

Autonomy and Agency in Virginia Woolf's Writing

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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January 2019

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AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am truly grateful for the continued guidance, heart-warming kindness and inexhaustible patience my supervisor, Professor Sanja Bahun, has shown me throughout the course of my doctoral study. Her unwavering support has been part of my research journey since my undergraduate days, when I took my first modernist literature module and wrote on Woolf for the first time. She has helped me develop and grow as a researcher more than I can say. I feel very privileged to have had the pleasure of working with her.

I also wish to thank my Supervisory Panel members, Professor Fabian Freyenhagen and Professor John Gillies for their insightful comments and dedication to this project. They were generous and responsive readers, who helped me “rid myself of all the muck” and see the final shape of the project. The Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies has been my academic home for the better part of a decade now and I thank them for making me feel welcome and inspired.

To my friends and colleagues Maria-Irina Popescu, Jessica Houlihan and Penny Simpson – sharing this journey with you has been such a wonderful experience. Your creativity, tenacity, and wisdom have been invaluable. Margot Kuylén has stood with me through many conceptual storms and filled my PhD days with joy and friendship.

A big thank you to my mother, Elka, sister, Monika, and aunt, Ivanka for always being there for me.

And finally, to Ian who gave me his hand many moons ago and has not let go.

ABSTRACT

Woolf's interest in practices of recording subjectivity and her experimentation with them is evident throughout her body of work. The Woolfian subject firmly resides within the larger material, political, and legal histories of early twentieth-century Britain, decisively demonstrating the overlap between discursive and power relations that shape both individual and social modalities of governance. This thesis examines representations of autonomy and agency in Virginia Woolf's writing that challenge prevailing notions of these terms. In particular, it interrogates the role personal autonomy plays in the formation of subjectivity and in the cultivation of the agential impetus that propels emancipatory action. In this sense, autonomy is seen as providing a crucial link between understanding the reach of oppressive patriarchal practices in people's lives and their capacity to resist them. In doing so, I aim to include Woolf as an important participant in the history of feminist thinking about the constraints of autonomy as well as to examine her own contribution towards liberating the term from the harmful individualistic associations it still conjures up today. Aided by discussions of autonomy in contemporary critical social and feminist theory, I argue that Woolf finds dominant conceptualisations of autonomy too constraining for fostering transgressive structures of agency due to their implication in and entanglement with internal and external structures of domination. In the final chapter, the thesis offers an account of the narrative and aesthetic strategies Woolf employs to subvert existing forms of autonomy and examines possible routes toward cultivating alternative forms of agency.

Introduction

The Revolution thus was not merely an event that had happened outside her; it was an active agent in her own blood. She had been in revolt all her life – against tyranny, against law, against convention.

Virginia Woolf, “Four Figures: Mary Wollstonecraft”¹

Then I longed for a power of vision which may overpass [the] limit.

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*²

In 1919, the British Parliament passed The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, which stipulated that “a person shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function,” effectively granting women equal access to the professions.³ Together with the momentous 1918 Representation of the People Act, which gave women over 30, who met property qualifications, the right to vote, the 1919 Act represents a significant step in women’s social and economic emancipation in Britain. It was at that point, according to the law, that women could be counted as autonomous persons (from the Greek, αὐτο “self” and νομος “law”); in other words, they were not simply law takers anymore, but instead became law makers for themselves and others. Twenty years later, Virginia Woolf wrote her famous women’s rights polemic “Three Guineas” (1938) to examine the function of these newly acquired freedoms in relation to women’s personal, economic, and political life, finding that the principles of patriarchal power remained, to a large extent, intact. In the essay, constructed as an epistolary response to an imagined (male) interlocutor, she questions the social practices of exchange that form the core of a privileged system of agency and progress, which excludes those who do not possess anything to offer in return. She writes:

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: Second Series* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 158.

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1999), 94.

³ National Archives < <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/9-10/71/section/1> >

But the word ‘free’ is used so often, and has come, like used words, to mean so little, that it may be well to explain exactly, even pedantically, what the word ‘free’ means in this context. It means here that no right or privilege is asked in return. The giver is not asking you to admit her to the priesthood of the Church of England; or to the Stock Exchange; or to the Diplomatic Service. The giver has no wish to be ‘English’ on the same terms that you yourself are ‘English’. The giver does not claim in return for the gift admission to any profession; any honour, title, or medal; any professorship or lectureship; any seat upon any society, committee or board. The gift is free from all such conditions because the one right of paramount importance to all human beings is already won. You cannot take away her right to earn a living. Now then for the first time in English history an educated man’s daughter can give her brother one guinea of her own making at his request for the purpose specified above without asking anything in return. It is a free gift, given without fear, without flattery, without conditions. That, Sir is so momentous an occasion in the history of civilisation that some celebration seems called for. But let us have done with the old ceremonies – the Lord Mayor, with turtles and sheriffs in attendance, tapping nine times with his mace upon a stone while the Archbishop of Canterbury in full canonicals invokes a blessing. Let us invent a new ceremony for this new occasion.⁴

In this passage, Woolf outlines the centuries old tradition of patriarchal power being passed on from one man of privilege to another, transferring capital and rights in the process. As newly active economic agents, women were expected to learn to perform the same social routine – discern value and exchange it for a better or more desirable position – but, unlike their male counterparts, they had not been given the chance to accumulate much worth exchanging. This model then, and the purported freedom it brought, was not a genuine way for overcoming the restrictions provided by the patriarchal norms that controlled women’s lives. For Woolf, this exchange economy of human rights was something she was not prepared to support and bargain for. The “free gift” she is describing here is not connected to this system of social discipline, which puts women and all those who have not led a life of privilege at a distinctive disadvantage, as it “is given without fear, without flattery, without conditions.” This free gift from a free woman, in the text of the essay, refers to one of the eponymous guineas, which the respondent is asked to pledge in the service of preventing the incoming World War II and securing peace. But, as this thesis will argue, it has more far reaching implications for understanding how patriarchal

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Anna Snaith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 178-9. All subsequent references to this edition are given in text following the citation as AROO and TG respectively, followed by a page number.

power participates in the very processes through which autonomous personhood is constituted as well as how it comes to shape our subjective, interpersonal, and social relations. Woolf indicates that securing legal and economic autonomy from their patriarchs is an important step towards emancipation for women, stating that the “the one right of paramount importance to all human beings is already won” and that this is a “cause for celebration.” However, in a mocking tone, she rejects the traditional ceremonies usually performed to mark historical occasions of significance and calls for the invention of a new ceremony. Woolf, of course, is acutely aware that no such celebration, traditional or otherwise, was either historically or literarily granted, and this thesis traces her own aesthetic and political efforts to create its blueprint.

In addition to this formulation of social freedom, seen as freedom from constraint and conditions, Woolf gestures towards another iteration of the concept in her 1924 essay “A Room of One’s Own.” There she writes about “the greatest release of all,” that is “the freedom to think of things in themselves” (AROO, 30). Referring to the ability to make up one’s own mind in relation to one’s opinions, preferences, inclinations, and actions, Woolf arrives at a condition of women’s emancipation from “the large and imposing figure of the gentleman,” which comes very close to the classical understanding of the concept of autonomy. Often used interchangeably with freedom, autonomy is defined as the capacity for self-determination or self-government; that is the capacity to make independent decisions about oneself and one’s life, or in Katerina Deligiorgi’s formulation “the idea that we can lead our lives rather than suffer them.”⁵ In this sense, autonomy is a crucial link between understanding the reach oppressive patriarchal practices and norms have in our lives and our capacity to resist them. This thesis shows that the tension between patriarchal oppression and resistance is a central aspect of Woolf’s writing and thinking throughout her life. Charting the way in which Woolf represents, questions, and

⁵ Katerina Deligiorgi, “Introduction. Autonomy: Specification of a Term, Recognition of a Problem,” in *The Scope of Autonomy: Kant and the Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

reformulates autonomy, leads to uncovering a mode of acting within a patriarchal social sphere, wrought with mechanisms of oppression, that interrupts the currents of dominant normative directions. I demonstrate that Woolf treats autonomy as a constitutive element in the process of self-constitution but one that is deeply embedded within material and political reality. Instead of languishing in the universalist individualism the original concept seems to offer though, Woolf attempts to salvage and reclaim the capacity for autonomy as a transformative mechanism of resistance against patriarchal control. Developed within the context of a gendered social sphere, Woolf's representations of self-constitution challenges existing theoretical models of autonomy and the types of agency that can be generated by it. Instead of relying on established definitions of intent and agential direction, built on philosophical and political frameworks designed to support and preserve patriarchal power, she conceives a new model of autonomous agency which does not reside within the reactive constraints of the exchange economy outlined above, but in the human capacity to heal and repair.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each focusing on a pair of Woolf's texts. The pairings are not chronologically but rather thematically motivated in order to show the dynamism and persistence of Woolf's thinking about modernist literature's role in representing self-constitution and agency throughout her life. The selection of the texts has been made to demonstrate the expression of these concerns across a variety of forms and genres, including *Bildungsroman*, essay, stream of consciousness novel, polemic, historical novel, biography, and pageant novel. Although an emergent object of scholarly interest, Woolf's engagement with autonomy and agency has not been the organising principle of a full-length study so far and highlighting the pervasiveness of the issue across her oeuvre was considered to be of primary importance. The theoretical portion of each chapter combines strands of Woolf's own arguments developed mainly in her essays, diaries, and correspondence with discussions in contemporary

feminist philosophy, critical theory and literary criticism in order to bring forth the historical richness and contemporary relevance of Woolf's thinking about how one becomes a person in the context of patriarchal oppression. This interdisciplinary inquiry is informed by a critical juxtaposition of philosophical discussions of autonomy, early twentieth century political and social history, and politically alert close reading. As Rita Felski argues in her recent piece on postcritical reading, creating positive accounts of literary texts and the ways in which they "replenish, reconfigure, recreate, reimagine, reinvent" social reality is just as important as exposing the ways in which literature subverts damaging social norms, albeit often overlooked.⁶ Broadly inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on queer theory, Felski's approach to reformulating critique poses a challenge to traditional modes of reading and interpretation, driven by a unilateral commitment to a so called "hermeneutics of suspicion," a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur to denote the type of thinking, inspired by the work of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and their intellectual successors, that aims to draw attention to various manifestations of social oppression, which are designed to remain hidden. Sedgwick argues that the dominance of this kind of thinking has had an "unintentionally stultifying side effect."⁷ Furthermore, fostering a climate of paranoid and predictable critique that prides itself in presenting problems without having the foresight to imagine any future variations, has suppressed alternative reparative hermeneutic practices. Postcritical readings in these terms "are informed by critique while pushing beyond it."⁸ My reconfiguring of autonomy and agency within the context of Woolf and

⁶ Rita Felski, "Postcritical Reading," *American Book Review* vol.38, no. 5 (July/August 2017): 4.

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 124.

⁸ As suggested by Tyrus Miller's analysis of the history of critical theory in *Modernism and the Frankfurt School*, this tendency in critical theory to overextend itself to demonstrate all the ways in which our social world is broken at the expense of imagining future alternatives is at odds with the original inception of this school of thinking via the Frankfurt School (p. 6-10). The direction of the Institute is outlined in Max Horkheimer's influential 1937 essay "Traditional and Critical Theory," where he states that critical theory's purpose is not merely to state "what is" today but to hypothesise "how things could be" in the future: "One thing which this way of thinking has in common with fantasy is that an image of the future which springs indeed from a deep understanding of the present determines men's thoughts and actions even in periods in which the course of events seems to be leading far away from such a future and seems to justify every reaction except belief in fulfilment." (Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical

modernist studies is intended to contribute to precisely this kind of alternative critical reading project, engaged and critically alert to outline instances of oppression present in the way we act towards ourselves and the social world, but also committed to follow Woolf's own thinking in trying to imagine a resistance and a future.⁹

Chapter One presents Michel Foucault's theoretical model for autonomous self-constitution, particularly focusing on the internal conditions required to achieve autonomous personhood; that is conditions thought to be achievable through the exercise of the individual's faculties, such as perception and reasoning. Through a reading of *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), it foregrounds Woolf's doubts about the scope for transgression and individual freedom traditionally recognised, or privileged, expressions of personhood allow. Her thinking is positioned within the feminist critical tradition, represented by thinkers such as Judith Butler and Amy Allen, and who demonstrate that dominant accounts of autonomy, such as Foucault's, do not give alternative, or non-privileged, forms of agency sufficient attention and completely forgo any considerations of gender. Furthermore, I argue, Woolf recognises the potential for oppression encoded within the rigid hermeneutical requirements that have to be met for an individual to be recognised as an autonomous person. She explores their implications through experiments with characterisation in the two novels in question, particularly in relation to the two female protagonists, Rachel Vinrace and Clarissa Dalloway.

Chapter Two focuses on the external conditions that either help or hinder the individual in developing the capacity for autonomy. Through readings of *The Years* (1937) and "Three

Theory," trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972), 188-243.)

⁹ Rita Felski, "Postcritical Reading," 4. In this piece, Felski also discusses the need to create new "vocabularies of value" and critical vocabularies "more attuned to the complexity of ties – not just as chains of domination, but also indispensable forms of relation." For similar challenges to critical reading methods drawn from hermeneutics of suspicion, see Sharon Marcus's collaboration with Stephen Best and Heather Love "Surface Reading" and "Building a Better Description" (2016) in the journal *Representations*.

Guineas" (1938), in conjunction with theories of habit, historical narrative, and democratic participation, this chapter follows Woolf's critique of available educational, legal, and nationalistic discourses utilised in registering, documenting, and remembering privileged forms of agency at the expense of others that get left behind in centralised narratives of progress. Such discourses facilitate the acquisition of autonomous subjectivities for agents deemed valuable to the state and restrict access for those who are not, thus radically revising and sanitising the type of subjective expressions available for agents to take up and develop on their own terms. Exposing the underlying narratives of self-mastery, possession and domination, Woolf demonstrates that privileged forms of agency are built upon existing frameworks of (institutional) power and control and as such can only have a limited role in overcoming structures of oppression. More explicitly, Woolf's analysis shows that the normative conditions used to ascertain autonomous personhood are in themselves implicated in proliferating practices of oppression. As such, a novel or at least a radically revisited method for conceptualising and representing agential capacity would be required in order to move towards a more emancipatory model for self and political organisation. Together Chapter One and Two demonstrate the restrictiveness of dominant frameworks of autonomous personhood and agency, their complicity with patriarchal and state oppression, and their incapacity to meaningfully contribute to modes of thinking and organisation that can contribute to developing an emancipated political life.

Chapter Three makes further links between the transmission of civic identities via gendered bodies and the relationship between socially sanctioned modes of self-legislation and the institutional legislation of human and civic rights. In developing this line of argument, the discussion benefits from work by Rosi Braidotti, Seyla Benhabib, and Butler on the relationship between gender and autonomous personhood. Finally, this chapter brings to light Woolf's commitment to subvert the representation of privileged modes of agency and their accompanying

practices of control and search for other means. I focus on her literary experiments with *Orlando* (1928) and *Between the Acts* (1941) and the narrative and affective strategies used by the writer in order to cultivate alternative forms of reparative, non-privileged and queer agency. Acting without constraint, thinking independently, and developing an affective relationality become the markers of a reparative agency that allows agents to make themselves against the grain of patriarchal norms and seek novel means of self-constitution and expression.

The following two sections of this Introduction outline the main operative terms, autonomy and agency, and establish their relation to modernist literature and Woolf studies.

Autonomy

The idea of aesthetic autonomy, or the question of whether art holds independent properties in relation to politics or other types of culture, is not new to modernism. Formalist accounts of art, derived from fin-de-siècle aestheticism, promoted by intellectuals and writers including Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, found art to be the ultimate purpose of life, and as Pericles Lewis writes, “strove to make life itself into a work of art.”¹⁰ Pater also saw art as removed from moral and social considerations. He thought art had to account for the process of individual perception, or the impressions experience leaves on the mind. “Every one of those impressions,” he writes, “is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.”¹¹ Divorcing itself from moral concerns in this sense was modernism’s last act of rebellion against socially determined and imposed standards and thus its final step towards transcendence.¹² Espousing artistic practice with the kind of autonomy that severed art from real

¹⁰ Pericles Lewis, *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

¹¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (1837), quoted in Lewis, 55.

¹² This short discussion only accounts for the English formalist tradition, i.e. aestheticism, in order to provide the historical context within which Woolf’s position was formed. Another, more significant for the development of avant-garde forms of rebellion against the establishment is Russian formalism.

life, was also enthusiastically embraced by Woolf's fellow Bloomsbury members Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Desmond MacCarthy. Their discussion reaches back to Immanuel Kant's theories of aesthetic experience, which continue to shape discussions in philosophy of art and aesthetics to this day.¹³ As Christine Froula suggests, the notion of *disinterestedness* is precisely what forms the nucleus of Bloomsbury aesthetics.¹⁴ But modernist philosophers such as Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno had a different view. Aesthetic autonomy was often characterised in early Lukács as a quality of "self-sufficiency," "self-fulfilment," and/or "self-determination" of the artwork, which makes it possible for the work of art to exist beyond a particular historical time and space, and thus emancipates it from social and political determination, or what Theodor Adorno terms the 'cultic' function of art.¹⁵ In both camps, regardless of the precise specificity of their theoretical commitments, the idea that art possesses a quality that allows us to resist co-option by political forces is very prominent.¹⁶

Woolf certainly shared the concerns of her contemporaries as is made clear in essays such as "Why Art To-day Follows Politics", "The Humane Art", "The Narrow Bridge of Art", "Modern Fiction", and many others. For Woolf however, there is a direct representative link

¹³ For full discussion see S. P. Rosenbaum, *Aspects of Bloomsbury: Studies in Modern English Literary and Intellectual History* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998). Both Clive Bell in *Art* (1914) and Desmond MacCarthy in 'Kant and Post Impressionism' (1912), reprinted in Rosenbaum's reader, take interest in art's demand for freedom, which can only be actualised through a process of disinterested observation, during which the subject has to escape one's 'thick little ego.'

¹⁴ Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilisation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 12. In his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Andrew McNeillie argues that the term 'Bloomsbury aesthetics' is problematic because of the variety of aesthetic models available in the group. For full discussion of the wide spectrum of aesthetic views in Bloomsbury see McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-28.

¹⁵ For presentation of their views in full see Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) and Georg Lukács *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (MIT University Press, 1971); for additional modernist theories of art see Theodor Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 2007); for an influential contemporary take on modernist art see Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London and New York: Verso, 2007). The work of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière also centres on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, aiming to understand how aesthetic strategies can influence political action, see *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2006).

¹⁶ For contemporary scholarly discussion of modernist literature and aesthetic autonomy, see Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Farhang Erfani, *Aesthetics of Autonomy: Ricoeur and Sartre on Emancipation, Authenticity, and Selfhood* (Lexington Books, 2011).

between life and fiction. Seeing the novel as “owning a certain looking-glass likeness to life” (AROO, 54) brings her to search for insights concerning lived experience within the realm of fiction. Woolf is certainly not alone in that practice as the relationship between life and fiction is a deeply-embedded modernist concern. However, instead of theorising the abstract dimensions of aesthetic autonomy as an inherent property of art, she examines art and thought as practices embedded within specific sets of material conditions. Issues of gender, class, and race become, in her thinking, as constitutive elements of an artwork as the canvas it was painted on or the ink it was written in. This is where analogies with personal autonomy begin to emerge. A person, like a work of art, can be seen to possess certain qualities or capacities to allow them to resist (political) domination; and like examining a work of art in order to ascertain what aspects of it grant it such qualities, we can examine a person’s character and actions in order to ascertain whether they are acting out of their free will or under some kind of controlling influence. While recognising the importance of the aesthetic autonomy debate for modernist, and literary study more generally, this thesis focuses instead on its political and ethical counterpart.¹⁷ Autonomy, as signalled in Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, is an undiscovered territory with the potential to provide new directions for development in modernist studies, “cut[ting] diagonally across the ways we have thought modernism until now, slicing the centres and the margins into new configurations.”¹⁸ Reframing the ways in which modernist scholars understand autonomy in its hermeneutic and political, in addition to its aesthetic, manifestations can lead to new ways of thinking about the modernist subject beyond the phenomenological and poststructuralist divide.¹⁹ As Mark Hussey suggests,

¹⁷ This term appears in different formulations depending on the precise philosophical sub-field within which it emerges, i.e. ethical autonomy, moral autonomy, political autonomy, etc., each carrying slightly different connotations. To simplify the vocabulary, I will just use the term autonomy.

¹⁸ Eric Hayot and Rebecca Walkowitz, ed., *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

¹⁹ Phenomenological accounts of subjectivity focus on way in which modernist texts represent subjective perceptual experiences and interpret them as sources of information about the world from the individual’s first-personal perspective, without necessarily considering the external or social influences on such perspective. See for example: Ariane Mildenberg, *Modernism and Phenomenology: Literature, Philosophy, Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan,

however, despite their insightful explorations of the momentary workings of the mind in shaping the world, phenomenological readings of Woolf in particular face a serious issue by ignoring the conditions for self-constitution external to the subject's perspective.²⁰ Phenomenological readings are also in danger of presupposing a subject who is stable enough to make value judgements on itself and the world around it and who has unquestionable immediate access to empirical reality. From the 1980s onwards, some Woolf scholars began to see the subject as a more unstable construct of relations between certain cultural and institutional practices and discourses, loosely united under poststructuralist criticism.²¹ According to Pamela Caughie, poststructuralist criticism aims to "expose the essential difference, division, disorder, or discontinuation that gives rise to the seemingly unified, self-sufficient, coherent identity, whether of the individual or the system."²² In these types of reading identity becomes a matter of performance of certain socio-historical practices, rather than an attribute of exclusivity and personhood. Makiko Minow-Pinkney is an important exception here, because she asserts the equanimity between Woolf's feminist aesthetics and her modernist aesthetics. The force of her poststructuralist reading stems from her commitment to seeing Woolf's high modernist novels as expressions of a "feminist subversion of the deepest formal principles – of the very definitions of

2017). For phenomenological readings of Woolf see: Emma Simone, *Virginia Woolf and Being-in-the-world: A Heideggerian Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Heidi Storl, "Heidegger in Woolf's Clothing," *Philosophy and Literature* v. 32 no. 2 (October 2008): 303-314; Suzette Henke, "Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: A Phenomenological Reading," *Neophilologus* v.73 no. 3 (July 1989): 461-472. Earlier tradition from which phenomenological readings emerge focus of mystical or transcendent readings and examples of such scholarship include: For mystical readings see Michael Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf from Beginning to End* (New York: The John Jay Press, 1977); James Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Louise Poresky, *The Elusive Self: Psyche and Spirit in Virginia Woolf's Novels* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1981).

²⁰ Mark Hussey, 'Woolf: After Lives,' in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 22-3.

²¹ For poststructuralist readings of Woolf see Claire Colebrook, 'Woolf and 'Theory',' *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. ed. Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 65-78; Cloë Taylor, "Kristevan Themes in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, v. 29 no. 3 (Spring, 2006): 57-77; Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest & Question of Itself* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Ruth Porritt, "Surpassing Derrida's Deconstructed Delf: Virginia Woolf's Poetic Disarticulation of the Self," *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal* v. 21, no.3 (1992): 325-338; Anna Snaith, *Public and Private Negotiations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

²² Pamela Caughie, 'Postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches,' in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, ed. Anna Snaith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 147.

narrative, writing, the subject – of a patriarchal social order.”²³ In their determination to dispense with any vestiges of individual subjectivity and identity, poststructuralist readings tend to overlook Woolf’s efforts to create a discernible subjective presence even in her most experimental novels and instead argue for its dispersal. This process of self-constitution Woolf seeks to reveal goes far beyond an analysis of behaviours and language in narrative and character voices and attempting to deconstruct or criticise the normative framework within which they function cannot be productively accomplished without a clearer idea of how the making and expression of the subject are linked to social norms. Taking autonomy as a starting point can illuminate this formative tension and help us achieve a richer understanding of subjects’ relationship with norms and the different kinds of agency and intentionality they mobilise in order to participate in a deeply regulated social world.

Classical Kantian autonomy, a model against which Woolf rebels, is associated with rational capacity and is often a condition for ascertaining whether a person is acting freely or under some kind of coercion and whether a person can be held responsible for their actions. Autonomous decisions engender uncoerced actions identified by the agent as desirable and as such autonomy is deemed instrumental for developing the kind of agency that helps us defy conditions of oppression (theoretically at least) and resist external factors of control which may be trying to direct our life course. Discussions of autonomy in the Western philosophical tradition begin with the work of Immanuel Kant and his three-volume study on the foundations of human knowledge, elaborating a comprehensive challenge to the worldview that preceded him in terms of the way human beings relate to their world.²⁴ Autonomy as a concern begins to emerge in the second *Critique* via a formulation of the problem of free will, but Kant dedicates

²³ Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), x.

²⁴ The *Critique of Pure Reason* addresses the problem of the possibility, limits, and conditions of knowledge, the *Critique of Practical Reason* deals with the application of knowledge to morality, and the *Critique of Judgement* examines the category of judgement in its aesthetic, ethical, and metaphysical manifestation.

Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals, another shorter study, to dealing with it more comprehensively. The *Groundwork* examines and develops “the idea of the *will of every rational being as a universally legislating unit*.”²⁵ In Kant’s own account, autonomy as an expression of one’s rational will is to a large extent synonymous with morality as the universal law which directs social beings in their actions. A person cannot be moral if they are not autonomous and they cannot be autonomous if they are not moral, as Christine Korsgaard asserts in her Introduction to Kant’s *Groundwork*. According to Kant, she explains, when we follow the principle of autonomy, we present ourselves to others as free and thinking beings, able to make their own laws and as such deserving of respect, dignity, and rights. “The conception of ourselves as legislative citizens,” she writes, “is the source of dignity we accord to human beings.”²⁶ In subsequent developments of post-Kantian ethics, theorists have tried to outline more specifically than Kant ever did the conditions one has to meet in order to be considered an autonomous person by others. Broadly speaking, these accounts are divided into two sections: internalist and externalist. Internalist accounts contend that autonomy acquisition depends on capacity and properties that are internal to the individual, such as reason, will, and perception, whereas externalist accounts argue that external conditions, such as education or class, have an equally important role to play.²⁷ It is the latter, which are often also referred to relational autonomy accounts, that introduce intersubjective and social elements in the conception and practical function of autonomy, whilst trying to preserve its positive implication for a future of democratic equal rights.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4:431.

²⁶ Christine Korsgaard, “An Introduction,” in Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xxviii.

²⁷ For paradigmatic internalist accounts see Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *The Journal of Philosophy* v. 68, no. 1 (1971): 5-20 and John Christman, *The Politics of Persons: Individual Autonomy and Socio-Historical Selves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); for externalist accounts see Marina Oshana, “Personal Autonomy and Society,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* v.29, no.1 (1998): 81-102 and Andrea Westlund, “Rethinking Relational Autonomy,” *Hypatia* v. 24, no.4: 26-49.

Being self-legislating, or self-determining, is the condition demanded by moral, societal, legal, and medical norms in order to claim the right to have rights and be treated with dignity within the context of modern Western democracy. Without it, an individual is subjected to external control and domination. In other words, one has to prove that one has rights in order to be given them. However, not all subjects have equal standing before the law, be it moral, civic, or human rights law, and requiring the possession of a certain kind of capacity to be the threshold determining a person's status before the very legislative bodies that are meant to protect is an act of oppression against all those who cannot be said to lay a claim over such standing already. In other words, the autonomy ideal works with a certain subject already in mind; as Sara Ahmed writes, "it is the very normative assumption of a faculty of will that creates the impression of a subject that is behind an action."²⁸ This is the reason why the autonomy ideal and the understanding of agency that comes hand in hand with it have been subject to rigorous feminist critique.

Agency

As Sarah Buss and Andrea Westlund write in their recently revised *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry on personal autonomy: "every agent has an authority over herself that is grounded, not in her political or social role, nor in any law or custom, but in the simple fact that she alone can initiate her actions. [. . .] Despite the special inalienable nature of our authority over ourselves, it is possible for us to fail to govern ourselves, just as it is possible for a political leader to fail to govern those who fall within her domain."²⁹ Failure to govern ourselves is one of the phenomena that necessitates philosophical re-examination of the concept of autonomy and

²⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 25.

²⁹ Sarah Buss and Andrea Westlund, "Personal Autonomy", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/personal-autonomy/>. Accessed on 19 November 2018.

the types of agency it generates. Posed within a heavily regulated patriarchal context, the question about the capacity of subjects to develop the capacity for autonomy and act independently becomes a question about the relationship between agents and the social world they have created through their actions. The failure to govern extends beyond the individual self-relation of agents and into the political life they inhabit, making the role of discursive framework and practices of representation all the more important to consider. The concept of agency generally denotes a person's, or an agent's, capacity to act. Philosophical approaches to agency tend to split in three directions: neo-Aristotelian, psychological, and analytical.³⁰ Overall, encompassing all three approaches, the philosophy of action seeks to explain this capacity through an understanding of intentionality, i.e. what intentions motivate agents to act, and causation, i.e. what psychological or physical events in the agent's experience stimulate the formulation of such intentions.³¹ An agent is considered autonomous if they can rationally justify their actions and the motivations that led to them, which is why the idea of self-reflexivity, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter One, becomes so important. However, feminist thinkers insist that formulating an intention and carrying out the action it dictates is not as simple as it sounds. Actions do not take place in a vacuum and external factors can interfere with our motivations, affecting our intentions and the conditions within which we act.

The availability of means to act independently within a set of restrictive patriarchal norms becomes a real concern for feminist philosophers. They not only worry that women and other non-privileged subjects have a serious set of obstacles to face in building up the capacity to exist as autonomous agents, but cast serious doubt over the independent status of all acts

³⁰ For examples of each see Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Jack Martin, Jeff Sugarman, and Janice Thompson, *Psychology and the Question of Agency* (New York: SUNY Press, 2003), and J. R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

³¹ Schlosser, Markus, "Agency", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/agency/>. Accessed on 20 December 2018.

undertaken in an oppressive environment.³² And yet, as Diana Meyers states, feminist accounts of agency “must acknowledge that oppression impedes autonomy without stripping women of that autonomy which they have managed to wrest from a patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, ageist, class-stratified world.”³³ Salvaging a notion of autonomy that does not produce more self-harm and oppression within a framework of hostile normative demands will contribute to furthering emancipatory political projects as well as acknowledging women’s contributions to such projects to date and can further liberate women to act as social agents. Exactly how this can be accomplished requires thinking alongside the intersection between autonomy, power, and gender, as power conditions the forms gendered selves can take and gender, in turn, conditions the process of self-constitution through which agents come to claim an autonomous status. Such work has been done by theorists such as Nancy Fraser, Benhabib, Butler, and Allen, who all express different views of the way this intersection works.³⁴ The reason for contention is the extent to which power relations and patriarchal norms touch upon discussions of autonomy and subject formation. The idea is that if power and norms dominate the discursive frameworks within which individual identifications take place, then they must also play a determinative role in how autonomy is claimed and practised. This has larger implications for how we understand the “politics of our selves,” to borrow Allen’s formulation, together with our capacity to generate effective forms of critique and resistance to the social conditions that constrain us. Such analysis, Allen writes, helps us see “how our cultural construction mires us in modes of subjectivity that attach subject to their subjection and thus threaten to undermine the motivation for autonomous

³² For recent work on oppression see Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper, eds., *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ann Cudd, *Analysing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Sandra Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression,” in *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ann Cudd and Robin Andreasen (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 105-112; Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³³ Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror*, 16.

³⁴ For the source of the debate see Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

self-transformation.”³⁵ Many voices within this field of philosophical inquiry follow Wendy Brown’s influential call made over a decade prior, in suggesting that philosophy does not hold all the answers and cannot solve this issue using only its own toolbox. In Wendy Brown’s thinking the problems of political freedom and democratising power “cannot be resolved at a purely philosophical level if it is to be responsive to the particular social forces and institutions – the sires and sources of domination – of a particular age.”³⁶ María Pía Lara goes even further to suggest that feminist literary narratives “can create new forms of power, configuring new ways to fight back against the past and present injustices, thus making institutional transformations possible” as new political forms “have to be imagined before they can be achieved.”³⁷ Most recently, “Literature, film, and art” offer a possible course for imagining social transformation through the “realm of the cultural and social imaginary,” writes Allen in concord.³⁸

This concern with agency and the conditions within which it takes place is also present in Woolf. As Jessica Berman notes, “action emerges as a primary concern in Woolf’s fiction, not only in terms of her radical experiments with plot, fictional form, sentence style, and the expansion of the subject of narration, but also in terms of the limits and possibilities of real-world social and political action.”³⁹ This expansion of the subject of narration extends categories such as character and narrative beyond their literary function into categories of social representation and recognition agents rely upon in order to be seen and understood. They play a constitutive element in the normative frameworks developed within the patriarchal state and institutions in order to denote personhood, determine treatment, and grant dignity and rights to

³⁵ Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 21.

³⁶ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 7.

³⁷ María Pía Lara, *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 5; 77.

³⁸ Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves*, 183.

³⁹ Jessica Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 117.

its subjects. Modes of portrayal and representation, literary, political and legal alike, depend upon a dominant discursive cannon which has the power to deny existence. Judith Butler's analysis of such practices of signification is concerned precisely with the question of "how discourse injures bodies, but how certain injuries establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility. And further, how is it that those who are objected come to make their claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?"⁴⁰ Woolf saw the potential fiction and its constitutive elements had for exposing the injuries as well as for imagining a world beyond them, where agents can regenerate and repair, building a future of radical hope. The following chapters chart the conceptual journey, with its trials and errors, through the literary forms of Woolf's fiction that can take us there.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies the Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 170.

Chapter One

Characterising Autonomy: Patterns of Self-Constitution in Virginia

Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs Dalloway*

1.1 Introduction

In her essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf sees the modernist attitude to life as characterised by “contrast and collision” and describes it as one that demands “conflict of one character upon another” whilst simultaneously seeking “some general shaping power, some conception which lends the whole harmony and force.”⁴¹ In this essay, she traces the transformation of poetic consciousness from the Elizabethan period to her contemporary Georgians, marvelling at modern poets’ incapacity to write poetic dramas of substance. The crux of the transition from early modern to modernist poetics, Woolf finds, is precisely in the artists’ changed “attitude to life,” a transformation which extends from individual lived experience to its representation in fictional forms. Interestingly, the contrast that she establishes here is between freedom and self-consciousness: “the Elizabethans had an attitude which allowed them complete freedom” (CE 2, 221-2); whereas, the modern writer “has either no attitude at all, or one so strained that it cramps his limbs and distorts his vision [. . .]. He is a weary, secretive, suspicious animal, extremely self-conscious, extremely careful not to give himself away” (CE 2, 222). Woolf points out that self-consciousness, understood as an awareness of the boundaries of the self which demarcate the territory of individual presence and expression, might in fact be an

⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” in *Collected Essays, Volume II*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 219. All subsequent reference to this edition will be given in text following citation as CE 2.

inhibition for living a free life. Such boundaries are often forced upon the subject by the general shaping power of their social and political environment, demanding conformity and identification. The source of the demand would not be problematic if the subject identified with it, as in the Elizabethan period which provided a solid epistemological grounding to allow the matching of individual expression with the universally wholesome sentiments in a form that carries the perfection of their symbiosis to this day. But the modern attitude, in comparison is a groundless one –

In the modern mind beauty is accompanied not by its shadow but by its opposite. [. . .] There trips along by the side of our modern beauty some mocking spirit which sneers at beauty for being beautiful; which turns the looking glass and shows us that the other side of her cheek is pitted and deformed. It is as if the modern mind, wishing always to verify its emotions had lost the power of accepting anything for simply what it is. (CE 2, 223)

In Woolf's view, the opposites of experience can no longer fuse together, fulfilling each other, to create meaning, but instead they dialectically clash in the methodical negation or sceptical doubt over the very possibility of this fulfilment. The shadow of beauty, an integral part of experiencing the beautiful in the world, is torn away from it as its nemesis, leaving beauty plain and unfinished. The weapons of the modern mind - its satirical wit, ruthless irony, and discerning reason - strive to save subjectivity from the danger of becoming subject-less and pull it in the direction of singular exceptionality. In an effort to preserve its own sense of distinct individuality, the modern subject has allowed self-consciousness to curtail its reach for freedom and the protective layers have been transformed into epistemological straitjackets. In attempting to avoid being tricked into conforming to the desubjectivising set of normative behaviours, the subject begins to methodically pick out and disable moments of experience that are purely subjective and cannot be verified by objective standards of judgement. Processes of examination and verification, steeped in power relations and institutional control, then come to dominate the subject's engagement with her own experience, which removed from its source within her and translated through a set of external norms, become devoid of freedom. Woolf regrets the modern

mind's loss of ability to accept anything for simply what it is precisely because it signals a prior dispossession and a loss of oversight of the process which brings each individual subject into being.

Woolf's characterisation of the modern spirit as one torn between self-consciousness and freedom demands the examination of the constitutive processes which lead the subject to develop independent understanding, or knowledge, of oneself. Such reflective position would allow the subject to conceptualise how she acts upon herself in order to represent herself within a normative framework, or to use Judith Butler's terminology, to give an account of herself. As Butler observes in her account of that formation, self-reflexivity is a condition for giving an account of oneself, without which no form of autonomous self-presentation is possible: "The 'I' does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral framework. In an important sense, this matrix is also the condition of the emergence of the 'I,' even though the 'I' is not causally induced by those norms."⁴² I will return to the process of accounting for oneself in my reading of *The Voyage Out* (1.7), with particular reference to the processes of self-presentation and characterisation of Rachel Vinrace, the protagonist of the novel.

Modernism's commitment to subjectivity, as Charles Taylor has cautioned, does not imply a commitment to restore a "unitary self" that is capable of directing one's life as a well-disciplined moral agent suggested by the Kantian paradigm.⁴³ The first task of the modernist self-constitution project's first task instead was to address the paradox of the unitary self, whose inherent complexities could be understood on at least two levels. Firstly, the merger of sense and sensibility needed to create a unitary self could only be carried out through a subscription to a

⁴² Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham UP), 2005), 7.

⁴³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 462.

Kantian style of morality, based on a transcendental law. In this way the presupposed formal requirements for moral conduct would be given to the subject through her own experience of the empirical world. The content of moral acts would inevitably differ from one another, but the overarching construct of what it is to be a moral human being would remain intact, giving the subject a foundational narrative of what it means to be a rational human being and thus an autonomous agent. With the advance of modernity, however, and especially in the early twentieth century period, severe doubts engulfed the transcendental project and resulted in questioning the actual validity of the universal moral law, leading modernist writers and thinkers to look for alternatives.

Secondly, as the scepticism regarding a universally accepted model of self-making grew, the relationship between the subject and her moral and social environment also began to raise questions. The guiding powers of religion, state, morality and the law, the pillars of modern epistemology, were seen as suspect categories, enforcing varying levels of human oppression. In this context, reflecting on subjectivity became the privileged way for modernists to understand the place of the human in the modern world. However, this shift of emphasis also meant that the construct of the subject, traditionally understood as an agent capable of enacting her will in the world, had to be recovered from dominant processes of subjection. In Taylor's view, this thrust towards remaking subjectivity resulted, broadly speaking, in two opposing views, namely – the “subjectivist” and the “anti-subjectivist.”⁴⁴ This binary is reflected in scholarship on the matter in Woolf studies, as I have indicated in the Introduction by dividing it into phenomenological and poststructuralist readings respectively. Robert Pippin also draws attention to these two tendencies governing modernist conceptions of subjectivity, referring to them as the divination

⁴⁴ Taylor, 455-6.

project and the nihilist project respectively.⁴⁵ Influenced by Nietzsche's rejection of universally valid norms, exemplified by his "death of God" discourse, the divination project fashions the individual as the author of morality's golden standard, making individual agency the guiding principle for deciding a good action from a bad one. The nihilist project, on the other hand, incidentally also stemming from Nietzsche's ruminations on the fate of humanity in the modern world, invokes the powerlessness of the subject to take a significant stance against the overwhelming meaninglessness of this world. As it is clear that both the divination and the nihilist projects are built, more or less explicitly, on the basis of different conceptions of autonomy, Pippin's pronouncement that the problem of modernism is the problem of autonomy does not seem out of place.⁴⁶

My interest lies with the subjectivist theory, as the "divination project" is, I want to suggest, in many respects what modernist literature is motivated by - constructing and presenting a new subject and its corresponding conception of autonomy. However, as this newly emerged "subject" lacked a foundational source of "the Good," or any other ubiquitous ordering mechanisms to impose laws and values on lived experience, its own modes of self-constitution became increasingly problematic. Its conceptual function within the modernist framework is not a simple one either: the subject has to save the modernist project from falling into nihilist denial

⁴⁵ Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 2. In this respect, according to Pippin, postmodernism would have to be understood as a form of scepticism or a loss of belief in human power and transcendental truth. This point offers a chance to think about the prevalent demarcation of modernist/postmodernist discourse and potentially undermining the distinction. One of the claims I am putting forward in this thesis is that the notion of human power was questioned in modernist texts by Woolf and others, specifically in terms of autonomy, which became yet another unreliable universal truth.

⁴⁶ Pippin, 1. For Pippin modernity designates the historical period from the Enlightenment to mid-20th century, and modernism refers to the artistic output which comes to characterise the period, i.e. modernism is the art of modernity. This classification may be seen as presenting a methodological drawback by literary scholars as it extends the modernist period of artistic innovation and experimentation, which in its broadest form formulation in literary studies spans from the 1850s to the 1950s. However, issues of chronology should not detract us from the validity and importance of his discussion for two main reasons. Firstly, the debates regarding the periodisation and remit of modernism within the community of scholars dedicated to its study have not been resolved and, secondly, the socio-political changes which began to affect people's lives and artistic production, such as advancement of science and the break with the tradition of absolute rule can be dated back to the Enlightenment.

of the possibility of human freedom by embodying a model of self-constitution and edification that empowers it but does not make it the absolute source of the moral law. This conundrum shapes a range of problems connected to the human experience of modernity, clustered around the possibility of social freedom and the appropriate forms to express it.⁴⁷

This chapter begins to chart Woolf's experiment with representing autonomy in a modernist form by juxtaposing two interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, Michel Foucault's philosophical model of self-constitution and literary theorists' work on character as the chief mode of capturing subjectivity in fiction.

1.2 The task of producing oneself: Michel Foucault's techniques of the self

In his reading of Charles Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life," Michel Foucault identifies the making of modern man as an interest he shares with the modernist poet. Modern man, Foucault states, takes oneself as "an object of complex and difficult elaboration" and faces "the task of producing himself."⁴⁸ In one of his lectures delivered at Dartmouth College in 1980, Foucault declares that his overall theoretical project has been driven by a desire to uncover the limitations of available philosophies of subjectivity and to formulate, instead, "a genealogy of this subject" focused on "the constitution of the subject across history which has led us up to the modern concept of the self."⁴⁹ Foucault traces the trajectory of this own thinking about the subject back through its relation to the institutional practices, developing in modern hospitals,

⁴⁷ See Pippin, "Introduction," 3-4.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984. Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Volume I*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 311-2.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* v.21 no.2 (1993), 202.

asylums, and prisons, which subjected individuals to various modes of domination. The purpose of this form of study was to understand how society and its cornerstone institutions have come to shape our understanding of different forms of personhood from the seventeenth century onwards. In addition to institutional framing of personhood, though, Foucault was also interested in studying “those forms of understanding which the subject creates about himself.”⁵⁰ He identifies two types of formative techniques which pertain to the subject’s formation and bearing: techniques of domination and techniques of the self. The former, which will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Two, are defined as “the which permit one to produce, to transform, to manipulate things; the techniques which permit one to use sign systems; and the techniques which permit one to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain wills on them, and to submit them to certain ends or objectives.”⁵¹ By contrast, the techniques of the self are described as follows:

the techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on.⁵²

In order to follow the genealogy of the subject thoroughly one has to trace both types of techniques, particularly taking account of the points where the techniques of domination affect the processes “by which the individual acts upon himself [. . .] and the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Foucault, “Hermeneutics,” 203.

⁵¹ Foucault, “Hermeneutics,” 203.

⁵² Foucault, “Hermeneutics,” 203. Towards the end of the introduction, he makes a further clarification about the techniques of the self: they include those “oriented toward the discovery and the formulation of the truth concerning oneself [. . .].” These had to somehow relate to dominant practices of social being and self-representation which dictate that because “in our societies everyone had not only to obey but also to produce and publish the truth about oneself, [. . .] examination of conscience and confession are among the most important of those procedures here Foucault contrasts the Ancient Greek notion of knowing oneself with the Christian demand to “confess, to your spiritual guide, each of your thoughts” and proclaims that this is the start of the hermeneutics of the self. He then embarks on a comparison between Ancient and modern practices of conscience and confession. See p. 204.

⁵³ Foucault, “Hermeneutics,” 203.

This Chapter will expose some of the ways in which the techniques of the self can be reduced to tools of subjective oppression that can harm one's capacity for autonomous living through an analysis of Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs Dalloway*. However, before attending to the reading of the novels, it is important to clarify the role the techniques of the self play in Foucault's overall theoretical model of self-constitution. In *The Use of Pleasure*, the second volume of Foucault's well-known *The History of Sexuality*, where we see his theory of the "hermeneutics of the self" unfold, he writes that his investigation of the self-making practices required him to examine the "forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognises himself *qua* subject."⁵⁴ Subjectivity, on this conception, is a relational process that requires cultivating a form of reflection on oneself as well as the social conditions one inhabits – a form of self-understanding that demands readiness to see oneself as a point of power play. As Judith Butler elaborates, in Foucault, the formation of the subject always occurs in relation to set of norms or social codes, which reveal self-constitution to be both "a kind of *poesis*," or a stylised, aestheticized mode of self-making, and "a part of the broader operation of critique," or a broadly rational and discursive way of thinking and self-expression.⁵⁵ In other words, the ways in which we conceptualise and comport ourselves as subjects has a direct relation with our ability to see problems in our social world and devise strategies to address them. In Foucault's framework, the process of self-constitution cannot take place outside the norms that guide the possible forms and manifestations the subject can assume in order to become intelligible to others in a particular socio-historical setting.⁵⁶ Yet, a number of critical theorists accuse Foucault of normative sloppiness because he does not spell out a consistent strategy of emancipation.⁵⁷ One of the most prominent voices here is Nancy Fraser, who

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume II, The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 6.

⁵⁵ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 17.

⁵⁶ See Butler, *Giving an Account*, 16-20.

⁵⁷ These accusations usually come from the Habermasian tradition. Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) is one of the most influential contemporary critical theorist. His work is inspired by the Frankfurt School, but has developed its own

explicitly targets the “normative confusion” of Foucault’s practice, writing that “whether we take him as suspending every normative framework or only the liberal one, or even as keeping that one he is plagued with unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions. Because he fails to conceive and pursue any single consistent normative strategy, he ends up with a curious amalgam of amoral militaristic description, Marxian jargon, and Kantian morality.”⁵⁸ In a more conciliatory tone, Amy Allen concedes that in coming to elaborate his conception of autonomy he “presupposes that individuals are capable of taking up a critical perspective on the technologies of self that are currently in use,” and that they “have the capacity for deliberate transformation of these technologies;” ultimately, however, she defends Foucault’s position by arguing that Habermasian critics misunderstand the role of the normative in Foucault’s emancipatory project.⁵⁹

Criticisms of Foucault usually target the tension created between the nature and the practice of critical reflection and normative conditions, constituted by power relations. The thought behind these criticisms is that he cannot account for autonomy as the capacity for developing a reflective and critical stance which can lead to a deliberate change of social norms work if he also wants to maintain his understanding of power as a strategic relation which “produces reality, [. . .] produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.”⁶⁰ This is because, the

strand of contributions, most notable of which is his theory of communicative action. Habermas is concerned with the relationship between reason, norms, and the public sphere and holds the belief that the solution to social problems can only be reached from inside the social norms currently in existence as there is not society beyond them and that such resolution can be achieved through development in rationality of discourse. Philosophers who work in the Habermasian tradition are usually very critical of Foucault, and those like him, who think that social transformation cannot be achieved under current social conditions but only through epistemological change.

⁵⁸ Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 31.

⁵⁹ Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves*, 46.

⁶⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 194. The accusations of untenability are generally coming from feminist philosophers and critical theorists pursuing the direction set by Jurgen Habermas. Lois McNay criticised Foucault’s analysis of practices of the self which she sees as privileging an “undialectical and disengaged theory of the self;” “Foucault’s non-dialogical conception of the individual leads to a false dichotomy between the individual and the social. The social realm is seen as invariably antithetic to individual interests, rather than as a realm which both protects and threatens, and therefore as a realm of contestation and struggle. Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self* (Cambridge: Polity

argument goes, in a social framework, where the subject is always put in a position of constraint and resides under a constant threat of domination, their capacity to reflect and think independently might become unlikely or unreliable at the very best. This is precisely what Jean Grimshaw has in mind when she asks: “when can forms of self-discipline or self-surveillance with any justification be seen as exercises of autonomy or self-creation, or when they should be seen, rather, as forms of discipline to which the self is subjected, and by which autonomy is constrained?”⁶¹ Although Grimshaw and others who have similar questions for Foucault are right to notice his reluctance to offer any specific strategies for resistance and emancipation on these terms, his hesitancy may not be entirely due to normative sloppiness. Rather, it could be the case that any attempt to posit a direct emancipatory trajectory would have to be as limited in scope as current norms allow and thus fail to see beyond. What is important for Foucault’s subjects is the ability to push and pull at the normative boundaries that surround them, through the exercises of their faculties and characteristics, in order to expand the possibilities of political life. This insight is important for my reading of Woolf’s project.

Self-constitution in Foucault is part of a process of social living which he refers to as “the arts of existence,” or those “intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre.”⁶² Foucault further blurs the normative lines by comparing self-making with the process of creating an artwork, because the former relies on the principles of individuality and recognisability operating within the social aesthetic. For example, even though Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* tells us a particular story, it also has to do so by

Press, 1992), 157; 190. Thomas McCarthy states that “Foucault’s aesthetic individualism is not more adequate to the social dimension of autonomy than was the possessive individualism of early modern political theory.” Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 73. Both arguments dismiss the aesthetic side of Foucault’s self-constitution project.

⁶¹ Jean Grimshaw, “Practices of Freedom,” in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 66.

⁶² Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 10.

referring to specific pre-set rules of expression which make it recognisable as a novel, and not a short story, a poem, or a play – a novel has to be written (mostly in prose), has to tell a story by means of character, plot, and narrative, it has to include multiplicity of voices, and so on. This is to say, the mode of expression, or recognisability, comes to guide and in some ways control the conceptual and formal span of the artwork. In the same way, a subject can be recognised as such only by exhibiting certain markers associated with subjectivity in the eyes of others. Establishing a common rule book which is used to assign social status, from which a person's position and rights within the social order are assigned, is precisely what forms the backbone of our normative structure.

Whether this normative structure is called morality, ethics, law, or democracy, there is a direct link between self-constitution and rules of conduct that have to be met in order for the subject's efforts to be recognised by other members of society. Foucault formulates this equation as a replication of the relation between moral codes and moral behaviours. Moral codes, he writes, are understood as:

a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), education institutions, churches, and so forth. It is sometimes the case that these rules and values are plainly set forth in a coherent doctrine and an explicit teaching. But it also happens that they are transmitted in a diffuse manner, so that, far from constituting a systematic ensemble, they form a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct each other [. . .] providing for compromises and loopholes.⁶³

The morality of behaviours, on the other hand, is “the real behaviour of individual in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them: the word thus designates the manner in which they comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction of prescription; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of

⁶³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 25.

values.”⁶⁴ In other words, morality cannot be seen as a rulebook that inherently makes agents follow it blindly, but it is a living thing that changes and evolves along with the historical subjects that practice and perform it in their daily lives. A Foucauldian subject can conduct herself morally in different ways. The relation between a subject and a moral act is not simply a matter of internalisation of the moral code by the subject, which could lead to a diminished capacity for autonomy, but of an interplay between subject and law that reflects the dialectical nature of autonomy as a balancing act between reflective self-constitution and its performance in the social sphere and opens up the possibility for transforming oppressive power systems. In this sense, acting morally is not enough to guarantee autonomous ethical conduct, as it could be a symptom of compliance with forms of self-discipline and self-surveillance, raised by a number of feminist critics, because the subject has not established her own mode of relating to given norms.⁶⁵ As Foucault writes, the rule of conduct is one thing – “but another still is [. . .] the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code.”⁶⁶ This is where the philosophical differences between Habermas and Foucault come in full view: for Foucault social change cannot be accomplished by seeking more sophisticated ways of tweaking current norms or power operations, but instead can only be reached by means of trial and error, of pushing against the grain, of remaking.

Foucault insists that in order to achieve autonomous self-constitution one would have to engage in a project of self-reflection which would lead to a deliberative relation to moral norms and their practice by the individual subject. The possibility for autonomy and critique then rests

⁶⁴ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 25.

⁶⁵ Jean Grimshaw, “Practices of Freedom,” in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 66; Amy Allen, “Foucault, Feminism, and the Self: The Politics of Personal Transformation,” in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, ed. Dianne Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 235-57.

⁶⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 26.

on the subject's willingness to examine, test, and experiment with her own boundaries in relation to the obligations she has to observe as a social agent. In this respect, Amy Allen is right to question Foucault's less than forthcoming position on intersubjectivity and relational autonomy, both topic of fervent discussion in contemporary feminist theory. The relationships between self-constitution and gender, a topic which will be discussed in more detail in the second half of this Chapter as well as in Chapter Three, is another problem that does not receive enough attention in Foucault's model. My main preoccupation here has been to provide a general account of the techniques of the self as part of Foucault's self-constitution project in order to establish a loose theoretical framework to encompass Woolf's work on the process of self-constitution and their manifestation through practices of characterisation in the selected novels.

1.3 Subjectivity and Character

As outlined in the Introduction, most poststructuralist approaches to Woolf can be accused of overlooking, or even openly negating, subjective agency in the subject formation – something Woolf herself is not prepared to do, even in her most experimental texts. Resisting oppression has to engage with the subject's material conditions, just as Woolf demonstrates in her texts. Despite the problematic construct of the subject, its suffering of the effects of patriarchal oppression cannot be mitigated by conceptually abandoning ship and overlooking its often obscure and deeply embedded causes. Poststructuralist, as well as phenomenological approaches, to Woolf's treatment of subjectivity, in spite of their differences, maintain an understanding the subject as either an expression of glorified singularity or a product of homogeneity. In this way, they tend to fortify the binary, rather than disrupting or critically evaluating it. A critical theory framework, exemplified in this chapter by Butler and Foucault, in contrast, does not negate the formative agency either of the subject or of institutional power relations for establishing the

modes of one's self-constitution and relation to the world. Established modes of self-constitution and its representation in narrative, including characterisation, rely on normative formulations of personhood and have an important role to play in the codification and marginalisation of subjects, which merits serious examination.

To recall Makiko Minow-Pinkney's important assessment, Woolf's high modernist novels are expressions of a "feminist subversion of the deepest formal principles – of the very definitions of narrative, writing, the subject – of a patriarchal social order."⁶⁷ Woolf examines the formal pillars of the realist novel, namely, narrative, plot, and characters and uses them to criticise models of self-expression tied up in patriarchal forms and preloaded with normative content.⁶⁸ In this traditional triad, characters are deemed the building block associated most closely with rendering subjectivity as a verifiable form of personhood and autonomous identity in narrative. Understanding the function of characters within a narrative will pay dividends for the current discussion, as it will help us understand the relation between subjects and the conditions within which they constitute themselves and emphasise the approach Woolf developed in terms of representing subjectivity in fiction.

Character in fiction has been traditionally neglected by literary theory both as a narratological device and as a conceptual problem. Seymour Chatham, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Jonathan Culler, and Alex Woloch, among others, have all expressed their dismay at the lack of critical engagement with this constitutive element of fiction.⁶⁹ Mieke Bal suggests that the reason behind this striking oversight is rooted in the connection between fictional character

⁶⁷ Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf*, x.

⁶⁸ Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf*, 14.

⁶⁹ Seymour Chatham, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 107; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983), 29; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1975), 230; Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters in the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2003), 14.

and its implied real-life counterpart: “that no one has yet succeeded in constructing a complete and coherent theory of character,” Bal writes, “is probably because of this human aspect. The character is not a human being, but it resembles one.”⁷⁰ Theorists have grappled with making sense of the formalist function of characters as a structural element of narrative, but even more so with their referential function, as the link between author, reader, and text. Woloch rightly notes that the tendency to favour the discussion of the structural function of character dates back to the Russian formalists and their legacy in French structuralism and poststructuralism. This approach neglects or even negates the referential link between a character and a person, either on ideological grounds, hermeneutic-semantic basis, or a combination of the two.⁷¹ In addition, within the context of Anglo-American modernism, proponents of formalism and new criticism were determined sever the link between moral laws and fictional characters, reducing them to a mere syntactic shape. Influenced by this tradition, modernist scholars have also been keen to sever the referential link and rely exclusively on structural and narratological approaches, which would account for the very limited engagement with character in the field.⁷² Perhaps due to this tendency or by reliance on conclusions of Woolf’s early readers, such as Baruch Hochman’s pronouncement that “many things did not interest Woolf, and character in its classical sense was one of them,” attention to character among Woolf scholars has been negligible.⁷³ Scholars still hesitate to fully engage with the referential dimension of Woolfian characters and by proxy the implication that reading is a process of investment, not disinterest, laden with value judgements and shaped by normative demands; a point Woolf was deeply committed to making.

⁷⁰ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, Second Edition*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 115.

⁷¹ Woloch, 16. For ideological objections see Hélène Cixous and Keith Cohen “The Character of ‘Character’,” *New Literary History* vol. 5, no. 2, Changing Visions of Character (Winter 1974): 383-402 and Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel* [1963], trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965) – referential basis of character underlies a bourgeois notion of personhood; for hermeneutic/semantic objections see the work of A. J. Greimas and Philippe Hamon; for objections on both grounds see Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁷² For a notable exception see Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form: From Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

⁷³ Baruch Hochman, *The Test of Character: From the Victorian Novel to the Modern* (East Brunswick: Associated University Press, 1983), 157.

This critical attempt to step away from the referential nature of character, however, can be contested by looking at modernist novelists' own writing on the subject. As noted by Eric Sandberg in his recent, and only book-length study of Woolf's characterisation practices, Woolf's contemporaries shared a commitment to preserving the link between fictional characters and real people.⁷⁴ The most important of these discussions, and one most relevant to Woolf's own practice, is E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, a compilation of a series of lectures he delivered in 1927.⁷⁵ In this work, Forster defines characters as word "masses" created to appeal "to our intelligence and imagination, not merely to our curiosity" and divides them into two categories – flat and round.⁷⁶ Similarly to Theophrastian characters, Forster's "flat characters" refer to a type rather than an individual and rely on external markers, such as social rank, occupation, and gender to portray the internal constitution of the individual.⁷⁷ Constructed from a single idea or quality, they are easily recognised by the reader and are memorable: "they remain in the mind," he writes, "as unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances; they moved through circumstances, which gives in respect a comforting quality, and preserves them when the book that produced them may decay;"⁷⁸ they could be said to be particularly amenable to structuralist analysis. Round characters, on the other hand, spill over their syntactic confines and surprise us with their capacity for change. They "cannot be summed up in a single phrase" and "we remember them in connection with the great scenes," they pass and "as modified by those scenes." Unlike flat characters, round ones have "facets like a human

⁷⁴ Eric Sandberg, *Virginia Woolf: Experiments in Character* (Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2014), 4.

⁷⁵ For an interesting discussion of the interactions between Forster and Woolf on the subject of novel-writing, see James J. Miracky, *Regenerating the Novel: Gender and Genre in Woolf, Forster, Sinclair, and Lawrence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) and Ann Henley, "'But We Argued About Novel-Writing': Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, and the Art of Fiction," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* vol. 20, no. 3 (1989): 73-83.

⁷⁶ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1955), 43-4.

⁷⁷ J. W. Smeed, *Theophrastian Character: The History of a Literary Genre* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 5.

⁷⁸ Forster, 69. Some flat characters can be expressed in one sentence "'I must conceal, even by subterfuges, the poverty of my master's house.' There is Caleb Balderstone in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. He does not use the actual phrase, but it completely describes him; he has no existence outside it, no pleasures, none of the private lusts and aches that must complicate most consistent of servitors. Whatever he does, wherever he goes, whatever lies he tells or plates he breaks, it is to conceal the poverty of his master's house. It is not his *idée fixe*, because there is nothing in him into which the idea can be fixed. He is the idea, and such life as he possesses radiates from its edges and from the scintillators it strikes when other elements in the novel impinge."

being” as their changeability disturbs the reader’s capacity for memorising a character as a fixed, predictable, and compliant entity; they cannot be summed up as indices.⁷⁹ Combining the two types, Forster argues, allows the author to exercise his craft in capturing “the incalculability of life [. . .] within the pages of a book” and to “harmonise the human race.”⁸⁰ Characterisation for Forster is the entry way form immersing oneself in a work of fiction – we see something familiar, which we recognise in its wholeness, which can soothe us and temporarily resolve our own internal conflicts.

More recently, and in a counter-move to structuralist approaches, fictional character has been defined as “a personage in a narrative or dramatic work” and “a kind of prose sketch briefly describing some recognisable type of person.”⁸¹ Additionally, the process of characterisation has been re-described as “the representation of persons” in narratives that may include either direct methods such as attributing qualities by the author in description or authorial evaluations, or “indirect methods inviting readers to infer qualities from characters’ actions, speech, or appearance.”⁸² The close link between fictional characters and real life persons becomes even more obvious if we look at the etymological origin of the term. Derived from the Ancient Greek word *kharas*, it means an engraved mark as well as the sharp-pointed implement for writing on clay or wax tablets. “This etymology,” Maria Di Battista tells us, “is morally as well as technically suggestive. The stylus makes distinctive marks through a steady application of force; so, too, character is fashioned by those pressuring forces that shape condition and keep character in character.”⁸³ Another word denoting character particularly in its habitual disposition, as Di Battista notes, is *ethos*; it is used by Aristotle in his description of tragic character in the *Poetics*. *Ethos* also means, “accustomed place,” “custom,” and “habit” and it shares its root with the word

⁷⁹ Forster, 69-70.

⁸⁰ Forster, 78.

⁸¹ Chris Baldick, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 52.

⁸² Baldick, *ODLT*, 52.

⁸³ Maria DiBattista, *Novel Characters: A Genealogy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3.

ethikos, from which the word ethics is derived.⁸⁴ The conjunction of ethics and character indicates a conception of character rooted in the ideal of delineating human beings in their habitual expression, manifested in the way they interact with the world. On the basis of shared knowledge of commonly accepted social practices, characters are judged by readers in terms of their correspondence to pre-established models of normative subjectivity in an instrumentalised world, where every action corresponds to an appropriate value judgement. In this way, the notion of character as a fictional form displaying commonly held markers of personhood helps sustain the concept of a universal Kantian subject with the capacity to conduct her own self-constitution and self-legislation by following a set of predetermined rules, Foucault objects to as we saw in the previous section. Habitual characters are linked to historicised perceptions of ethical conduct and moral law; in this respect they seem to not carry a critical capacity, as their very conception is established on the basis of compliance with the normative discourse of what constitutes a human being. These types of characters, bound to function as implied and recognisable persons, presuppose some measure of subjective coherence and invoke a type of a unified self. But can that be otherwise? Can we have a conception of character that preserves some form of both personal and moral referentiality, and even display habitual trait, but does not come overloaded with normative content? Can we have fictional character as measure of personhood function as a tool for the kind of self-transformation that could lead to freedom and liberation from the oppressive discourse of identity formation, as per Foucault's instruction? In the remainder of this section I will argue that we can, if we dispense with the split between structure and reference in understanding fictional character.

⁸⁴ DiBattista, 4.

Alex Woloch aptly observes that literary character is divided in its nature and always emerges “at the juncture between structure and reference.”⁸⁵ In this sense, any notion of it would have to be balanced over the precarious relation between the “sense of the character as an actual human placed within the imagine world” and “the space of the character within the narrative structure.”⁸⁶ Dostoevsky’s treatment of character, Woloch argues, is a case in point; it revolves around the “gap” between “motive” and “action,” or “between the interior thoughts of a human being (which are ‘infinitely complicated’) and the finite limited manifestations of this consciousness through external social action.”⁸⁷ Our engagement with the characters in a novel is therefore guided by the spatial politics of the text, that is by “the narrative’s continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe.”⁸⁸

In order to elucidate how characters relate to each other, Woloch constructs two narratological categories: character-space – “that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole” and character-system, or “the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character spaces – differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure – into a unified narrative system.”⁸⁹ Woloch’s recasting character as character-space brings together the referential and structural aspects in question. Conceived in this way, a fictional character cannot be a mere carbon copy of a person, because its very existence within a specific narrative structure and its role and position within that structure means that it is performing a particular aspect of personhood which gains relevance only in relation to the fictive universe within which it is positioned; the implied person, therefore, will always change in accordance with its narrative

⁸⁵ Woloch, 17.

⁸⁶ Woloch, 13.

⁸⁷ Woloch, 13.

⁸⁸ Woloch, 13.

⁸⁹ Woloch, 14.

distribution. However, this innovative merger of reference and structure does not accomplish much in terms of overcoming the difficulties encountered by previous theoretical approaches. Woloch's theory liberates fictional character neither from its entrenchment in and instrumentalization by normative codes, nor from its structural subservience to narrative structure. The seemingly emancipatory function of character-spaces which opens the way for an infinite number of possible incarnations, both structurally and referentially, crashes at the gate of the character-system, which cuts this number down to one. The ultimate goal, which takes precedent over the richness of referentiality or the depth of the character's structure, is the unification of the narrative – characters have to comply and play their designated roles, and the “real” human beings need to undergo fictionalised compression or even elimination to achieve this goal.

As this discussion suggests, even the most benevolent attempt to positively reconcile the referential and structural functions of fictional characters through their relation as constitutive components of narrative are likely to be unsuccessful, because they will always have to face the discourse embedded in the narrative structure. I would like to suggest that, if we want a concept of character that is not entrenched in normative social ideals of personhood and one that offers us potential for deliberate self-transformation, we need to develop an understanding not of fictional character's role for driving narrative progression through its relation to other characters, but its relation to itself. We need to look away from the broader structural facilitation of character development, and inspect the small, internal moments, in which characters think, talk, and perceive themselves, as these moments when the narrative stops and the only thing that holds the bond between reader and text, is the character waiting, anticipating, imagining an alternative. These states of being are something Woolf herself was interested in, as demonstrated in her article on Constance Garnett's translation of Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband and Other*

Stories, where Woolf observes a discrepancy between the Russian and English methods of characterisation. English novelists, she thinks “reproduce all the external appearances – tricks of manner, landscape, dress, and the effect of the hero upon his friends – but very rarely, and only for an instant, penetrate the tumult of thought which rages within his own mind.”⁹⁰ Instead, Dostoevsky makes us wonder “whether we recognise the feeling he shows us, and we realise constantly and with a start of surprise that we have met it before in ourselves, or in some moment of intuition have suspected it in others” (*E* 2: 86). In Woolf’s own practice there is a deliberate attempt at invoking the referential connection between reader and character. It should not come as a surprise, but perhaps as confirmation of Woolf’s successful experiment in challenging characterisation norms, that in his 1915 review of *The Voyage Out* upon its publication, young Forster criticised her characters: “Mrs Woolf’s success is more remarkable since there is one serious defect in her equipment; her characters are not vivid. There is nothing false in them, but when she ceases to touch them they cease, they do stroll out of their sentences, and even develop a tendency to merge shadowlike.”⁹¹ Despite the apparent critique, one wonders whether this insight into the operation of Woolf’s characters would influence the development of Forster’s more sophisticated theory of character more than ten years later, as well as the development of theories of character by his interlocutor – Woolf herself.

1.4 Woolf on Character: “Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown”

Woolf seems to understand (human) character as an *ethos* that envelops people’s lives, as demonstrated by her famous pronouncement in “Character in Fiction” (1924) that “in or about

⁹⁰ Virginia Woolf, “More Dostoevsky,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume II, 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), 85. All subsequent references to this edition will be given in text following the relevant citation as *E* 2.

⁹¹ E. M. Forster, “Review,” *Daily News and Leader*, 8 April 1915, in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 53. “It is for a voyage into solitude that man was created, and Rachel, Helen, Hewet, Hisrt, all learn this lesson” (p. 54).

December 1910 human character changed” alongside a sizeable shift in “all human relations.”⁹² She continues her argumentation in this essay with the assertion that everyone is a “judge of character,” as social interactions are built on the ability to read each other’s character. “Our marriages, our friendships, depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help” (*E* 3, 491). Admitting the generality of her own formulation, Woolf ventures into the story of a recent train journey when she comes across two passengers sitting opposite in the same carriage – Mr Smith and Mrs Brown. Initially they have an uneasy conversation about servants and oak trees, Woolf tells us, designed to prevent others from detecting that they have an unpleasant sort of business to discuss. She is struck by Mrs Brown’s ability to appear both frail and vulnerable under the dominating gaze of her travel companion, and tenacious, even heroic, when she picks up her bag and disappears among the crowd on the station platform, seemingly able again to navigate her own actions. The reason for the author’s fascination with this old lady in the corner opposite (and the effect she may exert on a traditional novelist like Arnold Bennett) is the following: Mrs Brown’s manner of conversing, her clothing, her tiny black shoes barely touching the floor of the train compartment, all impress on the observer an image of the kind of person Mrs Brown appears to be at that particular moment in time and testify to her social status and position in life. And, yet, her manner of comportment betrays nothing about her singular exceptionality as a person, nor does it offer a structured narrative of her life, nor any tools by means of which to give an account of Mrs Brown that would help us understand who she really is. Even though Woolf, ventriloquising a realist novelist, describes her facial features and everything visibly particular to her that she is able to observe, Mrs Brown still escapes us. Simultaneously, she draws us in, pricking our

⁹² Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1988), 421-2. All subsequent references to this edition will be given in text following the relevant citation as *E* 3. This essay is also known as “Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown,” as it was published as a pamphlet with this title in October 1924. It was based on an earlier essay with that title and “Character in Fiction,” a lecture Woolf delivered for the Cambridge heretics and subsequently published as an essay in the *Criterion*. I refer to this essay as “Character in Fiction” as this is the title under which it is reprinted in her *Essays*.

curiosity, urging us to recast her in the image of a recognisable entity that we are able to identify in our lives and cultivate a relation that corresponds to that identification.

We come to deduce, shortly before Woolf announces it, that Mrs Brown is not just a random old lady on the train but what the author refers to as a symbol of human nature and that we, the readers, encounter her on a daily basis in our own lives. Pointing out that the expression “human character” was not a common use of language during Woolf’s lifetime, Eric Sandberg asserts that taking “human character” and “human nature” to be interchangeable would be a mistake.⁹³ It is much more likely that Woolf was trying to compel her audience to interrogate their presumptions and ideas about what they understood by human nature and what they meant by human character, respectively. Woolf concludes that, when we look at one another, we see only the fragments that trigger a process of interpretation, which is always tied up with the interpersonal and social conditions that govern it. Woolf does not subscribe to an understanding of transcendental morality and universal rationalism, but rather, much like Foucault, is open to understanding the subject and its manifestation in literary form as products that bear the stamp of the historical discourses within which they have emerged. “Mrs Brown’s character,” she writes, “will strike you very differently according to the age and country in which you happen to be born. It would be easy enough to write three different versions of that incident in the train, an English, a French, a Russian (*E* 2, 425). These lines suggest that an understanding of “human nature” as a unified template according to which personhood is conducted would be difficult to reconcile with Woolf’s conceptual framework. On the other hand, human character seems to imply a certain level of embodiment of the natural attributes of personhood in a variety of individual configurations. However, instead of locking human character as an exclusive manifestation of human nature, both in life and in fiction, she gives herself the possibility to

⁹³ Sandberg, 1.

explore fiction's problematic commitment to fixing character as a closed instance of subjectivity instead of a more active set of possibilities for self-making. Woolf invokes the tension between the structural properties and constraints of fictional character and its living counterpart in relation to the notion of human nature, which constitutes both. In doing so, she anticipates the theoretical recognition of the importance of the interplay between the aesthetic and ethical components of self-constitution, conceptualised by Foucault and others. More directly, she provides the key to the experimental investigation of this interplay in her own creative practice.

Understanding the operation of discourses of power requires a certain level of interpretative criticism, both in terms of interacting with persons in life and characters in fiction. In this respect, fictional and real-life character are linked through a process of decoding – the same play of our faculties is engaged in “reading” someone in daily interactions as it is in reading fictional characters, as Forster observes.⁹⁴ Expressing the “essence” of Mrs Brown is not the prerogative of the writer exclusively, but a collaboration between the reader and the writer, who bring in their own encountered fragments into the process of experiencing human nature and “author” their versions of it. This “I”-“You” relationship is further complicated by the presence of the text and language, as the field where the encounter between the two takes place. But this complication only conditions the process without determining it. Asking about the nature of Mrs Brown is the call for Mrs Brown to make herself seen and understood, to account for herself. This call is not unilateral but one that is shared within the “I”-“You” dyad; in other words, reader and writer both make claims on each other to account for themselves by accounting for Mrs Brown in two different modes of authorship.

⁹⁴ See Sandberg, 4. Forster, 65; and Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* [1921] (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963) 7.

The real complication, which is insightfully formulated by Judith Butler, arises when in an attempt to answer the demand of the other to account for oneself, the subject has to exchange her singularity for a measure of recognisability. She writes:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognisable and understandable [. . .] I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognisable. The narrative authority of the “I” must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my own story.⁹⁵

Woolf anticipates the problem: “The writer must get into touch with his reader,” she states, “by putting before him something he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy” (*E* 2, 431). In order to achieve intimacy both have to give something away; various fragments of themselves which make them singular have to be modified or altogether dispensed with, so that a common ground of intimacy and recognisability can be established. And, in doing so, they will have to admit and accept that any given account has to be incomplete, as it would be based on the norms and rules of intelligibility which govern the moment of constructing an account of oneself. Any such account will have to involve parts that do not belong to the subject, whether because they are linked with the norms that direct her own self-constitution or the norms that guide her expression and intelligibility. In this respect, Butler asserts, “it is only in dispossession that I can and do give an account of myself.”⁹⁶ Butler’s thought here provides a good continuation of Foucault’s self-constitution model but also pushes forward the productive point regarding the momentary disengagement from the practice of the moral law as a necessary step toward reaching a self-reflective position from which to enact critique. In light of her account, fictional characters, plainly put, provide an opportunity for a momentary escape from the demand for identification whilst also shining a light onto the interpretative and reflective practices which come into play when giving an account of oneself.

⁹⁵ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 37.

⁹⁶ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 37.

1.5 Giving an account of oneself: character and gender in *The Voyage Out*

The Voyage Out, the first of Woolf's novels, is very un-Woolfian in many respects; particularly in that it appears rather conventionally set up. Most of the characters are inconsequential and relatively "flat," and no character has any direct bearing on the plot development. Instead, they come across as place-holders with no obvious purpose. If there was a novel that contained only minor characters, *The Voyage Out* would be it. To describe them in line with Forster's definitions of flat and round characters, discussed in Section 1.3 – the personages we encounter in Woolf's debut novel do not surprise us and they often can be summed up in one phrase – which is, in fact, what Woolf often does; and "when she ceases to touch them they cease."⁹⁷ And, yet, they have facets like human beings, resulting from the combination of flat and round features Woolf demonstrates. The Oxbridge professors read Greek, translate Pindar, talk about botany and nautical affairs, and smoke cigars; the elderly ladies share their disdain with the Suffragette movement, whilst reading articles about Greek ruins in *The Times*; and the younger women are made to reflect on their femininity and marriage prospects whilst attending dances and picnics; and all is in very good humour. In terms of plot, the story is also rather simple: it relates an English middle-class family's journey to the fictional Caribbean island of Santa Marina, where they meet, almost exclusively, other middle class English people, with the exception of a short trip down the river, into the interior, where they visit an indigenous village.⁹⁸ It is this journey of exploration that leads to the engagement of a young lady and

⁹⁷ Forster, "Review," 53.

⁹⁸ For recent scholarship on *The Voyage Out* and discourses of empire/colonialism see Nick Montgomery, "Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice: Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," *Twentieth Century Literature* vol. 46, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 34-55; Julia Kuehn, "The *Voyage Out* as Voyage In: Exotic Realism, Romance, and Modernism," *Woolf Studies Annual* vol. 17 (2011): 126-150; Patricia Novillo-Corvalan, "Empire and Commerce in Latin America: Historicising Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," *Woolf Studies Annual*

contracting of a fever, which eventuates in her death. In this novel of minor characters, this young lady, Rachel Vinrace, appears to be most alike to what we would normally call a “protagonist” and she will provide the focus for the following reading of the self-constitution process in the novel.

At the start, Rachel is an empty vessel incapable of opinions, thoughts, and emotions, as far as her aunt, Mrs Helen Ambrose, can detect. She also passes away before the novel ends, leaving the plot unscarred by her loss. An embodiment of a *tabula rasa* - this young woman is seen by the people around her as someone who is incompetent at being a person. Mrs Ambrose records the following observations of her niece: “If Rachel were ever to think, feel, laugh, or express herself, instead of dropping milk from a height as though to see what kind of drops it made, she would be interesting, though never exactly pretty.”⁹⁹ Despite the unreliability of her aunt’s individual impressions, Rachel is clearly portrayed as lacking personhood and autonomy because the existence of her rational faculty is put into question early on. “A hesitation in speaking,” we are told by the narrator, “or rather a tendency to use the wrong words, made her seem more than normally incompetent for her years” (*VO*, 15-6); and further on, “her eyes were unreflecting as water [. . .] her mind was absent” (*VO*, 17). Her inability to find the words to express her thoughts is a source of confusion both for Rachel herself and those she tries to communicate with and presents the main concern in terms of her characterisation. In the opening chapters of the novel, she does not have the voice or agency to present herself as a singular character, because we are told, her mind and her language are not under her own command.

vol. 23 (2017): 33-62; Rebecca Walkowitz, “Virginia Woolf’s Evasion: Critical Cosmopolitanism and British Modernism,” in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglass Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2006), 119-144; Laura Doyle, “Transnational History at Our Backs: A Long View of Larsen, Woolf, and Queer Racial Subjectivity in Atlantic Modernism,” *Modernism/modernity* vol. 13, no. 3 (2006): 531-559.

⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* [1915], ed. Lorna Sage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in text following relevant citations as *VO*.

Mrs Ambrose, who takes it upon herself to educate Rachel not only how to be a person but also how to be a woman. According to Mrs Ambrose, her niece's sheltered upbringing by her two aunts, after the death of her mother when she was twelve, is the reason why she appears so removed from worldly interpersonal affairs, such as the relations between the sexes, marriages, or how babies are born. That is to say, Rachel's ineptitude at being a person is taken to mean that she has been denied the proper schooling which would have taught her how to relate to and use her femininity as a means of self-direction. As it stands, she was left to try and make something of herself through her own devices unencumbered by the role of social norms. One might argue that this is an ideal autonomy scenario, where a person gets to learn how to use her faculties independent of any tempering from outside, but Rachel is not even characterised as a person at the start of the text, let alone an autonomous one. Woolf's acute understanding of the importance of norms, and here gender norms in particular, for one's right to personhood lays the foundation for her more detailed critique of traditional institutional education which will be explored in Chapter Two. As Rachel's position is taken to be the result of an educational lapse, i.e. her family failed to teach her gender norms, and Mrs Ambrose endeavours to correct this mistake, a worrying association of granting someone the right to be a person and institutional approval is set up. This inference appears in direct contrast to a free-standing non-negotiable social principle, suggested by the ideal of autonomy. As Judith Butler writes in her analysis of the effect on gender norms on the visibility and status of non-conforming bodies:

Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no 'one' who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a 'one,' to become viable as a 'one,' where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms.¹⁰⁰

Woolf elucidates the relationship between gender norms and the constitution of the subject precisely through this instructional phase Rachel is made to undergo in her training – she has to

¹⁰⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 177.

learn how to be a woman, before she can become a person. “I have taken it upon myself to enlighten her,” Mrs Ambrose writes in a letter to a friend, “and now, though still a good deal prejudiced and liable to exaggerate, she is more or less a reasonable human being” (*VO*, 105). Rachel’s miraculous transformation from being someone who could not claim any subjectivity to being a reasonable human being is taken to be the result of Mrs Ambrose’s light-touch instruction in matters of life and relationships, or a traditional induction to feminine necessities and requirements. Rachel is allowed to walk around, explore gardens and pathways, play her music, talk to young gentlemen, and self-educate by reading books from Mr Ambrose’s vast collection, all reasonable activities on the way to becoming eligible for marriage. The matron molds her niece following the young feminine heroine template, thus giving her a position to occupy in the social order.

Eric Sandberg states that characterisation is the novel’s chief preoccupation, not only as a formal principle, but also as a mode of relation between its characters: “one of the primary mental activities of its characters is defining, or characterising, other people.”¹⁰¹ Reading character, to refer back to the earlier discussion, forms the thematic centre of the novel, opening up a discussion on the nature of recognition and interpretation as the two features of this reading process for readers both internal and external to the novel. This dynamic is easily discernible in Mrs Ambrose’s relation to Rachel, and indeed in the interactions of most other characters. At the close of Chapter 3, Clarissa Dalloway, who makes a minor appearance on the ship accompanied by her husband, has a peculiar dream which sheds a light on the relations between the characters she has just met. This is how the narrator describes it:

She then fell into a sleep, which was as usual extremely sound and refreshing, but visited by fantastic dreams of great Greek letters stalking around the room, when she woke up and laughed to herself, remembering where she was and that the Greek letters were real people,

¹⁰¹ Sandberg, 46. “Character, Helen’s experience indicates, is provisional rather than absolute – human character not human nature – and this is a departure point for the novel as a whole.” (48).

lying asleep not many yards away. Then thinking of the black sea outside tossing beneath the moon, she shuddered and thought of her husband and the other companions of the voyage. The dreams were not confined to her indeed, but went from one brain to another. They all dreamt of each other that night, as was natural considering how thin the partitions were between them, and how strangely they had been lifted off the earth to sit next to each other in mid-ocean, and see every detail of each other's faces, and hear whatever they chanced to say. (*VO*, 53)

In his reading of this passage, Sandberg argues that Woolf chooses to draw human typologies rather than individualised characters as a way to reject “both individual identity in favour of a broad correlation to norms and the portrayal of internal experience in favour of internal observation.”¹⁰² He reads Mrs Dalloway's dream as the conflation of “issues of subjectivity, relation, and characterisation,” but the latter part of the passage, which refers to the strangeness of experiencing one another, is excluded from his consideration.¹⁰³ While this dream indeed suggests a link between “fictive world masses printed in characters, reduced to Theophrastian characterisations” and “real people,” as Sandberg states¹⁰⁴ and Woolf's will to “play” with the tangibility of fictional characters is also in evidence, her experimental characterisation here goes beyond these matters. On the one hand, Woolf refers to the intersubjective rule book connecting all expression of individual identity, emphasising the characters' interconnectedness; they share dreams and are only separated by thin partitions, which demonstrate the pervading force of the normative connection that unites them as a social grouping. On the other, she alludes to the responsibility they each share for those around them – to read and interpret others as persons – and unreliability of process, brought forward ever more forcefully by the contrast between “earth” and “mid ocean.”

The misreading of the narrative situation, namely, that moving the setting away from the everyday lives of characters has absolved them from the responsibilities dates from Woolf's

¹⁰² Sandberg, 52.

¹⁰³ Sandberg, 54.

¹⁰⁴ Sandberg, 54.

early interpreters, namely Joan Bennett's assertion that "in *The Voyage Out*, characters are removed from the common-place world of everyday duties and pleasures, on the ship and then on the island."¹⁰⁵ For Woolf, however, as demonstrated by the previous quotation, the ship and the island are not mythical places of displacement and idyllic pastoral scenes, but spaces of social interaction which continue to enforce everyday duties. This physical displacement, signalling the shifting ground of self-consciousness, will become a strong feature of Woolf's negotiations with selfhood in her later work, especially in *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*. Perceiving faces, memorising them, learning to recognise and relate to them, is a common experience both in real life and in encountering fictional personages, but characters do not generate language – they are generated by it. Like their faces, their speech is contained to the page: every details is laid out for the reader who is given the opportunity to survey and overhear "whatever they chanced to say" (*VO* 53). We as readers expect characters to be fully formed, recognisable, likeable, detestable, good, evil; we look behind their words convinced that they contain some meaning, because we desperately seek to validate our own self-relation. Woolf disturbs this essential necessity for artificial identity verification by suggesting that characters do not say anything more than what we require them to say. The face, in this novel, functions both as the external marker of personal identification, allowing communication to be anchored to a specific speaking subject, and as a marker of personhood, or humanity, allowing characters to believe they have arrived at some kind of identity destination.¹⁰⁶

Rachel's apparent failure at being a person could be related to Woolf's demand for disrupting this process of settling of an identity, building up self-consciousness, and resisting freedom to form future identifications. This strategy goes against the novelistic tradition of the

¹⁰⁵ Joan Bennett, *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964), 8.

¹⁰⁶ The 'face' is an important concept in the philosophy of Immanuel Levinas, which has recently gained a lot of traction in modernist studies. See for example, Donald R. Wehrs, *Levinas and Twentieth-Century Literature: Ethics and the Reconstitution of Subjectivity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013); David Sherman, "A Plot Unravelling into Ethics: Woolf, Levinas, and 'Time Passes,'" *Woolf Studies Annual* vol. 13 (2007): 159-180.

Bildungsroman, Woolf's complex engagement with which has often been singled out in relation to *The Voyage Out*.¹⁰⁷ I shall return to the discussion of this genre and autonomy towards the end of my reading of the novel. Here, I should like only to point out one aspect that relates to the development of autonomous subjectivity. *Bildungsroman* is the reflective literary form that aims to make its protagonists fit to inhabit the words they have been born in – which presupposes that the only trajectory of the subject is self-fulfilment, which, in turn, can only be achieved through an reconciliation with, and an assimilation within, a certain social construct. Signalling one's readiness to become a part of the "social contract" is usually performed through learning to speak the language of the given social sphere – and this is precisely the practice with which Rachel explicitly struggles.¹⁰⁸

Rachel's relationship with language is very curious because she feels that words are heavy things one has to choose carefully in order to make one's mark in the world. Her uncertainty about the kind of person she is prevents her from making a verbal commitment to it. But as the narrative progresses, Rachel learns to question: she questions others, though, not herself. Even when a moment of self-reflection, inspired by her reading manifests itself, she engages in it from a distance:

'What I want to know,' she said aloud, 'is this: What is the truth? What is the truth of it all?' She was speaking partly as herself and partly as the heroine of the play she had just read. [. . .] for the moment she herself was the most vivid thing in it – a heroic statue in the middle of the foreground, dominating the view. Ibsen's plays always left her in that condition. She acted them for days at a time, greatly to Helen's amusement; and then it would be Meredith's turn and she became Diana of the Crossways, but Helen was aware that it was not all acting, and that some sort of change was taking place in the human being. (*VO*, 136-7)

¹⁰⁷ On *The Voyage Out* as a failed *Bildungsroman*, see Lucio P. Ruotolo, *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf's Novels* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986); Susan Stanford Friedman, "Spatialization, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*", *Ambiguous Discourse*, ed. Kathy Mezei (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996), 109-135; on the novel as a transformed *Bildungsroman*, see Christine Froula, "Out of the Chrysalis: Female Initiation and Female Authority in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, v. 5, n. 1, (1986): 63-90.

¹⁰⁸ For an interesting discussion of *Bildungsroman*'s function as a social educator as well as an individual one, see Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* [1987] (London: Verso, 2000).

Mrs Ambrose's very motherly instincts towards Rachel provide her with the authority to pass judgement on the younger woman's performance in their social circle. In fact, at one point, she directly gives Rachel permission to be a person:

‘So now you can go ahead and be a person on your own account,’ she added. The vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind, flashed in Rachel's mind, and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living. (*VO*, 90)

Rachel's excitement at this prospect does not materialise in a conscious effort of making herself into a “real everlasting thing,” as she slides out of view at every chance of establishing herself. As Woolf introduces one insignificant character after another, Rachel is instinctively compelled to put herself in a position to be recognised as a unique person every time she is asked to introduce herself. When Mr Dalloway beckons: “[. . .] Now tell me about yourself. What are your interests and occupations? I should imagine that you were a person with very strong interests. Of course you are! Good God!” Rachel responds: “You see, I'm a woman” (*VO*, 79). Later in the narrative, upon becoming acquainted with Mr Hirst and Mr Hewet, who will become the object of her affection, the former proposes that each member of their party “gives a short biographical sketch of himself or herself.” Rachel's reaction is the following: “Rachel stated that she was twenty-four years of age, the daughter of a ship-owner, that she had never been properly educated; played the piano, had no brothers or sisters, and lived at Richmond with her aunts, her mother being dead” (*VO*, 159). “Although they had talked so freely they were all uncomfortably conscious that they really knew nothing about each other,” the narrator tells us (*VO*, 161). In fact, these descriptions of life facts and social standing are only comparable in substance to the *Who's Who* compendium of short biographies of famous people Rachel reads on her journey to the island. But these demands to give an account of herself, to present herself to the world, to name and qualify herself appears as a rite (but also a right) of passage in the novel. As Judith Butler asserts:

The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, and that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms at present.¹⁰⁹

What Butler argues here is that the demand to name oneself as a singular autonomous individual is not a universally available constant, but a historically contingent qualification. The history of usages that control the ideal of autonomy have often excluded women, queer, and non-white persons from the speech acts that are considered to demonstrate manifest self-determination. Every identification has to occur within this already determined codex of personhood in order to be communicated and understood and thus risks further re-entrenching the prevalent constraints. But Butler also sees a potential for transformation by exceeding the control that governs the process. For Rachel, this is the point where the draw towards identifying herself as a singular subject with unique attributes and freedoms to express herself comes to clash with the demand to do so within the framework of a predetermined set of recognisable features. The response to this injunction to qualify oneself as a specific subject within the set of available norms determines the type of self-constitution one is embarking upon. Whether the subject will allow herself to be subjugated by forms of discipline or open up the way to a deliberated transformative and liberating practice of autonomous self-making, would depend on the level of critical reflection one is able to exercise, theoretically at least.

Within the novel, the most extreme instance of this tension is Rachel's relationship with Terence Hewet. During their first intimate outing, when she begins to share the habitual ceremonies comprising her life back in Richmond, Rachel is surprised by his interest in her conversation. At this moment, "Rachel," the narrator states, "who had become oblivious of anything, and had reverted to a childlike state of interest and pleasure, lost her freedom and

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 173.

became self-conscious. She felt herself at once singular and under observation” (*VO*, 245). Here self-consciousness is portrayed as the antithesis to freedom. The awareness of a compositional structure of oneself one has to abide by within a set of social conditions, might in fact be an inhibition for living a free life, due to such awareness being forced upon the subject by a general shaping power. And Rachel’s intention to launch into an argument about her position as a woman is foiled by Terence’s questions aimed at gaining complete knowledge of her being – he wants to dominate and possess her in full, much like Ralph Denham in *Night and Day* (1919) wants to gain control of his beloved Katharine Hilbery.¹¹⁰ Her realisation that he sees her as a woman inhibits her impulse to defend herself, to express an opinion and to stake a claim of her own autonomous capacity to determine the mode of her self-expression in this particular social relation. Terence is an aspiring novelist who wants to write about the power of an idea to corrupt a man and his inquiring, demanding, dominating gaze challenges Rachel to commit to a succinct narrative version of herself. There is an implication here that freedom is realisable only in a childlike state of being in which no demands and no norms have come into play yet. Their gendered relationship, however, inevitably confronts them with notions of recognisability and behaviour that shape their interaction and make Rachel feel self-conscious.

In a sense, Woolf is a traditionalist here, drawing attention to the constitutive power of a first love, a passage into adulthood that comes to shape people into responsible, pliant adult subjects. But Woolf does not see this as liberation from some sort of naïve, dreamlike pastoral of childhood, but rather as a demand for surrender. Rachel is under threat of becoming a fixed entity, unreflecting and unthinking fixture in the social life of their little community, Terence’s future wife. There is a danger, however, in committing to straightforward either/or reading of Woolf’s critical position here, i.e. either Rachel rejects Terence’s demand to account for herself

¹¹⁰ “He wished to dominate her, to possess her,” thinks Ralph to himself. Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, in *Night and Day* [1919] and *Jacob’s Room* [1921], ed. Dorinda Guest (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2012), 372.

and remains a free young woman, or she accepts it and trades in her capacity for autonomy. Such interpretation would not reflect the despair and darkness which pervade the closing chapters of the novel: a simple choice between singularity and recognisability is simply not possible. The demand to present oneself as an identifiable subject is a formative part of interpersonal relation and it is always there before an instance of self-reflection can generate the type of knowledge required in Foucault's account of self-constitution. This is to say, for Woolf, the available shapes a subject can take are already normatively ordained by the history of their previous usages; but to preserve even any measure of singularity, the subject would have to achieve a reflective stance on herself as an object of knowledge within the structures she has to navigate and thus gain an understanding of their construction. She offers us a chance to examine this possibility in Rachel's experience of the Sunday church service.

Having previously attended mass only to enjoy the music, Rachel's strong critique of the service comes almost as a shock. She looks around herself and sees the faces she knows from luncheons, walks, and card games, and, for the first time, she sees them as hypocritical puppets who have no understanding of themselves.

All around her were people pretending to feel what they did not feel, while somewhere above them floated the idea which they could none of them grasp, which they pretended to grasp, always escaping out of reach, a beautiful idea, an idea like a butterfly. One after another, vast and hard and cold, appeared to her the churches all over the world where this blundering effort and misunderstanding were perpetually going on, great buildings, filled with innumerable men and women, not seeing clearly, who finally gave up the effort to see, and relapsed tamely into praise and acquiescence, half-shutting their eyes and pursing up their lips. (*VO*, 264-5)

In a mode of Cartesian revelation Rachel rejects "all that she had implicitly believed" (*VO*, 265). In the history of philosophy, this form of questioning and re-examination of all knowledge one has of the world is the birth of the modern autonomous subject. That Woolf has this symbolic birth take place in a church is mark of biting irony as well as of her concerns with the effect of

external determination on the subject. Rachel is horrified by her fellow travellers' need for validation and comfort, which makes them into "slavishly acquiescent [. . .] limpet[s]," who allow themselves to be manipulated by a corrupt structure of value and virtue, implicitly taking control over their thoughts and feelings (*VO*, 265). What astounds Rachel most of all is not the willingness to acquiesce, as she does so herself at the altar of her feelings for Terence, but the blind impulse to do so for the sake of being seen as doing what is the proper thing to do. This mode of compliance is also part of the formal blueprint of the novel as a genre that has to convey meaning through its rendering of narrative and characters, as Lyndsey Stonebridge has recently argued. "Playing along with the social world," she writes, "is precisely what novels get their characters to do to make them seem socially real."¹¹¹ In that way, literature can be seen as complicit with discourses of domination that control the form of subjective relation and expression personhood can take, excluding non-confirming subjects.

The church scene and Rachel's reaction to it is an obvious moment in the novel which can be used to test Foucault's notions of the capacity for autonomy contained in the techniques of the self. Jean Grimshaw's criticism of Foucault's presupposition of the capacity for critical self-reflection might be of use to sharpen this point here. As mentioned in Section 1.2, Grimshaw is concerned with the notion of resisting prevalent modes of subjection from a position of subjection: "when can forms of self-discipline or self-surveillance with any justification be seen as exercises of autonomy or self-creation, or when they should be seen, rather, as forms of discipline to which the self is subjected, and by which autonomy is constrained?"¹¹² Grimshaw's argument is well illustrated here – Woolf presents her reader with a group of people who accept a form of self-discipline and surveillance in exchange for social

¹¹¹ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writings, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 36.

¹¹² Jean Grimshaw, "Practices of Freedom," in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 66.

recognition; they may have failed to evaluate it and themselves and this situation critically. But is Rachel right to think that there has not been any prior moment of determined reflection upon their principles of self-constitution? And, if there has been one such, is Foucault right to think that doing work on oneself in a reflective manner in order to delimit the part of the self that is to constitute the subject's moral practice guarantees a liberating transformation of one's relation to the knowledge and power discourses that shape self-relation? How does his model square with the argument in contemporary feminist theory that rational deliberation having taken place before the subject's decision to adopt it is not enough to grant someone a pass on having exercised their autonomy?¹¹³ In theories of relational autonomy, practices of self-responsibility and self-control, predicated on deliberative practice of self-reflection, become the expressions of the autonomous nature of the subject's self-constitution. However, with reference to the novel, such framework would be a dubious interpretation, as Woolf's satiric ridicule of the minor characters that provoke Rachel's critical reflection on the behaviour of those around her leads the reader to seeing them as props within the narrative, not as fully-formed reflective beings.

Alex Woloch makes a similar point by commenting on the clash between the "novel's commitment to everyday life which promotes an expansive 'narrative gaze'" and an "empiricist aesthetics [that] highlights the importance and authenticity of ordinary human interiority," which manifests itself most clearly in the realist novel. Such view brings out a productive dialectic between mimetic representation and allegory in relation to creating characters that are capable of invoking identity formations we associate with certain types of personhood. The important point here is that "allegorical characterisation [. . .] comes at a price: the price of the human

¹¹³ See Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy" (2009) and Oshana, "Personal Autonomy and Society" (1998).

particularity it elides.”¹¹⁴ The function of secondary character within a novel by definition is to elucidate the protagonist in some way. For this reason, they become allegorical formations of features designed to draw attention to a particular trait within the protagonist and to condition our reading of it. The formal structure of the novel as a genre denies any possibility for singularity, as personhood is being made into an allegory or a reference. Its expression always has to rely on the pre-established understanding of what constitutes a person, and the novel must reflect it. In other words, by playing with the role of each minor character within the narrative, Woolf demonstrates their pronounced lack of autonomous agency for self-formation. The tension between singularity and recognisability then should be seen as a false dichotomy, because both impulses are induced through oppressive disciplinary practices, evident on the level of self-constitution as well as on that of intersubjective relation.

What are we, then, to make of Rachel’s reflective exercise? After the church scene she begins to fade away from the narrative. Even when she accepts Terence’s proposal, she is not really a person with a conscience of her own, but a mere echo of the sentiments he offers her. “‘You like being with me?’ Terence asked. ‘Yes, with you,’ she replied. [. . .] ‘We are happy together.’ He did not seem to be speaking, or she to be hearing. ‘Very happy,’ she answered. [. . .] ‘We love each other,’ Terence said. ‘We love each other,’ she repeated” (*VO*, 316). The meaning of Rachel’s presence in the novel begins to fade, as the other characters begin to congratulate her on her engagement and relate to her as Terence’s fiancée. Their previous distance from the ethereal young lady who spends her days daydreaming is overcome by her identification as a social presence they can recognise. Taken to have fulfilled her potential handsomely, she is expected to achieve the fairy tale ending of living happily ever after. It was strange, Rachel thinks whilst returning Thank You notes that “considering how very different

¹¹⁴ Woloch, 19. For Woloch, the realist novel shows its awareness of the allegorical reduction to which it subjects character through mastering what Forster refers to as flatness of character and its integration and productive relation with the roundness of the protagonist.

these people were, that they used almost the same sentences when they wrote to congratulate her upon her engagement" (*VO*, 342). Identity becomes subsumed by language and loses its singularity under the demand of recognition. Her death follows shortly after and does not come as a surprise: she contracts a fever at the same time as her engagement and elegantly slips out of consciousness. In Suzanne Raitt's reading, Rachel's death is the epitome of Woolf's exploration of "the ambiguous discourse of imperialism and resistance within which Rachel must shape her selfhood."¹¹⁵ And, in a sense, this is true, because the form of selfhood available to her as the wife of an English gentleman necessarily constrains, or brings to a halt, other possible accounts she might have wished to draw of herself. As Butler argues, "the norm does not produce the subject as its necessary effect, nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norm that inaugurates its reflexivity; [. . .] this struggle with the unchosen conditions of one's life, a struggle – an agency – is also made possible, paradoxically, the presence of this primary condition of unfreedom."¹¹⁶ Even though Rachel chooses to become Terence's wife, the norms which come attached to her decision are not hers to choose, but are hers to comply with. The unfreedom of that modification, if we follow Butler's argument, however, is still an instance of agency, because it involves an act of dispossessing oneself of a set of identificatory markers which up to that point one had considered essential.

In many respects, *The Voyage Out* indeed reads like a nineteenth century *Bildungsroman* – a story about the edification of a young woman from youth to womanhood. Rachel learns how to navigate her interpersonal relationships, in compliance with her duties, but,

¹¹⁵ Suzanne Raitt, "Virginia Woolf's early novels: Finding a vice," in *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 30. For other readings of *The Voyage Out* from the viewpoint of feminism, empire, or both see: Mark Wollaeger, "Woolf, Postcards, and the Elision of Race: Colonising Women in *The Voyage Out*," in *Modernism/modernity* vol. 8, no. 1 (2001): 43-75; Nick Montgomery, "Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice: Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," in *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Literary Journal*, 46:1 (Spring 2000), 34-55; Jed Esty, "Virginia Woolf's Colony and the Adolescence of Modernist Fiction," in *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899-1939*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), 70-90.

¹¹⁶ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 19.

uncharacteristically for a *Bildung* story, loses herself in the process. She does not develop the reflective position which would allow her to relate meaningfully to herself and her practice of self-constitution, and as a result her subjective arc becomes fractured. Mastered by the normative constructs which dominate subjective rituals of self-making, Rachel becomes an insignificant bearer of identity markers, a controlled and disciplined manifestation of feminine delicacy and vulnerability. As Susan Stanford Freedman argues, “*The Voyage Out* kills off the traditional life story of upper-middle class British women and thus accomplishes a victory of sorts over the ‘powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him [the writer] in thrall to provide a plot . . . in the accepted style.’”¹¹⁷ The novel closes itself off, some time after the death of its protagonist, signalling its own incapacity to save her autonomy from the dehumanising powers of the narrative structure whose purpose is to destroy the illusion of freedom of choice. However, Woolf also uses the determinism of the narrative to illustrate the lack of alternative arcs of development for Rachel’s character, making a subtle point about the historically limited resources women have at their disposal when it comes to acknowledging their practices of self-constitution. She has given us a *Bildungsroman* without *Bildung*, whose protagonist’s status is disrupted and diminished instead of asserted and expanded as traditionally expected with the progress of the narrative; until, finally, her death is reduced to a conversation topic after tea for the people who wrote all those identical congratulatory notes upon her engagement. However, in terms of the discourse of self-constitution, Rachel is just a casualty – alive or dead, the person behind the face had already disappeared. The empty sound of her name when Terence calls out to her as she passes away, imprisoned on the page, “‘Rachel! Rachel,’ he shrieked,” rings inevitable and hollow (*VO*, 413). As Sybil Oldfield states “the whole point of Rachel’s death is [. . .] that it is meaningless [. . .] For me this meaningless-ness is the truly revolutionary, modernist

¹¹⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, “Spatialization, narrative theory, and Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*,” in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, ed. Kathy Mezei (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 109.

20th century message of Virginia Woolf's defiant first novel," appears to mean more than an attempt for a triumphant affirmation.¹¹⁸

1.6 Establishing a subject: *Mrs Dalloway*

Published ten years after *The Voyage Out*, in 1925, *Mrs Dalloway* is widely considered as one of Woolf's modernist masterpieces as well as one of her most explicit fictional engagements with political and social critique. This 24-hour narrative tells a story about the success of a party amidst the failures of its attendees. Clarissa Dalloway is Richard Dalloway's wife (readers of Woolf had already encountered them on board the ship in *The Voyage Out*), who is a low-level politician, involved in Government, but who has failed to make it into Cabinet. Clarissa performs the functions of his wife with propriety and decorum, only blemished by her unjustified hatred of Miss Kilman, an impoverished middle-aged woman who earns her living by giving private tuition in history to the daughters of affluent Londoners.¹¹⁹ On the sunny morning before her party, Clarissa leaves her house to get flowers, and whilst navigating the bustle of Westminster, she thinks to herself: "did it matter that she [Clarissa] must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? [. . .] but it spread ever so far, herself, her life."¹²⁰ In this respect, *Mrs Dalloway* starts where *The Voyage Out* ends, exploring the question of what remains of a person in another's mind and memory.

¹¹⁸ Sybil Oldfield, "A Child of Two Atheists – Virginia Woolf's Humanism," Lecture to the Ethical Society, 22 May 2011, *Ethical Record* v.116, no.7 (July/August 2011), 15.

¹¹⁹ For an interesting take on Woolf's relationship to class see Jean Mills, "Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Class," in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 217-233.

¹²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* [1925], ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in text following relevant citations as MD.

Clarissa believes that people leave traces of themselves in the psycho-geographical and emotional maps of others:

Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best. (*MD*, 8)

This fluid sense of selfhood, made up of a myriad of different pieces of experience and rich enough to yield remnants that can be preserved within different external vaults, requires an enormous amount of interpersonal capacity. The self, in Clarissa's ontology, is not one localised at the centre of determination and agency, but in a flurry of impressions and traces we notice and process with different intensity. This view challenges the Foucauldian practice of self-constitution as it suggests that deliberation and directed self-improvement, as well as the sensations and experiences we leave behind or consciously choose to retain, are not ours to control. They are born within an intersubjective framework and require a different set of norms, which ground the processes of becoming an ethical subject. Foucault's reluctance to account for the intersubjective dimension of the techniques of the self beyond stating the existence of norms is partly where Amy Allen's critique of his position originates. In defence of Foucault's position, Ladelle McWhorter and Margaret McLaren have argued that, because Foucault's account of self-constitution takes place within a normative framework, it has to necessarily be an account of a social, not a hermit, self. This is to say that techniques of the self are not an exclusive individualistic practice, but in fact should be seen intersubjectively and relationally.¹²¹ However, as Allen points out, this argument may be seen as amounting to nothing more than accepting the basic claim for Foucault's, or, in fact, any other social philosophy, that the subject does not exist in a vacuum. Because in Foucault, exercising freedom always happens within the constraints of strategic power relations, "his conception of the self will necessarily overlook the role played by

¹²¹ See Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalisation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999) and Margaret McLaren, "Foucault and the Subject of Feminism, *Social Theory and Practice* v.23, no.1 (1997): 109-28.

nonstrategic social relations, relations based on communication, reciprocity, and mutual recognition, in the development of autonomy and the self.”¹²² One way in which Foucault accounts for the social dimension in *The Use of Pleasure* is the link between the mastery of the self and mastery of others, an illuminating point of difference between his approach to subjecthood and Woolf’s. In his rendering of the marital relationship between husband and wife in Ancient Greece, he postulates:

in the man’s case, it was because he exercised authority and because he was expected to exhibit self-mastery in the use of his authority, that he needed to limit his sexual options. For the wife, having sexual relations only with her husband was a consequence of the fact that she was under his control. For the husband, having sexual relations only with his wife was the most elegant way to exercise his control.¹²³

And in relation to the proper exercise of political power, Foucault writes: “the prince’s motivation . . . serves as the basis of a sort of compact between the ruler and the ruled: the latter can obey him, seeing that he is master of himself.”¹²⁴ Foucault refers to this as an “ethics of self-delimiting domination.”¹²⁵ Inasmuch as this is said in relation to the practice of the care of the self, utilising the techniques of the self, the idea of self-mastery seems a necessary means to develop the reflective stance on one’s own processes of self-constitution and to emerge as an ethical subject. I would argue that Woolf would see this kind of approach not simply as undesirable but also as potentially threatening. As the idea of self-mastery implies a regulatory mechanism, a subject in the process of self-constitution, who has not developed a strong practice of autonomy and reflection, would be in danger of internalising the disciplinary practices and surveillance methods that further enslave rather than liberate. Any kind of control, mastery, surveillance, and policing activities the subject performs on herself, either as part of the practice of self-constitution or curating a type of self-expression that be recognisable to others can be

¹²² Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, 69.

¹²³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 151.

¹²⁴ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 174.

¹²⁵ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 184. See also Amy Allen, “Foucault, Feminism, and the Self: The Politics of Personal Transformation, in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, ed. Dianne Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 235-57.

harmful to the autonomy of that subject. Woolf explores these processes and their implication in *Mrs Dalloway* with specific reference to ideas of proportion and conversion. These arise in the novel in relation to the treatment of Septimus Warren Smith, a World War One veteran suffering from shell-shock, by Sir William Bradshaw, an eminent mental health specialist. As the novel progresses, questions regarding proportion and conversion as forces for shaping individuals into subjects fit for appropriate social interaction, also come to dominate Clarissa's party.

Lucrezia Warren Smith takes her husband, Septimus, to Sir William Bradshaw to seek help. After a quick evaluation, the doctor decides that Septimus should be sent to rest in bed in a "beautiful house in the country," where "the nurses were admirable" and Sir William would have the pleasure of visiting him every week. Septimus is not given a choice here – his life's course has been imposed on him by the respected doctor. "He was not mad, was he?," Lucrezia asks. "Sir William said he never spoke of 'madness:' he called it not having a sense of proportion" (*MD*, 82). In an unusual aside, which only happens at this point of the novel, the narrator ventures to explain what this idea of proportion means. We immediately understand that it has a formative function in Sir Bradshaw's practice:

Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they had, too, shared his sense of proportion [. . .] so that not only his colleagues respected him, his subordinates feared him, but the friends and relations of his patients felt for him the keenest gratitude for insisting that these prophetic Christs and Christesses, who prophesied the end of the world, or the advent of God, should drink milk in bed, as Sir William ordered. (*MD*, 84)

But proportion is not the only principle, operational in Sir William's practice (and the social world), we are told; it has a sister named "conversion." She is "less smiling, more formidable [. . .] even now engaged in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her stern countenance. [. . .] She feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adorning her own features stamped on the face of the populace" (*MD*, 85). These are the two

principles responsible for exercising normative control within the social sphere Woolf identifies. Proportion sets up the standards of normalisation one has to abide by in order to be considered as a fully-functioning human being, capable of acting in conformity with the imposed standards. These norms are imposed in a hierarchical fashion, depending on the distribution of power within a specific sphere, however they steep into the social network through processes of enforced transformation. This is to say the project of self-mastery and mastery of others are one and the same for Woolf, and they are both dangerous; even though the principles of mastery are applied in a hierarchical fashion, they are distributed through communication and reciprocity among subjects, as they leave traces of themselves through intersubjective interactions. And this is precisely why the danger of conversion, the punitive social mechanism of enforcing norms, is so palpable. Techniques of domination, of policing, of surveillance, make their way to the heart of interpersonal subject formation by masquerading themselves as upholders of golden standards of moral ubiquity to the point where they become converted into a normalizing set of features that becomes inseparable from discourse of self-constitution. For Woolf selfhood has to remain a process of fluid intersubjective relationality - the urge to settle on a specific social identity would block the capacity for self-reflection. Rachel's tragic death, discussed in the previous section, presents one bleak solution to the problem of externally imposed social identity – death, and so does Septimus's suicide. Woolf rather bluntly communicates to us her conviction that the fixity of personal identity in compliance with ideals of social recognition, is a form of discipline which can be avoided only in death.

In her characters' lives, their inability to comply with these regulatory mechanisms of personhood, leads to dissatisfaction and failure, which is the second formative impulse in *Mrs Dalloway*. Not being able to feel, not knowing what one feels, and not being able to express one's feelings is a burden all characters carry with them on their solitary walks around London.

The most emotionally devastating of these manifestations of broken-down self-understanding and failure to relate to another in a meaningful way is Richard Dalloway's incapacity to say to Clarissa that he loves her after decades of marriage. "It was a great age in which to have lived. Indeed, his own life was a miracle; let him make no mistake about it; here he was, in the prime of life, walking to his house in Westminster to tell Clarissa he loved her. Happiness is this, he thought" (*MD*, 99). He repeats his intention four times, convincing himself of his truthfulness, reflecting back on their lives together and on the current policing measures he has to take as part of his latest political manoeuvre. Reflecting on the affinities between political and personal policing, Woolf has Richard rendered incapable of speaking his mind to his wife. When he sees Clarissa sitting at her writing table, worrying that inviting her improperly attired and socialised cousin might ruin her image as a gifted party hostess, he cannot say that he loves her. In parenthesis, we are told "(But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words.);" he substitutes his confession with a call for companionship "but let us sit down for five minutes" (*MD*, 100). Richard's failure to share his feelings speaks to the extent to which notions of control and policing have seeped into the most intimate relations within the character's lives. They have no mastery of themselves, indeed they are continuously being mastered by the demands of employing specific methods of conversion and comportment which overpower their own understanding of themselves and the emotions that drive them. Richard is incapable of sharing his feelings for his wife because he is unable to relate to her on an intimate, subjective level, as Clarissa, the woman he purportedly loves. The proportioned relation between husband and wife relegates their interactions with one another to simple social functions rather than subjective connections.

This feeling of failure and loss of connection pervading the novel takes us back to Butler's claim about dispossession, briefly discussed in the previous section. Butler sees a

productive, and potentially emancipatory, role for the state of being, advocated by Foucault, in which the subject tests and measures up different forms of identity. In her view, in this process of choosing oneself, one would reach a point where she would be forced to let go of a habitual form of identification in order to modify herself in accordance with another. Being emptied out of one's identity, Butler argues, should be considered a requirement for ethical action:

We must recognise that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity [. . .] to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me [. . .] and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession.¹²⁶

This is applicable to the ritual Clarissa performs in front of the mirror in her bedroom, after not being invited by Mrs. Burton for lunch damages her sense of self-worth. Clarissa's sense of self is bound up with the social structure she inhabits to such degree that any deviation from protocol is perceived as a crack in the system and is directly reflected in the image she has created for herself. Behind closed doors, away from social obligations and demands, she unravels alone. Looking at her mirror however, she finds the strength to build herself up again from the ashes of what was broken:

Collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. 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 – pointer; dart-like; 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 there in her drawing room and made a meeting point. (*MD*, 31-2).

Piecing her self together, as a prop, Clarissa reaffirms her capacity to be the source of her own subjectivity – she is aware of the norms that guide and require her to be as she is. In this sense, she seems to be in possession of her subjective trajectories and is capable of summoning them as

¹²⁶ Butler, *Giving an Account*, 136.

required to perform her social duties. The character here operates at the same time as an index, a rich reference for action, and a deep psychological structure, but this operation is disclosed, in line with my previous argumentation, only in moments of private self-inspection. In the context of Clarissa's self-constitution, an act of dispossession would require (to satisfy Butler's ethical demand) in the first instance a strong sense of awareness of the types of subjective incarnations she has brought herself to occupy. In addition, she would also have to develop a deliberate detachment from the norms that conditioned the broken self image in order to be able to shed the incarnations that are oppressive to her, by developing a critique of said norms. As Foucault writes, this type of ethical subjectivation requires an active commitment of the subject who has to "delimit the part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, define his position relative to the precepts he will follow, and decide on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal."¹²⁷ Foucault thinks that "the prime material of moral practice" should be sought precisely in these conditions of deliberate self-constitution, "in the contradictory movements of the soul [. . .] much more than the carrying out of the acts themselves."¹²⁸ It is entirely sensible to question, however, Foucault's flourishing-oriented vision of Ancient Greek harmony and finding the golden mean of reciprocity between agents and the moral codes they observe; it intimates the sense of proportion Sir Bradshaw invokes. And so Woolf takes a different path: she has the character of Clarissa, embrace her glued-back sense of subjective coherence and returns to her duties of a woman whose party will be attended by the Prime Minister.

Clarissa thus reverts to her established mode of social practice which requires her to parade around richly-decorated parties. This is not a simple failure of the autonomous subject. When Woolf talks about "the privacy of the soul," she is interested in precisely that process of experiencing oneself as an aesthetic object, making oneself into a work of art that transmits a message of experience. True, the ability to choose the type of artwork the subject wants to

¹²⁷ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 28.

¹²⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 26.

represent herself by, does not guarantee that by virtue of the choice, the subject has exercised her autonomous capacity, as Septimus Smith writes on his postcards – “once you stumble [. . .] human nature is upon you” (*MD*, 78). However, the introduction of the aesthetic component of the practices of the self, which require testing, measuring, trying on, improving, or rejecting self-transformation and commitments to norms, allowed within the specific historical conditions of intelligibility, gives the subject opportunities for detachment from the law.

The prevalence of oppressive norms of self-discipline, self-surveillance, self-policing, and self-control makes it rather difficult to see anything beyond their debilitating impact in terms of self-constitution and social relations. In most cases, these practices of self-control and self-consciousness, in the Woolfian sense, continue to be forms of power and discipline that subjugate the self and reduce its capacity for autonomy. Simply put, under the current distribution of power relations and methods of discipline, it would be irresponsible to claim otherwise. The ethical side of Foucault’s self-constitution project, which presents the subject as responsible for establishing a relation to herself based on reflective engagements with her modes of existence and presupposes the autonomous urge of the subject to make herself freer through deliberative change, risks re-inscribing methodologies of domination and control within the process of self-constitution. It is in this sense that the category of character proves insufficient for Woolf’s experiments with autonomous self-constitution; character is restricted by the larger construct within which it operates, namely the genre and narrative requirements which delimit its functions in the broader representation of subjectivity in fiction. Without account for the historical conditioning of the very utterances one has at her disposal to give an account of herself at any given moment in time, any account of self-government will further threaten to deny non-conforming, or non-privileged subjects, the ability to claim personhood and the social and human rights associated with it. Thus Chapter Two focuses on Woolf’s scrutiny of the

techniques of domination, identified by Foucault as an important aspect of the self-governance process, and the external conditions for carving out a capacity for autonomy.

Chapter Two

Autonomy and its discontents in *The Years* (1937) and “Three Guineas” (1938)

“Modern man is rather like a bisected wasp which goes on sucking jam and pretends that the loss of its abdomen does not matter.”

George Orwell, “Review”¹²⁹

2.1 Introduction

In his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale” George Orwell considers the position of English literature in the face of the raging war. Although mainly a review of Henry Miller’s novels *Tropic of Cancer* and *Black Spring*, it discusses literature as a resistance mechanism against fascist politics and ideas. Orwell finds that not all literature can serve that purpose; in fact, he claims, in the face of fascism, only one type of literary labour production has remained uncompromised. “Now and again,” he writes, “there appears a novel which opens up a new world not by revealing what is strange, but by revealing what is familiar.”¹³⁰ As an example he singles out Joyce’s *Ulysses*, whose most remarkable feature, in Orwell’s opinion, is “the commonplaceness of its material” and its ability to “get the familiar onto paper.”¹³¹ This emphasis on the familiar “break[s] down [. . .] the solitude in which the human being lives” by representing what he calls the “common man” who can recognise themselves in the work; there would be “no humbug in it, no moral purpose, merely an implicit assumption that we are all

¹²⁹ George Orwell, “Review: *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller;” originally appeared in *New English Weekly* (1935), reprinted in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume I An Age Like This, 1920-1940*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 154. This review became the basis of Orwell’s famous essay “Inside the Whale.”

¹³⁰ Orwell, “Inside the Whale,” 495.

¹³¹ Orwell, “Inside the Whale,” 495.

alike.”¹³² Establishing a “common man” removed from moral direction, as the backbone of the possibility for social salvation seems rather counterintuitive at first. This is especially the case when we take into account “the implicit assumption,” Orwell invites us to make, “that we are all alike” – a position that rests on the ethical recognition of others as equals to oneself. By advocating a literary work that centres on everyday human experience instead of the authoritative voice of universal moral teaching, however, Orwell is emphasising the danger of relying on external direction. A grand narrative, like morality, holds the power to manipulate and endanger individual acts of rebellion and resistance, necessary for the life of a healthy democratic society. In order to counteract the monopolising and homogenising tendencies prevalent in Western modes of governance, epitomized in the advance of fascist ideology throughout Europe, Orwell thinks, literature should refocus its lens and concentrate on smaller, everyday performances of personal and social organisation, or the life of the “common man.” As discussed in Chapter One, the subject’s ability to critically reflect on oneself and recognise oneself as an object of knowledge constituted through a specific set of social relations is vital for the development of an autonomous subject. Orwell’s admonition further highlights the importance of everyday practices and the interpretative modalities they invite for understanding the intervention of narratives of social order in the process of autonomous self-constitution.

Orwell’s discussion is also a reaction to a debate that shaped the literary character of the 1930s. Under the shadow of fascism and immediately following the creative eruption of formal and stylistic innovations which came to characterise British modernism of the 1920s, this was a time of uncertainty.¹³³ Tyrus Miller and Marina MacKay have identified the decade as part of a project termed “late modernism” and have argued compellingly for its specific nature, one that

¹³² Orwell, “Inside the Whale,” 495.

¹³³ For an interesting study of the intersection between literature and pedagogy in 1930s Britain, see Natasha Periyar, *The Politics of 1930s British Literature: Education, Class, Gender* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

marks the split between high modernism and postmodernism.¹³⁴ Tyrus Miller maintains that works of late modernism deserve robust critical attention because they are a product of a time of conflict, both in political and aesthetic terms, and as such embody a captivating impulse for reinvention in the face of adversity. He writes:

Accordingly, the works of late modernist literature should not be viewed simply as cultural curiosities salvaged from time, aesthetic souvenirs that exert their unsettling fascination by reviving an already moribund modernism. Rather, they mark the lines of right artists took where an obstacle [. . .] interrupted progress on established paths. Facing an unexpected stop, late modernists took a detour into the political regions that high modernism had managed to view from the distance of a closed car, as part of a moving panorama of forms and colours.¹³⁵

The unexpected stop Miller is referring to was of course a conceptual, aesthetic, and political one at once. Politically, and within Britain specifically, the threat of fascism engulfing Europe and spilling out on the shores of Britain, combined with the gradually diminishing political power of the British Empire, caused ruptures in national identity and uncertainty about the underlying nature of the nation's political project.¹³⁶ As Thomas S. Davis observes late modernist writers were preoccupied with “phenomena that upended the British world-system: the Sino-Japanese war, the expansionist policies of fascist states and a civil war in Spain that destabilised the political equilibrium Britain so needed.”¹³⁷ Furthermore, for the first time in its modern history Britain faced a threat of home invasion, bringing with it a sense that it had lost its capacity to protect its citizens. Aesthetically, high modernism's exclusivity and emphasis on formal and stylistic innovations was perceived as increasingly removed from a cultural sphere that was

¹³⁴ See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999) and Marina MacKay, “‘Doing Business with Totalitaria:’ British Late Modernism and the Politics of Reputation,” *English Literary History* v.73 no.3 (2006): 729-53.

¹³⁵ Miller, *Late Modernism*, 12-3.

¹³⁶ Jed Etsy argues more forcefully in *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) that late modernism is the appropriate style to characterise loss of imperial power, marking modernism's withdrawal from its metropolitan roots and reinvention in English national culture. He compellingly aligns late modernism and early postcolonial writing by the younger migrant writers arriving in England after the war and the rise of Birmingham Cultural Studies (76-90). For a broader overview of the scholarly material around late modernism, see Thomas S. Davis, “Late Modernism: British Literature at Mid-century,” *Literature Compass*, vol.9 no.4 (2012): 326-337.

¹³⁷ Thomas S. Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 16.

beginning to feel a need to intervene in political action. And, conceptually, high modernism's preoccupation with the nature of reality and how we understand it began to give way to a more pressing concern regarding the nature of reality as such, or to borrow Brian McHale's terminology – modernism's epistemological, world-disclosing preoccupation was transitioning into an ontological, world-making one, characteristic of postmodernist sensibility.¹³⁸ Suddenly, as Miller suggests, there was simply nowhere to go and late modernists had to reinvent, if not to build anew, an artistic reality that responded to dominant social narratives. This altered position demanded urgent redefinition and restructuring of Britain's conceptual and physical space, allowing literature to begin to create new narratives of belonging and nationhood that helped to propel a number of emancipatory discourses following World War II. For all these reasons, the 1930s modernist works of literature are marked by a tightened sense of purpose and social duty.

This brings us back to those curious works of fiction that Orwell proposes we consider: those artworks that manage to create new worlds and offer them to their readers in an attempt to recreate communal recognition of shared reality. As discussed in Chapter One, Woolf, similarly to Orwell, expressed the conviction that creating a certain intimacy with one's reader based on common recognition was one of the writer's most urgent necessities, especially at a time of transformation in fiction. Both writers consider it significant that the reader should be put in a position to recognise something familiar in order to foster the type of intimate responsiveness that facilitates productive engagement with works of fiction. However, as Woolf asserts in her 1940 essay "The Leaning Tower," delivered as a lecture to the Sussex branch of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the state of literature in the 1930s could not be brought to bear on previously established rules of engagement. Instead, the poetry and prose of the decade,

¹³⁸ Brian McHale, *Postmodern Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, [1987] 2004), 12.

thrown into turmoil, were “betwixt and between” two worlds.¹³⁹ In this essay, Woolf compares the world of her contemporaries with that of nineteenth century authors, who had at their disposal “leisure,” “society,” and the confidence that “life was not going to change.” This state of tranquillity, prosperity, and peace (on British soil), as Britain solidified its status of world-dominating superpower in wars fought far away from its shores, provided, according to Woolf, the conditions for a common understanding in nineteenth century literature. There was a certain flavour of familiarity, which despite all the great differences that separated Charles Dickens from George Eliot for example, united them in the common security of their world and their own position as writers within it. She writes:

[t]o the nineteenth-century writer human life must have looked like a landscape cut into separate fields. In each field was gathered a different group of people. Each to some extent had its own traditions; its own manners; its own speech; its own dress; its own occupation. But owing to that peace, to that prosperity each group was tethered, stationary – a herd grazing within its own hedges. And the nineteenth-century writer didn’t seek to change those divisions; he accepted them. He accepted them so completely that he became unconscious of them.¹⁴⁰ (*E* 6, 263)

In addition to the stability of their social template, the great writers of the past, Woolf tells us, had another thing in common: the privilege to receive selective education. They were taught their craft “by about eleven years of education – at private schools, public schools, and universities.” By virtue of this education, she continues, the writer was raised above the common people “upon a tower [. . .] built first on his parents’ station, then on his parents’ gold” (*E* 6, 266). Throughout the history of English literature, this tower was a stable one, Woolf tells us. But in 1914, it shook, and it leant.

The next generation of writers, known as the Auden generation, poets Stephen Spender,

¹³⁹ Virginia Woolf, “The Leaning Tower,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI, 1933-41 and Additional Essays 1906-1924*, ed. Stuart N. Clarke (London: Hogarth Press, 2011), 172-3. All subsequent references to this edition are included in text in brackets after the citation as *E* 6.

¹⁴⁰ Woolf here continues working on a motive discussed in more detail in Chapter One in relation to “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” namely the tension between “unconscious” and “self-conscious” writing. For Woolf, the balance between the two is essential. If one overtakes the other in the creative process and the writer’s engagement with her subject matter, the product will be an ineffective work of literature.

W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis, and novelist Christopher Isherwood among others, began writing in mid-1920s and throughout the 1930s, but did not experience such firmness of station and vision. They belonged to the same class and tradition as their predecessors, went to the same schools and universities, travelled to the same foreign countries, read the same poets, but their position was radically different. Instead of tranquillity and leisure, they experienced unrelenting change and revolution, instead of prosperity and peace, they had to face fear of death. Woolf writes:

Everywhere changes, everywhere revolution. In Germany, in Russia, in Italy, in Spain, all the old hedges were being rooted up; all the old towers were being thrown to the ground. Other hedges were being planted; other towers were being raised. There was communism in one country, in another fascism. The whole of civilisation, of society, was changing. [. . .] But even in England towers that were built of gold and stucco were no longer steady towers. They were leaning towers. (*E* 6, 267)

The change of the angle of seeing, naturally led to a change in perspective. They were closer to the ground and yet unable to reach it – fully prepared to recognise their own bourgeois privilege, yet unable to renounce it because they could not see what awaited them beyond it. Suddenly, they were running out of present, whilst being unable to progress towards a future. “The bleat of the scapegoat sounds loud in their work, and the whimper of the schoolboy crying ‘Please Sir it was the other fellow, not me,’” Woolf continues scathingly. Towards the end of this essay Woolf admits, in a more conciliatory tone, that the 1930s generation of writers, from which she excludes herself, were dealt an appallingly difficult hand. She acknowledges that having to open up a new world when all they could see was uncertainty and danger was a Sisyphean task. But despite their shortcomings, she sees the Auden generation as a necessary step in the emancipatory development of English literature and acknowledges their success in throwing away the little tool box of the great writer of the past to clear the space for a new post-war literature that will begin to build anew.

This uncertainty as to how to proceed and what the end goal was – a more political literature or more literary politics – suggested by Orwell’s and Woolf’s questions becomes an important characteristic of the writing produced in the last decade before the war. The politics of the time, almost by definition, required a strong commitment from writers, which in turn necessitated a change in the established course of the literary process. The old debates around the autonomy of art resurfaced with renewed vigour, as the boundaries between artistic production and political action were becoming increasingly blurred. Strong voices spoke in defence of both sides. Cecil Day Lewis linked the idea of pure art with the bourgeois belief in individualism, both of which he deplored.¹⁴¹ Stephen Spender saw literature as a way to conceptualise integrity – as a matter of personal, moral, rather than poetic commitment – a necessary component for withstanding the fascist attack which aimed to disintegrate social cohesion.¹⁴² I. A. Richards, on the other hand, enthused over T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* for its “complete severance of poetry and all beliefs” and proposed separation between literary utterances and factual propositions about reality.¹⁴³ In addition to the diverging beliefs, further questions, like the ones Woolf is raising in “The Leaning Tower,” regarding class, social position, political conviction and their treatment in literary works were beginning to seriously complicate things for a British modernist tradition represented almost exclusively by white middle-class writers. The commitment to creating literary works that will help to bring down the proverbial leaning tower was in essence to write against one’s own class and the political power and privilege that class carried, as Woolf observes in her essay.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ See Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1934); Quoted in Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Let-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

¹⁴² Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-1975)* (London: The Macmillan Press (by agreement with Fontana Paperbacks, 1978), 13-33.

¹⁴³ I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (London: Kegan Paul, 1926), 65. See also his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924).

¹⁴⁴ This important psychological contradiction is also picked up by Jean-Paul Sartre in his essay “Black Orpheus” where he refers to it as the “dichotomy between their ideal and their class.” Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” *The Massachusetts Review* vol.6, no.1 (Autumn 1964-Winter 1965), 18.

The 1930s generation, Woolf tells us, committed themselves to the communist cause, to building a towerless society, in which “every one is equal and every one is free” (E6, 272). But split over two temporalities, they became the spectres of literature dwelling “in two worlds, one dying, the other one struggling to be born,” all the while their sole desire was “to be whole; to be human” (E 6, 272-3). In a way, this impulse puts them in the range of the Orwellian author who uses literature to break away from the solitude of human existence by focusing on the similarities of the human condition and the threads of everyday experience that bound us together. But “[h]ow can a writer who has no first-hand experience of a towerless, of a classless society create that society?” (E 6, 272). The goal surely must be to find out what the nature of literature is in times of social and political turmoil, before we can ask it for solace, and before we can employ it to create community. As Woolf’s essay demonstrates, the writer is not an omniscient presence who can recreate life removed from their own experience, social sphere, education, and the history of those who came before them. And, in some respects, Orwell is perhaps asking too much. Torn between the demand to preserve some semblance of humanity and wholeness, how could modernist writers of the 1930s have the courage to look ahead in order to create the new worlds and inspire their readers? Equally, though, if literature proclaimed itself helpless in the face of atrocious cruelty and attempted to protect what is left of its leaning tower, how could it justify its existence beyond the fascist reign of power? As Natasha Periyar argues, Woolf’s essay has a distinctly pedagogical as well as literary purpose: “it emerges from a distinctly wartime perspective, which privileged the work of the adult education movement in the cultivation of social and cultural democracy.”¹⁴⁵ Periyar convincingly positions “The Leaning Tower” within its contemporary debates on comprehensive education, a social measure that was

¹⁴⁵ Natasha Periyar, “‘Altering the structure of society’: An Institutional Focus on Virginia Woolf and Working-Class Education in the 1930s,” *Textual Practice* 32, no. 8: 1312. For additional readings of the essay in its pedagogical contexts see Erika Yoshida, “‘The Leaning Tower’ Woolf’s Pedagogical Goal of the Lecture to the W.E.A. under the Threat of War,” in Diana Royer and Madelyn Detloff (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: Art, Education and Internationalism* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press, 2008), 33-9; Maroula Joannou, *Women’s Writing, Englishness and National and Cultural Identity: The Mobile Woman and the Migrant Voice 1938-1962* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

designed in principle to erase class difference and provide the means for building a more democratic post-war political order.¹⁴⁶ The overhaul of non-democratic structures and the social narratives they produce is an important concern for Woolf, closely related to her social critique and her understanding of autonomy and agency. As such, it will be discussed in more detail in the following section, examining her women's rights polemic "Three Guineas."

As well as apprehensions about the role literature and education may play in the struggle with social inequality, "The Leaning Tower" indicates Woolf's concerns with the nature of authorial power. In Benjamin Kohlmann's view, this question was another explicit marker of literary and critical writing during the 1930s. The deep-seated uncertainty about the purpose of their own authorial influence and the most productive use of literature at a time when the very possibility of future life and freedom was in critical danger, created a strong mutual dependency between literary and critical discourses, which helped "to shape the modes in which literary writing was conducted."¹⁴⁷ This tendency can be observed in Woolf's writing as she conceived the defining project of her work during the decade – a novel-essay which would bring into view the social, economic, and political conditions that prevented women from occupying their rightful position of equality in Britain. This project was first entitled "The Pargiters: An Essay" and was based upon a paper read to the London/National Society for Women's Service on 11 October 1932. In her diary, on 2 November 1932, she describes it for the first time as follows: "it's to take in everything, sex, education, life etc.: and come with the most powerful and agile leaps, like a chamois, across precipices from 1880 to here and now."¹⁴⁸ Initially, the formal

¹⁴⁶ Periyar quotes T.C. Worsley's *Barbarians and Philistines: Democracy and the Public Schools* (1940), which Woolf read in preparation for the writing "The Leaning Tower," who states that the public school's presence in the post-war world "will effectively sabotage the establishment of democracy." (Periyar, "Altering the Structure": 1314)

¹⁴⁷ Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

¹⁴⁸ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1931-1935*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982), 129.

structure of the book was to alternate essays with fictional extracts that would rework the material developed in their non-fictional counterparts. However, as the project grew, it bifurcated into a critical essay, published as “Three Guineas,” and a historical novel, *The Years*. The physical split of the essays from the novelistic material, however, should not be taken as a sign of Woolf’s abandonment of the works’ socio-critical basis, but instead, as Anna Snaith has argued, as an affirmation of its centrality to the project.¹⁴⁹ The choice to integrate the subject’s struggle to emerge as an autonomous presence with its attendant material, historical, and political conditions affirms Woolf’s increased sensitivity to negotiating issues of personal autonomy, political identification, and social purpose, as well as the complexities presented by their perpetually shifting boundaries. Continuing the discussion from Chapter One, this chapter has a dual purpose. Firstly, moving away from the internal conditions required for autonomous self-constitution, the chapter focuses on the effects external conditions (i.e. social organisation, political conditions, institutional control) have on the subject’s ability to develop the type of autonomous self-relation advocated by Foucault. Secondly, the chapter aims to scrutinize the dynamics whereby traditional narratives and practices produced and perpetuated by means of institutional control, privilege certain types of agency to the exclusion of others. To this effect, I offer readings of “Three Guineas” and *The Years*, as two texts that question the socially validated authority of dominant socio-political narratives of agency and the exclusivity of “progressively” orientated practices of subjectivation to which they lead.

The following section discusses “Three Guineas” as an instance of Woolf’s enquiry into the formation of oppressive practices of social organisation. I read Woolf’s critique of education as a demonstration of her concern that such practices dilute the subject’s capacity for self-awareness and increase the danger of internalising practices of control masquerading as

¹⁴⁹ Anna Snaith, “Introduction,” in *The Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), lxii.

emancipatory forms. I position her critique in dialogue with influential social theories of the everyday which argue that habitualised daily practices, performed with a diminished conscious awareness, provide opportunities for social and institutional discourses to infiltrate, or colonise, the mind in order to reduce the likelihood of emancipatory impulses, and thus chip away at the subject's capacity for autonomy.

2.2 Tradition, gender and autonomy in “Three Guineas” (1938)

“Three Guineas” is an extended essay in the form of a long letter on the politics of the 1930s, discussing the ideological and institutional barriers to women's full access to the social sphere. Woolf presents the text as her response to a query by a learned gentleman asking her opinion on the matter of how women could be utilised in the war prevention effort.¹⁵⁰ The essay casts fascism not simply as an one-off political catastrophe but rather as a pervasive ideology that underpins the structural organisation of Western societies, including English public and private life and one that is deeply rooted in English national consciousness.¹⁵¹ Her analysis proceeds through a sustained examination of patriarchal state practices and the treatment of women in English society following the 1919 Sex Disqualification Removal Act, which gave women increased access to the professions, as mentioned in the Introduction, and the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act of 1928, which granted women full electoral equality with

¹⁵⁰ Woolf's choice of title also signals both her commitment both to supporting the professional role of women and awareness of their position within the British colonial project. The guinea has an association with English colonial expansion – specifically the gold and slave trade; Woolf is bringing into focus the reality of violent oppression associated with the British Empire, of people being bought and sold, for the interest of capitalist modernity and she includes women in that history. See Anna Snaith's Introduction in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), xi-xxxvi.

¹⁵¹ Woolf actively researched and followed the developments of fascism across Europe from the early 1930s. Hogarth Press published Mussolini's *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism* in 1933, two years before he invaded Ethiopia alongside a counter text on communism; she monitored the progress of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, which had attracted about 50,000 supporters by 1934, commenting that she would “emigrate” if this trend continued; travelled to Germany in 1935 with Leonard, despite numerous warning by their friends.

men.¹⁵² By emphasising the blatant inequalities of pay, social station, and opportunities for professional development between women and men in the civil service, Woolf aims to demonstrate that a patriarchal worldview was still operational as a normative truth during a time when women were, in theory, legally facilitated in gaining equal opportunities.¹⁵³ Woolf perceptively draws attention to the fact that *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy may in fact not overlap.

In doing so she describes the formation of fascist and other extreme ideologies as political processes embedded in the fabric of the same social normativity and validated by socially condoned practices. This is, she states,

the egg of the very same worm we know under other names in other countries. There we have the embryo of the creature, Dictator as we call him when he is Italian or German, who believes that he has the right whether given by God, Nature, sex or race is immaterial, to dictate to other human beings how they shall live. (TG,135)

Woolf here clearly identifies the shared origin of all practices of domination and control, regardless of their particular manifestation in any given context. In contemporary feminist philosophy oppression understood as “structural or systemic in nature,” as Veltman and Piper assert, and Woolf clearly understood that.¹⁵⁴ Following Marilyn Frye’s influential analysis, Veltman and Piper conceptualise oppression not only as limiting of “opportunities and life options” or preventing persons “from acting autonomously in ways that reflect her values and commitments,” but also as something that “deforms desires” and “infects” conditions of socialisation.¹⁵⁵ In Frye’s own definition, oppression is “a system of interrelated barriers and forces which reduce, immobilize and mould people who belong to a certain group, and effect their subordination to another group.”¹⁵⁶ As demonstrates by this passage, Woolf sees oppression

¹⁵² See Ray Strachey’s *The Cause* for historical detail and discussion on the 1919 Act.

¹⁵³ Snaith, xxx.

¹⁵⁴ Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper, *Autonomy*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper, *Autonomy*, 2.

¹⁵⁶ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1993), 33.

in its most pervasive and deeply penetrating form. For her, all forms of oppression be it on the basis of religion, race, gender, or class, and every form of prejudice that puts one human being in control of another are forms of political dictatorship.

To expose further the affinities of thinking between the English establishment and its German counterpart, Woolf offers the following quotation from an article published in the *Daily Telegraph* on 22 January 1936: “Homes are the real places of the women who are now compelling men to be idle. It is time the Government insisted upon employers giving work to more men, thus enabling them to marry the women they cannot now approach” (TG, 135). Not even stopping for a second to appreciate the irony of masculine insecurity masquerading as political commentary at a time when aggressive bravado with undertones of militaristic discipline was considered to be a show of strength, but focused on solidifying the above claim, Woolf introduces another quotation for comparison. As Anna Snaith informs us, this one is taken from a speech by Hitler to the Nazi Women’s League quoted in *The Sunday Times* on 13 September 1936: “There are two worlds in the life of the nation, the world of men and the world of women. Nature has done well to entrust the man with the care of his family and the nation. The woman’s world is her family, her husband, her children and her home” (TG, 135). Emphasising the ideological parallels between the two statements, Woolf then daringly asks her reader to find a difference between them. “We all agree that a dictator abroad is dangerous and ugly animal. And he is here, among us, raising his ugly head [. . .] in the heart of England” (TG, 135).¹⁵⁷ The political commitments and practices both societies engage in are in her view “false and unreal positions taken by the human form in England as well as in Germany [. . .] due to the limelight which paralyses the free action of the human faculties and inhibits the human power to

¹⁵⁷ In this line of thought, she identifies a somewhat oxymoronic equivalence between war and liberty that is used to justify military action, specifically with reference to the then Lord Chief Justice of England, Gordon Hewart, portraying England as the bastion of liberty that “will be defended to the last” (94). This is an interesting position and a good start of a discussion on Woolf’s pacifist position but falls outside the scope of current discussion.

change and create new wholes” (TG, 190). Notoriously defending a strong pacifist position until late into the 1930s, Woolf considered nationalism and patriotism as one such unreal position that provided false motivation for aggression and war. There is also a gendered element in this specific type of determination to participate in competitive practices of proving one’s strength and mastery over another, which are effectively exemplified in military practice. She specifically highlights men’s affinity to war “as a profession, a source of happiness, and excitement [. . .] and outlet for manly qualities, without which men would deteriorate” (TG, 93). The majority of the male sex, she tells us, is overwhelmingly in favour of war, attributing this proclivity to a particularly male drive to protect property and privilege, propelled by narratives of “worth” and social progress and validated by institutional practices, such as education.¹⁵⁸

Having exposed the affinity between the forms of patriarchal control operating at the heart of English civil society and the fascist social vision, Woolf moves on to examine the institutional structures that perpetuate and promulgate it. Her point of departure is a discussion of traditional education practices and values in England and their social function. In education, men and women are treated differently, she states, first, on the level of conception, and second, on the level of practice. First, and most obviously, women had only been granted access to public education around 60 years prior to her writing, whereas men had enjoyed the privileges of specialised education for many centuries prior.¹⁵⁹ In addition to the obvious access and opportunity issues the lack of institutional education created for women’s professional realisation, Woolf detects another fundamental problem. Women’s exclusion from the

¹⁵⁸ The gendered element of the war effort becomes even more explicit in Woolf’s 1940 essay “Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid,” where she writes “up there in the sky young Englishmen and young German men are fighting each other. The defenders are men, the attackers are men. Arms are not given to Englishwomen either to fight the enemy or to defend herself. She must lie weaponless tonight” (*E* 6: 242). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

¹⁵⁹ Queen’s College for Women and Bedford College, the first public schools for girls were opened in 1848 and 1849. The 1870 Education Act legislated for public primary education for both sexes. Girton and Newnham Colleges at Cambridge were founded in 1869 and 1871.

established course of education in Britain affects the perception of their function in the social formation of the nation and diminishes their official participation in it. In this sense, women have become the dispossessed outsiders to its “official” history, because they were kept out of its institutional formation. Historically, their contributions have been neglected, undervalued and often completely erased from the formative narrative of the nation and the values that go with that account. “Our country,” Woolf writes, “throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions” (TG, 185). This position, in her view, is both a burden and a blessing, because it could be politicised successfully and made to undermine the structural formations upon which it is based. It was indeed the case, especially following 1919, when women are formally allowed to earn their own living in the professions, and thus to secure their financial independence and intellectual liberty. As Woolf puts it simply, women now “have money to subscribe to causes”, which means that, for the first time in the history of the British Isles, women have direct access to influencing political and social narratives by means of independent capital¹⁶⁰ (TG, 107).

Woolf, however, is far from convinced that gaining access to traditional, institutionalised education has a “positive value” in and of itself (TG, 111). With her characteristic irony, which permeates the text of “Three Guineas,” she comments on the ingrained ideological principles of this glorified form of education:

It is not good in all circumstances, and good for all people; it is only good for some people and some purposes. It is good if it produces belief in the Church of England; bad if it produces a belief in the Church of Rome; it is good for one sex and for some professions, but bad for another sex and for another profession (TG, 112).

¹⁶⁰ Even though she acknowledges that women are paid for their professional work and have some independent means free of direct patriarchal control, she is under no illusion with regards to parity of pay and opportunities. Due to the scope of this chapter, I have no opportunity to explore here her detailed analysis of all the ways professional women were still discriminated against and marginalised within their chosen professions. For discussion of unequal pay and advancement opportunities see “Part Two” in “Three Guineas.”

More specifically, Woolf highlights that traditional education creates a strict hierarchical order of social control, designed to keep the power to formulate and enforce formative social discourses of national identity and values in the hands of a specific class and a specific gender. They advertise this power in the social sphere, Woolf argues, by means of strictly regulated ceremonies of dress and behaviour, which hold a symbolic value. “It serves,” she writes, “to advertise the social, professional, or intellectual standing of the wearer” (TG, 105). This is particularly relevant in relation to war pageantry: “your finest clothes are those that you wear as soldiers. [. . .] partly in order through their vanity to induce young men to become soldiers (TG, 105). But this practice is by no means reserved for demonstrating military prowess. “In courts and universities, we find the same love of dress,” Woolf asserts. “There, too, are velvet and silk, fur and ermine” (TG, 107).¹⁶¹ However, Woolf reasons, as university education is a restricted space, into which people cannot simply be recruited, and is in educated men’s interest to keep the number of those allowed to enter their ranks as limited as possible, advertisement cannot be the only function of the ceremonial exhibition of honours. The second purpose she identifies is to demonstrate superiority, maintain the social hierarchy which has produced their privilege, and protect their social capital. If such practices of establishing domination and maintaining it are taught at schools and the universities the nation’s elite has attended, Woolf asks, “do they not prove that education, the finest education in the world, does not teach people not to hate force but to use it?” (TG, 115).

In addition to suppressing social mobility and protecting power relations, Woolf exposes traditional education’s function as a restrictive and controlling practice in terms of individual formation and development of independent thinking capacities, one of her markers for individual

¹⁶¹ Woolf further exemplifies the links between war and the judiciary through the presence of Lord Chief Justice of England, Gordon Hewart in the text. First, she cites his ruminations on the glory of England as the home of democratic institutions and the bastion of liberty on p.94; and then, includes a picture of him simply titled “A Judge” on p. 144, where he is not formally identified. Mary Pawlowski makes the evocative identification in “Virginia Woolf’s Veil: The Feminist Intellectual and the Organization of Public Space,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no.4 (Winter, 2007): 735.

autonomy as noted in the Introduction. “The barriers of wealth and ceremony, of advertisements and competition make the old and rich universities such uneasy dwelling places – cities of strife, cities where this is locked up and that is chained down; where nobody can walk freely or talk freely for fear of transgressing some chalk mark” (TG, 119).¹⁶² It is her view that structures of traditional education stifle free thinking and creativity – first, because they limit the quantity of fresh minds that can dwell within their walls by means of selectivity, and, second, because the men who get produced as human beings there, to play on Woolf’s phrase, are indoctrinated into the already established system of social relations. In this sense, Woolf argues that the establishment and its institutions, in formulating the defining social narratives, of Englishness, nationalism, protection of liberty, patriotism and so on, only reproduce the same old power structures and hierarchies of force and domination. In a sense, she does not believe this broken system can be fixed, which prompts her impassioned call for institutional arson:

Take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incinerate the willows. And let the daughters of educated men dance around the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry ‘Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this ‘education’! (TG, 120)

Yet, Woolf quickly acknowledges afterwards that even though the college is a symbol of an irreparably broken system, this institutional education is still the only ticket out of home education for women, and thus to access to independent financial and intellectual means. In other words, in having to choose between “the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility” and “the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its

¹⁶² The alternative she offers is quite radical indeed: “it would be a place where society was free; not parcelled out into the miserable distinctions of rich and poor, of clever and stupid; but where all the different degrees and kinds of mind, body, and soul merit cooperated. Let us then found this new college; this poor college; in which learning is sought for itself; where advertisement is abolished; and there are no degrees; and lectures are not given, and sermons are not preached [. . .]” (TG, 119). This train of thought breaks off when the realisation that this in some sense can only be an idealistic dream until “reality” and “society” operate in the way they do.

pugnacity, its greed,” women are forced to contend with two equally problematic and violent modes of oppression (TG, 156).¹⁶³

Biographies of the lives of educated men have nothing more to teach us about the severity of this choice and its consequences, in Woolf’s view. This conclusion prompts her to turn to the biographies of women – those records of public and private life that she sees as untainted by institutional ideology, due to their authors’ reduced access to institutional manipulation and influence. She lists Florence Nightingale, Anne Clough, Mary Kingsley, Gertrude Bell, Christina Rossetti, and Charlotte Brontë, whose teachers were not learned dons, but rather experience of life under patriarchal oppression and the resulting four guiding principles, namely poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties. Woolf clarifies them in turn as follows:

by poverty is meant enough money to live upon [. . .] enough to be independent of any other human being and to buy that modicum of health, leisure, knowledge and so on that is needed for the full development of body and mind. [. . .] By chastity is meant that when you have made enough to live on by your profession you must refuse to sell your brain for the sake of money [. . .]. By derision [. . .] is meant that you must refuse all methods of advertising merit [. . .]. By freedom from unreal loyalties is meant that you must rid yourself from pride and nationality in the first place; also, of religious pride, college pride, school pride, family pride, sex pride (TG, 160-1).¹⁶⁴

The four principles are oriented towards an extrication of women’s cultural and intellectual work from the means of patriarchal capitalist production, in order to afford them a space for emancipatory action. Only by reversing the institutional teachings imbued with normative value judgements and upon which our social relations are based, Woolf advises, can we begin to open

¹⁶³ Even more explicitly: “The one shuts us up like slaves in a harem; the other forces us to circle like caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred three, of property. It is a choice of evils. Each is bad.” (TG, 156)

¹⁶⁴ Woolf has been criticised by feminist scholars for the oblivious treatment of class-difference here, and a rather naïve approach to working class women’s access to such forms of knowledge. As she herself says in the essay, the number of “daughters of educated men” who could afford to live independently according to these principles is very limited, so questions have been raised about the political usefulness of her position. See for example: Mary M. Childers, “Virginia Woolf on the Outside Looking Down: Reflections on the Class of Women,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1992) and Donna Landry, “Congreve Recovered: or, the Limits of Woolf’s Feminism,” *Michigan Academician* 17 (1985): 58-69.

up a world where freedom for all would be more attainable. In this sense, the very act of writing an alternative account that aims to unmask the deceit of the patriarchal social project becomes an act of resistance; her own rhetorical question “what else can I do but write?” which comes in the third and last segment of “Three Guineas,” finds echoes in the voices of future generations of feminists who believe that feminism is a “transformational politic” that aims to enable new, freer forms of subjectivity and free the world from oppression.¹⁶⁵ The very act of writing, for Woolf was an act of rebellion and resistance through which she strove to be heard. A prolific reviewer throughout her life for publications such as *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Athenaeum* and others, she reflects on the sense of censorship she experienced as a female writer: “To say what one thought – that was my little problem – against the prodigious Current; to find a sentence that could hold its own against the male flood.”¹⁶⁶ I will return to this concern in Chapter Three in relation to Woolf’s larger project of recording and telling histories of women. But this precise concern to forge a mode of narration and a practice of recording subjectivity as a political act anticipates the contributions of future radical feminist thinkers such as Andrea Dworkin, whose work in the radical feminist tradition focuses on the denial of autonomy to the female subject under conditions of patriarchal and sexual objectification. Understanding the struggle against the patriarchy as a revolutionary act further reverberates within Dworkin’s work, who writes “it is part of a planetary movement to restructure community forms and human consciousness so that people have power over their own lives, participate fully in community, live in dignity and freedom. [. . .] It is a commitment to transformation of the self and transformation of the social reality on every level.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ See Lorna Finlayson, *An Introduction to Feminism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁶⁶ Preparatory Manuscript Notes for “Professions of Women Speech”, 163-4. Quoted in Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilisation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 217.

¹⁶⁷ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Plume, 1974), 17. Dworkin borrows Woolf’s phrase for the title of her essay “Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality,” where she discusses issues of

Woolf's alternative method of social construction emphasises the subversive position of women as outsiders, not bound by institutional loyalty to contribute to the perpetual production of histories and justifications of structures of power. However, her position also indicates an important further worry, which forms a crucial point for understanding Woolf's view of autonomy. Woolf warns against a certain docility of the mind, manifested through uncritical acceptance of ideas which ground our public discourse and confront us through everyday rituals, such as reading the newspaper for example. She introduces the idea of "intellectual slavery" to demarcate a state of uncritical engagement with social discourse premised on perceived self-interest and cultivated through the daily practices we engage in both in our public and private lives. In this sense certain types of dominant patriarchal values are filtered through our social structures and reach us in our various daily roles; they can then be internalised and come to replace our capacity for independent thinking and self-reflection, and, by extension, prevent us from conducting autonomous practices of self-constitution.

2.3 Colonisation of the mind: autonomy, habits, and everyday theory

Everyday theory is a branch of cultural studies that has shaped a significant line of enquiry within modernist studies in the last decade. Originally everyday theory emerged in the 1950s and 1960s with Henri Lefebvre's Marxist sociological critique of everyday life conditions in capitalist society. In his three-volume study, *Critique of Everyday Life* published between 1948 and 1981, he criticises modern capitalist technological and consumerist operations as having colonised the mind, increasing levels of mindless mass-consumption whilst decreasing the quality of everyday life. Lefebvre advocates for the recovery of the everyday from capitalist

censorship, obscenity, pornography, subordination, speech, and equality in relation to patriarchal oppression, signalling a certain sense of conceptual affinity.

appropriation and repurposing it as a mechanism, rich in aesthetic and political revolutionary capacity, to destabilise the mechanics of capitalist reality. In his own words:

The quotidian is what is humble and solid, what is taken for granted and that of which all the parts follow each other in such a regular, unvarying succession that those concerned have no call to question their sequence; thus it is undated and (apparently) insignificant; though it occupies and preoccupies it is practically untellable, and it is the ethics underlying routine and the aesthetics of familiar settings.¹⁶⁸

This definition and its accompanying discussion has inspired serious theoretical engagement with the nature of the everyday and its potential political uses, including work by Michel de Certeau, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes and Guy Debord. Localised in repetitive practices of often inattentive engagement with the world, and yet impossible to define conclusively as a particular type of existential movement, the everyday appears to have the double status of something determined by capitalist laws of production by mere necessity but also something that escapes its categorising imperative thus retaining a potentially subversive status.¹⁶⁹

Lefebvre's interest in the colonisation of the mind by everyday rituals and ceremonies espoused and promoted by capitalist modernity, and the resulting reification of consciousness, invites questions about the habituation of experience and the role of autonomy in such practices. This line of enquiry destabilises high-modernism's assertion of exceptional individual expression, urging us to interrogate the capacity of the subject to overcome aggressive practices of domination and control which can play a constitutive part in her self-constitution, as discussed in the previous Chapter. In the same tradition, Habermas refers to the everyday as a space in which capitalist systems colonise our lifeworld, manipulating truthful and effective communication and thus directly regulating individual consciousness. According to Habermas systematically distorted communications have the potential not only to inhibit communication

¹⁶⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 24. This is the concise version of Lefebvre's extended study.

¹⁶⁹ It has been argued that the structures of the everyday defined by Lefebvre, and specifically his idea of the "colonisation of the everyday" should be understood as "the continuation of the structures of imperialism within the everyday" – see Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996).

between subjects, but, as Andrew Edgar puts it, to reach “into the very possibility of the subject’s development as a competent human being.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, the everyday can be instrumentalised by institutional power systems in order to erase singularity and increase social homogeneity and conformity. But, for Habermas, this contamination of seemingly open spaces of experience is not only a process aimed at colonising the external spaces of an individual’s life, so that they could be appropriated for capitalist gains; but also at gaining control over individuals by means of internalisation, initiating practices of self-deception and self-instrumentalisation, in the context of the subject’s own self-constitution. Thus, the capacity of the subject to critically examine the epistemological and social conditions that guide her own self-making processes, a necessary condition, according to Foucault as already discussed, for the development of autonomous subjectivity becomes uncertain; and so does the subject’s ability to successfully choose practices that do not further extend conditions of oppression.

These concerns can be detected in Woolf’s discussion of women’s role, and their complicity, in maintaining the established social order, specifically in relation to supporting the war effort, in “Three Guineas” and other late essays. In “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1940), she questions the purported freedom of those who fight against the Nazis and compares the position of male pilots and women on the home front. “Everyday they tell us that we are a free people, fighting to defend freedom,” she writes, “[. . .] It is not true that we are free. We are both prisoners tonight – he boxed up in his machine with a gun handy; we lying in the dark with a gas mask handy” (*E6*, 243). Both the male and female agents of Woolf’s observation are connected through a form of ritualised agency, driven by the war effort, but nonetheless pervasive in terms of its everyday functions. Moving alongside the axes of gendered agency they have been prescribed to counteract the “common” threat – the active, combative role, dedicated

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas* (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), 156.

to fighting off, is of course reserved for men, whereas women are positioned in a more subdued, passive, home-keeping function. In other words, Woolf suggests that if there is ever an equality between the sexes, it is precisely on the level of unfreedom, as the subject simply internalises the social demand and complies with it, regardless of gender:

We are equally prisoners tonight – the Englishmen in their planes, the Englishwomen in their beds. But he stops to think he may be killed; and we too. So let us think for him. Let us try to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down. It is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave. Even in the darkness we can see that made visible. We can see shop windows blazing and women gazing; painted women; dressed up women; women with crimson lips and crimson finger-nails. They are slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves. (*E6*, 243)

References to imprisonment and “subconscious Hitlerism” directly point to Woolf’s concerns about the internalisation of oppression, which she links to desires for aggression and domination. The idea that oppression breeds oppression is clearly linked here both to militaristic practices of social governance and to rituals of capitalist modernity, the latter embodied particularly by women, linking back to Lefevbre’s concern about the colonisation of the mind through mindless daily rituals.

Foucault’s theory of autonomous practices of the self has come under suspicion and attack from feminist critics in part due to the problem presenting by internalising oppression and failures of self-government. To be sure, bringing practices of domination and control within the self-constitution process, as he does, is useful to gender theorists as it allows them to work with more diverse conceptions of the self than those offered by mainstream philosophical accounts of individualistic and essentialist selfhood.¹⁷¹ However, when power relations outperform the practices for engendering autonomous subjectivity these processes of domination instead of being successfully negotiated can be internalised by the self and used against its own wellbeing.

¹⁷¹ Amy Allen, “Foucault, Feminism and the Self,” 235.

We often observe tendencies to internalise oppressive notions and discourses, which diminish one's capacity for autonomy such as different idealised conceptions of female beauty and the necessity of pursuing them for example. These instances can occur under various guises and have been theorised by using a heterogeneous set of terms including self-control, self-objectification and self-policing. Helen O'Grady has argued that such types of self-relation are harmful for developing a balanced identity and a way to relate to oneself autonomously. "Self-policing," she writes, "frequently entails harsh and debilitating ways of relating to the self and keeps individuals tied to prescribed identities. It effectively means that individuals live their lives as though under constant observation."¹⁷² The implicit critique of Foucault's position here is that he needs to develop a more gender-sensitive theory of care of the self that would take into account the different set of cultural norms and conditions that women have to negotiate in fighting for preserving (or on some accounts even creating) their capacity for autonomous self-constitution, particularly factoring in issues related to internalising oppressive mechanisms of control.

Following in Woolf's footsteps, but without explicitly acknowledging her contribution, contemporary feminist theorists have expressed various degrees of concern regarding the co-option of conceptual spaces for self-formation and identification by discourses framed around what we consider as specifically male conceptions of agency and autonomy. Such objections are formulated particularly around Foucault's discussion of the necessity of acquiring and demonstrating mastery in order to establish governance over oneself or somebody else, referred to in Chapter One. He borrows this idea from ancient Greek practices of care of the self and transposes it into his self-constitution model. Simply put, according to Foucault gaining self-rule in the process of identity constitution to a large extent overlaps with achieving self-mastery. Lois

¹⁷² Helen O'Grady, "An Ethics of the Self," in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, ed. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 91.

McNay, Helen O’Grady, and Amy Allen have all reacted against this, with O’Grady pointing out that relations with the self on his account are constituted and characterised by “masculine notions of control, battle, conquest, and hierarchy.”¹⁷³ Kate Soper further suggests that his account is not simply in conflict with feminist investigations, but that it is individualistic, narcissistic and thoroughly masculine.¹⁷⁴ In her view, Foucault gives an abstracted and individualised account of self-constitution, which overlooks the “dialectic of personal relation” and makes the ethical appear “a very private – and masculine affair: a matter primarily of self-mastery and authorial creation.”¹⁷⁵ Jean Grimshaw goes even further to argue that Foucault’s analysis of the techniques of the self seems to be concerned with the relation to self of a few privileged males “and it is noteworthy that those with whom they have relationships seem to be thought of as instruments through which they can fashion their own freedom.”¹⁷⁶ Feminists working within the Foucauldian tradition have tried to counter these criticisms and foreground the social dimension of Foucault’s idea of the self, but their work has struggled to elucidate a useful conception of the social, as Amy Allen points out.¹⁷⁷

This social dimension, and its impact on practices of establishing autonomous self-relation, infiltrate the subject’s conceptual space precisely through everyday life and practices, conditioned by capitalist ideological pursuit to colonise our minds and neutralise the dangers of independent thinking. This brings together two distinct types of self-relation, namely a conscious

¹⁷³ Helen O’Grady, “An Ethics of the Self,” in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, ed. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 91

¹⁷⁴ Kate Soper, “Productive Contradiction,” in *Up against Foucault*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 35-6.

¹⁷⁵ Soper, “Productive Contradictions,” 41.

¹⁷⁶ Jean Grimshaw, “Practices of Freedom,” *Up against Foucault*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 68.

¹⁷⁷ Allen, “Foucault, Feminism, and the Self,” 239. For feminist defence of Foucault’s care of the self, see Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalisation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) – “putting care of one’s self above all else could be the founding moment of an intensely ethical life” (196); and Margaret McLaren, “Foucault and the Subject of Feminism,” *Social Theory and Practice* (1997) v.23 no.1:109-28. – “care of self did not result in individualism, but on the contrary is a social practice” (119).

awareness of the subject's own presence in the world (or "moments of being," to borrow Woolf's phrase) and an alternative mode of unawareness, which obscures our access to the latter (or, "moments of non-being").¹⁷⁸ Liesl Olson and Bryony Randall, two insightful readers of Woolf's work on the everyday, are right to point out that moments of non-being occupy an important position in Woolf's fiction.¹⁷⁹ Narratives about practising autonomous self-constitution have to make space for the mind's proclivity to wander off and be inattentive, as this is an integral part of the subjective relation to the world. But there is an even more valuable purpose to Woolf's engagement with non-being, and this is precisely her interest in the colonisation effect of everyday practices and their link to internalising oppression. By identifying forms of external conditioning and oppression women face in the organisation of their everyday lives, Woolf implicitly questions the forms of self-relation that are, firstly, advocated institutionally and discursively as normative, and, secondly, specifically constructed in order to build a certain type of dominant or dominating agency. In other words, the process of self-constitution, the autonomy ideal, and the practical agency they engender should be seen as deeply intertwined with practices of institutional domination and control, facilitated by traditional institutional models firmly embedded in everyday practices.

Woolf's interests in everyday life and the modes of agency that go into constructing it are well documented both in her autobiographical writings and diaries, as well as in scholarly engagement with such materials. According to Rita Felski, the everyday is often conceptualised as "synonymous with the habitual, the ordinary, the mundane."¹⁸⁰ Habits are usually

¹⁷⁸ For full discussion of these different types of being see Woolf's autobiographical fragment "Sketch of the Past" Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind and Hermione Lee (London: Pimlico, 2002). Subsequent references will be given in text in brackets following the citation as MB followed by page number.

¹⁷⁹ See Liesl Olsen, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Life and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁰ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 77.

characterised as activities or attitudes carried out mindlessly, without fully engaging one's critical and perceptual faculties (this being another reason why the everyday is often linked with femininity, implicitly connecting women with notions of mindlessness and incapacity to reason). This particular feature of the everyday is linked to the ever-intensifying push of capitalist modernity to erase the subject's free-thinking time, in order to limit any impulse for transformation and dissent; whilst the modern institutional system and its supporting disciplinary practices endeavour to extend the mindless time, as it leaves the individual vulnerable to ideological attacks. This is why the everyday, and specifically its habitual mode, is seen as an enemy of autonomous thinking and agency by Marxist thinkers such as Lefebvre.

However, recent theoretical engagement with everyday habits, emerging mostly from feminist quarters, seeks to problematise the binary between autonomy and habit and to further question the presumptions made about women's agency by a predominantly male pool of thinkers. "The ritualized activity known as habit," Felski writes, "constitutes a fundamental element of being-in-the-world whose social meanings may be complex and varied. From such a perspective, habit is not something we can ever hope to transcend. Rather, it constitutes an essential part of our embeddedness in everyday life and our existence as social beings."¹⁸¹ She further cautions that dividing human experience into valuable active moments of living and moments of the everyday, dominated by monotony and compulsion "slides imperceptibly into ranking persons: those exemplary individuals able to escape the quotidian through philosophy, high art, or heroism versus the rest of humanity."¹⁸² The habitual acts of daily living, and by

¹⁸¹ Felski, *Doing Time*, 90.

¹⁸² Felski, *Doing Time*, 80. And naturally, she continues, ranking proceeds along gendered lines as well. As Laurie Langbauer writes, the history of the everyday in cultural studies "is a history from which the experiences of women are conspicuously absent."¹⁸² Historically, women have been linked to everyday spaces, cycles, and rituals such as the home, housework duties, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, as well as consumption in the capitalist context; or spaces far removed from any hint of heroism. Lefebvre refers to women as the "victims" of everyday life: "everyday life weighs heavily on women. Some are bogged down by its peculiar cloying substance, while others escape into make-belief. (Lefebvre, *Everyday Life*, 73)

association those unheroic human beings who perform them, start being seen as a threat to the “modern projects of self-determination, subordinating individual will to the demands of an imposed pattern”.¹⁸³ In other words, Felski suggests that there is something valuable to be recovered in habitual presences (or absences) in our daily processes of self-relation and movement through the interpersonal sphere.

In “Sketch of the Past,” an important autobiographical essay where Woolf reflects on her aesthetic practice, the writer clearly signals her own investment in capturing everyday life on the page by depicting “the way habit functions, the way habit composes a life.” This formulation implies that habits hold and exercise a curious type of agency over individuals. As described above, allowing habitualised forms of thinking to be internalised and take over one’s critical capacity can lead to adopting oppressive patterns of self-relation and blocking further potential for independent self-constitution. On the other hand, Liesl Olson argues, this “habituation” can be also seen as a reciprocal process, because identity is formed partly through accumulation of habits, which we choose to keep or not keep.¹⁸⁴ These moments of choice, over time, create a pattern of agency in operation, particularly visible within daily practices of self-maintenance. The minute performances of everyday rituals hold the potential to be subversive, for Olson, because in the process of habitual practice one can disengage from those potentially harmful practices of social conditioning. “Woolf wants to connect,” she writes, “what gets written down—recorded history—with the unselfconscious rituals and routines that grow out of this past. She suggests that everyday actions sometimes have the power to resist or subvert the history that preceded them, albeit in very small ways.”¹⁸⁵ In this sense, contrary to Marxist sociologists like Lefebvre’s assertions that habitualised forms of behaviour only lead to further

¹⁸³ Felski, *Doing Time*, 84.

¹⁸⁴ Olson, 64.

¹⁸⁵ Liesl Olson, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘cottonwool of daily life’,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no.2 (Winter 2002-3), 64.

exposure to practices of domination and control, a case can be made, that such forms of behaviour provide the subject with opportunities to disengage from dominant narratives. If the mind is, so to speak, closed for business, the assertion that this leads to it being more vulnerable to ideological indoctrination is perhaps premature, and it could reasonably be the case that it just closes and stops being receptive to any stimuli, benign or malign. Through a reading of *The Years*, the following section will explore the resistance potential of such habitual sensibilities particularly in relation to the project of modern self-determination, the types of agency that it privileges, and the types of history that records it.

2.4 The Failure of Progress: *The Years* (1937)

Jessica Berman has argued in relation to “Three Guineas” that the essay generates a “radical democratic politics and a vision of the future by dismantling narrative unity and calling attention to the impossibility of a consensus point of view.”¹⁸⁶ Woolf’s novel *The Years* presents a similar challenge. It inverts the notion of history and narrative as a historical progression and embraces a cyclical modality that represent a history without a future. The most realist of Woolf’s novels, it paints history as a lost cause, a forgotten commitment that has lost any substantive value and purpose. In this sense, any political intervention *The Years* can make has to be one of failure – failure to tell the narratives of control, failure to achieve the histories of progress, failure to promise autonomy on the terms given.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the approaching World War II, unlike the World War I, did not bring any illusions of achieving historical progress and democratic

¹⁸⁶ Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 4.

advancement; rather, the morose anticipation of a potentially catastrophic conflict contributed to exacerbating an already palpable mood of political crisis. Marina MacKay convincingly argues that the literature of the period recorded the renovation of the public sphere in Britain, giving it the critical and affective content to the story of England's cultural remaking."¹⁸⁷ In a sense, the intellectual project preceding and following World War II was to conceive of a new way to tell the history of Britain as a political entity. And Woolf's late fiction had an important role to play in this process in terms of interrogating and rethinking English national identity, in novels such as *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. So, it is important to note that Woolf's chosen genre for this interrogation is the historical novel. This genre suits the given task, not least because it could be taken as a particularly British genre, arising, in its modern form, on the British Isles with Walter Scott's writing, according to Georg Lukács. "What is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott," he writes in his 1937 study, "is precisely the specifically historical, that is, the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age."¹⁸⁸ On his account, what makes the historical novel "historical" is its concern "to show its characters as belonging to any concrete time."¹⁸⁹ In contrast to the realist novel, the social novel of the eighteenth century represented the world "with unusual plasticity and truth to life, but is accepted naively as something given: whence and how it has developed have not yet become problems for the writer."¹⁹⁰ In this sense, Lukács argues, the purpose of the historical novel and its writer would be not to simply reflect the social world from which it emerges, but also to

¹⁸⁷ Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

¹⁸⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* [1937], trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 19. 19.

¹⁸⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 19.

¹⁹⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 19. Lukács detects parallels between Scott's time and the 1930s in terms of understanding ideas of social and historical progress: "England has now once more become the model land of development for the majority of continental ideologists, though of course in a different sense from that of the 18th century. [. . .] Now, in the eyes of the historical ideologists of progress, England appears as the classic example of historical development in their sense. The fact that England had fought out its bourgeois revolution in the seventeenth century and had from then on experienced a peaceful, upward development, lasting over centuries [. . .] showed England to be the practical, model example for the new style of historical interpretation. But this of interpretation of course suits what he calls "the bird-s-eye philosophy of history, or one that does not attend to the "real facts of social development."¹⁹⁰ The purpose of the historical novel, according to Georg Lukács, is "the disclosure of all the contradictions of progress" (29-32).

demonstrate, in its very form and constitution, the process of history-making – how we construct histories and how those histories shape the discourses we use to narrate them. In this sense, the novel must narrate history through the characters it creates, who in turn have to be situated within the material conditions characteristic to the historical setting in which they are located.¹⁹¹

Thomas Davis has argued that *The Years* challenges Lukács's definition of the historical novel as it is "incapable of adapting historical phenomena to narrative structures and interpretative frameworks" and instead depicts "the protracted decline of a British-centred world-system as a crisis of historical consciousness."¹⁹² Written at a time of this world-system's collapse the novel has to capture this moment of conceptual and ideological unravelling "constructing a mode of thinking historically, that is independent of, or at least in contradiction to those narratives of investable progress."¹⁹³ On Davis's reading then, Woolf's purpose is not to adapt history to narrative and interpretative structures and make it show through them, as the traditional historical novel might have done. Due to the destabilisation of the social mechanisms recording British history as a teleological narrative of progress in the 1930s, Woolf and other historical novel writers of the day, including Christopher Isherwood and Sylvia Townsend Warner, had to adapt this purpose. They could not follow the same route but instead had to carve alternative paths for thinking about history and did so by focusing on everyday life details that reveal "phenomena that corrode the historical systems and laws governing the longer tradition of the historical novel."¹⁹⁴ The privileged discourses that come together to constitute a dominant historical narrative reach individuals and become part of "common" people's lives precisely through everyday practices. Furthermore, at a time of historical crisis and collapse of historical consciousness, presenting the corrosion of historical narrative and not rehashing its teleological

¹⁹¹ For an extended discussion, see Ernst Bloch and Lukács's exchange in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁹² Davis, 69.

¹⁹³ Davis, 73.

¹⁹⁴ Davis, 73.

mythology, is precisely engaging with the historical particularity of the 1930s. By presenting her characters in their daily lives whilst history unfolds somewhat outside them – when Martin reads about the Balkan Wars in the newspaper, or Eleanor hear about the death of Charles Parnell from the cries of the newspaper boy, or Maggie and her dinner companions have to interrupt their dinner and take shelter at the sound of the air raid siren – Woolf “shows her characters as belonging” to their concrete historical time. They are (mis)shaped by it, affected by it, changed by it, and yet somehow remain disconnected from it. It is on this point of alienation, or disconnect, of the historical subject from its history, not in the adaptation of historical phenomena to narrative structures, that Woolf diverges from Lukács’s ideas regarding the purpose of the historical novel.

This sense of historical alienation is most forcefully apparent in the novel through the treatment of Peggy’s experience. Peggy is part of the new generation of Pargiters, daughter of Morris and niece of Eleanor. In *Present Day*, before they attend Delia’s party, which forms the central event of the last section of the novel Peggy and Eleanor have dinner together. Peggy is a “new woman” in Eleanor’s eyes - she is institutionally educated, she is intelligent, rational, a doctor, who is at times too “cold” and “serious” for her family’s liking. In many respects, Peggy could be perceived as Eleanor’s counterpart, who starts the novel as an exacting surveyor of the home accounts in the Pargiters’ home, doing the accounts and managing the household. She, like her father, has a life and purpose outside the domestic sphere and we see her exploring the streets and neighbourhoods of London from on omnibus seat on her way to perform her charitable work with the poor. But after her mother’s death, Eleanor is bound by daughterly duty to care for her aging father, and life begins to happen outside of her so to speak. Her struggles to fully exist within a moment happening in real time and relate to the other participants in it is a recurrent motif in the novel, illustrating a sense of the unfinishedness of her life as well as her thoughts.

Eleanor was the “new woman” of the past – a woman who had dreams and made plans for the future, a brighter better future that never comes to be. In the relation between her and her niece, the novel expresses a strong tension and a fear that the past will repeat itself, that the openness of Peggy’s future will be obscured by external factors and she will not be able to attain it. This fear becomes even more palpable because Peggy herself feels trapped and cannot see beyond the present moment. She seeks escape in Eleanor’s own history – “she liked getting Eleanor to talk about her past; it seemed to her so peaceful and so safe.”¹⁹⁵ However, she is denied escape and exposed to the experience of not being able to get across or engage her aunt’s mind fully. “‘D’you know the feeling when one’s been on point of saying something and been interrupted;’ Eleanor exclaims, ‘how it seems to stick *here*,’ she tapped her forehead, ‘so that it stops everything else? Not that it was anything of importance’” (TY, 309). This sense of interruption and blockage, of going back and forth, trying to get through and getting stuck over and over again is a rhetorical strategy Woolf employs precisely to expose an understanding of historical process as one of constant movement forward – instead she positions it at the very core of everyday experience. History is what happens when people have finished their dinners and are waiting for cabs to arrive to take them to a party, she seems to be telling us, and trying to follow it and attempt to catch it and cease hold of it, let alone make it, is quite out of the question.

The ambiguity Woolf feels in relating her historical novel to wider practices of constructing historical narrative is palpable in the economy of the novel, which weaves together different narrative strands, hoping to avoid the dangers of directive and expansive narration. The sheer number of characters, types of consciousness, and modes of experience prevents the reader from becoming invested in a single viewpoint or version of events. The narrative strands do not progress, but interweave, recur, and undergo change through sheer subjective experience and

¹⁹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Years* [1937], ed. Hermione Lee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 309. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

agency that processes them in different ways. This process is transposed on the level of self-constitution, which is evident on the level of characterisation in *The Years*. To quote Jessica Berman, “Woolf’s narrative involutions, gaps and detours challenge the efficacy of a complete and coherent accounting for oneself” and provide “what Hannah Arendt has described as the link between ‘word and deed,’ which begins with the answer to the (ethical) question ‘Who are you?’ and ends with Woolf’s trenchant critique of the politics of patriarchal authority [. . .].”¹⁹⁶ Following the Enlightenment narrative of self-cultivation and eliminating the obstacles standing between the subject and the attainment of truth, becoming an autonomous subject is the ultimate goal of human development and as such the epitome of progress. Unable to follow the conversation with his older relatives, North, Peggy’s brother, asks himself: “What do they mean by Justice and Liberty?”, “all these nice young men with two or three hundred a year. Something’s wrong, he thought; there’s a gap, a dislocation, between the world and the reality. If they want to reform the world, he thought, why not begin there, at the centre with themselves?” (TY, 385). North’s own personal history is deeply interwoven with the British colonial and military projects. He spends a number of years in the army and then purchases a farm in Africa, only returning to his native England in the final section of the novel. Like Penny, he struggles to understand his family as well as to reveal himself to them. He tops up Eleanor’s glass with champagne, watching the bubbles “rise and explode,” following their natural physical movement, inert in their trajectory, but nonetheless complete in fulfilling their purpose.

He watched the bubbles rising in the yellow liquid. For them it’s alright, he thought; they’ve had their day: but not for him, not for his generation. For him life modelled on the jet (he watched the bubbles rise), on the spring, of the hard leaping fountain; another life, a different life. Not halls and reverberating megaphones; nor marching in step after leaders, in herds, groups and societies, caparisoned. No; to begin inwardly, and let the devil take the outer form, he thought, looking up at the young man with a fine forehead and a weak chin. Not black shirts, green shirts, red shirts – always posing in the public eye [. . .] To keep the emblems and tokens of North Pargiter – the man Maggie laughs at; the Frenchman holding his hat; but at the same time spread out,

¹⁹⁶ Berman, *Modernist Commitments*, 41.

make a new ripple in human consciousness, be the bubble and the stream, the stream and the bubble – myself and the world together – he raised his glass (*TY*, 389-90).

In many ways, North, publicly at least, is the highest ranked product of the British cultural machine – he is male, middle-class, educated, and has served his country's imperial needs. A colonial hero, who returns from his mission, because it failed its promise of progressive growth. This promise of progress has served as the motivation for individual action in North's life, eliciting the construction of the type of subject and the type of agency that is capable of reaching the promised land. Like the bubbles and the stream in the champagne glass, the subject is being pushed this way and that, on no accord of her own. And the very movement itself is taken as a sign of will. Woolf wants to expose the illusory, caparisoned, pathological autonomy which dominates the narrative of the modern project of self-constitution, hand in hand with a problematic narrative of historical progress. "He wanted to make other sentences," we are told – "but how can I [. . .] unless I know what's true; in my life, in other people's lives?" (*TY*, 390). North's capacity to escape from the dominating narrative which have governed his life is clearly diminished by his perceived failure to understand himself and those around him. He is the embodiment of autonomy's failure to bring a successful ending and the overpowering effects of patriarchal discourses of domination, which imperceptibly alter our very utterances as well as our actions. Using the same methods of gaining untainted knowledge of ourselves that have created this obstruction to leading our lives instead of suffer them and manufactured the norms that control us, would be foolish. But how can we do otherwise? The arrival of the other life, of the different life, is delayed, blocked by one's inability to throw off the caparison and say what one means. "It's no go, North thought. He can't say what he wants to say; he's afraid. They're all afraid; afraid of being laughed at; afraid of giving themselves away. [. . .] And I'm afraid of him because he is clever. He looked at the big forehead, from which the hair was already receding. That's what separates us, fear, he thought." (*TY*, 393)

2.5 Writing autonomy at the end of history

As the fictional companion of “Three Guineas,” *The Years* confronts the reader with a rather surprising start. The revolutionary calls to burn down traditional institutions that bring structures of discipline and control into social life and “let them blaze” appear to have been subdued as we are placed right in the belly of one such institution, namely a gentleman’s club. This is where we find Colonel Abel Pargiter, the patriarch of the large Victorian family whose history the novel carries. He is sipping coffee after luncheon amidst memories of his imperial past, surrounded by other “men of his own type, men who had been soldiers, civil servants, men who had now retired.” “[T]hey were reviving,” we are told, “with all jokes and stories now their past in India, Africa, Egypt, and then, by a natural transition, they turned to the present” (*TY* 4). The transition from one form of occupation to another seems rather seamless. The novel’s opening is situated within the firmly established social order of Victorian Britain, with political discourse safely in the hands of a privileged male ruling class, the same ruling class described “Three Guineas.”¹⁹⁷ Stopping along the way to focus on significant moments of British history to mark the passing of time, the novel slowly moves towards the 1930s, a decade characterised by the advance of fascism. The text is separated into ten chapters, two cover the closing decades of the Victorian period, 1880 and 1891, seven are dedicated to early twentieth century, more specifically the Edwardian and Georgian periods as well as World War I, 1907, 1908, 1910, 1911, 1913, 1917, and 1918, whilst the final chapter, “Present Day,” leaps 19 years forward to the summer of

¹⁹⁷ For a good discussion of domestic Victorian space and practices, see Steve Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*. Anna Snaith’s “Leonard and Virginia Woolf: Writing Against Empire” offers an insightful discussion of Woolf’s thinking on empire and imperialism, although not specifically related to *The Years*. Also see Laura Marcus’s paradigm-shifting essay “Britannia Rules *The Waves*?” in *Decolonising Tradition*, ed. Karen Lawrence (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 136-62.

1937.¹⁹⁸ The narrative starts in the “uncertain spring” of 1880, a time when social and imperial structures of the British Empire begin to crack and betray signs of becoming obsolete, and finishes with “simplicity and peace,” a historical moment which saw ideological assaults being launched across Europe, threatening the very ground beneath Western European democratic social order. This narrative thread appears to carry the typical progressive development characteristic of historical progress narratives, and indeed of the traditional historical novel as a genre. My contention however is that *The Years* subverts such disciplinary guidelines and exposes them as ideologically problematic by employing a cyclical palimpsestic structure instead of following a linear narrative sequence. As Merry M. Pawlowski argues, the very experience of the novel as a palimpsest of time and space works against a traditionally progressive and linear conception of history, leaving the reader to ponder the logistics of the arrangement. This type of narrative organisation, according to Pawlowski, partly rests on Woolf’s commitment to “resist and even mute the unfolding of history as purely a patriarchal chronicle of external events.”¹⁹⁹ Another reason for this organisation she identifies is “to explore [. . .] the world of sweeping change and global events balanced against life as experienced at the level of the everyday;” thus history and individual existence are woven together “as a series of repeating patterns in the novel’s cyclical structure.”²⁰⁰

Woolf’s ambition for *The Years* appears grounded in the very same impulse that drives traditional historical narratives, namely to offer a comprehensive picture of lived reality. But in the very formulation of her ambition for the novel, she touches upon something very different. In a letter to Stephen Spender she shares her hope that *The Years* would “give a picture of society

¹⁹⁸ Merry M. Pawlowski argues that “Woolf constructs a spatial and temporal palimpsest which incessantly modulates an originary English Victorian space/place.” (Merry M. Pawlowski, “‘Where Am I?’: Feminine Space and Time in Virginia Woolf’s *The Years*,” in *Literary Landscapes: From modernism to Postcolonialism*, ed. Attie de Lange et al (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 76.)

¹⁹⁹ Merry M. Pawlowski, “Where Am I?,” 76.

²⁰⁰ Pawlowski, “Feminine Space,” 76.

as a whole . . . [and] envelop the whole in a changing temporal atmosphere.”²⁰¹ Realist novels traditionally offer a slice of life at a given time – a temporal commitment which sees narrative progression but resists any fundamental alteration of the temporal setting of the text. Woolf’s interest lies precisely in undermining the solid foundation of the established historical fact and question the versions of history such facts are used to create. This is partly to do with prevalent anxieties about political authority and absolute ideological commitments as well as with Woolf’s anxiety about her own authorial voice and its role in the formation and maintenance of dominant social narratives. It further connects to her own underlying project to hold her own against the “male flood” in terms of formulating an alternative mode of accounting for non-privileged forms of writing subjectivity and agency. To this effect the novel demonstrates preoccupations with everyday practices and objects that remain outside the socially validated methods of recording human agency and progress, and yet remain significant in the formation of individual rituals of self-organisation. As David Bradshaw has argued the novel’s preoccupation with “deformation”, “pollution,” “smeared things, and stains” urges us to see the work as struggling against the dominant currents of historically progressive narratives and simultaneously searching for a suitable and non-authoritative expression for its anti-Fascist strategy.²⁰² Building on Bradshaw’s argument, Judy Suh also reads the novel as a work of anti-fascist struggle that advances the

²⁰¹ Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We’re Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI, 1936-1941*, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanna Trautman (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 116.

²⁰² David Bradshaw, “Hyams Place: *The Years*, the Jews and the British Union of Fascists,” in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics, and History*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 182. Bradshaw reads the novel specifically against the developments of the fascist support in Britain through the growth of Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, arguing that it makes space for Jewish discrimination to be considered as part of larger practices of oppression. He ends his essay with the following quotation from Kathy Phillips: “[*The Years*] shows the links among various exclusions: of women, homosexuals, servants, and colonized people.” Bradshaw adds: “it is time to add Jews to that list” (p.189). For more detailed discussion of this position see: Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Study* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) and Kathy J. Phillips, *Virginia Woolf Against Empire* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 28.

“shifting set of contaminated, imperfect, contextual, and provisional strategies of everyday life” as an mode of anti-fascist resistance.²⁰³

The formal unsettling through this unusual narrative structure and organisation maps onto the conceptual misalignment between external historical narratives of progress and individual process of convoluted self-constitution. The expectation for a new better life and a new better world recurs throughout the novel. It does so with predictable cyclicity, from Eleanor’s motivation to engage in charity work with the poor at the start of the novel, through her dinner with Maggie, Renné, Nikolay, and Sara during a First World War air-raid, to the final family gathering in the last section of the novel. And yet, the text carries a sense of perpetual failure of sensibility, of something remaining perennially unchanged and unassimilated, and a future that remains elusive. The constant movement forward, ahead of oneself, through the timeline of British history, does not translate into a triumphant affirmation of autonomous agency. To the contrary, the characters are shown as being caught up in agential inertia unable to deliver or reach the future, in the new and better world, they so desire. This is highlighted in the cyclical recurrence of images, memories, thoughts, and phrases that fade and re-emerge throughout the novel. Like the painting of Mrs Pargiter, which appears in the Victorian portion of the novel in the family’s home at Abercorn Terrace, only to reappear cleaned in “Present Day” in Eleanor Pargiter’s apartment (*TY* 308). The fallen flower on the grass in the corner of the painting, remains unnoticed by Eleanor in the scene where it first appears, but she sees it now and draw’s her niece’s attention to it. This ephemeral presence links three generations of Pargiters but it requires a cleaning up in order to be uncovered. ““It was hidden by the dirt,”” said Eleanor, ‘But I can just remember it, when I was a child’” (*TY*, 308). Even though the formal structure of the novel pursues a chronological narrative from 1880 to 1937, Woolf’s stylistic experiment with

²⁰³ Judy Suh, *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 128.

recurrent fragments of experience and memory signal her desire to move beyond directive of a rationally ordered historical experience. Questioning the nature of historical fact, she draws her readers' attention to insignificant ruminations that often pass unnoticed through conscious experience and yet come to represent so much of how we understand and represent ourselves as persons.

In Woolf's own words, *The Years* is a "deliberate failure."²⁰⁴ The novel's laborious construction process, which stretches back to 1931 and its temporary coexistence as the fictional component of "Three Guineas," speaks to the conceptual struggle Woolf undertook to bring her vision to fruition. The text went through a number of working models and titles, including "The Pargiters" (1931-33), "Here & Now" (1933-4), "Dawn" (1934), "Sons and Daughters" (1934), "Ordinary People" (1934), and "The Years (1935)."²⁰⁵ "Here and Now" and "Ordinary People" in particular reveal Woolf's interest in carving out moments of reflection within the march of historical time to create spaces not for the heroic conquerors who adorn the pages of official histories, but for the lesser known and the ordinary. Often referred to a "fractured" novel and even an "antinovel," it has elicited conflicting responses from critics who tried to pinpoint and explain where its aesthetic or ideological failures may lie.²⁰⁶ In critical eyes, as Thomas Davis points out "*The Years* remains the stray, ugly duckling of her oeuvre, an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise handsome career."²⁰⁷ Prior to the novel's rediscovery in the 1970, despite it being a commercial success at the time of its publication, *The Years* had not attracted much critical attention. Scholars have often viewed it as a move away from the experimental psychologism of

²⁰⁴ Full quotation reads: "but the point is that I myself know why it's a failure, & that its failure is deliberate." Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume V, 1936-1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press), 6. The novel was published on 15 March 1937, see B. J. Kirkpatrick, *A Bibliography of Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 62.

²⁰⁵ Other provisional titles that had a shorter life-span include "Music," "Daughters and Sons," "The Caravan," and "Other People's Houses."

²⁰⁶ See John Whittier-Ferguson, "Repetition, Remembering, Repetition: Virginia Woolf's Late Fiction and the Return to War," in *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no.2 (Summer, 2011): 232.

²⁰⁷ Thomas Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 74.

The Waves, and thus as a means of abandoning concerns of subjective experience and interiority, and even of the modernist project itself. Utilising Woolf's famous statement on the balance between exterior and interior in fiction, John Whittier-Ferguson characterises this switch to a more explicitly "exterior" position, as a move from "rainbow" to "granite," – "object instead of subject, outer before inner."²⁰⁸ Woolf, he writes, "works with the world and its contingencies as they impinge on the self," he writes, "[. . .] *The Years* is a novel fractured by or fruitfully exploiting this turn."²⁰⁹ In her diary, Woolf characterises this turn towards more explicit factuality as follows:

What has happened of course is that after abstaining from the novel of fact all these years – since 1919 – and *N[ight].&D[ay]* is dead – I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change [. . .] though I feel now and then the tug of vision, but resist it. This is the true line, I am sure, after *The Waves* – *The Pargiters* – this is what leads naturally onto the next stages – the essay-novel."²¹⁰

Starting with Alex Zwerdling and championed by more recent scholars such as Marina MacKay, Thomas Davis, and Jet Esty, an effort to attend to these material conditions and historicise Woolf's late novels has led to rich and insightful readings, particularly in relation to their immersion in the political context of the 1930s.²¹¹ Many of these readings situate *The Years* within the aesthetic climate of late modernism and the political turmoil of the decade, particularly her relationship to anti-war and feminist politics.

²⁰⁸ Whittier-Ferguson, "Repetition, Remembering, Repetition," 232.

²⁰⁹ Whittier-Ferguson, 232.

²¹⁰ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1931-1935*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andre McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982), 129. Further on her fascination with facts, and as a demonstration of Woolf's methodical accumulation of material to produce a work of social critique, see the following quotation from a diary entry written on 19 December 1932: "This one [The Pargiters] releases such a torrent of fact as I did not know I had in me. I must have been observing and collecting these 20 years – since *Jacob's Room* anyhow. Such a wealth of things present themselves that I can't choose even [. . .] but there's a good deal of gold – more than I'd thought – in externality" (*D* 4: 133).

²¹¹ See Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), Jet Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Thomas Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Modernism and the Everyday* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), Naomi Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

In the early 1980s, another group of scholars including, Grace Radin and Michel Leaska, who employ genetic criticism of the archival material leading up to the publication of the novel aimed at recovering evidence for Woolf's radical politics.²¹² There is a general agreement that in the process of revision, from first draft to publication, Woolf has smoothed over some of the more radical political angles of the novel. This political repositioning led to a scholarly push to bring to light the lost political vision of Woolf 's initial intent, on the basis of an argument that the critics' neglect of Woolf's narratively suppressed social theories had colluded with patriarchal obfuscation of feminist scholarship. In Radin's own words: "scant attention has been paid to her social theories, perhaps because they cluster around feminisms, a point of view that has only recently been restored to serious consideration."²¹³ Notwithstanding the methodological and conceptual issues these approaches raise, they have given rise to a prominent current of Woolf scholarship that reads *The Years* explicitly in feminist terms. Furthering the genetic approach, Christine Froula has provided insightful and more recent reading of materials produced around the novel, such as notes, diary entries, drafts, manuscripts and so on, to uncover models of repression of women's psychological and sexual lives. "In its very 'failure,'" she writes, "this experiment illuminates gender as, for women, a realm of unconscious loss and forbidden or alienated desire."²¹⁴ Similarly, Julia Briggs states that the novel "records the gradual release of its closely constrained young women into freedom and even self-

²¹² See the *Bulleting of the New York Public Library* devoted to *The Years* (Winter, 1977) and the Library's edition of the earliest version of *The Years*, "The Pargiters, A Novel-Essay," containing Woolf's original structure for the novel, namely essays alternating with chapters.

²¹³ Grace Radin, *The Years by Virginia Woolf: The Evolution of a Novel* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), xxii-xxiii. Gloria Fromm expresses strong disagreement with such utilisation of the archival material in order to fit a ready-made critical political position which is harder to square with the actual published novel. "The novel that Virginia Woolf spent more than four years composing and recomposing deserves a better fate than to be praised for the flaws she tried to eliminate from it. If we[. . .]actually look for answers to the questions about form and meaning which the novel raises, instead of providing them beforehand, it might be possible to see that the notorious difficulty *The Years* gave Virginia Woolf is not altogether accounted for in the pre-packaged readings of the novel that the documents have been used to support." ("Re-inscribing *The Years*: Virginia Woolf, Rose Macaulay, and the Critics," *Journal of Modern Literature* 13, no. 2 (July, 1986): 289-306.)

²¹⁴ Christine Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilisation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 214.

determination as the Victorian patriarchs, like so many dinosaurs, die out.”²¹⁵ Despite the prominently optimistic tone of such readings, I would like to urge caution in adopting such an overtly congratulatory tone in terms of freeing young women from the contains of patriarchal oppression. As the final scene of the novel suggests, even though the Victorian patriarchs had died, patriarchal power relations remain very much alive. When Eleanor looks out the window she sees a cab stopping outside a house across the street. “A young man had got out; he paid the driver. Then a girl in a tweed travelling suit followed him. He fitted his latch key to the door [...] [which] shut with a little thud behind them” (TY 413). Economic power is still in the hands of men, who pay for women’s lives and hold the keys to their houses. Reflecting back to Woolf’s conclusions reached in “Three Guineas,” women’s oppression cannot be overcome until full intellectual and economic freedom are achieved, an aim that appears unachieved in the closing section paragraphs of *The Years*. The warm sunny morning which concludes the narrative points to a recurring order of things more than an fulfilled dream of equality and freedom, but the hope of “beauty, simplicity, and peace” is still alive in the face of the growing threat of war.

Woolf’s pacifist position is another critical entry point for interpreting *The Years*. In her recent examination of the interplay between violence and peace in Woolf’s work, Susan Cole argues that *The Years* veers away from “direct representation of war or violence, opting instead for [. . .] frail suggestions of hope and survival in a darkening world.”²¹⁶ In relation to Woolf’s problematic representation of Jewishness in the text, Maren Linnett also ascribes to her text a special type of frailty – that of the “imperilled” autonomous imagination, as an “important

²¹⁵ Julia Briggs, “The novels of the 1930s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, 2nd Edition, ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 78. Alice Wood and Teresa Winterhalter combine the two dominant interpretative frameworks and argue for their compatibility, advancing convincing feminist-pacifist readings. See Alice Wood, *Virginia Woolf’s Late Cultural Criticism: The Genesis of The Years*, “Three Guineas,” and *Between the Acts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and Teresa Winterhalter, ““What Else Can I Do But Write?” Discursive Disruption and the Ethics of Style in Virginia Woolf’s “Three Guineas,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 236-57.

²¹⁶ Susan Cole, “Woolf, War, Violence, History, and . . . Peace,” in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 342.

component of Woolf's militarism and fascism."²¹⁷ Similar notion of frailty, as either a property of Woolf's political position or the incapacity of her characters to go against the grain and deliver practical political change, often appears in critical interpretations of the novel. Identifying a frailty of agency, Thomas Davis further argues that, "if *The Years* turns a sceptical eye towards historical development, character development reveals a similar scepticism towards the agency of everyday individuals."²¹⁸ Few critics however have connected Woolf's political struggle, both on the patriarchal and fascist fronts, as is evident from her discussion in "Three Guineas," to a politics of self-constitution. More precisely, the impact traditional frameworks of control and domination would have on the individual's capacity for creating truly autonomous forms of subjectivation and thus to effecting emancipatory modes of living, has remained largely unexplored. The following section takes this notion of frailty and develops it as a form of critique of privileged narratives of autonomy.

2.6 Frail autonomy

I use the term "frail autonomy" to denote the kind of autonomy that underperforms or fails to meet the standards of dominant accounts of the term as presented so far in this thesis. This notion is appropriate for understanding Woolf's experiments with self-constitution practices as it allows her to circumnavigate the oppressive aspects of autonomy encoded in its strict adherence to requirements of rationality, self-reflection, and self-mastery, and to diversify the kinds of agency produced by such agents. In weakening the original category, I borrow from Paul Saint-Amour's approach to weak theory which aims to open up theoretical thinking in the field by making space for new and more diverse concepts, although his research has not dealt with autonomy

²¹⁷ Maren Linett, "The Jew in the Bath: Imperilled Imagination in Woolf's *The Years*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 342.

²¹⁸ Davis, 83.

specifically. “Equating modernism with [. . .] muscular idol smashing and warrior masculinity misses both the traditionalism of the strong and the dissidence of the weak. [. . .] ‘Strong’ modernism belongs to a largely superseded moment in modernist studies,” he writes.²¹⁹ The draw towards “strong” modernism is evident in critical reproaches that Woolf tries to suppress conflicts and antagonisms in her writing, or that her critical treatments are inefficient and “notably undialectical manner” within Woolf studies too.²²⁰ Often attached to this critique is an accusation of ineffective politics that is described, at best, as non-progressive and, at worst, as perpetuating the patriarchal system and actually harming women.²²¹ Such readings rely on the assumption that political change is often fuelled by the explosive force or anger at the injustice those suppressed by the political order are experiencing.²²² As Lili Hsieh writes, “for a long time, the politics of Virginia Woolf has been implicitly equated with the emotion of anger: the angrier Woolf appears, the more her writing is read as political.”²²³ Woolf’s pacifist writings, among which *The Years* occupies a prominent place, however, openly challenge the idea that positive change can be achieved through any use of anger and aggression – affects she associates with the perpetuation of patriarchal and fascist violence. In fact, as Teresa Winterhalter suggests, a good case could be made that Woolf is advocating a fusion of pacifist and feminist ideals as the most productive way to overthrow the patriarchy. This is certainly the case in “Three Guineas,” and the textual evidence in *The Years* seems to call for the same conclusion. In what follows I examine the operation of this stance through one of the key narrative lines in the novel and to juxtapose it with new approaches to the category of autonomy.

²¹⁹ Paul K. Saint-Amour, “Introduction: Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,” in *Weak Theory* Special Issue, ed. Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Modernism/modernity* vol.25, no.3 (Sept 2018): 437.

²²⁰ See Davis, 82;

²²¹ Donna Landry, “Congreve Recovered: or the Limits of Woolf’s Feminism,” *Michigan Academician* 17 (1985): 58-69; Mary M Childers, “Virginia Woolf on the Outside Looking Down: Reflections on the Class of Women,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no.1 (Spring, 1992).

²²² For an insightful read on the politics of anger see Amia Srinivasan, “The Aptness of Anger,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* vol. 26, no.2: 123-144.

²²³ Lili Hsieh, “The Other Side of the Picture: The Politics of Affect in *Virginia Woolf’s* “Three Guineas,” *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no.1 (Winter 2006), 20.

Early in the novel we learn of Rose's, the youngest of the Pargiter siblings, involvement with the suffrage movement and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), in particular.²²⁴ The WSPU was the leading militant organisation campaigning for women's suffrage in Britain between 1903 and 1914, employing tactics of violent protest, or even domestic terrorism on some accounts, including breaking windows of prominent buildings, arson of unoccupied properties, and detonating bombs. Its membership and policies were strictly controlled by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel. In the 1908 section of the novel, we see a passing mention of Rose's involvement with the cause. "They began to discuss politics. She had been speaking at a by-election. A stone had been thrown at her [. . .] but she had enjoyed it. [. . .] She ought to have been a soldier, Eleanor thought" (*TY*, 150). In 1914 we find Rose in prison: "sitting on a three-legged stool having meat crammed down her throat," a clear reference to suffragette hunger strikes and practices of force-feeding employed by the authorities to counteract them (*TY*, 220).

By the Present Day section, Rose has long forgotten her political causes and aspirations, having been awarded a medal for her service during the First World War and enjoying a comfortable life. "Where's your decoration, Rose?" – teases her brother, Martin (*TY*, 399). The WSPU faced strong opposition for its dedicated and fervent support to the British war effort during WWI. Resistance came particularly from the left-wing of the WSPU, as it was taken as an act of complicity with the state aimed at defending patriarchal social organisation. This is a position strongly defended by Sylvia Pankhurst, who, like Woolf and much of the Bloomsbury

²²⁴ For contemporary accounts of the suffrage movement and the organisation and activities of the WSPU see Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* [1931] (London: Virago Press, 1988), Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* [1928] (London: Virago Press, 1988) and Millicent Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage: A Short History of a Great Movement* (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1912). More recent histories and studies include: Laura E. Nym Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Maroula Joannou and June Purvis, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: New Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), Harold Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign, 1866-1928*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

group, maintained a pacifist and anti-war stance. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst justify their decision on patriotic and nationalistic terms, as well as a belief that active participation in the war would give them leverage to influence policy after the war and win the right to vote.²²⁵ In Martin's remark, Woolf very consciously introduces more than a hint of brotherly mockery. Through this fictional representation of activism, Woolf advances the idea that political action organised on the same principles and directed by the same rules as practices of domination and control only perpetuates structural violence and in supporting the British Army and the war effort many suffragettes did just that.²²⁶ Kitty Lasswade's toast to Rose reflects this more directly than Martin's jibe. "'Rose is a fine fellow,' she said, raising her glass. 'But Rose was wrong,' she added. 'Force is always wrong.'" (TY, 399). Moving from an active struggle for women's equality, through support of the war effort, and to a final withdrawal from political life altogether marks Rose's trajectory of the novel, just as it does those of many real-life suffragettes.²²⁷ The mental and physical exhaustion from active political struggle is often quoted as a reason for cessation of activity, but Woolf here alludes to a different kind of ailment on an agential level. Davis suggests that "with Rose, Woolf ultimately conjoins political action with pathology," meaning that she sees something inherently rotten in the commitment to acting in this way.²²⁸ Despite being somewhat of an overstatement, Davis's point uncovers something important. Not all types of political consciousness and agency are emancipatory; some are pathological in nature because they are designed to promulgate structures that enforce violence and oppression.

²²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the political manoeuvring surrounding both positions, see Chapter 4 in Katharine Connelly, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, Socialist, and Scourge of Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

²²⁶ For a detailed account of Woolf's participation in political activism, see Clara Jones, *Virginia Woolf: An Ambivalent Activist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Chapter Two deals with Woolf's involvement in suffrage activism in particular through the People's Suffrage Federation.

²²⁷ Christabel Pankhurst, Grace Roe, Annie Kenney, Charlotte Marsh and many others followed the same path. For a contemporary account of the movement and reasons for stepping away from politics, see for example, Annie Kenney's *Memories of a Militant* (1924).

²²⁸ Davis, 86. "the novel makes it difficult to see anything heroic or progressive in Rose's trajectory from childhood guilt and shame to activism. What first appears to be narrative of political awakening inverts into one of psychopathology."

The reference to pathology is well-chosen here as it productively captures the notion that political agency bound with a desire to inflict pain and establish control is a form of agential disease that corrupts agents' capacity to resist instances of oppression.²²⁹ In this sense, internalising social through everyday consumption of our lives, becomes a dangerous prospect, specifically in a context of military struggle, motivated by the absolute duty to defend the nation's freedom and autonomy. This is, in turn, persistently necessitated by ideals of historical exceptionalism and progress, requiring specific types of agents sharing the "right" values in order to perform the required service. Even though this concern is formulated within the specific contextual requirement of the incoming World War II, Woolf also reflects on its implications on the level of self-constitution. Understanding autonomy as an ideal of attaining self-knowledge, control, or mastery of the self in order to impose forms of government on oneself are modelled on external conditions of domination and control, and as such can be seen as pathological symptoms of a pathologically oppressive social system. "'Well, I'm proud of it!' Said Rose, brandishing her knife in his face. 'I'm proud of my family; proud of my country; proud of . . .'" (*TY*, 395), proclaiming her complete submergence in the rhetoric Woolf finds so harmful.

Woolf works to identify and expose precisely such pathological manifestations of the political and categorise the types of agential actions and motivations that contribute to their proliferation. She finds traditional narratives of national duty, heroism, and patriotism highly suspicious precisely because they emerge from a very exclusive narrative of national identity that glorifies privileged types of agential power to the exclusion and derision of others. Discursive constructions of values, duties, and responsibilities have, for Woolf, very real and

²²⁹ A branch of contemporary critical theory inspired by the Frankfurt School deals with what is termed "social pathology" which investigates how the ways in which we have organised our societies make us ill, in physical, political, and moral terms. See for example Fabian Freyenhagen, "Critical Theory and Social Pathology," in *Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, ed. Espen Hammer, Alex Honneth, and Peter E. Gordon (London: Routledge: 2018).

tangible impact on embodied everyday lives and the subjects that experience them as she demonstrates in “Three Guineas.” Rose’s character development expresses the failure to embody dominant norms uncritically and to turn them into individual forms of agency that can bring forth opportunities for emancipation. In a way, she is the predecessor of the mindless painted women, Woolf refers to as the breeders of slaves in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid.” Women’s complicity, as she sees it, in practices of oppression stems partly from their attempt to embrace off-the-shelf privileged forms of agency, attached to larger narratives of national pride and exceptionalism, which by nature support a patriarchal social order. Beginning to think instead of something like frail autonomy brings new possibilities for agential expression because it does not rely on the official blueprints that determine who and by what means is recognised as an agent.

The phrase “force is always wrong” echoes throughout the novel and with its persistence necessitates thinking about the opposite approach. If force is always, so irrevocably, wrong – what is the alternative? The alternative is a frail action, as the capacity to resist impulses of control and domination, demands for co-options and self-mastery, and begin to repair one’s sense of self and agency battered and bruised by patriarchal oppression. There is an obviously gendered element to this conception of autonomy, associated with femininity and female delicacy or weakness; however, in Woolf’s reading this is precisely what brings empowerment and emancipatory potential to it. Frail autonomy is an alternative type of self-constitution and manifests through a non-aggressive, non-privileged types of agency. In Felski’s view, following dominant accounts of modernity “one could be tempted to conclude that the gender of modernity is indeed male.”²³⁰ Felski juxtaposes this type of narrative that reads modernity “as an Oedipal revolt against the tyranny of authority, drawing on metaphors of contestations and struggle

²³⁰ Marshal Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (London: Verso, 1983).

grounded in the ideal of competitive masculinity” with one that emphasises the imaginative centrality of female psychology for the experience of modernity in order to counter the dominant narrative, designed to promote idealised representation of male subjectivity.²³¹ To this effect, she notes, feminist scholars have worked to develop “an extensive critique of such idealised representation of autonomous male subject, arguing that this ideal of freedom carries within it the seeds of domination in its desire to subjugate the other.”²³² It is because of her dissatisfaction with dominant forms of agency, that Woolf sees traditional norms of self-constitution as serving the wrong purpose – a pathological purpose of perpetuating systems of domination. *The Years* demonstrates this discomfort through refusing to perform and promote affects and practices associated with violence and force. The narrative gives voice, instead, to an attempt to carve out a space for emancipated political action – completely severed from traditional narratives of power, aimed to develop a sense of historical progress as a justification for subjection of others both on the battle and the home fronts.

This chapter has traced Woolf’s examination of the production of privileged types of agency in two of her most obviously political interventions in the 1930s – “Three Guineas” and *The Years*. I have situated Woolf’s project within the political and aesthetic climate British modernism found itself in the decade which saw the senseless of the Spanish Civil War and expected to face the horrors of a second World War in order to demonstrate the pervasive sense of a world-system coming to an end and literature’s commitment to respond to it. I have argued that in Woolf’s case, this commitment to respond to the crisis of political and historical consciousness that had engulfed Britain’s crumbling identity as an imperial superpower, manifests in two ways. In “Three Guineas,” we witness a critique of traditional practices for producing privileged types of agency and attaching social value to them, by suppressing and

²³¹ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2-3.

²³² Felski, 2. See also Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

controlling alternative means of self-constitution. *The Years* demonstrates that such practices of domination and control of agency are deeply embedded in readings and retellings of history as a progress narrative. Such narratives and coercive practices privilege patriarchal or other types of privileged agency to the exclusion of others. Woolf further identifies disciplinary discourses and models of autonomy aimed at achieving self-mastery or control over oneself as belonging to such coercive narrative practices and refuses to perform them both in her essay and in the novel by challenging narrative, rhetorical and genre conventions associated with the forms. In refusing to provide a point of consensus, but instead orchestrating failure, she makes a stance against authoritarian forms of thinking, of writing history, and of constructing agency. The following chapter focuses on Woolf's explorations of alternative modes of life writing that offer opportunities for emancipatory cultivation with autonomy and engagement with non-privileged types of agency in *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*.

Chapter Three

Rights, emancipation and reparative hermeneutics in *Orlando* (1928) and *Between the Acts* (1941)

3.1 Introduction

As we have seen in Chapter One, the processes through which women and other non-privileged agents come to give an account of themselves are supposed to adhere to dominant models of self-constitution. The necessity to meet certain internal conditions (i.e. self-reflexive rationality), exemplified through my reading of *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), has limiting and oppressive effect on their agential capacity. Chapter Two sees Woolf interrogating the external conditions which come to control the expressions of agency available to non-privileged agents, via re-examination of traditional practices of learning and education in her essay *Three Guineas* (1938) and of everyday family life in her historical novel *The Years* (1937). This chapter, in turn, examines the possible strategies of resistance to dominant models of autonomy and agency embodied in Woolf's aesthetic project, culminating in what I have termed, borrowing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term, "reparative hermeneutics." The chapter focuses on two of Woolf's most hybrid texts, the mock-biography *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and the play-poem novel *Between the Acts* (1941) and reads them as records of alternative forms of agency. In these texts, I argue, Woolf tries to locate alternative spaces and modes of expression, where forms of subjectivity can develop whilst negotiating their own processes of subjection and relation to the normative frameworks (such as gender) from which they emerge. I do this by first situating Woolf's work in relation to the Victorian and modernist biography traditions in order to

subvert traditional forms of life-writing, or what I refer to as “establishment biographies” and the forms of subjectivity they protect. I then go on to outline the narrative strategies Woolf employs to innovate the modes of collection and documentation of women’s lives, histories, and writing with references to her narrative practice in *Orlando* (1927). I discuss two feminist models (Rosi Braidotti’s and Seyla Benhabib’s) of theorising the constitutive roles of normative frameworks, and gender in particular, in processes of developing modes of autonomous subjectivity and agency; here I consider Woolf’s practice in *Orlando* as an alternative. In trying to understand self-legislation as a form of embodiment within a specific set of material circumstances, I analyse the connection between regulations of the body and the cultivation of the civic and human rights discourse in relation to Orlando’s legal battles, in order to show the link between normative self-legislation and institutional legislation of identity. In the second half of this chapter, I examine *Between the Acts* as a document of reparative agency. I read Woolf’s last novel in its contemporary World War II context focusing, first, on the forms of physical, epistemic, and emotional violence depicted in the text. I explicitly link Woolf’s discussion of gender and sexual violence with experiences of war and the threat of incoming German invasion, outlining the persistent forms of domination contained in narratives of freedom which accompanied war propaganda. I evaluate Woolf’s engagement with political organisation in the form of democratic participation and demonstrate the levels of restraint encoded in the practice of the even most privileged types of dominant autonomous agency. The last section charts an alternative mode of agency through engagement with William Dodge and Miss La Trobe as examples of queer, non-privileged, alternative agency that chooses to heal rather than dominate.

3.2 *Orlando* as anti-establishment biography

Orlando: A Biography, one of the most inventive and adventurous literary experiments in Woolf's career is a cross between a novel and a biography.²³³ Inspired by and dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, who was a dear friend and a romantic interest at the time, *Orlando* traces the life of an English nobleman who transitions to a woman, over a period of 400 years, passing through the Elizabethan, Enlightenment, Victorian eras and into the twentieth century. In this narrative Orlando is accompanied by her biographer, whose fruitless attempts to capture the essence of his biographical subject remain a gratifying point of amusement throughout the novel. Orlando's fantastical life journey takes us through a love affair with a Russian noblewoman during the Great Frost, Ambassadorship in Constantinople, enormous renovation project of her ancestral home, affairs with various partners, conversations with the great men of English literature, including Pope and Swift, who surprise with their taste for wine as much as for their longevity as they appear both in the eighteenth and nineteenth century chapters, a marriage, a flying visit to the department store, and a dizzying car ride, among other more and less significant events. Throughout it all, Orlando changes sex, transgresses moral and physical boundaries of the appropriate and the possible, and ultimately questions the nature of subjective identification and self-making. Despite the fantastical timeline and the speed at which the plot progresses, this is a text that also contains significant silences, ellipses, moments of inconclusiveness, and instances in which we see the protagonist on her own, writing and thinking. When first imagining the novel, Woolf wrote in her diary: "I sketched the possibilities which an unattractive woman, penniless, alone, might yet bring into being."²³⁴ The possibility that new forms of self-constitution and agency may be borne out by those in a most destitute state of dispossession is suggested by Woolf's initial design. The penniless woman gives way to a dazzling aristocrat, but

²³³ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* [1928], ed. Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be made in text.

²³⁴ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III, 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), 131.

the commitment to showing how an alternative form of agency can be brought into being remains and forms one of the text's central preoccupations.

Being placed in the context of the biographical novel, Orlando, the protagonist, is of course very rarely left on his/her own as it is the good biographer's job to shed light on all aspects of his subject's life. Woolf is aware of this potentially intrusive and controlling dynamic and the narrative reflects her concerns, offering moments of interruption to the life-writing discourse in which the narrator and Orlando part ways for a number of paragraphs at a time. Laura Marcus's suggestion that Woolf's women are often "most themselves when they are most alone" gains a renewed significance when considered in relation to practices of autonomous self-constitution and women's agency at a point of transition between their private and public expression.²³⁵ This narrative arrangement is important for Woolf herself in her dedication to finding an appropriate methodology for documenting such expressions without relying on forms of knowledge, constructed through patriarchal guidelines and complicit with gender oppression. The unsettling experience of transgressing normative categories is well captured in the following observation by the novel's narrator/biographer: "the truth is when we write of a woman, everything is out of place – culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man." (*O*, 180) In this sense, one of the central commitments of the text is to demonstrate women's capacity for developing inventive, creative, or fantastic forms of autonomous agency, adverse to all forms of impersonal categories and deeply rooted in embodied relational experience. Woolf aims to preserve such unruly and disorganised forms of agency in order to insert counter-narratives and points of contention with dominant discourses of what we recognise as personhood and how we record it.

²³⁵ Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 2004 [1997]), 11. See also Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

Woolf's own biography is rich in connections to the established biographical tradition of capturing Victorian valour she so purposefully rebels against. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen was the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-91) and was himself a committed writer of biographies. His contributions to the influential series of literary biographies "English Men of Letters", published by Macmillan, include *Samuel Johnson* (1878), *Alexander Pope* (1880), *Swift* (1882), in the first series, and, somewhat surprisingly, *George Eliot* (1902) and *Hobbes* (1904).²³⁶ As Max Saunders elaborates, this tradition of writing biography was rich with national pride and committed to narratives aimed at supporting the establishment. "The *DNB*," he writes, "was not only a Victorian institution, but (despite Stephen's agnosticism) might be considered the biographical wing of the Establishment: an enterprise dedicated to defining nationality and national history in terms of the 'lives of great men.'"²³⁷ Woolf likens this nationalistic drive in biography writing to burial rituals that transform living human beings into effigies: "the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey that were carried in the funeral processions through the streets," she writes, "effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin" (*E* 6: 182). Victorian biography transformed substantively in the first decades of the twentieth century, though, and Woolf herself as well as a number of her Bloomsbury group colleagues, including Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicholson, Vita's Sackville-West's husband, were instrumental in modernising the genre.

In her 1927 essay "The New Biography" Woolf traces this very transition from Victorian biography to "New Biography," focusing on a viewpoint shift, which occurred in the twentieth

²³⁶ His works also include biographies of Henry Fawcett (1885), Sir Victor Brooke (1894), Sir James Fitzjames Stephen (1895); and intellectual history of the 18th century in two volumes (1876), and philosophical works on social and political matters, *Social Rights and Duties* (1896), *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1903-4), and *The English Utilitarians* (1900).

²³⁷ Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 451.

century. She sees Victorian biography as having too many commitments external to its central subject – the life of a person. The first of these commitments is to a type of scientific truth, constructed with institutional and establishment backing: “it is truth,” she writes, “as truth is to be found in the British Museum.”²³⁸ The second one, is a commitment to moral teaching. Due to the Victorian biographer’s allegiance to “the idea of goodness,” his (and it is always a *he/his* Woolf uses) creation becomes “parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous.” (*CE*, 4: 231) Woolf argued that these two preoccupations have led Victorian biographies to giving the impression that life is a linear series of endeavours and achievements. Furthermore, this approach takes away their subjects’ individual agency and turns them into assemblages of the moral and intellectual qualities deemed valuable for propping up the models of privileged agency deemed worthy by the establishment. The advent of “New Biography,” in Woolf’s words, “freed [us] from servitude [. . .]. No longer need we pass solemnly and stiffly from camp to council chamber. We may sit, even with the great and good, over the table and talk” (*CE*, 4: 231). The new biographer’s “relation to his subject is different,” observes Woolf, as instead of “toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero,” he “sees his subject spread about him. He chooses, he synthesises; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become the artist” (*CE*, 4: 231). And it is precisely this liberation from the demands of scientific facts and moral teaching that allow the reader to see those figures worthy of historical commemoration not just as admirable emblems of human progress, but as functioning people who lived their lives in the same type of flux and uncertainty as their readers.

The performance of cultural singularity and significance, narrated through Victorian biographies, has dual function: it convinces the reading public that their social and political reality continues to thrive, but simultaneously suggests that they are far removed from the level

²³⁸ Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography,” in *Collected Essays, Volume Four*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967), 231. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be made in text following relevant citation as *CE* 4.

of agency and exceptionality required to attempt any comparable accomplishments.²³⁹ To counter this, the New Biography, in Woolf's conception at least, works to destabilise the dominant discourse, interrupt establishment orders, and democratise life-writing. In the Preface to his *Eminent Victorians* (1918), a cornerstone New Biography text, Lytton Strachey also denounces official Victorian biographies and their purpose to offer moral edification in as large a volume as possible:

Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead – who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the *cortège* of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funeral barbarism.²⁴⁰

Strachey wanted to bring the principles of modernist aesthetics to bear on the drudgery of Victorian biography in order to create spaces for representation of non-conformist identity formation. The four eminent lives, represented in his own volume, portray four key figures of British social life: Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Thomas Arnold, and General Charles Gordon. These four subjects represent the most influential Victorian professional sectors: the Church, medicine; education; the Army.²⁴¹ Instead of being treated with reverence, these historical figures are portrayed in a mischievous and speculative manner, exaggerating their flaws (for example, Florence Nightingale's story is presented as War Office propaganda and Nightingale herself as an unbearable person). A similar use of humour and wit can be observed in Harold Nicholson's "new biography" *Some People* (1927), which Woolf specifically commends. "Mr Nicholson," she writes, "has devised a method of writing about

²³⁹ For studies in Victorian biography see Felicity James and Julian North, *Writing Lives Together: Romantic and Victorian Auto/Biography* (London: Routledge, 2018), Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1993) and *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017).

²⁴⁰ Laura Marcus, *Autobiographical Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 115. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 10. In Woolf's words, his own volume compresses 'four stout Victorians into one slim volume' (CE, 4: 231).

²⁴¹ Twenty years later, in "Three Guineas," Woolf will carry on with the tradition of conceptualising the English establishment based on the same four pillars, adding the Law to the list, and exposing their participation in forms of control and domination against women.

people and about himself as though they were at once real and imaginary” (CE 4: 231). Nicholson’s book embodies what Adam Smyth describes as the key feature of English autobiography in this period: “living and writing about life become blurred, autobiographical forms feed back into lived life and conventions of representation (e.g. modernist self-reflexivity) tumble out of the text and into the world.”²⁴² Despite Woolf’s often ambiguous musings on the interactions between fact and fiction, and a small warning that too much mixing of the too could result in failures of creative effort, she views Nicholson’s book as a demonstration that “the attitude of the bribed and docile official has been blown to atoms” (CE 4: 232).²⁴³

This image of a fatal explosion is appropriate for the immediate aims of Woolf’s 1927 appraisal of new biography, which relies on a juxtaposition between modernist and Victorian biographies, associating the former with life and rejuvenation and the latter with death and decay. This line of thinking continues in “The Art of Biography” (1939), another essay on the subject written more than a decade after *Orlando*. There Woolf states that “the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey that were carried in the funeral processions through the streets – effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin” (E 6, 182). “The Art of Biography” imagines new biographical writing as a form of resuscitation of worn-out ideals, reinventing the “standards of merit” and helping to “set up new heroes for admiration” (E 6: 186). Using the same analogy, she captures the relationship between biography and its subjects as something deadly and menacing: “shadow on the page; and there would seem to be something deadly in that shadow,

²⁴² Adam Smyth, ed. *A History of English Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

²⁴³ Full quotation is rather amusing and reads as follows: “Foreign Office it should have been respectfully. His tone towards the world of Bognors and Whitehall should have been friendly but devout. But thanks to a number of influences and people, among whom one might mention Max Beerbohm and Voltaire, the attitude of the bribed and docile official has been blown to atoms. Mr Nicholson laughs. He laughs at Lord Curzon; he laughs at the Foreign Office; he laughs at himself. (CE, 4: 232). For discussion of tension between fact and fiction for Woolf’s biography projects see Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*, Chapter 11.

for after all, of the multitudes of lives that are written, how few survive” (*E* 6: 181). Laura Marcus has commented on this warning and argued that, for Woolf, biography (despite its etymological signification, i.e. from Greek βίος - life in the sense of a qualified life experience) is both “life- and death-writing,” due to the violence in biographical representation which “immobilises and even negates the subject.”²⁴⁴ Importantly, biography’s role in Woolf’s vision is not that of a simple recorder of lives and events past, but as a measure that shapes the way people see themselves, evaluate themselves against the common standard, and (re)make themselves accordingly. This is why the relationship between past and present, memoir and history, biographical and historical writing becomes one of the most important aspects of her works, Marcus asserts.²⁴⁵

Woolf sees life-writing as forward-looking and capturing the possibility for change instead of reversing to outdated moral standards: “opinions change as the times change,” she writes, “the accent on sex has changed within living memory. This leads to the destruction of a great deal of dead matter obscuring the true features of the human face” (*E* 6: 286). Naturally, such shifts in historical and material conditions of subjection and self-understanding alter the parameters within which autonomous subjects and emancipatory forms of agency can be generated. Woolf wants to demonstrate the importance of biography for exploring the dynamic relationships between subjects and their norms and for this reason seeks to challenge the generic and stylistic constraints of the biographical narrator’s authoritative voice by presenting more than one focal point. In order to encourage opportunities for diverse viewpoints and representations to emerge more vividly, Woolf insists that biographies should be composed “by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners,” which will bring out ‘not a riot of confusion but a richer unity’ (*E* 6: 186). What is at stake here is not simply the content of the biographical life as

²⁴⁴ Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 126.

²⁴⁵ Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 126.

such, but the content of its subject and the methodology we use to give an account of it. Reconstituting the histories of a controlling establishment, both personal and national, would open up ways to conceive of subversive forms of agency not accounted for in the official establishment histories. As Woolf poignantly observes: “and again, since so much is known that used to be unknown, the question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography [. . .]?” (*E* 6: 186).

3.3 History reconstructed

Blurring the lines between a novel, a biography, an autobiography and a literary history, *Orlando* is a very agile, vital, and slippery text. Its experimental nature demonstrates innovative modes of genre-bending and complicates the standard critical lexicon often employed to discuss literary texts. This diversity of literary expression is underpinned by a particular notion of how history, in its official, or establishment, capacity, affects the way human subjects act. Bryony Randall rightly observes that *Orlando*’s chief preoccupation is to rewrite history by “fundamentally challenging the discourses and paradigms through which history is constructed.”²⁴⁶ As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Woolf’s rebellion against narrating history as a developmental process is rooted in her conviction that such formulations of history are complicit with state institutions such as the education system or the law, and with the operations of disciplinary power that aim to restrict the expression of certain types of agency and promote the

²⁴⁶ Bryony Randall, ‘The Day of *Orlando*,’ in *Sentencing Orlando: Virginia Woolf and the Morphology of the Modernist Sentence*, ed. Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 128. For examples of Woolf’s early reviewers who treated *Orlando* as a new history see Eleanor McNees, ed., *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments* (Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 1994), 416-21. A particularly good example is Henry Seidel Canby’s ‘*Orlando*, a Biography,’ *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 3 November 1928, 313 (also reproduced in McNees).

development of others.²⁴⁷ Furthermore, her refusal to engage in such practices of historical memorialisation is linked to restrictions which their attendant modes of narration place on processes of self-constitution. Following on from my discussion in the previous section, Woolf's project extends beyond a critique of establishment histories that can be seen as participating in practices of disciplinary power and institutional control, to a rethinking of the ways in which such narratives relate to the creation of establishment-subjectivities that restrict women's capacity for autonomy.

Instead of relying on a singular version of history or even a singular mode of documenting it, Woolf interweaves different types of historical record to further interrupt the representation of history as a linear progressive narrative. Laura Marcus has summarised these effects as follows:

Orlando is a biography that is also a mock-biography (a contemporary referred to it as a 'pseudobiography') or a 'metabiography,' reflecting on the conventions of the genre even as it uses them. It also satirises historiography, drawing attention to the ways in which history is periodized and categorized, and simplistic concepts of 'the age' [. . .] It is a literary history in many senses. It scatters literary allusions and literary figures throughout its pages; it shows up that ways in which our concepts of an age are drawn from literary works, thus blurring the division between fictions and history; it is, crucially, the mock-biography of a writer, whose poem "The Oak Tree," like the oak tree on the estate, is a constant throughout changes and comes to embody identity itself.²⁴⁸

In a directly biographical sense, the novel uses material from Vita Sackville-West's *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922), where Vita details her own familial history, traced back to the bequest of her ancestral home, Knole, to Thomas Sackville by Queen Elizabeth I. Woolf herself visited

²⁴⁷ One of the examples used in previous chapter is state school/university promoting values of patriotism to their almost exclusively male pupils, creating an agential position that requires expressions of aggressive masculine domination, which is then glorified as the highest expression of such value system and used to promote justifications for military action

²⁴⁸ Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 119. Makiko Minow-Pinkney, 'Virginia Woolf and the Age of Motor Cars', *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela L. Caughie (New York: Garland, 2000), 159-82; Leena Kore-Schröder, 'Reflections in a Motor Car: Virginia Woolf's Phenomenological Relations of Time and Space', *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Time*, ed. Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 131-47.

Knole with Vita and used her observations for the descriptions of Orlando's stately home in the novel.²⁴⁹ Orlando's marriage to Spanish dancer Rosina Pepita, during his Ambassadorship to Constantinople, is also thought to be a play on Vita's personal history, whose mother was the illegitimate daughter of Lionel Sackville-West, 2nd Baron of Sackville and a Spanish dancer Josefa de Oliva, known as Pepita. The question of Orlando's sexuality can also be seen as an artistic treatment of Woolf's own romantic relationship with Vita, the novel being commonly-dubbed "the longest and most charming love letter in literature."²⁵⁰

These biographical details, however, are fused with a number of fictional and even fantastical elements. Orlando's love interest at the start of the novel, the Russian princess Sasha (during London's Great Frost (1682-3), who breaks Orlando's heart by escaping with a Russian sailor, reappears in the last chapter (the morning of 11 October 1928) during Orlando's visit to the department store "Marshal & Snelgrove" (*O*, 174). Moments of historical specificity, such as the precise date and time of Orlando's visit to the department store help to link the narrative to a particular historical and material context and to establish a sense of temporal movement. But these temporal and spatial signifiers are very frequently undermined or buried under so many layers of fantasy and fragmentation that the reader cannot with any certainty firmly state what historical moment they inhabit from sentence to sentence. "As she was fingering the linen

²⁴⁹ She records her impressions in a diary entry: 'Vita stalking in her Turkish dress, attended by small boys, down the gallery, wafting them on like some tall sailing ship – a sort of covey of noble English life: dogs wallowing, children crowding, all very free & stately: & [a] cart bringing wood. How do you see that? I asked Vita. She said she saw it as something that had gone on for hundreds of years. They had brought wood in from the Park to replenish the great fires like this for centuries: & her ancestresses had walked so on the snow with their great dogs bounding by them. All the centuries seemed lit up, the past expressive, articulate; not dumb & forgotten; but a crowd of people stood behind, not dead at all; not remarkable; fair faced, long limbed; affable; & so we reach the days of Elizabeth quite easily'. (*D*, 3: 125)

²⁵⁰ Much recent work exists on lesbian readings of Woolf. For example: Sherron Knopp, "If I saw You Would You Kiss Me?": Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, *PMLA* 103:1 (1988): 24-34; Leslie Hankins, 'Switching Sex and Redirecting Desire: the Surrealist Film, *Entre'acte*, and Woolf's *Orlando*, *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 67 (2005): 25-7; Elizabeth Meese, 'When Virginia Looked at Vita, What Did She See; or, Lesbian: Feminist: Woman – What's the Differ(e)a(n)ce?', *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Second Edition, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, [1992] 1997, 467-81. For a useful overview of lesbian approaches to Woolf see Madelyn Detloff, 'Woolf and Lesbian Culture: Queering Woolf Queering', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 342-352.

abstractedly,” a whiff of scent produced by the opening of the door, makes Orlando imagine seeing Sasha again entering the store and going through the candle isle:

a girl, by God! Furred, pearled, in Russian trousers; but faithless, faithless! [. . .] far off she saw the masts of a Russian ship standing out to sea, and then, miraculously (perhaps the door opened again) the conch which the scent had made become a platform, a dais, of which stepped a fat, furred woman, marvellously well preserved, seductive, diademed, a Grand Duke’s mistress; she who, leaning over the banks of the Volga, eating sandwiches, had watched men drown; and began walking the steps towards her. (O, 175-6)

Neither Orlando’s recognition of her long-lost love nor her flashback to the painful sight of her lover ground Sasha’s image within a coherent subjective representation occurring at a particular historical moment. The image of the young girl in the Russian trousers, followed by that of the Arch Duke’s mistress, and then a woman eating sandwiches on the banks of the Volga whilst watching men drown create a kaleidoscopic mixture of narrative fragments, which prevents us from piecing together a coherent version of Sasha. The one fragment that serves to ground her however is the normative gender role which frames and conditions her experiences as “a Grand Duke’s mistress.” Sasha inhabits an uncertain and unverifiable conceptual space, with the text of the novel throwing in doubt the very reality of Orlando actually seeing her. The portrayal we are given is the product of Orlando’s authorship and clearly affected by her sense of rejection and betrayal, along with a farcically stereotypical gender representation, despite numerous indications of Sasha’s gender fluidity such as her trousers. The fantastical and unverifiable elements of this encounter acutely demonstrate the lack of a singular authoritative presence in the documentation of their lives that can make a pronouncement on the validity of their experience. This allows Woolf to undermine established modes of capturing the life of a subject and reflect on what aspects of it are considered to carry more importance than others. The department store is a decidedly everyday location which positions women as consumers of capitalist reality and gender as a commodity, and yet, some sort of agential presence is developed. Whether Orlando sees Sasha or not, she extends her personhood beyond the concerns

of her everyday life and into an intersubjective, despite possibly imaginary realm. This scene also demonstrates the double bind in which women find themselves in their attempts to formulate a form of agency not supported by establishment standards. Even though we do not have an explicit overseeing eye to control the scene, the structure of power relations and gender norms remains in place, as part of the architecture of women's social experience.

In addition to temporal and conceptual disruption, Woolf also utilises experimentation with stylistic conventions to further upset the mechanisms used to record and categorise women's lives. Sanja Bahun identifies such strategies at the very core of the novel morphological structure, linking Woolf's commitment that a woman should not write "like a man," formulated in the 1929 essay "Women and Fiction," to her effort to create an alternative idiom. "*Orlando* bears striking witness to this effort to forge a female idiom," she writes, "as a rule, Woolf's syntax in *Orlando* is rhythmic, convoluted and replete with parataxes; its hallmark is unusual sequencing with the obscured or stalled introduction of the subject's position."²⁵¹ This stalling of the introduction of a fully-developed subject, represented through syntactical and stylistic gendering technique allows Woolf to avoid understanding the subject's self-constitution and agential capacity as either firmly relying on a robust rationalist intentionality or on ideas relating to the dispersal of the self as a category of meaning altogether.

Orlando's unnaturally long and healthy life is not a purely fantastic trope but one that throws a spanner in the wheels of history and disrupts its natural progression. The preservation of a non-binary subject through the 400 years of narrative history the novel covers is an important statement. Developing her own model of the new biography as a fantasy, Woolf keeps

²⁵¹ Sanja Bahun, 'Let us go, then, exploring': Intertextual Conversations of the Meaning of Life,' in *Sentencing Orlando: Virginia Woolf and the Morphology of the Modernist Sentence*, ed. Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 72. The full quotation around Woolf's idea around not writing 'like a man' is in her 'Women and Fiction' (1929) essay: 'the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use.' (*E*, 5: 32)

the current of events in an unpredictable and undirected flux. Institutional and social histories run through the novel, making it a deeply political text that is deeply embedded in material conditions, despite all the fluctuations of thought and attention Orlando undergoes (these have a further disruptive purpose in their own right). But the historical narrative is not given a dominating and overbearing presence. Rather, it is Orlando who travels through the ‘ages’ of European modernity, driving the plot and the narrative forward.²⁵² In fact, historical progress as such is represented as time passing, a movement emptied out of meaning without the subject who brings it to bear on the social world: “It was Now November. After November, comes December. Then January, February, March, and April. After April comes May. June, July, August follow. Next is September. Then October, and so, behold, here we are back at November again, with a whole year accomplished” (*O*, 155). Woolf’s effort to disrupt historical processes and their documentation, particularly with a view to preserve her subject’s personality and capacity for autonomous agency, necessitates a move further away from the tenets of establishment biographies that represent life as a sequence of actions.

Stepping outside the narrative mould designated for capturing the subject’s life, Woolf creates opportunities for liminal forms of agency to emerge through the cracks of the broken historical edifice she is exposing. In this sense, *Orlando* offers an experiment with a life practice that is deeply rooted in embodied relational experience and its complex dynamics with a historically constituted subjective position. In Jessica Berman’s reading, this is the beginning of a model of “a fractured yet coherent political life” built around an “extended notion of personal identity, one that continues subjectivity as coming into being always in fluctuating relation to a

²⁵² One can reflect further on the link between modes of transportation and identity oscillation in *Orlando*, as well as in Woolf’s larger body of work. See Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 124-6 and Derek Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

small group of affiliated yet singular others.”²⁵³ Conceiving agency in such communal setting, according to Berman allows us to conceive of *Orlando* as a “community biography,” understood as a text that “rejects the conventions of biography both to expand the possibilities of character and to recuperate community.”²⁵⁴ Berman’s instinct to read an extended notion of personal identity in Woolf’s biography experiment is indeed well-founded, but her understanding of the nature of the political life this kind of subjectivity entails requires further thought, specifically with respect to the relationship between normativity and forms of individual and civic legislation.

3.4 Gender, autonomy, and anti-establishment subjectivity

Capturing a life in a narrative, especially a biographical narrative, requires an explicit identification. Who is the subject of the given biography, what kind of life they have lived, what in their life is worth remembering and what forgetting, are all questions that stand to be answered one way or another. Providing these answers involves making decisions about documenting specific types of subjects, who perform specific deeds, and respond to a specific set of concerns. Modernist biography tries to contend with this problem in two ways. First, as described above, it endeavours to achieve these effects by satirising the kind of people establishment biographies captured and the importance and value of their achievements. In other words, the new biographers tried to destabilise the formal framework, in which such texts were created and valued. This strategy did not solve the problem with the servility of the genre to specific forms of identification. The alternative proposition, which many modernist texts take up,

²⁵³ Berman, *Modernist Fiction*, 121. Here and in the following pages Berman offers a detail discussion of the specific notion of community she is working with (“not predicated on the traditional terms of kinship and proximity, not on allegiance to a specific political party, nor even in participating in the broader groupings of region or nation”) and an analysis of *Orlando* and *The Waves* in those terms.

²⁵⁴ Berman, *Modernist Fiction*, 138.

is to re-orient themselves towards escaping the drudgery of the “realist” representation altogether and focus instead on a higher universal, disinterested, and impersonal subject.²⁵⁵ The idea of an impersonal identity is one that haunts many modernists texts and their respective interpretations, and one that has been a particularly rich focus in Woolf scholarship.

Readings of Woolf from a broadly impersonal perspective often focus on ideas around the dissociation, dissolution, or the complete demise of the self, turning the narrative motion into a mechanism to transcend embodied social realities. As a text that has the theme of transmigration (of gender, period, space, history, self), *Orlando* unsurprisingly occupies a position of prominence in such readings.²⁵⁶ The notion of interpersonal identity has captured the attention of a number of scholars, including Derek Ryan, Claire Colebrook, and Rosi Braidotti.²⁵⁷ Ryan and Colebrook in their respective explorations focus on ideas of ‘queering’ desire and sexuality in discourses of identity, subjectivity, and self-formation. Ryan’s contribution attempts a move towards a “post-anthropocentric theory of both desire and love,” in which desire is not conceived as subject or even person centred.²⁵⁸ “What we find in *Orlando*,” he writes, “is a desire and a history filled with molecular events, where the particular moment in all its historical specificity becomes an accident of entangled agencies.”²⁵⁹ Relatedly, Colebrook reads the novel as an expression of what she terms “queer vitalism” which requires us to move beyond majoritarian and into minoritarian politics by seeing “bodies in their general recognisable form, as this or that ingoing and unified entity” but instead as part of a process “to approach the world as unfolding of events.”²⁶⁰ Whereas both readings offer valuable thoughts on integrating

²⁵⁵ See T. S. Eliot’s essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ for a good example of such discussion.

²⁵⁶ Marcus, 471.

²⁵⁷ Derek Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); See also Beatrice Monaco, *Machinic Modernism* and Claire Colebrook’s ‘Queer Vitalism’, *New Formations* 68 (2009): 77-92.

²⁵⁸ Ryan, *Virginia Woolf*, 105-7;

²⁵⁹ Ryan, *Virginia Woolf*, 120.

²⁶⁰ Colebrook, 83.

the insights of queer theory and post-humanist theory to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of desire, sexuality and interpersonal relationships, they overlook the importance of *Orlando*'s direct relationship with its material conditions. The motivation to move beyond the dictates of identarian politics, announced by both authors, is indeed an admirable pursuit, but not at the expense of dispensing with politics and embodied materiality altogether; especially as queer and feminist commitments in the novel abound, and they are in no way unpolitical.²⁶¹ Even though Orlando undergoes a transition from man to woman and struggles with formulating specific identifications of her sexuality and sexual commitments (which remain throughout the novel bisexual), gender issues maintain a constant presence in the narrative.²⁶² The lack of a specific gender or sexuality commitment does not mean that gender regulations and dependencies are absent altogether. And even if Orlando is not completely and absolutely defined by them, she is nonetheless constrained by the normative requirements of the gender categories she is inhabiting at particular moments throughout the narrative. Instructive in this respect is her realisation of behavioural expectations after she becomes a woman. During her trip back to England, Orlando, now a beautiful and desirable lady, enjoys the advances of the ship's Captain and quickly realises that the performance of desire has undergone a shift.

At any rate, it was not until she felt the coil of skirts around her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatness politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realised with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position. [. . .] It took her the entire length of the voyage to moralise the meaning of her start (*O*, 91)

²⁶¹ A further theoretical objection can be made against so called "postindividualistic" concepts of freedom on the grounds of having a dubious political efficacy to resolving direct problems of inequality and oppression, see for example Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995): "Like a bat flying around the owl of Minerva, it would attempt to formulate a philosophy of freedom on the grave of selected philosophical traditions rather than to consider freedom in existing configurations of power – economic, social, psychological, political" (p.6).

²⁶² Some gender theorists see a correlation between sexual relations of subordination and gender categories, i.e. men defined as sexually dominating and thus having a dominating social position and women are defined in a dominated position both sexually and socially. Prominent figure here is Catharine MacKinnon. Others argue the opposite case and establish a critical differentiation between sexuality and gender relations. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Epistemology of the Closet*, 27-39; "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others"; and Gayle Rubin "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Racial Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole S. Vance (New York: Routledge, 1984), 267-319.

This is to say, that even without a unilateral identification on her part as a woman, she is already faced with the edifice of normative gender relations she has to abide by. In other words, there are certain types of normative constraints that a woman is expected to exist within, and Orlando certainly does. We see her becoming a wife and a mother in Chapters V and VI, and even though the descriptions and engagement with both experiences are slightly farcical and potentially transgressive in some manner, Woolf nonetheless has Orlando perform these two essentialist characterisations of traditional womanhood.²⁶³ In this sense, any attempt to theorise a transgressive subject position cannot be accommodated through paradigms removed from the material conditions of embodiment and gender politics the novel explicitly engages in. Furthermore, this has to be understood within the larger juridico-political framework that exerts biopolitical control over the subject.²⁶⁴

Rosi Braidotti's work, instrumental for Ryan's and Colebrook's readings, has recently given rise to a wide array of productive approaches to modernist literature, particularly with respect to the rise of animal and post-humanist studies. Her work is rooted in an eclectic mix of post-structuralist philosophy and psychoanalysis, with Gilles Deleuze's influence being particularly prominent. In her recent book *Transpositions*, she uses *Orlando* to address a criticism often levelled at the theoretical framework she has devised, namely that whereas her approach provides an interesting and compelling subjective ontology not rooted in an anthropocentric original space, it struggles to create a reciprocal political or ethical grounding.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ For a discussion of the transgressive potential of Orlando's marriage see Chapter 3 in Derek Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

²⁶⁴ For influential account of relationship between biological life and political life ("bare life"), biopolitics, and legal and political foundations of modern state power see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [1995], trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). For example: "Until we become aware of the political nature of bare life and its modern avatars (biological life, sexuality, etc.), we will not succeed in clarifying the opacity at their centre. Conversely, once modern politics enters into an intimate symbiosis with bare life, it loses the intelligibility that still seems to us to characterise the juridico-political foundation of classical politics." (p.120)

²⁶⁵ Many thanks to Peter Adkins and Ruth Clemens for our conversations on Braidotti's theory, which helped me clarify my position.

In it she insists that a notion of “depersonalisation” or “positive self-effacement” is key for opening up the possibility of creating forms of being that rely on multiplicity and not on singular identifications. “A depersonalisation of the self, in a gesture of everyday transcendence of the ego, is a connecting force,” she writes, “that links the self to larger internal and external relations. An isolated vision of the individual is of hinderance to such as a process, as [. . .] Virginia Woolf knew all too well.”²⁶⁶ She continues with reference to the psychoanalytic dynamic at play between Vita identifying and recognising herself in Orlando,

one’s affirmation of the life that one is shot through with is materially embodied and embedded in the singularity that is one’s enfleshed self. But this singular entity is collectively defined, interrelational, and external: it is impersonal but highly singular because it is crossed over with all sorts of ‘encounters’ with others and with multiple cultural codes, bits and pieces of the sticky social imaginary which constitutes the subject by literally gluing it together, for a while at least.²⁶⁷

Braidotti here offers a type of reading of the poststructuralist subject, which has found strong opposition in feminist critical theory. The work of Seyla Benhabib makes a good comparison as Braidotti herself refers to Benhabib, and both offer thoughts on *Orlando*. Their theoretical commitments position them in opposing camps, where theories of subjectivity are concerned. In *Feminist Contentions*, Benhabib engages in a debate with Judith Butler on the nature of subjection and the subject’s capacity for autonomy. Under the heading of postmodernist “death of the subject,” which refers to readings like Braidotti’s for example, that aim to dispense with any form of essentialist, core self, she claims that such understanding is “not compatible with the goals of feminism” as it undermines “concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity, and autonomy” as well as moral and political agency.²⁶⁸ Butler’s response points Benhabib to issues related to asking after the “process of [the subject’s] constitution and the political meaning of the consequentuality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory.” She goes further to state that “to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is

²⁶⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: on Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 197.

²⁶⁷ Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 198.

²⁶⁸ Benhabib et al, *Feminist Contentions*, 20.

determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency.”²⁶⁹ In other words, the cause of disagreement here is whether a fragmented subject can generate enough autonomy and intentionality to motivate a course of individual agency; in this sense, Benhabib is advocating a more robust concept of autonomous, rational subject whereas Butler is arguing for better understanding of the forms of normative requirements that interfere in the process of the subject’s construction of patterns of autonomous agency. Butler also warns that putting an already formed subject before theory has certain pitfalls, including potentially re-entrenching and perpetuating disciplinary and controlling discourses and blocking possibilities for emancipatory politics.

This small detour to the Benhabib-Butler contention was simply intended to illustrate the very different positions from which Braidotti’s and Benhabib’s uses of *Orlando* emerge. As Amy Allen observes, in her more recent work, Benhabib does employ a more conciliatory tone aimed at striking a balance between an “overly robust, essentialist conception of the self that guarantees autonomy and agency, at the cost of assuming an illusory unity or mastery of the self” and “an anti-essentialist, overly fragmented self that renders autonomy and agency unthinkable.”²⁷⁰ To do this, Benhabib offers a narrative conception of the self, coupled with a notion of practical autonomy that she defines as “the capacity to exercise choice and agency over the conditions of one’s narrative identifications.”²⁷¹ She refers to *Orlando* to illustrate this method, arguing that the novel suggests that “fixed sexual identity, as defined by rigid gender codes and categories, is not central to the core identity of the self [. . .] The sources of the self as

²⁶⁹ Benhabib et al, *Feminist Contentions*, 35; 45.

²⁷⁰ Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, 162-3. It is Allen’s contention that Benhabib fails in this attempt ‘by downplaying the role that gendered modes of subjection have on individuals who are thrown into societies structured by pervasive gender subordination.’ (163)

²⁷¹ Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 16.

a unified being, if there are any at all, suggests Woolf, lie deeper.”²⁷² Despite their differing positions, Braidotti and Benhabib both allow for the same problematic proposition in relation to the novel, namely that the self’s identity and self-constitution processes in some ways go around or beyond gender as a directing mechanism of subjective expression. What is more, they both assume that salvation from “pervasive gender subordination,” to use Amy Allen’s term, lies in minimising the role of normative gender requirements in processes of subjection.

Woolf’s position, as expressed in *Orlando*, departs both from the robust autonomy and the self-effacement positions just outlined. In the examples above, where Orlando tries to learn how to flirt as a woman, as well as becoming a wife and a mother, we see her conditioned by gender norms and restricted by their behavioural requirements. This comes to show that Woolf is committed to preserving normative gender conditioning as an important aspect of autonomous self-constitution and agency. She offsets the illusory rational control over one’s subjective formation and removes, the conceit of autonomy to borrow Butler’s term, by handing the power of narrating Orlando’s life and subjectivity to another voice (the fictional biographer’s), instead of giving her the authority and control over her own self.²⁷³ In this way, she accounts for the conditions of gender control and subordination in dominant narratives and normative processes of constitution of the self, whilst preserving a position which endorses multivocality of viewpoints without descending into impersonality. Additionally, Orlando is not a dominant or authoritative presence in the narrative as the narrator often feels inclined to look away from his/her central subject and launch their own ruminations on a variety of topics, from time and memory (*O*, 58-9), to literature and culture (18-9; 45-6), landscape (110), genius (121-2) and a

²⁷² Seyla Benhabib, “Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellations,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24:2 (1999): 343.

²⁷³ Butler’s definition of the conceit of autonomy is the following: “It may be that the conceit of autonomy implied by self-naming is paradigmatically presentist conceit, that is, the belief that there is a one who arrives in the world, in discourse, without a history, that this one makes oneself in and through the magic of a name, that language expresses a “will” or a “choice” rather than a complex and constitutive history of discourse and power.” (Butler, *Bodies*, 173.

number of others. The first of these occasions is when Orlando falls into a week-long trans following the departure of his beloved Russian princess Sasha. Whilst Orlando is asleep, the narrator launches into a rumination of the nature of life and death, questioning “of what nature is death of what life;” but after waiting “well over half an hour for an answer” however, the narrator sees that “none [were] coming” and decides to simply “get on with the story” (*O*, 42). In this getting on with the story, the narrative presents multiple opportunities for the reader to look sideways, explore and make alternative decisions and interpretations, not bound by the narrative direction of the novel. Furthermore, during these frequent narrative interruptions, Orlando is granted freedom from the constraints of her own narrative and given the opportunity to cultivate alternative and more personal forms of agency, through her pursuits as a writer, for example.

Orlando’s relationship with writing is fraught with insecurities and doubts, but nonetheless constant attribute to her persona, regardless of historical period or gender. Her poem “The Oak Tree” is an anchor to her identity, as Marcus observes, as much as her ancestral land on which the eponymous oak tree grows. We see the novel begin with it: “he loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth’s spine beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be” (*O*, 14) and ends with Orlando’s return to it – “the tree had grown bigger, sturdier, and more knotted since she had known it, somewhere around the year 1588 [. . .]. Flinging herself on the ground, she felt the bones of the tree running out like ribs from a spine this way and that beneath her” (*O*, 188). She goes to bury her poem, which contains her life’s work, in the same spot. The relationship between belonging and attachment in relation to documenting women’s life and literature is one Woolf is particularly interested in; it pertains to her project to trace the ‘lives of the obscure’ as she does in less well-known shorter pieces “Lives of the Obscure” and “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” for example. The lives of Woolf’s women are obscured almost by default, existing in a cultural sphere which either

passively disregards or actively erases their contributions to history. The only woman in the history of English literature presented in the novel is Mrs Anna Williams, who only appears in her connection to her life partner Dr Samuel Johnson, but who was actually a successful poet in her own right; Orlando looks in from the street but cannot hear the words of her literary predecessor. In this sense, in writing *Orlando*, Woolf inserts another anonymous figure into the established ranks; camouflaged, thrown about across centuries, in ecstasy and in destitution, Orlando arrives to us as the biographical embodiment of the archetypal female author to claim her position in the cannon. The materiality of Orlando's relationship to her manuscript, which she carries in her bosom and close to her heart, tells us something about the transformation of literary discourse needs to undergo in order to accommodate its lost figures. She asks during the burial ceremony, "was not poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?" (*O*, 188) But her voice and that of her ancestresses have been heard in a historical and literary tradition dominated by the canonised words of a privileged male heroes. Orlando throws her manuscript and leaves it to "lie unburied and dishevelled on the ground" and turns to watch the sunset:

the vast view, varied like an ocean floor this evening with the sun lightening it and the shadows darkening it. There was a village with a church tower among elm trees; a grey domed manor house in a park; a spark of light burning on some glass-house; a farmyard with yellow-corn stacks. [. . .] she saw the far Scottish hills and the wild tides that swirl about the Hebrides. She listened for the sound of gun-firing out at sea. No – only the wind blew. There was no war today. (*O*, 189)

The night comes, and she feels free – to dream, to imagine, and to feel. A feeling of ecstasy engulfs her being as she awaits the arrival of her husband, a naval explorer and a woman, on top of the oak tree hill, in celebration of her sexuality.²⁷⁴ Having shaken off the confines of a literary

²⁷⁴ The orgasmic setting of this scene is wonderfully and rather amusingly analysed by Jane Goldman in her recent essay on *Orlando*. See Jane Goldman, "'The Queen had come': Orgasm and Arrival", in *Sentencing Orlando*, ed. Elsa Högberg and Any Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 15-31.

tradition that has cannibalised her voice, Orlando is free to start again, as she welcomes to her ancestral home another Queen.²⁷⁵

3.5 Civic identity, autonomy and biopolitics

In addition to helping us situate the importance of gender as a constitutive principle of individual identity, reading *Orlando* as an embodied and gendered narrative, places the text in a wider history that follows the relationship between the body and state power, extending from the seventeenth century to nowadays. The emergence of the modern nation state and its accompanying model of citizenship during the Enlightenment brought with itself new rules for self-making as the concept of the citizen transitioned from feudalism to democracy. A new type of modern subject was required to navigate this novel social and political landscape, so the state became actively involved in cultivating that subject, with the introduction of comprehensive state education, institutionalisation of healthcare, and the curation of public histories and artistic canons with the growth of the museum, among others.²⁷⁶ In this climate and under the aegis of the modern state, gender and sexuality became classified into binary identity categories, as noted by Jessica Berman.²⁷⁷ In his history of sexuality, *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur also points out that “sometime in the eighteenth century sex as we know it was invented. The reproductive organs went from being paradigmatic site for displaying hierarchy [. . .] to being the foundation of expressing incommensurable difference.”²⁷⁸ It is in this context, I want to propose, that we can read Orlando’s trans experience across the annals of modern history as Woolf’s attempt to

²⁷⁵ This scene mirrors the arrival of Queen Elizabeth in Chapter I; but it does not carry historical accuracy as George V was on the throne at the time the chapter quotes, i.e. Thursday, 11 October 1928.

²⁷⁶ In her philosophical treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft famously states that “the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of female understanding.” (Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Janet M. Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 124.

²⁷⁷ Jessica Berman, “Is the Trans in Transnational, the Trans in Transgender?”, in *Modernism/modernity* v 24, no 2 (2017): 224.

²⁷⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 149.

rethink the conflicting history of autonomous personhood in conjunction with its attendant histories of state power, regulation, and restriction of social rights.

This is particularly evidenced in the eighteenth century section of the novel, which sees Orlando experience her sexuality in its most experimental and unrestricted manner, dropping off from the official narrative of her life. Determined to explore the world on her own terms, Orlando dresses as a “*young man of fashion*” and heads to London, where she comes across Nell, a prostitute on Leicester Square (*O*, 125-6). Orlando is led to Nell’s room and the gender relations inscribed in their sexual encounter challenge Orlando sense of gender identity: Nell performs the role of the timid girl, with pliant disposition and hesitant answers, which rouse in Orlando “all the feelings which become a man,” although as a woman herself she is aware of the artifice of this performance of femininity (*O*, 126). As Nell puts on the disguise of a willing lover behind the dressing screen, Orlando removes hers and admits herself a woman. Her refusal to perform a normative gender role here positions Orlando in a liminal space, where she cannot be accounted for in official historical narratives. She lives in the very outskirts of normativity and in such a way that her life becomes unrecordable as far as the civic machinery of the establishment is concerned. In her biographer’s words:

But to give an exact and particular account of Orlando’s life at this time becomes more and more out of the question. As we peer and grope in the ill-lit, ill-paved, ill-ventilated courtyards that lay about Gerrard Street and Drury Lane at that time, we seem to catch sight of her and then again to lose it. [. . .] The task is made still more difficult by the fact that she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another [. . .] her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive. (*O*, 128)

Her adventures are recorded, instead, by means of gossip and rumour – modes of language of very explicitly anti-establishment nature, due to their purported unreliability, and often specifically associated with story-telling typically practised by women.

At the close of the eighteenth century, Orlando sits at her window in Blackfriars reminiscing of her childhood during the Elizabethan era.

On such as night as this the impermeable tangle of the forests on Highgate and Hampstead would be outlined, writhing in contorted intricacy against the sky. Here and there, on one of the hills which rose above London, was a stark gallows tree, with a corpse nailed to rot or parch on its cross; for danger and insecurity, lust and violence, poetry and filth swarmed over the tortuous Elizabethan highways and buzzed and stank. (*O*, 128)

As the dark cloud of the nineteenth century approaches, she remembers the corpses of the criminal, the disabled, the mentally ill, the poor, or those otherwise deviating from the norm, bodies punished by the judicial system for their transgressions and displayed rotting and stinking for all to see. “Thus stealthily and imperceptibly, none marking the exact day or hour of the change, the constitution of England was altered and nobody knew it” (*O*, 132), writes Orlando’s biographer to mark the arrival of the new era; an era that will see the astonishing advancement of institutional incarceration and hospitalisation as a mechanism for social and political control manifest itself across the social spectrum. Such sanitising and regulatory practices further restrict civic identity by removing all those who are seen as transgressors of the normative codex of individual and social relations. The enforcement of gender identity and sexuality becomes an important element of this process. As Berman notes, this administration of gender and sexuality is in fact “part and parcel” of the state’s interest in “determining the specific factual, and immutable bodily identities of its citizens in order to separate them from infiltrators, enemies, and undesirables, and to enforce colonial relationships and hierarchies of race, in the early decades of the twentieth century.”²⁷⁹

One of most sustained targets of the constitutional change Woolf’s biographer evokes are sexuality and gender practices. In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault traces the growing

²⁷⁹ Berman, “Is the Trans in Transnational, the Trans in Transgender?”, 226.

scientific and institutional interest in scrutinising sex in order to ensure the state's future prosperity and continuous procreation. As Erin Carlston points out, this inspection was not attempted solely on religious or moral grounds, but as a national security measure. In the first decades of the twentieth century gender and sexual deviance were linked in Britain to fears of German "perversion" infiltrating and corrupting British society, as well as to espionage and treason.²⁸⁰ Foucault's genealogical study traces the regulatory mechanisms used to control the expression of sexual and gender identities from the 17th century, a "time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will," to the "monotonous nights of Victorian bourgeoisie".²⁸¹ The model of conjugal heterosexual love, according to Foucault, was then established as the normative and legitimate expression of sexual desire and gender identity, and the surrounding moral, scientific, political, and legal discourses all collaborated in the process of sanitisation of all forms of gender and sexual identification that deviated from that norm. He further theorises the relationship between sex and (state) power as one of repression but insists that understanding it in such simplified terms is not productive enough to lead to a transformation of normative standards. Furthermore, he is concerned that simply putting sexuality and gender emancipation "on the agenda for the future"²⁸² will only reaffirm the prohibitive regimes of power that control it, instead of contributing to positive change; unless we begin to understand the sexual repression as part of complex interplay between a number of negative elements expressive of the intricacy of power relations. In Foucault's words:

[D]efences, censorship, denials - which the repressive hypothesis groups together in one great central mechanism destined to say no, are doubtless only component parts that have a local and tactical role to play in a transformation into discourse, a technology of power, and a will to knowledge that are far from being reducible to the former.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Erin Carlston, *Double Agents: Espionage, Literature and Liminal Citizens* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 30-1.

²⁸¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. I, 3.

²⁸² Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. I, 6.

²⁸³ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. I, 12.

In other words, political control over subjects, who participate in the creation and reinforcement of normative standards that limit the modes of identification available to them and their expression, operates within a complex web of power relations, entrapped in their own rights within a framework of social organisation, irreducible to repression alone. Instead, as *Orlando* shows, critique has to be linked to a larger knowledge economy which accounts for the political and epistemological ties between the subject and its social environment.

This is the context from which Foucault's late concept of biopolitics emerges. In his essay "The Birth of Biopolitics" he explains the term as follows: "the endeavour, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalise the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birth rate, longevity, race."²⁸⁴ These problems, argues Foucault, cannot be "dissociated from the framework of political rationality within which they appeared and developed their urgency."²⁸⁵ This is precisely why we cannot separate practices of individual identification, together with the various modes of self-legislation we impose on our selves, from the larger structures of civic and legal regulation operative throughout our social world. In this sense, Woolf's portrayal of Orlando's civic as well as gendered identity is significant for her understanding of the relationship between personal autonomy and agency. On the one hand, as discussed above, Woolf presents gender as a constitutive element of individual identity and processes of self-constitution; this does not mean that gender is non-negotiable or absolutely determinative in terms of formation of agential intent, but simply that it is an important factor that cannot be easily brushed aside. On the other hand, however, the biopolitical regulation of gender and sexuality clearly interferes with and controls the modes of sexual or gendered identity an individual can take up, process, or present to the world, in the interest of preserving

²⁸⁴ Foucault, "The Birth of Biopolitics", in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, Vol. I*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: The New Press, 1997), 73.

²⁸⁵ Foucault, "The Birth of Biopolitics", 73.

the sovereign power of the state. It is precisely through the judicial system and its inherent judgement process which classifies personhood and citizenship and their attendant set of unalienable human rights; in this sense, gender and sexuality sit at the very centre where individual and civic rights intersect, and autonomy is relevant to both.

The prolonged legal battles that aim to determine Orlando's right to hold her ancestral property, marking her social existence as a legal subject, are a case in point. The legal verdict determining her right to own property finally comes entwined with a definitive pronouncement on her gender identity. Orlando reads in the letter she receives to communicate this development: "‘My sex’, she read out with some solemnity, ‘is pronounced indisputably, and beyond the shadow of a doubt [. . .] female. The estates which are now desequestrated in perpetuity descend and are tailed and entailed upon the heirs male of my body’" (*O*, 148). The legal determination of her identity is here directly tied into her personal and civic rights relating to being able to hold and inherit property. Vita Sackville-West herself had to go through lengthy legal proceedings, which finally determined that she could not inherit Knole as property and she could not pass it into female heirs. Even though Woolf reverses the real-life judgement against Vita and Orlando is allowed to hold and pass her property to her (male) children, the judgement is nonetheless grim as it legitimises only one permissible use of her body, that is, the bearing of children and enshrines in law the continued discrimination against future women in this regard. This is a point Judith Butler makes in her discussion of the signification of performative speech acts, or utterances that double down as actions, such as the "I do" pronouncement in the marriage service.

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform an action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statement which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power

of discourse to produce that which it names is linked to the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts *as* a discourse.²⁸⁶

The judicial process in this sense directly legislates the terms upon which Orlando's body is allowed to function, if she wants to preserve her own family, home, and history. In this sense, Jessica Berman's observation that "the very notion of the 'human' or 'person' upon whom natural rights devolve emerges in modern Western thought already attached to specific assumptions about the normate gender-conforming body" is particularly apt.²⁸⁷ The instructive directive, i.e. bear children or lose your civic rights, is expressed in a detached and officious legal language designed to deliver a warning. The punitive consequences of any form of refusal to abide by such norms are not directly expressed by Woolf but they are clearly implied. The loss of citizenship and personhood in the eyes of the law will accompany any deviation from the designated verdict. Woolf also draws attention to the economic harm inflicted on Orlando by this lengthy legal process, as she sacrifices her wealth in order to convince the law that she can function as a legal subject. She enters into possession of her titles, house, and estate: "now so much shrunk, for the cost of the lawsuits had been prodigious, that, though she was infinitely noble again, she was also excessively poor" (*O*, 148). Woolf's consideration of Orlando's legal status serves as a good example of concern about the apparent conflict between the regulation of the law and individual agency in modern society.²⁸⁸ As Ravit Reichman astutely observes, Woolf "confronted the law as that force which, in distinctly concrete ways, restricts one's ability to act in the world, and which needs to be reckoned with and resisted as such."²⁸⁹ In fact, as Reichman

²⁸⁶ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 171.

²⁸⁷ Berman, "Is the Trans in Transnational, the Trans in Transgender?", 230.

²⁸⁸ This also invites consideration of issues of access to the legal system. Orlando is white and upper-class, with a large amount of financial resources at her disposal; economically marginalised people due to class, race, gender would not even stand a chance of making a claim for themselves. For an interesting discussion of class in Woolf see Jean Mills's recent essay "Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Class" in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 219-234.

²⁸⁹ Ravit Reichman, "Woolf and the Law", in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 243.

observes, it is precisely those material conditions that are governed by the rigorous application of a judicial framework that constitute “the foremost barrier to critical thought and productivity”.²⁹⁰

The restrictive manner of application and the controlling aspect of legal judgements as acts of state power have a great impact not only on the capacity of individuals to express their identity or social standing, but also on the access points at which one qualifies as a human being who is owed a certain set of rights. Woolf’s commitment to writing the lives of the forgotten, with which this thesis started, becomes an ethical imperative in the context of a legal and civic framework in which human rights are bestowed on the basis of conformity with a system of legal recognition and identification; a system that privileges patriarchal protection over the emancipation of its most vulnerable members. As Joseph Slaughter emphasises, in the context of post-Enlightenment legal systems and in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the discussion revolves not around what makes a human *human*, but around how a person is constructed “as a member of a people or nation – a particular kind of human activated as legal or moral unit.”²⁹¹ This is another way to illustrate what Foucault means by the point of intersection between the techniques of the self and the techniques of domination, discussed in Chapter Two. The notion of the normative citizen, continues Slaughter, is derived from within their “local histories of gender and sexuality, in addition to those of race, ethnicity, and class.”²⁹² Judicial and legal frameworks and narratives play paramount role in the shaping of those histories and the material conditions within personhood and designated and experienced. “The ‘person’ therefore becomes embodied as a normative entity with specific rights, responsibilities, and duties under existing social, cultural, moral, and judicial systems and remains inscribed

²⁹⁰ Reichman, “Woolf and the Law”, 245.

²⁹¹ Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 58.

²⁹² Slaughter, 58.

within – and often subjected to – existing hierarchies of gender, power, and value.”²⁹³ It is precisely in this context of normative personhood and entitlement to social and human rights that Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* poses the question “who counts as the human [. . .]?”²⁹⁴ The law relies on precedent, in the same way as ethics, and the same way as autonomy. Who is a human today is also who was a human yesterday; the incessant movement of history and discourse leaves the marginalised and the disposed among us facing a hard battle. To complement discussion in previous two Chapters, this is another reason why accounts of dominant autonomy struggle to ground a truly emancipatory trajectory, be it in the form of personal, moral, or political agency: it is controlled by the same institutional structures that it is meant to keep from infringing upon freedom and democratic life. As Elsa Högberg observes in her comparative reading of Butler and Woolf, both authors provide a critical perspective on the relationship between the autonomy ideal and national sovereignty, disputing the “the assertion of the autonomous ‘I’ as an ethically violent act which causes and perpetuates private as well as public forms of violence.”²⁹⁵ In the Kantian model, described in the Introduction, freedom and the law are one and the same, but Woolf shows us throughout her work that this is one privileged assumption which cannot be taken at face value.

This issue becomes ever more poignant in Woolf’s thinking and evident in her aesthetic practice with the start of World War Two. Issues of social vulnerability and cohesion, as well as doubts about the status and function of agency and responsibility in a world with an uncertain future become paramount concerns in her last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941).

²⁹³ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* (Brooklyn: South End, 2011), 30, 37. Referred to in Berman, “Is the Trans in Transnational, the Trans in Transgender?”, 230-1.

²⁹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 17.

²⁹⁵ Elsa Högberg, “Voices against Violence: Virginia Woolf and Judith Butler,” *Le Tour Critique* vol. 2 (2013):425.

3.6 Waiting for the future to show: *Between the Acts*²⁹⁶

Between the Acts is set in an English countryside house, Pointz Hall, owned by the Oliver family. The novel takes place in June 1938, the last summer of peace before World War II, over the course of 24-hours, a form Woolf has relied upon once before in *Mrs Dalloway*. These novels, alongside *Jacob's Room* and *The Years* form Woolf's set of war novels, are increasingly read comparatively within the context of interwar literature. The centre piece of the novel is Miss La Trobe's pageant of English history (and English literary history), spanning from the time of Chaucer to the summer of 1938. The performance is hosted at Pointz Hall by the Oliver family, respected upper-class members of the community, whose own belonging to the idyllic English village is called into question in the opening pages of the novel: "Only something over a hundred and twenty years the Olivers had been here;" "Olivers could not trace their descent for more than two or three hundred years. But the Swithins could. The Swithins were there before the Conquest."²⁹⁷ The Olivers' own status as relative newcomers signals a lack of essential connection to the land as the formative source of English national identity. The Roman road surrounding the village, visible from an aeroplane, suggests an unnatural process of appropriation and establishment of a cultural hegemony, one in which the Olivers have played a part. Their links with British colonial expansion are pointed out on the very first page through the introduction of the family patriarch Mr Bartholomew Oliver "of the Indian Civil Service, retired" (*BTA*, 3).²⁹⁸ The British Empire manifests its deeply woven presence within the very fabric of English life, as it touches most of the major characters, filtering their discursive and

²⁹⁶ Woolf uses the phrase "wait for the future to show" in the runup of WWI in *To the Lighthouse* (1992: 171). The phrase is evoked by Marina MacKay in her discussion of *Between the Acts* in Jessica Berman's *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, p. 151.

²⁹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* [1941], ed. Frank Kermode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6; 28. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in text following citation as *BA*.

²⁹⁸ "'Tinker, tailor, soldier, apothecary, plough-boy . . . It appears', said old Bartholomew, laying down his spoon, 'that I am a thief'" (*BTA*, 47)

political identities through its lens.²⁹⁹ Isa's mother died in India, Giles deals with colonial money and goods on the stock exchange, Mrs Manresa's late husband enriched himself by stealing precious stones from the colonies, Colonel Mayhew is devoted to the British Army.

Scholars have often commented on the bleak opening of the novel, which ushers in images and scenes of violence. The conversation the night before the pageant, with which the novel starts, revolves around a cesspool, promised by the county council but as yet undelivered, and an incongruous reference to a misidentified nightingale. Alongside the obvious comment on the ineffectiveness of government, the mention of the bird, perhaps the only native inhabitant of the land among them all, conjures an impression of dispossession and excision. Marina MacKay further associates this mention with gender violence through Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" as well as Ovid's Philomela, both carrying themes of death, rape and mutilation.³⁰⁰ The visceral danger of a world coming to an end is almost physically felt in these opening pages and the experience of foreboding increases throughout the novel, as images of violence and decay are nestled among everyday moments of family life. This thematic preoccupation raises questions about the qualities and values of this old, pastoral way of life, which shapes the very heart of Englishness, what is worth saving, and what can be left behind, to make a new world after the war. Woolf's rhetoric goes far beyond a simple protectionist and insular conception of defending freedom. In fact, as I have argued throughout this thesis, she persistently questions the meaning of "freedom" in a political state built on practices of domination and control and advocates a

²⁹⁹ For material on Woolf's anti-imperialism, see Mark Wollaeger, "Woolf, picture postcards, modernity," in *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected papers from the tenth annual conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001), 213-20; Kathy Phillips, *Virginia Woolf Against Empire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994); Jane Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*," in *Decolonising Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Cannons*, ed. Karen Lawrence (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 136-62.

³⁰⁰ Marina MacKay, 'Between the Acts: Novels and Other Mass Media,' in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 161.

more far-reaching and deeply transformative understanding of the social world, through a practice which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and José Esteban Muñoz call reparative hermeneutics.³⁰¹

Woolf's reflections on women's experience of sexual violence are interconnected with the experience of war. On the morning before the pageant, Isa picks up *The Times* and begins skimming through the headlines, her attention caught by a story about a horse with a green tale. "The troopers had told her the horse had a green tale; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed parts of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face" (*BTA*, 18). The news story continues two pages later and resurfaces occasionally as Isa goes through her day, "The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer" (*BTA*, 20). This very visceral description of a deeply traumatic act of violence appears within a mindless and yearly recurrent, as we are told, conversation about the weather between Mr Oliver and Mrs Swithin ("Which will it be? [. . .] Wet or fine?" (*BTA*, 20)) and looking out the window to verify the forecast made in the paper. "Here came the sun – an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf. Then in compassion, it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering. 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" (*BTA*, 21)? Importantly, the question of legislating, or putting the self and its world in order, occurs in the context of the aftermath of violence. The surrealism of the military gang rape scene, introduced with the image of the horse with the green tale, and its reception "they all looked to the sky to see whether the sky obeyed the meteorologist" makes it all the more impactful. The narrator's observations of the sky, as they are not attributed to any particular character, merge the unpredictability of the weather with sexual violence against women, as two forces of nature

³⁰¹ For full discussion of reparative vs paranoid/suspicious practices of critique see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

unescapable and constant. The figure of the meteorologist, an interesting synecdoche for the patriarchal figure of control, expects obedience, and yet is not completely in control to guarantee it. Whose law is it they all obey, Woolf asks, as if to ascertain who should carry the burden of responsibility for the injury women suffer within the patriarchy; so the hope that perhaps if we found the source of the legislation, we could remedy its consequences emerges. And yet, the painful doubt that there is no law they obey and instead are either moved to act by sheer chance or human nature persists.

Gender violence, however, is not a natural but a social phenomenon lodged in material reality. The abstract ruminations of the narrator regarding self- and social legislation have to necessarily be grounded in the conditions that surround them. There is no universal human and there is no universal law. Stuart N. Clarke tells us that such rape indeed occurred on 27 April 1938 and was reported in *The Times* on 28, 29, and 30 June 1938, and Woolf as a daily reader of the *Times* would have certainly read about it.³⁰² “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1940), also conveys the threat of assault and vulnerability, marking women’s participation in military conflict. “The Germans were over this house last night and the night before that”, she writes. “It is a queer experience, lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet which may at any moment sting you to death” (*E*, 6: 242). This opening introduces a short essay where Woolf reflects on the kind of action women can take to bring about peace and future happiness.³⁰³ The essay explores the sinister biopolitical discourse of reproductive politics, before crossing into considering potential categories of emancipatory contribution such as thinking against the current and creative agency.

³⁰² Stuart N. Clarke, “The Horse with a Green Tail,” *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* vol. 34 (Spring, 1990): 3-4. Referred to in Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Counter-Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 169.

³⁰³ Woolf’s characterisation of an emancipated future as one of happiness in this essay and letter quoted above can be read critically. For an argument about happiness as a construct of capitalist and patriarchal power to ensure continued structural domination, see Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010).

Outlining a dichotomy between an “unfertile” and “fertile” mode of relations between men and women, Woolf blurs the lines between begetting new ideas and new generations. The former is associated with the old world of war and aggression, where men lust after glory and recognition and labour under the banners of patriotic citizenship: “all the searchlights are erect. At any moment a bomb may fall on this very room. [. . .] All feeling, save one dull dread, ceased. A nail fixed the whole being to one hard board. The emotion of fear is therefore sterile, unfertile” (*E*, 6: 244). As in the opening paragraph of the essay (“lying in the dark”, “hornet which may [. . .] sting you to death,” “guns on the hill go pop pop pop,” “the searchlights finger the clouds” (*E*, 6: 242)), the language here invites associations with an experience of sexual assault. Not being able to “defend herself,” being “held down,” “lying weaponless” against the invader as well as the “current” of discourse on home soil flowing “fast and furious,” “issue[ing] in a spate of words” positions women within a political reality which is meant to assault them physically, emotionally, psychologically, and politically.³⁰⁴ The kind of power, Woolf seems to imply, that shapes the patriarchal order is by design invasive, traumatic, and harmful for women. Similarly to the discussion of Rose’s forcible feeding in *The Years*, as a direct reference to the torture suffered by militant suffragettes at the hands of the state, Woolf links this state of assault women exist in to their attempts to gain standing as political citizens who can contribute to the political discourse and decision making that govern them. In contrast, the envisaged mode of democratic future relations Woolf describes at the close of the essay is one of “fertile” peaceful cooperation which goes beyond national boundaries: “if you can free the man from the machine, the seed does not fall upon an altogether stony ground. The seed may be fertile” (*E*, 6: 245). Englishmen and women, Germans, Italians sharing a cigarette and a cup of tea, making a better future is the idea Woolf plants, from which hope can begin to flourish.

³⁰⁴ The fertility of women as a trope for the continued life and success of the nation was utilised as a propaganda technique both by both sides during WWII. For a good comparison see Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilising Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

The World War II brought a very distinct threat of foreign invasion to Britain, as only a 22-minute flight separated its shores from the continent. By 1940, when Virginia and Leonard Woolf started planning their suicide pact in case of German landing, Woolf's famously pacifist position, defended in "Three Guineas," had begun to crumble. Many left-wing intellectuals who had refused to support World War I or the Spanish Civil War had seen the urgency to defend liberal freedoms against the Nazi threat and given in. But for Woolf this was not a straightforward endorsement of the use of force and violence to secure freedom. Her relationship with pacifism at this point was a complex negotiation and not the strict pro or against dichotomy often used to describe it.³⁰⁵ The political position she defended in "Three Guineas" and *The Years*, effectively summarised by Kitty Lasswade's expression, "violence is always wrong," instead acquires the more urgent (and gendered) characterisation "how far can she fight for freedom without firearms?" in "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (*E* 6, 242). The answer as far as the essay is concerned is "we can fight with mind" to "help the Englishman who is fighting up in the sky to defeat the enemy" (*E* 6, 242). How this translates in practical terms remains more ambiguous, however. As with "Three Guineas," Woolf uses this essay to urge "thinking against the current." Men have the firearms but women have weapons too – they have the power to generate ideas, forms of private thinking, or "tea-table thinking" (*E* 6, 242), as Woolf calls it, that go against the current to help generate defences for the old world order as well as to imagine a new one.³⁰⁶

A deep concern for all the ways in which violence reaches and settles into people's lives, the forms of agency or inaction that allow this to happen, and the responsibility that must be

³⁰⁵ As for example Marina MacKay does in "Virginia Woolf and the Pastoral Patria."

³⁰⁶ Woolf is rather scathing with regards to women who submit to the demands of mindless consumerism and conformity: "We can see shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women; women with crimson lips and crimson finger-nails. They are slaves who are trying to enslave." (*E* 6, 243)

faced, pervades Woolf's writing over the last few years of her life. The forms of political participation and agency required to respond to the threat of destruction and death, both within and outside the nation, become concerns of paramount importance for her as a thinker and writer who is committed to making a contribution to futurity. She feels compelled to fulfil her duty as a writer, a commitment recorded in many of her essays and letters of this period: "Let us think what we can do," she urges, "to create the only efficient air-raid shelter" (*E* 6: 242); "this idea struck me: the army is the body; I am the brain. Thinking is my fighting" (*D* 6, 285). Woolf perceives that the necessity to respond and the impulse to act, however, manifest differently to different agents. Women, without any political and professional representation, cannot create political discourse, she seems to suggest, but they can influence it. In a sense, this is the same argument about the role of women in creating peace we see in "Three Guineas" – women's position of social outsiders can serve them to escape the confines of a traditional system built on patriarchal values and practices; women, in other words, can learn independently and think against the current in order to generate new forms of agential expression and political participation. In "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" she further elaborates the scope of this independent influence – "we must give him access to creative feelings. We must make happiness. We must free him from the machine. We must bring him out of his prison into the open air" (*E* 6: 245).

The project formulated on these terms, however, seems to give women a rather tall order. Even if women had not been indoctrinated in the same rhetoric of patriotism, domination, and military triumph, how can we say that they have not been marked by the hand of patriarchal domination? How can we see them as outsiders to political exploitation? And how can we imagine that they have not been constrained and conditioned in the same way men have? Woolf herself asserts that women are affected by the same "desire to dominate and enslave" and

scathingly criticises women's participation in a capitalist political economy that subjects them to oppression: "We can see shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed up women; women with crimson lips and crimson finger-nails. They are slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves" (*E* 6: 243). Here, Woolf demonstrates her awareness that women's lives are shaped by economic and political laws of citizenship and consumption, but at the same time refuses to deny them the agency to overcome this predicament. Understanding alternative (or creative) forms of agential expression, she seems to be suggesting, is our only hope of re-engendering political life and producing a vision for the future. This vision however has to be generated in full view and understanding of all the ways in which patriarchal structures of power and domination affect the lives of those subjected to them.

In Marina MacKay assessment, "as the Blitz began, the bombs that indiscriminately hit city slums and royal residences became the figurative forces clearing away the stratified and corrupt old England to make room for a new social order."³⁰⁷ The idea of imagining a new social order interested Woolf immensely, as evident from essays like "The Leaning Tower," discussed in Chapter Two, and is clearly present in *Between the Acts* too. Such refocusing required a vision of political life that would bring about emancipation from various forms of "slavery" – including intellectual and economic dependence, class and gender inequality, discrimination on the basis of race and sexuality and so on. As Sanja Bahun asserts, "it is precisely because the air raids force the question of social levelling that Woolf is made to reflect on the historical events in conjunction with [. . .] her felt need to speak to all historical actants."³⁰⁸ In a letter to Lady Simon from 22 January 1940, she wonders what life might look like after the war:

³⁰⁷ Marina MacKay, "Virginia Woolf and the pastoral patria," 32.

³⁰⁸ Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 155.

Meanwhile, do cast your mind further that way: about sharing life after the war: about pooling men's and women's work: about the possibility if disarmament comes, of removing men's disabilities. Can one change sex characteristics? How far is the women's movement a remarkable experiment in that transformation? Mustn't our next task be the emancipation of man? How can we alter the crest and the spur of the fighting cock? (*L6*, no. 3580)

This path to future "natural life of happiness" she describes in other words relies on loosening the rules around agential expression and its regulation by the disciplines and institutions appointed by the state – the very building blocks of masculinity and femininity; of the duties and practices associated with both; and of the ability to espouse difference.

A social transformation of this scale began to take shape in British politics after Woolf's death and the end of the war, when, in 1945, Clement Atlee brought the Labour Party its first landslide victory and majority government. On a social change mandate under the motto "Let Us Face the Future," Atlee's government started working to rebuild Britain, fulfilling manifesto promises such as nationalisation of industries, economic planning, employment rights, a National Health Service, a social security system.³⁰⁹ As Woolf was writing *Between the Acts*, however, such vision of Britain would have seemed a fanciful dream and yet statements from the novel come surprisingly close: "Homes will be built. Each flat with its refrigerator, in the crannied wall. Each of us a free man; plates washed by machinery; not an aeroplane to vex us; all liberated; made whole . . ." (*BTA*, 164). But this dream, as presented in the novel, is vague, with no intention or agency to drive it to reality, a passive waiting for a future of technological advancement to transport one into a different state of being. Playing on the various meanings the title seems to suggest, Woolf invites us to consider what happens between the acts of the pageant that demarcate the hybrid aesthetic body of the text as well as the communal experience of its

³⁰⁹ For a social history of the British welfare state, see Bernard Harris, *The origins of the British Welfare State: Society, State and Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800-1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy Since the Industrial Revolution*, 3rd Edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Virginia Noble, *Inside the Welfare State: Foundations of Policy and Practice in Post-War Britain* (London: Routledge, 2009).

characters. But the literary term signifying one self-contained portion of a dramatic play, the meaning of an act – what begets it, what justifies it, what follows it – looms large. There is something dystopic and threatening in this vision of a world that comes into being without intent. Woolf, with her characteristic mindfulness, recasts the issues of intentionality in the context of violence.

3.7 Democratic participation: *Between the Acts*

One of the central axes of *Between the Acts* is precisely the relationship between gender, agency, and action. What a woman can do? What a man can do? Is everyone equal in their abilities? Are they all equally responsible for their present and future worlds? Interestingly, Woolf approaches the problem negatively, from the perspective of restriction and violation. “The novel’s scenes beyond the pageant,” as Marina MacKay asserts, “are dominated by acts of physical violence.”³¹⁰ It is also important however to emphasise that these acts of violence are not the indiscriminate and impulsive products of aggression, but subdued, persistent, and gendered. They are settled in amongst seemingly innocent moments of familial amiability and pastoral idyll, and almost imperceptibly, smuggled in in the guise of habit or tradition, come to shape the characters’ lives.

During the pageant’s interval break, when the audience congregates in the barn for tea and cake, the long-established rules of class-consciousness and social order overshadow any democratic impulse. At this point, Woolf even seems to question the idea of democracy and what role it plays in the establishment of a social order containing such brazen inequality. It is curious that the only two times Woolf mentions the word democracy in the novel appear in this section. Much like each member of the audience has their own role to play in the overall pageant

³¹⁰ Marina MacKay, “Virginia Woolf and the pastoral patria”, 27.

performance, their behaviour in the barn also appears directed and choreographed. When queueing for refreshments, Mrs Manresa decides to give way to the villagers and stops outside to observe the architecture of the barn, but they remain still, refusing to take their food before she does. “The villagers still hung back. They must have someone to start the ball rolling.

Well, I’m dying for my tea!’ she said in her public voice and strode forward. She laid hold of a thick china mug. Mrs Sands giving precedence, of course, to one of the gentry, filled it at once. David gave her cake. She was the first to drink, the first to bite. The villagers still hung back. ‘It’s all my eye about democracy,’ she concluded.” (*BTA*, 91-2)³¹¹

The stuff and nonsense of democracy speak here to Woolf’s doubt that a democratic ideal that has already been corrupted by a controlling patriarchal political order which accommodates class, gender, and race discrimination is the answer to the need to imagine a future. The second mention, where the democratic principle is eschewed in favour of convenience which further re-entrenches class boundaries, also fails to inspire confidence in the democratic project. “Then, at the end by the door, they came upon the old couple, Lucy and Bartholomew, sitting on their Windsor chairs. Chairs had been reserved for them. Mrs Sands had sent them tea. It would have caused more bother than it was worth – asserting the democratic principle; standing in the crowd by the table” (*BTA*, 97). But is Woolf prepared to dispense with democracy altogether? In the liberal political imagination democracy is inextricably linked to freedom. As Wendy Brown asserts, it is the “dream of democracy – that humans might govern themselves by governing together” and the relationship between freedom and identity that “yields the paradox in which the first imaginings of freedom are always constrained by and potentially even require the very structure of oppression that freedom emerges to oppose.”³¹² The idea of a social order is clearly present in the novel, as the plot is choreographed between the acts of the pageants, as well as

³¹¹ “all my eye” is an archaic expression dating back to the 18th century meaning “stuff and nonsense”. See “eye, n.1, P4/n (a)”. OED Online. July 2018. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67296?redirectedFrom=all+my+eye> (accessed September 23, 2018).

³¹² Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 5;7.

within them. In fact, captured within the confines of the novel itself, despite its hybrid and experimental form, intentionality and the capacity to act freely is very limited. “Our part [. . .] is to be the audience. And a very important part too,” says simply Mr Oliver, the retired civil servant who had made a life of following imperial orders in India (*BTA*, 54). But in addition to specific instances of order and control imposed upon her characters, Woolf draws our attention to the larger structural conditions which accommodate such practices: “so we answer to the infernal, agelong and eternal order issued from on high. And obey. ‘Working, serving, pushing, striving, earning wages – to be spent – here? No dear no. Now? No, by and by. When ears are deaf and the heart is dry’” (*BTA*, 107). Woolf’s criticism of this uncritical impulse to blindly obey is a sign, however, that her distrust of the democratic order and its promise of freedom does not translate into a complete damnation.³¹³

In fact, if the purpose in *Orlando* was to show restriction by means of the narrative’s fantastic opulence, *Between the Acts* is decidedly marked with restraint, made all the more unsettling by the rich generic and formal texture of the text. Pastoral woven through pageant, music interlaced with comedy, romance intermixed with history, construct a diverse creative landscape where communal rituals of remembering and hoping can be practised. Despite the diversity of creative expression, restraint is evident in the acts of the novel’s characters. Woolf’s composition, compressed within 24 hours of narrative time, has everyone following a precisely delineated agential arc that accommodates only the most minimal of actions. The characters’ daily lives revolve around their individual habits - Mr Oliver’s reading of *The Times*, Isa’s dressing in front of the mirror and ringing to order food, Mrs Swithin’s church attendance, the

³¹³ This quotation is reminiscent of a statement Theodor Adorno makes in a 1960 radio talk: “Yet the very willingness to connive with power and to submit outwardly to what is stronger, under the guise of a norm, is the attitude of the tormentors that should not rise again. It is for this reason the advocacy of bonds is so fatal. People who adopt them more or less voluntarily are placed under a kind of permanent compulsion to obey orders. The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating” (“Education after Auschwitz”, 4).

cook's preparations of luncheon, and habitual communal practices. Breakfast rituals lead into luncheon, luncheon is followed by nature watching, then the play starts, Act I, interval, tea and cake, the pageant continues, and the day ends with the family sitting in the parlour. Act after act, they are swept into the ebb and flow of the day, and the possibility to formulate an intent and make a choice is thrown into question. The object of inquiry here becomes not simply how does a person act in a time of violent threat, but can one act at all. In this sense, Woolf refuses to accept a purely negative understanding of social constraint and continues to question and explore different agential models. How free is a person to act even when there is visibly nothing to constrain them? As the title on the novel demonstrates, Woolf is interested precisely in capturing the stasis *between* the acts themselves, seen as fragments of a dramatic sequence, character actions, or instances of agential capacity more broadly.

Even Giles, a white man in his prime, who works as a stock trader feels unable to perform his own actions:

Aunt Lucy, foolish, free; always since he had chosen, after leaving college, to take a job in the city, expressing her amazement, her amusement, at men who spent their lives buying and selling – ploughs? glass beads was it? or stocks and shares? – to savages who wished most oddly – for were they not beautiful naked? – to dress and live like the English? A frivolous, a malignant statement hers was of a problem which, for he had no special gift, or capital, and had been furiously in love with his wife – he nodded to her across the table – had afflicted him for ten years. Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another and the conglomeration of things passed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water. So he came for the weekend and changed. (*BTA*, 42)

The passage reveals the mechanisms of power and control developed through the capitalist and imperial economic world order, reaching down into the very depths of people's most intimate lives. The ties between marriage, family, and capital erase experiences of individual affect and agency that motivate one's commitments. Woolf's language is explicitly commerce-based; referring to buying and selling, stocks and shares, capital, conglomeration she names the modus

operandi of this system of privilege which denies choice even to those it is designed to champion. This is a similar sentiment to the one expressed in “Three Guineas”, where Woolf sees men as victims as well as beneficiaries of institutional power. This economy of trade implies a simple relation of meeting a need with a corresponding service, implying the equal standing of both seller and buyer. Woolf is interested in this trade off: if choice is treated as a given, how does one know when and how they can choose? Mark Hussey’s proposition regarding the affinity “between Keynes’s economic models and the instabilities and uncertainties of Woolf’s fiction” is worth considering.³¹⁴ But the Keynesian link between individual motivations and economic actions is not what interests her most. In addition to offering a critique of existing social conditions and practices of oppression, any feminist position (or socially critical position for that matter) worth its salt has to offer a possibility for transformation. In line with this tradition, Woolf is not satisfied with the Adornian idea that only negative freedom is available to us within the structural constraints of capitalist modernity. Adorno’s position is that the best we are capable of under such conditions is resistance, but not of regaining autonomy and agency as they are too deeply intertwined with conditions of power and oppression.³¹⁵ Woolf, however, is committed to imagining a more positive transformation from within the constraints of patriarchal domination.

3.8 Queer autonomy and reparative hermeneutics

³¹⁴ Mark Hussey, “Mrs. Thatcher and Mrs. Woolf,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* v.50 no.1 (Spring 2004): 9. In short, this revolves around Keynes’s proposition that the motivations of economic actors be considered as well as their acts (the latter being the domain of classical economics). For an account on the links between Keynes’s ideas and Bloomsbury, see Piero Mini, *Keynes, Bloomsbury, and The General Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991).

³¹⁵ See Fabian Freyenhagen’s *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) for an account of Adorno’s negative philosophy and the ethical commitments possible within it. Another good study exploring the links between Adorno’s thought and modernism, see Espen Hammer, *Adorno’s Modernism: Art, Experience, Catastrophe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Critical theory operates in two parallel directions referred to as “explanatory-diagnostic” and “anticipatory-utopian”. In Amy Allen’s formulation, the explanatory-diagnostic task revolves around “the analysis of power relations in all of their depth and complexity” to uncover “relations of domination and oppression that enslave human beings, block emancipation, and generate social crises and pathologies.”³¹⁶ According to Seyla Benhabib, the anticipatory-utopian aspect of critical theory “views the present from the perspective of the radical transformation of its basic structure, and interprets actual, lived crises and protests in the light of an anticipated future.”³¹⁷ On Benhabib’s account, the transition from one to the other requires a robust account of autonomy as a mode of self-legislation to allow the subject to develop an independent critical and reflexive perspective, which can guide her decisions and actions. This understanding presents, under a different guise, the problem encountered in Benhabib and Braidotti’s readings of *Orlando*, discussed earlier, as a text which demonstrates that gender commitments do not occur on the level of self-formation but are required post factum. Some critical theorists, like Benhabib, ask for a very clear-cut definition of autonomy that is untainted by power relations. The idea behind this position is that only a robust account of autonomy can give us the uncontaminated intentionality and agency to utilise towards an emancipatory purpose. On this view, as long as power and autonomy are mixed together, it will not be possible to determine whether the agent’s intentions and actions are the product of oppressive and conformist impulses or indeed driven by autonomous decision making.

³¹⁶ Amy Allen, “Emancipation without Utopia: Subjection, Modernity, and the Normative Claims of Feminist Critical Theory”, *Hypatia* vol. 30, no.3 (Summer 2015), 514. See also Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender and Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) and *Against Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), Allison Weir, *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory between Power and Connection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³¹⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 226.

But, of course, as I have been arguing in this thesis, Woolf's treatment of the making of the subject suggest a more complex picture. Amy Allen has argued that power and autonomy are by necessity interlinked and that in order to devise a more productive understanding of the "anticipatory-utopian" commitment and direction of critical theory, we must seriously rethink what we mean by emancipation as the explanatory-diagnostic analysis of gendered power relations; in her words, "complexity seems to undercut the very possibility of emancipation on which the anticipatory-utopian task relies."³¹⁸ Keeping in mind Foucault's and Butler's insight that every kind of personal and social transformation necessarily has to happen within the confines of power, promises of a fully emancipated society of the good where all forms of oppression are eradicated might prove to be illusory and dangerous, or indeed even be a form of "consorting with fundamentalism", according to Wendy Brown.³¹⁹ In her view, "ideals of freedom ordinarily emerge to vanquish their imagined immediate enemies, but in this move they frequently recycle and reinstate rather than transform the terms of domination that generated them."³²⁰ How are we to proceed, then? Queer and gender theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and José Esteban Muñoz have long called for a hermeneutic revolution – a complete overhaul of the way we approach critique. This has been formulated in various ways by these two theorists, but what it means, in essence, is a rejection of the negative philosophy of hermeneutics of suspicion and embracing a more hopeful, future-oriented approach, as well as a commitment to fostering reparative affects.³²¹ Woolf's approach seems to have anticipated this recent direction in gender and critical theory and begun to seek reparative means in *Between the Acts*.

³¹⁸ Amy Allen, "Emancipation," 513.

³¹⁹ Wendy Brown, *Edgework*, 101.

³²⁰ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, 7.

³²¹ See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

William Dodge, the reluctant self-negating writer, and Miss La Trobe, the foreign playwright who refuses to explain her art, both provide examples of queer agency that can initiate a reparative impulse. Dodge's queer identity sparks the rage contained in Giles's constrained masculine agency: "a toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his sense; but a teaser and twitcher; a fingerer of sensations; picking and choosing; dillying and dallying; not a man to have straightforward love for a woman – his head was close to Isa's head – but simply a – At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips" (*BTA*, 55). Giles's frustration rises precisely because paradoxically he sees some freedom in Dodge's sexuality that he himself does not possess. The picking and choosing he imagines Dodge's able to do stands in stark contrast with Giles's self-perceived succumbing to the conventions of heterosexual masculinity ("Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things pressed you flat" (*BTA*, 43)). Isa too believes in Giles's agency and feels "pride in herself, whom he had chosen" (*BTA*, 44). His aunt is proud of him and his father loves him, we are told, thus completing the family economy which seems to revolve around reacting to Giles's affects: Bartholomew notes his anger and Isa watches him in fear as he finishes his lunch and starts eating his cherry tart. The falsity of this construct, built upon the unstable foundation of presumed masculine agency and knowledge, threatens the coherence of the family unit as Isa imagines herself having an affair with Mr Haines, the farmer, and Giles flirts with Mrs Manresa.

"A poor specimen he was," thinks Isa of Dodge, seeing him fidget and deny his identification as an artist multiple times. This refusal to define and integrate, an instinctive agential swerve from the pattern of dominant autonomous practice is precisely what gives Dodge the attribute of being able to choose and to not be pressed flat. Touring the house with Mrs Swithin is the closest he comes to sharing a piece of himself with another

He saw her eyes only. And he wished to kneel before her, to kiss her hand, and to say: 'At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty, Mrs Swithin; so I married; but my child's not my child, Mrs Swithin. I'm a half man, Mrs Swithin; a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass, Mrs Swithin; as Giles saw; but you've healed me . . .' So he wished to say; but said nothing. (BTA, 67)

Even through the experience of trauma Dodge is able to regenerate enough of himself to begin a process of healing, to give himself another chance to survive and carry on, he fears dispossession of the identity that has caused him almost as much pain as the one he is hiding. As Sedgwick writes, "the desire of a reparative impulse [. . .] is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."³²² This is not the same type of agency as the one upon which power relations are built, namely the aggressive, demanding recognition, and autonomous mastery impulse that controls and dominates. Woolf offers us here a reparative agency generated through the effort to continue through the injury of fear and oppression, through the dull everyday struggle not to get destroyed for one's difference, through the pain of being denied justice. Despite his failure to verbalise his confession, his capacity to make a connection on this level to another person is indicative of Woolf's hopefulness that, given enough care, his agential impact will grow.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler evokes the transformation of the term "queer" from signalling "degradation" to signifying "a new and affirmative set of meanings."³²³ This generation of new and affirmative meaning of oppressive discourses is made through power relations and within the process of historical development as a series of speech acts, performed stubbornly and recurrently with perseverance and dedication. "There is no power, construed as a subject, that acts," she writes, "but only [. . .] a reiterated acting that *is* power in its persistence

³²² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.

³²³ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 169.

and instability. This is less an ‘act’, singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power.”³²⁴ In a memorable exercise of reparative agency, Miss La Trobe overcomes what she sees as the failure of her artistic vision in the performance of the pageant and continues to generate new ideas. After the performance is over and her audience has disappeared, she pronounces her creative effort “a failure” (*BTA*, 188). Her identity is queer both due to her unspecified national belonging and her sexuality, two markers setting her apart from the rest of her social environment in the small English countryside village. Miss La Trobe acutely feels this difference, “the horror and terror of being alone” and “somehow set apart from her kind” drive her to seek consolation in drink (*BTA*, 190). As she enters the pub, she interrupts the public narrative of her own self shared and transformed in the villagers’ conversations. She ignores their voices and through the surrounding cigarette smoke begins to hear a new story and repairing what has been broken. Like Woolf’s, Miss La Trobe’s process of reparative agency is a process of trial and error, of invention, and of fantasy. The gift she tries to give her audience is not restricted by constraint and conditions; it is a free gifts freely given by a free woman. “She raised her lips. And drank. And listened. [. . .] Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning – wonderful words” (*BTA*, 191).

³²⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 171.

Conclusion

Discussions of modernism and politics have abounded in the field over the last couple of decades. Spurred forward by the growing tiredness of methods and types of reading which traditionally relied on formalist and Leavisian commitments to determining aesthetic value and preserving the purity of art, and by the emergence of the “new modernist” studies framework through the work of Rebecca Walkowitz, Douglas Mao, and others, scholars now show an ever-expanding interest in modernist conceptualizations of political life. However, the forms of political life that have attracted most critical attention are still those represented by what I have called in this thesis “establishment subjectivities.” By taking an interest primarily in the type of agents that can be placed in this category, that is, those of dominant gender, sexuality, race, or nationality, critics are in danger of further occluding the already largely marginalized areas of political life considered the province of the power-less: women, queer and non-binary agents for example, as well as those of non-white and non-British origin, and the ways in which these identities intersect. Understanding how modernist literature engaged with politics has to be informed by an understanding of the formation and operation of power (and control) within the socio-cultural sphere; and we should not attempt to understand power by looking exclusively at those who wield it.

As Cassandra Laity argues, in her introduction to the inaugural issue of the journal *Feminist Modernist Studies*, the first of its kind in the field and only launched in 2017, “gender issues are either largely omitted, summarily added on, or - within feminist scholarship – subsumed under modernism’s broader intellectual expansions into globalization, cultural studies, and interdisciplinarity.”³²⁵ The perception that women are supposed to appear “everywhere” in

³²⁵ Cassandra Laity, “Editor’s Introduction: Towards Feminist Modernisms,” *Feminist Modernist Studies* vol. 1, no. 1-2 (2018): 1.

modernist studies and, still, as Laity asserts, “a full-scale, feminist recovery has yet to occur”³²⁶ is rather worrisome. It demonstrates the difficulty critics continue to face in stepping away from the safety of not only the largely male cannon, but also, and importantly so, from the mainstream definitions of modernism, modernity, and progress that often erase women’s participation or unquestionably reframe it in terms of the dominant narrative. Such re-writing has often occurred in the case of canonical women writers like Virginia Woolf, but her contributions to the thinking methodologies that shape modernism and its legacies are still open for investigation. Inadvertently, the supposition that “of course” women are “everywhere” and “everyone” knows it may cause further obscurity and marginalization of issues pertaining to structural inequality and the contributions of women and other non-privileged agents make to our shared political life, in a liberal “post-feminist” critical economy. My thesis reexamines Virginia Woolf’s writing in order to uncover a model of thinking about new forms of agency, a model that can help one such feminist recovery project to commence.

The ideal of rational autonomy is in many ways what launched the project of enlightenment modernity – a power transfer from God to man which ensured that man was able to satisfy his ambitions of taming nature, conquering new territories, and controlling his fellow beings. Shrouded under the questionable moral justification of historical progress as both transcendental and empirical truth leading to the height of human civilisation seen as embodied in white European patriarchy, this aggressive political force created a code of disciplinary practices that solidified traditional power structures and the types of subjectivities associated with it, while legitimising inflicting various forms of oppression on those who were not. As Rita Felski writes, “within the constraints of single mythic narrative [of modernity], it is inevitably man who assumes the role of collective subject of history, while woman can exist only as Other,

³²⁶ Laity, “Editor’s Introduction,” 2.

as the object rather than the subject of historical narrative.”³²⁷ Felski, however does not espouse creating new counteracting mythologies. Similarly, my intention with this thesis has not been to conceive a new origin myth for feminist modernity. What I hope to have accomplished is to use current critical commitments to destabilise the traditional conception of the autonomous subject and the kinds of agency that are mobilised by it and discover its specific modalities and agential propositions in Woolf’s fiction. Focusing on the problem of autonomy and subjecthood, I argue, allows us to re-start the inquiry into autonomy and agency from the very beginning of subject formation. This focus propels the two main questions driving this thesis: what role does gender play in our self-determination as persons in a context of power relations and how can we generate new forms of agency that can resist the oppressive demands of patriarchal norms. As demonstrated by the theoretical materials used throughout this thesis, feminist philosophers have done important work to recover aspects of autonomy that can be beneficial for an empowering and emancipatory feminist politics. However, the disciplinary confines of the debate limit its progression beyond a handful of well-established positions, exemplified in this project through the work of Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, and Amy Allen, and eventuating in the two strands of critical theory termed as explanatory-diagnostic and anticipatory-utopian. Turning the lens towards the intellectual and aesthetic force of modernist women writers, and Woolf in particular, allows us to do three things at once: to substantively enhance our understanding of modernist artistic production and agency, to expand our critical horizon beyond the boundaries of suspicion, and thereby to complicate and enrich our understanding of autonomy as such. Pulled between the aspiration to diagnose and to anticipate (a utopian alternative), autonomy debates often result in a stunted vision of the future. Instead, modernist literature allows, to recall Max Horkheimer’s directional call, any such critical project to dream, to imagine, to fantasise.³²⁸

³²⁷ Rita Felski, *Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7.

³²⁸ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972), 188-243.

Woolf did not adopt a ready-made vision of feminist autonomous subjectivity; rather, I suggest, she came to it through a long and laborious process of artistic trials and material history tests, a process that was itself generative of her fiction and of her well-known proclamations of modernist activism. My thesis follows closely this process to recover a feminist notion of autonomy.

My interpretation of Woolf's fiction, essayistic, and personal writings suggests that the writer convincingly exposes the dangers of simply adopting a universal and ungendered autonomy model and using it as an inspirational and idealized condition of personhood, awarded with the highest manifestation of social recognition and rights. I argue that she convincingly exposes the dangers of simply adopting a universal and ungendered autonomy model and using it as an aspirational and idealized condition of personhood, awarded with the highest manifestation of social recognition and rights. To counter this model prone to petrification, I argue, Woolf emphasizes and brings forward the material and social conditions, such as class and education, as well as the normative requirements that govern the types of subjectivity that are acceptable and expressible in the social world in order, to show that personhood not only does not exist outside these frameworks of reference, but that in many ways it is determined by them. The types of agents that exist within these confines, she discloses, are regulated by patriarchal mechanisms of discipline and alternative, non-privileged, modes of agency are punished, sanitized, or remain unrecognized. Woolf, however, does not stop at the diagnostic step and tries to imagine a more hopeful future. By means of aesthetic and conceptual experimentation, Woolf achieves a utopian glimpse at a futurity that is grounded not in the harmful dialectic of reason and accountability, but in a compassionate and affective mode of agency directed at healing and self-preservation. This new reparative hermeneutic does not simply change the answers to issues of diversity and

inclusivity in building a democratic social world that does not harm its own subjects but has the potential to alter the very questions that condition the nature of our political life.

My investigation of the processes that brought about this argument stretches across the three chapters of this thesis. Chapter One begins with a presentation of Michel Foucault's account of autonomous self-constitution, which has been influential for many subsequent feminist arguments relating to autonomy. Using the characters Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* and Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway* as case studies to examine how Foucault's model fits with Woolf's practice of characterization and representation, I draw out a significant point of difference. Foucault's understanding of the "technologies of the self" requires the subject to develop a position of self-reflection from which they can form rationally sound conclusions about their position within the hold of power relation and institutional control; in other words, a person can only constitute oneself in the context of those power relations and has to be understandable or recognizable within them to other agents as this is the only way to communicate and be recognized as a subject. In turn, this in Judith Butler's view, constitutes a demand to give an account of oneself that can be broadly conceptualized as making oneself seen by others by means of a will or a choice. "The conceit of autonomy," as she refers to this practice of accountability, is precisely the notion that autonomy depends on personal attitudes, internal resources, and a dash of good will. The demand for recognizability, however, as Woolf successfully exhibits through Rachel's transformation from a non-person to a fiancée, comes with a price. In order to become recognizable one has to modify markers of singularity within one's comportment and movement through the social world. For Woolf, this is a serious warning sign, and as I argue, one concession too many, demonstrating that even in Foucault's account, which is broadly considered one of the most efficient in bringing about a formulation of emancipatory and democratic principles, already presupposes a type of privileged subject that

has the capacity to generate a self-reflexive modality that can be seen and justified as such. Chapter One ends, with a discussion of the failed *Bildungsroman* as a category of resistance Woolf employs to demonstrate that the dominant autonomy model does not serve the legitimizing needs of those who do not already enjoy such privileges.

Chapter Two investigates the external obstacles women and other non-privileged agents face in the struggle to establish themselves as autonomous agents. The discussion takes inspiration from Woolf's own feminist polemic "Three Guineas," which establishes the conditions of patriarchal dominance that restrict all forms of dissent and unsanctioned agential impact. Woolf's critique of the traditional institutional order underpinning the British social establishment is supported here by insights from Wendy Brown and Seyla Benhabib's works on the nature of normativity and the democratisation of political life. By further examination of theories of habit and the everyday, I follow Woolf's attempts to establish an alternative domain for agential formation and expression. I establish her distrust of traditional historical narratives of progress which are used for awarding value and validity to acts of mastery and domination, designed to preserve the conditions of power and distributed through its institutional programmes, such as education and the law. The second chapter ends with a reading of *The Years*, a historical novel that aims to demonstrate the complicity of such narratives in suppressing opportunities for cultivating autonomous agency that can lead to a political transformation. Woolf makes an explicit point here that all agents' freedom, even those carrying privileged and recognisable status, are harmed by such narrative norms, as intentionality becomes co-opted by power preservation and perpetuation. In other words, the chapter concludes, even those who most benefit from traditional formulation of the autonomy ideal suffer a diminished capacity for personal and intellectual development.

Chapter Three traces Woolf's search for alternative modes of recording and narrating lives. Her life writing practice is juxtaposed with traditional forms of biography and autobiography, demonstrating the interdependence between larger social discourses of accountability and exceptionalism and literary representation. Woolf's aversion to establishment forms of subjectivity finds expression in her aesthetic experiment with genre, form, and fantasy in the conceptual construction of *Orlando*. This text also provides a fertile ground for examining more closely the role gender plays as a constitutive component of autonomy and self-determination, both on an individual and social level. I argue that gender is not simply a form of characterisation one picks up after forming the narrative core of one's self, but rather an element that constitutes the performance of that formation as a whole. Furthermore, I examine the link between gender identification, embodiment and the legal status of the subject, a verdict carried out by the state even to this day, which comes with political and economic consequences. The second half of the chapter explores the modes of affect and reaction that can be generated by experiencing lack of control over one's own person through a reading of *Between the Acts*. I argue that Woolf preserves a commitment to democratising political life despite the failures of democratic principles she detects, just as she wishes to recover autonomy to serve an emancipatory purpose despite its complicity with oppression. Through a description of various forms of sexual violence, in war and in peace, she arrives at an alternative form of agency, what I have called "reparative agency," that intends to heal and recover, not to dominate and master.

Thus the thesis ends at a new beginning. The avenues to thinking about political life, the agents who participate in it, the actions they carry out, and the modes literature employs to represent them uncovered by Woolf can be a valuable resource on the way to fully developing the feminist recovery project in modernist studies Cassandra Laity has in mind. One could say that Woolf reconceptualises autonomy as a what Jacques Derrida named "pharmakon," the

poison which contains its own remedy.³²⁹ Similar approaches can be employed in further expanding the work of modernist critics to democratising the field and to bringing in non-privileged view points as participants and contributors to a vast aesthetic and conceptual production, instead of just as footnotes or illustrations of somethings larger that stretches beyond them. Furthermore, it has the potential to challenge the dominant narratives of progress, authorship, cannon, and even intertextuality as a corpus of normative markers of intellectual and literary development. Woolf's reimagining of autonomy shows that texts, words, and writing that do not fit the template in use should not be simply discarded as defective in some way but instead should be re-examined and re-read with obstinacy and commitment to help us see beyond our normative limits.

This new, and newly reinvigorated way of thinking points to a further research project on charting a modernist history of agency, using the works of women and queer writers to trace alternative routes for the recovery of autonomy. Reflecting on the hermeneutic, aesthetic, social, and legal frameworks women mobilise to realise and represent their own political agency, will be a further step in pushing the present critical enquiry beyond critique and following modernist literature's dream course. Woolf believed that artistic works are powerful sources of dissent which can help us maintain "the recurring dream that has haunted the human mind since the beginning of time; the dream of peace, the dream of freedom" (TG,143); I hope this research has made a small step towards achieving this dream.

³²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

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