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# **'A WONDERFUL COMPASS OF VOICES': FROM A PASSIONATE APPRENTICESHIP TOWARDS FULL-SCALE WRITING**

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The Conference celebrating the Centenary of the Bloomsbury Group and the beginning of Virginia Woolf's professional career as a writer proves to be an excellent occasion for the research done on her early work.

In my article I am going to look closely at the diversity and complexity of the ways through which Woolf's identity was sought. I intend to turn to her early diaries and essays of the late 1890s and early 1910s, to examine the process of identification shaping itself. Taken in this perspective Virginia Woolf's (then Stephen's) diaries and essays are a remarkable subject for analysis. They reveal (and this is something I am going to expand on below) numerous links between the early semi-obscure pieces written at the dawn of her career as a professional writer, and her mature works of the 1910s and 1930s. I claim that glimpses of Woolf's specific understanding of the writer's identity that we get from her early work are much more self-revealing than the ones we find in her later texts.

Assuming that Woolf's early work is marked by the writer's identity taking shape, I further claim that a certain mistrust of 'I', a suspicion of its being limited and narrow found in the early work by Woolf, signals the underlying significance of 'the Other'. It is 'Otherness' that links Woolf as early as the 1900s with the broad milieu of modernity.

Let us turn to Woolf's early diaries and essays to examine the process of identification taking shape, agreeing with Foucault that one of the formal means for identity to express itself is the writer's or speaker's use of this or that personal pronoun.<sup>1</sup> Taken in this perspective Virginia Woolf's (then Stephen's) diaries and early essays are remarkable in the predominant use of the first-person plural. The latter is multifunctional. There are obvious cases of her using 'we' as a parody of the stiff quasi-academic convention. For

example, "these [the details] we have a melancholy pleasure in now presenting to the reader" (APA 150); "but we must hasten our unwilling pen to enter in upon the details of the disaster" (Ibid. 151).

Often, however, it acquires an autobiographical family connotation of sisters and brothers who are used to thinking about themselves as 'we'. Note, for instance, the spontaneity of using the first-person plural in the entry of her diary at Warboys during the summer holidays of 1899:

This being *our* first night, & such a night not occurring again, I must make some mark on paper to represent so auspicious an occasion, tho' my mark must be frail & somewhat disjointed. However we came here sober [?] & with not much bother of spirit - save that twice we had to change (APA 135; my italics).

What is interesting about those instances of Woolf's modelling her identity via family 'we' are cases of a literary shift in meaning. By the latter I mean Woolf's associating herself with writers whom she thought to be dear and familiar to her, in whose company she loved to spend time while reading and speculating. She would register this experience in her diary piece "The Talk of the Sheep" (1903): "My solitude is genuine; ... & I sit down too much for any real dogs temper. But like Wordsworth - like many distinguished people (it is well to be in good company) I find solitude sufficient, strangely so" (APA 197). There is something of that sense of speaking from the heart of her love for certain English writers in her use of the first-person plural in the early essay "Haworth, November 1904": "Our only occupation was to picture the slight figure of Charlotte trotting along the streets in her thin mantle, hustled into the gutter by more burly passers-by" (BP 167). What is noteworthy here is the spirit of nostalgia, which is registered in this essay written in the year of Leslie Stephen's death. The speaker goes back - in memory and body - to her favourite writers, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, reviving them in her imagination not as great writers but as slim figures walking along the road to Keighley. Woolf's 'our' seems to embrace herself, her father and the writers dear to her in one imaginary sweep. Her using the first-person plural defines her identity as the one belonging to the literary family. (Though, certainly, the surface meaning of the first-person plural denoting a group of travellers visiting Haworth in the deep autumn of 1904 remains there as well). Besides the autobiographical and personal literary implications of Woolf's early use of 'we' in some particular instances, there are early cases of her referring to 'we' while attempting to model her reader, the latter being the intention she

would sometimes be explicit about: "An innocent reader (I suppose a reader sometimes for the sake of variety when I write; it makes me put on my dress clothes such as they are)..." (APA 144).

It is of note that the reader's first-person plural often appears in an opposition to some striking personality, as is the case described in Woolf's essay "Elizabeth Lady Holland" (1908). Her heroine is made to look an extraordinary woman, ahead of her time, openly speaking her mind, independent and happy in marrying a man whom she loved though at the cost of breaking certain social conventions. Lady Holland's character is given here as a presence in the room (the first instance of Woolf's comparing a woman's personality to someone's presence in the room, which would later grow into a symbol of the woman's world). In her essay she wrote:

But there is some quality in a scene like the following, trivial as it is, which makes you realise at once the effect of her presence in the room, her way of looking at you... We seem to feel, however dimly, the presence of someone ...who has an extraordinary force of character. She makes certain things in the world stand up boldly all round her; she calls out certain qualities in other people. While she is there, it is her world (BP 193).

Much in the same way (as in "Elizabeth Lady Holland") a woman of striking personality is given as a desirable identity in another of Woolf's early essays, "The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt" (1908). Here Sarah Bernhardt's life is made to look no less than a way to resist 'the floods' of death and oblivion: "... but still she [Sarah Bernhardt] will sparkle, while the rest of us - is the prophecy too arrogant? - lie dissipated among the floods" (BP 207). Curiously, however, the speaker who is obviously attracted by the actress's sense of identity would never use the first-person singular either in reference to Sarah Bernhardt or to herself. Throughout the essay only 'she' and 'we' are used to denote the heroine and the speaker respectively. It sounds as if the speaker would not commit herself to the unconventional 'I', though it is clear that she stresses the necessity for every one to have a strong sense of identity to be able to fight death back.

Speaking more generally, it looks as if for some reason 'I' as a voice did not come easily to Woolf in her early diaries and essays.

Later, in her "The Modern Essay" (1925), Woolf would justify the use of the first-person plural by a modern essay writer in socio-cultural terms. Her suggestion was that the new democratic age was contributing to the long-term

practice of English essay writing by making the essayist more open to the reader:

Paradoxically enough, the shrinkage in size [of the essay form] has brought about a corresponding expansion of individuality. We have no longer the "I" of Max [Beerbohm] and of Lamb, but the "we" of public bodies and other sublime personages. It is "we" who go to hear the *Magic Flute*; "we" who ought to profit by it; "we", in some mysterious way, who, in our corporate capacity, once upon a time actually wrote it (CR<sub>1</sub> 279).

Woolf's contemporaries did not find her arguments for using 'we' in her writing convincing. A well-known example is Desmond McCarthy's class-critique, made in *The Sunday Times*, of her essay "The Leaning Tower"; Woolf argued against McCarthy "that her education gave her the right to say 'we' when she talked to the Workers' Educational Association".<sup>2</sup> There are some strong points both in favour of Woolf's democratic/feminist stance expressed via 'we', as well as in her contemporaries' class-critique of it. However, in a sense it would be useless to pursue this argument any further, for it deals with both sides' declarations rather than the tones and undertones of Woolf's using the first-person plural in her writing.

If we now look at the identity issue in Woolf's writing from the point of view of the critic's reflection, we will not fail to identify the theme of the striking personality as opposed and thwarted by society. The reception of a writer as opponent suppressed by society looks as a hint of 'the Other', in Foucault's sense of the word. In her essay "Coleridge as Critic" (1918) Woolf offers her reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge as an extraordinarily gifted person who had to live in a society with limited intellectual and artistic claims. It gave his talents no chance of blossoming. It did not devise any means of satisfying his powerful and diverse ideas. Woolf thinks this discrepancy to be the major reason for Coleridge's works having been left unfinished. She comes up with a paradoxical observation: a reader who becomes conscious of his own dumbness and blindness when compared to Coleridge cannot help thinking that it is exactly his lacking a powerful 'I' that makes him accepted today:

The reader of the "Table Talk" will sometime reflect that although, compared with Coleridge, he must consider himself deaf and blind as well as dumb, these limitations, in the present state of the world, have protected him and most of his work has been done within their shelter (BP 34).

Woman's 'I' as a split one is hinted at in Woolf's early essay "On a Faithful Friend" (1905). Half-jokingly a woman's identity is related there to the dog's or cat's 'I'. Very much like the animals who are tamed and suppressed without any notion of their ancient origin, women have been considered for centuries to be household pets devoid of any inner world of their own. Woman (implied in the image of 'the silent critic on the hearthrug') is described in the essay in terms of mythical Pans, dryads and nymphs, again putting the researcher into thinking of the writer's guilty subconscious, with 'the Other' as materially and socially suppressed:

One cannot help wondering what the silent critic on the hearthrug thinks of our strange conventions... There is something, too, profane in the familiarity, half contemptuous, with which we treat our animals. ...It is one of the refined sins of civilization, for we know not what wild spirit we are taking from its purer atmosphere, or who it is - Pan, or Nymph, or Dryad - that we have trained to beg for a lump of sugar at tea (BP 10).

This passage predicts Woolf's future *Flush* (1934) with its representation of events through the eyes of a dog - that 'silent critic' - who possesses his own mysterious inner world hidden under his common appearance. Is not this two-fold nature the reason for a likeness between Flush and his new hostess, Elizabeth Barrett? "There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I - and then each felt: But how different!" (F 26). The woman poet and the dog are alike in their being outsiders: Flush is a stranger in the world of human beings, whereas Elizabeth Barrett is a stranger in a culture which is man-made and man-oriented. It is no accident that her room seems to Flush to be illusory as if split in identity: "...everything was disguised. ...Nothing in the room was itself; everything was something else" (F 24).

In the essay "Swift's Journal to Stella" (1925) Woolf interprets Swift's life in terms of the writer's live feelings being driven by societal conventions into a cryptic discourse of journals and letters. Identity got split, points out the essayist, and it was only at the end of his life that Swift managed to regain his 'I'.<sup>3</sup>

Thus what Woolf's early diaries and essays reveal in relation to the identity issue is a certain tension in the writer's use of 'I'. Woolf would rather stick to the first-person plural with its spectrum of meanings, or set on modelling a reader's image, or associate herself with the writers of the past long dear and familiar to her, than use her autobiographical 'I' directly

and explicitly. This, together with her interest in the literary-historical cases of split identity seems to point at the 'Otherness', be it the writer's guilty subconscious, or her sense of opposition. We could predict her experimenting with 'I' in her early pieces of writing. There is an instance of her playing the part of a fake newspaper correspondent in the diary entry of August 1899:

Extract from the Huntingdonshire Gazette.

TERRIBLE TRAGEDY IN A DUCKPOND

A terrible tragedy which had its scene in a duck pond has been reported from Warboys. Our special correspondent who was despatched to that village has had unrivalled [sic] opportunities of investigating the details as well as the main facts of the disaster, & these we have a melancholy pleasure in now presenting to the reader (APA 150).

The use of the first-person plural here is certainly a pure convention. It is a slight attempt at pretending to be a journalist without any knowledge of what his identity is like. Nevertheless, it should not be dismissed as something worthless, for it opens a succession of fake identities of fake speakers in Woolf's essays written between 1916 and 1934. In fact, by first using it Woolf struck upon a way of going about identity in her essay writing which, as I will show below, would prove to be a rewarding and far-reaching strategy. Also registered in those early diaries is Woolf's obvious wish to fictionalise newspaper facts. As early as 1903 she developed that line of writing out imaginary 'lives' which later would produce "An Unwritten Novel" (*Monday or Tuesday*, 1922), Judith in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and many others. In her diary of 1903 she gives a newspaper fact first and then goes on to expand on it:

I read it & it has stuck in my memory so that I can write it here. Yesterday morning then, the first Park Keepers saw something afloat in the Serpentine - *What* it needed little looking to tell. Bodies in the Serpentine are not uncommon in the early morning. They drew it ashore & found that it was a woman who had been drowned... (APA 211-2).

From a newspaper article Woolf would turn to imagining what that poor woman's life could have been. Then in one sweeping phrase she would identify herself with the woman by using 'I', which is quickly abandoned first for the third-person singular and then for a general 'you':

Then of a sudden comes that pang - Without husband or children, I yet had parents. If they were alive now I should not be alone. ...For the first time in her



life perhaps she weeps for her parents... That sorrow I say is bitter enough in youth... Your husband may die & you can marry another... but if your father & mother die you have lost something that the longest life can never bring again (APA 212-3).

A shift in identity embraces the 'she' of a drowned woman, Woolf's autobiographical 'I' for identifying herself with the unhappy creature, the 'I' of a speaker ('that sorrow I say is bitter enough in youth'), and the 'you/your' of the speaker who identifies herself with others, with anybody. Thus what this early diary piece reveals is that the situation of fictionalising a fact or imagining on the basis of a fact in an essay or diary proves to be a good means for Woolf to become flexible in her identity.

For the first time a fully developed strategy of assuming a fake identity as an author's mask and speaking via it occurs in Woolf's essay "Heard on the Downs: the Genesis of Myth" (1916).<sup>4</sup> Its subtitle "From a Correspondent" seems to point to the authenticity of a report allegedly sent direct from the battle front. The result, however, is exactly the reverse: its explicitly female approach to the war makes it a fake. The whole essay then is turned into a subtle play on identity: what is a correspondent? we ask. Obviously a war correspondent cannot be a woman, and yet so woman-like it is that it cannot belong to a man. Thus the second part of the title "The Genesis of Myth" is unexpectedly justified and foregrounded: it may be applied both to the theme of the essay and to the very process of writing it.

This seemingly marginal essay opens up a succession of Woolf's essays and biographies based on exotic personages who pose there as speakers or commentators, protagonists or characters, while being in fact either fakes or fantasies in spite of their convincing historical titles, names, data, etc. Take, for instance, Judith, a fake sister of Shakespeare from *A Room of One's Own*. Or *Flush*, a real dog once belonging to the Brownings but transformed in Woolf's essay into a semi-fantastic creature with a superb gift of understanding, who is made the commentator of the events related. Or take Nicholas Greene from *Orlando* (1927): his surname and the context are convincing enough to bring up literary-historical associations with Robert Greene (1558-1592), though his first name, Nicholas or Nick, suggests that the whole thing is an element of fiction (O. 82-3).

Taken in a biographical perspective, this identity trick of Woolf's hiding behind a quasi-historical 'I' to play out a different history in her imagination seems to be analogous to her gesture of 'wrapping' her diary and essay writing

in the pages of some old book. She struck upon the latter as an exciting idea in her diary entry of 18 September 1899:

A sudden idea struck me, that it would be original useful & full of memories if I embedded the foregoing pages in the leaves of some worthy & ancient work ...My work - the present volume, attracted my attention firstly because of its size, which fitted my paper - & 2ndly because its back had a certain air of distinction among its brethren. I fear the additional information given on the title page that this is the Logic of the "Late Reverend & Learned Isaac Watts D.D." was not a third reason why I bought it.

Any other book almost, would have been too sacred to undergo the desecration that I planned; but no one methought could bewail the loss of these pages (APA 159-60).

The implied irony of the gesture hinted at by the phrase, "I fear the additional information given on the title page that this is the Logic of the 'Late Reverend & Learned Isaac Watts D.D.' was not a third reason why I bought it", is revealed via the description of the Warboys journal provided by the editor in his footnote: "AVS used the Warboys journal for [...] essay-writing during her holiday and for experimenting with various nibs; in many instances she used the same page for both purposes, and this gives the original journal its appearance of immense chaos" (APA 160; fn 8).

To play havoc with the old and dignified book on Logic, thereby deceiving the expectations of any one who would take up the book, is very Woolfian. Much to the same effect is another of Woolf's tricks. As is known, she sent a copy of her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) to Vita Sackville-West with the inscription *Vita from Virginia (In my opinion the best novel I have ever written)*. The copy, however, was a dummy: the reader opened it to find blank pages.<sup>5</sup> Although the cases mentioned above are different in content, function and effect upon the reader, there are two common points about them. One is Woolf's decision to use someone else's identity; the other is deceiving the reader's expectations raised by that identity by playing around the subject. Behind these cases there stands the same strategy of breaking stereotypes of logic and rational thinking. Also, the putting on strangers' identities and taking them off like masks may be well related to what Woolf wrote in her diary on 30 June 1903:

last night I could lie with my nightgown open & my hair tumbled over my forehead as it is at this moment. I often think of that famous painter who would only work in his court dress - or kept different dresses for different

occasions. Though I hate putting on my fine clothes, I know that when they are on I shall have invested myself at the same time with a certain social demeanour - I shall be ready to talk about the floor & the weather & other frivolities, which I consider platitudes in my nightgown. A fine dress makes you artificial (APA 169).

However critical and suspicious Woolf is about the identity-in-disguise mode of writing in her early pieces, for her own essays it proved to be a rewarding strategy. Thanks to the writer investing her 'I' in the clothes or the voice of a definite social type, it is culturally and historically bound. Also, a speaker's identity being foregrounded, it allows for the writer's irony. This practice of fake identification proved to be rich and flexible in socio-cultural and ideological accents, a fact which Woolf acknowledges in "A Letter to a Young Poet" (1932) written after twenty years or so of practising the fake-identity mode:

The art of writing... can be learnt... much more drastically and effectively by imagining that one is not oneself but somebody different. How can you learn to write if you write only about one single person? ...if you want to satisfy all those senses that rise in a swarm whenever we drop a poem among them - the reason, the imagination, the eyes, the ears, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, not to mention a million more that the psychologists have yet to name, you will do well to embark upon a long poem in which people as unlike yourself as possible talk at the tops of their voices (CE-II 193).

Let us now contextualise the identity-in-disguise mode and evaluate it against the background of the impersonality theory which is considered to be part and parcel of the concept of Modernism. For what the identity-in-disguise mode of writing comes to is, in terms of literary theory, de-explicating or impersonalising the author. Let us note that Woolf provided her own arguments for her substituting historical and quasi-historical figures for 'I'. To a great extent these were shaped by her thinking that literature had little to do with an author's emphasizing his/her 'I', his/her ideas or political priorities. She would choose the position of an artist with a neutralised 'I', that of an observer. In *Flush* there is brought into relief a suspicion that nothing could be more dangerous for art than a writer's wish 'to be somebody'. It is given a playful shape through the poet's and the dog's achieving a satisfactory state of being via the symbolic (and certainly humorous) act of clipping off *Flush's* luxurious 'coat':

It was the coat that Mr. Browning now proposed to sacrifice. He called Flush to him and, 'taking a pair of scissors, clipped him all over into the likeness of a lion'. [...] To be nothing - is that not, after all, the most satisfactory state in the whole world? [...] His spirits rose. [...] So might a clergyman, cased for twenty years in starch and broadcloth, cast his collar into the dustbin and snatch the works of Voltaire from the cupboard. So Flush scampered off clipped all over into the likeness of a lion, but free from fleas. [...] The true philosopher is he who has lost his coat but is free from fleas (F 127-8).

'Fleas' being an intertextual reference to de Goncourts' diaries <sup>6</sup> with a metaphorical meaning of the artist's overdeveloped vanity attributed to it, the passage reads as an implied author's statement about the writer's truly rewarding status in the world as 'to be nothing'. However playful and insignificant this 'definition' may seem to be, it does bear the weight of Woolf's long-term speculation about the social aspect of a writer's identity. What I think is important to stress is the fact that Woolf is distinguished from a typical modernist writer by her focusing as much on the socio-cultural implications of depersonalising a writer's identity as on the formal technique of de-explicating the author in the narrative.

This observation makes us turn to Henry James's and Ford's experiments with point of view in the novel, so as to contextualise Woolf's identity-in-disguise mode of writing. From the formal perspective Woolf's identity technique may be taken for just another example of Henry James's strategy as described in the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*: "'Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness', I said to myself, 'and you get as interesting and beautiful a difficulty as you could wish'". <sup>7</sup> Technically it is a well-known approach, with the only difference in whether it is applied to an imaginary generalised type or a fantastic being, or to a fake quasi-historical personality. But what Woolf's writing mode does differ in from Henry James's manner is the implicit view of the writer as an outsider, or 'the Other' in relation to the order of things. We get glimpses of Woolf's specific understanding of the writer's identity both in her early and later work. A remarkable instance of her defining her identity as a wanderer, a gypsy, occurs in her early sketch "Wilton Fair":

I never see a gipsy cart without longing to be inside it. A house that is rooted to no one spot but can travel as quickly as you can change your mind, & is complete in itself is surely the most desirable of houses. Our modern house with its cumbersome walls & its foundations planted deep in the ground is

nothing better than a prison; [...] & more & more prison like does it become the longer we live there & wear fetters of association & sentiment, painful to wear - still more painful to break (APA 208).

Becoming 'one' with the world, blending 'one's room' of creativity with the world at large means to achieve desirable anonymity, which seems to be Woolf's view of the writer's identity in her essay "I am Christina Rossetti" (1930):

...so great the miracle of poetry, that some of the poems you wrote in your little back room will be found adhering in perfect symmetry... when Torrington Square is a reef of coral perhaps and the fishes shoot in and out where your bedroom window used to be; or perhaps the forest will have reclaimed those pavements and the wombat and the ratel will be shuffling on soft, uncertain feet among the green undergrowth that will then tangle the area railings (CR2 244).

What is put here in semi-mystical, semi-playful terms as a future posthumous life of a poet's work in the world is in fact a re-statement of Woolf's identity idiom of the writer as anonymous and all-embracing presence. To sweep the cobwebs off this mythologised image we need go back to the Ms version of *A Room of One's Own*, where Woolf identifies a writer with an anonymous medieval pedlar walking from place to place singing ballads (WF 3). This instance is absent from the final text. Yet the very fact of its being omitted by Woolf, as well as her early sketch with the gipsy image and the recurrence of the latter in *The Waves* (TW 237), show the writer's identity as a medieval ballad-singer who comes and goes as being meaningful to Woolf. What we need now is to contextualise it in cultural terms. That Woolf tended to think of the writer's identity in terms of the past rather than the present, of the writer's enlightening function rather than the artistic function of creating 'pure art'<sup>8</sup>; of the writer's anonymity, as well as of the centralized 'I' in the text as a disadvantage - all these look to be proper modernist features in her early work.

However, these are not the only things that the writer's identity idiom implies. There have cropped up other themes and issues in my study of Woolf's letters and diaries that would be worthwhile to define. As was pointed out by Colin MacCabe, in the modernist text "the lack of a centre becomes the explicit focus of the text", "an authorial and authoritarian 'metalanguage' [in it which] judges and controls all the other discourses in the text" is subverted.<sup>9</sup> Indeed,

instead of an 'authoritarian' voice, there is a polyphony of selves, as in the work of Woolf.<sup>10</sup> And I intend to go further and beyond the formal aspect, by looking into the possible socio-cultural sources or implications of such defocused narrative. There may be something to Lukács's and post-Lukácsian statements about the modernist writer's view of man as a fragmentary being responsible for the fragmentary mode of writing.<sup>11</sup> Proceeding, however, from the assumption that Woolf's early work is marked by the writer's identity taking shape, I propose to consider the defocused narrative as a sign of search for identification beyond and above 'I', as was established then by the previous literary and cultural practice. This search needs to be evaluated, I think, in broader terms than just technical, or as a modernist feature. I take it to be part of the then burgeoning modernity. A certain mistrust of 'I', a suspicion of its being limited and narrow, which is always there in the work of Woolf, signals the underlying significance of 'the Other'.

In early Woolf's work 'the Other', hinted at by various masks her narrators put on, resembles 'otherness' as a socially oppressed state (of both men and women), constituting, therefore, part of her guilty subconscious.<sup>12</sup> 'Otherness' links Woolf with the broad issue of modernity. Accordingly, with Woolf, 'voice' is closer to social-cultural and behaviour practices. Of special note is the fact that the writer deals with the reader's stereotypes. Woolf does so by evoking a cultural stereotype and making the reader question it while questioning something else, for instance, the view of literary history.

To sum up *en passage*, the combination of modernist and modernity features, as revealed by the study of the identity aspect in Woolf's work, makes the investigation of the aspect of writing an important point. It was writing that she questioned in certain specific ways. I assume that the study of her questioning writing will also bring up, alongside some well-known and established modernist characteristics, a different and broader perspective.

I now propose to consider some of the discourse and social-cultural practices of writing in Woolf's work. I intend to look closely at the language aspect of the writer's work, which has been given little attention if any from this particular point of view. To consider the ways in which language was questioned by Woolf would mean our getting a clearer view of the writing mode taking shape in her work. The study here may be rewarding in its focusing on the letter and diary discourses which are, at least partly, unchecked, and therefore preserve a writer's personal, cultural and social accents, rather than on a finished piece of writing which is normally characterized by a high degree of self-consciousness and control.

Woolf's early diary-writing strikes one with a certain social stiffness. It sounds socially bound, upper-middle class and now out-of-date. Note her using 'methinks' or 'perchance': "The God babies methinks are amusing themselves" (APA 137); "monotony, so methinks, dwells in these plains" (Ibid.138); "I must blurt out crude ecstasies upon sky & field; which may perchance retain for my eyes a little of their majesty in my awkward words" (Ibid.). The monotony (to borrow Woolf's word) of one social voice which she soon outgrew contrasts vividly with the relish she found in verbal exuberance and the very process of writing. In her diaries Woolf remarks that she loves all the attributes of writing, pen and paper included. She is distressed when something interferes with the fluency of her writing:

My pen, I must add, is rather unwell at present, & the aspect of this book distresses me. I cannot write prettily when my pen scratches & all joy in the art is lost to me. I love writing for the sake of writing, but when my pen is enfeebled it becomes a task & bother to me. The domestic Mary "a nice girl, but very empty Miss" investigated the mechanics of my pen before we came away, & something of its divinity has fled since (APA 139).

Writing is joy, drive; it gives you a sense of freedom, being marked with some exceptional power ('something of its [pen's] divinity'). Also, there is awareness of the inexhaustibility of a writer's occupation, of responsibility and a devoted wish to do better: "So ended a somewhat grim day of pleasure. This has taken me considerably longer to write than the whole day itself: such a relation of details is extraordinarily difficult, dull & unprofitable to read. However there is no end to writing, & each time I hope that I may make better stuff of it" (Ibid. 149-50).

The new sensibility about writing which I think is outlined in Woolf's early diaries can be found in her focusing on her own writing techniques as well as in her critical evaluations of other writers' styles. In those early diaries she would often leave traces of writing while going back in thought or saying she has forgotten what she was writing about. A parenthesis like the following one in the entry of 1903 is quite common with Woolf: "I am sorry that I began to write this page - I forget now where it was to lead me, or why I chose this circuitous path" (APA 177). This turn reminds us of Woolf's future moves of this kind in *A Room of One's Own*.<sup>13</sup> She obviously tries to get her thoughts and feelings on paper unchecked as they come and go. The critic in her would register some notes in passing, but the whole process is set on the flow or the drive of writing:

the diary of some ancient Bishop written in flowing ancient English that harmonised with this melancholy melodious monotony (what an awful sentence!) of bank & stream. Activity of mind, I think, is the only thing that keeps one's life going, unless one has a larger emotional activity of some other kind (APA 138).

The approach to writing suggested here and in the above-quoted passages runs parallel to the modernist sensibility of setting 'I' free on paper rather than of organizing the impressions into a clear-cut and coherent artistic whole. (With the obvious reservation that I base myself on Woolf's diary which necessarily presupposes a certain formlessness). Her critical comments on Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* (1876), which she was reading then, also point at her sense of the limitations of the Jamesian style of writing:

That is a book which reminds me of an infinitely fine pencil drawing; it lacks colour, it lacks outline, but it is full of exquisite drawing, as an artist would say - & the slightest stroke, you see, has its meaning. You don't get any of that spontaneous & unreflecting pleasure out of it that you do out of the great books, [...] but you get a marvellous amount of reasoned enjoyment. It is the enjoyment of the intellectual palate tickled by something fine & rare - you need be a little of an epicure to see how very fine & rare it is. [...] But this isn't an altogether satisfactory style of art (APA 205).

She is no less critical of Hardy's writing in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), though on grounds different from her remarks about Henry James's novel. She is suspicious of the *Tendenz* in Hardy's novel. To her thinking it destroys the novel as such: "the writer is so sternly determined that we shall see the brutality of certain social conventions that he tends to spoil his novel as a novel" (APA 206). She seems to have in mind a certain balance which there should be in a literary work. Something of it is hinted at in Woolf's evaluation of Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1775): "Boswell somehow manages to cut out a whole chunk of the earth & air & stick it all alive under a glass case for us to come & see" (APA 206).

Alongside its obvious modernist slant, Woolf's sensibility about writing, even at this early stage, has other implications as well. These may be defined as the beginnings of the discourse of modernity. Her critical attitude to the genre of the maxim points at a sensibility which sets out to express itself via a profound and rich experience shaped as an illuminatory and exuberant discourse:



I foresee that one day I shall write a book of maxims - like a French-woman. I often think of things that sound to me remarkably like what in English we call 'Thoughts'. But mine have this drawback - they are very obvious - a little false - & after all where will one sentence lead you? All the thoughts, maxims, &c. &c. &c. which we can see so laboriously printed & translated from one language to another as though no one literature could be selfish enough to keep these treasures for itself - all, I say, have only one moment of legitimate life. I can imagine that they sound well at a dinner table - go off with an enlivening pop, as of dexterous little crackers. But they wont blow up anything or do much in the way of illumination (APA 177).

However, it is her thinking that writing is good when it achieves a 'compass of voices' that is most remarkable. The notion of 'voice' is used in her early diaries as a positive characteristic. Though in the example I quote it is applied to the wind, it has, I think, a wider application:

It is easier to write tonight than to sleep. A wind which has been playing about all day, suddenly goes to work in dead earnest. It is battering at my windows pressing them as tight against the frame as possible, & then swerving aside so that the pane released from pressure rattles loose. The wind has a *wonderful compass of voices* (APA 205; my italics).

The stress laid by Woolf on the diversity of voices raises the issue of her increasing awareness of the social-cultural aspect of writing. The exuberance of discourse Woolf sought (note her 'wonderful compass of voices'), which would reflect the diversity and spontaneity of experience, points at a new sensibility she was aiming at. That the issue of a new sensibility about writing was an open and challenging one with her, is evident in the point of tension mentioned above; with Woolf, it is her focus on developing the social-cultural discourse of modernity via writing that is important to examine. What matters now is to expand on these issues by providing the details, examples, so as to reveal further implications of her writing as related to identity. Let us turn to Woolf's early novels.

Here I will limit myself by focusing on the writing technique as revealed in *Night and Day* (1918). In particular, I focus on the issue of a new sensibility about writing which, in Woolf's case, implied a 'compass of voices', as well as critical awareness of the work of Henry James and Hardy as limited in terms in experience or too tendency-bound. The aim of my study is to justify my assumption that Woolf came to develop the social-cultural discourse of modernity by writing open-ended novels based on the de-centralised 'I'.

Basing myself on the study of identity in Woolf's early diaries and her essays pursued above, I assume that the new sensibility in Woolf's writing took shape along with the search for a broad life experience combined with her intention to get 'a compass of voices' into her discourse. The plurality and interplay of selves, i.e. the 'I', 'you', 'we', 'one', third-person positions, were seen as a possible way of gaining in width of social observation and thereby overcoming a certain social stiffness in her early discourse. The search for a flexible novel form was undertaken as a means to go beyond the limitations of the novels created by the writers of the older generation.

Some of these crucial aspects of Woolf's new sensibility in writing are well expressed in her early essay, "Sterne" (1909):

The fascination of novel writing lies in its freedom; the dull parts can be skipped, and the excitements intensified; but above all the character can be placed artistically, set, that is, in fitting surroundings and composed so as to give whatever impression you choose. [...] Again, a real life is wonderfully prolific; it passes through such strange places and draws along with it a train of adventure that no novelist can better them, if only he can deal with them as with his own inventions (GR 168).

Here is stated Woolf's early intention to make her discourse as open to life-experience as possible (to get 'a compass of voices'), simultaneously giving it the modern artistic edge, or shape. Let us see whether or how it was realised in her writing practice.

In *Night and Day* (1918) modern culture comes broadly into the novel with the accurate descriptions of the life-style of the young in the 1910s. For instance, the description of the reading of the paper at Mary Datchet's place (ND 46,49) has the same cultural background as Woolf's autobiographical sketch "Old Bloomsbury" (1921/22?) (MB 159-79) or as some old photos, for example, the photo of Katherine Cox in 1911 (L-II ill). There is a view that the modernism of *Night and Day* consists in 'the search for order' which is present there. According to Jane Marcus, it "impelled Eliot and Joyce to shape their feelings of despair in ancient mythological structures" and "was the same impulse which drove Virginia Woolf to shape *Night and Day* around the imitation, quest, and journey myths of *The Magic Flute*".<sup>14</sup> A formal approach like this may certainly help discover interesting intertextual parallels between this novel and the literature of the past (Ibid. 99). But it also may dim and ultimately ignore the modern agenda which is explicit in this novel. The discourse of modernity is perhaps best to be looked for not in Woolf's direct response to the war, of

which there is none (a fact that disturbed her contemporaries, though the writer's silence on a certain subject may sometimes be as eloquent as his or her straightforward discussion of it), but in the further shaping of modern sensibility out of the texture of social and family relationships.

The stress here laid on the plurality of approaches is made more pronounced and pointed than anywhere before in Woolf's writing. It is there in the emphasis placed on the analysis of one's emotions as a positive value, and a way out of conventional dramas and false relations, that reminds the reader of G. E. Moore's ethics which provided, as is known, one of the central points in the Bloomsbury outlook.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in the following dialogue between Katherine and Rodney:

'Sit beside me. Let's consider sensibly –'  
 'Your sense has been our undoing –' he groaned.  
 'I accept the responsibility.' ...  
 'Yes, we should both be free. ...' he could not deny that a divine relief possessed him, and that the future, instead of wearing a lead-coloured mask, now blossomed with a thousand varied gaieties and excitements (ND 302-3).

The reasonable attitude of the protagonists to the conventions and to people's relations and feelings sounds very Moore-like, but, in historical retrospect, it has broader implications than this. Open talk about one's feelings, as in the dialogue between Katharine and William (ND 270), sorting out one's own and others' emotions rather than subjecting them to strictures on the basis of traditions, rules, and the experience of the past, seem to have become since then a sign of modernity.

Another modern idea of the past and its status in a young generation's life is played out in the novel in several ways. One is the past as claiming the present, which is treated with gentle irony here:

Above her [Katharine's] nursery fireplace hung a photograph of her grandfather's tomb in Poet's Corner, and she was told in one of those moments of grown-up confidence which are so tremendously impressive to the child's mind, that he was buried there because he was a 'good and great man' (ND 34).

Katharine's 'experimenting in living' when 'the great age [of her ancestors] was dead' is part of the position of the generation of the moderns in relation to the Victorian past:

Perhaps it is a little depressing to inherit not lands but an example of intellectual and spiritual virtue; perhaps the conclusiveness of a great ancestor is a little discouraging to those who run the risk of comparison with him. It seems as if, having flowered so splendidly, nothing now remained possible but a steady growth of good, green stalk and leaf. For these reasons, and for others, Katharine had her moments of despondency. The glorious past, in which men and women grew to unexampled size, intruded too much upon the present, and dwarfed it too consistently, to be altogether encouraging to one forced to make her experiment in living when the great age was dead (ND 35).

Throughout the novel there goes on a critical discussion of Victorian values and the nineteenth century as a whole.<sup>16</sup> The whole issue of the Victorian past is made complicated, and the way out offered in the novel is rather via some surreptitious escape, which looks comic:

It was like tearing through a maze of diamond-glittering spiders' webs to say good-bye and escape, for at each movement Mrs Hilbery remembered something further about the villainies of picture-framers or the delights of poetry, and at one time it seemed to the young man that he would be hypnotized into doing what she pretended to want him to do, for he could not suppose that she attached any value whatever to his presence (ND 19).

One of the aspects of the novel adding to its comic tone is the description of identity as split into mechanical reactions to social conventions, rules, routine duties, etc., and spontaneous intimate responses which have very little or nothing to do with conventionalism. What makes this division comic is the mathematical, absolutely unromantic precision it is marked with, and the unmistakably ironic voice of the implied author:

If Denham could have seen how visibly books of algebraic symbols, pages all speckled with dots and dashes and twisted bars, came before her eyes as they trod the Embankment, his secret joy in her attention might have been dispersed. She went on, saying, 'Yes, I see. ...but how would that help you?... Your brother has passed his examination?' so sensibly, that he had constantly to keep his brain in check; and all the time she was in fancy looking up through a telescope at white shadow-cleft disks which were other worlds, until she felt herself possessed of two bodies, one walking by the river with Denham, the other concentrated to a silver globe aloft in the fine blue space above the scum of vapours that was covering the visible world (ND 278-9).

The intention to achieve a 'compass of voices' works in the novel in

several ways. One is by bringing together the two socially different figures of Katharine Hilbery, who belongs to the middle-class intellectual and cultural elite, and Ralph Denham, a young Jew, a journalist who writes on legal matters. Also, it is marked by discourses which are made to sound socially different. Katharine's is marked with stiff upper-middle-class accents as in, "I dare say I shouldn't try to write poetry" (ND 15). In contrast to Katharine's, Ralph's discourse is more relaxed both in meaning and in form: "It must be a bore, though, showing your things to visitors", he added reflectively" (ND 14). Or, "I couldn't bear my grandfather to cut me out" (ND 15).

So, the analysis of the strategies Woolf elaborated in *Night and Day* to enhance its 'compass of voices', allows us to see deeper into the means she would use to restructure her writing technique in *Jacob's Room*.

To sum up, Woolf's strategies at shaping a new sensibility in writing developed along two main lines. One was connected with literary artefacts of the past; the other was a challenging issue of giving voice to those ambitions, which had not been given any definite literary form by the writers of the present or previous generations. Of the artefacts of the past Woolf gave priority to nineteenth-century literature, which can be well seen in the critical irony of Woolf's distinguishing the social conventional 'I' and the individual 'I' in the identity of her contemporaries. The presence of the nineteenth-century tradition (with the traces of it being foregrounded) in her early work makes it predictable that Woolf would be looking for ways of reconsidering or transcending it. As for exploring the new possibilities in writing, it is here that she found herself to be a 'voyager out' in search of 'a wonderful compass of voices'.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is interpreted by Michel Foucault as the sign of the author in a text, in his 'What is an Author?' In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted from Lee, Hermione. *Virginia Woolf*, p. 754.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. "Years passed; insanity overcame him; he exploded in violent outbursts of mad rage. Then by degrees he fell silent. Once they caught him murmuring. 'I am what I am', they heard him say" (CR2 77).
- <sup>4</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *The Essays*, Vol. 2, 40-2.
- <sup>5</sup> See Sutherland (ed.), 334.
- <sup>6</sup> See Goncourt, Edmond et Jules de, 243.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted from Peter Faulkner's 'Introduction' to Peter Faulkner (ed.) *A Modernist Reader*, 16.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas's view which associates 'modernist impulse' 'with the bourgeois Enlightenment and with the latter's still universalizing and Utopian spirit'. See his 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project?', in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983, 3-15. The essay was first published in *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter 1981), 3-14, under the different title 'Modernity versus Postmodernity' (see ref. in *Modern Criticism and Theory*. Ed. by David Lodge. London and New York: Longman, 1988, 383).
- <sup>9</sup> MacCabe, Colin. 'Language, Linguistics and the Study of Literature' (1979). Quoted from *Modern Criticism and Theory* 436, 431.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. 'In Woolf's fiction, her fluctuating narrative persona, her deliberate experiments with literary form, her subversion of conventional reading expectations and the changing interrogative strategies she developed throughout her work are all invariably provocative'. Quoted from Flora, Luísa Maria. "'So Men Said': Virginia Woolf and a History of Women's Creativity", in *Feminine Identities*. Ed. by Luísa Maria Flora, Teresa F. A. Alves and Teresa Cid. Cadernos de Anglistica-5. University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, 57.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. 'Man is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is as inexplicable to others as to himself'. From G. Lukács's 'The Ideology of Modernism'. Quoted from *The Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. David Lodge. A Reader (1972). London and New York: Longman, 1991, 480.
- <sup>12</sup> For the given interpretation of 'the Other', see Val Cunningham's *In the Reading Gaol* (350). The issue of 'the Other' as materially or socially or colonially oppressed is present in Woolf's writing. Here it is worthwhile to refer to her early essay

'On a Faithful Friend' (1905) (BP 10-3); her diary entry of 6 January 1918 (D-I 100-1); *A Room of One's Own* (1929); *Between the Acts* (1940), etc. Of the extra-literary sources it is of use to refer to Leonard Woolf's experience as a colonial officer in Ceylon of which she certainly knew and whose highly critical attitude to colonialism she shared.

- <sup>13</sup> Cf. 'For this reason - that my memory failed me - the argument flagged for want of material'; 'For truth ... those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham' (AROO 22-3).
- <sup>14</sup> Marcus, Jane. 'Enchanted Organs, Magic Bells: *Night and Day* as Comic Opera'. In *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity. A Collection of Essays*. Ed., with an Introduction by Ralph Freedman. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1980, 97.
- <sup>15</sup> Without going into the intricacy of the issue of the relationship between G. E. Moore's views and Virginia Woolf's works, which has been studied by J. K. Johnstone in *The Bloomsbury Group*. New York: Noonday, 1954, 20-45; Quentin Bell in *Virginia Woolf*, vol.1, 139; S. P. Rosenbaum in 'The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf', in *English Literature and British Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, 316-356; Ralph Freedman in his *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, André Gide, and Virginia Woolf*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963, 197-200; and 'The Form of Fact and Fiction: *Jacob's Room* as Paradigm' in *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, 136-7 (to which I owe this reference), I would like to stress the link between Woolf's *Night and Day* and Moore's concept of 'a refutation of idealism' (1903) which has so far been overlooked by Woolf's scholars.
- <sup>16</sup> "'No, we haven't any great men' Denham replied. 'I'm very glad that we haven't. I hate great men. The worship of greatness in the nineteenth century seems to me to explain the worthlessness of that generation'" (ND 17).

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