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Characterization and the hermeneutics of recognition in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

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ABSTRACT

This article traces Virginia Woolf's interest in the representation of women back to her first published novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). It argues that her dissatisfaction with traditional modes of women's characterization stems from their reliance on recognizable patriarchal models of personhood, an unhealthy dependence which restricts the development of new forms of gendered political and personal identification. This reading uses the concept of recognition, as understood in the post-Hegelian feminist tradition, as a key structuring and interpretative tool to demonstrate Woolf's early critical insight into the fraught relationship between idealized narratives of individual autonomy and gender. In doing so, it makes a case for the broader inclusion of recognition as a critical term of inquiry in modernist studies, both as an aesthetic and political site of contention.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's contemporaries often highlight characterization as a flaw in her writing practice. This common critical trope accompanies the publications of all her novels, starting with the very first, *The Voyage Out* (1915). An unsigned review in the *Nation*, for example, declares it "hardly a work of art. Partly because of its form, partly because it is too passionately intent upon vivisection."[1] Despite offering generous praise for the execution of nearly every other aspect of the text, E. M. Forster finds that the "characters are not vivid. […] they do not stroll out of their sentences, and even develop a tendency to merge shadow-like."[2] Woolf's reactions to such comments were initially confined to her diaries and personal correspondence and ranged from frustration to acquiescence. Towards the end of the 1910s and early 1920s, however, they began to take a more distinct and public shape as a loose theory of modern fiction, developed in celebrated essays such as "Modern Novels" (1919), "Reading" (1919), "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923/4), and "Character in Fiction" (1924).[3]

The clamor of voices decrying the insufficiencies of modernist characters was a common feature in the critical landscape of the day, particularly when discussing novels of development and education, like *The Voyage Out*. As Jed Esty argues

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modernists often tried to circumvent the *Bildungsroman*'s "generic dictates or to revise them out of recognition."[4] As a result, their modifications of the traditional developmental trajectories followed by its protagonists, associated with a process of learning and successful adaptation to social norms, tend to "block or defer the attainment of a mature social role."[5] For Esty, Woolf's novel accomplishes just such an intervention through the workings of its plot and setting, which position its characters firmly within the histories of colonial contact, displacement, and migration.[6] Susan Stanford Friedman also focuses on the text's challenges to the "orthodoxies of representation" and its defiance of the "boundaries of expectation as these have been erected by literary tradition."[7] This reading concentrates explicitly on the function of women in the successful execution of the marriage plot and raises important questions about the role of gender in conventionally constructed narratives of development. The category of the "female Bildungsroman," under which *The Voyage Out* was classified by early critics, has been in feminist critical parlance since at least the 1970s, chiefly occupying itself with investigating how women writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represented "the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by patriarchal gender norms."[8] In their well-known study in this tradition, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, argue that the traditional *Bildungsroman* excludes gender "as a pertinent category," an omission that has had direct effects on the dominant models for its "narrative structure," "psychology," and "representation of social pressures."[9] What is more, reading the history of the *Bildugsroman* as a document of the development of modern subjectivity, "one could be tempted to conclude that the gender of modernity is indeed male," an impression, which, as Rita Felski states, calls for a sustained critique of the "idealized representation of the autonomous male subject."[10]

As I will argue in what follows, Woolf's first novel engages in performing precisely this task and in doing so exhibits the development of a related interest in Woolf's thought. That is, the representation of women in fiction as a political problem, which is brought to bear on the aesthetic strategies of character construction and the hermeneutic practices employed to interpret them. Consequently, this article places emphasis on character, rather than plot formation, in order to bring to light Woolf's early insight into the regulatory power of reading norms. While the *Bildungsroman* plot in *The Voyage Out* allows Woolf to formulate a direct challenge to the narrative of development, as it relates to women's lives, her concerns go beyond a criticism of the limited social positions they are allowed to occupy.[11] Directing her critical focus towards traditional models of characterization, heavily underwritten by the ideal of self-determination, shows that she identifies the very construction of the subject, in and through the normative conditions of power relations that shape our experiences as gendered and embodied agents, as a site of contention, anticipating much contemporary feminist theory on the topic. Furthermore, it lays the foundation of her critique of institutionalism and the forms of knowledge it engenders and propagates, which she elaborates more completely through her essays and novels of the 1920s and 1930s. As stated by Stephanie J. Brown in a recent essay, feminist approaches to Woolf's writing have been successful in instilling the importance of attending carefully to her "growing conviction that existing institutions are structured by an ineradicably patriarchal logic, and therefore inadequate to the needs of women and to the requirements of a just society."[12] Elucidating the ways in which Woolf sees this inadequacy as functioning through the narrative and

hermeneutic norms which govern the literary representations of personhood, is the main objective of this article.

To begin this discussion, I would like to return to the term "recognition," used in passing by Esty. Despite playing an important role within larger histories of ideas associated with personal autonomy and democratic social organization, the concept of recognition has been insufficiently developed in literary studies, as Felski has recently observed.[13] Some consideration of recognition has taken place, mainly as a principle of poetics, derived from the Aristotelian notion of *anagnorisis*, which is generally understood to signify a moment of transition from ignorance to knowledge.[14] These reflections have largely taken place within a framework of realist forms of representation, which tend to rely on a narrative logic of an inevitable revelation of purpose and meaning, a feature very much in operation within the *Bildugnsroman*, and one, which, as outlined above, the modernist novel of this kind tends to undermine. Hence, recognition in this sense, despite its customary operation as a principle of identity construction, has been deemed largely immaterial for modernist criticism in general, and feminist modernist criticism in particular. The larger political point encoded within the problem of recognition as an organizational device in fiction, which often evades detection, is brought into focus by Woolf's narrative of her young protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, who undertakes the task of becoming a socially recognizable individual within the context of a patriarchal economy of knowledge.[15] The novel stages Rachel's engagement as the culmination of this educational process, the narrative and hermeneutic end of the literary imagination, followed by the young heroine's death. In a sense, this is the highest form *anagnorisis* can attain and its ultimate limitation – fiction constructed on this model, cannot see beyond that which is knowable, or even that which is known. As Ben Parker observes, it is at the point that the Aristotelian notion begins to acquire Hegelian echoes. "The logic of recognition," he writes, "presumes an ultimate knowability: the truth of subjectivity requires a detour though otherness," a detour obstructed under the conditions of capitalist modernity and the norms of identity development it espouses.[16]

Contemporary political theories of recognition also trace back to Hegel. His concept of *Anerkennung* as developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is concerned with the constitution of knowing subjects, which he sees not as an isolated activity, but one which must be performed in communion with others: "[s]elf-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another self-another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged."[17] This process upholds for Hegel the infinite nature of this two-fold exchange in dialectical opposition to the determinateness of self-consciousness. In other words, the subject has to be recognized by others and have its claims to personhood validated through intersubjective acknowledgement within the social sphere in order to escape the laws of its own determination. This also leads to establishing an autonomous sense of self and the creation of ethical obligations for the treatment of others. However, receiving and granting recognition under conditions of social inequality raises questions about the hierarchies of value generated by this exchange. Feminist philosophers continue to dispute the usefulness of recognition as a formative principle for democratic social structure, within which women can find emancipation. A significant voice in these debates is Judith Butler, whose concerns regarding the concept and its relationship to oppression are deep and persistent, as further discussion below will

demonstrate. The benefits of reading Woolf in tandem with Butler have been brought into sharp focus by Elsa Högberg, who examines the practice of recognition as an ethical counterpart to the problem of violence in the work of both authors. While Högberg's study focuses on the interwar novels, from *Jacob's Room* (1922) to *The Waves* (1931), my analysis locates Woolf's interest in constructing new "aesthetic strategies for reconfiguring individuality" at an even earlier moment, in her debut novel.[18] It also explicitly takes up these strategies' gendered dimensions, focalized in *The Voyage Out* through Rachel's course of development towards acquiring a recognizable form of personhood in keeping with the limitations imposed by her social position as a young woman.

Striving for recognition

Judith Butler understands recognition as an essential aspect both of self-formation and interpersonal relations, part of a reciprocal communal exchange, for which "we are all, in different ways, striving."[19] This is to say that recognition is a common human condition, a token of validation we require to affirm our existence as functioning agents within the social sphere. This fundamental reliance, for Butler, engenders certain dependencies which make us vulnerable to others as well as to the very norms that govern our relations with the wider world. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she outlines this situation as one of "primary dependency [which] conditions the political formation and regulation of the subject and becomes the means of their subjection."[20] The subject then is "formed in submission" to power "that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject," but in "pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity."[21] This relationship within which personhood is born, is one that "initiates and sustains our agency" but also restricts and controls it.[22] The concept of recognition, on this account, becomes implicated in practices of control, prevalent within the paradigmatic structure of power relations that shape the individual within a patriarchal context. Despite its subordinating power, however, recognition continues to be a necessary process due to our psychic and social need for it. In Butler's view the subject in the process of self-formation either has to accept this form of subordinating relations or forgo participation in social life altogether. Both options prove undesirable, in different ways, harboring the illusion of a meaningful choice. The resistance strategy she offers is framed through a process of re-signification of the terms and practices individuals utilize to counter the prevalent logic of subjection such as forms of "critical desubjectivation" and "incoherence of identity."[23]

Woolf's position, as it emerges in *The Voyage Out* itself and later essays carries more ambiguity. In the first instance, she situates recognition within the reading process, as a tool of characterization, and acknowledges its instrumental function for engendering a productive connection between writer, reader, and text. In "Character in Fiction," she states that

> [t]he writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one's eyes shut.[24]

A shared experience emerges from this state of being in common with others. Establishing this intersubjective "meeting-place" relies on a relationship of recognition between the reader and the forms of personhood they encounter in the text. When left to work in peace, the norms of judgement determine the types of fictional representation that can be recognized as characteristic of personhood. When they are meddled with, the entire socio-epistemological functioning of the reading process is endangered. The difficulty Woolf identifies for the writer is that the construction of a common space around a practice of recognition can constrain the emergence of new forms of identification, as well as the author's aesthetic field of experimentation. This complication, also formulated by Butler, arises through the demand to give an account of oneself, or to become legible, within the social sphere. In doing this, the subject is confronted with the exchange of their singularity for a measure of recognizability. "If I try to give an account of myself," she states:

> if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable […] I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. 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.[25]

In *The Voyage Out*, Rachel comes to experience this demand directly on several occasions, usually when asked to introduce herself. During an outing, St John Hirst, one of her companions, proposes that each member of their party should provide "a short biographical sketch."[26] In response, Rachel states that she is "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" (159). This matter-of-fact description is only comparable in substance to the *Who's Who* compendium of short biographies of famous historical figures Rachel reads on board her father's ship, which takes her to the fictional colonial location of Santa Marina, where most of the novel's action takes place.[27] She issues this string of facts, referring to her age, class, educational status, family history, and her sole occupation efficiently and impersonally, as if in fear or under duress, each comma marking yet another aspect of her social personhood. She presents herself as a common, not a singular being, one of many, her identity not porous, but impermeable, forged under the pressure of the unforgivable inevitability of norms.

Terence Hewet, an aspiring novelist, and Rachel's future fiancée, also challenges her to give an account of herself. At Terence's prompt, "Rachel," the narrator states, "lost her freedom and became self-conscious. She felt herself at once singular and under observation" (245). For Felski, this would constitute a moment of recognition, which, unlike Butler, she sees as a potentially generative experience. When we engage in a process of recognition, she writes, "we make sense of what is unfamiliar by fitting it into an existing scheme, linking it to what we already know."[28] But this initial connection with the norms we recognize does not have to produce an experience that is repetitive, derivative, or in any way subordinating. Instead, it could show us things in a new light, compelling us to imagine a "revised or altered sense of who I am."[29] On her reading, the self-conscious moment can simultaneously serve "as a social diagnosis and an ethical judgement."[30] As a result, she advocates preserving a certain epistemological openness, which harbors the potential to create new forms of self-knowledge that can

be taken up by the subject through a phenomenological relation of "self-scrutiny rather than self-loss."[31]

The startling experience of self-consciousness, provoked in Rachel by Terence's demand, however, is presented by Woolf as inimical to her freedom. Overwhelmed by the demands of recognition, the self-realization that she must become intelligible as a subject of norms threatens her capacity for generating self-knowledge. The realization that he sees her as a woman additionally inhibits Rachel's ability to communicate an individual position. Furthermore, she feels constrained and "hampered," the necessity of self-scrutiny only revealing more loss of possibility (246–7). In this moment of self-consciousness Rachel comprehends her dependence on Terence and her own vulnerability, exposing Woolf's own critique of recognition predicated on the certainty of knowledge as model of emancipation. Instead, Rachel's freedom is diminished, she becomes an object of enquiry, of knowledge, and of desire, which can be mastered and acquired by others.[32] Once she perceives her newly drawn outline produced through Terence's recognition of her womanhood, she is compelled to inhabit it by modifying or relinquishing other fragments of her identity. In this way, the norm prevails, forcing an act of dispossession.[33] Louise DeSalvo draws attention to the differences between the first English edition of the novel and the first American one, published five years later, at this crucial moment in the development of the relationship between Rachel and Terence. The American edition, DeSalvo observes, offers a more combative Rachel, who refuses to be "pinned down by any *second* person," which demonstrates Woolf's heightened attention to emphasizing the disbalance in the hermeneutic positions which Rachel and Terence occupy in this exchange.[34] Rachel never demands a reciprocal account from Terence, allowing him the possibility to escape self-scrutiny and categorization. The novel purposefully refuses to represent this exchange between the two lovers as reciprocal and equal, a point which serves to complicate models of analysing ethical readings of recognition as "dyadic encounters," which tend to equalize the power both agents hold in the validation of one another.[35] In the context of a social infrastructure built upon networks of patriarchal power, Woolf seems to be suggesting, the position of women in this exercise, is one of deep disadvantage. In this sense, the common meeting place becomes less of a democratic locus for reinvention and more of a battleground for survival.

Becoming a person

Early in the novel, Rachel is described as someone who is struggling to become a person. The prime impediments to this are associated with her ability to adequately employ her rational faculties, accumulate knowledge, and exercise command over her language. "A hesitation in speaking," the narrator observes, "or rather a tendency to use the wrong words, made her seem more than normally incompetent for her years" (15–16). Further on we are told that "her eyes were unreflecting as water" and "her mind was absent" (17). As Allison Pease notes, this is not an unusual representation of womanhood in early twentieth-century literature. Rachel "has failed the qualifications of post-Cartesian selfhood," she "knows nothing; she thinks and feels, but she is an outsider to a system that produces knowing individuals."[36] The inability to find the words to express her thoughts is a source of confusion both for Rachel herself and the people

around her. Her preference for musical over literary forms of expression, reflective of her discomfort with explicit verbal identifications, is evident throughout the text. As a result, Rachel is seen as someone who is not possessed of the ability to generate rational certainty, making this one of the main issues in terms of her characterization. Emma Sutton connects this to her "inarticulateness" and the difficulties of expressing the intense richness of inner thought through the limited commands of spoken language.[37] Molly Hite goes even further to suggest that in favoring "an inherently nonrepresentational" art of expression for Rachel, Woolf curates "an aesthetic form that invents rather than represents."[38] Music creates modalities of connection and identification that are non-structural and non-hierarchical, and allow Rachel to give full expression to the complexities of her interiority without having to negotiate the struggle for recognition.

In a novel, whose characters' chief occupation, as Eric Sandberg observes, is "defining, or characterizing, other people," Rachel's lack of clear outline presents a puzzle.[39] In addition to failing the Cartesian principles of selfhood, rooted in rational self-examination, she seems to lack awareness of the gendered aspects of socialization. Mrs Helen Ambrose, her aunt, functions as a figure of female authority, whose role is to induct Rachel in traditional practices of womanhood, including those associated with motherhood and marriage. She takes it upon herself to "enlighten" (105) the young woman, whose sheltered upbringing by her two (unmarried) aunts, following the death of her mother, according to Helen, is the reason why she appears so removed from worldly interpersonal affairs, especially those associated with sexual desire. Rachel's encounter with Mr Dalloway on the ship to Santa Marina, provides a brief and unwelcome disclosure in this regard. During one of their brief conversations, he prompts: "'[…] Now tell me about yourself. What are your interests and occupations?'" Rachel responds: "'You see, I'm a woman'" (79).[40] Her admission is met with an outburst of passion, which moves Mr Dalloway to assault her with a kiss, following which he misdirects responsibility for the violent act and accuses her of temptation. The direct second-person address, "'You tempt me,'" summons an act of individual agency Rachel is unable to account for (80). Her resulting feelings range from discomfort to fear, she is unable to sleep and stop thinking about the experience, feeling persecuted and entrapped. She confides in Helen, who simply explains that this is the way things are between men and women: "it's the most natural thing in the world" (86). This leads Rachel to formulate a link between herself and "those women in Piccadilly," who her aunt confirms are prostitutes (86). As Hite emphasizes, "the existence and meaning of the prostitute are of acute importance to a young girl entering the arena of sexual arrangements."[41] The topic emerges again in a discussion with Evelyn Murgatroyd, another character in the novel, who is trying to navigate her marriage prospects, when it is explicitly linked to the economic foundations of marriage, understood as a "relation of sexual ownership."[42] The process of becoming a person recognizable by others for Rachel, as for Evelyn, and the rest of the women in the novel, is inevitably tied with negotiating the terms on which their bodies will be interpreted, valued, and possessed. The moment of confrontation with patriarchal sexuality leads Rachel to see "her life for the first time [as] a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled forever" (87). She suddenly starts to understand how gendered expectations restrict and direct behavior. This emerging sense of limitation foregrounds the conflict

between the normative rituals associated with Rachel's "culturally determined destiny" as a wife and mother, as Christine Froula has argued, and her desire to "break out of the female initiation plot that her culture imposes upon women, constituting them not as fully legitimated participants in history and culture."[43] Woolf's concerns with this process of legitimation are linked to the institutional hierarchies that create disparities between those who can claim to be possessors of the means of knowledge production and those who can only acquire the resulting outcomes, a distinction which radically alters the balance of power in the practice of recognition.

The Voyage Out interrogates the role literature and practices of reading play in the establishments of these hierarchies, particularly as they relate to the education of women. As Friedman observes, "the reading of people" and "the reading of books" in the novel are often presented as binary opposites – the former related to the social sphere, and generally the domain of women and the latter, linked to the institutional production of knowledge, and thus reserved for men.[44] The politics of reading was a topic that clearly occupied Woolf during the extended composition period of the novel, stretching from 1908 to 1913, during which she completed several essays on the topic.[45] In the novel itself, Rachel receives instruction on her reading by various male characters, including Richard Dalloway, St John Hirst and her uncle, Ridley Ambrose. Mr Dalloway suggests Burke's writings on the American and French revolutions to induce a development of a political conscience. St John recommends Gibbon's multivolume history of the Roman empire as a way to test the viability of her mind. Mr Ambrose offers a course of learning based on the contents of his travel library that stretches from Balzac back to Marlowe.[46] In his study, she is allowed to select her own reading and leaves with Le Cousine Bette (1846), a novel which displays women's insubordinate behavior as a persistent threat to the bourgeois stability of the family unit.

As the narrative develops, it is through the study and performance of literary characters that Rachel begins to take a more definite shape:

> "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. (136–7)

Rachel's selection of texts focuses on the stories of modern women who inhabit a hostile world and commit various transgressive acts to free themselves from the confines associated with their gender identity.[47] Her choices also reflect a forming idea of social inequality as Ibsen is followed "by a novel such as Mrs Ambrose detested, whose purpose was to distribute the guilt of a woman's downfall upon the right shoulders" (138). In addition to providing her with examples of womanhood, modern fiction also offers a space for experimentation with language. She reads the shiny, yellow-covered books "with the curious literalness of one to whom written sentences are unfamiliar, and handling words as though they were made of wood, separately of great importance, and possessed of shapes like tables and chairs" (137–8). Rachel uses the language of literary representation to learn the normative shapes and sizes of modern human experience, and particularly

that of women, aware that words carry the weight of the meanings ascribed to them. This experience of trying on fictional characters highlights the collaborative force with which language, norms, and forms come together to formulate the recognizable models of identification available to the modern reader.

Rachel's education and reading practice slowly create an archive of linguistic and behavioral codes to help her construct a picture of a coherent gendered personhood. As her performance within her social circle improves and reaches the expected standard, Mrs Ambrose directly gives her 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 see or the wind, flashed in Rachel's mind, and she became profoundly excited at the thought of living. (90)

Rachel's jubilation at this prospect does not materialize in a conscious effort of making herself into a "real everlasting thing"; instead, she slides out of view at every chance of establishing herself, a practice encouraged by her eclectic reading. As Butler argues, the draw towards accounting for oneself as a singular subject, in search for social validation, is a crucial step in the practice of recognition, that inevitably comes to clash with the necessity to do so within a normative framework of social relations. 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."[48] Having "learned something about the social limits to her possibilities," in Hite's formulation, Rachel is shown to realize the constrained scope of agential action, determined by the gender norms associated with her self-development, within which she is allowed to operate.[49] The novel also adapts to this disruption of the recognition arc and its "representational strategies" and begin to "define her body more and more in terms of an observer's gaze," manifesting its awareness that "the knowledge of and entrance into the public realm involve endangering other kinds of knowledge and other realms of ontological contact."[50]

Entering the public sphere

Following her experience of self-consciousness triggered by the confrontation with Terence's demand, Rachel perceives that the shapes she can inhabit that can generate recognition in response are always already there, carved out of normative demands. The implied function of recognition as a regulation principle, which determines the forms of identity that can be legitimately adopted within the wider normative order, is exposed during the Sunday church service. Rachel looks at the faces she knows from luncheons, walks, and card games and for the first time regards them as fabricated. This realization triggers a process of Cartesian revelation, which makes her reject "all that she had implicitly believed" (265). She is unsettled by her fellow travelers' need for validation, which makes them into "slavishly acquiescent […] limpet[s]," who allow themselves to be co-opted within a deeply suspect economy of exchange (265). Rachel's internal monologue shows her becoming critically aware of the norms of legibility which govern the social order in which she is

expected to enlist. This is the closest the novel comes to articulating a scene of recognition in the traditional sense and it is significant that Rachel's transition from a position of relative inexperience to one of "enlightenment" occurs not as an act of self-reflection, but as one of public reading. In her previous encounters with the male characters who demand an account of herself, she has been evasive, impersonal, but never fully open or entirely paradigmatic as a participant in the economy of desire. Instinctively aware of the threat recognition carries for her own singularity, she is not prepared to be transparent to others, her presence in interpersonal exchanges being marked by a curious elusiveness and withholding of substance. Woolf's own elusiveness in terms of offering "authorial guidance" functions not only through the presentation of "conflicting tonal cues" in relation to the reading of characters, but through her deliberate refusal to structure her narrative around the recognition coordinates expected of it.[51] In this way, she also expands her critical examination from its initial focus on the normative links that are used to construct the novel as a form primary concerned with the representation of personhood, into the "political stakes of the specific work of literary production."[52]

Woolf's skeptical attitude towards the function of the literary establishment, which to a large extent determines the relationship between texts, authors, and readers, forms an important part of her larger institutional critique. She is particularly disparaging in her evaluation of the British reading public's attachment to norms, expectations, and habitual practices. She declares it "a very suggestible and docile creature," which often persists in supporting commonly held notions. In her view, the public generally wants books to confirm their own view of the world, without much defiance:

> [o]ld women have houses. They have fathers. They have incomes. They have hot-water bottles. This is how we know that they are old women. Mr Wells and Mr Bennett and Mr Galsworthy have always taught us that this is the way to recognise them.[53]

A relationship of this kind conducted on the basis of supply and demand principles, for Woolf, "ceases to be a means of communication between writer and reader, and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment."[54] This misconception of the novel's function underscores its implied cooperation with the maintenance of established social standards in the context of patriarchal capitalist modernity. As Victoria Baena argues, through a reading of Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay "The Author as a Producer," the "role of the intellectual" should be understood "less in terms of political 'commitment' than as the writer of works that change or at least challenge the world" – an apt description of Woolf's statement of intent in her debut novel and a lens through which to read her subsequent experiments with literary work in all its guises, as a form of feminist social criticism.[55]

After the church scene, Rachel begins to fade away from the narrative. Her status as a protagonist is repeatedly disrupted and diminished instead of asserted and expanded; until, finally, her death is reduced to a conversation topic after tea. Even when she accepts Terence's offer of marriage during their visit to an Indigenous village, she is not really a person with a mind of her own, and only echoes the sentiments he offers her, adhering to social protocol.

> "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. (316)

Rachel's position in the novel becomes further obscured as other characters start relating to her as Terence's fiancée, following the announcement of the engagement. Their previous caution towards her is quickly overcome by her identification as a social presence they can recognize. While returning "Thank You" notes she thinks it strange that "considering how very different these people were, […] they used almost the same sentences when they wrote to congratulate her upon her engagement" (342). Shortly after this, Rachel's fever overcomes her and she slips out of consciousness.[56] This is the final act of dispossession the novel performs. The form of personhood available to her as a married woman obstructs all other possible accounts she might have wished to draw for herself. Even though Rachel agrees to become Terence's wife, the norms which govern this decision are not hers to make but are hers to comply with. As Butler asserts,

> one invariably struggles with conditions of one's own life that one could not have chosen. If there is an operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint.[57]

By allowing Rachel to break out of the characterization model allocated for women in the *Bildungsroman*, Woolf undermines the exercise of choice as an expression of agency, and with that the entire foundation on which the "idealized representation of [the] autonomous male subject" rests.[58] Rachel's disrupted narrative shows that under conditions of patriarchal oppression, the self-determination narrative, mapped out across various points of recognition, becomes another form of control.

Conclusion

In theoretical terms, literary character has almost exclusively been discussed as a universal concept, nearly an ideal, akin to that of the autonomous Kantian subject, and in many ways designed to replicate it. It's failures and successes are decided by the same measure. It is often encumbered by expectations of accuracy, truthfulness, and relatability, which all combine to curate a reading process organized around the principle of recognition, both as an aesthetic and political construct. Woolf, however, saw this as a rather restrictive convention and made her opposition to it the cornerstone of her critical engagement with modern fiction. One of the reasons she questioned recognition-based principles for the construction and reading of fiction was connected to a concern about the potential of this convention to narrow the field of authorial invention and thus obscure the novel's ability to respond to changing social realities. Another, was a more broadly political one, connected to the representation of women in fiction. Woolf worried that a recognition-based model for the construction of personhood, can be used to support a binary world of power and gender relations, where norms are used to control the formation and expressions of identity and the ways in which they can be legitimized. Woolf's interest in this project, initiated in her first novel and continued throughout her writing life, is not confined to simply decoding the restrictive and implicit dangers of relying on such models in fiction as well as in life. Her first novel begins the work of proposing a new code of practice that would support more diverse forms of personhood and engender the formation of novel and emancipatory forms of political life. In this project the purpose of the novelist appears to be nothing short of imagining personhood anew, of learning to *re*-cognize it, and deliver it from the confines of its traditional forms.

Notes

1. Majumdar and McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, 60.
2. Ibid., 53. See also Gerald Gould's review for the *New Statesman*, which specifically comments on the unreality and lack of humanity of the characters (55–6). The *Morning Post* finds that "we do not get to know enough of the people and their real selves to be interested in them" (51). W. H. Hudson was perhaps the sharpest critic. In a letter to Edward Garnett he declares that "there are about twenty characters, men and women, but there is not one real man" (61). There was some appreciation of Woolf's characters too; the *Times Literary Supplement* found the "people […] brilliantly drawn" (50). In his review for the *Manchester Guardian*, novelist Allan Monkhouse notes that "the events or definite projections of persons are so admirably done that we want more of them" (58). The *Athenaeum* finds the characters "sketched […] with a few deft strokes" (59). The *Spectator* admires the "psychology" which contributes to "the illusion of real life" where "every one seems to have an independent character" (63). Lytton Strachey wrote to Woolf personally in 1916 to express his admiration of the book, noting that "the people were *not* mere satirical silhouettes, but solid too" (64). For a summary of the general reception of all novels, see Majumdar and McLaurin, "Introduction," 7–41. Shared concerns tended to revolve around the characters' reality, relatability, and ability of engender emotive responses from readers.
3. Evidence for Woolf's response to reviews of her first novel is limited due to her ill health during this period. Her diary ends on 15 February 1915 (*The Voyage Out* was published in March) and is not resumed until 1917. She rarely mentions it in her letters.
4. Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 1.
5. Ibid., 2
6. Ibid.
7. Friedman, "Virginia Woolf's Pedagogical Scenes," 105; 103–4.
8. Lazzaro-Weis, "The Female 'Bildungsroman,'" 17.
9. Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, "Introduction," 5.
10. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 2–3.
11. For a recent argument on Woolf's challenges the traditional *Bildungsroman* and its limitations when considering women's initiation into the patriarchal sphere, see Sutton, *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music*, 29–30. Other influential readings include those by Christine Froula, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Susan Dick.
12. Brown, "Woolf's Feminism," 321.
13. Felski, *The Uses of Literature*, 23–50.
14. A key study here is Terence Cave's *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics*, which includes chapters on modern criticism and Conrad's novel *Under Western Eyes*, but is primarily concerned with tracing the transition of the practice from drama to narrative, from antiquity to the twentieth century. See "Introduction," 1.
15. Megan Quigley's reading of *The Voyage Out* discusses the novel in tandem with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and considers the philosophical foundations of the text's rebellion against these conventions, making a case that Woolf targeted the very "logic of development at work in the inherited literary forms she knew so well." See, "Reading Virginia Woolf Logically," 103–4.
16. Parker, "Reification of Recognition?," 132.
17. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111.
18. Högberg, "Voices Against Violence," 428 and *Virginia Woolf and the Ethics of Intimacy*, 2–4.
19. Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," 31.
20. Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 7.
21. Ibid., 2–3.
22. Ibid., 2.
23. Ibid., 130; 149. The "suspension of the first-person perspective" in relation to the dissolution of identity and the loosening of the aggressive impulse associated with the autonomous "I" form the core of Högberg's argument, see "Voices Against Violence," 434.

24. Woolf, "Character in Fiction," 431.
25. Butler, *Giving an Account*, 37.
26. Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 159. Hereafter cited in text.
27. A significant body of critical work on the novel focuses precisely on its colonial setting. Indicative readings include, Montgomery, "Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice," 34–55; Kuehn, "The *Voyage Out* as Voyage In," 126–50; Walkowitz, "Virginia Woolf's Evasion," 119–44; Doyle, "Transnational History at Our Backs," 531–59; Wollaeger, "Woolf, Postcards, and the Elision of Race," 43–75; Esty, "Virginia Woolf's Colony," 70–90; Novillo-Corvalán, "Empire and Commerce in Latin America," 33–62.
28. Felski, "Recognition," 25.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 36.
31. Ibid., 35.
32. Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 22.
33. Butler, *Giving an Account*, 37.
34. DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage*, 118.
35. Högberg, *Virginia Woolf and the Ethics of Intimacy*, 5, 13.
36. Pease, *Modernism, Feminism, and the Culture of Boredom*, 101.
37. Sutton, *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music*, 27.
38. Hite, *Woolf's Ambiguities*, 122.
39. Sandberg, *Virginia Woolf*, 46.
40. For a further discussion of the sexual assault scene and its connection to the violent ideologies of Tory conservatism, imperialism, and patriarchal oppression, see Lewis, "The Visual Politics of Empire," 110.
41. Hite, *Woolf's Ambiguities*, 118.
42. Ibid.
43. Froula, "Out of Chrysalis," 63.
44. Friedman, "Virginia Woolf's Pedagogical Scenes," 106.
45. During this period instances of her thinking about characters in fiction occur regularly in her journalism and reviews. Examples include "Temptation" (1907), "Oliver Wendell Holmes" (1909), "Sheridan" (1909), "Mrs Gaskell" (1910), "Rachel" (1911), "The Novels of George Gissing" (1912). Another essay which examines reading and education as practice of character cultivation is "Hours in a Library" (1916), where Woolf comments on the experience of reading as a child and a young person. This project comes to full fruition in the first *Common Reader* (1925), as discussed in Friedman, "Virginia Woolf's Pedagogical Scenes," 117–19.
46. For an insightful extended analysis of this course of instruction and the politics of canon formation, see Baena, "Labour, Thought, and the Work of Authorship," 92–4.
47. For a discussion of Rachel's encounter with these works as an experience of self-dissolution, see DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage*, 96–7.
48. Butler, *Giving an Account*, 37.
49. Hite, *Woolf's Ambiguities*, 113.
50. Ibid., 120.
51. Ibid., 111.
52. Baena, "Labour, Thought, and the Work of Authorship," 85.
53. Woolf, "Character in Fiction," 433.
54. Ibid., 434.
55. Baena, "Labour, Thought, and the Work of Authorship," 86.
56. Rachel's death has elicited conflicting responses in readers of the novel. For a useful summary of these, see Hussey, *Virginia Woolf A-Z*, 341–2. I find that the novel shows premonitions of a tragic end through early references to malignancy (6), Rachel's reading of the libretto of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* ("He brings the corpse-like Bride," 33), references to *Antigone* (44) and *Wuthering Heights* (59), and Rachel's dream on the ship in which she appears to be entombed (81) among others.

57. Butler, *Giving an Account*, 19.
58. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 2.

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