associated with the maternal body to which the acculturated infant had been attached. Under the term "poetic language", Julia Kristeva develops the notion of a language that breaks away from the symbolic that structures social discourse. Poetic language does not altogether obliterate the symbolic, for it operates within meaning and still strives for communication. However, this semiotic discourse cannot be reduced to the single function of signification. Kristeva offers the pre-phonemic rhythms and intonations that accompany the infant's speech (which are reiterated in psychosis) as examples of the ways in which a poetic language which takes into account the semiotic drives exceeds the linear, signifying mandate of the symbolic (132-133). The "unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language" retrieves these semiotic drives. By returning to the maternal body, the revolutionary subject violates the incest taboo and therefore frustrates the signifying economy set up by the symbolic order (136).

The maintenance of social order hinges upon the taboo against incest, and therefore insists on the suppression of a semiotic mode which intimates a too close

attachment to the maternal body. Furthermore, it becomes quite evident at this point that this insistence on what reveals itself to be a very heterosexist social order is corollary to the kind of symbolic logic that permeates language. By viewing language as mere signification, that is, by construing it as a mere one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified from which a more or less unified, unitary, and integral meaning can be obtained, the symbolic order rejects the ambivalence of alternatives. Poetic language, by contrast, effects a fissure that destabilizes the linearity of the symbolic. The semiotic drives, seen as excessive and dangerous elements of dissent against the law of the father, are given permission to suffuse language. Poetic language then becomes a tool through which a critique of the social order can take place. This overview of Kristeva highlights the ways in which Woolf's own arguments might be construed to run along similar lines of thinking. Woolf would no doubt agree with Cixous and Kristeva that the destabilization of language can bring about a revolution in the gendered polarity or any other hierarchy founded on the logic of the symbolic order that structures society. However, it is important to note that the psychoanalytic or Lacanian basis for the thought of these French critics was never explicitly acknowledged by Woolf. Furthermore, it is important to examine the limitations of Kristeva's and Cixous' theories before accepting them too hastily (as DuPlessis and Kaivola do) into the fold of feminist criticism.

Refreshing as Kristeva's visionary writings are, they cannot be accepted unproblematically. In a post-structuralist feminist environment that has gone to great pains to demonstrate the insidious dangers of taking the construction of identity and especially of gendered identity for granted, Kristeva and Cixous's writings are riddled with essentialism. Judith Butler mounts an interesting argument against the liberatory

quality Kristeva assigns to the semiotic drives that constitute poetic language. Butler begins by taking issue with Kristeva's too easy acceptance of Lacan and the narrative of the Oedipal crisis, which has been identified as the primary locus for the acquisition of restrictive gender specificity. Butler argues that because Kristeva can never fully dislodge her poetic language from the clutches of the symbolic, a true discourse of emancipation is impossible (Butler 86). The subversion is only temporary, and must ultimately submit again to that against which it had tried to rebel.

In a recent study entitled Poetic Language and the Maternal Body, Michelle Boulous Walker illuminates some problems in Krsiteva's use of the female body that echo the concerns I have raised regarding Woolf's negotiation of art and material circumstances. It is first of all disturbing, Walker argues, that Kristeva concentrates so exclusively on male artists as bearers of the avant-garde that is an expression of poetic language. On a more analytical level, Walker claims that this dependence of poetic language on the maternal body is an appropriation, or even a misappropriation, that silences the female voice. She begins her critique by asking the following incisive question: "What does the maternal represent, and in so doing, what does it fail to represent" for Kristeva? (Walker 116). Walker goes on to suggest that the artist, in an act of filial transgression against the symbolic, establishes a metaphorical correspondence between the maternal body and the marginal discourse he is entering through his use of poetic language. This inscription of the maternal by the male artist, Walker claims, is an appropriation of and a speaking for the mother, who is reduced to the insubstantiality of an imaginary body (118). Walker's critique here is that Kristeva follows Lacanian theory a little too closely for feminist comfort. What, she asks, does this metaphorical use of the

maternal have to do with real, concrete women? (125) What is at stake in both Kristeva's elaboration of a poetic language that will revive the repressed maternal body by infusing the symbolic with semiotic drives and in Butler and Walker's critiques of such a theory, are the knotty negotiations between the body and the formation of artistic structure. The interface between materiality and aesthetics is also, as we have seen, the driving force behind Woolf's argument in A Room of One's Own. It is at this juncture of body and text that critics such as DuPlessis and Kaivola appropriate Woolf for a feminist vision built in the wake of theorists such as Kristeva and Cixous. However, they tend to misinterpret her materialist view of the body and its needs, reading it as the psychosexual matrix from which a feminine aesthetic will emerge. This collapse of two divergent theories is, perhaps, not all together unwarranted, but it is problematic in that the feminism that motivates DuPlessis and Kaivola stops short of questioning the heterosexist leanings of Kristeva and Cixous.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis' Writing Beyond the Ending is a meeting ground for Woolf's text of 1929 and the debates that have ignited feminist thought for the last few decades. DuPlessis' argument hinges on Woolf's discovery that the twentieth-century female writer, embodied in A Room of One's Own by the fictional novelist Mary Charmichael, had "broken up Jane Austen's sentence", and proceeded to break the sequence (Woolf 99). DuPlessis elaborates on this pronunciation of Woolf's to argue that the "broken sequence" is one which no longer leads the heroine to the romantic resolution that awaits her at the end of so many nineteenth-century novels. Thus, the "broken sentence" is celebrated by DuPlessis as revolutionary. Its disjointed structure problematizes, deconstructs, and, finally, rewrites the social and cultural narrative that

imprisons women within a stereotypically gendered identity. Thus, Woolf seems to have found in the broken sentence and the broken sequence an aesthetic form for her intuition that the social codes of the nineteenth century were beginning to falter. Despite the liberatory force behind DuPlessis' interpretation of the broken sentence, some questions remain to be answered before a theory of feminine writing can be accepted wholeheartedly. How can feminist literary criticism escape the very essentialism it is trying to liberate women from when its own theories celebrate a writing that is so specifically gendered?

DuPlessis herself states that to posit a female sentence or narrative structure is to posit, at the same time, a feminine identity. She informs her readers that

> [t] his study is also designed to suggest what elements of feminine identity would be drawn on to make plausible the analytic assumption that there is a women's writing with a certain stance towards narrative. The narrative strategies of twentieth-century writing by women, are the expression of two systemic elements of female identity--a psychosexual script and a sociocultural situation, both structured by major oscillations (35).

The "oscillations" that duPlessis alludes to here refer to a kind of divided consciousness also noted by Woolf in A Room. Socially, this state of ambiguity stems from the fact that a woman's allegiances are divided in a masculine society of which she is both inheritor and marginalized critic (DuPlessis 38-39). More relevant to my present argument, however, is the idea that these oscillations are the remnants of an original bisexuality which the oedipal crisis never quite manages to eradicate in women. The process of heterosexualization slips out of order when the girl's allegiances vacillate between the

father (the proper object of choice after oedipalization) and the pre-oedipal mother. Thus, like Kristeva and Cixous, DuPlessis arrives at a conception of "feminine expression" via the problematic route of psychoanalytic or Lacanian theories.

Such an essentializing account of the gendering process has been a contentious issue for feminists in the second half of the twentieth-century. It is not surprising that, while drawing on psychoanalytic terminology, DuPlessis chooses her diction judiciously. She speaks of the elements of female identity which might serve her purposes of exposing a specifically gendered female sentence. Thus, she does not presume to subsume all these elements under an entire, proscribed, and fixed female identity. A bit later in the essay she acknowledges that the details of the oedipal crisis are historically contingent, and that "[t]he drama might unfold with some alternate figures and some alternate products or emphases" (36). Sadly, the extent of duPlessis' critique is confined to an acknowledgment of variations on what remains, at bottom, an incontrovertible theme. DuPlessis proceeds by plunging right into the narrative of oedipal development that she then uses as an unquestioned justification for the emergence of the gender difference which produces a specifically female aesthetic.

In the end, Freud's assumption of an initial, pre-Oedipal bisexuality in girls is also the starting point for DuPlessis's elaboration of a feminine aesthetic that is "broken", dived, and bipolar. DuPlessis says, with Freud, that "[t]he "original bisexuality" of the individual female is not easily put to rest or resolved by one early tactical episode; rather, the oscillation persists and is reconstituted in her adult identity" (37). The task of the twentieth-century female writer is to write against the too easy post-oedipal resolution that decrees an erasure of earlier vacillation. The broken sentence emerges as a liberating

aesthetic medium that expresses this oscillation and ambivalence. Despite the fact that DuPlessis's intent is to suggest that the broken sentence is an act of rebellion which mirrors, and perhaps even effects the fissures that riddle the narrative of the oedipal crisis, she is still assuming that this script of orthodox psychoanalysis is the one followed by all human beings. Thus, DuPlessis is subject to the same criticism lodged against Kristeva by Butler. DuPlessis makes strange bedfellows of Freud and Woolf. The very impetus of her argument seems to rely on a discursive strategy that is itself built on an oedipal model. Woolf emerges as the pre-oedipal mother to whom a brood of female writers can turn in order to redeem their narrative from the too restrictive clutches of the Freudian father figure. She denies the possibility that the little girl--or the little boy, for that matter--can possess the imaginative potential to develop her own script, or follow an alternate one from the beginning. DuPlessis's argument co-opts Woolf's observations on the female "broken sentence", enlisting it in the march towards an oscillating feminist aesthetic that denies the resolution of completed heterosexualization, but that also unproblematically reiterates Freud's own observations that proper female gendering is an unstable and volatile process.

In a discussion of a twentieth-century aesthetic that embodies specifically feminine concerns, Karen Kaivola also makes much ado about this issue of ambivalence. She begins by reiterating Marianne Dekoven's argument that, resistance being appealing to and yet risky for women writers, they develop strategies that bear the marks of a doubled consciousness. Also like DuPlessis, Kaivola seems intent upon raising, once again, the specter of the oedipal narrative which, because of its origin in incest, represents transgression, but also resolution and recuperation in its post-oedipal stage (Kaivola 2-3).

It is Kaivola's contention, however, that for Woolf, Barnes, and Duras, the transgression is never quite resolved and that, in a parallel gesture, their narratives remain open. Kaivola again articulates the kind of oscillation in female writing which DuPlessis also points to and which, once again, is attributed to the psychoanalytic notion that the resolution of the oedipal crisis into a properly gendered individual is never quite complete or stable for women (4). Though Kaivola recognizes that these authors write against the notion of sexuality proscribed by the psychoanalytic model, she also suggests that such writing risks punishment. Kaivola then comes to the conclusion that women have had to develop narrative strategies in order to conceal their rebellious stance. Their lyricism strains against the conventions of novelistic form, but without directly attacking the sociocultural tradition so central to the novel. Rather than directly resisting tradition, they retreat into "diffuse and private pleasures" (15).

When Kaivola turns more specifically to Woolf's prose, she recognizes the following paradox: "even as" Woolf's fiction "challenges the workings and distributions of power, it invites retreat from politics into a world of aesthetics and pleasure" (17). This ambivalence is interesting because it raises the question of the relationship between art and politics. This relationship is an important one, as it embodies the "ways in which women are produced in cultural representations" which are often in collusion with oppressive social forces (14). Kaivola is aware of the paradox inherent in the fact that Woolf wants to ignite as well as cover over social critique. Such an oscillation is, once again, what forms the female aesthetic. Though in Kaivola's case such a reconfigured syntactical structure is "lyrical" rather than "broken", she finds recourse for its explanation in the same, largely psychoanalytic, sources as DuPlessis. Kaivola qualifies

Woolf's prose as lyrical because it relies on rhythm and repetition rather than on plot for its development. This description is, of course, reminiscent of the terminology Kristeva uses to define poetic language.

This insistence on a correlation between Kristeva's celebration of the semiotic drives that infuse the symbolic in poetic language and Woolf's understanding of the broken sentence, needs to be questioned a bit further. In light of DuPlessis and Kaivola's enthusiasm for this newfound feminine aesthetic, it is interesting to note that Woolf herself is not quite so celebratory of the broken sentence. There are instances in A Room that are problematic from a feminist standpoint. Woolf seems to suggest that once material conditions have been altered so that they are equal for men and women, women will write with the aesthetic integrity that is, for the time being, an exclusively male privilege. Woolf's discussion of the "androgynous mind" in A Room's concluding chapter is damning. Barrett suggests that what is so disconcerting about this "erasure" of gender is that it places Woolf on the "equality" side of feminist debate, a model that does not shake the patriarchal infrastructures as much as the more radical "difference" model. Is Woolf retracting her argument that the effects of material conditions on writing must be acknowledged? Such a suggestion is not completely out of order given Woolf's mocking attitude towards Jane Eyre. She asks of Charlotte Brontë:

> Would the fact of her sex in any way interfere with the integrity of a woman novelist--that integrity which I take to be the backbone of the writer? Now, in the passages I have quoted from Jane Eyre, it is clear that anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist. She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered

> that she had been starved of her proper due of experience--she had been made to stagnate in a parsonage mending socks when she wanted to wander free over the world (80).

Woolf's socialist concerns seem, here, to clash with her aesthete's elevation of art above material reality. Indeed, in her critique of Brontë, Woolf seems to turn quite the "neurasthenic nymph" again, becoming squeamish at the first encounter with the material realities of class and gender.

As an antidote to these rude intrusions, Woolf proposes the "androgynous mind" which, in an impeccable symmetry that embodies both the masculine and the feminine, will have an orthopedic effect on the lopsided, too specifically gendered sentence: "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least grievance; to plead even in justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman" (112). Surely DuPlessis, who sees such a close correlation between narrative and societal structures, will have something to say in response to this unabashed plea for the separation of politics and art. Woolf seems to be arguing, again, for a narrative development not hindered by material conditions. It is as if she herself is allowing the surface of the water (or the thinker's mind) to close again behind the rowing undergraduate (or the irate beadle) who had made such a tear in the perfect tableau of "sky and bridge and burning tree".

In Imagination in Theory: Essays on Writing and Culture, Michelle Barrett examines the issues concerning this tangled and contentious relationship between aesthetics and politics. Though Barrett also understands that Woolf's shifty stance on the

issue is problematic, she argues that it is through Woolf's crafty artistry that the contradiction finds some kind of resolution. Her novels, Barrett argues, are quite amenable to a post-structuralist stance, because they dismantle assumptions of unitary identity by presenting a consciousness that is divided, shifting, and multiple. Yet Woolf also possessed a "strongly mystical streak that cut against such tendencies towards fragmentation. It led her to an unproblematic retention of ideas such as 'freedom', 'truth', or 'vision' that we might now understand in more relative terms as the ideas of a particular historical period or intellectual culture" (45-46). These sudden shifts towards the metaphysical, so contrary to Woolf's insistence that the work of the intellect is dependent upon material conditions, is apparent in her various pleas for fiction to remain detached from gender or any other such bodily concerns. The truly integral artistic form, she argues, is one brought about by the androgynous mind. Barrett attempts to resolve this contradiction by stating that Woolf herself "buried feminist insights into the deepest recesses of her own novels. The real debate hangs on how, not whether, feminist ideas interact with the imaginative content of the novels, and for Woolf simply to proscribe intrusiveness is to deal with the problem at a relatively superficial level" (47). I will go on to explore this interesting suggestion that Woolf's intricate narrative structures contain the "solution" to the problem of androgyny.

This clever embededness of social critique within a complex artistic style is what Kaivola also pointed to when she spoke of a Woolfian prose that moved from disclosure to concealment. It is difficult to say, however, whether Woolf adopted such an obfuscating style because, as Kaivola claims, Woolf was afraid of the social sanctions that such a critique might bring about. I am not saying that Kaivola is wrong, but that it is

just as interesting to read Woolf's style as style--for its inherent inclination to be shifty and playful. Woolf has, after all, been called upon to discuss "women and fiction" and to exclude the second, more formal rather than political part of her topic would be to address only half the issue that has been put before her. Woolf begins to show her artistic agility when she states that such a topic can be interpreted in a multitude of ways:

> When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontes and a sketch of Hawthorne parsonage under snow; some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to Mrs. Gaskell and one would have done. But at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fictions might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together (7).

Woolf's tentative interpretations of her topic move from rather straightforward questions of biography, to the more knotty and problematic issues of representation. This progression encapsulates not only a sketch of the thematic content that Woolf thinks ought to fill the shell "women and fiction", but also the form through which these issues might be deployed. She opens her argument by giving her audience a glimpse of the surroundings in which the thought process that lead to the present discussion occurred. Such an introduction gives the impression that the lecture will traverse the boundaries of genre to integrate biography and academic discourse. Biography, often related to the

domestic and viewed as a feminine genre, is therefore already bound up with the question of "women and fiction". Woolf's reference to biography suggests (misleadingly, of course) that the style of her own essay will conform to the conventions set for her gender.

As Anne Fernald makes clear, Woolf's stylistic route is much too circuitous to be so easily captured under a single generic label. Fernald's examination of Woolf is ensconced within a larger discussion of genre. Taking issue with the current trend in feminist and other post-structuralist discourses towards "personal criticism", she suggests that, despite the fact that Woolf eventually distances herself from autobiography by handing the narrative voice over to a persona, her essay fulfills the call for "personality" in writing in a much more elegant and effective way. Fernald is reticent to embrace personal criticism because, though its mandate purports to take into account the experience of having a body, life events, emotions, and thought, it privileges the three first when the fourth is the most interesting and revealing of individual idiosyncrasies (172). Fernald states that Woolf's use of the "essay" can be traced back to Montaigne, who endeavored to lead his reader through the transformation of thought, charting the ebb and flow of uncertainty, change, and illumination (169). That A Room of One's Own should be at the center of the articulate case Frenald makes for the essay is illuminating. Though Woolf begins her account of her thought progress with a confession suggestive of biography, she creates the persona of Mary Beton, who will take her place as narrator and therefore deflect attention from Woolf herself (165). Mary Beton becomes, according to Fernald, a "device" (165), a veil that is not present in other "personal" genres such as autobiography or diary and letter writing.

The persona is, of course, a tried and true literary device. Fernald suggests that it "allows Woolf to adopt for non-fiction the ability to move in and out of character" and to convey a personal tone at the same time that she cloaks herself in distancing techniques (177). That Woolf should be so agile with the tools of prose at her disposal is of no surprise. The fact that A Room is so explicitly self-conscious of its own stylistic gymnastics bears further discussion, since I posited above that it is precisely in these issues of style that Woolf resolves her ambivalant stance towards the relationship between the body and the text. The image encapsulated by the metaphor of the writer sitting on the banks of the river becomes a clever self-reflective meditation on the very act of using figurative language, which is the essence of literary style. The mind and the river, joined by their shared ability to "reflect", are placed face to face in a tableau that captures a literal illustration of what it is that metaphor does on a literary level: the juxtaposition of two disparate images in order to flesh out a description of the characteristic they have in common. Here, tenor (the thinking writer) and vehicle (the water) become both metaphor and metonymy for the entire task at hand. The image becomes metonymy because it represents figurative language, which is the raison d'être for the writer whose workings A Room strives to describe. This image of what happens to the surface of the river as the world imprints itself upon it illustrates the workings of artistic creation. Thus, what appears to begin as an innocent fact of autobiography unfolds in Woolf's agile hands to become a point of departure for a discussion of writing. Since the water's reflection is interrupted by a boat, and the writer's mind by a disconcerted beadle, and since these interruptions launch, as we have seen before,

Woolf's concern for the woman writer and her "broken" sentence, the metaphor can be unpacked to reveal the thematic issues "embedded" in Woolf's stylistic concerns.

The playfulness that Woolf thus infuses in her writing can also bring us to a more complex understanding of her unsettling (at least from a contemporary feminist point of view) suggestion that the best writing is that devoid of the markings of gender. Indeed, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar place it in a context that liberates it from attacks of essentialism. Woolf, like many of her female contemporaries such as Radcliffe Hall, Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein, was engaged in a "feminist modernist commitment to the subversion of gender categories, the disentangling of anatomy and destiny", so that "gender became in some sense an artificial construct" (Gilbert and Gubar 354). Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar later have to defend such a breed of "gender ambiguity" from critics such as Elaine Showalter who posit a socially shaped female experience as the spring-board for the "woman centered ideology known as feminism" (Gilbert and Gubar 372). To remain too dogmatic about such ideological matters is to ignore the fact that Woolf enjoyed the playful nature of both literature and gender ambiguity. Gilbert and Gubar claim that just as Orlando—a text written and often read as the fictional companion to A Room—signals its character's sex-change through a change in fashion, so does Woolf's playfully changing style trace the development of literary and historical styles.

This reading allows for a new understanding of the relationship between text and body initially posited by A Room. Just as Woolf was swept away by the liberatory force of the fashionable androgynous figure whose body was malleable, so was she enthralled with a text that likes to play with its devices. The "veil" which Woolf creates through Mary Beton and which she lifts and drops at will, mimics the change of clothes that turn

Orlando from man to woman. This androgynous proclivity, rather than mending the disjunctive nature of the feminine sentence, creates one that is purposely and playfully broken so that it can keep in step with a body that refuses to be fixed by heterosexist categories. Woolf's own sentence and narrative are broken, despite the complaints she lodges against predecessors such Charlotte Brontë. How do the ways in which Woolf genders the body enter her sentence and her narrative sequence, which then become broken and transformed in their own way? And how might Woolf's particular configuration of the relationship between the body and language fit into and help us work our way towards an understanding of the contentious debate surrounding a specifically feminine way of writing?

The "broken sentence" to which Woolf finally becomes reconciled is the crossroads of these two divergent passions. It embodies the dichotomy that is not naturally inherent in the debate, but which, I would like to suggest, is externally imposed. For it seems that it is only in discussions of women and fiction that any idea of the gendered body comes into play. Just as the female writer of the nineteenth century is culturally conditioned to view her commitment to writing as antithetical to her domestic duties and is thus forced to produce a text that is rent with contradictions, so is Woolf torn between a commitment to feminism and an interest in the aesthetic. The broken sentence is not just a "mistake" or an aberration resulting from the oppressed woman's asphyxiated state. The broken sentence can also be a consciously shaped and complex structure. Its ability to destabilize language is indicative of Woolf's anti-phallocentric attitude, as well as her enthusiasm for a playful style. Thus the broken sentence, because

its is so new and jarring and breaks the linearity she had despised in the materialist Edwardians, also remains true to her modernist aesthetic vision.

Nowhere is this syntactic embodiment of political concerns more evident than in the opening sentence of Orlando:

> He--for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it--was in the act of slicing at the head of a moor which swung from the rafters. It was the color of an old football and more or less the shape of one, save for the sunken cheeks and a strand or two of coarse, dry hair like the hair on a coconut. Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa; and now it swung, gently, perpetually, in the breeze which never seized blowing through the attic rooms of the gigantic house of the lord who had slain him (11).

The semantic game that Woolf plays in this passage rests (precariously, like the swaying head) on a motion that is double. She posits meaning and, at the very same moment, attempts to retract it. The rhythm that animates the sentence at both the phonetic and the semantic level is a back and forth motion that breaks the linearity of teleological syntax. The first sentence forges its way across the page with a very disquieting fragmenting motion. It gestures at making meaning, but quickly reveals that gesture to be--well, just jest. The syntax is, indeed, cut short at its most fundamental level: not even a relationship between the subject and the verb can develop unhindered. The subject is posited (He--), then cut off from its cohort, the verb, with a dash (so characteristic of Woolf) that introduces an aside. The reader (like the head) is left in precarious suspense.

That the aside--and the fact it is an aside, of course, foregrounds its centrality--should be such an emphatic assertion of the gender of "He--" is unsettling. It is ironic, because what Orlando is infamous for is the very uncertainty of his sex. The fact that the sentence has to be interrupted before it even posits an action in order to confirm the gender of "He--" raises questions about the "he-ness" of Orlando. Even this certainty that "there could be no doubt of his sex" is followed close at the heels by a "though" which reverses the assertion that Woolf has been at such pains to establish: "though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it". Thus, rather than offering the linearity conducive to meaning, Woolf fragments her sentence. She keeps the reader in suspense as she delays the verb that will give the sentence a teleologically linear meaning. She frustrates this linear development of meaning further by splitting the fragmenting aside into two statements, the second of which dissolves the assertion of the first. This gap between the subject and the verb unbalances a coupling that is taken for granted as the basis of syntactic structure.

"He--" finally meets its verb and the reader discovers that Orlando is "slicing at the head of a Moor". But again, before the sentence can finally end and the reader, having gotten a general overview of it, can go back in order to reinstate semantic order, another clause is introduced, announcing that the head Orlando is slicing at is swinging from the rafters. In one fell swoop and in the short space of one single sentence, not only is the certainty of Orlando's sex asserted and then retracted, but even the action that gives the "He--" its purpose, that coveted verb, is deactivated. The narrator is tricking us into believing that "He--" is in the midst of performing an act of heroic proportions, but ends the sentence with an absurd image that reduces Orlando's posited bravery to ridicule. Not

only is the syntactic order destabilized by the separation of verb and subject so that the expected end in meaning is postponed, but meaning itself, even when attained, becomes multiple. Orlando's gender is put into question, as is the very action that defines him. This syntactic fragmentation destabilizes the culturally constructed certainties of gender. This, of course, is obvious in Woolf's recognition that what in the Renaissance was seen as perfectly suitable masculine attire looks, to the twentieth-century eye, somewhat effeminate. When the verb finally comes to complete the sentence, the meaning it is supposed to bestow upon it and the identity of the subject in action are retracted.

As it forges its way towards meaning, this opening sentence moves to a rhythm that frustrates all teleological linearity and unity of signification. When the verb finally arrives to complete the sentence, the meaning it is supposed to bestow upon it as well as the identity of the subject in question are retracted. The broken sentence is indicative of both a protean sexuality and a fragmented signifying process. It embodies both Woolf's political concerns with the materiality of bodies and her aesthetic inclination for semantic playfulness and indeterminacy. The destabilization of meaning also produces a problematized relationship between reader and text. The latter is no longer a fertile field that the former can till to productive ends. Woolf's text is playful and frustrates the meaning that Woolf refuses to hand over in the form of a "nugget of pure thruth" (A Room 7).

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Conclusion

Much like the interrupted thought process of A Room's narrator, the route that Orlando's introductory sentence takes towards meaning is circuitous and inconclusive. The Edwardian and Victorian "materialist" need for objective truth and surface appearances is somewhat dissatisfying. In the end, Woolf prefers a sentence that does not stop at mimetic representation, but that is rife with multiple meanings or "significant form". While Barrett is right to suggest that Woolf's Marxist materialism is sometimes marred by a discomforting impulse towards mysticism, it is nonetheless possible to conclude that Woolf's aesthetic does, in the end, fit well with the fragmenting tendencies of contemporary post-strucuralist thought. The flexibility and craftiness she exhibits in her prose shares this uncanny affinity with contemporary feminism: Woolf's "broken sentence" refuses to accept an imperialistic desire to possess a text by reducing it to a single, unitary, and therefore more easily controlled meaning.

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