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Virginia Woolf, the artist and the limits of Signification

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> 'And she wanted to say not one thing, but everything. Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing. [...] The urgency of the moment always missed the mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low.'[1]

Virginia Woolf's work is littered with fictional artist and writer figures. In her first novel *The Voyage Out*, we hear Woolf's early writerly ambition echoed in Terence Hewet's wish to write a novel about silence,[2] in *To the Lighthouse* the modern painter Lily Briscoe is desperately trying to project her vision onto canvas, and finally in her last novel *Between the Acts* the dramatist Miss La Trobe is struggling to hold her vision together on stage. Writing in the middle of a society and literary scene in rapid transformation, from early on in her career Woolf was concerned with finding new forms to replace the 'ill-fitting vestments' of Edwardian fiction from which '[l]ife escapes',[3] to find new ways to satisfyingly capture the change in human character that she found to have coincided with the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition.[4] This strive for freshness and constant refinement of her technique would continue to the very end of her life and still finds expression in the 1937 essay 'Craftsmanship', in which, aware of the limitations of language and its implications on literary presentation, she asks: 'how can we combine the old words in new orders [...] so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?'[5] In fact, a close reading of Woolf's novels reveals a deep concern over the limits of language as a semiotic system and a related anxiety over the possibility of perhaps never truly communicating with another person, of never satisfyingly expressing oneself, of never fully capturing one's experience in words or of attaining stable meaning in them. Through the lens of structuralist, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory, this essay will explore the ways in which Woolf uses the artist figure in *To the Lighthouse* and in *Between the Acts* to reflect on the limits of art and language as signifying activities, on the instability of meaning in texts, and particularly in the highly metafictional *Between the Acts* to reflect on the author's relationship to her text and the literary tradition.

Although many of the artist figures in Woolf's fiction are male, Lily Briscoe and Miss La Trobe arguably allow the author to reflect on the social position of female artists. Both are outsiders: when painting, Lily is described as 'drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people' (TL:180); La Trobe as 'an outcast' whom '[n]ature had somehow set apart from her kind' (BA:125). Sexually both women are "modern" and thus marginalised, LaTrobe a lesbian, Lily choosing to remain unmarried. The marginalisation of these women can certainly be read as a reflection of Woolf's struggle to find a place for herself as a woman writing within a predominantly male tradition as well as the Modernist

[1] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (henceforth TL) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 202.
[2] N. Takei da Silva, *Modernism and Virginia Woolf* (Windsor: Windsor Publications, 1990), p. 196.
[3] Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', reproduced in the module reader, p. 13, 12.
[4] 'on or around December 1910, human character changed.' Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', reproduced in the module reader, p. 1.
[5] Virginia Woolf, 'Craftsmanship' in The Death of the Moth, and other essays <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91d/chapter24.html> [accessed 9 January 2011].

movement which greatly valued this tradition, 'the mind of Europe',[6] as T.S. Eliot called it. That the phrase women '[c]an't paint, can't write' (TL:180) resurfaces in Lily's mind, even though at first she cannot attribute it to anyone, serves as proof of the pervasiveness of surviving pre-twentieth century patriarchal discourse on the topic, which would have found resonance in Woolf's own life: the voice inside her head is that of a man's. As expressed in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's exploration of new forms is intimately linked to her gender.

> She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked:
> it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. (TL:23)

Lily is extremely sceptical about her skill and achievements as an artist, her canvas described as a 'formidable ancient enemy of hers' (TL:180), her act of creation expressed in the language of combat. She has a vision, but successfully transferring it onto canvas takes desperate, painful effort. It becomes clear from Lily's tiring battle to signify on canvas that at the heart of the novel lies the uneasy question of whether the signifier can ever satisfyingly express the signified. Even for all its celebration of life, a pervading sense of darkness and threat of meaninglessness lies underneath the novel's surface and can be glimpsed at in moments of solitude, such as when Mrs Ramsay is described as shrinking 'with a sense of solemnity' into 'a wedge-shaped core of darkness' (TL:72). Mr Ramsay senses the darkness too: when gazing solitarily at the sea 'facing the dark of human ignorance', he regrets 'how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on' (TL:51-52). This threat finds its most explicit expression in the 'Times Passes' section, covering the years of the very real destruction of the First World War, where the abandoned decaying house is only at the very last moment saved from being swallowed up by darkness, paralleling the coming of peace in Europe. 'One feather, and the house, sinking, falling, would have turned and pitched downwards to the depths of darkness.' (TL:158) Just like Mrs Ramsay, the novel itself has a core of darkness.

The threat of meaninglessness can be seen as resulting from a lack of communication between characters and the solitude that falls on their part due to this resignation to non-signification. The menacing darkness is tangible in the library when 'wishing only to hear his voice', Mrs Ramsay silently pleads her husband to talk to her, '[f]or the shadow, the thing folding them in was beginning, she felt to close round her again' (TL:141); she herself 'never could say what she felt' (TL:142). The house is described as being 'full of unrelated passions' (TL:168) and even the children 'suffered something beyond their years in silence' (TL:176). This lack of communication reveals a deeper anxiety over the limited nature of language as a semiotic system; whether it can suffice in truly bridging the gap between people, or whether words will always 'strike the object inches too low' or 'flutter sideways' in a perpetual deferral of meaning.[7] Woolf writes in her diary: 'obviously I grope for words [...] Still I cannot get at what I mean.'[8] She sees words as clumsy, imprecise tools for expressing thought and emotion and makes this a concern of her fiction.

Just as Lily turns to her canvas, putting her faith into a visual form of self-expression, recognising the trouble with words, Woolf turns to symbols and images to find new depth and accuracy of expression by shifting from a metonymic to a metaphoric mode of representation

[6] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, 2nd ed., (New York: Longman, 1989), p. 27.
[7] 'Signification supposes both difference and deferral: that meaning is never present (fully formed) in individual signifiers but is produced through a series of differences; that meaning is always temporally deferred, sliding under a chain of signifiers that has no end.' For an explanation of Jacques Derrida's concept of différance see *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan, 2nd ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), p. 113-119.
[8] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 75.

that has been identified by David Lodge as a defining feature of modernism.[9] He observes that progressively in Woolf's fiction 'the unity and coherence of the narratives comes increasingly to inhere in the repetition of motifs and symbols'.[10] I would argue that this change in Woolf's technique is a result of two particular artistic concerns: firstly, her interest in the 'dark places of psychology'[11] which, again according to Lodge, aligns her with modernism,[12] because the unconscious may find better expression in symbols which are the language of dreams, and secondly, her familiarity with the Bloomsbury notion of 'significant form'. The most prominent symbol in the novel is the lighthouse which, standing alone in the distance, could be seen as representing the isolation of the characters and thus contributing to the theme of lack of communication. Another highly symbolic image is that of the tear '[b]itter and black, half-way down, in the darkness' (TL:34) forming and falling into waters within Mrs Ramsay. Besides providing unity, the repetition of symbols betrays their doubleness: whilst to Paul Rayley the lights of the town represent 'things that were going to happen to him - his marriage, his children, his house' (TL:90), to Mrs Ramsay they stand for 'all the poverty, all the suffering' (TL:79) in the town below. That aesthetic unity was a consideration for Woolf in the novel's composition is evidenced in her diary where she ponders the effect 'Time Passes' will have on the overall structure of the book: 'and then this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time and the consequent break of unity in the design.'[13] Indeed, the symbol of the perfectly arranged plate of fruit could be taken as self-reflexive commentary on the importance of unity in a work of art which is spoilt immediately if one structural element is removed. Nevertheless, a potential contradiction between these two projects of accurately depicting human consciousness and of crafting a unified form has been noted by William R. Thickstun who questions the 'psychological verisimilitude' of the novel's closure dictated by 'an aesthetic demand', if Woolf with other Modernists was trying to highlight 'the perpetual openness of experience'.[14]

This shift in the mode of representation can also be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms as a move away from the rigidity of the language of the Symbolic Order towards the pre-linguistic maternal sphere of the Imaginary, the desire for which could be said to find more explicit expression in symbols that encroach upon the unconscious. Though she wants to see herself as a modern woman and 'improve away [Mrs Ramsay's] limited, old-fashioned ideas' (TL:198), Lily articulates a strong desire for the older woman, whom she sees as a mother-figure, and longs to discover, through intimacy, the knowledge about life and love that she metaphorically imagines is inscribed on stone-tablets within Mrs Ramsay - a kind of Law of the Mother. Her desire to become 'inextricably the same, one with the object one adored' can be interpreted in Jacques Lacan's terms as a desire to return to the pre-linguistic Imaginary and once again achieve unity with the mother.[15] This reading is reinforced by the characterisation of this knowledge through unity as decidedly maternal, feminine, in the narrator's words: 'nothing that could be written in any language known to men' (TL:60). Realising the shortcomings of patriarchal language ('For how could one express in words these emotions of the body?' [TL:202]), the rigidity of the Symbolic order, her longing for the feminine fluidity of the Imaginary is expressed in the simile 'like waters poured into one jar' (TL:60).

[9] For a summary of Lodge's argument in relation to Woolf see John Mepham, 'Virginia Woolf and Modernism' in *Criticism in Focus: Virginia Woolf*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 45.
[10] David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977) p. 177.
[11] 'Modern Fiction', reproduced in the module reader, p. 14.
[12] 'Modernist fiction is concerneed with consciousness, and also with subconscious and unconscious workings of the human mind.' Lodge, p. 45.
[13] *A Writer's Diary*, p. 81.
[14] For a summary of Thickstun's argument see Mepham, p. 48-49.
[15] A summary of Jacques Lacan's theory of the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order can be found in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 99-101.

This rigidity of the Symbolic is also apparent in the language of desire focalised through Lily: 'To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain' (TL:203). In Lacanian terms, the object of desire can never be realised for it is forever elusive, perpetually deferred in a 'metonymic sequence'.[16] Thus, the impossibility of achieving unity with Mrs Ramsay becomes analogous with her quest for the ever-elusive signified that, in Derridean terms, is also perpetually deferred, and thus with the impossibility of her ever finding the signifier that will fit the signified squarely. For Lily, painting is just another, semiotic but non-linguistic, way of expressing desire, of reaching toward a satisfying totality of meaning and just like a compelling desire, her art is described as 'this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her, emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded her attention' (TL:180). It can be seen from another example in the novel, that of Mr Ramsay longing to reach Z in his symbolic alphabet of understanding and intelligence, the prospect of which he sees as the fulfilment of his life and career, that indeed much of Woolf's work is characterised by this metaphorical movement of reaching, straining for something elusive.

In *Between the Acts*, I would argue that Woolf is evoking the figure of the artist to reflect not so much on the process of signification onto the work of art but rather on the sign's reception, and to consider the artist's authority over her work and the meaning taken from it. Miss La Trobe, the writer, director and producer of the village pageant, like Lily, has a clear vision that she is trying to realise on the terrace-stage, but unlike Lily who is battling with herself, she is fighting with external forces that, to a greater degree than she seems willing to admit, are beyond her control. Accordingly, creation is again depicted in the vocabulary of combat with La Trobe leading the battle: pictured as having 'the look of a commander pacing his deck',[17] she thinks of her actors as 'troops' (BA:40), and threatening them 'with her clenched fists' (BA:84) she issues them imperatives. Like a military commander, she accepts all responsibility for artistic risks: 'taking all responsibility and plumping for fine, not wet' (BA:39). Read alongside Roland Barthes's essay 'The Death of the Author' and in view of all the forces beyond her control, La Trobe's frustrated but perpetual effort to single-handedly control the meaning of the text becomes rather ironic. Privately called 'Bossy' and no doubt seen as a dictator by her actors ('No one liked to be ordered about singly' [BA:40].) La Trobe's character can arguably be seen as a target of Woolf's criticism not only as an author clinging onto the notion of stable meaning, but as an aggressive authoritarian trying to assert a single meaning.[18]

Woolf's apparent metafictional critique of La Trobe is nevertheless complicated by the seeming contradictions in La Trobe's own philosophy of authorship. For all the exactingness of her vision that would seem to want to minimise the effect of any external force on the performance, she welcomes extradiegetic interventions if they help to 'continue the emotion' (BA:85). The artist's relationship with nature is especially contradictory, for she is both battling against it - the wind that blows away the actors' words rendering their sentences meaningless - and welcoming its timely contribution to the performance when it fills gaps opened up by human failure. At one point the tune of the gramophone, the view that opens up behind the terrace-stage and the cows merge into a 'triple melody' (BA:81) that captivates the audience. Most significantly and much to the audience's dismay, La Trobe

[16] For a discussion of 'the metonymic sequence that desire follows' see the transcript of the lecture 'Jacques Lacan in Theory' given by Paul Fry in *Introduction to Theory of Literature* at Open Yale <http://oyc.yale.edu/english/introduction-to-theory-of-literature/content/transcripts/transcript-13-jacques-lacan-in-theory> [accessed 8 January 2011].

[17] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (henceforth BA) (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 39.

[18] In *Three Guineas* Woolf is highly critical of authoritarianism and tyranny, which she sees as practiced mainly by men, both in the public and private spheres. In this sense Woolf appears to be signifying masculine characteristics onto La Trobe, thereby deepening her sexual ambiguity.

does not come forward at the end of the play for them to 'make responsible' or to 'thank for their entertainment' (BA:115). Steeped in literary conventions, the audience subscribe to the ideologically produced idea of the author as 'an indefinite source of significations which will fill a work'[19] and therefore help to explain its meaning. However, by refusing to give herself to the public, '[t]o give the text an Author', La Trobe is refusing to 'furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing'.[20] Her being called 'Miss Whatshername' by several members of the audience underscores this desire to remain anonymous and let her work stand on its own.

Authoring a theatrical performance entails more risks for lost and distorted meaning but on the other hand more potential for new meanings. Through the risk of potential misinterpretation of La Trobe's directions, the actors who can be seen as Barthes's 'mediators' or 'relators'[21] open up the theatrical text in a way ultimately out of the director's control and, through emphasis on their performance of the text, can be seen as demoting the author as the origin of its meaning. However La Trobe's vision also entails opening the text up voluntarily in a number of ways such as by asking the audience to imagine a scene and by effectively introducing them into the storyworld by using mirrors. The dialogue makes apparent the audience's confusion over the meaning of the play and the free indirect discourse focalised through Etty Springett allows Woolf to satirise the hopelessly Victorian ideals of fixed meaning: 'How difficult to come to any conclusion! [...] She liked to leave a theatre knowing exactly what was meant.' (BA:98) Similarly Woolf leaves the ending of her novel open, placing the meaning of the text in the hands of the reader, reflecting back into the audience, allowing them to posit meaning.

As Woolf explores the topic in her essay 'Craftsmanship', an old language like English inevitably opens any text up to the past. Certain words are stamped with memories and associations that makes their purely denotative use impossible, and thus through the metonymic chain of deferral, leading to more and more signifiers, results in a proliferation of meaning that can be considered either enriching or destabilising. Both the play within the novel and the novel itself contain a myriad of echoes from the history of English and to an extent European literature. Both Woolf and La Trobe can thus be seen as engaging in a dialogue with the past but not simply with unquestioning reverence. In fact, *Between the Acts* can clearly be read as a sort of democratising response to what has been seen as erudite and elitist in the way Modernism generally employs intertextuality[22]. Woolf's stated intention of writing a novel with 'a centre: all literature'[23] certainly shares ground with Eliot's claim that a mature poet should write with an awareness of 'the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country'[24]. However *Between the Acts* does not limit its references to Shakespeare and Keats, authors included in Eliot's canon, but is also full of allusions to folk sayings and beliefs and to popular culture. An illustrative example of Woolf's apparent irreverence towards the canon is her juxtaposition of Queen Elizabeth's line 'For me Shakespeare sang' (BA:52) with a cow mooing. By including Eliot in her network of allusions, Woolf can also be seen as bringing him down to the level of the villagers. The idea of tradition plays a similarly significant role in the audience's reception of the play, as is evident from Mrs Mayhew's comments. She expects it to 'follow the genre of

[19] Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', trans. Josue V. Harari, in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, p. 274.
[20] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', trans. Richard Howard <http://www.deathoftheauthor.com> [accessed 10 January 2011].
[21] Ibid.
[22] Anna Snaith has noted that Woolf responded to Benedict Nicholson's accusations of Bloomsbury elitism and exclusivity thus: 'I did my best to make [my books] reach a far wider circle than a little private circle of exquisite and cultivated people.' *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 141.
[23] *A Writer's Diary*, p. 289.
[24] Eliot, p. 26.

Empire Day pageants', but it 'pursues a different course'[25] thus destabilising her notion of a what a village pageant can be like. Arguably such a destabilisation of the canon and the accepted narrative of history of literature and the nation can lead to a destabilisation of the concept of Englishness itself. Through satire of the character of Constable, who according to Anna Snaith 'represents imperialist, as well as patriarchal oppression' and 'polices gender roles', 'race [...] and all aspects of life, particularly sexuality',[26] La Trobe, and on a more general level Woolf herself, can be seen as deconstructing the dichotomies upon which Victorian society and Empire, which as a consequence of the ultimately destabilising war will be dismantled, had been built. Thereby through the use of intertextuality Woolf is demonstrating the precariousness and ultimate instability of such cultural constructions.

It seems clear then that Woolf is again reflecting on the shortcomings of language as a semiotic system. Even though in 'Craftsmanship' she warns against the perils of '[combining] new words with old words', in *Between the Acts* she coins new words in an attempt to stretch the limits of an old language, trying to create meaning in the synthesis of two signifiers[27], which by its very nature is unstable, the two base words threatening to '[flutter] to right and to left, like pigeons rising from the grass' (BA:46)[28]. It is exactly in this doubleness of a sign where its destabilising potential seems to lie, as can also be seen in the example of the amateur actors whose real-life identities remain visible alongside their fictional identities: 'Queen Elizabeth - Eliza Clark, licensed to sell tobacco' (BA:52). The narrative also constantly draws attention to the signifying nature and doubleness of the props used in the play: 'the soap box in the centre, representing perhaps a rock in the ocean' (BA:52). This threat of instability in language and on stage is not only mirrored in the instability of the weather, the fear of rain ('There was a fecklessness, a lack of symmetry and order in the clouds, as they thinned and thickened. Was it their own law, or no law, they obeyed?' [BA:16]), but in the approach of war. Having lived through the First World War, the community is suspended between the acts of war, living with a constant threat of destruction, of the descent of civilisation into meaninglessness: 'At any moment guns would rake that land into furrows; planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly.' (BA:34)

Old Mr Oliver may think that he 'must respect the conventions' (BA:120), but it becomes evident that Woolf is evoking the artist figure in To the Lighthouse and Between the Acts to do precisely the opposite and self-reflexively draw attention to the literariness of the novels, to their status as fictional representation and to the formal considerations that have gone into their writing. She is constantly breaking the illusion La Trobe is so desperate to maintain, therefore exposing the literary text as an unstable semiotic construct. Both novels also allow Woolf to express autobiographical concerns about the female artist's search for a place in relation to a male tradition as well as a new generation's quest for new forms to express the experience of modernity, to stretch language in order to accurately capture what she calls 'the exact shapes my brain holds'[29]. More generally this metafictional aspect of Woolf's work allows her to enter into a discussion with the reader about art as an expression of the desire to find unity, stability and meaning in the threat of darkness and savagery present in both novels either as the intervention of the First World War or the impending doom of the Second. Even though it seems impossible to capture within the net of language

[25] Gillian Beer, 'Explanatory Notes' to *Between the Acts*, p. 137, note 60.
[26] Snaith, p. 144.
[27] 'Woolf's coining of the word "dispersity" itself seems to hover between "dispersal" and "disparity".' Snaith, p.145.
[28] It is interesting that Woolf uses the same image in both novels. This can further be seen to evidence the importance of symbolism in her work.
[29] *A Writer's Diary*, p. 176.

the 'innumerable atoms'[30] of life, and signification through art seems like a hopeless battle, 'a fight in which one was bound to be worsted' (TL:180), there is meaning to be derived in both the act of creation and the act of interpretation. Making it clear that, for her, writing is the best way to express the lack at the heart of language, Woolf writes passionately about her craft: 'This insatiable desire to write something before I die, this ravaging sense of the shortness and feverishness of life, make me cling, like a man on a rock, to my anchor.'[31] Even if Woolf seems to be saying that all literary texts are open and that meaning is not stable since different readings will emerge in different hermeneutic contexts, she is delighted that the public should derive any sort of meaning from her work: 'And I can already hardly read through the reviews: but feel a little dazed, to think then it's not nonsense; it does make an effect. Yet of course not in the least the effect I meant.'[32] Anticipating Derrida's work, Woolf is also evoking the artist figure in order to reflect on the destabilising potential of the plurality of the sign, and through her intertextual destabilisation of the canon, demonstrate how unstable the monologic cultural narratives, onto which notions like Englishness and the Empire have been built, are. As each word summons up echoes of others, as each signifier leads to another, meaning proliferates and no end is in sight to the act of interpretation.

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> 'Where then are we to lay the blame? Not on our professors; not on our reviewers; not on our writers; but on words. It is words that are to blame. They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things.'[33]

[30] 'Modern Fiction', p. 13.
[31] *A Writer's Diary*, p. 119.
[32] Woolf writing about the positive reaction to *The Years* in *A Writer's Diary*, p. 277.
[33] 'Craftsmanship'.

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