

The Poetics of Conversation in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: Constructed Arbitrariness and Thoughtful Impressionism

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The reception and critical evaluation of Woolf's essays regrettably falls short of the appreciation of her fiction. All in all her essays comprise more than 800 reviews and articles on biographies, collections of letters, memoirs, single literary works, editions of works and anthologies: fiction, poetry, literary criticism (cf. Nünning 17; Lee, "Essays" 96), but they were published only gradually and incompletely. It was in the middle of the 1980s when Andrew McNeillie started his complete edition of her essays, and not before the 1990s (cf. Lee 91-95; Nünning 7, 16, 17) have they begun to be adequately recognized. In this paper the conception of conversation in her essay *A Room of One's Own* will be regarded in relation to her fiction with a special focus on the politics of feminism in theme and language.

I. Aims of Investigation

Virginia Woolf's critical essay was composed at a time (1928-29) when she was simultaneously working on other literary projects such as *Orlando* and *The Moths*. Its concern for women and fiction rendered it ineffective compared with the Great Depression whose tremendous social and cultural impact was to be felt in the 1930s and 1940s. Virginia Woolf herself was aware of the seeming discrepancy between that world-wide crisis and the theme of her essay (cf. p. 95).

In comparison with the suffrage campaigns before the First World War the feminist movement at the end of the 1920s caused much less public stir. It was in the 1960s and 1970s only, during the second wave of feminism, that the issue of "Women and fiction" or female writing

was to become an important concern. In May 1928, though, women won the right to vote on equal terms with men and by that year also enjoyed more access to higher education (cf. Shaw 157).

My paper, however, does not deal predominantly with the importance of Woolf's essay for the genesis of feminist criticism or gender studies. In *A Room of One's Own* issues of ideology and language are closely linked and it is just the correlation between theme and style that caused so much controversy in Woolf criticism but has not been closely studied. With my essay I should like to try and fill this gap.

II. The Method of Woolf's Essay

From the very start the author makes it clear that to her the writer is not capable of proclaiming a certain "truth." What she can do is document the process of the genesis of her ideas:

At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show *how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold*. (4; italics mine)

[...] much of what I have said in obedience to my promise *to give you the course of my thoughts* will seem out of date; [...]. (104; italics mine)

She [Mary Beton] has tried *to lay bare the thoughts and impressions that led her to think this*. (105; italics mine)

In other words, the ways of reasoning are as important as the aim or the results. For the narrator, the truth to be reached in this difficult question of "women and fiction" (4, 27, 28) is the result of struggling through an "avalanche of opinion" (41) and proceeding through errors also (105). It is not to be had in the form of a conclusion (3, 4) or finite results, embodied in "a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantel piece for ever" (4). Woolf's truth is as unstable and tricky and resisting final definition as her description of erratic, undependable reality is:

[...] now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and

stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. (110)

Offering a metaphor instead of a scientific definition and linking the elusive and evasive term of truth to that of reality (implying for her material and immaterial, physical and mental reality) shows that Woolf finds “truth” in the course of her essay in a similar way that she comes upon reality: in fits and glimpses, through impressions, comments, and discursions, through conviction and instinct (109). She uses an impressionistic method and a meandering style that borrow from fiction and allow for some degree of subjectivity.

From the second chapter on the “pursuit of truth” (26) becomes ever more difficult. Woolf explores questions like why one sex was so prosperous and the other so poor, what effect poverty has on fiction, which conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art. She hopes to get an answer “by consulting the learned and the unprejudiced” (25) in books at the British Museum (cf. also 26, 28, 29), only to find out that neither is to be trusted, which nearly makes her despair of her topic and task. The first reason for her dismay is the sheer quantity of male writing on women: woman is “the most discussed animal in the universe” (26, see also 27). Another reason why it is impossible “to tell the truth” is the multitude of men’s opinions concerning women’s ability to be formally educated (30).

The third reason is dissatisfaction with her intellectual deficiencies. By that stage she has become more conscious of the problematical, i.e. erratic or arbitrary character of her method that endangers her to fall prey to distraction and yet more questions. The juxtaposition with the methodically working student from Oxbridge (28) makes this all too evident. The final point for a new departure is reached when the narrator notes that even her handwriting has become indecipherable (30). She does no longer try to find out what male writers had to say about women (30, 31) but decides “to give up seeking for the truth” (41) or at least to consult only such historians who record not opinions but facts (for instance about the living conditions of women). This

approach, though not very encouraging in the light of the dismal facts, leads to the formulation of new tasks for historiography and fiction in the future, i.e. the recording and representation of the so far obscure lives of women.

This solution is symptomatic of the entire essay. Instead of “scientific” truth Woolf finally decides to tell a kind of subjective truth concerning a specific historical moment (1928):

All I could do was to offer you *an opinion* upon one minor point—[...]. (4; italics mine)

She admits her own limitations as a critic as well as the danger of spreading prejudice, not being unbiased herself, or telling lies mixed with some truth (4) for various reasons: because female writing is such an important issue to her, because her choice of reading is so very wide (108) and because books have acquired an extreme significance for her in the face of her lacking a formal education. Moreover, her reading in history, biography, poetry, and fiction has become slightly monotonous (108-9). Therefore she wants to read well-written books, preferably by women for the good of women and the world at large (109).

If, then, instead of objective truth a kind of subjective truth is to be aimed at, the very process of reasoning seems the way to make the writer’s ideas convincing and prove their authenticity and establish a perfect rapport of writer and reader:

But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can *to show you how I arrived at this opinion* about the room and the money. (4; italics mine)

Thus Woolf decides in favour of a circumstantial, leisurely, discursive, and process-oriented method.

What is even more important is the essay’s open claim to fictionalization, the mix of fiction and fact (4). Since, even though there is no chance to arrive at objective truth, there is some prospect of enlightenment on the author’s and the reader’s part if opinions are carefully weighed, Woolf is sure that “Fiction here is likely to contain more

truth than fact" (4). She employs fictionalization in criticism as the only reasonable method for her and boldly confesses to "making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, [...]" (4). She deliberately transfers methods from fiction to criticism and, as in the novels, departs from factual reality.

I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; "I" is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. (4)

Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance) [...]. (5)

Woolf has no doubt about the future for women: provided that there is some advice and encouragement women will, given time and education, enter a new position in society. Yet at the present stage of affairs to cloak her beliefs in the form of fiction is a safety measure for her, the more so because she is likely to raise almost more questions than provide answers to them:

A thousand pens are ready to suggest what you should do and what effect you will have. My own suggestion is a little fantastic, I admit; I prefer, therefore, to put it in the form of fiction. (113)

However, since Woolf usually splits up every major issue into several other minor ones, her procedure is scientific enough and is not likely to provide lazy reading for example, when the author wants to know how women, money, a room and fiction are connected and, furthermore, what the words "women and fiction" mean (3). She also adopts a scholarly attitude when she refuses to speculate on female fiction in the future and limits herself to a critical evaluation of the question in history and the present time (77). She only allows for one exception, the physical conditions for the writing women (78). Otherwise she is clear-sighted enough to realize that the time for an evaluation of the comparative merits of men and women as writers has not yet come and that at present it is more important to gather some knowledge about the material living conditions of women than to speculate on their capacities (105).

Despite these scholarly features in the essay the reader cannot but notice that Woolf often muses so elaborately on single aspects that the original issue has almost got out of sight when she at last resumes it. The gaps, jumps, interruptions, retrospectives, resumings, repetitions, narrative 'inconsistencies' etc. are accepted by her as necessary steps on the way to tentative conclusions. Perhaps this could be called "écriture féminine." Certainly it means an adequate reconstruction of Woolf's conception of a fragmented and multiple reality in criticism, in the form of fragmented narrative structures. These narrative structures and strategies give the essay the character of an impressionistic, spontaneous, subjective, non-authoritative, open-ended, and fictionalized discourse at a specific given point in history with a clearly defined task.

III. Speaker, Situation, and Topic: Material and Mental, Seeming Spontaneity, Constructed Arbitrariness

The correlation of speaker, place and time (situation) and topic or idea becomes most clear in one of the first sentences of the famous beginning at the river which, for me, recalls the start of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* on a river bank:

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. (3; italics mine)

Here then was I [...] *sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought.* (5; italics mine)

In other words, place and time and atmosphere are conducive to the author's thinking as demonstrated throughout the essay. The link between time and place (situation) and speaker and between material and mental aspects of the processes of reasoning in a perfect way is quite obvious:

It was *impossible not to reflect*—the reflection whatever it may have been was cut short. The clock struck. It was *time* to find one's way to luncheon. (10; italics mine)

The transfer of methods from Woolf's fiction to her criticism becomes evident when we think of a similar technique in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), where the chiming of Big Ben is the only link between 'real' (or physical, linear) time and the various kinds of relative (or fictitious, subjective, psychological) time in the novel. Her essential working principle of deducing mental abstractions from material evidence is found in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for instance, as well. Woolf connects the material with the mental when she lets Lily Briscoe settle a difficult question of composition in her developing painting by taking up the salt cellar and putting it down again on a flower in the tablecloth's pattern to remind herself to move the tree.

In *A Room of One's Own* the connection of the material and the mental is perhaps most finely expressed in the phrase concerning the influence of good eating and drinking upon thinking and talking (10-11, 18). The kind of eating determines the kind of ideas one has. This notion only seemingly contradicts Woolf's criticism of the lunch-to-dinner business in materialist writers such as Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H. G. Wells (cf. Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 147 ff.). In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf transcends material reality for the sake of exploring mental reality. Later in the essay she proves the importance of good eating and drinking for thinking and talking by making the bad dinner in the great dining-hall (17) responsible for the conversation between the narrator and Mary Seton to flag: "The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes" (18).

Woolf exploits the correlation between the material and the mental in other passages as well. Thus she speaks of the two sexes of the mind as corresponding to the two sexes of the body (98 ff.) or interprets the £ 500 needed by every woman writer and the lock on the door as symbolic of the power to work and think independently (106). For her intellectual freedom depends upon the necessary material basis (108).

Above all, however, it is this link between place and time (situation) and theme (topic, idea) as synthesized or embodied in the persona of the speaker which demonstrates the close link between physical con-

ditions and aesthetics in the essay: the speaker conceives her ideas as she is leisurely strolling through Oxbridge, going to Fernham (a fictitious name alluding to the two female colleges Newnham and Girton founded in 1866 only, cf. Erzgräber 133; Nünning 84) and Headingley, visiting the British Museum and walking the streets of London. She arrives at her insights between the time before lunch time on one day at Oxbridge and the morning two days later on October 26, 1928 in London (95, cf. also 4).

The meandering progress in the formulation of ideas is intertwined with certain material or physical circumstances that provide a mental or intellectual stimulus and seem, by chance, to produce almost 'necessary' results. The process of reflection once more turns out to be as important as the ideas. It is significant that certain things happen at certain times and under certain circumstances, producing certain insights:

The narrator arrives at the idea of the cultural disadvantages to be faced by women when she encounters the beadle barring her way across the turf (6).

She comes to grasp the unequal distribution of wealth among men and women in history when she faces the gentleman barring the entrance to the university library and reflects on the material history of the chapel (9 ff.).

She becomes aware of the tremendous socio-political changes in England and Europe caused by WW I (12; a caesura that she depicted elsewhere in fiction, e.g. in *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs Dalloway* or *The Waves*) when she watches the Manx cat.

She comprehends the economically and materially based cultural disadvantageousness of women when she leaves the modest dinner in the great dining-hall of the women's college (18; cf. also 19, 20, 22, 24).

She understands that money is more important for female emancipation than the female franchise is (37) when she has to pay her bill at a restaurant near the British Museum.

She notes the imaginative importance, but practical insignificance of women in society when she studies the literature on women by men and in books of historiography at home in the evening after a disappointing search in the library (46) and vaguely recognizes the reasons for this discrepancy in women's limited access to education and their difficult living conditions in the Elizabethan Age (46).

She deduces quality standards in essay and novel writing (correlation of sound, sense, and meaning, or, of subject and style) when walking through Oxbridge and recalling Charles Lamb's essay about revisiting Oxbridge in the long vacation (6-7).

The essay thus displays a seeming spontaneity and haphazardness in the narrator's coming to hold certain opinions. Actually, Woolf's ideas are the result of a carefully constructed arbitrariness and thoughtful impressionism (further characteristics of fiction). Woolf herself makes fun of the inevitable causal connections brought about by coincidence:

If by good luck there had been an ash-tray handy, [...] one would not have seen, presumably, a cat without a tail. (11)

Later the narrator misses the turn to Fernham (15) because she is so deep in thoughts about what is truth and what is illusion (about WW I). Yet the accidental physical deviation leads to other interesting insights that are not as 'unplanned' as they seem. In the British Museum the narrator makes an arbitrary choice of a dozen volumes or so. And in a restaurant near the British Museum she idly reads the headlines of a newspaper left there by chance by somebody (33 ff.).

But would a different environment have made any significant change in her reasoning? Or, to express it in Woolf's own laconic way: what if she had not met the beadle? My answer is that certainly it would not have made a difference. Woolf would not really have let her opinions depend on chance and incident. She had already determined her ideas when she construed with great mastership the fictitious 'inevitable' steps which gave rise to them.

IV. Narrator and Reader: Multiple Narrative Voices and Perspectives, Role Play, Conversation, Dialogue, and Communication

In an ordinary scholarly work of criticism it should not be difficult to equate 'author' and 'narrator.' *A Room of One's Own*, however, is a work of criticism and fiction at the same time. Of course, Virginia

Woolf is at the heart of the whole essay, but she fictionalizes herself. Other fictitious personae express their opinions such as Mary Seton (the after-dinner conversation partner in the female college); Mrs. Seton (the mother of Mary Seton, who functions as the female representative of a whole generation of women and mothers still subject and submitting themselves to the rules of patriarchal society); Mary Beton (the imaginary narrator's aunt); Judith (the fictitious sister of Shakespeare); Mary Carmichael (a fictitious female writer in Woolf's own time); and Miss Clough and Miss Davies. We may in fact see a parallel between Woolf's technique and John Dryden's four speakers in his famous essay *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668).

The personae of the three Marys are generic. They stem from a sixteenth-century Scots ballad with the title *Marie Hamilton* or *The Queen's Marie* (Erzgräber 130-31; Fox 208 ff.). A similar technique is employed by Woolf, by the way, in the form of Mary, Elizabeth and Helen in "Street Haunting" and the three letters in *Three Guineas* (cf. Lee 98).

For most of the essay Mary Beton is presented as the first-person narrator, a fact that the reader is only rarely reminded of:

Here, then, Mary Beton ceases to speak. (105)

On p. 105 Virginia Woolf 'undisguised' a little surprisingly announces the end of that passage and her intention to conclude the essay in her own person. However, the opinions expressed throughout the essay are to be attributed to Woolf, especially as far as the major issue of the essay, the mental independence of women through material safety, is concerned. There is also an autobiographical context to it: at the time when Woolf was revising the manuscript of *A Room of One's Own*, she was beginning to be so successful through writing for the very first time in her life that the danger of poverty (and its material and immaterial consequences) was warded off. In 1928 her income from writing was £ 1434 (Shaw 159). Moreover, Woolf was actually planning a new room of her own at Monk's House (Lee 556). In the essay, however, she hides behind her fictions in order to prevent being misunderstood:

I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary. If I had said, Look here am I uneducated, because my brothers used all the family funds which is the fact—Well theyd have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously. (Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smyth, 8 June 1933, *Letters* 5: 2746, 195)

Her role-playing and her use of multiple narrative voices and perspectives—another parallel to her fiction—also show that *A Room of One's Own* is essentially a conversation: the narrator is rather a speaker, the structure is that of a talk, we hear different narrating and talking voices, and there is a talk going on between diverse fictitious or exemplary personae as well as between the narrating and speaking voices and the reader. Thus there is an oral discourse that follows oral strategies of narrative such as conversation, dialogue, direct communication with the reader, and a leisurely proceeding through diverse mental associations.

The qualities of an oral discourse derive to some extent from the genesis of the essay: Virginia Woolf was commissioned to deliver a lecture at two women's colleges at Cambridge, i.e. "to speak about women and fiction" (3; cf. also 4: "the first duty of a *lecturer*"; 111: "a paper *read* by a woman to women"; italics mine) in the form of an after-dinner speech (cf. Jane Marcus 223) to women undergraduates, the potential next generation of writers. She prepared this through walking, talking, thinking and discussing. Later, in an intermediate phase, she would take notes (e.g. when working on the title catalogue and single volumes in the British Museum; 26, 28-30) and transform all this into a lecture (104). As the material was far too vast to be read out, she cut it short for the lecture, i.e. the oral occasion (30, 111). Later she altered and expanded it for the printed version once more, but kept the oral conversational approach (cf. 110: "[...] every speech must end with a peroration").

Furthermore, she frequently uses criteria of sound, for example when comparing the two lunch parties before and after the war: the words "sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves" (12). This hum-

ming noise set to words is exemplified in verse by Tennyson and Christina Rossetti (12, 13).

Later, she subjects female writing to an oral test. She tests the soundness of female writers' sentences by exploring the correlation of sound and sense (81), a correlation that again reminds one of John Dryden, who explored it for a lifetime in poetry, drama and music theatre. A test of Mary Carmichael's sentences in her first novel "Life's Adventure," for instance, results in the observation that the "smooth gliding of sentence after sentence" has been interrupted (80). Moreover, Woolf comes to the conclusion that the male sentence construction was unsuited for the female writers of the nineteenth century (76). At least it proved to her to be a "clumsy weapon" for Charlotte Brontë and produced atrocities in George Eliot. The only exception she is ready to make is Jane Austen, whom she credits with the only sentence construction naturally devised (76-77).

A major characteristic of the essay is its emphasis on communication. "Communicate" and "communication" frequently recur to describe the intensive writer-reader rapport or even cooperation Woolf envisaged in good fiction. For example she demands from a good writer:

The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is *communicating his experience* with perfect fullness. (104; italics mine)

Once more she transfers a quality from fiction to criticism (cf. 101, when she criticizes the critic B. for the fact that his emotions do not communicate). The (good) writer has to communicate not only experience and emotion, but other things as well, for instance reality:

It is his business to find it [reality—C.B.] and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us. (110)

And this is indeed what Woolf does in the essay, communicating experiences, feelings and reality—through conversation with the listening reader. In her own life, personal talk and letter-writing—two very direct and personal ways of communicating—together with

reading made up for her lack of formal university education. In her collections of essays *The Common Reader*, published before (1925) and after (1932) *A Room of One's Own*, the title alone hints at her aiming to establish a 'community of belief' in aesthetics with the reader (cf. Erzgräber 25; Nünning 43). Woolf made a special point of giving "recommendations for a democratic literary community" on the basis of a "shared, common ground of communication between readers and writers" (Lee, "Essays" 95-96) in her numerous essays.

To bring about this writer-reader rapport it is necessary to record the processes of reasoning. Furthermore, Woolf arrives at her judgments in the presence of the reader who is to be a witness to the process, a necessary constituent and agent in this dialogue- and process-oriented approach:

I am going to develop *in your presence* as fully and freely as I can the *train of thought* which led me to think this [opinion about room and money]. (4; italics mine)

Allowing the reader so much participation and independence is by no means a sign of condescension on Woolf's part. It relieves her of the burden of perfection, absolute responsibility and rightness of judgment, i.e. single authority. Woolf is not ready to take up the role of a gatekeeper. The reader is not regarded as the receiver of an absolute truth, but of debatable opinions that the narrative voices hand over to her or him for judgment and further reflection. Though not a specialist (cf. also *The Common Reader*, 1), the reader is an instrument to be trusted with the responsibility to test the authenticity and usefulness of her ideas, separate fact from fiction, add and deduce things, fill the gaps and make judgments of her or his own. The way that Woolf invites the reader to participate and share is well comparable to the conception of the reader as described in the later-emerging reader-response theory:

Perhaps if I lay bare the ideas, the prejudices, that lie behind this statement *you will find* that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction. (4; italics mine)

One can only *give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions* [...]. (4; italics mine)

[...] *it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide* whether any part of it is worth keeping. (4-5; italics mine)

[...] *if you look carefully you may find it* [the thought] *for yourselves* in the course of what I am going to say. (5; italics mine)

While she [Mary Beton] has been doing all these things, *you no doubt have been observing her failings and foibles and deciding* what effect they have had on her opinions. *You have been contradicting her and making whatever additions and deductions seem good to you.* (105; italics mine)

In other words, finding a tentative answer to the urgent questions troubling the author can only be achieved through the critical and active interference of the reader. Woolf's method is one of interaction.

Inviting the reader for active participation is convincingly achieved by giving the impression of an oral situation. We feel the presence of a talking voice as in conversational speech. This technique was also employed by Woolf in quite a number of other works of fiction and criticism (cf. Lee, "Essays" 103-4) such as *The Waves*, the first *Common Reader*, "A Talk about Memoirs," "A Conversation About Conrad," "A Conversation about Art," "Miss Ormerod" and others.

Apart from consistently constructing the situation of a talk and dialogue with the reader, Woolf creates various other speaking situations, e.g. the narrator speaking to herself or with Mary Seton (18) or Mary Beton (37-105). Often she addresses the reader or other characters directly as 'you' as if she was facing the person physically (cf. also 90, 105 etc.):

The only way for you to do it, I thought, addressing Mary Carmichael *as if she were there*, [...]. (84-85; italics mine)

All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded, I said, addressing Mary Carmichael *as if she were present*; [...]. (89; italics mine)

In another passage the speaker makes sure that only women are present as readers or listeners when she raises the subject of Chloe and Olivia:

Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit *in the privacy of our own society* that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women. (82; italics mine)

V. Emotional Involvement of the Reader or Listener, Figurative Language, Free Mental Associations, Stream-of-Consciousness, Imagination, Psychoanalysis

Another consistent means of engaging the reader is through establishing emotional ties. The speaker for instance never leaves the reader in doubt about her own emotions and reactions: at the beginning she informs the reader that she feels "bowed down by the weight of the subject" (4, cf. also 5). Woolf even uses a personification to describe her state of mind here: as she sees herself in a striking accord with the nature around her, bushes glow with heat of fire, willows lament (5).

Additionally Woolf mentions gestures and movements and evokes the physical surroundings in her essay. When she is testing the qualities of Mary Carmichael's novel she describes herself as "still hovering at a little distance above the page, [...]" (88)—uneasy about the observer's role of Mary Carmichael (88) and the self-consciousness to be noticed in her work.

Moments of emotional closeness also appear in the passages where Woolf speaks about lesbian relationships, creating an atmosphere of female comradeship, of emotional and psychological 'sisterhood' (cf. 82, quoted above), or about the writer's communicating his experiences to the reader (104), and material and mental presuppositions of female writing (108).

Woolf also engages the reader through the intensive use of figurative language, through vivid descriptions that bring the message home, particularly after the passage about the encounter with the beadle. Thus she compares the vast dome of the British Library to a huge bald forehead (26), regarding herself as "a single but by now somewhat harassed thought" (29) in it. In some cases the figurative language (rhetorical figures such as images, metaphors, symbols, similes, personifications, synecdoches, metonymies, antitheses etc.) is

an expression of the whole process of reasoning, as when she creates the image of letting "the line of thought dip deep into the stream" (109).

Moreover, Woolf uses metaphors for creating an expressive shorthand of her major ideas. The cultural dichotomy of male and female is expressed with reference to gendered psychology in life and work and writing. In one instance she describes the contrast between male and female by reference to a complacently sleeping venerable university library whose treasures are locked away safely within its breast, whereas the female comes to waken it and disturb the settled peace and decidedness of the male world (8). Slightly later she refers to the university as "a sanctuary in which are preserved rare types which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand" (8-9). The male here stands for settledness, inflexibility, even stagnation and protectedness, the female for lively and unorthodox action, movement and progress. With this exhilarating expression of doubt as to the male's fitness for survival, Woolf offers, as it were, an unorthodox feminist reinterpretation of Darwinism. The closing of the gates at Oxbridge in the late afternoon, the beadles with keys, and the university are likened by her to a treasure house made secure for another night (13). This evokes the association of a locked-in, stagnant male world which has nothing to aspire to for a woman.

In another passage she illustrates the antithesis of male educatedness and female uneducatedness by stating that for a man a question "runs into its answer as a sheep runs into its pen" (28): he methodically shepherds his question past all distractions. In contrast to this, her own question ("Why are women poor?"), the question of a woman with no university education, "flies like frightened flock hither and thither, helter-skelter, pursued by a whole pack of hounds" (28). Sometimes the figurative language epitomizes her view on female lives, for instance, when she comprises the complex problem of the compatibility of profession and family for women in the phrase "Making a fortune and bearing thirteen children—no human being could stand it" (22), or when she critically addresses the problem of

the material basis of culture in asking, "What force is behind the plain china off which we dined, [...]?" (20), referring to the symbolic power of the material. She strikingly gives expression to the fact that female achievements frequently remain unrecorded, in contrast to lots of documents about historical and political events and male activities in the world:

For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children set to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie. (89)

These images and examples in a twentieth-century essay elucidate the personal character of criticism, the fact that theory and criticism originally derived from the practice of writing and reading. While we are used to scholarly language which is often rather scientific in the bad sense of the word, i.e. 'dry,' impersonal, neutral, inexpressive, Woolf superbly employs poetic speech in a piece of criticism on issues of literature, culture and society at large.

Another prominent working principle, that of progressing through free mental associations, is extremely well linked to the figurative language. Both support the conversational character. One example is the passage in which Woolf proceeds from an observation of contemporary London to the idea of androgyny. Characteristically, a trivial physical incident within a greater flow of things signifies an intellectually important issue. The following example is the more remarkable because here the movement of a leaf in contemporary London is mentally associated with the flowing river, the undergraduate in his boat and other leaves mentioned before:

At this moment, as so often happens in London, there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. [...] A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the

dead leaves. Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxi-cab; and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere. (96)

Woolf works with free mental associations born from the flow of thinking that she names as such several times. For example, she speaks of the "train of thought" (4, 109) or "course of my thoughts" (104) or announces to the reader: "[...] I give you my *thoughts as they came to me [...]*" (6-7; italics mine). Later, when the speaker is so deep in thought about the issue of truth and illusion that she misses the turn to Fernham she says "I spare you the *twists and turns of my cogitations*, for no conclusion was found on the road to Headingley, [...]" (15; italics mine). Again, her ideas develop in that typical peripatetic and meandering way. The quasi-spontaneous character of the thinking process is highlighted when she confesses: "I have handed on all that has come my way *without going in search of it, [...]*" (111; italics mine), but it is in fact a deliberate act of composition on the author's part.

At times her ideas emerge from the stream of consciousness, as for instance when during the talk of the speaker to her friend Mary Seton in her room a new stream of thought is coming up:

In a minute or so we were *slipping freely in and out among all those subjects of curiosity and interest which form in the mind in the absence of a particular person, and are naturally to be discussed on coming together again—[...]*.

While these things were being said, however, I became shamefacedly aware of a *current setting in of its own accord and carrying everything forward to an end of its own*. (19; italics mine)

This thought stream leads Woolf to the idea of the material conditions of culture and the awareness of the cultural disadvantages faced by women. Towards the end of the essay she resumes the image of catching fish, i.e. creating ideas, when she advises women to write and travel and be idle and "dream over books and loiter at street corners

and *let the line of thought dip deep into the stream*" (109; italics mine). The image of anything first used on p. 5 thus forms a kind of frame for the whole essay.

Her own method of reflection can indeed be fully characterized by the simile of the thought stream and the oaring undergraduate. The line of associations is: sitting in thought on the banks of a river and watching the reflections in the water; the movements of the mind (fishing for ideas) are likened to letting one's line into a stream and catching fish; an idea (fish) turns up and is caught; i.e. thoughts emerge as from a stream:

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. There one might have sat the clock round lost in thought. Thought—to call it by a prouder name than it deserved—had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating. (5)

The fish turns out to be a particularly significant image, in Woolf's essay and in her fiction. The fin of a fish actually produced the idea for the novel *The Waves*. When the passage in the essay is continued Woolf associates fishing for ideas, fruitful fishing and a tumult of ideas, not entirely unlike (to mention Dryden once more) the image of artistic ideas as procreated out of chaos in the Dedication of *The Rival Ladies*.

But however small it [the fish] was, it had, nevertheless, the mysterious property of its kind—put back into the mind, it became at once very exciting, and important; and as it darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither, set up such a wash and tumult of ideas that it was impossible to sit still. It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. (5-6)

Once more the circle of physical movement, mental reflection and new physical movement is concluded. Only the encounter with the beadle sends Virginia Woolf's little fish or idea into hiding: the reflections are interrupted (cf. 6). After that episode the speaker can once more indulge in meditation, in harmony with the moment (8), an idea that recalls Paterian sentiments.

All this goes together with the use of the imagination, another feature Woolf's essay shares with fiction. For example the speaker remembers Christina Rossetti's lines and betrays "the folly of fancy" by imagining lilac in October (16). In the garden of Fernham she imagines similar phantoms in the spring twilight, daffodils, bluebells, spring weather and somebody in a hammock (17). In her friend Mary Seton's room she envisages a scene of masons on a high roof five centuries ago with kings and nobles bringing treasure in huge sacks and pouring it under the earth, which is contrasted with another picture in the mind "of lean cows and a muddy market and withered greens and the stringy hearts of old men" (19). The two scenes are combating one another and in the end lead to an awareness of the contrast between a rich male culture and a poor female one.

The use of the imagination and the painting of imaginary scenes serve the same end as the other techniques discussed, namely to further the rapport between writer and audience. In the most productive passages of the essay these imaginative ideas or speculations, which work backwards into history as well as forwards into the future, help Woolf to sustain her main ideas. Inventing, for example, a childhood of Mary Seton spent unhappily while her mother "had been making money" (22), helps her understand the difficulty of making a profession and family compatible. Imagining the streets south of the river in the scene with the elderly lady and the middle-aged woman she recognizes the lack of historical memory and consciousness in women. Recalling the streets of London in her mind she feels the accumulation of unrecorded life (89), and imagining the shop hung with coloured ribbons and a girl behind the counter that Mary Carmichael should depict she fully grasps the necessity of recording

the as yet obscure female lives (90). Imagination helps her to test the validity of her ideas or bring them about at all and is therefore to be seen as an indispensable part of her discourse.

Another element is the reference to methods of psychoanalytical criticism and depth psychology, with which Woolf obviously was quite familiar. In the essay she came to use psychoanalysis in two different ways, passively and actively, so to speak. Passively she applied it in her analysis of human behaviour or special situations in life. One example is the Manx cat episode in which, through the appearance of the cat, all of a sudden the atmosphere is changed when the speaker is right in the middle of reflecting upon how important good eating and drinking are for an excellent conversation and brilliant ideas:

The sight of that abrupt and truncated animal padding softly across the quadrangle changed by some fluke of the subconscious intelligence the emotional light for me. It was as if some one had let fall a shade. Perhaps the excellent hock was relinquishing its hold. (11)

The interruption and disturbance, however, leads her to pursue another idea, that of the difference between pre-war and post-war lunch parties, and is thus a productive element. Alice Fox, by the way, suggests that the tailless Manx cat is also used as a metaphor expressing Woolf's claim to a liberation of women from patriarchal claims (cf. Fox, 202).

In a yet broader context psychoanalytical criticism helped Woolf to discern the character of her own age (the criticised sex-consciousness) and apply psychoanalytic criticism historically and culturally in her gender psychology when she put forward the idea of the female writers' ability to think back through their mothers (76).

But psychoanalytic concepts and practices are also actively employed by her. In *A Room of One's Own* she invents psychoanalytic scenes in order to bring her ideas into focus. A delightful and convincing example of the workings of the unconscious is the passage about Professor von X, in which Woolf expressly refers to Freud's ideas

about insights to be gained from idleness and dreams (31). The speaker cannot agree with the professor's statements about the supposed mental, moral, and physical inferiority of women (32) and finally recognizes the connection between anger and power in men (34). Her belief that no evolution would have taken place without male vanity and her insight into the role attributed to women by men as enlarging mirrors (35) are just two examples of her thoughtful rethinking of Darwinian and Freudian notions in terms of gender psychology.

To work from the surface of a phenomenon toward its essence as demonstrated in the Professor von X-passage epitomizes the overall method of Woolf's essay. Her search for answers takes on a spiral character. She is digging ever more deeply, exploring the issue in an ever acuter way, turning from the concrete, material and physical to the most sophisticated and abstracted insights. Her questions become more and more precise, her probings more profound. She presses insights out of seemingly arbitrary and trivial incidents through free mental associations, talks, imagery, logical reasoning, comparisons, dialectical thinking, and emotions. From under the mass of trivial outward incident she uncovers the philosophical essence. Woolf comes across her 'truth' in moments of vision or revelation (epiphanies), searching for the essence of reality and reconstructing her ideas in similar ways as in her fiction.

VI. Conclusion: The Politics of Essay-Writing; Content and Form, Subject and Style

For me Woolf's major contributions to literary and social criticism in *A Room of One's Own* are doubtless to be seen in:

the orientation of the essay to the future of female writing (opening up of the genre of criticism and essay-writing to women);

a beginning of feminist criticism and gender studies proper (far-sightedly Woolf assigns students, scholars, historians, psychologists, artists, politicians etc. their concrete tasks as to stated deficits in considering the female cause);

an impulse for the study of society, the material or economic basis of its gender-patterned culture;

an intensification of the life-art discussion with respect to fiction (expanding the views of John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, G. E. Moore and others);

a redefinition of the essence of fiction and art in general, touching on autobiography, biography, fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fiction;

the writing of an associative literary history including genre history (e.g. poetry-writing, essay-writing, novel-writing; comparative poetics);

a reflection, further elaboration and anticipation of important movements in literary criticism and theory such as historical criticism, Marxism, psycho-analytical criticism, reader-response theory, post-structuralism, feminist criticism, cultural studies, deconstruction; post-colonialism etc. ;

a new synthesis in her reflections on the discourses of poetry, philosophy and historiography.

This is not to gloss over her shortcomings and misjudgments, e.g. the lack of solutions for the problems faced by women in social and historical reality (no concrete hints as to how to earn £ 500), the omission of the working-class woman, the ghostlike appearance of the working classes in general, or the apparent contradictions inherent in Woolf's attitudes as to whether genius or tradition and environment are responsible for major cultural achievements.

As a consequence of the second wave of feminist critical theory the reception of Woolf's ideas became very polarized at the hands of essentialist gynocritical and non-essentialist theoreticians. The late 1980s and 1990s only slightly reconciled these extreme judgments. Woolf was denied and newly assigned a role model for the women of our time (cf. Erzgräber 144; Poole ix-xiii; L. Marcus 211 ff.).

The correlation of subject and style in *A Room of One's Own* has, however, remained a critical target since the publication of the essay. Recognition of the quality of her narrative strategies and style was slow to come and provided a hotly debated issue in the reception history of the essay—as did the thematic issue of women and fiction before. In particular, Woolf's use of the imagination and her special way of constructing the narrative texture of the essay were evaluated in negative as well as positive terms. A well-meaning unsigned re-

view "Women and Books" from 31 October 1929 called *A Room* "a delightfully peripatetic essay" and made it clear that "the main path" of the essay was the spiritual and material necessities for female writers. (*Times Literary Supplement* 867; Majumdar no. 79, 255). Vita Sackville-West, in the *Listener* of 6 November 1929, pointed to the mixed generic characteristics of the essay, which could neither be regarded as a novel nor pure criticism (620; Majumdar no. 80, 257).

It was Arnold Bennett who started the real controversy in his review of 28 November 1929. Though not denying to Virginia Woolf that she could write (Bennett 147), he called her imagination "fancy" and held it responsible for the thematic digressions in the essay (148). Since then the controversy has been continuing (cf. Williams 149-50; West 169-70; Rogat 185). The link between subject and style thus already disconcerted the early critics and has only by comparatively few critics been seen as an indispensable or dialectical phenomenon. Among these are female scholars such as Winifred Holtby (171); Alice Fox (201-02, 210-11), Annabel Robinson (215-19); Jane Marcus (221-24, 232, 246), Julie Robin Solomon (252-53, 257, 263), Hermione Lee (91-108) or Marion Shaw (166-68). Following their lead, I hope to have shown that the thematical achievements of the essay are in no way to be separated from its narratological merits. The essay is in fact of seminal importance with respect to subject *and* style. It is a compendium of historical, social, political, cultural *and* aesthetic criticism in the context of a fully emerging Modernism. It is provocative and unorthodox as to its methods and ideas and, with respect to its philosophical, historical, aesthetic and theoretical implications, well comparable to such works as John Dryden's essay *Of Dramatick Poesie* or Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*.

Woolf succeeds in expressing what she wants to say never 'despite' the narrative and stylistic features of the essay. Rather, they appear to be the immediate result of its compelling conversational strategies. The cross-connections with Woolf's fictional works are evident in *The Voyage Out*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Orlando*, *The Waves*, *Night and Day* *Flush* and other novels. The dialogic and the interactive, the

casual and the digressive, the ruminative and the associative, the imaginative and the fragmentary are inextricably connected with Woolf's assumptions about gender, culture and fiction.

Moreover, the essay agrees largely with Woolf's own criteria for essay-writing. A look at "The Modern Essay" in the first volume of *The Common Reader* reveals that Woolf derived these criteria from numerous studies of essays from the past and present and consistently put her ideas into practise in *A Room of One's Own*. Her criteria are related to (1) the author (task of giving pleasure; vision instead of just knowledge; presence of the author without preaching the gospel; independent feeling and thinking of the author, triumph of style rather than feat of skill, cf. 220, 222); (2) the circumstances of modern essay-writing (critic writing weekly and daily and briefly for busy and tired people, 219); (3) the text (well-balanced texture; shape and intensity; no decoration; exciting the reader's interest in domestic themes is justified if it is unaccompanied by manipulation and insubstantial peroration; ideas going beyond the level of talk in order to make the essay come alive with the readers; a naturally rich speaking voice; no skimming the surface of thought and diluting the strength of personality; display of beauty, courage, and thought; the essay should be exact, truthful, and imaginative instead of loose, merely plausible, and commonplace, 214); and (4) the reader. The effect on the reader desired by Woolf is

to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life—a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure [...]. (212)

Woolf's preliminary definition of a good essay, to

have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out (222)

shows the indispensable link between personality, conviction, language, artistic integrity, and inclusion of the reader.

Actually for her there are no criteria for good essay-writing other than those for good novel-writing, i.e. artistic integrity or vision:

[...] not knowledge [...], but a vision, such as we get in a good novel where everything contributes to bring the writer's conception as a whole before us. (213)

This credo more or less means a definite farewell to fundamental functions of the classical essay such as educating the reader's taste, establishing a canon of literary highlights and perhaps even censoring cultural achievements—activities that Woolf considered with scepticism though this did not prevent her from expressing very decided opinions on authors and works.

A Room of One's Own opened up new dimensions for modern criticism. It does not defy tradition altogether and yet at the same time ignores the traditional boundaries of non-fiction and fiction, attracting the reader to the common qualities of both discourses. Woolf thus established herself as a skilful theoretician and practitioner of literary criticism, a genre that she encouraged women to explore beyond the novel (together with historiography, biography, scientific and other kinds of writing). She made room indeed for the next generation of women writers and critics.

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