

*I: & the not I: & the outer, & the inner*

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## I: & the not I: & the outer, & the inner

the body, its traces and carapaces in the work of Virginia Woolf

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

The following abbreviations are used in the text and notes:

BA	Between the Acts
CE	Collected Essays
D	The Diary of Virginia Woolf
GR	Granite and Rainbow
HH	A Haunted House
JR	Jacob's Room
MB	Moments of Being
MD	Mrs Dalloway
ND	Night and Day
O	Orlando: A Biography
ROO	A Room of One's Own
TL	To the Lighthouse
VO	The Voyage Out
W	The Waves
Y	The Years



## INTRODUCTION



“Somewhere, everywhere, now hidden, now apparent in whatever is written down is the form of a human being” (*Virginia Woolf, Reading, CE II, 29*)

There is something both fascinating and uncanny about rebuses. The muteness of things without a meaning to justify their being together, heaps of broken images so that one cannot say or guess, makes one uneasy. Once names are given, once the things compose themselves to create a code, the code is deciphered, the solution is given – uneasiness is gone: fascination is gone. The enigmas posed by Woolf's fiction are “something one trembles to pin through the body with a name and call beauty” (O 211); this is why my intent in writing this dissertation about the body and its experience of the outside in Woolfian work is not to solve the rebus – this would be utterly anti-Woolfian – but to raise questions; to see how the images and situations contained in Woolf's fiction and essays can be connected to a wider net of thought; in my opinion, it is the only possible way to read her work; otherwise this would somehow mean to betray her message – if it is proper to speak of a message. Hence, notwithstanding the theme dealt with would easily lend itself to a similar reading, I keep distance from gender theories linked to the body, as well as from that part of the criticism that insists in retracing in



Woolf's novels (the most mistreated in this sense is definitely *To the Lighthouse*) Freudian hints to Oedipal mechanisms, fear of castration, etc., in an attempt to psychoanalyze the author and her family. "Experiment, don't signify and interpret!":<sup>1</sup> it is not a case if my purpose is to follow this advice by Gilles Deleuze, the anti-Oedipus par excellence. If one wants to *interpret* the lighthouse symbol, one is forced to forget what Woolf herself said about it: "I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*."<sup>2</sup> If an explanation is to be given to the lighthouse, it is just the absence of every possible interpretation; when we wonder "So that was the Lighthouse, was it?", the only possible answer is: "No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing." Anyone who tries to face Woolfian work as an analyst – or psychoanalyst – has forgotten her fundamental suggestion: "Do not dictate to your author; try to become him." (*How Should One Read a Book?* CE II 2). This as for the premise, which I hope to fulfill.

The quotation in the epigraph raises a fundamental problem: the correspondence between the human shape and the body of the text. *Kai ho logos sarx egeneto*, and the Word became flesh: the relationship between the ordinating power of the *logos* and the materiality of human flesh has always been bound by the double thread of Platonic and Evangelic tradition. For Lacan, the *logos* is the "I", or "phallus", described as the regulating principle that allows to enter the realm of the Symbolic, that is, language. Language is thus closely linked to the idea of possessing an identity, moreover, an identity that is distinctly separated from the outside. It is through the formation of the ideas of "Self" and of "Other", and through the definition of the relationship between the two, that the sense of language, and its consequent ability to communicate, becomes possible. The "I" is the line that represents – also visually – the human body seen as a separate self, the vehicle of meaning, the *σῆμα* (*sema*: sign, mark, token) through which the *logos* inscribes itself moulding the shapeless soil of human flesh in its own image. The "I" – as the lighthouse – is "a central line down the middle [...] to hold the design together."<sup>3</sup> Woolf's attempt to deconstruct the "I", to show how in reality the human body, the human language, and the sense of one's self have not such definite

<sup>1</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated and Foreword by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 153

<sup>2</sup> Q. Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, London, 1972; volume 2, p. 219

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



outlines as they are traditionally held to do, is represented beautifully through the short story *The Mark on the Wall*: the narrator notices a sign on the white wall – a *sema* on a white page – and suddenly her mind wanders in search of an explanation of it – an *interpretation*; but what was thought to be the fixed pivot to which a whole series of considerations could anchor, turns out to be the softest, most changeable being one can think of: the slimy, clammy body of a snail. And a snail is also the centre around which the microcosm of *Kew Gardens* revolves; while the handwritings (marks) of several characters in *Jacob's Room* are blotted, odorous, dribbling as an insect's trail.

What in Lacan's language is the “I” or “phallus” becomes in Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's reflections the arborescent mode of thought; the roots of a tree depart from a pivotal spine, the One, that branches out becoming two; at their turn, the two become four, and so on according to a sort of binary law. Similarly, the arborescent thought is organized about a vertical axis (that we could sum up as being the correspondent of the logos) and proceeds along dichotomous routes. To the binary logic of the root, Deleuze and Guattari oppose the rhizomatic mode of thought; unlike a tree's root, the rhizome permeates the ground horizontally, referring not to a central ordinating axis, but constituting a potentially infinite layer of undifferentiated nodes; the rhizome does not depend on a main organism, but it can be severed at each point and give rise to a new plant. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor to its multiple; it is not a One that becomes two, three, four, etc., nor can the One be added to it; it does not function, as the tree root does, according to the formula  $(n + 1)$ . It “constitutes linear multiplicities with  $n$  dimensions, having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plain of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted  $(n - 1)$ .”<sup>4</sup> It is starting from this difference between the  $(n + 1)$  arborescent thought and  $(n - 1)$  rhizomatic thought that I have attempted two definitions for two kinds of bodies that can be recognized in Woolfian fiction and essays: the *convex* body  $(n + 1)$  and the *concave* body  $(n - 1)$ . Rather than considering them as two fixed labels that would somehow restate dualism, nullifying what has been said up to this point, I would prefer to use them as the two extreme poles between which an infinite range of different kinds of

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<sup>4</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 23



bodies can be located.

The vacancy of the One, of the “I”, is in my opinion one of the central issues in Woolf's oeuvre. Once the gravitational centre misses, the core of things becomes a “centre of complete emptiness” (TL 170). Strange as it may seem, the effect of this vacancy is not a negation of the human body, but rather a return to it: “Language necessarily fails to give the moment whole, for the 'I' exists in discourse only by repressing the body, the unconscious, desire and pleasure.”<sup>5</sup> By undermining the sense of “I” and of language, Woolf operates a restoration of the underground strata of physical sensation, of the wordless deeps of human body and soul. The return to the body goes against the Cartesian tradition of seeing it as severed from the mind: more, the self of Descartes professes to need no body. The void left by the breakdown of the only possible certainty of the *cogito* is thus but a higher conquest. Paradoxically, Woolf gives the body back to itself by denying it: obliterating its solidity, suggesting its absence, asserting the possibility of the presence of “nothingness”. Consequently, also the text becomes “a construction of skins (of layers, of levels, of systems) whose [body] contains, finally, no heart, no core, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the very infinity of its envelopes – which envelop nothing other than the totality of its surfaces.”<sup>6</sup> This delicate task demands no doubt virtuoso devices: Woolf practices in fatiguing, pernicious exercises in out-of-focus sight; she concentrates her interest in the between, in the beyond; she watches the world from the corner of her eye, trying to become not-human – animal, as dogs and horses, whose visual field is more concentrated on the sides of the eye than on its centre; mineral, or even molecular, as the airs that enter the Ramsay's ruining house, and which are the only spectators of a decline unwitnessed by human souls. The solidity of the body is negated by concentrating attention on what *surrounds* it.

The texts that will be mostly taken into consideration will be *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and, in part, *Between the Acts*. Occasional hints will be given to Woolf's short stories, essays, diaries and letters, and to what is considered by the critics – I do not have the space to enquire the reasons, nor the properness, for that – her minor production, that is, *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *The Years*. The

<sup>5</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1987, p. 163

<sup>6</sup> R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1989 p. 99



dissertation envisages only marginally the analysis of *Orlando*, a work that has been the subject of a former dissertation of mine,<sup>7</sup> to which I will make occasional references. Actually, the character of *Orlando* would be the most useful paradigm to understand the kaleidoscopic display of shapes that a Woolfian body can go through. Orlando's progress can be summed up as the route of a body – both physical and literal – crossing all its possible stages, from the supreme convexness of the Renaissance hero (male, of noble breed, a descendant of men of war) and of its literal translation into the traditional biographical genre, up to the supreme concaveness of utter fragmentation of the self and ecstasy (Orlando becomes a woman and a writer), portrayed in Woolfian style that aims at the breakdown of traditional genres. The dissertation could be a useful premise to understand what has been in a way the starting point for this new work.

The three chapters are organized as follows: the first focuses on clarifying the distinction between *concaveness* and *convexness*, and analyzing at what distance from each of the two Woolf's main characters can be placed; the second is an enquiry into the different modes of convexness, mostly conveyed by the *surfaces* that cover the body, that mediate between the body and the outside, and that function as the materialisation of the projection of the body outside of it; convexness will be considered both in its negative aspects of constriction and fixation and in its positiveness as the only way in which a meaning can be communicated; in the last chapter, a similar discourse will be made for concaveness: whereas it can issue in a superior unity with the outside, or creative ecstasy, it could also lead the body to a perilous self-annihilation.

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<sup>7</sup> L. D'Errico, *Orlando in Front of the Mirror: The Self, the Other, and the Other Self*, 2005



## § I. “FOR THERE SHE WAS”

### Concaveness and Convexness in Woolfian Bodies



In her essay *Modern Fiction*, Virginia Woolf distinguishes between two possible subjects in literature, a difference that can account for great part of her poetics: on the one hand there is the life of the imagining mind or soul; on the other, the body of facts, to which the Edwardian “materialists”, Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy, were in her opinion too much committed. What seems to be a simplistic declination of the the Platonic division between *psyche* and *soma*, is but the tip of the iceberg of a very complex thematic developed all through her work. Applying Platonic categories to Woolfian aesthetic is nonetheless tempting: the *soma* becomes the *sema*, that is, the tomb inside which the soul is limited and buried waiting to be set free and to live again. But at the same time, *sema* means “sign”, “meaning”: without a body, the *psyche*-soul cannot be given a significance; thus, the body kills as it provides the only possible conveyor of meaning, allowing communication. Woolf’s relationship with the body-sign has an ambivalence that springs from this contradictory doubleness. Her need to communicate the most evanescent – but at the same time most essential – part of life, the life of the soul, the life of a creating mind, is hampered by the need for words that, for all their unwieldiness and lack of resemblance with life, are all that she has at her disposal. I like to see all her career and research as a struggle – and a hard, fatiguing, even dangerous one – to compromise successfully out of this puzzle; to thin out the rigid envelope of the



*soma-sema* as much as possible, running the risk of breaking it, and letting its content split. Something similar tantalizes many of her characters: Lily Briscoe wishes her painting to be “feathery and evanescent, [...] but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. [...] A] thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses.” (TL 163). The delicate balance described as “that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” (*The New Biography*, GR 155) is what every artist should try to achieve.

Yet, Platonic dualism seems to me to stand at the antipodes of Woolf's poetics. Binary oppositions are just what the above mentioned struggle dreads as its first enemy, and to read her oeuvre as lining up the positiveness of imagination and soul against the cruelty and torments of the body's rigidity would be a naïve misunderstanding. The point, in my opinion, is not the difference between body and soul, but rather, the wide range of significances that the body can have. At a certain point in *Night and Day*, the protagonist Katharine Hilbery feels “herself possessed of two bodies, one walking by the river with Denham, the other concentrated in a silver globe aloft in the fine blue space above the scum of vapours that was covering the visible world.” (ND 287). The body is not a closed-ended entity, a *soma* (corpse) with a defined outline; it is also the focus of sensorial perceptions; a force field crossed by impulses and signals; an antenna transmitting and receiving; a container; a content; the content *and* the container *of itself* – the parallel with the *sema*-sign here goes without saying. The point is where the *boundary* between the inside and the outside of the body is located, and how it behaves: it could function as a permeable membrane that lets the inside and the outside communicate and even intermingle; or it could harden into a sharp weapon, opposing and menacing what is not part of it; again, it could split open, letting its content flow freely. As DiBattista comments about *The Waves*, her novels can be seen as “an anatomy of the 'body' of literature in the Western tradition” in which “Woolf's primary intent [is] to enumerate the various styles of figuration through which the literate body expresses itself.”<sup>8</sup> The body is capable of infinite chemical reactions with what lays outside of it, and since dualisms are to be avoided, I would prefer not to tag them with a definition;

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<sup>8</sup> M. DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels*, New Haven London, Yale University Press, 1980, p. 183



but for the sake of convenience, it could be useful to give a name to the two opposite poles among which the infinite multitude of Woolfian bodies can be located, and these are the *concave* body and the *convex* body.

Writing in her diary about the composition of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf explained how she was going to “dig out beautiful caves behind [her] characters” (D2, 30 August 1923). This process of tunneling behind the people described in the novel would give depth to them, connect them with each other by means of invisible, subterranean bonds. This explains in part what a *concave* body could mean: the character has a “cave” behind it that makes it a receptacle of sensations and meaning, open to an exchange with the outside. This depth and openness allows it to be in communication with other bodies, so that the novel is crossed by a complicated net of underground correspondences woven through its characters. The most evident is the tunnel that links the protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, and the schizophrenic Septimus Warren Smith; though, it is not enough to say that the two are a sort of alter ego of each other. Both characters work out a sort of theory that denies the truth of single identity in favour of an open-ended view of the world. For Clarissa, it is not possible to be just one thing, to say “I am this, I am that” (MD 6); whereas Septimus's madness leads him to see the boundaries of things irremediably blurred, so that his bodily sensations are perilously mixed with the outside world. Thus, the correspondences between the two, both underlined in the novel and pointed out by the critics unanimously, reinforce their own theory of being just parts of a wider union with other bodies.

In her essay *Virginia Woolf's Two Bodies*,<sup>9</sup> Hite introduces another distinction between two kind of bodily experiences lived by Woolf's characters. The first, called the “social body”, is affected by the laws of society, and therefore its own image depends closely on how the others see it; it is the body “seen in the mirror”,<sup>10</sup> what implies its being constructed both as a visual image (thus detached from more physical, carnal sensations) and as a social one. The body approved by the dominant social order is that subjected to the laws of dualism: it is gendered, adult, mentally sane. It can be summed up, with Deleuze and Guattari, as “the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male

<sup>9</sup> M. Hite, *Virginia Woolf's Two Bodies*, Genders on Line Journal, 2000

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



speaking a standard language.”<sup>11</sup> This is what I call the *convex* body; a body, that is, that imposes its solidity on the outer world, asserting its severance from it. The most outstanding example of it is Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs Dalloway*: a psychoanalyst whose method of healing his schizophrenic patients is based on recovering their lost sense of proportion. With his “natural respect for breeding and clothing” (MD 85), he embodies the social power to which everybody must submit; in some sense, he resembles Deleuze and Guattari's Freud in his refusal to understand the otherness in his patient, claiming to be able to give an interpretation to their phantoms while he does nothing but project his own theory (and ego) upon them: likewise, Bradshaw's therapy will turn out to be unsuccessful, leading to his patient's obliteration (in Septimus's case, also effective). Sir William and Lady Bradshaw become the only possible paradigms to confront people with. Whoever finds himself situated outside of this rigid scheme, is to be expelled or forced to be changed until his proportions reenter the limits imposed by the social model. Despair is “penalised”; it is however significant that, while Bradshaw makes “England prosper”, at the same time he “forb[ids] childbirth” (MD 87), a hint to the cultural sterility that this attitude leads to, in particular by denying validity to Septimus's creative, “alternative” mode of thought. Through the repeated hints to Septimus's need for gaining weight, his body is re-conducted to its purely material essence, while his schizophrenic bodily sensations are presented as dislocated outside of it, merging with the vegetable world and with the impalpable, fleeting dimension of sound and colour:

[...] the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. (MD 18)

On the contrary, the characters who manageably channel themselves into the reassuring (but for Septimus – and Woolf – rather uncanny) furrow of social acceptability, are “men

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<sup>11</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 116



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who never weighed less than eleven stone six” (MD 131); the other proponent of the social cause, Hugh Whitbread – the “admirable Hugh” (MD 3), in perfect evening dress and socks – is characterized by a bulky build and a sluggish yet inexorable greed. On the contrary, Septimus, dreads, with Shakespeare, “the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly!” (MD 78). An actual scarnification occurs in him, described in almost gory terms:

Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock. (MD 59)

A similar de-fleshing, with the body thinned out in a veil that with its flimsiness contrasts with a rock in the background, is also felt by the body Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*, tormented by illness:

Her body became a drift of melting snow, above which her knees rose in huge peaked mountains of bare bone. It was true that she saw Helen and saw her room, but everything had become very pale and semitransparent. [...] The room had also an odd power of expanding [...] (VO 369)

The social body thus, in its will to define itself as separate from the outside, from the other who does not accept to be framed in the guidelines of “proportion”, is vector of convexity; it is “the perceiver” that for Apter “sees only what is publicly known and publicly accepted, [and] kills the world as he observes it.”<sup>12</sup> Also artistic creation is meant to be canalized into secure and proper ways by the Bradshaws:

Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William's goddess, was acquired by Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals. (MD 87)

Lady Bradshaw's photographs closely resemble the work of a professional, a fact that devaluates the profession of the artist as superfluous (in the adverb “scarcely”, however,

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<sup>12</sup> T. E. Apter, *Virginia Woolf, a Study of Her Novels*, London, The Macmillan Press, 1979, p. 51



Woolf's condemning mockery is in my opinion to be overheard). About the act of catching salmon, I am going to analyse later how it is linked with the recurrence of fishing images throughout all of Woolf's narrative and essays. Later, at Clarissa's party, Sir William examines a picture, but his interest goes first of all to the engraver's name. The sentence: "Sir William Bradshaw was so interested in art" (MD 171), is of course bitterly ironic; it is evident that who is speaking is not the author, but the admiring voice of societal approval, the summing of the onlookers' readymade opinion about what is a sane, responsible approach to art. No need to say that this is in utter contrast with art in Woolf's view, who saw it as a potentially disruptive, bursting, even scandalous force.

The representative of divine proportion's sister, the Goddess of Conversion, is Doris Kilman, obsessed with the repression of the flesh; by contrast, no more ironically than disquietingly, she is superabundantly physical: she is large, she smells; her nearly animal voracity is the epitomizing feature of her possessive relationship with what is outside her. Christian conversion becomes her gastrointestinal tract which devours, digests, assimilates, tears into molecules that end in being reassembled into something ugly – her body. The effect of her Platonic division between mind and body is the *contrappasso* of living entirely for her body – whereas claiming her intellectual and moral superiority: for "her food", "her dinner, her tea; her hot-water bottle at night" (MD 114). She would like to possess Elizabeth, to "grasp" and "clasp" her with her menacingly prehensile hands, to swallow up her (the pink candy she is greedy for reemerges in the girl's pink frock at the party). While Clarissa is able to absorb the world through becoming the outside – and at the same time impressing herself upon it – Kilman compensates her inability to do so by stuffing herself up with food. It is significant that her body, with its clumsy solidity, is a convex rock against which the vitality and bustle of London breaks against at the strike of the hour.

The sense of Clarissa's body as a whole is threatened by her being subdued to the social law of marriage:

But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this



astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (MD 7-8)

It is not my intention to discuss feminist theories about Woolf's work, but it is worth noting how she felt that a woman's body could be impoverished by marriage, relegated to a hidden and unknown existence. I would like to point out how the English habit of making a woman adopt the husband's surname and first name here turns out in a kind of obliteration of Clarissa ("not even Clarissa any more"). In her body a splitting occurs between the private person and the public parsonage, labelled and fixed: the two coexist but cannot coincide, and an insubstantial, invisible body haunts the mind. This second kind of body is envisaged in Hite's analysis as "visionary". Although this definition seems to refer to intellectual sensations, visionary bodies are "allowed the most unrestricted experience of ecstasies and raptures (as well as of loss and horror)";<sup>13</sup> as I noticed before, the crucial point is not the distinction between an evanescent mind and a solidly fleshy body. Centering her dissertation on gender theories, Hite identifies it with the "female modernist body";<sup>14</sup> but in my opinion, even if womanhood has much to do with it, the problem is far more complex.

To explain what for me is the true essence of concave-visionary bodies in Woolf, I must borrow from Deleuze<sup>15</sup> the concept of *becoming*. The Deleuzian translation of the distinction between visionary and social can be summed up with the two Husserlian poles *Leib/Körper*, where the first is the body that lives and continually mutates, and the second, also called organism, is the rigid envelope of the *corpse*, a body severed from its outside not only by the epidermis, but by a thick stratus of dermas that define it and anchor it to the controlling systems. *Becoming* means evading the sclerotized form of the *Körper* in search of infinite other possibilities of being: to be living (*Leib*), the body cannot but incessantly become; and for Deleuze, to become is necessarily not to become a Man. Man (that is the human, the male, the *white* male, the *sane* male) is the embodiment of the *Körper*, a rigid form that imposes the violence of its power over other minority forms: animals, women and children. This anti-hierarchy of the forms of life

<sup>13</sup> M. Hite, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, *Passim*



has its aim in the disruption of the hierarchy itself. In this sense the matter of being “visionary” is one of womanhood: “it must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all other becomings.”<sup>16</sup> The becoming-woman is the means through which every being – also the male – can achieve a liberation from the coerciveness of the organic view of the body. With her incessant, at times even frustrating metamorphoses, Orlando is the emblematic figure of becoming;<sup>17</sup> she escapes the pre-constructed “social” ways of being, tossed towards the limine of minority conditions by an irresistible centrifugal force: womanhood, nomadism, uprooting from the temporal dimension; and, last but not least, being a writer. For Deleuze, writing means not imposing a fixed form on a living matter; rather, it is the locus, the flux of becoming, or better, the method itself for the becoming.

Undergoing this kind of becoming, Woolfian concave bodies, through a tunneling process akin to that described for the creation of *Mrs Dalloway*, are put in connection with other beings, in whose form they unexpectedly re-emerge. In *Between the Acts*, the disgust of Giles Oliver for William Dodge, the “toady” “fingerer of sensations” (BA 37), creates an underground bridge that transforms Dodge into the “monstrous inversion” of a snake eating a toad; the repelling irregularity of his homosexual body is for the straightforwardly masculine Giles a “birth the wrong way round” (BA 62), a disturbing impasse (“The snake was unable to swallow, the toad was unable to die” BA 62) to solve which the only solution he can find is stamping his foot on it; this obliterating gesture issues from and gives vent to the rabid and impotent gripping the chair's arm which occurred some hours before. This secret transmutation reminds one of the famous scene in Proust's *Recherche*, when Charlus's union with Jupien is associated to the union of a bumble-bee with an orchid; not only because a natural image is used to embody an irregular form of love, but principally because an akin translation is taking place. The symbiosis of two bodies whose union is not biologically classified as sexual (in Woolf not yet unfruitful, the exact reversal of birth: not even deathly but hopelessly sterile) under-lyingly links to the pairing of two male bodies. In Proust, the problem of the relation of the body with the outer world is the starting point of a

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough analysis of the figure of Orlando, see L. D'Errico, *op. cit.*



reflection on the use of metaphors: external objects, taken in their independent existence from the viewer, seem terrifying, because the gap between them and the observer's body makes him mercilessly aware of his separateness from the outside. The only way to diminish this anguish, to re-establish a contact with the outside, seems to be domesticating (in both broad and strict sense, that is, making them feel “like home”) their otherness through habit. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel's childhood room, which was filled with objects vehicular of his personality, is made threatening by the introduction of a magic lantern, which casts on its walls unknown shadows that take possession of the everyday objects, subtracting them from the child's control. Looking upon what is entirely “other” from oneself, becomes an uncanny nightmare. But habit inevitably blunts the object's beauty while providing a salvation from it; the observer's task becomes rather absorbing the object by making its beauty part of himself – to use Deleuze's words, to *become* the object. Beholding the hawthorn flowers, Marcel says that he wants to “imitate, somewhere inside myself, the action of their blossoming.”<sup>18</sup> The only way of really possessing an object is turning it into something personally felt and imagined. The action of the hawthorn blossoming *becomes* thus the movement of the head of a girl. There is a sort of subterranean correspondence between apparently separate objects that links them while emerging at different stages of this process of becoming. So metaphors act as distillers of a particular characteristic of one object that is shared by other ones, making their knowledge to the observer more complete: not only are they regarded as a literary device, but also as an epistemological means. The same aim animates Woolf when in *Women and Fiction* she writes: “For a novel, after all, is a statement about a thousand different objects – human, natural, divine; it is an attempt to relate them to each other” (*Women and Fiction*, GR 81). Like the entire Combray unfolds from the flavour of the madeleine, Woolfian bodies and objects emit an aura of correspondances that permeates the space around them, creating bridges that connect them to other bodies and objects. The perception of the external object, merges with thought and changes according to its run:

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<sup>18</sup> M. Proust, *Swann's Way*, (vol. 1 of *Remembrance of Things Past*), translated from the French by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, p. 97



Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it. (HH 81-82)

External objects possess no fixed outlines, but they are moulded by the action of the observing subject. Perception of the outer world is thus not passive, but a creative action, through which the perceiver is able to shape the world, to enclose it in his own body by means of thought. Listening to the outer world, appreciating its beauty, is a creative action. Otherwise, when the external object is alien – as Marcel's room transfigured by the lantern, or the hotel room that manages to paralise him with its terrifying otherness, the body is returned to itself with no hope of communication with the outside. Also remembrance, in both Woolf and Proust, can spring from bodily sensation; sensorial experience functions as a window that opens on the past, as when in the manuscript version of *Mrs Dalloway* a bodily position revives in Peter Walsh a memory of Clarissa. In *Jacob's Room*, an image shared by more perceivers functions as the turning point of the discourse from one character to another, a technique already experimented in *Kew Gardens*, where the “hinge” around which the changing of perspective took place was the vantage point of a snail. In *Mrs Dalloway*, this evolves into what is called “represented speech,” which “generates an effect of subjective haziness [...] across the whole text.”<sup>19</sup> This technique allows a continuous shift from a character's interiority to the exterior world, so that the literary discourse is transformed into a sort of medium that permeates things, a placenta-like envelopment that allows an uninterrupted exchange between the inside and the outside. As argued in the fundamental text *The Brown Stocking* by Auerbach,<sup>20</sup> the discourse takes place in an indeterminate location between character and author.

Strange as it may sound, the characteristics of the sclerotized *sema* are for Deleuze concentrated on the thin surface of the face, rather than in the physical bodily presence. The face for him is a condenser of meaning, the part of the body most

<sup>19</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*, p. 54

<sup>20</sup> E. Auerbach, *The Brown Stocking*, from *Mimesis*, English translation from the original *Die Braune Strumpfe* by Williard R. Task, in Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986



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capable to convey signs and therefore to impose the despotic power of societal order. It is the white surface, while the black holes of the eyes are seen as the refuge of subjectivity. Writing about the role of the face in the determination of power relations in Western societies, he points out how

Regardless of the content one gives it, the machine [of faciality] constitutes a facial unity, an elementary face in biunivocal relation with another: it is a man *or* a woman, a rich person or a poor one, an adult or a child, a leader or a subject, “an x or a y” [...] the abstract machine of faciality assumes a role of selective response, or choice: given a concrete face, the machine judges whether it passes or not, whether it goes or not, on the basis of the elementary facial unities. This time, the binary relation is of the “yes-no” type [...]: the binary relation is between the “no” of the first category and the “yes” of the following category, which under certain conditions may just as easily mark a tolerance as indicate an enemy to be mowed down at all costs.”<sup>21</sup>

And again:

The semiotic of the signifier and the subjective never operates through bodies. It is absurd to claim to relate the signifier to the body. At any rate it can be related only to a body that has already been entirely facialized.<sup>22</sup>

The discrepancy with the Platonic distinction *psyche/soma-sema* is here brought even further. The face, traditionally regarded as a window through which the soul can stretch out of the narrow tomb of the body, is now the ultimate conveyor of the violence and rigidity of meaning-*sema*. According to this analysis, the social body could be defined also as a facialized body. The face as a means of social recognizability and acceptance contributes to negate roundness to the body, reducing it to the mere surface of the facial traits, that must undergo the test of a sort of binary code (“an x or a y”) which decides the rules for an acceptable self. The face/glance is denied its traditionally held primacy: the truth is no more to be found on a surface, one needs to return to the body, to its mass, its weight, through a Cézannian de-representation; the *vera icon* of human

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<sup>21</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 196

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201



consciousness has become but a two-dimensional mask. Many of Woolf's characters are connoted with irregular facial features. In particular, Lily Briscoe and Elizabeth Dalloway share the common trait of Chinese eyes. Not only their eyes – traditionally said to be the mirror the soul – are like those of a stranger, but also are oblique, furthestmost preventing the possibility of a facial identification with an interlocutor. In the light of Deleuze's concept of facial machine, a striking case becomes that of Rhoda in *The Waves*, who connotes herself with the recurrent refrain: "I have no face" (W 19). The absence of the filter of the signifier provided by the face, makes it impossible for her to survive in a world where social communication is indispensable. Bereft of the facial shield, her body is open-ended and bare, and cannot protect itself from the glances of the others that "pierce" it like "arrows". The loss of the face-*sema* makes it impossible for her to interpret signs: geometrical figures frighten her, for they are just abstract forms whose puzzle she cannot decipher, turning into a "metaphor depicting absence of all metaphors."<sup>23</sup>

The indeterminacy of the boundaries between bodies is wonderfully exemplified through the recurrence of the image of the fish in Woolf's fiction and essays. This very frequent symbol, to my knowledge wrongly neglected by the critics, is a downright irradiating core of meaning from which a great number of implications start out. From an intertextual analysis, it emerges how this image is associated with various concepts. In *Mrs Dalloway*, it is the hidden self, or soul:

For this is the truth about our soul, [...] our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities threading her way between the boles of giant weeds, over sun-flickered spaces and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable; suddenly she shoots to the surface and sports on the wind-wrinkled waves [...] (MD 142)

In *The Waves*, it is the sentence that Bernard, the writer, is looking for:

Or I would say, walking along the Strand, "That's the phrase I want", as some beautiful, fabulous phantom bird, fish or cloud with fiery edges swam up to enclose once and for all some notion haunting me [...] Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is

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<sup>23</sup> T. E. Apter, *op. cit.*, p. 127



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only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers. (W 171)

A comparison between the essay *Professions for Women* and the 1931 speech that served as a draft for it, shows how fishes can turn into swimming naked bodies, symbol of both imagination and – the parallel is only superficially paradoxical – truth. In the speech imagination is a naked young woman who, fish-like, swims into “the world that lies submerged in our unconscious being”. In the essay we read:

The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. (*Professions for Women*, CE II 287-288)

No need to say how this truth differs from that of masculine, societal power, that with its “facts uncompromising” (TL 4) restraints and frustrate the free course of imagination, as Mr Ramsay does with his son James's irrational hope of going to the lighthouse despite the bad weather forecasts. Another version of the same metaphor is the bird, which similarly moves in the elastic element of air. By device of a curious logical skip, the two images are often intermixed; the most telling example is in *Orlando*, where the protagonist, anxious to catch the wild goose representing literary creativity, complains that

Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets (here she flung her hand out) which shrivel as I've seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them; and sometimes there's an inch of silver – six words – in the bottom of the net. But never the great



fish who lives in the coral groves (O 204-205).

From this intertextual glance, that of the fish outlines as a unifier image for self-soul, artistic creation, imagination, truth, functioning as a pivot around which these concepts revolve and are interlinked. Moreover, the boundaries of this image are not close-ended, but they mix with those of the naked body and of the bird. The soul-imagination-truth is represented by a living thing that, once fished and taken out of its watery element, must die. This image implies not only the impossibility for the essence to be caught, that is formulated in a fixed paradigm, but also how it is vital for it to be inserted in a flux with the outside. The osmotic need of the body of the fish for water outside it, to be part of a continuity with what surrounds it, becomes in the metaphorical translation the need for reality to have blundered edges to be close to truth and to serve the needs of imagination.

In this light, the incidental episode in *To the Lighthouse*, when a fish is caught and mutilated to be thrown still living into the water could be read as an act of violence against the soul-imagination. Previously, something similar had happened in the Grimms' fairy tale "The Fisherman and his Wife", that Mrs Ramsay read to her son James: there, a miraculous fish was caught and, while the fisherman wanted to release it, his wife insisted to use it to improve the human lot, causing though a disturbance of the natural order because of her greedy misuse of its powers. DiBattista<sup>24</sup> reads this episode as a translation of Mrs Ramsay excessive confidence in the force of her uniting imagination, whose illusory fruits (as the marriage between Paul and Minta) are bound to turn into disruption (the couple's separation). According to this vision, the mutilation episode may hint to the masculine – Mr Ramsay's – approach to truth: dissecting it, taking only a part of it violently and disrespectfully; cutting reality into alphabet letters with no regard to its inexplainable wholeness, demanding those bleeding parts to keep a semblance to life (the act of throwing the fish back, and still living, into the sea). The fish that is curiously associated not to creative freedom but rather to the rigidity dictated by social laws is the salmon. The salmon is caught by both Sir William Lady Bradshaw in

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<sup>24</sup> M. DiBattista, *op. cit.*, p. 80



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*Mrs Dalloway* and by Oliver Giles in *Between the Acts*, and this parallel cannot in my opinion be overlooked. An hypothesis for explaining this recurrence may be considering the salmon as the traditional symbol of the quest for knowledge; its upstream struggle, suppressed by the fishers, may be seen as the act of superimposing social conventions barring the way to whoever tries to contradict them.

An example of a naked body held as a standard for truth, often in opposition to prudishness, is that of Sally Seton in *Mrs Dalloway*, who walks along naked in Clarissa's holiday house, incurring the indignation of an old aunt; Sally is the imaginative, creative girl, that with her nonconformist behaviour leads Clarissa to experience “moments of being”, like the one when she kisses her in the garden, source of an almost religious feeling of pureness and preciousness. Nakedness is associated with irregularity: like when Orlando, to the cry of “Truth!” awakens turned into a woman:

The sound of the trumpets died away and Orlando stood stark naked. No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace. As he stood there, the silver trumpets prolonged their note, as if reluctant to leave the lovely sight which their blast had called forth; and Chastity, Purity, and Modesty, inspired, no doubt, by Curiosity, peeped in at the door and threw a garment like a towel at the naked form which, unfortunately, fell short by several inches. (O 87)

The garment that the allegorical figures of Chastity, Purity, and Modesty throw trying to cover the truth of Orlando's nakedness are a telling symbol of the censorial mechanisms operated in the society to conceal irregularities by trying to deny their reality.

The vision of truth as a fish contrasts with the image that in *To the Lighthouse* is evoked to explain Mr Ramsay's vision of reality. When Lily Briscoe asks Mr Ramsay's son Andrew about the content of his books, the answer is:

“Subject and object and the nature of reality,” Andrew had said. And when she said Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. “Think of a kitchen table then,” he told her, “when you're not there.”

The kitchen table was something visionary, austere; something bare, hard, not ornamental.



There was no colour to it; it was all edges and angles; it was uncompromisingly plain. (TL 148)

That reality is a “kitchen table” is indicative of Mr Ramsay's view of the world: for him, it reduces itself to simple objects, truths that do not envisage any questioning by sympathy, hope or even beauty (the table is “uncompromisingly plain”). Mrs Ramsay's illogical belief that the weather is going to be good, so that next day their son James will be able to go to the lighthouse, annoys him because of its lack of logic. In this sense, the kitchen table, whose somehow cumbersome presence stoutly resists the absence of an observer, negates the possibility that one's vision of the objects can affect and transform them. It is not unlike the “old tramp's boot” in *Between the Acts* (see chap. II), that seems stubbornly to contrast the ebb and flow of the tide, presenting itself as always immutable against the perpetual mutability of the waves. Lily's vision of truth is quite different: she sees it as a “company of gnats”, an entity composed by separate beings but kept together by an “invisible elastic net” (TL 23).

Mr Ramsay's solidity, his convexity, is underlined throughout all the novel. He is “like a beak of brass, barren and bare” (TL 34). With his continuous requests for sympathy from his wife, his disrespect for his son's feelings, he intrudes as a “solid object” in the liquid and osmotic relationship between the child and his mother. The sprig with which he tickles James's bare leg is the visualisation of his convexness, which will reappear later under the form of the knife that James would like to have at hand to vindicate himself and kill his father. Convex bodies are represented, also graphically, by the “I”: as Minow-Pinkney<sup>25</sup> often underlines, they are “thetic subjects”, whose integrity is not questioned. Posing oneself as an “I” in relation to the surroundings has several implications; the fundamental analysis of the “I” made by Lacan sets forth the relation of it with the principle of the *phallus* and the formation of identity. Lacan's psychological theories about the entrance of the child in the realm of the Symbolic (that is, language) provides – underlining its patriarchal nature – the idea of the phallus as the regulator centre of the linguistic system, which, welding together the chains of signifiers, gives stability and a carrying structure to elements that, in the unconscious, would remain

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<sup>25</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*, *Passim*



floating and unfixed, always sliding and shifting into each other. The phallus is a psychological category that represents the centre of the human world which every individual tends to substitute with its own person – a substitution that is to remain utopian – to compensate the lack due to the loss of the original unity with the body of the mother and with the whole world by virtue of the ignorance of the binary opposition self/other. Of course male individuals feel this impossible desire much more strongly than female ones: thus the categorized character of language – its alphabetical linearity – is an exquisitely manly prerogative. There are moments in which Woolf's characters are overcome by the sense of the uniqueness of their own "I"; such is the case of Clarissa when, in front of the mirror, she feels a "contraction" that makes her self "pointed":

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self – pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives [...] (MD 31)

But, if convexness gives her the capacity to become a "centre", in another passage she feels a "contraction of the cold spirit", lacking "something central which permeated, something warm which broke the surfaces" (MD 27): contraction can be either an affirmation of the body as a cohesive "I", or a withdrawal from the body, opposite to the "dilatation of the nerves of the heart itself" (MD 154) at the party and somehow akin to what Peter Walsh means when, entering Clarissa's house and preparing himself to the scrutiny of society, feels that "the body must contract now" (MD 145). According to the sharp analysis by Maria DiBattista,<sup>26</sup> Clarissa is often mentioned as a virgin – of course not effectively, but from a spiritual point of view (another quality that she shares with Septimus, who does not want to have children). When she retires in her attic room and confronts herself with the bed and mirror which furnish it, the symbol of inviolability

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<sup>26</sup> M. DiBattista, *op. cit.*, p. 18



provided by virginity is regarded as both a failure – when drawn near to the bed – and a higher completion of the female body – integrity regarded in the mirror. When she contemplates her own image, Clarissa feels “pointed; dartlike; definite”, “one centre, one diamond”. She has become a meeting centre that is able to collect its separate parts without being bluntly harmful for the outside. The diamond, hard but radiant, solid but transparent, is the symbol of a higher kind of unity that assembles but at the same time lets light pass through. The perfect union she had in her youthful love for Sally Seton is also described as the gift of a diamond. To say it with Minow-Pinkney,<sup>27</sup> she experiences both being a “thetic” subject and separated into a multitude of selves.

If the “pointed” Clarissa slices “like a knife through everything” (MD 5) (even if we are far from the idea of penetration; Clarissa's convexness is very different from Mr Ramsay's menacing and intrusive one), Rhoda in *The Waves* and Mabel Waring in *The New Dress* feel speared by the eyes of the others; it is worth noting how Woolf puns on the word “pointed” to underline the piercing effect of the gaze on the body in the following passage:

Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?

"Let us go on, Septimus," said his wife, a little woman, with large eyes in a sallow pointed face; an Italian girl. (MD 12)

The gaze as a sharp weapon is also a recurrent theme of T. S. Eliot's early poetry; it is enough to think of the “crooked pin” with which the eye of the prostitute is metaphorized in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, the gaze of the others has a positive effect for Bernard's self in *The Waves*: “To be contracted by another person into a single being – how strange” (W 57); it forces him to re-collect himself from dispersal, an act that is visualized also by his pushing his arms into his sleeves, giving his body a close envelope, the translation of the “must, must, must”, “merciful words” that prevent the self from dispersing. So, if the sense of one's identity generates a fracture in the self's integrity (“One cannot extinguish that persistent smell. It steals in through

<sup>27</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*, *Passim*.

<sup>28</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, London, Penguin, 1998 p. 17



some crack in the structure – one's identity. I am not part of the street – no, I observe the street. One splits off, therefore.” W 74), as DiBattista notes, “solidity – the integrity of individuated matter – and liquidity – the original amorphous state to which matter is destined to return – these terms define the world polarized for that nascent subjectivity [...]”<sup>29</sup>

The central pivot that gives unity to the six speaking voices of *The Waves* is Percival, the seventh character of the novel, who never speaks. Embodying both the western, almost Roman *virtus*, and the heroism of a Graal quester, he “experiences no radical and unsurmountable opposition between public and private roles, between the active and contemplative life, between body and mind, between knowing and loving [...]”<sup>30</sup> His name derives from the French, meaning *pierce the veil*: here, the veil is his own self's perception, in other words the “window pane” (see chapt. II) that separates him from the outside world, so that he lives in a sane and satisfied relationship with it. His involvement with reality is active; rather than being a perceiver, as the others are, he is perceived, as if his identity was mirrored by the other six speaking voices who function as as many vantage points in order to define him and give roundness to his character. He is the silent hub of the wheel of which the six voices are the spokes. His solidity and linearity is suggested by words such as “straight”, “pillar”, “wake”. Percival projects himself outside of his body, but only as *homo faber*, imposing on it the illusion of linearity and clarity, of the centripetal power, and generating “communion” among the six speakers, all of whom, even if in very different ways, are in love with him. As the diners leave his party, his absence makes them fall back into chaos; his solidity and the emptiness subsequent to his death are central in the novel. Death makes him an absent centre, lending him some affinities with Jacob Flanders, whose “present absence”, as I am going to argue in the second chapter, is the distinguishing feature of *Jacob's Room*; his being silent makes the perception of his mind a hole in the text. Neville says, “about him my feeling was: he sat there in the centre. Now I go to that spot no longer. The place is empty” (W 100). Also the writer Bernard, in his creativity, unites and centres around the threads of his stories; but the way in which he connects follows rather a circular course;

<sup>29</sup> M. DiBattista, *op. cit.*, p. 167

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162



his sentences are made up of “bubbles”, “chains”, “rings” of words. Thus, while Mr Ramsay and Percival, both epitomes of male convexity even if with a different degree of intruding violence, are associated with earth, solidity, linearity (the linearity of the keyboard or alphabet of Mr Ramsay's logical thought), the female power of unity is rather that of the mist, of the sea, of an (amniotic) liquid that fills the crevices welding together separate parts without an impinging contact. While Mr Ramsay disrupts, his wife unites; as Clarissa and Rezia, she weaves the cotton wool of daily life behind which Woolf recognizes a hidden pattern; she makes the world a work of art, but without the grandeur of Shakespeare's or Beethoven's names;<sup>31</sup> through a contradictory logic, she manages in rounding off the sharp obtrusiveness of the world of things: she makes it possible for the boar skull hung in the children's room, that frightens Cam while James wants absolutely not to take it off the wall, to be there and at the same time not to be there, since she wraps in the green shawl of her empathic creativity. Clarissa (“having that gift still; to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed [...] with the most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element” MD 154) and Mrs Ramsay, with their ability to unite and combine, share “the same purpose: to affirm life, to manufacture moments of order in the face of chaos”<sup>32</sup> trying to discover a superior order in the world. While Percival is the sun of male “enlightenment”, Mrs Ramsay “wears gray clothes during the day and black by night, so that the reader is given the odd impression of looking at once upon and through her whenever she appears.”<sup>33</sup>

The power of the gaze of others in Woolfian fiction has often a disintegrating effect on the sense of wholeness of the observed body. Gazes at a party are as arrows that slice through the flesh tearing it asunder. Since *Genesis*, shame has been linked to the consciousness of possessing a body: a naked, blameworthy body, exposed to the gaze of an external and omniscient judge (God). According to a record in the autobiographical *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf was well aware of that, saying she “could feel ecstasies and

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<sup>31</sup> Cfr. the famous passage in *A Sketch of the Past*: “Behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.” (MB 72)

<sup>32</sup> M. Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 100

<sup>33</sup> J. Hafley, *op. cit.*, p. 80



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raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or the least sense of guilt, so long as they were disconnected with [her] own body” (MB 68). Bodies like those of Mabel Waring and of Rhoda are mercilessly subjected to the scrutiny of society, feeling torn into pieces. The idea of the inquisitive looks at a party that turn themselves into pointed and perilous torture stocks is also the subject of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T. S. Eliot, a composition entirely pervaded by the sense of a body fragmentation as a consequence of being merged into a social context. Prufrock dreads

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?<sup>34</sup>

The trial to which the outside gaze puts the body, dehumanizes it to a Kafkian and disgusting insect, “pinned” by a phrase, a formula that negates its roundness by reducing it to a two-dimensional definition (and to death also, thanks to the pun on formulated/formalin). Perhaps something similar happens to Clarissa Dalloway when Peter Walsh fixed her in the definition of the “perfect hostess”, negating her roundness while reducing her to just one aspect of her self, and not a pleasing one.

*The Voyage Out* can be seen as portraying the progress of the way Rachel Vinrace experiences her own body. Crossing the whole scale of embodiment degrees, she starts a nearly asexual girl, to become aware of her own body as an object of sexual passion through Richard Dalloway's kiss; her engagement with Terence Hewet goes further in this, raising the problem of marriage – a problem which she is not ready to face still. This *voyage out* of social conventions, and *voyage into* her body consciousness, is to end in her consummation through illness. The relationship that the three female characters in *The Waves* have with the outside – in particular in a social context, but not necessarily – has led Hussey<sup>35</sup> to place them at three different degrees in a scale of embodiment. On

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<sup>34</sup> T. S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 5

<sup>35</sup> M. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, Ohio University Press, 1986, *Passim*



the highest degree we find Jinny, whose self coincides perfectly with her own body. There is no separation between her consciousness and her physique, and thus her body has a solidity and compactness unknown to the other two. She could be drawn close to Mrs Manresa in *Between the Acts*, who longs to take off her stays and roll on the grass naked, laying out her body to the onlookers – “She had given up dealing with her figure and thus gained freedom” (BA 25). Jinny is complete and feels totally at ease in a “society of bodies” (W 39), as she calls it, where there is no need for words or thoughts to communicate. Indeed, she communicates entirely with her body which functions as a “transceiver” of signals. It irradiated attractiveness and casts a “circle” around it, beyond of which there is nothing; it is so committed to emanating its sexual signals that it cannot receive: a totally convex body, which rather functions as a magnet irresistibly attracting people. In front of the description of her bodily imagination, one cannot but be curiously reminded of Pirandello's *lanternosophy*:<sup>36</sup>

But my imagination is the bodies. I can imagine nothing beyond the circle cast by my body. My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light. I dazzle you; I make you believe that this is all. (W 84)

Jinny is a centre around which the universe of the party pivots. The door that opens and shuts continually does not frighten her, because also her body behaves so: an antenna transmitting and picking up, always open to the outside but at the same time immune to it, impermeable. Her entirety is reflected in the way she experiences time: she wishes that “the week should be all one day without divisions” (W 33), and would like to abolish night, to turn it into a day to avoid its being obliterated by the mind through sleeping and dreaming.

At a middle degree in the range of bodily consciousnesses is Susan. She is an embodied character, but there is a gap between mind and body, inexistent in Jinny. Susan is an earthly character: she is at ease in nature (quite unlike “the wild child of nature” BA 25 Mrs Manresa, who acts a part squatting to the soil and longing to roll in

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<sup>36</sup> The theory advanced by Anselmo Paleari in *The Late Mattia Pascal*, according to which every single human consciousness casts around itself the illusion of its separateness in the form of the light of a lantern; beyond the circle of light there is an undifferentiated darkness, that is enhanced by the insufficient light of the self.



the grass, a part that is but a social game), her body is fruitful as the countryside that surrounds her, she is a mother. Through sensorial experience, she can identify herself with the external world: the union she feels with the earth allows her to get out of her own body. Thus, Susan is located at a middle level between Jinny and Rhoda: she is solidly embodied (convex), but allows the outside world to enter her, to mingle with her inside. This would have been impossible to Jinny, who places herself in the world as a hard centre which captures but is not permeated by the others. When Susan walks along the country, she is no more a woman, but becomes light, and even the seasons and the months; however, this experience is only transitory and does not allow her to lose completely herself in the outside: feeling the weight of her body against the gate, she is recalled to her own physicality, to her being convex. She is integre, and hers is the integrity of nature, that “cannot be divided, or kept apart” (W 63). Her capability to project her body on the outside is enhanced by her pregnancy. Unlike the sterile Rhoda, her life can be prolonged in that of her child, whose eyes “will see when [hers] are shut”; she thinks that she “shall go mixed with them beyond [her] body” (W 113). When she is expectant, her body becomes “a hollow, a warm shelter for my child to sleep in” (W 113). With age though, a sense of loss overcomes her, and she feels “sick of the body, [...] sick of [her] own craft, industry and cunning” (W 127). The consciousness of her body is activated by the jealousy she feels for Jinny; instantly, she feels ugly, “short” and “squat” – features that contribute to linking her to the soil. The gaze of the others rouses shame in her, and she must hide her hands, which she feels to be unpolished. It is significant to note how Jinny and Susan incarnate the two opposites of city and country, the latter seen as a world where social conventions do not matter.

At the lowest degree of embodiment we find Rhoda: “Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. I dream; I dream” (W 27). Rhoda's body is dangerously open-ended, the opposite pressures of her inside and outside are not well balanced and threaten – and in the end will manage – to disintegrate her. While Jinny hates night, she prefers sleeping, forgetting her bodily existence; but she cannot find relief in it, on the contrary as she falls asleep she is overcome by the panic of losing her



identity. At time she seems to lose the perception of herself as a body, and she needs the help of a hard, external object (the parallel of the gate against which Susan recovers her sense of self) to come out of “nothingness”:

Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body. (W 26)

Rhoda hates looking-glasses: in Lacanian terms, she cannot achieve unity; her own body image, as the geometrical figures of the mathematics lesson, urge her to become one identity. Associated with whiteness and emptiness, she clings to unmoving and physically hard objects to recover the lost sense of her being a thing among the things, as a sort of Sartrean Roquentin. Again, the sense of time reflects the scrappiness of her sensations; for her “one moment does not lead to another”:

I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. (W 85)

The feeling of time not naturally flowing but going on, so to say, by fits and starts, is something Rhoda has in common with Prufrock, who “measures out [his] life and coffee spoons” and divides the day in “evenings, mornings, afternoon”.<sup>37</sup> The parallel world of the party (the day begins when *it* begins, that is by evening, and the image coffee spoon renders both the pettiness of the tea party and the smallness of the moments into which Prufrock's life is anatomized), with its artificiality, condemns its victim to feeling time in an unnatural way. Clearly enough, Rhoda's relationship with her own image generates terror in her. Woolf lends her an experience she herself felt during her adolescence, that of being not able to cross a puddle, into which she presumably saw her own image reflected:

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<sup>37</sup> T. S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 5



I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather, I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed. (W 40)

The puddle is described as “cadaverous”; the sense of one's identity, fixed through an external image, reminds one of the existence of a *Körper* that with its fixity suppresses the flowing vitality of the self, and into which one “draws oneself back”.

When she read the enthusiastic review of *The Times*, praising her outlining of the characters in *The Waves*, Woolf was surprised to read about *characters* where she meant to create none. None of the six voices is by himself one person; rather, as Hafley suggests, “all of them merge to form a single identity, just like Orlando's selves had done, in a 'communication'”;<sup>38</sup> at a certain point, referring to Percival, Bernard sees “for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget” (W 185). The six bodily attitudes of the characters are but partial points of view upon what is the unportrayable nature of the human body. As in a triptych by Francis Bacon, the body is decomposed in a series of partial snapshots, the scraps of a kaleidoscope that can form a unity only when considered as a whole – and illuminated by the centralizing light of Percival. Percival is the sun which, in the italicized seascape descriptions which open each section, progressively illuminates things making them separate from one another; however, according to Apter, at a certain point “their distinctness becomes fanatical and aggressive.”<sup>39</sup> Truth is to be found neither in concaveness nor in convexness, as they would in any case constitute a partial point of view of things; rather, in the always changing forms that take place between these two poles of intensity. Thus, the concept of the convex body “I” is not destroyed: this would be impossible if one wants to remain within language (within the *sema*-meaning). The “I” remains, like the central line of the lighthouse, which by itself means “nothing”, but “hold[s] the design together.”<sup>40</sup> In *The*

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<sup>38</sup> J. Hafley, *op. cit.*, p. 109

<sup>39</sup> T. Apter, *op. cit.*, p. 115

<sup>40</sup> Q. Bell, *op. cit.*, volume 2, p. 219



*Waves* it is the pattern of dance that mediates between the differences constituted by the two different bodies of the sexes: the male (hard) and the female (soft) bodies are encircled in the figure of the dance. Likewise, the artistic pattern can provide unity allowing difference to be maintained. This grammar of the bodies is thus reflected in actual grammar: syntax is subordinated to rhythm, that in Woolf's intention is supposed to weld the bood together. But as reality does not lie in complete concaveness, so does Woolf never radically destroy the laws of syntax. Unlike Joyce, she does not attempt a drastic demolition of language; rather, by subtly undermining syntactic laws, she prefers loosening it. Grammar dissects and regulates the flux of the subject's desire; a certain degree of conventionality – usually third person and past tense – is kept, but just as a device to allow more freedom to a subject that is outside the principles of identity, which can identify with different scenes without integrating itself fully into them. In this sense a woman writer, being not integrated in society and in the literary milieu as a man could be, is more capable to portray the liminality necessary to upsetting the rules of language without making its system collapse. Deleuze writes:

When Virginia Woolf was questioned about a specifically women's writing, she was appalled at the idea of writing “as a woman”. Rather, writing should produce a becoming-woman as atoms of womanhood capable of crossing and impregnating an entire social field, and of contaminating men, of sweeping them in that becoming.<sup>41</sup>

To achieve “that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself” (ROO, 96), feminist consciousness is detrimental. If on one hand Woolf was very concerned with the enquiry on the sensations experienced by a female body (in *Professions for Women* she deplores not having solved the problem of “telling the truth about my own experiences as a body [...] I doubt that any woman has solved it yet” *Professions for Women* CE II 288), on the other hand in my opinion a solely feminist reading of Woolf cannot be completely genuine: considering her oeuvre from the point of view of a woman means to negate what is the womanly characteristic par excellence in Deleuze's thought; that is, having *no* point of view, encompassing in one's point of

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<sup>41</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 304



*I: & the not I: & the outer, & the inner*

view more than one. The woman writer must produce “atoms of womanhood”; *pace* feminists, here is the noxious paradox of gender-conscious critics: to be a woman and to assert it proudly would mean to *become* a man.

In conclusion, we wonder: what is the device that manages to fill the crevices between separate bodies, between the inner and the outer; what makes a body concave without risking to be dispersed, what makes a body convex but not aggressive, capable of assembling things around it without substituting the Big Ben of proportion to the centre of complete emptiness? Longing to obliterate distances, Lily Briscoe, wonders:

Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee. (TL 47)

The only desirable knowledge is not of a linguistic or philosophical kind; rather, more closely to a Proustian metaphor, it is, almost biblically, love-making; the loving, carnal, sexual act of artistic creation, the only possible way to communicate, to make the bodies no longer severed. The more than three-century-long poem Orlando writes is “like the intercourse of lovers” (O 213): writing is but writing love letters to the world in all of its manifestations, love is the force that eclipses Marcel's self behind the form of the hawthorn:

For it is through writing that you become animal, it is through colour that you become imperceptible, it is through music that you become hard and memoryless, simultaneously animal and imperceptible: in love.

Only in the black hole of subjective consciousness and passion do you discover the transformed, heated, captured, particles you must relaunch for a nonsubjective, living love in which each party connects with unknown tracts in the other without entering or conquering them [...] <sup>42</sup>

Citati's comment in front of Woolf's letters goes as follows: “Quale verbosità febbrile:

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-9



quale dedizione ai colori e alle superfici del mondo, e a tutte le persone incontrate, alle quali non poteva mai negare un abbraccio fuggitivo. Desiderava la vita: voleva abbracciarla; ingoiava e assimilava e possedeva tutte le cose viste o appena intraviste. Corteggiava il mondo, e voleva essere corteggiata. Viveva, e vedeva attraverso gli altri.”<sup>43</sup> Love is what makes possible for Woolf, as for Clarissa and Mrs Ramsay, to absorb the world without harming it, to make it whole without forcing it into a superimposed mould. Woolf's meandering route through the dangers and horrors of life and literature (for it is “very, very dangerous to live even one day” MD 6) issues in a enamoured, ecstatic reassertion of the Virgilian *Omnia Amor Vincit*. And to undress this adage from its commonplaceness, to give it back to us polished and transparent as a diamond but fleeting and fragile as a butterfly was her effort.

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<sup>43</sup> P. Citati, *I fantasmi di Virginia Woolf* *Virginia Woolf*, Repubblica — 20 gennaio 1999



*I: & the not I: & the outer, & the inner*

## § II “HOW ONCE THE LOOKING GLASS HAD HELD A FACE”

Frames, Surfaces, and the Empty Centre



The surface of the organism, the angle of signifi-  
cance and interpretation, and the point of subjectifi-  
cation or subjection. You will be organized, you will be an  
organism, you will articulate your body – otherwise  
you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified,  
interpreter and interpreted – otherwise you're just a  
deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a  
subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the  
statement [...] (*G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, A Thousand  
Plateaus*)

In Hindu mythology, the veil of Maya provides an illusion to men, making them believe that they can identify with their own individual body and mind, and constitute an entity (*ahamkara*) separate from the oneness of the world. It is the governing principle of dualism within the phenomenal world. Etymologically, it means: not (*ma*) that (*ya*), implying the falseness of a dichotomous view of things. The myth of Maya sets forth a



central issue in the relation of the body with the outer world: surfaces. Like the veil, the surfaces that cover the body/mediate between it and the outside, either conceal and mask the fleeting essence of the soul, or function as a screen onto which it is projected, but at the same time sclerotized. Surfaces function as a double mirror: in them we look both at ourselves and at the others while they are looking at us. That is, we look at ourselves through the eyes of the others. They can make up the soul so as to change it to the eyes of the observers; but they can also be changed by the subject projected upon them. They are, so to say, the no man's land upon which the battle (which could also be love-battle, love-making) between the lined armies of the self and the non-self is fought. Surfaces are notoriously dangerous: Pirandello, writing about the projection of the actor's image on the film screen notes how "his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence."<sup>44</sup> Like a Hiroshima shadow, the body is pulverized into photons that cling to the (un)holy shroud of its image – in broad sense. Whatever surrounds the body mingling with it and carrying the imperishable traces of its all too perishable essence uselessly trying to define it, to give a veridical outline of it, has a preponderant role throughout Woolfian fiction and essays.

As hinted previously about the Platonic *soma-sema*, frames in Woolf seem to have a double nature: on the one hand they are the externalization of a constriction of the body that forces it into defined boundaries and prevents it from being inserted in the spontaneous flux that connects it with the outside. On the other hand – and that is also the case of the frames of art: for example pictures, and, in a translated sense, the frames of literature – they are the only means through which a meaning, or the lasting idea of a personality, can be conveyed. As catalysts of convexity, they can both disrupt the body, re-conducting its vitality to a fixed form, or unite it, giving it that sense of separateness from the other that is vital for avoiding a panic and perilous dispersal. Therefore, Woolf's attitude towards them is often ambiguous: they are dangerous, but one cannot do without them. The characters that embody artists – often amateur ones – offer valid

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<sup>44</sup> L. Pirandello, *Si Gira!*, quoted by W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 31



examples of this, finding it troublesome to “frame” (that is, operating a selection, a *tranche de vie* on) the material of reality. Orlando is harassed by the way in which words always fail to describe the real essence of their object; Neville and Bernard in *The Waves* self-consciously play literary games that unmask the falsity of pre-constructed artistic patterns.

Portraying empty frames allows Woolf to attain the literary rendering of one of the focal issues of her philosophy: the empty centre. All through her work the haunting consciousness of “an emptiness about the heart of life” (MD 26) is felt as the sense of a terrifying vacuum that substitutes the core of things. The only way to convey this paradoxical presence of nothingness is through the display of empty carapaces, abandoned by a living body, that still carry traces of it creating an effect of harrowing absence. In *Mrs Dalloway*, this emptiness is “an attic room” (MD 26). This is the place where Clarissa “disrobes”, an act that symbolizes her wearing off of social duties. There, she is unobserved and can retire in a sort of monastic solitude. The attic is chilly, almost aseptic; there, her self is protected from the gaze of the others, from the chaotic life of the city, but also secluded from its vitality. This double sense of protectiveness and solitude sheds light on the two functions of the room as the first Woolfian frame we are to analyse: the walls that enclose the body allow it not to be dispersed; but at the same time, they provide a separation from the flow of external life. In *The Voyage Out*, the separate hotel rooms that Rachel Vinrace sees from the outside by night, stand for the separateness of the people who inhabit them. As Hafley argues, “each bedroom holds its individual, but this unity is part of the diversity of the whole. The diversity itself, however, resolves into the unity of the hotel [...]”<sup>45</sup> The room is thus an objectification of the individual self, and there the single ego is isolated, bound in by the walls. But on the other hand, they manage to protect from chaos and dispersion:

Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification which is simplicity itself; stalls, boxes, amphitheatre, gallery. (JR 63)

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<sup>45</sup> J. Hafley, *op. cit.*, p. 16



In her diaries, Woolf writes that Jacob's room is supposed to “hold him together”. Rooms are also a metaphor for the mind, as when Woolf in her diaries reports: “I like going from one lighted room to another, such is my brain to me; lighted rooms” (D2 15 August 1924); or, they can represent the multiple selves a body-house can host (“There are many rooms - many Bernards”, W 174). Especially when lit, they are a secure refuge in which to retire, often in opposition to an outside described as menacingly dark and watery; such is the case of the room of the dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, where the light confers homeliness, but most of all unity, to the atmosphere: the people “scattered about, in attics, in bedrooms [...] assemble in the dining room for dinner” (TL 77), so that they “had their common cause against that fluidity out there” (TL 90). The autonomy and privacy of the soul that only a room can provide is the central issue of Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, where the roles of differentiated rooms again correspond to the social roles of the body/soul. The social image of the woman has always been associated with the drawing-room, that with its mediation between the public streets and the private bedrooms is the locus of convention; women need to own a personal room to be freed from this publicized view and to attain that privacy that is fundamental to let their own imagination express itself. In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf's childhood house is described as being divided into two parts: “Downstairs there was pure convention: upstairs pure intellect” (MB 135); the sense of rooms as compartments for different aspects of the human life was evidently already felt by her through her child experience.

The coexistence of creative and repressive effects of seclusion is the “supreme mystery” in *Mrs Dalloway*: “here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?” (MD 112). The sense of being separate entities that are nonetheless comprised in a superior unity haunts Clarissa. As Rosenthal puts it, her “obsessive concern for the privacy of the soul is a complicated feature of her character, at once her genius and, to a degree, her failure.”<sup>46</sup> The old lady she sees through the window opposite to hers is the human soul in its quintessence, bare of social constructs, solitary and absorbed in its own process of living. But from privacy spring also the “coldness” and “hardness” of her

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<sup>46</sup> M. Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 97



character. In her attic room she finds her single bed, in which she sleeps alone thus testifying to her self-abnegation (her husband Richard is forced to find a surrogate of her bodily warmth in the hot-water bottle); and the mirror, symbol of self-contemplation, in which she can regard herself as a whole, have the feeling of being entire and creatively separate. A link is traced between her ability to “assemble”, to “create” (her party-giving is for her a form of art) and her frigidity and contraction, her inability to express feelings that is frequently remarked by Peter Walsh.

Clarissa's attic room is somehow connected to another attic: that in which Lily Briscoe's painting will be hung. The empty attic room here is the materialization of the regardless state in which her art will fall, a symbol of failed communication. Empty rooms are an even more forceful topic than inhabited ones, for in them the presence of nothingness is uttermost felt. The most striking example of it is obviously to be found in *Jacob's Room*. From the title itself, we understand, oddly enough, that the subject is not a person, but his room; and the whole novel is to confirm the impression given by its title. Even if keeping the external carapace of a *Bildungsroman* in its depicting of the formation of a young man through his childhood, humanistic instruction, and final death *pro patria* in the First World War, the novel fails to give a steady impression of him, to *build* him effectively. It vainly tries to define Jacob by not touching him, but only approaching him from the outside, collecting things from his environment. From the description of his room at Cambridge, one is supposed to come to a definition of his personality:

Jacob's room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece; a photograph of his mother; cards from societies with little raised crescents, coats of arms, and initials; notes and pipes; on the table lay paper ruled with a red margin – an essay, no doubt – “Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?” [...] His slippers were incredibly shabby, like boats burnt to the water's rim. Then there were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua – all very English. [...] Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there. (JR 33)

The books on the shelves, the biographical hint in the photograph of the mother,



bohémien shabby slippers, should tell us everything there is to know about a young man of culture. But they do not: the room is filled only by a “listless” air, and the arm-chair, ghostly creaking, makes the absence of its owner almost distressing. Jacob is the missing core, the “emptiness at the heart of life”. All throughout the book, premonitions of his death, that is to annihilate him positively, are felt. There is another death that precedes Jacob's, that of his father Seabrook. The following reflections accompany his funeral:

"Merchant of this city," the tombstone said; though why Betty Flanders had chosen so to call him when, as many still remembered, he had only sat behind an office window for three months, and before that had broken horses, ridden to hounds, farmed a few fields, and run a little wild – well, she had to call him something. An example for the boys.

Had he, then, been nothing? (JR 10)

Betty Flanders, Jacob's mother, wonders whether he has been at all; the untruthfulness of the sentence on the tombstone – and that is everything a tombstone can be, untruthful – is the empty carapace that fails to define Seabrook, just as the “room” around Jacob will do later.

*Jacob's Room* is anticipated by the short story *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*, where the same attempt to portray a character by describing the empty room where she lives is made. Isabella, the lady of the title, is described as a “tremulous convolvulus” (HH 87); she is a climber plant, but she misses her support – somehow like the falling tree in the novel stands for the missing “I”, the lack of a defined identity that fails to give support to the scraps that uselessly try to outline him. Like Jacob, she is an empty centre: “One cannot reach back to an 'essence' of Isabella from the 'traces' of her found in the letters in her room.”<sup>47</sup> In the end, she turns out to be “perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody.” (HH 92). The short story shares with the novel the same fascination for letters:

Let us consider letters – how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark – for to see one's own envelope on another's table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien. Then at last the power of the mind to

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<sup>47</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*, p. 37



quit the body is manifest, and perhaps we fear or hate or wish annihilated this phantom of ourselves, lying on the table. Still, there are letters that merely say how dinner's at seven; others ordering coal; making appointments. The hand in them is scarcely perceptible, let alone the voice or the scowl. Ah, but when the post knocks and the letter comes always the miracle seems repeated – speech attempted. Venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost. (JR 86-87)

Also letters, as empty envelopes, are a “phantom of ourselves”, menacingly deathly just as they try to “immortalize”. Several letters mentioned in the book bear the stamp of a living body, like the one Betty Flanders is writing at the beginning, which gets stained by her tears as if it visualized the weakness of her grief: the letters broaden into a “horrid blot” (JR 1). Florinda's spelling is like “a butterfly, gnat, or other winged insect, attached to a twig which, clogged with mud, rolls across a page” (JR 88). The sense of a – often disgusting – bodily fluid contaminating the Apollonian asepticism of words contributes to enhance the difference between the abstract envelope and the living organism leaving its traces on it.

It is precisely as a phantom that Jacob is characterized since the beginning of the novel. In the opening seaside scene, he is absent, his brother's cry “Ja-cob” finds no answer and breaks against the rocks, ominously representing the volatile essence of his soul clashing against hardness. The brother himself makes his first appearance as a blue shadow on his mother's letter. Moreover, Jacob mistakes a rock for his nanny: the human body is missing, substituted, and the child Jacob is “lost”; what follows is only an attempt to imagine his life, while his body, his essence, is bracketed. Other characters are seen as shadows: Florinda appears to Jacob as if she had no body, a blank-faced pierrot, in a scene where faces, as Deleuzian white screens, appear out of darkness as detached from their bodies. The women Jacob loves possess a kind of incorporeality: they are semi-transparent, translucent, and compared to the abstract Greek ideal of statues. The insistence on people's clothes underlines Jacob's difficulty to accept the human reality of women: he cannot grasp their substance. Florinda has no surname, and for parents she has “the photograph of a tombstone beneath which, she said, her father lay buried” (JR 71): the materiality of her father's body is trice deferred, firstly as a photograph, secondly as a tombstone and thirdly as the doubt that she is speaking the truth about it.



Besides, the fact that the father “had died from the growth of his bones which nothing could stop” (JR 72) uncannily reminds one of the several images of skeletons and skulls as sclerotized images of death-in-life that permeate the whole book. Jacob himself is given a statuesque materiality that, far from restoring his lost concreteness, contributes to placing him among the ghostly world of inanimate things. When he sees Florinda in the company of another man, the fact of being faced by another's independent reality annihilates Jacob exposing his body mercilessly to vision. The light reveals each single particular of his apparel, he is re-conducted to the limits of his boundaries:

The light from the arc lamp drenched him from head to toe. He stood for a minute motionless beneath it. Shadows chequered the street. Other figures, single and together, poured out, wavered across, and obliterated Florinda and the man.

The light drenched Jacob from head to toe. You could see the pattern on his trousers; the old thorns on his stick; his shoe laces; bare hands; and face.

It was as if a stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid whetstone, which was his spine; as if the switchback railway, having swooped to the depths, fell, fell, fell. This was in his face. (JR 88)

For McCluskey, “more and more, we get the sense that when Jacob is not 'staring straight ahead,' a kind of Byzantine character not only backless like the Greek statue, but dimensionless as well, he is looking backward. Even our seeing him from many different angles through the eyes of many people, does not sufficiently flesh him out.”<sup>48</sup> The moth, in Woolf always used as a symbol for life, soul, and spirit, inevitably escapes him. The pinned butterflies seem to simbolize external objects that trace, rather than Jacob's progression through life, his limits: Jacob seems to be condemned to repeat patterns (for example, in his relation with women). His faded name on his letter box is indicative of the difficulty one makes in outlining him even during the occupancy of his room. The name, which for DiBattista<sup>49</sup> is the symptom of the male instinct to leave a trace, to inscribe a mark, linked to the territorial instinct, is the vocalisation of the social self; while Clarissa through her middle-class marriage becomes just “Mrs Richard

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<sup>48</sup> K. McCluskey, *op. cit.*, p. 37

<sup>49</sup> M. DiBattista, *op. cit.*, *Passim*



Dalloway” (MD 8), Peter Walsh, trying to overcome conventions, keeps for himself an unnamed name that transcends mere identity. the self cannot be named. Yet, fear from the loss of one's identity leads characters as Louis in *The Waves* to be obsessed with their own name: “‘I have signed my name,’ said Louis, ‘already twenty times. I, and again I, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands, my name. Clear-cut and unequivocal am I too.’” (W 109). When Neville, who asserts “I am one person – myself”, suffers an identity crisis, he says he does “not know myself sometimes, or how to measure and name and count out the grains that make me what I am.” (W 53). The self is atomized in countless and nameless grains. The defining power of the name is thus to remain but an illusion; “without the distancing, distorting, shaping, *naming* of human being, there is nothing: ‘pure form’ is one of the myriad (false) names of nothingness.”<sup>50</sup>

The presence of bodiless (and often naming) voices is another device that conveys absence; the voice, coming so to say from off stage, shares the volatile quality of the air that always inhabits empty rooms in Woolf's descriptions, and does but underline emptiness through the absence of the body that utters it. The wind that moves the arras in Orlando's manor, the “airs, detached from the body of the wind” (TL 120) that enter the Ramsays' ruining house, are the fleeting portrait of nothingness. When Bonamy silently cries “Jacob, Jacob”, the answer is a ghost that ruffles the dead leaves outside; it is the fulfillment of Jacob's ominous absence to the cry of his brother at the beginning of the novel, which already was presented as “Pure from all body, pure from all passion, going out into the world, solitary, unanswered, breaking against rocks” (JR 3). The voiced name of the absent is the rendering of its shadow; as Deleuze writes about Francis Bacon,<sup>51</sup> the shadow is the body that escapes from itself from a point of its own surface, in this case, the mouth. Curiously, an identical device is used by Pirandello in *Shoot!*, when, after the description of the empty house of the grandparents where a bereavement has been, a voice coming from the garden calls the dead young man. The similarities with some passages in *Jacob's Room* are so striking that the excerpt deserves quoting:

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<sup>50</sup> M. Hussey, *op. cit.*, p. 111

<sup>51</sup> G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, London, Continuum, 2003, p. 12



Ah, yes! I had only to turn and look at those curious brackets which seemed to shrink from touching the floor with their gilded spidery legs. The marble top of each was a trifle yellow, and in the sloping mirror above were reflected exactly in their immobility the pair of baskets that stood upon the marble: baskets of fruit, also of marble, coloured: figs, peaches, limes, corresponding exactly, on either side, with their reflexions, as though there were four baskets instead of two.

In that motionless, clear reflexion was embodied all the limpid calm which reigned in that house. It seemed as though nothing could ever happen there. This was the message, also, of the little bronze timepiece between the baskets, only the back of which was to be seen in the mirror. [...] Next I see the room from which one goes down to the garden. (From one room to the other one passes between a pair of low doors, which seem full of their own importance, and perfectly aware of the treasures committed to their charge.) This room, leading down to the garden, is the favourite sitting-room at all times of the year. It has a floor of large, square tiles of terra-cotta, a trifle worn with use. The wallpaper, patterned with damask roses, is a trifle faded, as are the gauze curtains, also patterned with damask roses, screening the windows and the glass door beyond which one sees the landing of the little wooden outside stair, and the green railing and the pergola of the garden bathed in an enchantment of sunshine and stillness.

The light filters green and fervid between the slats of the little sun-blind outside the window, and does not pour into the room, which remains in a cool delicious shadow, embalmed with the scents from the garden.

What bliss, what a bath of purity for the soul, to sit at rest for a little upon that old sofa with its high back, its cylindrical cushions of green rep, likewise a trifle discoloured.

"Giorgio! Giorgio!"

Who is calling from the garden?<sup>52</sup>

The description also recalls the empty room in the Ramsays's house; the light of the sun that enters the window suggests an outer world of life that peeps in, enhancing with its bliss and fervour the artificial, sepulchral stillness of the inside. An empty mirror (that in *To the Lighthouse* "had held a face" TL 123, had contained the image of a body that is no more) reflects and uselessly doubles only the furnishings, among which fake fruit and a timepiece of which only the back is seen in the mirror: the fruit that does not wither, the clock whose dial is eclipsed, are ominous signs of the interruption of time; not idyllic suspension of the childhood time, but its obliteration through Giorgio's untimely death.

<sup>52</sup> Luigi Pirandello, *Shoot! (Si Gira!)*, translated from the Italian by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, the University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 25



With the slow industry of a mollusk building its shell, the living being can shape at its own image the room it inhabits. The process through which the human body moulds the room that contains it, and the fact that in reality the things that surround it are not fixed but change through the perception one has of them, is paradigmatically rendered in this passage of Proust's *Recherche*:

Perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves, and not anything else, and by the immobility of our conceptions of them. For it always happened that when I awoke like this, and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything would be moving round me through the darkness: things, places, years. My body, still too heavy with sleep to move, would make an effort to construe the form which its tiredness took as an orientation of its various members, so as to induce from that where the wall lay and the furniture stood, to piece together and to give a name to the house in which it must be living. Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, knees, and shoulder-blades offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept; while the unseen walls kept changing, adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirling madly through the darkness. And even before my brain, lingering in consideration of when things had happened and of what they had looked like, had collected sufficient impressions to enable it to identify the room, it, my body, would recall from each room in succession what the bed was like, where the doors were, how daylight came in at the windows, whether there was a passage outside, what I had had in my mind when I went to sleep, and had found there when I awoke.<sup>53</sup>

The description is a sort of kaleidoscope of all the different rooms the body remembers; that is, the rooms the body has shaped through its perceptions, leaving traces of itself on its walls. The rooms seem to writhe with their inhabitant's semi-aware breath, they expand and contract to the rhythm of the sleeper's bodily fluids, as happens for the diseased Rachel Vinrace. Therefore, once the living body abandons its shell, it disquietingly keeps its mould, so that Clarissa's theory about death, that "the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death" (MD 135) is in a way fulfilled. In the following passage of *Jacob's Room*, the contrast between the deaf and blind sitting-room that does not "know"

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<sup>53</sup> M. Proust, *op. cit.*, p. 8



or “care” and the “human sweat”, “human dirt” and the “alarming presence” of the sexual intercourse between Jacob and Florinda is almost distressing; after the coitus, the two ominously turn attention to as many empty frames – looking-glass and letters:

The sitting-room neither knew nor cared. The door was shut; and to suppose that wood, when it creaks, transmits anything save that rats are busy and wood dry is childish. These old houses are only brick and wood, soaked in human sweat, grained with human dirt. But if the pale blue envelope lying by the biscuit-box had the feelings of a mother, the heart was torn by the little creak, the sudden stir. Behind the door was the obscene thing, the alarming presence, and terror would come over her as at death, or the birth of a child. Better, perhaps, burst in and face it than sit in the antechamber listening to the little creak, the sudden stir, for her heart was swollen, and pain threaded it. [...] Florinda followed, lazily stretching; yawning a little; arranging her hair at the looking-glass – while Jacob read his mother's letter. (JR 86)

The empty room, defined by John Graham as the image of “selfhood formed in time,”<sup>54</sup> cannot but raise a fundamental question: to use Woolf's own words in the early version of *Between the Acts*, titled *Pointz Hall*, “But who observed the dining-room?” Kiely remarks how “the repeated use of such descriptions – static, framed, complete in themselves, observed only by the narrator and the reader – invites a different kind of attention”:<sup>55</sup> author and reader occupy the empty centre of the room, the “emptiness at the heart of life.” In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty deplores the absurdity of the idea of the house as “the geometrized projection of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives, that is, the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived, the house seen from nowhere.”<sup>56</sup> Yet, the impression we receive in front of the description of empty rooms in Woolf is precisely that: the vantage point is absent, as the observer is. Here is the report of the above cited passage in *Pointz Hall*:

There was silence in the dining-room, for lunch delayed. The chairs were all drawn up, and the places ready; wine glasses, knives and forks, napkins, and in the centre the variegated flowers [...]

<sup>54</sup> J. Graham, *Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*, cited in H. Richter, *Virginia Woolf. The Inward Voyage*, Princeton University Press, 1970

<sup>55</sup> Robert Kiely, *Jacob's Room* and Roger Fry: *Two Studies in Still Life*, in Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p. 154

<sup>56</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge, 2002 p. 77



*I: & the not I: & the outer, & the inner*

But who observed the dining-room? Who noted the silence, the emptiness? What name is to be given to that which notes that a room is empty? [...] Certainly it is difficult to find a name for that which is in a room, yet the room is empty [...] And further goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one.<sup>57</sup>

The name that Woolf finds for the absent presence is that of the writer. Thus, the core of emptiness, the supreme form of disembodiment and of concaveness, is the creative attitude of the artist, with his capability to let the impressions from the outside fill up the void left by his missing “I” in order to give a superior unity to the vision. The missing body of the artist is like the empty step where Mrs Ramsay used to sit: through absence, creativity (in this case, Lily Briscoe's) is triggered out. In *Between the Acts* the image of the empty centre at the core of the house is even further complicated by the duplication of the “shell” provided by the walls of the room through an empty vase, holding in it only “silence”:

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence. (BA 22)

The empty room is “the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness of passion, the camera, the third eye.”<sup>58</sup> Never the “camera”, that is the vantage point par excellence, has been closer to its latin etymology (room).

A kind of frame that is considered as utterly dangerous for the communication between the body and the outside is the mirror. The already mentioned short story *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* begins and ends with the admonition about its disruptive potential: “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms” (HH 86). The mirror, projecting one's image outside of oneself, has a splitting force in many sense. First of all, the mirror doubles reality; thus, from a Platonic perspective, it is a copy of a copy,

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<sup>57</sup> *Between the Acts*, “Typescript with author's corrections, unsigned, 2 April '38 – July 30 '39 (earliest dated draft)” in the Berg Collection, cited in M. Hussey, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 186



therefore providing a breakaway of the body from itself. To say it with Jorge Luis Borges, “mirrors have something monstrous about them [...] mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men.”<sup>59</sup> Secondly, the body is reduced to an image, thus flattening to a two-dimensioned surface that seems to deny its roundness, complexity and consistence. The image in the mirror is evanescent in the worst sense: rather than giving back a faithful account of the fleeting nature of the self, it menaces to disrupt it just while it falsely sums it up. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

The mirror's ghost lies outside my body, and by the same token my own body's “invisibility” can invest the other bodies I see. Hence my body can assume segments derived from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them; man is mirror for man. The mirror itself is the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into a spectacle, spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself.<sup>60</sup>

Except for the case of Dodge in *Between the Acts*, for whom the dissociation of his own mirror image from an irregular and shameful body is the representation of Mrs. Swithin's acceptance of his homosexuality (Miller),<sup>61</sup> the splitting of vision and touch disturbs and menaces one's sense of identity, as happens for Vitangelo Moscarda in *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, whose crisis' starting point is the disconcerting discover that his nose is not seen by his wife as by himself. The Lacanian implications of the mirror image in Woolfian literature have been thoroughly analysed by the critics;<sup>62</sup> it is enough to remind one how the body of the baby going through the *miroir stage* is for the first time seen as alienated from its physical sensation and transmitted on the two-dimensional surface of the looking-glass as an image. The mirror image separates the body from its owner creating a gap between *feeling* one's body and *seeing* it: the senses of sight and touch are assigned two separate dimensions of bodily experience. When the baby sees his own body from the outside, he feels that it is *other* than himself: through the mirror he contemplates it as he uses to contemplate the *others*. But on the other hand, if

<sup>59</sup> J. L. Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, in *Labyrinths: selected stories & other writings*, New York, New Directions Publishing, 2007, p. 3

<sup>60</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, London, Routledge, 2004 p. 300

<sup>61</sup> R. Miller, *Virginia Woolf: The Frames of Art and Life*, Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press, 1988, p. 92

<sup>62</sup> See also L. D'Errico, *op. cit.*, for an insight of *Orlando: A Biography* as the backward application of the *miroir stage* in the character of Orlando



until then the visual experience of it happened only fragmentarily – he could see only his hands or feet – thanks to the mirror the baby can gain a further knowledge of his own identity as a “thetic” subject. The same thing happens to Clarissa when, as she looks at her image in the glass, she “collect[s] the whole of her at one point” (MD 31), draws together the scrappy parts that constitute her identity. In front of the mirror she becomes “pointed”, “dart-like”, convex that is.

Yet, the most frequent reaction to the reflected image seems to be negative, even of fear or revulsion. In *A Sketch of the Past*, the author reports an episode of her childhood from which the sense of uneasiness associated with mirrors clearly emerges:

There was a small looking-glass in the hall at Talland House [...] When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it (MB 67-68)

Drawn by a similar dread, Mrs Ramsay accurately avoids her own image in the looking-glass. The *vanitas* of the mirror is so in an etymological way: emptiness, as what happens for Isabella in *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*. As Dionysus and Narcissus, one dies in front of a mirror. The mirror reminds one of one's social body: when at the end of the pageant in *Between the Acts* a mirror reflecting the audience is brought in the scene, people deplore the cruelty of being shown to themselves “as we are, before we've had time to assume...” (BA 114). To assume, what? But, of course, their “enacted” role, to enter the part they usually perform in life. It is not a case that the only person that “accepts the mirror's challenge”<sup>63</sup> is Mrs Manresa, just because the role she usually plays in life has been internalized at such point that she no longer feels any splitting in her personality. Mockingly, Woolf makes her define herself “a wild child of nature” (BA 25), what is utterly in contrast with her highly affected, “performed” attitude.

Like looking-glasses, apparels, and in particular boots and shoes, function as a metaphor for the fixity in which the self can be constricted, and of a projection of the social body. *The New Dress* of the eponymous short story becomes a projection of Mabel

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<sup>63</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 93



Waring sense of inadequacy in the social milieu. In her identity, a split is generated by the fact that in private she appreciates her dress, while in public, once subjected to the vision of the onlookers, it makes her awkward and absurd. This leads to an attempt of de-legitimizing the others' point of view, thus narrowing the possibility to establish a communion with them. The looking-glass in which Mabel sees her dress reflected, reduces it to "the size of boot-buttons or tadpoles" (HH 54); she seems to suffer a kind of physical shrinking mirroring the moral belittling caused by the hypocrite comments of the ladies at the party. In *The Waves*, Bernard thinks that "our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence" (W 73). Clothes separate the naked body from Nature and from Truth: like for Adam in *Genesis*, nakedness is felt as scandalous, its truth is a reason for shame, and it must be hidden and covered. Human kind cannot bear very much reality, or to say it with Miss La Trobe, "Reality too strong" (BA 111). When Woolf depicts the coming of Victorian age in *Orlando*, its prudishness and sanctimonious detachment from truth-nakedness shows in a proper invasion of protecting surfaces:

Rugs appeared; beards were grown; trousers were fastened tight under the instep. The chill which he felt in his legs the country gentleman soon transferred to his house; furniture was muffled; walls and tables were covered; nothing was left bare. (O 147)

Miller sees the recurrent use of shoes and clothes as "representatives of 'reality', 'truth' and 'fact'"<sup>64</sup> objects that, with their reassuring yet ordinary presence, stand for the banal aspects of life; in my opinion the potential of the image goes further, in that shoes, containing a portion of the body, once they are seen separately from it, function as a sort of useless envelope that creepily reminds us of the absence of it. Moreover, feet and shoes are in contact with the earth, so that their being referred to often gets charged with a deathly significance. In this light, in the ending of *Jacob's Room*, Jacob's shoes underline, with their remarked uselessness ("What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?" JR 173), their owner's death. They are "the trace of the feet which moulded them, a

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6



grotesque sloughed-off skin, a death cast.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, they shed a backward light on the rest of the novel, so that we re-evaluate it, realizing for the first time that Jacob – despite he as always been missing – is no more. “The shoes refuse to let Jacob slip easily out of the text, they question absence, they stand as a snare for the reader”:<sup>66</sup> similarly to what happens in front of Van Gogh's shoes, one tries to give them back to their owner. As Derrida argues, “something *happens*, something *takes place* when shoes are abandoned, empty, out of use for a while or forever, apparently detached from the feet [...]”<sup>67</sup> Likewise Jacob's mind is made “extraordinarily vacant” by the sight of hats and dresses during a service in King's College Chapel, as if apparels had the power to substitute themselves to the person and fill it up with mental void:

Surely, if the mind wanders (and Jacob looked extraordinarily vacant, his head thrown back, his hymn-book open at the wrong place), if the mind wanders it is because several hat shops and cupboards upon cupboards of coloured dresses are displayed upon rush-bottomed chairs. Though heads and bodies may be devout enough, one has a sense of individuals – some like blue, others brown; some feathers, others pansies and forget-me-nots. (JR 27)

More explicitly, the empty house of the Ramsays is scattered with unsettling yet moving cocoons of the absent bodies which used to inhabit it:

What people had shed and left – a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes – those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a face [...] (TL 123)

The shapes of the bodies have moulded the lifeless objects, fulfilling, as hinted before – but in a somehow gruesome way – Clarissa's belief that “the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death...” (MD 135). In this case, the “unseen” is the “shape of loveliness” (TL 123), the

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<sup>65</sup> C. Lanone, *Abject Objects in Jacob's Room*, in *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* hors série, Montpellier, Presses universitaires de Montpellier, 1999, p. 80

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87

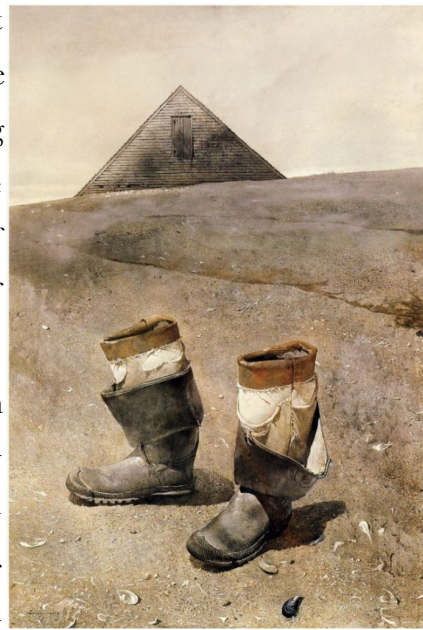
<sup>67</sup> J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Bennington, Ian McLeod, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 265



“centre of complete emptiness” (TL 170) of the missing body.

Charles Tansley, forced to conversation at Mrs Ramsay's party, feels “rigid and barren, like a pair of boots that have been soaked and gone dry so that you can hardly force your feet into them” (TL 83). Clarissa's obsession for shoes, gloves, and hats, the apparels that hold together the extremities of the body, could spring from a similar sense of societal coercion that prevents the person from expanding itself in the outer world.

This image of the feet forced to go where they do not want to is linked to the scene in the final part of the novel, when Lily Briscoe manages to find a talking point with Mr Ramsay in his well-shaped boots. The two episodes can be seen as portraying the two sides of convexity: while Tansley feels the violence, the falsity of social constructions (boots) upon a living nature (feet), Mr Ramsay's boots perfectly fit him: they can be seen as a miniature of the lighthouse, a convex body keeping the self close together and imparting unity – and a fingerhold for Lily to gain contact with Mr Ramsay, to establish a human relationship previously



impossible because of her lack of empathy with him. In *Between the Acts*, the figure of an old boot, with its mute obtusity, provides a sort of objective correlative for the inaptness of the clergyman's appearance. It is a piece of rubbish on the shore, but moreover, the fact that once it belonged to a tramp contributes to connote it with menace and uneasiness. The boot used to contain a part of a living body, while now its rigidity and uselessness has a deathly after-taste.

As waves withdrawing uncover; as mist uplifting reveals; so, raising their eyes [...] they saw, as waters withdrawing leave visible a tramp's old boot, a man in a clergyman's collar surreptitiously mounting a soap-box. (BA 117)

Later on, the image is reused, associated with the word “no”:



"Yes," Isa answered. "No," she added. It was Yes, No. Yes, yes, yes, the tide rushed out embracing No, no no, it contracted. The old boot appeared on the shingle. (BA 133)

while the word “yes” is linked to the tide (which moreover before was drawn close to the mist), thus reinforcing the opposition between the liquidity of the (living) sea and the blunt solidity of the boots. A parallel can be drawn with one of Woolf’s short stories, *Solid Objects*; also there we have a marine setting; the two characters are presented as irrupting in the neutral surface of the seascape first as an indefinite blot (the sense of separation with the environment is immediately given) and later with the words: “nothing was so solid, so living, so hard, red, hirsute and virile as these two bodies for miles and miles of sea and sandhill” (HH 79). One of the character merges its hands into the sand, until it clutches around a lump of solid matter, singling it out of the indefinite, chaotic continuum of the sand (a relative of which is to reappear, in my opinion, in Minta’s buckle irretrievably lost in the beach and covered by the tide in *To the Lighthouse*). As Richter argues, objects can become a sort of “mirror-image, an extension of the self”:<sup>68</sup> through sensations, memories, in short all that constitutes individual perception, we can interact with it, mould it partly to our own image. In this, Woolf has been probably influenced by his friend John Russell’s thought about perception processes, in that he sees the external object as something that through perception becomes part of the human brain. But there is a side of the object that we cannot know, and that is just its blunt solidity that imposes itself as “other” to the body and mind of the perceiver. The solid objects of the short story manage to act reversely, imposing with their convex physicality and depriving the protagonist, obsessed for collecting them, of his humanity. The chief symbol of this obtuse opposition of things to the individual perception – we could say to its Deleuzian becoming through Proustian metaphors (see chapt. I) – is the skull, representing the hard, not malleable core of the “thingness” of objects. The skull, de-fleshed centre of a living creature, returns several times in *Jacob’s Room*, once even mysteriously intermingled with the image of a rose, as a sort of substitute for the missing solidity of the protagonist. It is a reminder of the world of objects, whose existence goes on notwithstanding the fact that no one is observing it; the

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<sup>68</sup> H. Richter, *op. cit.*, 67



materialization of the body-debris, of the body turned into a cuttlefish bone, or Eliotan marine mirabilia (among the wastes of the sea at the beginning of the novel we find also a crab which, once captured, struggles to get out of a bucket). In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay's maternal and artistic power to modify the external world through her own perceptions, manages to annihilate the menace of solidity wrapping her green shawl around the ram's skull that frightens her daughter Cam. The shawl, opposite to solidity, a cloudy mass of pure colour, succeeds also in removing the Mr Ramsay-like efficiency of logic: she encounters both James's and Cam's wishes, the first desiring the skull to stay in the children's room, the second dreading it. Mrs Ramsay's shawl is the answer to the aggressiveness and fixity of the binary law of dualism: the third way between a yes and a no. It goes by itself that outer things are representatives of the social body; often people cling to them to identify themselves with them, yet reaching the opposite effect, in that far from giving people a clear-cut identity, they make them anonymous, as when Bernard states that "charged in every nerve with a sense of identity, who could not see a tooth-brush in a glass without saying, 'My toothbrush'" (W 72). One cannot but be reminded of the closing of one of the most beautiful poems about the solidity of objects, *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* by T. S. Eliot:

The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,  
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life.<sup>69</sup>

In the same way *Jacob's Room* "accumulates people, objects, hints around Jacob, but the centre itself remains curiously vacant."<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, the positive nature of the objects' solidity is shown when Septimus sees the coal-scuttle and the sideboard and clings to them as real things; he has a "screen" in front of him, that prevents him from seeing the beauty of things but at the same time manages, even if for some moments only, to recover his lost sense of the outer world (what doctor Holmes does switching "off from his patients on to old furniture" MD 80; in his case the attachment to the world of things has become regardlessness of live people).

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<sup>69</sup> T. S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 19

<sup>70</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*, p. 28



Considering what has been said previously about rooms and their enclosing function, a very important role is that of the openings that connect them with the outside: windows and doors are symbols of the open-ended quality of the bodies, thus giving the convexity of the room a possibility of concaveness. As Miller observes, the window combines the characteristics of more than one already analysed symbol, “sharing the mirror's sheet of glass, the room's creation of an inside and an outside, and the threshold's position as a passage between two spheres.”<sup>71</sup> In *To the Lighthouse*, the difference between the role of doors and of windows is often underlined. Mrs. Ramsay recommends to her housemaids that “they must keep the windows open and the doors shut” (TL 12).<sup>72</sup> Starting from the semiotic systems of Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, McCluskey<sup>73</sup> incidentally remarks how doors and windows are unmarked (-) and marked (+) as for the quality of transparency. If they both provide concaveness, the window stands for the creative one, while the open door leads to the loss of control: through it, chaos enters, the self is in danger of negative dissolution. In the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, the repeated sound of the door slamming creates an acoustic pattern that reappears in the *Time Passes* interlude, when the doors of the empty house, inhabited by the ghostly airs, swing loosely. The door that at the party for Percival opens unceasingly frightens Rhoda, who in the flux of people entering it sees a “tiger” that “leaps” (W 68); the chaotic threat of social encounter is on the contrary hailed by Jinny with joyful arousal (“Every time the door opens I cry 'More!'” W 84). On the contrary, the window's transparency makes it the very symbol of concaveness; Banfield,<sup>74</sup> reprising Russell's vision of “active and passive places”, sees the Lighthouse as a body emitting particles of light, and the window as a receiver. Windows have a double function: like a diaphragm, they connect and separate at the same time. They are a mirror that has been deprived of its reflecting power, and therefore allows light to pass through itself. Other times a “pane of glass”, either metaphorical or effective, prevents the characters

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<sup>71</sup> R. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 100

<sup>72</sup> Apter's comment on this passage, that “somewhat too obviously the author repeats that Mrs Ramsay believes windows – that is, eyes – should be open, and doors – that is, the self – should be closed”, is in my opinion to reject.

<sup>73</sup> K. McCluskey, *op. cit.*, p. 56

<sup>74</sup> A. Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 129



from getting out of psychical limitations: Septimus sees beauty as something behind a pane of glass; Jacob wishes to reach out of the train window that separates the space of the wagon from the outside to merge in the Italian countryside and “take up a handful of earth – Italian earth” (JR 131).

In *How Should One Read a Book?* the act of looking out of the window is compared to reading: “Is there not an open window on the right hand of the bookcase? How delightful to stop reading and look out! [...] The greater part of any library is nothing but the record of such fleeting moments in the lives of men, women, and donkeys” (*How Should One Read a Book?* CE II 5). Sharing the portrait's frame, the window is the symbol of the selection that the painter-writer operates on life. At the end of *Between the Acts*, the window against which Isa and Giles stand, enclosing nothing else but a colourless sky, is framing the beginning of a new drama, enacted in real life and located not only outside the entitled space of the pageant, but also outside the perception of the reader. A window, duplicated by Lily Briscoe's canvas, makes of the figure of Mrs Ramsay with her son James the permanent image of a work of art, a somehow madonna-like emblem of motherhood. For Apter, Lily that looks inside the window “represents the other side of the artistic vision, the view from behind the frame, the perceiver perceived.”<sup>75</sup> Singling out certain views, especially when seen from above, the window either underlines the intimacy of the onlookers (it is the case of Dodge and Mrs Swithin observing the guests of the party arriving from a secluded and isolated vantage point), or provides a moment of illumination, framing a scene not only physically but also giving it the clarifying message of a painting: Ralph Denham in *Night and Day* realizes his love for Katherine just when he is going to ask Mary to marry him by seeing her out of a window.

The composite and pregnant role of windows is the protagonist of what could be defined in my opinion as the culminating scene of *Mrs Dalloway*, that is, the episode of the old woman seen from the window at Clarissa's party. Its importance is anticipated in Clarissa's thought by the remark which occurs the first time she sees her: “that's the miracle, that's the mystery; that old lady, she meant, whom she could see going from

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<sup>75</sup> R. Miller *op. cit.*, p. 110



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chest of drawers to dressing-table” (MD 112). The separateness of individual selves is the mystery that neither religion nor love seem able to solve: “here was one room, there another” (MD 112). Later that night, she goes to the window and sees the old woman looking at her. This powerful structure made of two separate rooms which, through an opening, mirror each other, is enhanced by Clarissa and the old woman looking at the same time out of their own window and into the other's one. The miracle has been solved by a short circuit of concaveness: both women, leaning out of their individuality, try to enter each other's one, not through an invasive penetration but by the creative contact of glances. The moment is underlined by a stretto of the main motifs of the novel: the Big Ben striking with “the leaden circles” dissolving in the air; the drone from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*; Septimus's death and the recovered sense of beauty rising from it. If *Mrs Dalloway* can be read as a fugue (and surely it can), what follows is but a coda. To fully understand the potential of the window symbol however, the discourse must shift from convexness to concaveness: the window being the mediator par excellence between the outer and the inner.



### § III. “LIKE A MIST BETWEEN THE PEOPLE”

#### Bodies Out of Bounds



This tree, I breathe shaking off the new leaves. I am this tree. Tree, cloud; tomorrow book or wind; the book that I read, the wind that I drink. All outside, wayward. (Luigi Pirandello, *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*)

If identification with one's surface leads to the sclerotization of the living being and with its reduction to a still, dead carapace (still life, *vanitas*), life is to be found beyond surfaces, beyond bounds. *Mrs Dalloway* begins with Clarissa's plunge into the June morning, with the opening of a window. The action of opening the surface of the room and let the vitality of London life merge with its interior is indicative of the concaveness she is assuming in that moment. Real life lies “outside”, “beyond” the limitations provided by the physical boundaries of the body:

But it is possible to press a little further and wonder whether we may not refer our sense of being in a bright yet narrow room, confined and shut in, rather than enlarged and set free, to some limitation imposed by the method as well as by the mind. Is it the method that inhibits the creative power? Is it due to the method that we feel neither jovial nor magnanimous, but centred in a self which, in spite of its tremor of susceptibility, never embraces or creates what is outside



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itself and beyond? (*Modern Fiction*, CE II 107-108)

Being creative means being outside and beyond; death-in-life is avoided through the creative act that implies renouncing to the centrality of one's self. Yet, there is another window that opens on the outside: the one out of which Septimus throws himself to escape doctor Holmes. As convexity has its dangers and benefits, also concaveness can issue either in a superior creative mood or in the loss of one's integrity and in the consequent self-annihilation. To use Minow-Pinkney's words, "abolition of the limiting walls of individuality can be experienced either as the infinitising or the dissolution of the self; denial of unity can be a polymorphously perverse enjoyment of multiple selves or the agony of the fragmented selves."<sup>76</sup> With a different kind of plunge, Septimus's self projects itself out of a body that is no more capable of containing it. His movement out of the window seems to spring from doctor Holmes's entrance from the door; as malignant chaos pushes from the disruptive opening of the body-room (see chap. II), the stalked soul reacts releasing this unbearable tension out of the window.

Yet, his self-destruction is not totally aimless. When at the party the report of Septimus's suicide reaches the ear of Clarissa – managing to bring to light the compositional connection between the two that up to that moment had been only subterranean – she, at first overcome by discomfort, succeeds in seeing in the young man's action something creative:

This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (MD 163)

Through the sacrifice of his own body, Septimus has been able to communicate with Clarissa. Actually, Clarissa's relationship with death is linked to that of Septimus. Like him, she has elaborated a theory that dismisses the idea of death as an obliterating force. She asks herself "did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; [...] or did it become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? But that somehow in the

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<sup>76</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*, p. 169



streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived” (MD 6). In a somehow similarly comforting way, Betty Flanders sees her husband's death as a panic identification with all the manifestations of the outer world; this obviously enhances the gap between Seabrook's fleeting soul, now wandering freely as if atomized and mingling with things, and his epitaph which blankly tags him “Merchant of this city”:

Had he, then, been nothing? An unanswerable question, since even if it weren't the habit of the undertaker to close the eyes, the light so soon goes out of them. At first, part of herself; now one of a company, he had merged in the grass, the sloping hillside, the thousand white stones, some slanting, others upright, the decayed wreaths, the crosses of green tin, the narrow yellow paths, and the lilacs that drooped in April, with a scent like that of an invalid's bedroom, over the churchyard wall. Seabrook was now all that; and when, with her skirt hitched up, feeding the chickens, she heard the bell for service or funeral, that was Seabrook's voice – the voice of the dead. (JR 10)

Death is not seen as a deletion of life, but rather as a stretching out: not termination, but completion. For DiBattista, “transcending the ruins of time [...], is the power of the single life to disperse itself so far wide beyond its physical or visible boundaries that no one death can completely annihilate it.”<sup>77</sup> Rather than resigning herself to the death-in-life that the flawless social deportment of Whitbread, Bradshaw, and Holmes leads to, Clarissa longs for the life-in-death of an ecstasy which makes her “like something alive which wants to confide itself, to disperse itself, to be, with a tremor of delight, at rest” (MD 43). As Hite notes, this rapture can be experienced only by what she calls the visionary body, while “the social body undergoes evacuation and, eventually, death.”<sup>78</sup>

Clarissa's plunge “out” of the window happens in the present moment. Despite the flood-tide of recollections of her youth at Bourton brought – Proustianly – by the squeaking sound of the hinges of the window, the moment has no past and no future; rather, the present is moulded by both past and future. The different modes of time experienced in *Mrs Dalloway* stand for as many ways to live the internal rhythm of the body. Richter notes how “time or duration is actually the psychical state of becoming,

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<sup>77</sup> M. DiBattista, *op. cit.*, p. 35

<sup>78</sup> Hite, *op. cit.*



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poised on the brink between past and future and exhibiting qualities of motion, growth, and change comparable to the biological processes in which every tissue and fluid of the body are in a state of constant transformation.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the bodily dissolution represented by the plunge out of the window cannot but take place in a present freed from the walls of past and future, just as the equilibrating inside and outside pressures vanish letting the boundaries of the body throw open; the loss of the body's landmarks can be source of panic terror:

For what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment? That we survive the shock at all is only possible because the past shelters us on one side and the future on another. (O 195)

There was something strange in the shadow that the flicker of her eyes cast, something which (as anyone can test for himself by looking now at the sky) is always absent from the present – whence its terror, its nondescript character – something one trembles to pin through the body with a name and call beauty, for it has no body, is as a shadow without substance or quality of its own, yet has the power to change whatever it adds itself to. (O 211)

It is worth while focusing briefly upon the implications of panic, and the ways in which this phenomenon links the bodily sensations with the time dimension. Associated with the annihilating terror aroused by the apparition of the god Pan, panic is closely connected with the loss of one's sense of integrity. Its power of shattering the body projecting it outside of itself and making it merge with the external world (“pan” is also to read as “all”) underlines its being a kind of negative reverse of ecstasy. Pan unites the characteristics of the god, the human being, and the animal. His multiplicity, symbolized by the two horns, encompasses also androgyny and the union of the different ages of man, making it the very symbol of the breakdown of dualism: in a sense, it could be seen as the god of Deleuzian becoming. The hour in which Pan appears is the traditional *hora demonium*, midday; the hour when the body loses its three-dimensionality to be vaporized by the sunlight at its zenith into pure photons of a demigod-like spectrum; the shadow, and with it the bond of the body with the earthly dimension, is

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<sup>79</sup> H. Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 39



lost. Rezia's and Septimus's *hora demonium* corresponds, in a sort of bitter reversal, with the encounter with Bradshaw – maybe an unmasking of his depersonalizing clinical methods, falsely aiming to give back the person to his body through the divine law of proportion. On the contrary, the Shakespearean drone, beating all through the novel and functioning as a countersubject to the tolling refrain of Big Ben, inviting to “Fear no more the heath of the sun”, is the key that turns the panic disintegration of the noon into ecstatic and creative dispersal through the abandonment of fear.

Septimus's body has fallen out of time even before his escape into death: he is trapped in a perpetual present, with no more shelters provided by past and future. Having lost the *soma-sema*, he sees himself as pure soul: for that reason he cannot communicate his visions, because, his own body leaving him reft of the boundaries of meaning, they come to him “not [...] in actual words” (MD 17). The logical connection of things is upset, completely replaced by his insane point of view that prevents him from understanding and even perceiving the objects unless they have a meaning for him, that is, they are a recognizable symbol. His wife Rezia, in her desperate attempt to regain him to the consciousness of the outside world, tries to create a connection with the visual: she tells him to “look” (MD 21). Sight seems to give him back the sense of his own body in his last moments of life, but as he closes his eyes the world disappears again. The sense of his own body is shattered, like his capacity to use language logically. His disembodiment, begun when he is invited by his employer to develop manliness (through football playing!) accomplishes in his loss of sensitivity – he cannot feel pain for his war companion Evan's death – and with it, of his own corporeal dimension. This impasse leads him to escape from his body into a world where “there is no death” (MD 20), to develop an autistic, unsharable universe within himself.

Also the similarly fragmented sense of Rhoda's body is rendered by her experience of time: for her “one moment does not lead to another” (W 84). She can neither merge creatively with outer things nor achieve the unity of the body inserted in time consciousness. This is why, as for Septimus, solid objects do not keep constant outlines, but they appear even so fluid that she fears falling into them. She recurrently refers to the image of the “nymph of the fountain” (W 76): her body is atomized, made



watery (the word “nymph” itself being connected with water and humidity; more, with the amorphousness of the chrysalis), and her “softness”, like that of a snail that has lost her shell, makes her afraid of being pierced by a bird's beak. This fragmentation makes teleology impossible for her: her body expands, but has no target outside of itself, and this is why she cannot recognize the object of her love. As Hussey points out,<sup>80</sup> when she says “nothing can settle; nothing can subside” (W 79), both verbs have a sexual connotation, especially if related to the animal world; they mean, “to impregnate” and “to yield to the male”. This sense of sexual sterility, and the consequent inability to find a natural biological continuation of her own body, is the more poignant when faced to Susan's fecundity and Bernard's fatherhood. By contrast – strange as it may sound – the completely embodied Jinny, when celebrating the carnal ecstasies of love through the Dionysian rhythms of endless recreation of life through sexuality, is more creative. She sees bodies as united in a more permanent way than sexual embrace, that is, the patterns of dance. Her bodily imagination is based on the ordered rhythms of music, that manage to unify separate bodies in a positive way. Unlike both timeless fragmentation and permanent rhythmical pattern, the three quarters of an hour that Bradshaw allows to his patients are the translation of the dissection that medical science operates on the human body, intruding into it and anatomizing its natural rhythms. If the striking of the Big Ben, with its visual and auditory representation of the body seen as a defined “I”, mediates between the chaos of undivided eternity and the embodied, socialized time of human history, the only space of time where it is possible to dwell without risking both dispersion into undifferentiated duration and coerced anatomization, is the moment of suspense before the clock strikes: it is the present, the infinitely small gap between past and future. Yet the liberation from time, the bursting of the present moment can have a violence difficult to stand, as seen before for Orlando. The uncompassionate display of the mirror to the audience of the pageant in *Between the Acts*, which in the historic excursus it means to put in scene is tagged as the present moment (“The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves.”, BA 115) comes as a shock, generating a sense of open-endedness which is

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<sup>80</sup> M. Hussey, *op. cit.*



almost disgusting for the onlookers – I do not think it would be haphazard to compare it to the repulsion Orlando feels when she sees her gardener Joe's nail missing, somehow another symbol of the present moment to which her life (both effective and literary) has come.

The bodies of Septimus and Rhoda undergo a process similar to what in Deleuze is called the “schizo” body: there is a struggle against the superimposed hierarchy of organs, but at the price of catatonia. The solution that Deleuze – and Woolf in a sense – envisages is the so called Body without Organs, or BwO. The “hypochondriac,” the “paranoid,” and the “schizophrenic” are bodies which Deleuze asserts have failed to keep a link with subjectivity. These bodies are described as empty: as having emptied themselves of organs and organizations at such a degree that they have become lodged in a dangerous void. In other words, if the social bodies risk, like Isabella's in *The Lady in the Looking-Glass*, to be “completely empty,” totally dispersed ones issue in a similar negative result. As for Deleuze, for Woolf the body can be gained back to itself only through its dispersal in the force field of the outside world; the movement *outside* the body is a movement *of* the body, *towards* the body; whereas when the body becomes a *subject*, it becomes also *subjected* to its codification, abolished. Nevertheless, undoing the organism does not mean killing it: rather, opening it up to connections, circuits, links, without losing touch with its integrity. As Richter points out, “if Mrs. Woolf's moment of being begins with a shower of atoms, it ends with a dissolving of them: what remains is a single awareness of space or the “not-me” [...] The walls of the moment break; new atoms will fall, and another cycle of the moment, with its pattern of tension and relief, begins again.”<sup>81</sup> The body becomes a territory for experimentation, not for self-destruction, and in this delicate difference lies the fascinating challenge of Deleuze and Woolf.

As the physical body must disperse, so does the linguistic body, the *sema*-sign. The tetic subject “I”, or a Lacanian phallus, is in Deleuze's view the arborescent conception of thought, the pivot around which the linear mode of language-logical knowledge is centred. The linear logos is substituted by rhizomatic rhythm, that manages to give unity

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<sup>81</sup> H. Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 40



without compromising the otherness of the single parts. Rhythm is the pattern that substitutes itself to a hierarchical view of language as the Body without Organs substitutes to the organized one: the division of the body into organs, each one with its task, “imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences”<sup>82</sup> (as happens in the division of the house into separate rooms). The force that defies the anatomization of the body-time-language of the Holmes and Bradshaws is the body-rhythm-sound liberated from its semantic function. As Richter notes, “What emerges from [...] many scattered comments throughout her work and her diary is her apprehension, however vague, of a mind-body-feeling gestalt, a vision of the novel as a living organism whose totality would embody certain recognizable human features [...] Man is a feeling, thinking, moving whole, and the single most pervasive quality of that being may be said to be *emotional rhythm*: the fluctuations in mood, the increase and decrease in intensities of feeling, the motion inherent in the single duration or in the larger clusters of psychic states which compose the various scenes of her novels.”<sup>83</sup> Like Spenser in *The Faery Queen*, Woolf aims to gratify “the desire of the body, desires for rhythm [and] movement” (*The Faery Queen*, CE I 16). It is the “rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences” (W 171) that Bernard would like to make his own language, the idiotic “ee um fah um so / foo swee too eem oo” (MD 70) of the old tramp in *Mrs Dalloway*, outside lexis and syntax, “a frail, quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning [...] the voice of no age or sex” (MD 70). Sound has no sex, no age, it is not a x or a y crucified by the test of dualism. It is the rhythmic pattern of the sound of the sea, in which sameness and otherness miraculously coexist, the Deleuzian refrain that is different from meter, and primarily, from the death-in-life rhythm of the military march – of the same difference that goes between *Leib* and *Körper*, living body and corpse:

on they marched, past him, past every one, in their steady way, as if one will worked legs and

<sup>82</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 159

<sup>83</sup> H. Richter, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-207



arms uniformly, and life, with its varieties, its irreticences, had been laid under a pavement of monuments and wreaths and drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline. (MD 44)

Bernard would like to find a substitute for conventional language, and looks for it in liminal, minority forms of language. The language of lovers, “a howl; a cry” (W 198), the language of children, the Deleuzian nursery rhyme that holds together the self lost in the disruptive chaos of the night, as Mrs. McNab's dirge in *To the Lighthouse* is the frail but steady attempt to restore creative order against the centrifugal forces of wildness and darkness. The textual surface of *The Waves* is unceasingly rippled by leitmotifs whose subtle variation shows – actually, as the waves do – the continuous repetition of things in a slightly different manner. Through the recontextualization of echoes and images, the sense of sameness in difference and difference in sameness is rendered. The continual mutation of things is the more evident just as it is derived from the apparent stableness of words. Besides, the patterns provide an expectation for the reader, that is either to be fulfilled or deluded, one of the numerous means through which Woolf induces the reader to put himself in a creative relationship with the text, to recreate it through the act of reading, reasserting the sense of open-endedness also outside the written page. Similarly, the shared echoes, words or phrases, between Septimus and Clarissa contribute to blunt the dividing line between their minds. Woolf's aspiration is undoubtedly that of achieving the non-semantic power of a piece of music, making language “stammer”:

What could have been more secret, she thought, more slow, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods, and the farms and the brown horses standing at the gate, neck to neck, and the smithy and the kitchen and the fields, so laboriously bearing wheat, turnips, grass, and the garden blowing irises and fritillaries? (O 213)

It's easy to stammer, but making language itself stammer is a different affair; it involves placing all linguistic, and even non-linguistic, elements in variation, both variables of expression and variables of content [...] It was Proust who said that “masterpieces are written in a kind of foreign



language.<sup>84</sup>

The babbling, flowing sound of the non-semantic is the sound of the sea that is heard by Mrs Ramsay; but not all kinds of sound possess such a rhythmical, “concave” quality. There are also convex sounds, that with their straightness irrupt in the watery world shattering it. Such are the sound of the Big Ben, and Mr Ramsay slamming the door or slapping his thighs. Sound for Mr Ramsay is not a foot-loose phoneme, freed from the glebe of meaning, but the identifiable steps of the keyboard or alphabet. If Mr Ramsay advances in full stops and commas, the watery world of concaveness is punctuated by colons and semicolons. Such is the device used by Woolf to separate phrases through a permeable membrane, to create amphibious mixtures of sentences; the tunnel, the funnel through which they are allowed to reverberate into each other. The semicolon and colon are vehicles for the rhizomatic distribution of text, as so the anaphoric repetitions and the great use of the conjunction “for”, which “connects slightly different planes of discourse in a very loose, characteristically 'half-logical' way”;<sup>85</sup> whereas the use of the parenthetical remark, more than a simple authorial aside, functions as a window through which “the inner and the outer worlds” are placed “as close as possible on the page and so achieve a three-dimensional quality.”<sup>86</sup> If the musical refrain of the waves, the pattern of difference in repetition is the kind of sound that is linked to creative unity; and the pointed sound of the bell, or the well-tempered keyboard of Mr Ramsay's mind are the sounds of convexity, then the disrupting force of chaos, the bodily breakaway that is as negative as fixing convexity, is the cacophonous mayhem of jazz:

The tune changed; snapped; broke; jagged. Fox-trot was it? Jazz? Anyhow the rhythm kicked, reared, snapped short. What a jangle and a jingle! [...] What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult. And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peak and spy? (BA 113)

where the all-too-conscious use of shoddy auditory devices gives idea of a fake unity

<sup>84</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 109

<sup>85</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*, p. 57

<sup>86</sup> H. Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 45



poaching into chaos. In her letters, Woolf asserts her wish “to write four lines at a time, describing the same feeling, as a musician does; because it always seems to me that things are going on at so many levels simultaneously” (L5, p. 315); this is what she partly tries to achieve in the counterpoint of *The Waves*, where, like in a fugue, the six voices are like subjects and countersubjects of each other; or better, they all are countersubjects of the *cantus firmus* constituted by Percival. As in a fugue the countersubject is constructed on intervals necessarily moulded by the subject, so the six voices shape themselves around Percival's solidity; the fact that the *cantus firmus* comes to miss, generates a curious musical void akin to an absent Tartini tone or Schumannian *Innere Stimme*. The continual shifting of the vantage point allows us to see each speaker both from the inside and from the outside; whereas Percival (totally solid and convex, with no interiority, no concaveness) is completely rounded off as a full relief sculpture.

Let us focus on the following passage from *Mrs Dalloway* to see how many of the so far analyzed clusters are brought together by musical devices:

So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking (MD 33-34)

Undoubtedly, Woolf here is a composer as much as a writer; the sense of rhythm, of reverberation of the musical themes, are by no means an idle bravura piece, but work to corroborate and underline the meaning of the novel. The motif of the waves, as seen before a symbol of the internal rhythms of the body, is acoustically rendered through the triplet “collect, overbalance, and fall”; slightly diminished in the following sentence (diversity in oneness); the phonemes /f/ and /ɔ:/ are introduced in the final word “fall”, rhymed in the sentence “that is all”, the first time uttered by the whole world; there follows an increasing tide of meaning-rhythm, culminating in the repetition (enhanced by the capital letter) of the above mentioned sentence, this time proffered by the heart.



The importance of the motif of the heart has been already underlined, but I would like to insist on its centrality in *Mrs Dalloway*; Clarissa suffers from heart-ache, and the “emptiness at the heart of life”, which she consumingly yearns to fill, can be seen as one of the central themes of the novel; thus, the heart echoing back the utterance of the whole world makes this passage of capital importance. The after-trail of this echo is the reprise of the head of the Shakespearean drone “fear no more”, repeated twice, which now seems to spring from the antecedent “fall”: /fɔ:l/gets extended into /fiə nəʊ m ɔ:/, and the phonemes /iə/ and /ɔ:/ are also the translation of the sound of the rising and falling wave. The heart (Clarissa's) “sighs collectively for all sorrows”: her centralizing power, offering her heart in a kind of atonement for the whole world, is restated; now the rhythm of the wave which “renews, begins, collects, lets fall” is the rhythm of her own heart. The tension accumulated up to this point is diluted in the coda “And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking”, with the new element of the alliterated /b/ and a faint after-effect of the initial /fɔ:l/ in the word “alone” (/ə'leʊn/). Such passages are by no means a rarity in Woolf's fiction; I restrict myself to analyzing this one, in order to state how much musical language and rhythm matter in Woolfian style and how they contribute to vehicle meaning.

Not solely the auditory dimension is employed to render creative disembodiment; also colour is a vehicle for rendering the vibratile quality of the living body's internal rhythms. As happens in the short story *Blue and Green*, colours are often reduced to pure spectrum, pushed to the foreground as if they were more part of the retina of the observer than of the body that emits them; also in this way, the connection between the subject and the object can take place. In *To the Lighthouse* Mrs Ramsay abandons herself to a stream of perceptions that leads her to lose logical mediation of the outer world until it becomes pure colour (“so that she only knew this is white, or this is red”, TL 111). Moreover, she is disembodied twice to assume the shape of a triangular colour field: firstly through the abstract painting of Lily; secondly, through her becoming the “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (TL 58) that grafts between the strokes of the lighthouse. To this disembodied form, the range of experience is unlimited, being able



to overcome the boundaries of space and time. The darkness into which Mrs Ramsay turns herself, or gap between the two beams of light, is indicative of her creative concaveness, of her capability to host in herself the outer world and at the same time to shape it and weld together its separate pieces; a kind of darkness rather different from the pitch black at the beginning of the second section, a devouring disintegration that overcomes the sleeping house. Another colour whose function is similar is the grey of her dress, which gives the illusion that one is not looking at her as a solid body, but rather *through* her, as if she were made transparent by her empathy.

The body thus tries to get outside of the limits of its skin, its limbs. If Clarissa's fondness for shoes and gloves, and her feeling "conscious [...] of her hat" (MD 4) can be seen as an attempt to control a frightening if thrilling expansion of the body through its extremities, Betty Flanders "press[es] her heels rather deeper in the sand" (JR 1) as if desperately trying to find an outlet for the dead-end distress of widowhood. Man's soul, like the aeroplane in *Mrs Dalloway*, is determined "to get outside his body, beyond his house" (MD 23). The body recognizes traces of itself, "a vibration from within", in the outer world, and yearns to rejoin (and *rejoice*) in it:

For even if we have the sensation of being always enveloped in, surrounded by our own soul, still it does not seem a fixed and immovable prison; rather do we seem to be borne away with it, and perpetually struggling to pass beyond it, to break out into the world, with a perpetual discouragement as we hear endlessly, all around us, that unvarying sound which is no echo from without, but the resonance of a vibration from within.<sup>87</sup>

The body looks for *ex-stasis*, the exact reversal of panic and schizophrenia; an out-of-body experience relieved by pathological implications. Ecstasy as the loss of one's body's integrity has been depicted through the Greek myth of the *sparagmos*. As reported by Bly,<sup>88</sup> "Dionysus [...] is the Greek god most connected with wounds and woundedness." The myth says that when he was still and infant, the Titans gave Dionysus a mirror to distract him in order to tear him into pieces and eat him. The god in front of the mirror begins to undergo a sequence of transformations to escape his attackers, but as he turns

<sup>87</sup> M. Proust, *op. cit.*, p. 212

<sup>88</sup> R. Bly, *John Iron: A Book About Men*, Addison-Wesley, 1990



into an ox they catch and kill him. The god is linked to the ecstasy that derives from being torn and squeezed, just as inebriation comes from wine in that grapes are trampled. Self-contemplation establishes a kinship with Narcissus: in both cases the dangerous surface of the mirror doubles things, splitting the original unity. If the suicidal Septimus is a Narcissus who, scattering his identity in a world which has become too much imbued with the image of his own madness, gets lost in the short circuit of the contemplation of his shattered body from the outside, Clarissa merges her self with things (and in the microcosmical chaos of the party) in order to give “an offer”: like Dionysus's, her heart manages to stay entire, welding the disparate parts together. In *The Waves*, once the accentrating power of Percival faints, the six speakers are like “mortified limbs”,<sup>89</sup> cut off from reality represented by the dead hero. Their dismemberment is a trauma not too distant from the biological separation from the parental body.

The union of man and woman is a recurrent image for mental ecstasy and creation (DiBattista).<sup>90</sup> In *To the Lighthouse*, the darkness and disorder of the *Time Passes* section are a bitter, ironical reversion of the “sexual benediction that concluded the dinner party.”<sup>91</sup> The chaotic annihilation is quite different from the dissolution of the body that happens during the (again, Dionysian) orgasm in sexual intercourse. The rhythm and imagery of several particularly poignant passages about revelation and creation, very closely recall an orgasmic moment, like the following in which Clarissa, feeling “what men felt”, experiences

a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment.  
(MD 27)

Mrs Ramsay, in her contemplation of the lighthouse, loses herself in a similar gush of

<sup>89</sup> M. DiBattista, *op. cit.*, p. 172

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99



happiness:

but for all that she thought watching it with fascination , hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (TL 60)

A significant cluster of the above mentioned creative conditions of concaveness (window, rhythm, melting) is employed in the suggestion Woolf makes to the young poet, in a passage whose sexual rhythm cannot be denied: “All you need is to stand at the window, and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another” (*A Letter to a Young Poet*, CE II 191). A longing for an empathy of almost sexual quality is Lily's vexation; she would like to lose herself in Mrs Ramsay, to dissolve the differences between them:

What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? (TL 47)

Identification with the outer object is no more an extension of the ego, as happened in *Mrs Dalloway* (for Clarissa it is “the unseen part of us, which spreads wide” MD 135), but rather a dissolution of it. The means through which this union becomes possible, as anticipated in the first chapter, is love:

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover. (TL 59)



*I: & the not I: & the outer, & the inner*

A passage like this bears resemblances with Deleuze's already quoted passage that scarcely need any comment:

For it is through writing that you become animal, it is through colour that you become imperceptible, it is through music that you become hard and memoryless, simultaneously animal and imperceptible: in love.<sup>92</sup>

Clarissa and Mrs Ramsay, with their love for life – that is far as it can be from philanthropy (it is enough to read the almost sarcastic short story *The Man Who Loved His Kind*), let alone from Kilman's divine agape – are described as artists: what they create are perfect moments. When they are invested of such a powerful ability, they are described as a “mist”, that fills the spaces between separate things and manages in uniting them without even touching them. Such for Woolf is the artist's task: to make oneself purely concave, a receptacle of sensations and impressions; with DiBattista's words, “her writing 'I' abides in the space or gap between the romantic 'Subject,' beguiled by its own imaginings into the very heart – or abyss – of loss, and the novelistic 'Other' [...] The mimetic power and imaginative authority of Woolf's narrative presence derives from her negative capability in penetrating, becoming, and ordering the human and inhuman reality she contemplates. Hers is a species of mediumship descending from Keats's formulations concerning the chameleon poet who has no identity.”<sup>93</sup> A faint anticipation of the ability to identify herself with the outside that Lily is to gain only through her final “vision” – vision that, very tellingly, is due to the presence in absence of the body of Mrs Ramsay – is given through several allusions to the influence of the external events in the inner life of thought and sensation; Lily's body and mind are by no means presented as close in themselves. In front of the tranquil seascape, she and William Bankes participate physically with what happens outside, feeling “some sort of physical relief” (TL 18); analogously, the firing of Jasper's gun seems the effect of the culmination of her own thoughts, issuing in the visual burst of the flight of birds. In *The Waves*, and the parallell with the above quoted sentence by Deleuze holds out, the

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<sup>92</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 208

<sup>93</sup> M. DiBattista, *op. cit.*, p. 14



speaker who mostly succeeds in sharing other's visions and feelings is Bernard the writer:

we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt "I am you". This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome. Yes, ever since old Mrs Constable lifted her sponge and pouring warm water over me covered me with flesh I have been sensitive, percipient. Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan's tears. I see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt. (W 194)

The empathy with the suicidal Rhoda closely reminds of Clarissa's re-embodying Septimus's death; it is not simple imagining, actually "her body went through it [...] Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness" (MD 163).

Union with the outer world comes natural in childhood: George Oliver in *Between the Acts* is allowed an experience of unity that derives from Woolf's own infancy. The flower he sees as making a unity with the earth is the very image of a body not yet severed from the world – it is almost pleonastic to remark how much that has to do with the unity of the body of the child with that of the mother, especially under a Lacanian light; on Bartholomew's irruption and disruption of the baby's edenic world too much feminist criticism has already done justice to comment; rather, I would like to report Minow-Pinkney's acute analysis<sup>94</sup> of what happens to Isa while she is looking at George from the window: in a three-folded mirror she beholds her own image, seeing reflected in it her love for Rupert Haines, and at the same time the everyday objects that remind her of "the father of [her] children" (BA 8), that is the conventional, almost fictional, "enacted" love for her husband Oliver. But the third love that the mirror is not able to reflect is the one for her son, George, who, being a child, inhabits the edenic world outside language, from which Isa and Woolf are excluded and into which they both, as artists, strive to enter again; significantly, the window from which she looks at George in the garden prevents him from hearing her calling him.

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<sup>94</sup> M. Minow-Pinkney, *op. cit.*



Clarissa cannot feel herself as a single identity; just as her sense of time is ubiquitous, the present holding in itself both past and future, so is her perception of space; she is “everywhere; not 'here, here, here'” (MD 135). Her body is duplicated, spread in the world around her; body means not “I”; it is as when Deleuze asks “One or several wolves?”: to be a wolf means first of all to be part of a swarm. This happens also for Woolfian characters, they are points of intensity in “a swarming, a wolfin’g”,<sup>95</sup> just as a rhizomatic system, points of intensity of a Proustian metaphor. “Where does she begin, and where do I end?” wonders Peggy with Eleaonor in a cab in *The Years*: “They were two living people, driving across London; two sparks of life enclosed in two separate bodies; and those sparks of life enclosed in two separate bodies are at this moment, she thought, driving past a picture palace” (Y 292). The dichotomy between the act observing the street and being part of it makes Bernard “split off” (W 74). Clarissa

would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that. She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. (MD 5-6)

The most complete of all summing-ups of Woolf's literary struggle is in my opinion to be found in this statement by Deleuze: “the only way to get outside of dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the intermezzo – that is what Virginia Woolf lived with all her energies, in all her work, never ceasing to become.”<sup>96</sup> The *between* is the locus where survival from both the death-in-life of societal conventions and suicidal dispersion becomes possible; it is not madness; it is a training of madness, always skimming the surface of madness. Sanity and insanity are aspects of the same reality, united but not identical, as are Clarissa and Septimus. Eternally approaching the limit of dispersion, of openness, trying to do like Zeno's Achilles with his goal, that is, striving to reach it but never achieving it; exploring the infinitely little space that creates before

<sup>95</sup> G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 35

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305



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death-dispersion, but always trying to keep entire: the only, perilous zone where true life is, the moment of suspense before the clock strikes; prolonging this infinitely little present moment life-long: “to saturate every atom, to eliminate waste.” (D3 28 November 1928)



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## **ABSTRACT**

Starting from the distinction between “concave” and “convex” bodies and from the overcoming of the Platonic distinction between *soma* and *psyche*, this dissertation analyses the wide range of bodily attitudes that the main characters in Virginia Woolf's work assume in relation with the outside world. Convexity and concavity are the two extreme poles between which a body can locate, depending on how much it tends to identify with its own surface or, on the contrary, to go beyond it and merge with the external world. The first chapter focuses on the distinction concave-convex, and its implications; the second is an analysis of different modes of convexness, with their risks and benefits; in the third chapter a description of different modes of concaveness is given.