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Virginia Woolf's Letters: Writing in the Making

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Abbreviations

APA: *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909 and Carlyle's House and other Sketches*.

AROO: A Room of One's Own (1929).

BTA: Between the Acts (1941)

D I-V: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume I-V*.

E I-VI: *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*: *Volume I-VI*.

L I-VI: *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I-VI*.

MOB: *Moments of Being* (1976).

THL: *The Hogarth Letters* (1932).

TTL: To the Lighthouse (1927).

TW: *The Waves* (1931).

TY: The Years (1937).

Contents

Acknowledgements 1
List of Abbreviations 2
Contents 3

Introduction 9

1. The initiation of the thesis 10
2. Letter: a definition 11
 2.1. Letter as autobiographical writing: "They have Souls" 11
 2.2. Letter—a definition: "they can speak" 13
 2.3. The epistolary style: "the Transports of the Heart" 13
 2.4. The power of epistolary language 14
 2.5. Letter as an artistic form 15
3. Letter writing: women's practice and general criticism 15
 3.1. Women and letter writing 16
 3.1.1. Women's letter writing in Medieval Europe 16
 3.1.2. Women's letter writing in Modern Britain 17
 3.2. The modern debate on women's letter writing and the epistolary genre 21
 3.2.1. The nineteenth-century epistolary criticism 21
 3.2.2. Woolf's view on women's letter writing and the epistolary art 23
4. Introduction of Woolf's letters 28
5. A review of studies on Woolf's letters 28
6. Introduction of the thesis: selected subjects and methods 29

Part One: The Letters and Literature 31

Introduction: Letters and literature 32

Chapter One: Letters of facts 37

Introduction 38
1. Life: Moments of being and non-being, and the world beyond perception 38
 1.1. Moments of being 38
 1.2. Moments of non-being and the world beyond perception 41
2. Letter writing as the media to preserve daily life 42

1.1. The "living portrait" (*L VI*, 477) 45
 Introduction: Criticisms on Woolf's painterly writing 45
 1.1.1. Woolf's view on Walter Sickert's literary painting 47

1.1.2. Woolf's painterly writing and the reader's imagination 49

1.2. The camera-eye narrative 55

1.3. The "wave language" (*L VI*, 403) 60
1.3.1. The sonata-like modern life 62
1.3.2. The symphonic life 66

1.4. Life "better than any play" (*L V*, 432) 70
1.4.1. An evening with three visitors 70
1.4.2. Lady Ottoline Morrell's party 72

Conclusion 76

Chapter Two: Letters of imagination 81

Introduction 82
1. Woolf's "appetite for facts" (*L IV*, 34) in letters and the functions of facts 82
2. Imagination, people and writing 87

2.1. Imagination as the source of pleasure 91
2.1.1. The pleasure of imagination 91
2.1.2. Imagination and desire 92
2.1.3. Imagination as vicarious pleasure 95

2.2. Imagination as a bridge of space-time distance 97

2.3. Meta-fiction/biography in Woolf's letters 103
2.3.1. The shift from epistolary writing to fictional writing 104
2.3.2. Imaginative descriptions as the material of fiction 106
2.3.3. Meta-biographies in Woolf's letters 108
2.3.4. The limits of imagination 111

Conclusion 113

Chapter Three: Letters of thoughts: Woolf's theory of impersonality 115

Introduction: Letters as a vehicle for artistic thoughts 116
1. Letters and essays 116
2. Essay-letter 118

3.1. Writing as a "glass" (*L IV*, 155) for the self 119

3.2. Identity and depersonalization 122

3.2.1. The self and the process of depersonalization 122
3.2.1.1. The writer's self 122
3.2.1.2. From depersonalisation to impersonation 123
3.2.2. The self, humanity and anonymity 126
3.2.2.1. The self and humanity 126
3.2.2.2. The method of anonymity 128
Conclusion 131

3.3. The "platform" (*L V*, 167) of writing 136
3.3.1. The reviewer's way of writing 137
3.3.2. The suggestive method 140
3.3.2.1. Proust's "persuasive" (*D II*, 322) method 140
3.3.2.2. The suggestive method 143

Conclusion 146

Conclusion to Part One 147

Part Two: The Style of "central transparency" 149

Introduction 150
1. Personality, emotion and writing 150
2. Studies on Woolf's concept of "central transparency" 168

Chapter Four: Woolf's concept of "central transparency" 173

Introduction: Woolf's admiration for Vita Sackville-West and her writing 174
1. Woolf's admiration for Vita 174
2. Woolf's admiration for Vita's writing 177

4.1. "[C]entral transparency" as a sort of sympathetic vibration 180
4.1.1. "[C]entral transparency" in "human intercourse" (*L III*, 453) 180
4.1.1.1. Vita's lack of "central transparency" in "human intercourse" (*L III*, 453) 180
4.1.1.2. "[C]entral transparency" in human relationship 182
4.1.2. "[C]entral transparency" in literature 188
4.1.2.1. The technique of "central transparency" in descriptive facts 188
4.1.2.1.1. Vita's lack of "central transparency" in descriptive facts 188
4.1.2.1.2. The technique of "central transparency" in descriptive facts 190
4.1.2.2. "[C]entral transparency" in reading 193

4.2. "[C]entral transparency" as intense sentences 195

4.3. The "mould" (*L III*, 333) of the style of "central transparency" 198

Conclusion 203

Chapter Five: Woolf's style of "central transparency" (I): Imagery 205

Introduction 206
1. Woolf's style of "central transparency" as a feminine, "inward and intimate" style (*L I*, 212) 206
2. Introduction to Chapter Five 218

5.1. Images of animals: "[a]ll the romance of life" (*L V*, 226) and the "play", "private side of life" (*L V*, 396) 223

5.2. Imagery for people 234
Introduction 234
5.2.1. Imagery as a way to convey "the Aesthetic Sense" (*L I*, 295) 239
5.2.1.1. Vanessa Bell—"a game of mine to find figures for her" (*L I*, 310) 240
5.2.1.2. Lady Ottoline Morrell—"a real aristocrat" (*L VI*, 337), "a sense of Shakespeare" (*L VI*, 95) 244
5.2.2. "[M]y jocose remarks upon your character" (*L III*, 65) 253
5.2.3. "[W]hy is it so pleasant to damn one's friends?" (*L II*, 209) 260
5.2.4. "[A] horrible figure of speech" (*L III*, 6) 271

5.3. A "doubt [of] my own identity" (*L I*, 328) 276

5.4. The art of letter writing and emotions 284
Introduction 284
5.4.1. Letters of gratitude 286
5.4.2. Letters of admiration 288

5.5. "[A] cosmogony" (*L IV*, 84) of "Virginia Woolf's ghost[s]" (*L VI*, 224) and "my Style" (*L I*, 212) of imagery 291
Introduction 291
5.5.1. Violet Dickinson 293
5.5.1.1. Violet Dickinson: a "detached spirit" (*L I*, 259) 293
5.5.1.2. Imagery as an "inward and intimate" "Style" (*L I*, 212) 298
5.5.2. Jacques Raverat: "a divine sunset red" "in a sunset glow" (*L III*, 137) "on a hill top" (*L III*, 172) 302
5.5.3. Vita Sackville-West 308
5.5.3.1. Vita Sackville-West: "a lamp and a glow, and a shady leaf and an illuminated hall [in] in my existence" (*L V*, 141) 308
5.5.3.2. Imagery—"the bubble of affection, which is stupid and inarticulate" (*L III*, 480) 319
5.5.4. Ethel Smyth 326

5.5.4.1. Ethel Smyth: “a red sun I could see and feel hot through the mist” (*L VI*, 66) 326
5.5.4.2. Imagery, “with its recurring rhythm, and visual emblem”, as the most masterful technique in “the art of letters” (*L V*, 423) 335

Conclusion 339

Chapter Six: Woolf’s style of “central transparency” (II): Letters of soliloquy: Descriptive facts and “[T]he poetic speech” (*L V*, 103) 343

Introduction 344

6.1. The technique of descriptive facts 346
6.1.1. Descriptive facts: “without saying things” (*L III*, 199) 346
6.1.1.1. “[D]omesticity” (*L III*, 231) 346
6.1.1.2. Fictional writing—“a mirage” (*L III*, 241) 347
6.1.1.3. “Gloomsbury” (*L III*, 242) 349
6.1.1.4. The Hogarth Press 352
6.1.1.5. The upper class’s parties 353
6.1.2. Descriptive facts: “saying the opposite” (*L III*, 199) 354

6.2. “[T]he poetic speech” (*L V*, 103) 362
6.2.1. “[T]he poetic speech” (*L V*, 103) 362
6.2.2. The cry of agony and “[a] dialogue between the different parts of [one]self” (*L V*, 294) 364
6.2.2.1. The cry of agony 364
6.2.2.2. “A dialogue between the different parts of [one]self” (*L V*, 294) 366

Conclusion 371

Conclusion to Part Two 374

Part Three: Letter writing, addressees, and the letter writer 377

Introduction 378

Chapter Seven: Letter writing as writer’s and addressees’ co-creation 387

7.1. Male friends 388
7.1.1. Thoby Stephen 388
7.1.2. Bloomsbury Group members 390
7.1.3. Other male addressees 403

7.2. Female companions 406
Introduction: The female charm 406
7.2.1. Violet Dickinson 410
7.2.2. Vanessa Bell 418
7.2.3. Vita Sackville-West 425
7.2.4. Ethel Smyth 428

Conclusion 444

Chapter Eight: Letter writing as the site of self-discovery: "[T]he 4 dimensions of the mind" (*D V*, 96)—"I: & the not I: & the outer & the inner" (*D IV*, 353) 447

Introduction 448
1. Woolf's view on autobiographical and historical writing 448
2. Autobiographical writing as the site of self-discovery for the modern writer 454

8.1. "[T]he worlds—3 and 4" (*L VI*, 400): "I: & the not I" (*D IV*, 353) 457

8.2. "[T]he different strata of being: the upper under" (*D IV*, 258)—"the outer & the inner" (*D IV*, 353) 470

Conclusion 480

Conclusion to Part Three 482

Conclusion 485

Bibliography 494

Introduction

1. The initiation of the thesis

In "Virginia Woolf (1956)," Clive Bell predicts that the publication of Woolf's diaries and letters will arouse some more excitement for her writing:

> Sooner or later Virginia's diaries and letters will be printed. They will make a number of fascinating volumes: books, like Byron's letters, to be read and re-read for sheer delight. In the midst of his delight let the reader remember, especially the reader who itches to compose histories and biographies, that the author's accounts of people and of their sayings and doings may be flights of her airy imagination.[1]

Clive Bell reminds the reader that Woolf's descriptions of life and people in her journal and letters are partly the work of her imagination rather than truthful representations.

Susan Sellers, in her article, "Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters (2000)," states that Woolf "wrote many thousands of letters" and "[h]er earlier surviving letters was written in 1888, and she maintained a regular correspondence right up to her death, sometimes writing six letters a day." Sellers indicates that, though Woolf's letters, together with her diaries, "form a substantial part of her oeuvre" and "have been hailed as works of genius", reviewers treat both Woolf's letters and diaries as a marginalised documents rather than "distinct and intrinsically worthwhile works of art": "Yet, despite the accolades, the tendency has been to scour the diaries and letters for the insights they afford into Woolf's writing, or—in the wake of the seemingly endless fascination with Bloomsbury—into Woolf herself. They are rarely read in their own right."[2]

Before introducing the six volumes of Woolf's letters, we shall first define epistolary writing and the socio-cultural association between epistolary writing and women in history.

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[1] Clive Bell. "Virginia Woolf," *Old Friends: Personal Recollections*. 1956. 1st American edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1957: p. 97.

[2] Susan Sellers. "Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters," *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: p. 109.

2. Letter: a definition

In the twelfth century, Héloïse d'Argenteuil turns to letters to communicate with Pierre Abélard to keep their love alive, for, in her eyes, the letter could act as the portrait of her absent lover:

> I have your Picture in my Room, I never pass by it without stopping to look at it; and yet when you were present with me, I scarce ever cast my Eyes upon it; *If a Picture, which is but a mute Representation of an Object, can give such Pleasure, what cannot Letters inspire?* They have Souls, they can speak, they have in them all that Force which expresses the Transports of the Heart; they have all the Fire of our Passions, they can raise them as much as if the Persons themselves were present; they have all the Softness and Delicacy of Speech, and sometimes a Boldness of Expression even beyond it. (*our emphasis*)[3]

Comparing Abélard's picture to his letters, Héloïse uses a rhetorical question to emphasise the latter's inspirational capacity. In analysing Héloïse's statement, this section tries to define the letter from five different points of view.

2.1. Letter as autobiographical writing: "They have Souls"

In the quoted passage, Héloïse first indicates that the letter is the emblem of the writer's inner self: "They have Souls." Héloïse's view about epistolary writing as autobiographical revelation echoes Henry T. Tuckerman's consideration of letters as exponents of the writer's character, heart and mind.[4] Besides, for Emily Dickinson, a letter is the image of "immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend […] there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone."[5] Critics hence consider Emily Dickinson's letters as physical extensions of her identity, her non-corporeal self, which could offer readers an opportunity to glimpse into her

[3] Héloïse. *Letters of Abelard and Heloise: To which is prefix'd a Particular Account of their Lives, Amours, and Misfortunes, Extr. chiefly from M. Bayle*. Trans. John Hughes. 9th ed. London: James Rivington and J. Fletcher, P. Davey and B. Law, T. Lownds, and T. Caslon, 1760: p. 87.
[4] Henry T. Tuckerman. "The Correspondent: Madame De Sévigné," *Characteristics of Literature: Illustrated by the Genius of Distinguished Writers*. 2nd Series. Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1851: p. 87, 102.
[5] Emily Dickinson. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson 1845-1886* (2 vols). Ed. Mabel Loomis Todd. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906: p. 313.

mind.[6] Paul Valéry concludes that every theory is part of its author's autobiographies: "In fact there is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography."[7] This is what Roland Barthes challenges in "The Death of the Author" where he declares that writing is the language, which speaks, acts and performs, rather than the author, "me"; meanwhile, the author is a "prerequisite impersonality"—his personality and physical presence do not endow his language with any meaning.[8] Michel Foucault, in "What Is an Author?", will also argue that there is no author in a letter but his point will be slightly different, since for him, the author is an ideological product—a function of discourse within a society.[9] Close to our purpose, there is Bakhtin's claim that language is the author's language:

> The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning, that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention. No matter what "agonies of the word" the poet endured in the process of creation, in the finished work language is an obedient organ, fully adequate to the author's intention.[10]

Bakhtin insists that language serves as the verbal tool for the author's purpose in his writing—the author's words could refract, either directly or indirectly, his views and are under his control. It seems therefore more convincing to say that epistolary writing, as one form of the author's text, belongs to his or her autobiographical work.

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[6] See Lori Karen Lebow. "Autobiographic Self-Construction in the Letters of Emily Dickinson." Ph.D thesis. University of Wollongong, Australia, 1999: p. 10, 44, 121.

[7] Paul Valéry. "Poetry and Abstract Thought," *The Art of Poetry*. Trans. Denise Folliot. Intro. T. S. Eliot. *Bollingen Series XLV, Vol. 7*. Princeton University Press, 1958: p. 58.

[8] Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. Fontana Press, 1977: p. 143.

[9] Michel Foucault. "What Is an Author?" *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Ed. James D. Faubion. Trans. Robert Hurley and Others. *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 2*. New York: The New Press, 1998: p. 205-22.

[10] M. M. Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981: p. 285-6.

2.2. Letter—a definition: "they can speak"

Héloïse's second view about the letter as a vehicle for communication—"they can speak"—is how Webster defines the letter: "a direct or personal written or printed communication addressed to a person or organization and usually transmitted by mail."[11] To play as the letter writer's conveyer of news and sentiments is one of the letter's most obvious and basic functions—the literary artifact, which substitutes the intimate face-to-face conversation to entertain or condole families and friends, or to sustain or advance their relationship. It is also a shared space for correspondents to exchange amorous, ethical, aesthetic, critical or theoretical opinions. The exchange of private letters, which creates an ongoing dialogue, involves two sorts of meanings: first, letter writing is the writer's act of self-representation—to be heard out, either to report a fact or express a sentiment, either to offer a contemplation, to self-analyse or to give a voice to persuade addressees as the orator does. Reading a letter, according to Janet Gurkin Altman, could hence map the writer's temporal, spatial, emotional or intellectual coordinates at a particular time.[12] Altman argues that, besides the writer's self-expression, the epistolary conversation, caused by his separation from the addressee, also implies his call for response—to make statements in order to elicit a response.[13] Meanwhile, Altman defines the desire for exchange as the epistolary pact—the fundamental impulse behind all epistolary writing and the most basic parameter marking out epistolary language from other literary genres.[14]

2.3. The epistolary style: "the Transports of the Heart"

Composed in the most natural, informal and spontaneous style, which is considered by Jane Austen as the true art of letter writing,[15] epistolary writing is

[11] *The New Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1997: p. 391.
[12] Janet Gurkin Altman. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982: p. 119.
[13] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 122.
[14] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 89.
[15] Jane Austen writes to her sister, Cassandra Austen: "I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter" (*Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: p. 71).

generally considered as the language of the letter writer's heart. It is the only mirror of Samuel Johnson's breast and the imprint of Victor Hugo's heart.[16] Jean Rousset defines letter writing as the literature of the cardiogram—"cette littérature du cardiogramme";[17] while in Mary Wordsworth's eyes, reading William Wordsworth's letters is to see "the breathing of [his] inmost heart upon paper".[18] The nature of epistolary style is to reveal and materialise the movement of the writer's heart and emotion; it is actually what Héloïse means in her third sentence: "they have in them all that Force which expresses the Transports of the Heart."

2.4. The power of epistolary language

In her fourth sentence, Héloïse suggests that, as the material witness of the writer's affection, the epistolary language has the power to make the absent writer present. Accordingly, Altman defines "the epistolary discourse [as] the language of the 'as if' present [—] the language of absence, which makes present by make-believe."[19] That is, the power of the epistolary language can create a picture of the writer enabling his addressee to overcome the physical distance in order to finally bring the writer and addressee together.[20] Additionally, Tzvetan Todorov suggests a double meaning of the epistolary language: except the conversed message—the literal meaning, the letter is also the physical token of intimacy for correspondents, the material proof of the writer's authenticity, or could imply other related information. Through letters, correspondents could hence control their relationship, either bridge or break off their relations through and in language.[21]

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[16] See Patricia A. Rosenmeyer. *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The letter in Greek literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001: p. 193, 234.
[17] Jean Rousset. *Forme et Signification: essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel*. Paris: J. Corti, 1962: p. 78.
[18] William and Mary Wordsworth. *The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth*. Ed. Beth Darlington. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981: p. 46.
[19] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 140.
[20] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 14; see also Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The letter in Greek literature*, p. 151.
[21] Tzvetan Todorov. "The Discovery of Language: *Les Liansons dangereuses* and *Adolphe*." Trans. Frances Chew. *Yale French Studies, No. 45, Language as Action* (1970). 113-26; see also Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The letter in Greek literature*, p. 66-7.

2.5. Letter as an artistic form

As discussed above, for Héloïse, a letter is not only a printed conversation, similar to speech; but also the vital medium for correspondents to express their personal thoughts and critical views, which provide readers with important insights into the writers' intellectual concerns. In the last sentence of the quoted passage, by using the three words, "Softness", "Delicacy" and "Boldness" to characterise these two functions of letter—"Speech" and "Expression", Héloïse implies that both the nature and function of epistolary writing go beyond the conventional ones and the letter has become an artistic form. In other words, despite the spontaneous style of letter writing and its basic role as a medium for exchanging facts and opinions, the letter writer's deliberate treatment of his letter suggests that epistolary writing is a conscious act under its author's control and the discussed subjects are no more confined within their personal life, but concern more general and universal issues. The letter could hence be considered as art, literature.

To conclude, Héloïse's description of the letter includes all the features of epistolary writing—its autobiographical and communicative characteristics, its capacity to crystallise the movement of the writer's heart, its power to make the absent addressee present, as well as its unconventional feature as an artistic form.

3. Letter writing: women's practice and general criticism

Epistolary scholars consider female epistolary writing as the prototype of women's fiction. For instance, P. D. James states: "Long before women were writing novels they were expressing their emotions, aspirations, hopes and fears in epistolary form."[22] They provide two main reasons: one is due to the nature of the letter, which meets women's demand for self-expression and immediate communication; the other is that, without requiring a formal and high education, women's epistolary writing is not merely a practical and useful form but the only activity accepted by the patriarchal

[22] P. D. James. Foreword. *The Inmost Heart: 800 Years of Women's Letters*. Ed. Olga Kenyon. New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1992: p. vii.

society.[23] Moreover, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith declares: "The literary history of women's epistolary writing is a fascinating survey of cultural views of both the female gender and the letter genre."[24]

From a socio-cultural point of view, this section will first give a brief review of the history of women's letter writing in the western countries from Medieval Europe to Modern Britain. Then, in dealing with the debate about women's letter writing and the epistolary form among the British and American critics in the nineteenth century, it will focus on Woolf's views in her essays and letters. It will deal with the following major issues. Who were women letter writers in the different periods and how did they write letters respectively? What is the relationship between the epistolary genre and the English female novel? How did the nineteenth-century British and American critics view epistolary writing in history? And what are Woolf's views on both women's letter writing and contemporary epistolary writing?

3.1. Women and letter writing

3.1.1. Women's letter writing in Medieval Europe

The book, *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, edited by Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, aims to explore medieval women's letter writing in Western Europe from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries. In the introduction,[25] the two editors indicate that the letter was the only and common medium for both religious and secular women to communicate with the outside world. As letter writers nowadays, by writing letters, medieval women bridged spiritual, psychological, or physical distances to create communities of readers. Their epistle had five central functions: to teach, to influence politics, to maintain familial ties, to explore innermost emotions, as well as to convey a simple message. Most of these

[23] See Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus. eds., Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages. *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993: p. 1.
[24] Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. ed., Introduction. *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989: p. vii.
[25] Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages, p. 1-19.

letters were dictated, which didn't mean women had a lower status; on the contrary, dictating a letter enabled them to transcend both gender and educational barriers. Despite the facts that dictation entailed an absence of privacy, and that letters were often read aloud by the recipients to a community or circulated publicly; as written information, letters were still regarded as reliable and trustworthy, and served as either authorised documents or personal communication.

Cherewatuk and Wiethaus divide the medieval women's letters into two principal trends. One is the epistle in Latin written by noble women in Early Middle Ages, similar to the male letters. This sort of female letter not only revealed their writers' extraordinary literary capacity but also implied the high degree of their education. The other trend refers to those letters in vernacular by religious or secular women in High and Late Middle Ages. Though the diverse social contexts of these letters brought the decline of Latinity, its most important significance was to facilitate a simultaneous creative expansion of the genre in the vernacular. If the aristocratic women, such as Radegund, Héloïse and Christine de Pizan, used the epistolary form both as the locus of literary exploration and creation of the female mode of discourse; the less educated secular women made their contribution to vernacular literature by writing intimate and private letters. As written communication at the margins of a sexist realm, both sorts of letter writing, together with the epistolary form, provoked in medieval women the sense and use of their own authority. They were representative of the female voice: "Whatever the writer's social position, whatever her role, whatever her immediate goal in writing, the letter functions as the primary vehicle for her own voice."[26]

3.1.2. Women's letter writing in Modern Britain

According to James Daybell, the rise of female literacy and education decides women's letter writing in early modern England.[27] In the book, *Women*

[26] Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages, p. 15.
[27] James Daybell, ed., Introduction. *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing*, 1450-1700. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001: p. 4.

Letter-Writers in Tudor England, he considers the sixteenth century as a transitional stage of female literary production and advances in women's education and literacy. It is a period marked by the increased laicisation of literacy and the acquisition of epistolary writing skills that letter writing, increasingly disconnected from scribes and secretaries, became a more personal activity for a broader range of groups of women below the ranks of court and social elites. Not only is the surviving material over the course of this century the largest preserved female writing form but also the number of women letter writers increased: almost half of these letters were holograph epistles written by highly literate women, who were able to write in various hands, styles and genres; while one-quarter was written by amanuenses but signed by women senders with a rudimentary mark. Meanwhile, women's acquisition of full literacy in this century enlarged the functions of letter writing: practical, business-related, communicative, religious, literary, intimate, personal, and introspective. By flexing, molding and transforming the conventions within the confines of male authority, they modified and adapted male categories of the letter to satisfy their own needs as female authors, either to articulate experiences and emotions, or to convey their thoughts and viewpoints. Letters were hence able to reveal certain female qualities, such as independence, confidence, and forcefulness, to be representative of women's voice and identity as well as to record their literary experiments as writers.[28] Daybell's viewpoints towards the significance of female letter writing in the sixteenth century are identical with other epistolary scholars': Olga Kenyon declares that women not merely regarded letter writing as the outlet for experiences, viewpoints and emotions but attempted to construct a female identity in the patriarchal realm;[29] while Elizabeth C. Goldsmith indicates that, since the sixteenth-century when familiar letters were established as a literary genre, women's correspondence presented the best model of the epistolary genre.[30]

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[28] James Daybell. *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006: see especially p. 32-3, 37, 45, 71, 92-3, 125, 151, 199.
[29] Olga Kenyon, ed., Introduction. *The Inmost Heart: 800 Years of Women's Letters*. New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1992: p. x.
[30] Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, Introduction, p. vii.

If the sixteenth century witnessed a change in the nature of letters from the formal, pragmatic use to more personal, introspective and flexible ones; in Daybell's eyes, it is by the mid- to late-seventeenth century that the epistolary genre played as a literary forum for women's creative writing. He shows that Dorothy Osborne's letters are fictional while Margaret Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* (1664) are witty, practiced, semi-fictional. Over this period, both letter-writing manuals specifically addressed to women and collections of aristocratic women's letters, such as that of Margaret Cavendish, began to appear in print.[31] On the one hand, Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven point out that the publication of women's letters enabled a range of female voices other than the intimate;[32] while Daybell considers women's practice of letter writing in the late seventeenth century as both an individualising technology, promoting inwardness and introspection, and the material site of the self, central in the construction of early modern subjectivity.[33] On the other hand, if, according to Kenyon, that Margaret Cavendish used the epistolary narrative to depict real life and social issues signified the beginning of the epistolary novel;[34] for Daybell, Mary Wortley Montagu's correspondence, which was written in the early-eighteenth century and used as a vehicle for story-telling and travel narratives, could be considered as the precursor of female novels.[35]

Up to the eighteenth century, correspondence became the essential communicative medium most accessible to and acceptable for women, by weaving the social fabric of family and friendships through their letters of invitation, acceptance, news, condolence, and congratulations, as these centers of social exchanges were considered improper. Literate women were supposed to be able to write elegant letters for no particular reasons. Women letter writers of this period could be divided into two main groups: one consists of the upper-middle-class women—the bluestockings, who, by founding salons to encourage intellectual

[31] James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, p. 20, 125, 143-4.
[32] Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, eds., Introduction. *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000: p. 11.
[33] James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, p. 174.
[34] Olga Kenyon, Introduction, p. xiii.
[35] James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, p. 125.

activities among women from different social backgrounds, shared ideas and discussed the political issues, including women's education in their letters, which were famous for the striking style, either amusing, emotional, informed or well-argued; the other group was mainly middle-class women, whose letters were permeated with their emotions and self-analysis. In order to earn money, some of these women began to publish collections of letters, which were characterised by their wit and political acumen in lively conversational modes. Contrary to speech, the letter, as written conversation providing enough time for their writers to reflect and to choose proper words, helped raise female values in their consciousness in that period. From a literary point of view, letter writing was both the perfect way for women to develop the art of pleasing and the material site to tailor a self to satisfy their addressees' expectations and needs; while the epistolary narrative accelerates the development of fictional narrative techniques, as letters were considered as a convenient vehicle for women to express their own practical and artistic viewpoints.[36]

By the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, many women in the western countries used letters to create their female friendships. Thanks to both the establishment of the national Post Office and the introduction of stamps in late-seventeenth century, in particular, the reduction of cost by the penny post in 1839, women's friendships flourished in correspondence. During the Victorian era, letters became women's major domestic duties to nurture different social relationships and strengthen familial bonds.[37]

Studying the development of women's letter writing from medieval to modern times in the first half of this section makes it clear that women's close association with the epistolary genre is not merely connected with their literacy and literary capacity, but more importantly, with the historical, cultural and social factors. Letters

[36] See: Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, Introduction, p. 2; Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. ed., "Authority, Authenticity, and the Publication of Letters by Women," *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989: p. 54; Olga Kenyon, Introduction, p. ix-xii, xiv-xv; Ruth Perry. *Women, Letters, and the Novel*. New York, N. Y.: AMS Press, Inc., 1980: p. 68-70.

[37] See: Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven, Introduction, p. 6, 12; Vivien Jones, ed., Introduction. *Jane Austen: Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: p. xii-xiii; Olga Kenyon, Introduction, p. xii, xvi-xvii.

concerned with both women's private and public spheres lend themselves to different analyses: as historical, cultural and social documents, they show women's familial and social interactions; as literary texts, they reveal women's literacy and their ways of self-expression. In short, the changing style of letter writing could both reflect the change of women's position in society and their changing spirit and concern.[38]

The fact that culture and society are the decisive factors in women's letter writing is what Woolf indicates in "'The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford (1925)": "The art of letter-writing is of all arts the most dependent upon circumstances" (*E IV*, 15).[39] In discussing major viewpoints of women's letters and epistolary writing mainly in the nineteenth century, the second half of this section will emphasise Woolf's views on the changes of both women's letter writing and the epistolary art over time in her essays and letters.

3.2. The modern debate on women's letter writing and the epistolary genre

3.2.1. The nineteenth-century epistolary criticism

In the nineteenth century, there are two main sorts of critics on epistolary writing. One refers to such critics as John C. Bailey, who considered that the eighteenth century was the golden age of the letter-writer while the art of letter writing was dead afterwards. For Bailey, the letter is an art which consists of trivial matters and is composed by an easy, natural and light touch, and can present the writer's self and character and aims to amuse the recipient; it was hurry and weariness in his own days that destroyed the art of letter writing.[40]

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[38] See P. D. James, Foreword, p. vii.

[39] Woolf's view on the fact that the historical, cultural and social factors represent the overwhelming influence on women's letter writing can also be seen in two other essays. One example is in "A Scribbling Dame (1916)": "And in that long and very intricate process of living and reading and writing which so mysteriously alters the form of literature, so that Jane Austen, born in 1775, wrote novels, while Jane Austen born a hundred years earlier would probably have written not novels but a few exquisite lost letters, Mrs Haywood plays no perceptible part, save that of swelling the chorus of sound" (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 25). The other one is in "Dorothy Osborne's 'Letters' (1932)" while she is analysing Dorothy Osborne's literary gift: "Had she been born in 1827, Dorothy Osborne would have written novels; had she been born in 1527, she would never have written at all. But she was born in 1627, and at that date though writing books was ridiculous for a woman there was nothing unseemly in writing a letter" (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*: p. 384).

[40] John. C. Bailey. *Studies in Some Famous Letters*. London: Thomas Burleigh, 1899: p. 1-3, 231.

The other sort of criticism mainly focuses on the association between women and letters in the eighteenth century. The nineteenth-century American scholars, such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Tuckerman and John Bennett, agreed with Jean La Bruyère's viewpoint of women's superiority in the epistolary art in *The "Characters"* (1688): "That sex excels ours in this kind of writing."[41] They declared that, apart from the pragmatic use, both the natural, emotional style of the epistolary genre and the content of the letter, which is permeated with the acute observation of details in daily familiar life and feelings, are closely related to women's innate aptitude. Tuckerman considers women's letter as the artless written conversation, while Bennett regards the act of letter writing as a mindless activity where imagery, taste, pathos, spirit, fire as well as ease featuring in women's letters came from their heart instead of their mind.[42] According to Katharine A. Jensen, the cultural stereotype about women's epistolary excellence derives from the fact that women's letters are considered as a social art while men's are as literature. In other words, emotion characterises women's letters, while men usually write letters literarily, rhetorically, and self-consciously.[43] Such differentiation between female and male letters is clearly shown to result from historical prejudice by Katherine Binhammer: "The identification of letter writing as a female form stems from women's historical marginalisation from the public sphere."[44]

The cultural view that gendered the epistolary genre as female in that period could also be unveiled by Jane Austen through her character, Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* (1818). In describing Henry Tilney's conversation with Catherine Morland, through her hero's words, Jane Austen not only ironically refers to the

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[41] Jean La Bruyère. *The "Characters"* (1688). Trans. Henri Van Laun. London: John C. Nimmo, 1885: p. 20-1.

[42] See: Thomas Wentworth Higginson. "Women's Letters," *Women and Men*. New York: Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square, 1888: p. 110-4; Henry T. Tuckerman, "The Correspondent: Madame De Sévigné," p. 78-106; John Bennett. "Letter XLVI," *Letters to A Young Lady, on A Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects. Calculated to improve the heart, to form the manners and enlighten the understanding*. 10th American ed. Philadelphia: Published by John Grigg, 1829: p. 115-6.

[43] Katharine A. Jensen. "Male Models of Feminine Epistolarity; or How to Write Like a Woman in Seventeenth-Century France," *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989: p. 28.

[44] Katherine Binhammer. "Review of Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters." *Canadian Woman Studies: Les cahiers de la femme*, Vol 14, No. 1, 1993: p. 108.

widely held view that it is women's nature that produces their art while connecting it with the daily recording of a diary; but by Tilney's satirical comments on the deficiencies of women's letters, Austen actually challenges this stereotyped view and aims to assert the equal distribution of artistic excellence between the sexes.[45]

3.2.2. Woolf's view on women's letter writing and the epistolary art

Woolf's lifelong interest in women's writing, lives and histories surfaces in her essays, where she points out two drastic changes that occurred in the history of women's letter writing. First of all, like Daybell, Woolf, in "The Elizabethan Lumber Room (1925)," considers the sixteenth century as a turning point in women's literacy and education:

> A gulf lay between the spartan domestic housecraft of the Paston women and the refined tastes of the Elizabethan Court ladies, who, grown old, says Harrison, spent their time reading histories, or 'writing volumes of their own, or translating of other men's into our English and Latin tongue', while the younger ladies played the lute and the citharne and spent their leisure in the enjoyment of music. (*E IV*, 56)

During this period, the aristocratic women, as managers of their households in a patriarchal system whose duty largely focused on practical domestic pursuits and activities, began to be allowed some free time and certain opportunities for literary and musical activities. This revolution in women's roles and condition accounts for differences between the Paston letters and those that followed.

On the one hand, in "The Pastons and Chaucer (1925)," Woolf indicates that the long letters Margaret Paston wrote or dictated to her husband in the second half of the fifteenth century failed to represent her female identity: "The long, long letters […] make no mention of herself. […] But Mrs. Paston did not talk about herself" (*E IV*, 23). Instead of proceeding from a desire to convey emotion or intimacy, those letters are pragmatic, and simply convey messages or familiar news: "For the most part her

[45] Jane Austen. *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Ed. Susan Fraiman. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004: p. 15-6.

letters are the letters of an honest bailiff to his master, explaining, asking advice, giving news, rendering accounts" (*E IV*, 23). Woolf characterises the epistolary art at the end of Middle Ages as follows: "there is no writing for writing's sake; no use of the pen to convey pleasure or amusement or any of the million shades of endearment and intimacy which have filled so many English letters since" (*E IV*, 35). According to Juliet Dusinberre, in this essay, Woolf suggests that Margaret Paston did not write about herself because she had neither any consciousness of a self nor any free time in which to discover the pleasure of writing.[46]

On the other hand, in "Dorothy Osborne's 'Letters' (1932)," Woolf reveals that letter writing became the most prevalent and accessible activity for women by the late seventeenth century, as it fitted the scope of expectations of a woman's life. She defines Dorothy Osborne's letters as "a form of literature" (*E V*, 384), as in these intimate letters Dorothy Osborne depicts her life, sketches people, draws her own portrait as well as gossips to amuse her lover with a future group of public readers in mind: "For Dorothy Osborne, as she filled her great sheets by her father's bed or by the chimney-corner, gave a record of life, gravely yet playfully, formally yet with intimacy, to a public of one, but to a fastidious public, as the novelist can never give it, or the historian either" (*E V*, 384-5). If her French contemporary, Madame de Sévigné, as Woolf states in "Madame de Sévigné,"[47] succeeded in constructing herself through letters and is "one of the great mistresses of the art of speech" (*E VI*, 499), "[t]hat is partly because she created her being […] in letters—touch by touch, with repetitions, amassing daily trifles, writing down what came into her head as if she were talking" (*E VI*, 497). Dorothy Osborne, in "writing her mind to her lover, [suggesting] the deeper relationships, the more private moods, […] her own moodiness and melancholy" (*E V*, 387), actually presents her whole personality: "By being herself without effort or emphasis, she envelops all these odds and ends in the flow of her

[46] Juliet Dusinberre. "Letters as Resistance: Dorothy Osborne, Madame de Sévigné and Virginia Woolf." *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?* University of Iowa Press, 1997: p. 96-7.
[47] "Madame de Sévigné" is published posthumously, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*: p. 497-504.

own personality" (*E V*, 385). Like Madame de Sévigné who "says again and again that she writes her letters as she speaks" (*E VI*, 499), Dorothy Osborne compares letters to "one's discourse" (*E V*, 384) with "limits, she reflected, to free-and-easiness: '… many pretty things shuffled together' do better spoken than in a letter" (*E V*, 384).

Though letter writing is the activity women could practise with "the dignity proper to that age" (*E V*, 387) and "an art that a woman could practise without unsexing herself" (*E V*, 384), later in the mid-eighteenth century, Laetitia Pilkington, considered by Woolf as "a champion" (*E IV*, 127) for women in "The Lives of the Obscure (1925)," began to "write letters upon any subject, except the law, for twelve pence ready money" (*E IV*, 129) as "an adventurous career [with] a gay spirit" (*E IV*, 131); while writing was "ridiculous" (*E V*, 384) in the patriarchal society, except for a few women from the upper classes:[48] "the woman was impeded also by her belief that writing was an act unbefitting her sex" (*E V*, 383). Nevertheless, Woolf suggests that since that time, some female writers in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries such as Frances Burney and Jane Austen,[49] have been pretending to be writing letters while they were creating fiction:

> It was an art that could be carried on at odd moments, by a father's sick-bed, among a thousand interruptions, without exciting comment, anonymously as it were, and often with the pretence that it served some useful purpose. Yet into these innumerable letters, lost now for the most part, went powers of observation and of wit that were later to take rather a different shape in *Evelina* and in *Pride and Prejudice*. (*E V*, 384)

Though it was the aristocratic women who ruled and wrote letters up to the early nineteenth century,[50] from the middle part of the same century when "[w]riting

[48] In "Dorothy Osborne's 'Letters'," Woolf takes Duchess of Newcastle's publication of her books as an example among those upper-class women (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*: p. 383-4).
[49] In "Dr Burney's Evening Party (1932)," Woolf describes Frances Burney's writing secretly in the Observatory in the afternoon (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*: p. 430-45); while in "Jane Austen Practising (1922)" and "Jane Austen (1925)," Woolf repeats Jane Austen's stealthy creation of her fictions in the corner of the common parlour (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*: p. 331-5; *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*: p. 146-57).
[50] "Two Women (1927)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*: p. 419-26.

was the most accessible of the arts" *(E IV*, 420), the young ladies from the middle class with little education began to convey to each other their own amusements, pleasures and annoyances in a happy spirited manner of letter writing.[51] Woolf compares Emily Eden's letter writing to her needlework: "So it runs on, easy, witty, controlled, the young lady knowing how to turn a sentence as, presumably, she knew how to run her needle in and out of the pattern of her embroidery. The pattern of the letters was a gay and variegated one" (*E III*, 121-2). While in making her letters out of facts as easily and copiously as she talked, Jane Welsh Carlyle tried to analyse human nature, which demonstrates her genius for writing, her insight into characters and her creative and critical power of capturing the essential.[52] However, it is in analysing Julia Margaret Cameron's letters as the "model" (*E IV*, 380) of the letters of the time that Woolf concludes to the Victorian age being the other turning point of letter writing: "The Victorian age killed the art of letter writing by kindness: it was only too easy to catch the post" (*E IV*, 379).

Dorothy Osborne's letters, which demonstrate "the art of letter-writing [was] in its infancy [where] [m]en and women were ceremoniously Sir and Madam; the language was still too rich and stiff to turn and twist quickly and freely upon half a sheet of notepaper" (*E V*, 384), could be considered as "[a] whole world" (*E V*, 387), where we have a seat to read the author's mind;[53] Mary Wollstonecraft's letters are permeated with her arguments and experiments;[54] Emily Eden's letters could "bring so much of life into view" by "a story, a drama [where] the characters marry and change and grow up, and we watch them changing beneath our eyes" (*E III*, 122-3); Mrs Cameron's letters, contrary to those written with "certain ideals of logic and restraint" (*E IV*, 379) in the eighteenth century, were stimulated by the penny post and

[51] In "Real Letters (1919)," Woolf writes: "How, one wonders, did these young ladies of little education, though high breeding, hit off, while still in their teens, this happy spirited manner of conveying to each other the amusements, the pleasures, the annoyances of life? There were, it is impossible to doubt, rules well known to them and scrupulously observed. You will not find them rashly confiding, or introspective; their sense of humour is their standby; they would rather laugh than cry; and whatever they think proper for a letter they know how to put into words" (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*: p. 121).

[52] "The Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle (1905)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*: p. 54-8.

[53] "Dorothy Osborne's 'Letters' (1932)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*: p. 385.

[54] "Mary Wollstonecraft," in "Four Figures (1932)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*: p. 477.

were profuse with domestic details and enormous family affection as well as unrestrainedly overflowing inspiration.[55]

Has the penny post killed the art of letter writing in the Victorian age, as John Bailey suggests? Such a query can actually be found in Woolf's essay, "A Letter to a Young Poet (1932)," in which "that old gentleman" is obviously an allusion to John Bailey:

> Did you ever meet, or was he before your day, that old gentleman—I forget his name—who used to enliven conversation, especially at breakfast when the post came in, by saying that the art of letter-writing is dead? The penny post, the old gentleman used to say, has killed the art of letter-writing. Nobody, he continued, […] has the time even to cross their t's. We rush, he went on, […] to the telephone. We commit our half-formed thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the post card. Gray is dead, he continued; Horace Walpole is dead; Madame de Sévigné—she is dead too. (*THL*, 213)

Nevertheless, replying to the imaginary John, the author states that his letter is "stuffed with little blue sheets written all over in a cramped but not illegible hand" and "that several t's were uncrossed and the grammar of one sentence seems to [her] dubious," but such a letter reveals the art of letter writing: "I replied after all these years to that elderly necrophilist—Nonsense. The art of letter-writing has only just come into existence. It is the child of the penny post" (*THL*, 213). In the author's eye, the modern letter, such as John's, is "intimate, irreticent, indiscreet in the extreme", where "the line of [his] thought from the roof which leaks ('splash, splash, splash into the soap dish')", actually begins to represent "a true letter", even though this sort of letters "will have to be burnt", "only cost three-halfpence to send", and the reader might fail to catch the flights of the writer's mind: "I doubt, too, that posterity, unless it is much quicker in the wit than I expect, could follow the line of your thought" (*THL*, 214).

[55] "Julia Margaret Cameron (1926)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*: p. 379-380.

4. Introduction of Woolf's letters

Woolf wrote thousands of letters during her lifetime, and nearly four thousand have come out. Some 3,800 have been published in six volumes from 1975 to 1980: *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1888-1912*, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922*, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1923-1928*, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1929-1931*, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V: 1932-1935*, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936-1941*.[56] According to Trautmann Banks, about one hundred letters have been discovered after 1980, the finest appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies* in 1984. In *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Trautmann Banks adds another twelve letters found at the end of 1980s.[57]

5. A review of studies on Woolf's letters

As Sellers indicates, most scholars treat Woolf's letters as marginal documents—a kind of reference to her novels and her life, while very few critics consider Woolf's letters as a valuable work of art. Among the latter critics, Catherine R. Stimpson regards Woolf's letters as both a female sociograph and a theatre. She argues that Woolf's letters not only "exemplify a particular women's text", being "neither wholly private nor wholly public", but also "occupy a psychological and rhetorical middle space between what she wrote for herself and what she produced for a general audience." In Stimpson's eye, Woolf's letters also "inscribe a sociograph. They concern social worlds that she needed and wanted. They form an autobiography of the self with others, a citizen/denizen of relationships." At the same time, Stimpson considers Woolf as "a performer, an actress", while her letters as "bravura, burnishing fragments of performance art", each series of which are built "on the needs and nature

[56] See Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. Editorial Note. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1888-1912 (Virginia Stephen)*. 1975. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 1st American Edition. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975: p. ix.

[57] See Joanne Trautmann Banks. Editorial Note. *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf.* Ed. Joanne Trautmann Banks. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1989: p. xv.

of" individual audiences.[58]

Juliet Dusinberre thinks that, when reading women letter-writers in the early modern period, such as Dorothy Osborne and Madame de Sévigné, Woolf "registered a tradition of free writing and thinking whose legacy she had herself inherited." For Dusinberre, such freedom belongs to "the natural consequence of the privacy of letters", which allow the letter-writer to refashion her world to her own mould for an audience of one." Thus, for the three women letter writers, the letter "becomes a document of female power, of women mapping out new territories for themselves."[59] According to Susan Sellers, Woolf's diaries and letters should both be considered as "distinct and intrinsically worthwhile works of art." She argues that, "[w]ith their inclusiveness and fidelity to the disorder and flow of real life," like her dairies, Woolf's letters "embrace both the dross and the poetry—the babble and the rhapsody—and point to the accomplishment of that new form for writing for which Woolf was searching throughout her career."[60] Whereas Pierre Eric Villeneuve argues that Woolf's epistolary practice defines beauty as a space where autobiography and modernity come together.[61]

6. Introduction of the thesis: selected subjects and methods

This thesis aims to treat Woolf's letters as part and parcel of her work, and as indispensable to the author's works of art. The necessity of studying Woolf's letters as a whole stems from the fact that they not only demonstrate how the author trains herself as an innovative writer but also reveal or highlight some particularities of her writing, especially her fictional writing. Therefore, we shall not regard Woolf's letters only as a space existing between her real life and her imagination, as Clive Bell and

[58] Catherine R. Stimpson. "The Female Sociograph: The Theater of Virginia Woolf's Letters," *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*. 1984. Ed. Domna C. Stanton. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987: p. 168-9.
[59] Juliet Dusinberre, "Letters as Resistance: Dorothy Osborne, Madame de Sévigné and Virginia Woolf," p. 94, 108.
[60] Susan Sellers, "Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters," p. 109, 122.
[61] See Pierre Eric Villeneuve. "Autobiographie et modernité chez Virginia Woolf." *Le Pur et l'impur*. Ed. Catherine Bernard et Christine Reynier. PUR, 2002: p. 208: "La pratique épistolaire valorise alors une conception de la beauté comme résidu textuel, lieu d'une fracture du sens identifié au « sublime woolfien » où converge l'autobiographie et la modernité et qui sera en quelque sorte l'objet de ma démonstration."

other critics mentioned above do, but will explore the artistic value of Woolf's epistolary writing. Besides her letters, Woolf left behind a considerable volume of non-fictional writings, including diaries, essays and an autobiography—*Moments of Being* (1976). These references, which often explain or emphasise what appears in the letters, will be of great help for our analysis of Woolf's letters.

This thesis will be developed along three main lines. Part One will respectively discuss the content of the author's letters—facts, imagination and thoughts. By considering Woolf's epistolary writing as literature in order to explore its literary value, we shall show how Woolf uses the freedom of the epistolary form to transgress the generic boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, between creative or critical and autobiographical writing, thus blending different genres together. We will see how she attempts to remould the epistolary narrative prose into a collaborative or dialogic space between the letter writer and her addressee. Apart from allowing for a direct and equal exchange or conversation between the two, this enables Woolf to find her own voice and her position as an author, and to turn her letters into a site of creative writing or a practice field for her fictional writing. Finally, we shall see how she gives up the private self of the autobiographical writings and tries to construct a public self for her future published works. Part Two will focus on the style of "central transparency" as the main technique that Woolf attempts to master throughout her life. We shall first clarify Woolf's concept of "central transparency" as it appears in her letters to Vita Sackville-West before showing how she develops and experiments it in her epistolary writing. Finally, in the last two chapters of Part Three, we shall deal with the important roles Woolf's addressees play and trace the changes in her epistolary writing that occur as Woolf shapes her own self in her letters.

Part One: The Letters and Literature

"Do write me a letter full of *thoughts*: I like *thoughts* in a letter—not facts only. […] But the great work is written with an imaginative elegance which few can rival." (*Letter to Emma Vaughan*, 11 September 1899)

Introduction: Letters and literature

Some scholars indicate: "epistolary prose had frequently been endowed with literary status,"[1] and "[they] have even suggested that the letter is in some sense the quintessentially literary form, that all literature is a kind of letter."[2] Before discussing the relationship between letters and literature, we will first try to clarify their respective definitions. In the introduction, we have already shown that a letter is a form of written communication which contains autobiographical and artistic features, and its power to both crystallise the writer's heart and make the absent addressee present. But, what is literature?

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, literature, in its broadest sense, refers to "written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit."[3] The definition stresses the distinctive nature of literature as a written document, in contrast to the spoken words, and it also indicates the literary merit of this writing, as opposed to ordinary language. Etymologically, the term derives from Latin, "*literatura*, scholarship," "*literatus*, learned, skilled in letters," or "*litera*, a letter."[4] Samuel Philips Newman claims in *A Practical System of Rhetoric* (1827): "The word literature is most frequently used as denoting something in distinction from science. In this sense it refers to certain classes of writing. Such are Poetry and Fictitious Prose, Historical, Epistolary and Essay writing."[5] He suggests classifying epistolary prose as a branch of literature.[6] Sartre, in *What Is Literature?* (1948), defines literature as follows: "Thus, this is 'true,'

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[1] Marietta Messmer. *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001: p. 27.
[2] Roy K. Gibson and A. D. Morrison. Introduction: What is a letter? *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*. Ed. Ruth Morello and A. D. Morrison. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007: p. 3.
[3] *Oxford Dictionary of English*. 1998. 3rd edition. Ed. Angus Stevenson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010: p. 1031.
[4] *Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*. London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2007: p. 266.
[5] Samuel Philips Newman. *A Practical System of Rhetoric, or The Principles and Rules of Style: Inferred from Examples of Writing*. 1827. 3rd edition. Boston: Published by William Hyde & Co., 1832: p. 62.
[6] See also Marietta Messmer, *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*, p. 27-8.

'pure' literature, a subjectivity which yields itself under the aspect of the objective, a discourse so curiously contrived that it is equivalent to silence, a thought which debates with itself, a reason which is only the mask of madness, an Eternal which lets it be understood that it is only a moment of History."[7] Sartre argues that literature is a silent discourse referring both the writer's inner life and external life—his subjective views, "a thought" and "a reason", and his objective account of a given historical moment. For Sartre, literature is also "the work of a total freedom addressing plenary freedoms and […] manifests the totality of the human condition as a free product of a creative activity."[8] Consequently, we might define literature as written words, which represent both the writer's inner and external lives, such as poetry, prose, history, letters and essays.

Derrida declares in *The Post Card* (1980): "Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself."[9] G. O. Hutchinson regards Cicero's letters "as an artistic medium, and as belonging within a generic system;"[10] whereas, Galen Goodwin Longstreth, in analysing the correspondence of Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw, wants to "correct the literary injustice": "Modern literary criticism has generally neglected to acknowledge nonfiction letters as their own genre." Rather, by "introducing the idea that individual letters as well as a collection of letters—a correspondence—can stand alone as literary texts subject to critical scrutiny," Longstreth aims to "regard letters *as* literature."[11] Janet Gurkin Altman, in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, states: "the letter's potential as artistic form and narrative vehicle has been explored by writers of many nationalities and periods."[12] Altman argues: "we have come increasingly to

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[7] Jean-Paul Sartre. *What Is Literature?* (*Qu'est ce que la littérature?* 1948) Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Philosophical Library, 1949: p. 33.
[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 278.
[9] Jacques Derrida. *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. (*La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà, 1980)* Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987: p. 48.
[10] G. O. Hutchinson. *Cicero's Correspondence: A Literary Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998: p. 6.
[11] Galen Goodwin Longstreth. "Epistolary Follies: Identity, Conversation, and Performance in the Correspondence of Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw." *Shaw: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, Vol. 21. Ed. Gale K. Larson. The Pennsylvania State University, 2001: p. 27.
[12] Janet Gurkin Altman. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982: p. 3.

appreciate that form can be more than the outer shell of content, and that the medium chosen by an artist may in fact dictate, rather than be dictated by, his message. […] If the exploration of a form's potential can generate a work of art, it can also contribute to our understanding of that work."[13] Altman advocates "a more serious consideration of the epistolary form as a genre rather than merely as one type of narrative technique,"[14] and insists that epistolary literature in one sense "metaphorically 'represents' literature as a whole," e.g. the (epistolary) relationship between author and addressee standing for the general (literary) relationship between author and reader.[15] Even more, the book, *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters*, presumes: "Granted, then, that all of literature is a long letter to an invisible other, a present, a possible, or a future passion that we rid ourselves of, feed, or seek."[16]

The argument about the letter as literature and literature as a letter seems to echo Woolf's own viewpoint. When Virginia Stephen writes her review, "The Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle (1905)," in a letter dated July 1905 to Violet Dickinson, she considers Mrs Carlyle's "[l]etters are not literature" (*L I*, 198); nevertheless, as analysed in the introduction, she defines Dorothy Osborne's letters as "a form of literature" (*E V*, 384). Then, what kind of letters does Woolf herself write? Can they equally be regarded as literature? In a letter written on 11 September 1899 to Emma Vaughan, Virginia Stephen brings up her opinion about an ideal letter: "Do write me a letter full of *thoughts*: I like *thoughts* in a letter—not facts only. […] But the great work is written with an imaginative elegance which few can rival" (*L I*, 28-9). Early in 1899, the author has already envisaged

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[13] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 8.
[14] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 10.
[15] See Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 211-2: "Although epistolary literature seemingly constitutes a highly particular historically limited literary subgenre (whose particularities, indeed, have been the emphasis of my study), there is a very real sense in which it metaphorically 'represents' literature as a whole. By its very *mise-en-abyme* of the writer-reader relationship, the epistolary form models the complex dynamics involved in writing and reading; in its preoccupation with the myriad mediatory aspects involved in communication, in the way that it wrestles with the problem of making narrative out of discourse, in its attempts to resolve mimetic and artistic impulses, epistolary literature exposes the conflicting impulses that generate all literature."
[16] Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa. *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters.* Trans. Helen R. Lane. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975: p. 15.

to compose her own letters as "the great work," which consists of facts, thoughts and imagination. Therefore, the first part aims to analyse respectively these three different contents of Woolf's letters—facts, imagination, and thoughts. In addition, the author's statement about letters is close to Sartre's definition of literature: facts have to do with the author's external life, while both imagination and thoughts belong to her inner one.

Following Derrida, we try to treat Woolf's letters as literature; like Hutchinson, instead of regarding letters as a marginalised document or mere vehicles or explanatory companions to the author's published work or as supplementary factual sources of predominantly auto- or psycho-biographical value, we attempt to explore the literary aspects of Woolf's letters.[17] In the wake of Longstreth, we acknowledge Woolf's letters as their own genre and aim to demonstrate that her letters can be treated as literary texts deserving our critical scrutiny. The first chapter will discuss how the author artistically uses the basic function of the letter, as a vehicle of information, to communicate facts to her addressees; her imaginative language will be analysed in the second chapter; and finally, the third one contributes to Woolf's critical writing, her thoughts.

Dusinberre states that, in reading women writers' letters, Woolf inherits a special freedom—free writing and thinking in letters, with which women could refashion their world to their own mould for an audience of one.[18] In discussing Woolf's letters, we will show how Woolf, by using the freedom of the epistolary form, redefines it. In other words, we will explore how the author transgresses the generic boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, between creative/critical and autobiographical writings, thus blending different genres together. We will show how she attempts to remould the epistolary narrative prose into a collaborative or a dialogic space between the letter writer and her addressees, which, apart from allowing for a direct and equal exchange between the two of them, enables Woolf to find both her voice and position as an author, rather

[17] See Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 2.
[18] Juliet Dusinberre, "Letters as Resistance: Dorothy Osborne, Madame de Sévigné and Virginia Woolf," p. 94.

than being merely the site of creative writing or the practice field of fictional writing. And finally, we shall see how she transforms the private self of her autobiographical writings and shapes a public self for her future published works. On the whole, while analysing these letters, we shall discover how close they are to her published work.

Chapter One: Letters of facts

Introduction

1. Life: Moments of being and non-being, and the world beyond perception

In her autobiographical writing, "A Sketch of the Past (1976)," written in 1939 and 1940, Woolf states that every day, "good [or] bad", is composed of two sorts of being: "Every day includes much more non-being than being" (*MOB*, 70). Moments of non-being, occupying a substantial "proportion", "[a] great part of every day", are evoked as "cotton wool" beyond our perception: "nondescript", "forgotten" or "not lived consciously"; whereas, "[t]hese separate moments of being […] embedded in many more moments of non-being" refer to the time which we experience with our consciousness and are able to "remember" (*MOB*, 70). For Woolf, these two sorts of being are what the true novelists have the ability to present in their work: "The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being" (*MOB*, 70).

1.1. Moments of being

In "Modern Novels (1919),"[1] Woolf states that consciousness acts as a globe encircling the human mind: "the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end"; while life, through the human "mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life", is the "sum" of "a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent", falling arbitrarily like "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms", which are perceived by the human mind with consciousness and "engraved with the sharpness of steel" upon the "surface" (*E III*, 33) of their mind. In other words, for Woolf, life consists of those fragmentary moments of daily life that human beings consciously experience and perceive, and are able to keep alive in their memory. Frank Stevenson considers that in this passage, "the 'envelope' suggests a subjective, aestheticized view of consciousness while the 'atoms' suggest a radically empirical view of human perception."[2]

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[1] See *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 36, note 1: "An essay in the *TLS*, 10 April 1919, which Woolf substantially revised and included, under the title, 'Modern Fiction', in *CR* I." The quotations here are either from "Modern Novels (1919)" or "Modern Fiction (1925)".

[2] Frank Stevenson. "Enclosing the Whole: Woolf's 'Kew Gardens' as Autopoetic Narrative." *Journal*

Comparing Woolf's early view on life in "Modern Novels" to her late statement about moments of being in "A Sketch of the Past," it seems that impressions refer to moments of being. Woolf's definition of life in this essay refers to the sum of impressions or moments of being which exists exclusively in the human mind and depends on one particular human being's capacity of perception of the outside world. Since inner life depends on human beings' individual perception; since human beings' consciousness is "this incessantly varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation" (*E III*, 33) or "this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display" (*E IV*, 160), as Woolf details in "Modern Fiction (1925)"; since these fragmentary impressions or moments of being are "trivial, fantastic, evanescent", "separate" without order or continuity, and scattered among a great part of moments of non-being; in Woolf's eyes, life is not "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" (*E IV*, 160).

Woolf's view on inner life, the fleeting, variable and discontinuous impressions or moments of being, seems to echo Walter Pater's argument about the inward world of life. In his "Conclusion (1873)" to *The Renaissance*, Pater regards human life as constituted both of "our physical life [and] the inward world of thought and feeling"[3], two forms of life which interact in human beings' experience:

> At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, […] when reflexion begins to play upon these objects they are dissipated under its influence; […] each object is loosed into a group of impressions […] in the mind of the observer. […] this world […] of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, […] burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them […]: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. […] each of [impressions] is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than

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of the Short Story in English. *Special issue: Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Christine Reynier. 50, Spring 2008: p. 138.

[3] Walter Pater. "Conclusion." *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. 1873. Fifth Edition. London, Bombay, Calcutta, Melbourne: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1912: p. 233, 234.

that it is.[4]

Through both human beings' involvement in the physical life and their perception of it, the outer world, the "external objects" are transformed in the observer's mind into impressions; and because of the divisibility of time, these impressions can be divided into separate moments. These moments or impressions constitute the inner world of human life: "the whirlpool […] the race of the mid-stream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought."[5] Besides, Pater claims that these ecstatic moments are "[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself;" while to preserve them is an important achievement: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life."[6] Pater's view of ecstatic moments can be compared to the way Woolf describes her state of consciousness in her autobiography: "I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture" (*MOB*, 67).

For Woolf, inner life can be examined in "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" (*E IV*, 160). It is such a common inner life, either "big [or] small" (*E III*, 34), that Woolf considers as the "proper stuff for fiction" (*E III*, 33). The novelists not only have the responsibility—"the chief task" (*E III*, 33)—to convey it in their work with "courage and sincerity" (*E III*, 33), but they also should represent it in their writing: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (*E III*, 33-4). It is through such writing, with "as little admixture of the alien and external as possible" (*E III*, 33), that the novelists are able to present common life as accurately as possible in their work: "It attempts to come close to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them by discarding most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelists" (*E III*, 33).

According to Woolf, human beings not only experience these moments of

[4] Pater, "Conclusion," p. 234-5.
[5] Pater, "Conclusion," p. 234.
[6] Pater, "Conclusion," p. 236.

being consciously, but also possess the ability to remember them. In her letters, Woolf shows that she is fully aware of these fragmentary impressions, as she indicates in a letter written on 22 December 1932 to Ethel Smyth: "Do you find that when you're writing—the world goes out, except the precise part of it you want for your writing, which becomes indeed indecently clear" (*L V*, 137). In memory, these moments of being take on a life of their own: they separate themselves from the original life observed in the outer world and begin to form a different world in the author's mind, as she shows in a letter written on 2 July 1928 to Rosamond Lehmann: "Are you writing about the same people, or have you come out in an entirely new world, from which you see all the old world, minute, miles and miles away?" (*L VI*, 521) Life thus becomes "an entirely new world", into which moments of being, perceived in the outer world—"the old world", are reconstructed and reset in Woolf's mind beyond her control and consciousness.

When writing, these moments of being also turn into scenes that "one sees […] in a flash" (*L IV*, 195), and writing turns into "[a] mysterious process" (*L IV*, 211): "writing is only a final and momentary flash" (*L IV*, 211). Comparing writing to seeing a scene in a flash, Woolf shows that when these moments become memories, they are not merely experiences that we remember but sights that we see: "the sights that one only sees afterwards" (*L VI*, 66). In other words, moments of being turn from fragmentary impressions into visionary scenes.

1.2. Moments of non-being and the world beyond perception

For Woolf, moments of non-being can turn our everyday life, which is disorderly and discontinuous, into a whole. As she states in a letter written on 4 October 1929 to Gerald Brenan: "I daresay its the continuity of daily life, something believable and habitual that we lack" (*L IV*, 97). Though, here, Woolf states her disability to remember moments of non-being, in "A Sketch of the Past," as mentioned above, she indicates that the real novelists depict both sorts of being in their writings: "The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being. I think Jane Austen can; and Trollope; perhaps Thackeray and Dickens and Tolstoy. I have

never been able to do both. I tried—in *Night and Day*; and in *The Years*" (*MOB*, 70).

2. Letter writing as the media to preserve daily life

Nevertheless, how to grasp both the fleeting moments of being and the moments of non-being? How to convey the real aspect of human life, as Woolf queries in a letter written on 25 August 1929 to Hugh Walpole: "I mean, why is human life made up of such incongruous things, and why are all one's events so perfectly irrational that a good biographer would be forced to ignore them entirely" (*L IV*, 83)? Or, how does Woolf preserve all those different things in writing, as Roger Fry does in *A Sampler of Castile* (1923), according to her letter to him on 24 August 1923: "I think you have found a genuine and most successful way of giving shape to all sorts of things which normally run off in talk or thinking to oneself" (*L III*, 69)?

Daily life, as the material of all sorts of writing, is thus crucial to writers; while the act of letter writing, which, as the author shows in a letter written on 8 June 1903 to Violet Dickinson, principally contributes to "facts of life—the marryings and bearings and buryings" (*L I*, 79), etc.—so as to keep relationship fresh and alive, is the crucial media to preserve life: "Friendship, relationship at anyrate, consists in talk, or letter writing of some sort" (*L I*, 79).

In a letter dated August 1911 to Vanessa Bell, the author shows the importance of daily life for a writer: "As a painter, I believe you are much less conscious of *the drone of daily life* than I am, as a writer. […] What have you to do with all *this turmoil*? What you want is a studio where you can see things" (*L I*, 475, *our emphasis*). The hustle and bustle of daily life is not only the source of writing, it can also stimulate her desire to write, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 8 August 1931 to Vita Sackville-West: "you being a poet have no use for the odds and ends, the husks, the fragments, the general confusion and vibration which I can make myself believe I find in London" (*L IV*, 366-7). The importance Woolf grants daily life can be compared to what Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson do.

Austen's devotion to daily life can be seen in her letters, especially, in a letter to her sister Cassandra Austen: "Little matters they are, to be sure, but highly

important," or "I hope somebody cares for these minutiae."[7] Austen-Leigh describes Austen's letters of daily life as follows: "[T]hey treat only of the details of domestic life. […] They may be said to resemble the nest which some little bird builds of the materials nearest at hand, of the twigs and mosses supplied by the tree in which it is placed; curiously constructed out of the simplest matters."[8] Vivien Jones not only considers Austen's letters as "a particular genre—the female familiar letters", but also declares: "This fine balance between artfulness and intimacy, self-consciousness and spontaneity, is one of the defining characteristics of the eighteenth-century familiar letter."[9] Carol Houlihan Flynn indicates: "It is Austen's awareness of the texture of domestic life that generates her densely realized novels;"[10] while Kathryn Sutherland insists that Austen's letters are "the raw data for the life and the untransformed banalities which, magically transmuted, become the precious trivia of the novel."[11]

In Wendy Barker's eye, Emily Dickinson not only values the power of daily life lying "underground, under the surface, below external appearances": "The subconscious, the uncivilized, the primal, the 'raw'—what lies under the surface of small talk, of prose, what lies beneath the socially defined seeming shapes of things, the reality beyond this daily reality," but also regards it as "the source of creativity—the possibility of the raw material, the ore before it is cut, before it is rigidified into object, into something that can be lost."[12] While according to Connie Ann Kirk, "[Emily] Dickinson's attention to the smaller detail, especially to language and its expression, is so strong in the letters that current scholarly interest is in their aesthetic appeal as much as in the biographical detail they contain".[13]

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[7] Jane Austen. *Letters of Jane Austen. Selected from the Compilation of her Great Nephew, Edward, Lord Bradbourne*. Ed. Sarah Chauncey Woolsey. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1892: p. 121, 187.

[8] J. E. Austen-Leigh. "A Memoir of Jane Austen (1871)," *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*. Ed. Kathryn Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002: p. 51.

[9] Vivien Jones. Introduction. *Jane Austen: Selected Letters*. Ed. Vivien Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: p. xii, xvii.

[10] Carol Houlihan Flynn. "The Letters," *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen.* Ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997: p. 101.

[11] Kathryn Sutherland. "Jane Austen's Life and Letters," *A Companion to Jane Austen*. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite. Wiley-Blackwell: A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication, 2009: p. 18.

[12] Wendy Barker. "Emily Dickinson and poetic strategy," *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Wendy Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002: p. 87.

[13] Connie Ann Kirk. "Climates of the Creative Process: Dickinson's Epistolary Journal," *A Companion*

In short, for the three women writers, Austen, Emily Dickinson and Woolf, letters, as the media to present observations, to share news, to maintain relationship, as well as to express sentiments, either pleasure or sorrow, become the essential platform to preserve life. Austen's artistic, intimate, self-conscious and spontaneous letters of domestic life engender her novels, while Emily Dickinson's letters of the detail of life reveal both the truth of life and her poetic aesthetic. But how does Woolf treat daily facts in her letters?

In a letter written on 10 December 1922 to Jacques Raverat, Woolf states that, compared to painting, the art of writing is about the tangle of life: "Is your art as chaotic as ours? I feel that for us writers the only chance now is to go out into the desert and *peer* about, like devoted scapegoats, for some sign of a path" (*L II*, 591). However, in Rossana Bonadei's words, "life exceeds every form, life is fluid, demanding a fluid form, being subjected to time, moving and passing with time";[14] here, we might ask, what kind of "path" does Woolf try to discover or "*peer* about" in her whole life of writing? Or, from which "perspectives" (*L III*, 244) or "angle" (*L IV*, 203) does the author offer the momentary life to her addressees? Or, with "what a light" (*L IV*, 203) of art does she offer her addressees and her future letter readers—"glimpses […] through the laurels in the kitchen shrubbery" (*L IV*, 223)? Letter writing not only seems to be the best way to preserve life, but it is also the best media to investigate Woolf's art of writing.

Daniel Albright argues that modernism, confined to the first half of the twentieth century, is "*a testing of the limits of aesthetic construction*."[15] Albright not only claims: "But we must learn to challenge the boundaries among the arts, not only because the artists we study demanded it, but because our philosophy demands it as well," but also emphasises "the need for comparison among the arts": "To study one artistic medium in isolation from others is to study an inadequacy. The twentieth

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to Emily Dickinson. Ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz. Blackwell Publishing, 2008: p. 337.

[14] Rossana Bonadei. *Virginia Woolf: in the nerves of writing*. Bergamo: Bergamo University Press, 2011: p. 69.

[15] Daniel Albright. Series Editor's Foreword. *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. 2000. Ed. Pamela L. Caughie. New York: Routledge, 2013: p. ix, xi.

century, so rich in literature, in music, and in the visual arts, has also been rich in criticism of these arts."[16] While Bonadei states: "Engaging with Virginia Woolf's writing has implied parallel readings, as well as comparative, interdisciplinary approaches."[17] This argument actually echoes Woolf's own statement in "Walter Sickert: A Conversation (1934)": "The best critics, Dryden, Lamb, Hazlitt, were acutely aware of the mixture of elements, and wrote of literature with music and painting in their minds" (*E VI*, 44).

In a letter written on 23 April 1901 to Emma Vaughan, the author declares: "The only thing in this world is music—music and books and one or two pictures" (*L I*, 41), while in a letter written on 22 September 1907 to Elinor Monsell, she again states: "Art is the only thing; the lasting thing, though the others are splendid" (*L I*, 310). Accordingly, the first chapter analyses the facts of life that Woolf presents to her addressees in her letters and how she explores, through the epistolary form, the art of writing—the ways in which content, theme, form and technique are bound together. It will focus on how artistic medias, such as painting, cinema, music or drama, fuel Woolf's writing and how she uses them to turn daily life into a timeless one in her writing.

1.1. The "living portrait" (*L VI*, 477)

Introduction: Criticism on Woolf's painterly writing

In "Walter Sickert: A Conversation (1934)," Woolf states: "though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common" (*E VI*, 43). Woolf's view on the similarity between painting and writing has made critics aware that the author may well use the painterly technique in her writing. Jane Goldman indicates that the period of 1970s-80s saw considerable critical interest in the influence of the visual arts, particularly the formalist theories of Roger Fry,

[16] Daniel Albright, Series Editor's Foreword, p. vii.
[17] Rossana Bonadei, *Virginia Woolf: in the nerves of writing*, p. 9.

Clive Bell and the Bloomsbury Group at large, on Woolf's writing.[18] Goldman herself suggests that there is in Woolf's writing "an interventionist and feminist understanding of colour, more readily associated with aspects of Post-Impressionism than Impressionism."[19] Jack Stewart,[20] according to Michael Squires, not only discusses how writers, including Woolf, wield their pens as painters' brushes to sketch landscape and locates the canvas beneath the printed words, but also argues how they, "displaying the ontological dimensions of color and space, move writing so close to painting that the two forms energize each other."[21]

Some critics also analyse the influence of Vanessa Bell's painting on Woolf's writing: for example, Filby Diane Gillespie, in *The Sisters' Arts*,[22] debates Woolf's visual tendencies and her ability to see the world through her sister's eyes.[23] According to Alistair M. Duckworth, Gillespie, while discussing the parallel between Vanessa's practice of faceless figures and Woolf's theory about "the unimportance of 'materialistic' detail in fictional characterization," examines "the different capabilities of the visual and verbal media to explore psychological depth," and then indicates the influence of Vanessa's art and aesthetic doctrine on Woolf's move towards a studied and formal modernism in fiction.[24]

Other critics, such as Maggie Humm, consider that, besides Vanessa, other artists also play an important role in Woolf's response to art, in particular, Walter Sickert.[25] Linden Peach, in discussing a much more direct and extensive influence of

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[18] Jane Goldman. *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006: p. 131.

[19] Jane Goldman. *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: p. 9; see also Sue Roe. "The impact of post-impressionism," *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Sue Roe and Susan Seller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: p. 164-190.

[20] Jack Stewart. *Color, Space, and Creativity: Art and Ontology in Five British Writers*. Madison, NJ, and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008.

[21] Michael Squires. Review. *Color, Space, and Creativity: Art and Ontology in Five British Writers*. Jack Stewart. *Modern Philology*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (August 2012): p. E67-E69.

[22] Filby Diane Gillespie. *The Sister's Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988.

[23] See Alistair M. Duckworth. Review. *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. Diane Filby Gillespie. *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1/2, Women & the Arts (Spring/Summer 1990), p. 317.

[24] Alistair M. Duckworth, Review, p. 316.

[25] Maggie Humm. "Virginia Woolf and the Arts," *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*. Ed. Maggie Humm. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010: p. 11.

Sickert's realist aesthetics on Woolf's fiction, shows "profound similarities between them in their engagement with realist aesthetics."[26] That is, both Sickert and Woolf create "a fusion of the physical and the psychological" in their respective work by pushing at the boundaries between physical surroundings, domestic objects and a range of expressions, gestures, moods and consciousness on the part of the individual. Peach equally indicates that this level of intimate relationship between figures and the space which they occupy is also recognised by Woolf herself in "Walter Sickert: A Conversation": "Hence the intimacy that seems to exist in Sickert's pictures between his people and their rooms" (*E VI*, 41).[27]

1.1.1. Woolf's view on Walter Sickert's literary painting

As Humm indicates, Sickert is one frequently mentioned artist in Woolf's correspondence and diaries, just as he also dominated modern English art at the turn of the twentieth century.[28] In 1919, after visiting the exhibition of Sickert's paintings and drawings at the Eldar Gallery,[29] Woolf described it as "the pleasantest, solidest most painter-like show in England" (*D I*, 240), and considered Sickert as "a great painter" and her "ideal painter" in a letter to Vanessa the next day: "Did I tell you how Sickert is a great painter? In fact he's now my ideal painter; I should like to possess his works, for the purpose of describing them" (*L II*, 331). In 1923, again in her diary, Woolf wrote that Sickert's artistic talk is akin to her own opinion:

> I sat by Sickert, & liked him, talking in his very workmanlike […] manner, of painting. […] There is something indescribably congenial to me in this easy artists talk; the values the same as my own & therefore right; no impediments; life charming, good & interesting; no effort; art brooding calmly over it all; & none of this attachment to mundane things, which I find in Chelsea. (*D II*, 223-4)

[26] Linden Peach. "Virginia Woolf and Realist Aesthetics," *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*. Ed. Maggie Humm. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010: p. 113.
[27] Linden Peach, "Virginia Woolf and Realist Aesthetics," p. 113-5.
[28] Maggie Humm, "Virginia Woolf and the Arts," p. 11.
[29] See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 240, note 4.

This diary entry reveals that Sickert's artistic view of painting as able to convey, present or incarnate life as completely as possible, is consonant with Woolf's own theory about the role of writing in life.

Nevertheless, in Woolf's eyes, what kind of life does Sickert present in his "very witty pictures" (*L IV*, 336)? What sort of artistic skills does he employ in his work to stir Woolf's "admiration" (*L V*, 314), her passion—"like his pictures" (*L V*, 340), her desire to describe them, or to impress her greatly? As she shows in a letter written on 26 November 1933 to Quentin Bell:

> I'm involved with your friend Sickert. I went to his show, and was so much impressed that Nessa made me write to him; and he said "Do me the favour to write about my pictures and say you like them". "I have always been a literary painter, thank goodness, like all the decent painters. Do be the first to say so" he says. […] Do you think one could treat his paintings like novels? (*L V*, 253)

For Woolf, can Sickert be considered as "a literary painter" according to the painter's own opinion? And can his paintings be treated as "novels" or "books" (*L V*, 262)?

In "Walter Sickert: A Conversation," Woolf shows that it is by grasping "a moment of crisis" (*E VI*, 40) that Sickert tries to convey life in his paintings. In such a moment, Sickert aims to set his motionless figures in motion and action: "Sickert always seems more of a novelist than a biographer. […] He likes to set his characters in motion, to watch them in action" (*E VI*, 39). For Woolf, Sickert is a great biographer since human beings are the central subject of his work: "He never goes far from the sound of the human voice, from the mobility and idiosyncrasy of the human figure" (*E VI*, 43), and Sickert captures the life of his figures in his portraits: "Sickert is a great biographer, said one of them; when he paints a portrait I read a life" (*E VI*, 38). If he is "more of a novelist than a biographer," Sickert can be regarded as a realist novelist, like Dickens, due to his representation of "[t]he life of the lower middle class" (*E VI*, 41) in his paintings.

On top of that, Sickert is a silent painter, whose "moment of crisis" hides "a zone of silence" (*E VI*, 39) or "the silent land" (*E VI*, 44), as Woolf shows in "Pictures

(1925)": "The silent painters, Cézanne and Mr Sickert, make fools of us as often as they choose" (*E IV*, 245). Woolf places Sickert among other artists, who, like Coleridge, mute the meaning of their work and use silence or blanks in their art to stimulate the observers' imagination: "there is a zone of silence in the middle of every art. The artists themselves live in it. Coleridge could not explain *Kubla Khan*—that he left to the critics. And those who are almost on a par with the artists […] cannot impart what they feel when they go beyond the outskirts" (*E VI*, 39). In Sickert's pictures, the gestures and expressions of his motionless figures stir their observers' desire to both create a plot for them and imagine their talk: "The figures are motionless, of course, but each has been seized in a moment of crisis; it is difficult to look at them and not to invent a plot, to hear what they are saying" (*E VI*, 40). At the same time, the intimacy between the figures and their environment also demands their observers' narrative interpretation and conception of a life for them: "There are any number of stories and three-volume novels in Sickert's exhibition" (*E VI*, 41).

In short, according to Woolf, the silent land in Sickert's paintings that stimulates the observers to recreate a meaning for themselves is the very power that he aims to create in his art. Hidden in this dark corner, Sickert is able to both establish a cooperative relationship with people and play with his admirers or "critics": "make fools of us as often as they choose." Put it in another way, Sickert's pictures not only demand or emphasise the necessity of people's participation, but their meaning is completed by their creativity.

We shall see how Woolf not only looks at the world through Sickert's eye so as to capture the moments of her daily life—"moment[s] of crisis" —in her letters but also uses her brush as he does his, to draw her own "living portrait" (*L VI*, 477) in her own epistolary art.

1.1.2. Woolf's painterly writing and the reader's imagination

During the period of Quentin Bell's stay in the Swiss sanatorium with

suspected tuberculosis in the winter of 1933,[30] Woolf keeps a more frequent correspondence with him in order to convey domestic news. Among them is her account of an evening at Sadler's Wells Theatre:

> We went to Orpheus [Gluck]—the loveliest opera ever written—at Sadlers Wells; and there was a congeries of old fogies—Ottoline hawking and mousing; Stephen Spender, being hawked and moused; Helen [Anrep], the Russian children; Oliver [Strachey] and a hard featured lady who inspires him with rapture; also a young woman called Lynd, whom I think you might like. (*L V*, 259)

This fragmentary moment that Woolf grasps in her daily life and sketches for her addressee can be regarded as a moment of being preserved in her memory. In order to represent this moment of being, through the use of the -ing form—"hawking and mousing" —the past participle—"being hawked and moused"—and the present tense ("inspires"), Woolf tries to first print it in her letter, as Sickert does in his paintings, then to set it in front of her addressee's eyes in a flash, and finally, to use Woolf's own words, to "brand [it] on" (*L IV*, 4) her addressee's mind. As for Sickert, human beings are central to Woolf's visual representation of fact, and this scene is constructed around a fusion of physical environment (the opera) and human psychology. With short efficient epithets, Woolf fixes her friends, Lady Ottoline Morrell, Stephen Spender, Helen Anrep and Oliver Strachey, in her writing through the portrayal of their psychological state or their momentary mood. Apart from the basic function of facts as news, this moment not only interests and pleases the author herself, but also stirs her desire to share it with her addressee in order to amuse him.

Julia Briggs thinks that Woolf's short story, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection (1929)," "plays with the cliché of art as a mirror of life, bringing out both the mastery and the loss involved in the act of recording." She argues that "The mirror's frame, with its sharp exclusions (it cuts and slices off), holds a static world, a world already fixed and finished. It also suggests the way in which paintings differ

[30] See the introduction to *Letters 2801-2841 (October-December 1933)* in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 231.

from writing." According to Briggs, "[t]he still world of the mirror is opposed to the constant motion of living thoughts as they flush and darken in rhythm with the fluctuating feelings within the room."[31] However, Albright claims that "a picture not only may suggest motion, but is constructed by the mind acting over time."[32] Besides, a few critics emphasise that the author's art depends on the reader's reaction, reading and interpretation. For instance, Iser, in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach (1972)," considers that the meaning of a text is completed by its reader's interaction:

> [T]he literary work has two poles, […] the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized […] by […] the reader.[33]

According to Iser, the value of an author's work comes alive with his/her readers' realisation while reading, and it is also the readers' reaction that endows his/her writing with life. Similarly, Philippe Lejeune argues: "since [the texts] were written for us, readers, and in reading them, it is we who make them function."[34]

The reader response theory of Iser and Lejeune seems to be anticipated by Woolf's own words in her letters. Woolf advises repeatedly her addressees to imagine her descriptive scenes while reading her letters: "You can imagine the scene" (*L II*,

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[31] Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf*, p. 173; see also Abbie Garrington, "Reflections on a Cinematic Story." *Journal of the Short Story in English*. *Special issue: Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Christine Reynier. 50, Spring 2008: p. 218: "For Briggs, the reflection at the centre of this story is a musing upon the respective capacities of art and literature to describe, illuminate and immortalise a moment of being. […] In Briggs' reading, the mirror, representing plastic art, offers a static picture which fails to capture the flux of life."

[32] Daniel Albright, "Series Editor's Foreword," p. xiv.

[33] Wolfgang Iser. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach (1972)," *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: An Introductory Anthology*. Ed. Vassilis Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller. New York: University of New York Press, 1987: p. 381.

[34] Philippe Lejeune. *On Autobiography*. Trans. Katherine Leary. USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1989: p. 4. Moreover, regarding Iser and Lejeune's reader-response criticism, see also: Longstreth's argument in "Epistolary Follies: Identity, Conversation, and Performance in the Correspondence of Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw," p. 27-8.

451), "—in short you can imagine all that" (*L III*, 103), or "Imagine it, if you like, though romantically" (*L II*, 515). Woolf urges her addressees, possessing both "discrimination" (*L I*, 316) and the ability to "make the necessary connections" (*L II*, 404), to see the scene in their mind with their mind's eyes: "picture us" (*L I*, 389) or "now you can make a picture of all that, from the topmost twig to the profound root" (*L I*, 278). Even more, Woolf suggests that her addressees, such as Violet Dickinson, should imagine her people in her letters more freely—"Your imagination can play freely upon them" (*L III*, 30)—so as to be able to see them in motion, as they do while watching Sickert's pictures: "Now I have sketched the situation; placing all my pieces in position, and a woman of imagination can surely put them in motion for herself" (*L I*, 308). Furthermore, in a letter to Roger Fry, Woolf invites him to enter into her descriptive scene with his own imagination: "Fancy yourself dining out in Pall Mall" (*L V*, 180).

Through this description of their common friends in her letter to Quentin, Woolf wants to provoke his own experience and knowledge of the theatre and his own memory of their common friends, so that he can create a painting, comparable to Vanessa Bell's faceless figures, which would complete the depiction of the theatre she sketches here. With words, Woolf presents their friends' mood and psychological state, while Quentin, basing his work on his own memory of them and his creative capacity, can represent them with his brush in his painting. The fact that writers convey "ideas" (*L III*, 294) through their abstract writings while painters suggest them through their portrayal of solid "objects" (*L III*, 294), shows that painting and writing "must part in the end" but are also able to complement each other.

On the other hand, Woolf keeps silent in presenting other figures: "the Russian children; […] a hard featured lady, […] also a young woman called Lynd, whom I think you might like." Here, silence is "a ripple" (*L VI*, 382), with which her letter reader himself needs to explore the things "beneath the skin" (*L VI*, 382). In other words, Woolf draws the outline for these three groups of figures in her frame, in particular "a young woman […] you might like," in order to stir Quentin's desire to describe them with his own art, painting, and according to his own preference. It is a

blank in her writing which needs to be completed by her letter reader.

Both kinds of Woolf's writing techniques, her economic but intense depiction of their friends and her silence about other figures, are what Woolf wants to learn from Sickert's artistic skill: with the former, which requires a complementary relationship between painting and writing, Woolf succeeds in building a kind of cooperation between reader and writer in her letters; while the silent and dark space is where Woolf herself, as a writer, hides in order to stir her addressee's imagination. Both techniques involve her verbal games with her addressees, or, to use the author's own words in "Pictures," as quoted above, "mak[ing] fools of [them] as often as [she] choose[s]" (*E IV*, 245).

Altman divides letter readers into two sets: the internal letter readers refer to the actual addressees—the first, immediate readers of letter writers—whose reading the letters can influence the writer's writing of his letters; while the external letter readers are the secondary readers—the generic public, we—who read the work as a finished product.[35] Reading about this moment of Woolf's "living portrait" in her letter to Quentin, as external readers, with our own imagination, we are able to visualise this moment in the theatre, to enter the scene, and to derive pleasure from it, as the internal letter reader does. We can also see in our mind the letter writer's curious and penetrating eyes sweeping over the audience, her gaze fixing on the "congeries of old fogies"—the "news […] fish[ed] up [in] the depths of the soul" (*L III*, 348) or "the soul [picked out] on a pin" (*L III*, 502), her smile on her face at the moment when she recalls the scene while sketching it in her letter, as well as her expectation of her addressee's surprised and anxious reaction when reading her letter. We can also picture Quentin's reaction to his aunt's letter. The silence and darkness, which Woolf leaves in her scene about the other figures, also enable us to imagine a picture for ourselves, according to our own experience, preference, or creativity, as her addressee does.

The act of reading hence becomes an act of seeing, and this is what Woolf

[35] See Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 112.

shows in a letter from 8 July 1933 to Dorothy Brett: "But anyhow it was very nice of you to give me the book [*Lawrence and Brett: A Friendship (1933)*]; and I think you get through, as painters do so often, the hide of words with your sincerity. Thats why I open and shut and see bright visions; whether I like them or not" (*L V*, 202). Therefore, as Horace advises in "The Art of Poetry," "Ut pictura poesis," poetry requires the interpretative technique borrowed from painting: "The critic must bear in mind that poetry is like painting."[36]

In conclusion, the scene in the theatre is one of moments of being from daily life that Woolf wants to share with her nephew, Quentin. As Altman emphasises, "the epistolary experience […] is a reciprocal one,"[37] Quentin, as a young painter, influences Woolf's writing of her letter. Through the painter's eye, Woolf grasps a moment of crisis in the chaotic life; with the painter's brush, she tries to both immortalise and preserve fragments of life in her writing; by using Sickert's skill of painting, she leaves a silent and blank space in this moment of stillness and aims to provoke her readers, either the internal or the external one, to use their own imagination and creative capacity to complete it.

Both arguments developed in her letters about the suggestive power of writing and the relationship between writers and readers as collaborators echo Woolf's own statements in "Character in Fiction (1924)." In order to achieve the former one, Woolf indicates that writers should "bridge the gulf" (*E III*, 431) between themselves and their readers through their choice of skill and material, both of which are familiar to their readers: "The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy" (*E III*, 431). At the same time, Woolf not only declares that the position of writers is on the same level with readers: "In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of

[36] Horace. *Horace: Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*. Trans. H. Rushton Fairclough. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1926: p. 447, 480; see also: Daniel Albright, "Series Editor's Foreword," p. xii.
[37] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 88.

different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake" (*E III*, 436), but also insists that it is the readers' task to be the collaborators of their writers: "May I end by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs Brown?" (*E III*, 435-6)

1.2. The camera-eye narrative

Imelda Whelehan states that since the emergence of silent films at the end of the 19th century, not only writers, such as Leo Tolstoy, are fully aware of the advantage of the film technology both as a more enhanced representation of reality and a new form of writing to challenge the old methods of literary arts; but some critics also contribute to their research on modernist writers' experiment with cinematic techniques in their prose fiction.[38] David Trotter indicates: "Virginia Woolf's interest in the cinema has been a longstanding, if at best intermittent, preoccupation among her critics," and he argues that "the understanding of cinema Woolf evolved in very specific circumstances during the early months of 1926 made it possible for her to say things about the common life, and thus about existence as such."[39] Focusing on Woolf's concern with the artistic techniques and cultural technologies, Pamela L. Caughie shows that Woolf not only writes about new technologies, including cinema, photography, the gramophone, as well as the telephone, in her essays, novels and letters but also experiments with new narrative techniques inspired by new media.[40] Abbie Garrington argues that, in Woolf's short story, "The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection (1929)," "cinematic modes of

[38] Imelda Whalehan. "Adaptations: The contemporary dilemmas," *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. 1999. Ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan. Routledge, 2005: p. 5.
[39] David Trotter. "Virginia Woolf," *Cinema and Modernism*. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2007: p. 159, 161.
[40] Pamela L. Caughie. Introduction. *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. 2000. Ed. Pamela L. Caughie. Routledge, 2013: p. xx.

writing/viewing are worked out within the narrative itself."[41] According to Sharon Ouditt, in "The Cinema (1926)," Woolf reveals the immense potential of cinematic technique for formal innovation in fictional writing and its superiority outgrowing its aesthetic accomplishments;[42] whereas in the novel, *Orlando* (1928), "Woolf absorbs cinematic devices, adapting zooms, change-in-focus, close-ups, flashbacks, dissolves and tracking shots."[43] Ouditt's view on Woolf's awareness of cinema techniques is similar to that of Maggie Humm, but the latter offers a much deeper study of the essay. Humm argues that, in "The Cinema," "Woolf's description of film as a cognitive source of psychic transformations is pioneering," and she also indicates that Woolf is fully aware of the power of cinema techniques, which "lies in its antimimetic power and that spectators experience a dynamic visual process which releases buried memories and dreams."[44]

In "The Cinema," on the one hand, Woolf, like Tolstoy, shows that films give people a much more real visual experience than human beings' individual perception of "the actual world [and] contemporary life" (*E IV*, 349): "They have become […] more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life" (*E IV*, 349). On the other hand, as both Ouditt and Humm argue, Woolf admires the fact that cinematic technique has a viable, independent aesthetic and can expose our unconscious memories and our unacknowledged emotions:[45]

> But what then are its own devices? […] a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity. […] it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. […] it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. […] In fact, the shadow was accidental and the effect unintentional. […] it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that

[41] Abbie Garrington, "Reflections on a Cinematic Story," p. 221-2.
[42] Sharon Ouditt. "Orlando: Coming across the divide," *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. 1999. Ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan. Routledge, 2005: p. 147.
[43] Deborah Cartmell. Introduction. *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. 1999. Ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan. Routledge, 2005: p. 143.
[44] Maggie Humm. "Virginia Woolf and visual culture," *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Susan Sellers. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010: p. 223.
[45] See also Maggie Humm, "Virginia Woolf and visual culture," p. 223.

have so far failed to find expression. (*E VI*, 350)

It is clear that, for Woolf, the cinematic "devices" can symbolise the processes of human emotion and human consciousness, imagination, thought, or memory, more vividly and successfully than any verbal narrative, whether intentionally or not.

However, Whelehan indicates that "Apart from analytical work on narratological perspectives, *auteur* theory and genre, there is little that unites the study of visual and written narratives in academic work—even though there are clearly shared processes in the study of both."[46] By discussing the passage extracted from her letter to Vanessa Bell, which Woolf wrote on 28 June 1938 while travelling in Scotland, this section aims to analyse Woolf's narrative method from the camera-eye perspective: how Woolf combines the cinematic visual expression and the movement of human memory with the verbal narrative together.

In the letter written in Park Hotel in Oban to Vanessa Bell, Woolf describes her drive in the Scottish Highlands the previous day:

> We had a terrific drive yesterday in one of the worst known gales, over the wildest passes. Trees were hurtling; rivers simply cataractuous, but very beautiful, if the rain had stopped; but it didnt. Our petrol gave out; and the oil clogged the engine. But miracles happen, and suddenly an Inn appeared, in a black gorse; and on opening the door, there were 20 tables with cloths laid diamond shape, maids in white aprons, and 7 different cakes; including the best shortbread I've ever eaten. We were warmly welcomed by the 20 old fishing men and women—they're practically sexless, and I've often taken one for a dog and vice versa: Some had been fishing in the rain for days and caught one trout. They talk such a brogue I had to invent replies, so off the point that at one moment I was talking about the Queens mother's death [Lady Strathmore] and they were talking about the rarity of polecats or somesuch topic Then a garage mended the car. off we swept into the desert, and just as night was falling—that is a kind of cadaverous dawn, for the sun neither rises nor sets in the highlands—I saw a great deer, bounding from rock to rock Thats all the description you need skip. (*L VI*, 249)

[46] Imelda Whelehan, "Adaptations: The contemporary dilemmas," p. 3.

Woolf uses four different camera angles in this description. First of all, by using the high-angle shot, Woolf sets their "terrific drive" within a panorama of the environment: a car is driving at full speed in the rain on the Highlands road between "trees" and "rivers". The high-angle view of description not only presents the beauty and power of the physical world, but also suggests the threatening and wild force of nature. At the same time, this panoramic view offers an emotional reflection on the powerlessness, insignificance and weakness of humankind. Human vulnerability is symbolised by the breakdown of the car, when Woolf uses a bird's-eye view to focus on this: "Our petrol gave out; and the oil clogged the engine." Besides the car, "suddenly an Inn appeared, in a black gorse"—so as to establish a relationship between the car and its surroundings. Here, the cinematic visual effect from the high-angle shot to the bird's-eye view—the latter looking directly down on the subject, the inn, focusing on it, as well as enlarging it—means to impress the reader with a feeling of an unexpected surprise: "But miracles happen." Thus, the plot, the vision, and human emotion are woven together through the movement of the camera's eye.

The camera continues to be drawn down lower and lower, and begins to approach the inn. By putting the particle "on" in front of the phrase "on opening the door", and with the movement of the door and its opening sound, the camera angle switches to the point of view shot, the eye-level camera angle. The lounge scene of the inn unfolds and performs through the observer's own eyes; meanwhile, the observer, or the narrator herself becomes the object or the character of her own shot. This is a long shot that contributes to a moment of the contemporary life in the lounge of an ordinary hotel: the description of the inn lounge and its life, with the hotel guests, the observer herself, the dogs, people's conversation and activities. This verbal description is also one of the "hotel scenes" (*L II*, 457) that Woolf catches with "[a]n extra pair of eyes" (*L V*, 350), or through her addressee's eyes—"Do you think we have the same pair of eyes, only different spectacles?" (*L VI*, 158), for Vanessa, the painter, to paint. Through the portrayal of human interaction— "We were warmly welcomed"—Woolf also tries to suggest the power of human force against the

unforeseen accident: “Then a garage mended the car.”

If the particle “on” in the phrase “on opening the door” can be regarded as the rise of the curtain in the lounge scene, here, the particle “off” in “off we swept into the desert” can also symbolise its fall: the finale of the hotel scene. Along with the movement of the car, the camera, which accompanies the observer or narrator into the car, raises its eye to look up again at the outer world. The low-angle shot represents again the danger and mightiness of nature—the “falling,” “cadaverous” dusk, and it also displays the strong and powerful aspect of the living creature: “I saw a great deer, bounding from rock to rock.” Besides, by using dashes to insert a simile in a sentence in the present tense, “—that is a kind of cadaverous dawn, for the sun neither rises nor sets in the highlands—,” where dusk is likened to morning, Woolf seems to conclude that this eventful drive is also an experience of a range of emotions, from disappointment to contentment, that both her emotions and her experience of the drive are an illusion at the moment of writing them down, or even that there is neither despair nor hope: “the sun neither rises nor sets.”

In short, by employing a series of camera angles, Woolf succeeds in describing her travel by car with greater immediacy than a linear presentation would have done. Both the movement and change of the camera eye also hint at the process of consciousness: as Woolf indicates in the passage quoted above from “The Cinema,” the impression in the narrator’s memory appears first “accidental,” as a tiny shadow, then expands into a vivid and complete vision, both of the outer world and the inn lounge, and finally disappears into nothingness, “the sun neither rises nor sets.” The camera eye hence becomes the letter writer’s own mind’s eye while writing; or her letter readers’ mind’s eye, both her sister’s and the public readers’, while reading. The eye through which both the writer and her readers see the travel. The way Woolf has of conceiving and presenting her impressions and our way of perceiving and receiving them hence take place simultaneously. Furthermore, the last sentence—“Thats all the description you need skip”—suggests that the whole narrative stems from the letter writer’s wish to describe her drive rather than share it with her addressee. This description may thus be considered as an opportunity for Woolf to practice her

writing.

To conclude, with the camera eye narrative, Woolf offers her letter readers a mixture of both visual and emotional effects—"the unintentional effect." Moreover, the description, formed with "a surgical eye" (*L V*, 166), can also be regarded as Woolf's challenge to the old methods of writing so as to represent contemporary life in a more realist way.

1.3. The "wave language" (*L VI*, 403)

In her essay, "Music," Emma Sutton indicates that Woolf's statement in her letter, "I always think of my books as music before I write them" (*L VI*, 426), has encouraged critical investigation of the influence of music on the author's writing in the last fifteen years.[47] She argues that music plays a central part in Woolf's social and domestic life, and that the majority of the criticism on literary modernism and music, including the area of Woolf studies, is formalist.[48] Sutton not only suggests: "Formalist criticism is likely to continue to be a productive area of scholarship, exploring music's influence on Woolf's creative practice, narrative methods, and representation of interiority," but also queries: "Given all this evidence of Woolf's musical activities and her explicit acknowledgement of music influence on her writing, why have Woolf's later readers largely failed to 'hear' her work?"[49]

The collection of essays, *Virginia Woolf and Music*,[50] edited by Adriana Varga, from biographical, historical, and conceptual perspectives, explores "music in the Bloomsbury environment and the evolution of Woolf's own musical knowledge and textual praxis, interweaving modernist poetics with classical and contemporary

[47] See Emma Sutton. "Music," *Virginia Woolf in Context*. *Virginia Woolf in Context*. Ed. Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012: p. 278.
[48] See Emma Sutton, "Music," p. 281, 285.
[49] Emma Sutton, "Music," p. 282, 285; see also Christopher Wiley. "Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and 'The First Woman to Write an Opera'." *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 96, No. 2 (Summer 2013): p. 269.
[50] Adriana Varga. ed. *Virginia Woolf and Music*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014.

music."[51] The book focuses on "how Woolf's use of music led to her breaking with traditional forms of representation in her novels at various stages of her aesthetic development" and surveys "the inter-arts and interdisciplinary aspects of her modernist fictional experimentation".[52] Besides, as Christopher Wiley shows, recent scholars also discuss Woolf's fascinating association with the musician, Ethel Smyth, and suggest the latter's influence on the former.[53]

Apart from formalist criticism, some critics, in analysing the short story, "The String Quartet (1921)," try to reveal musical characteristics in Woolf's fictional writing. For instance, Émilie Crapoulet argues that, in this short writing, "[w]ords are chosen to describe the tempo, speed and textures of the music"; and concludes: "music is seen in this story to determine the creative modalities of a consciousness which can itself shape the world differently."[54] Whereas, Vanessa Manhire suggests that, in following Pater's idea of music—"All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,"[55] which embodies the perfect relationship between form and content, Woolf draws on music as a vehicle for the exploration of language or narrative: "the structure follows the twists and turns of a listening mind, tracing the particularities of its responses to both inner and outer realities as they unfold," meanwhile, the story "highlights such contradictions: the narrative's constant combination of outward form and inner feeling calls into question the relationship between the two."[56] Nevertheless, though asserting music as the basis for some of Woolf's literary innovations and musicality as an undeniable technique of her novels, Crapoulet considers that elaboration on these suggestive possibilities is beyond the

[51] Adriana Varga. Introduction. *Virginia Woolf and Music*. Ed. Adriana Varga. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014: p. 17.
[52] Adriana Varga, Introduction, p. 13.
[53] Christopher Wiley, "Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and 'The First Woman to Write an Opera'," p. 266; see also Emma Sutton, "Music," p. 281.
[54] Émilie Crapoulet. "Beyond the boundaries of language: music in Virginia Woolf's 'The String Quartet'." *Journal of the Short Story in English*. *Special issue: Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Christine Reynier. 50, Spring 2008: p. 209, 211.
[55] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, p. 135.
[56] Vanessa Manhire. "'The Worst of Music': Listening and Narrative in Night and day and 'The String Quartet'." *Virginia Woolf and Music*. Ed. Adriana Varga. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014: p. 134, 146, 149.

scope of her study.[57] Equally, Manhire explores the functions of music in Woolf's writings, either the inner life responding to the musical movement or music being a vehicle for narration, but she doesn't disclose the musicality of Woolf's language.

On 7 October 1940, Ethel Smyth writes to Woolf: "Those letters of yours intoxicate me like a phrase of Mozart's."[58] Focusing on two passages from two of Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth, this section tries to explore Woolf's musical language in her prose narrative: how Woolf turns her writing into a musical composition—as Pater insists: the "aspiration of all the arts towards music […] towards the perfect identification of matter and form,"[59]—and how she "describe[s] the same feeling, as a musician does, […] things are going on at so many different levels simultaneously" (*L V*, 315).

1.3.1. The sonata-like modern life

George Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* defines the aptly named Sonata as "a sound-piece, and a sound-piece alone: […] the unlimited concatenation of musical notes [which] have individually no significance," whose principles "had to be drawn from the inner self and the consciousness of things which belong to man nature only."[60] Yet, composers, according to their musical instinct, have ordered and developed its structural principles to make these unpromising materials intelligible. The essential quality of an ideal type of Sonata form lies in the repetition of the subjects and the harmonic manner, in which the subjects are stated: "the subjects […] enter and re-enter for the most part as concrete lumps of harmony, the harmonic accompaniment of the melody being taken as part of the idea."[61]

According to both Mathews and Liebling's *Dictionary of Music* and Charles Rosen's *Sonata Forms*, the sonata form, as the most important of all the complex

[57] See Émilie Crapoulet. *Virginia Woolf: A Musical Life*. London: Cecil Woolf, 2009; and Emma Sutton, "Music," p. 285.
[58] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 439, note 1.
[59] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, p. 142.
[60] Sir George Grove. ed. *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians (A.D. 1450-1883)*, *by eminent writers, English and foreign, with illustrations and woodcuts*. *Volume III*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1883: p. 554.
[61] Sir George Grove. ed. *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians (A.D. 1450-1883)*, *by eminent writers, English and foreign, with illustrations and woodcuts*. *Volume III*, p. 554, 555-6.

musical forms, generally consists of three or four movements, among which there is at least a sonata movement. The Sonata form possesses three main sections: first, the *exposition* is thematic: to present themes in contrasting styles and in opposing keys. It usually belongs to the sonata movement, the Sonata-Piece, which consists essentially of a Principal, a Second and a Conclusion, while the Conclusion is the essential part, concluding with a closing theme for the whole movement. Then, the *development* is generally a slow movement, lyric and ideal in character. It aims to explore the harmonic and textural possibilities of the thematic materials, but it might also include new materials or themes. Finally, the *recapitulation* is an altered repeat of the *exposition*. By introducing novel material, which has not been stated before, the *recapitulation* means to complete the musical argument. The sonata form might also contain an *introduction* and a *coda*: the former is an upbeat before the main musical argument; while the material of the latter might contain that from the movement proper, or vary from it in order to develop the themes.[62]

Drawing on Woolf's letter to Ethel Smyth of 21 August 1932, we will try to explore Woolf's musical language: how Woolf constructs her verbal narrative as a sonata.

The opening short phrase—"Ah-hah" (*L V*, 96)—can be regarded as the *introduction* of the sonata form. The laughing interjection, expressing the letter writer's delighted feeling and playing as an upbeat introducing the description, sets a cheerful and harmonious tone for the whole narrative. The short *introduction* is immediately followed by the first movement, the first three sentences or *exposition*: "Ah-hah-the heat wave has broken and we are all cool again. This happened quite suddenly here—a cold, sinister yellow wind rushed through the garden about 2: as if a lid had been opened and air escaped from a cauldron. Our thermometer fell I dont know how many degrees: then rose; then fell with a thud" (*L V*, 96). As in the

[62] See Mathews, W. S. B., and Emil Liebling. eds. *Dictionary of Music*. 1896. Philadelphia: The John Church Company, 1925: p. 26-7; and Charles Rosen. Introduction. *Sonata Forms*. 1980. Revised edition. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988: p. 1-7.

exposition within a sonata piece, there is a ternary movement in Woolf's letter with "the heat wave has broken and we are all cool again"—as the Principal, which, by introducing the first group of subjects—"the heat wave" and "we," presents two themes: the drop in temperature and people's cheerful feeling. The second sentence begins with a transition, "This happened quite suddenly here," combining the two themes together; and then elaborates on the first theme: how the temperature drops: "—a cold, sinister yellow wind rushed through the garden about 2: as if a lid had been opened and air escaped from a cauldron." As the principal of the Sonata-Piece, the second sentence is a slow movement and ends with a more lyrical phrase, the metaphor. The movement introduces new material, "wind," "a lid" and "air," which belong to the second group of subjects, different from the first group. The third sentence, the Conclusion or *Codetta*—"Our thermometer fell I dont know how many degrees: then rose; then fell with a thud"—aims to bring the *exposition* to a close, by a repetition of the first theme. Here, it seems that the joyful exclamation of the *introduction* not only belongs to the second theme of the *exposition*, people's joyful feeling, but it also increases the weight of the *exposition*, the downbeat, which describes the fresh ambiance.

The fourth and fifth sentences would correspond to the *development*:

> So we went to Lewes after tea and bought our weekly groceries and after that walked on the down above Lewes, and everybody was walking out too, like prisoners escaped—dogs bounding, horses galloping, wind blowing—everything released—how queer it looked: and I saw one old vagabond sitting under a furse bush, making a cushion of flowers' heads, either by way of thanksgiving, or a wreath for his wife, as you like it. All the little red blue and purple down flowers were strewn round him. (*L V*, 96)

The second movement contains the two themes of the *exposition*, the weather—"wind blowing"—and the living thing, but it expands the second theme. In the first half of the fourth sentence, by using different tenses, the *development* introduces new subjects, such as the simple past tense—"we went […] bought […] walked"—and the

past progressive tense—"everybody was walking […] dogs bounding, horses galloping, wind blowing." This half of the sentence, which shows a great degree of tonal, harmonic, and rhythmic instability, ends with a conclusion: "—everything released—how queer it looked." As Beethoven introduces another movement in his sonata, in the second half of the fourth sentence and the fifth sentence, Woolf adds a new theme between the second movement and the finale: the description of "an old vagabond […] making a cushion of flowers' heads." This depiction, which is composed by a peculiar kind of slow movement and emphasises the rich colour of the cushion—"red blue and purple"—and its random shapes—"either by way of thanksgiving, or a wretch for his wife," seems to suggest both the haphazard impressions stirred by music in the human mind, either colour or shape, or both; and the accidental emotions, such as a kind of grateful feeling, "thanksgiving, or a wreath": "as you like it."

The following two sentences, the sixth and seventh ones can be regarded as the *recapitulation*: "We had thunder at night of course, but not very tremendous, only enough to spoil the Promenade [Concert] to which we were listening. Odd—there was a crack of lightning over Caburn, and instantly Mozart went zigzag too" (*L V*, 96). The sixth sentence, introducing a new group of two subjects—"thunder" and the gramophone concert, repeats and completes the first theme of the *exposition*: how the temperature drops. Then, by using the adjective—"Odd—"—as the transition, the *recapitulation* adds two new subjects—"lightning" and Mozart music—so as to repeat and emphasise the theme in the previous sentence.

The movement continues with the eighth sentence as a *coda*: "Modern life is a very complicated affair—why not some sudden revelation of the meaning of everything, one night?—I think it might happen" (*L V*, 96). The first half of the *coda* contains all materials from the movement proper and ends with a generalised conclusion: "Modern life is a very complicated affair." The *coda* is also an extended cadence beyond the final cadence of the *recapitulation* and its extra material aims to present the last variation and new theme: "why not some sudden revelation of the meaning of everything, one night?—I think it might happen." As the climax of the

main body of the whole piece, the *coda* is created to present an idea through to its structural conclusion: the query of "sudden revelation of the meaning of everything, one night." As the *coda* to the whole sonata form, here, the query has the same importance as the whole musical argument.

In short, by depicting an impression of modern life in her letter, Woolf composes a sonata-like narrative to offer, test or play with her musician friend, Ethel Smyth. The musical narrative is not only Woolf's challenge to the old methods of prose writing, but the wave language, as Manhire reveals, also presents and symbolises the process of the human mind—the stream of consciousness. Apart from the portrayal of modern life in her musical language, Woolf also tries to depict her own life as a symphony, as will be analysed in the following pages of this section.

1.3.2. The symphonic life

According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, a symphony is "an elaborate instrumental composition usually in sonata form for full orchestra" and can refer to "something that in its harmonious complexity or variety suggests a symphonic composition."[63] Or to use the statement in Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the chief interest of a symphony work is centered upon the voice or voices.[64] Taking the passage from Woolf's letter written on 28 September 1930 to Ethel Smyth as an example, the following analysis contends that Woolf presents her own life as a symphony.

The description of an ordinary day in the letter writer's life begins with a slow introduction: "I'm lounging after tea—the fertile hour, the hour for hatching and planning and imaginatively surmounting all obstacles in The Waves—" (*L IV*, 222) The phrase, presenting the letter writer's life in a harmonic manner, is the bass part of

[63] *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*. Volume III. Chicago, London, Toronto, Geneva, Sydney, Tokyo, Manila: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1971: p. 2317.
[64] Sir George Grove. ed. *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians (A.D. 1450-1883), by eminent writers, English and foreign, with illustrations and woodcuts*. *Volume IV*. London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1902: p. 11.

the whole narrative, and it is used to contrast the principal musical argument. The harmonic background is instantly interrupted by the allegro movement—the first movement: "when there's a tap at the window, and there's Jack Hutchinson and Barbara; there's Mary Hutchinson; theres Lord Gage—the local nobleman who drops in to see how eccentric intellectuals can be, and is not disappointed" (*L IV*, 222). The first movement, which is composed of a long sentence with four short expletive constructions, introduces a repetition of four interruptions: "there's a tap […] there's […] there's […] theres." The interruption worsens in the first half of the second movement and is foretold by the comparative adjective—"or worse" (*L IV*, 222)—as the transition. The first group of subjects as interruptions, the short knock sound—"tap"—is replaced by the long pleading voice of visitors—the epistolary voice: "I get a letter, imploring me, because she's going away for a year to see Madame Bussy, who was Strachey, and is about to return to France; or from Ka Arnold-Forster who's motoring to Cornwall, and wants lunch" (*L IV*, 222). Here, the pattern slows down and interruption gives way to the narrator's complaints: her internal monologue and her imaginative responses to her friends' letters, in the second half of the second movement: "—what can I do thus trapped and implored, but say O all right, come in; you've ruined 10 pages of my book; I shall never catch that mood again; but by all means sit down while I boil the kettle, make toast, and show you the goldfish" (*L IV*, 222).

The interruptions continue to accumulate in the third movement, which begins once again with a superlative adjective—"Worst, superlatively worst" (*L IV*, 222)—as transition. The short transition, relying on repetition, is then followed by the third movement:

> my mother in law has settled at Worthing. Occupation she has none. Her youth passed in childbirth. Now nothing can make the innumerable days tolerable but frequent teaparties and conglomerations of children and long tables covered with little cakes, which she adores, and presents on birthdays, and remembering anniversaries; so that if she says can she come over on Friday, as Harold, Bella and Tom are staying with her and want to see Monks House, what can I do, but race

> off to Lewes, buy pink, red and yellow cakes, cakes striped with sugar bars and dotted with chocolate spots, return just in time to collect chairs, light fire. (*L IV*, 222)

The third movement is a fast-moving humourous one—a scherzo. First of all, by using three short sentences, an anteposition ("Occupation she has none"), and then a long sentence in a paratactic style, Woolf introduces the new subject, "my mother in law," with a jocular tone and a fast rhythmic beat. Then, by using the subject, Mrs. Woolf's proposed visit as a transition, the pattern quickens and the movement is followed by a series of the narrator's own reactions in a much faster rhythm. The whole movement—the depiction of the subject and the narrator's own acts—conveys a dramatic, playful and joking mood.

The last movement, which focuses on the conversation of visitors, can be regarded as a sonata-piece. The first section—the Principal—introduces the theme of interruption—the talk of the Woolf family interrupting Woolf's own life: "—here they are, dressed, like all Jews, as if for high tea in a hotel lounge, never mixing with the country, talking nasally, talking incessantly, but requiring at intervals the assurance that I think it really jolly to have them" (*L IV*, 222). Through progressive forms ("talking", "requiring"), ongoing interruption is emphasised. Then, the second section focuses on the juxtaposition of Mrs. Woolf's obsession with communication and the narrator's silent, hopeless feeling:

> "I am so terribly sensitive Virginia" my mother in law says pensively, refusing honey, but sending me into the kitchen to find strawberry jam; and then, like a perfectly aimless airball, off she drifts into long long anecdotes about Mrs Luard; girls who looks [*sic*] 14, and Mrs Watson's cook having a a baby which died—oh no it was Mrs Watson's cook who died—all this goes on till 7: when she says her head aches: I say, I will go off then, and show Bella, Tom and Harold the church. And leave me all alone? she says. Tears well up. (*L IV*, 222-3)

Through the comparison of Mrs. Woolf's purposeless talk with "a perfectly aimless airball," and the preposition—"off"—in front of the content of talk, "off she drifts

into long long anecdotes," the second movement of the sonata-piece elaborates on the theme of interruption—Mrs. Woolf's talk. At the same time, the narrator's helplessness in front of such interruption is suggested. The last two sentences, "Down I sit. Off we go again about Herberts temper and her own tremendous sorrows, virtues, courage and endurance in raising 9 Jews, all of whom, with the single excepting of Leonard, might well have been drowned without the world wagging one ounce the worse" (*L IV*, 223), is the Conclusion, which repeats both themes of talk and the narrator's agony. In this movement, the two prepositions—"Down" and "Off", put before the sentences—"Down I sit. Off we go again," are used as strong beats in order to both make a rhythmic narrative and highlight the narrator's hopeless feeling.

In this letter, by presenting the accumulation of interruptions in one ordinary day of her life as a symphony, Woolf not only tries to convey her inability to control her own time and life: "I'm such a damnable whirled dead leaf blown by in an invisible sandstorm" (*L V*, 67), but also tries to provoke a sympathetic vibration in her addressee, Ethel Smyth. As she states in the very beginning of the whole passage: "Your strictures on my weakness in wasting these last days that will never never come again, talking, when my entire year, almost, wastes in talk, are apparently justified, but actually, if you were in my shoes, what could you do?" (*L IV*, 222)

By presenting life, either an ordinary summer afternoon of modern life or an intense ordinary day of her own life, with a musical language, Woolf tries to convey "the pulse of life" (*L VI*, 111) to her addressee, the musician, Ethel Smyth. The musical narrative not only symbolises the movement of consciousness, but also presents the way with which impressions unfold themselves in the human mind, or to use Woolf's words, as the way Ethel Smyth writes her biographies: "There you gallop over turf as springy as a race horse […] I wish, vainly, you'd write more biographies, like the south wind blowing through the grass" (*L V*, 249). Finally, this kind of epistolary writing, in which "[m]usic moved beneath the words" (*E VI*, 589), can be regarded as the "melodies" (*L V*, 394) or the "wave language" (*L VI*, 403) that Woolf aims to compose for her letter readers, both the immediate one, Ethel Smyth, and the

public one, us; it is meant to be heard rather than read: "there's [a] wave language—for then you would have gone home with the sound of song in your ears" (*L VI*, 403).

1.4. Life "better than any play" (*L V*, 432)

While reading the manuscript of *Melymbrosia* (1912), which was later published as Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), Clive highlights the dramatic quality of the author's writing: "I expect your praise is immensely exaggerated: you (I guess) have so much more of the dramatic instinct than I have that you see it into my scenes" (*L I*, 383).[65] Steven D. Putzel shows that Woolf's personal and professional writing reveals that drama, theater, and performance form a continuous subtext in her art and in her life,[66] and "[her] lifelong practice of theatergoing gave Woolf ample opportunity to investigate the complex relationship between audience and performance and to translate it into her own works."[67] As for Woolf, she holds an opposite view, showing in a letter written on 14 October 1935 to Julian Bell, then in China, that real life exceeds a theatrical piece of writing: "Then we went to the Brighton conference, which was better than any play. […] this was as good as any play—not that Ive seen one" (*L V*, 432). By taking two of Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth as examples, we will try to address this apparent paradox and show how Woolf dramatises her experience of real life.

1.4.1. An evening with three visitors

Woolf's whole letter to Ethel Smyth of 3 October 1931 relates the visit of three persons, who came to see Woolf from six to seven thirty o'clock in the evening

[65] See Clive Bell. "Letters to Virginia Stephen." Appendix D. *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. Quentin Bell. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972: p. 214-220.
[66] Steven D. Putzel. Introduction. *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*. Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012: p. xiv.
[67] See Mary Wilson. Review. *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*. Steven D. Putzel. *Woolf Studies Annual*, Volume 19, Annual 2013. https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-385822109/virginia-woolf-and-the-theater

in her London home, 52 Tavistock Square. As the opening scene of a play would do, Woolf first introduces the three ragged, miserable and silent visitors through a description of their action, movement and appearance: "Then push in, shuffling past Nelly who did her best to bar their way, three small shabby dowdy, speechless figures; one, an old apelike man; two young women with shiny noses, cheap shoes, and unkempt hands" (*L IV*, 384-5). The narrative of the unexpected, annoying and disturbing visit, which is presented as an invasion of her life, then focuses on the male visitor's action—"Holding out an envelope the man approached" (*L IV*, 385)—and his self-introduction as Mr. Udall, "an elementary school teacher in Kent, but directly descended from the author of Ralph Roister Doister, the first English comedy" (*L IV*, 385), Nicholas Udall, as well as on the narrator's reactions, before conveying what prompted their visits: a letter of recommendation written by the poet Blunden. Apart from describing the gestures of three visitors, the main body of the letter is interwoven with Udall's words and those of a female visitor, Susanne. The reader is also given other information about them, such as their social and professional position, their relationship, as well as the purpose of their visit.

Through Udall's words, the reader knows that Udall is "by nature a reformer" (*L IV*, 385) and writes "plays" (*L IV*, 385), that Susanne is Udall's French guest through his sister, "who's at the Sorbonne […] studying […] Mrs Dalloway" (*L IV*, 385), and that Udall's daughter, Amy, who is "twenty; and a hard worker […] shy" (*L IV*, 386), writes "stories for children, as yet unpublished" (*L IV*, 385) and wants to ask the hostess if she could "make a living and still have her mornings free for writing […] in some circle that involved the society of educated literary people" (*L IV*, 386). Moreover, both Udall's and Susanne want to ask their hostess about her "views" (*L IV*, 385) or "viewpoint" (*L IV*, 385) and her "—pheel—o—so—phy—" (*L IV*, 385) or "intention" (*L IV*, 386) in her writing. The two visitors' discourse is interspersed with dashes to signal the change of subjects, the pauses, as well as their difficulty in pronouncing difficult words, such as "philosophy".

By transcribing her visitors' original discourse into direct speech, Woolf presents them in her letter as characters in a play, thus creating a dramatic effect. In

doing so, Woolf places her addressees in the position of spectators of a play who react to the comic movements as well as to the visual comic. And she does not spare herself in the process: "Ah my dear Ethel, how you would have laughed yesterday—its on these occasions I most vividly recall you, when theres something ridiculous in my situation" (*L IV*, 384). As this sentence also suggests, Woolf clearly composes her letters specifically and differently for different addressees; the concluding sentence of this dramatic scene—"I dont know why I've scribbled all this—however, let it be" (*L IV*, 386)—also shows that this kind of scenes not only amuses Woolf herself in her own life, but the act of writing them down also gives her pleasure and makes her experience the pleasure once again.

1.4.2. Lady Ottoline Morrell's party

The letter, written on 14 November 1930 to Ethel Smyth, is a letter about parties, among which the first one is the substandard "British aristocratic" (*L IV*, 253) party at Lady Ottoline Morrell: "Think of this: my 1st party was by command to Ottolines; and it was a shabby between the lights party" (*L IV*, 253).

Woolf presents Ottoline's party in two stages: the first one presents the atmosphere of the party, focusing on the narrator, as one of the guests' own seedy attire for the party: "a compromise, for one can slip in without even putting on those block shoes which you carry about to propitiate the British aristocracy in a cardboard box mended with safety pins—no paper fasteners" (*L IV*, 253), on the pitiful description of Ottoline's decayed house where "[i]n this twilight all the Italian furniture and pomegranates are faded to rose and amber" (*L IV*, 253), as well as on the miserable condition of Ottoline—the ageing aristocrat and society hostess. These three types of descriptions aim to show the shabbiness of the party.

The first stage emphasises the portrayal of Ottoline:

> […] now and then she flings a handful of cedar shavings upon the fire; dips her hand in a basket and brings up skeins like the entrails of flying fish, coloured wools, all tangled: these she drops again. […] I saw Ottoline stoop her hand to what seemed a coal scuttle and apply it to

> her ear: An ordinary black ear trumpet it was, ungilt unfunelled, and the apparition of this bare and ghastly object had somehow a sepulchral effect—and I cried out, in the midst of all the poetry. Heavens Ottoline, are you deaf? And she replied with a sort of noble negligence which struck me very much "Yes, yes, quite deaf—" and then lifted the trumpet and listened. Does that touch you? Well it did me, and I saw in a flash all I admire her for; and think what people overlook, in the briarwood bramble of her obvious tortuousness and hypocrisy. (*L IV*, 253-4)

Through the narrator's eye, the reader gets the image of this aristocrat settling herself, as we see in a play; and at the same time, the force of a feeling strongly felt, which is not articulated by words but suggested through this silent depiction, informs the feeling's articulation—Ottoline's indifference towards deafness. Ottoline's attitude is further highlighted through her composed conversation with the narrator about her deafness. Such a dramatic depiction moves the reader as a spectacle of heroic action would, and the figure of Ottoline, dominating the stage, arouses our admiration and our sympathy, which are similar to those of the narrator.

The second stage involves the conversation of the two poets—W. B. Yeats and Walter de la Mare:

> And on one side of the fire sat the poet Yeats on the other the poet de la Mare—and what were they doing when I came in? Tossing between then higher and higher a dream of Napoleon with ruby eyes, and over my head it went—*for what do I know of the inner meaning of dreams, I whose life is almost entirely founded on dreams* (yes, I will come to the suicide dream one of these days) *I mean I know nothing of the spiritual significance of ruby eyes, or a book with concentric rings of black, purple and orange*. But Yeats said, as it might be a man identifying a rather rare grass, that is the third state of the soul in contemplation (or words to that effect—it will not surprise you if I got them wrong). And then? *Did I like Milton? Yes.* And then—De la Mare does not like Milton. And then—dreams and dreams. and then stories of Irish life in brogue; and then the soul's attitude to art; and then (here I was touched, you I daresay not—) then, as the talk got more and more rapt, refined and erratic. (*L IV*, 253, *our emphasis*)

This stage is composed from three perspectives. First, the three sentences in

parenthesis belong to the narrator's epistolary discourse with her addressee. The second angle focuses on the fragmentary talk of the two poets—"dream", "soul", "poetry", and "stories of Irish life in brogue", all of which are conveyed through narrative monologues. The last angle refers to the narrator's soliloquies (the lines in italics)—her silent conversation with the poets or her reaction to their talk. If in the first stage, the narrator plays the role of a playwright, or she is a spectator like the reader, here, the narrator herself becomes one of the actors. Like a soliloquy in a play, the narrator's inner voice reveals her thoughts. Besides, in terms of music, Woolf regards the last two sorts of descriptions as a symphony, as she shows in another letter written on 17 December 1934 to Ethel Smyth: "But it was all very minute and wire drawn; merely what one thinks when someone else is talking—[*handwritten*]: in fun; by way of playing a tune on the bass. / I like trying to play tunes while people are talking—with a view to the whole sympathy" (*L V*, 354).

Resorting to a dramatic technique to present daily life in her epistolary writing—prose, on the one hand, Woolf tries to present the "shabby" persons, both the middle class—the elementary school teacher, Mr. Udall, his daughter who writes children stories in order to become a writer, as well as the French teacher, Susanne, who studies Woolf's novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)—and her friend, the decayed aristocrat, Lady Ottoline Morrell. Both kinds of people belong to the category that the author aims to represent in her writing, as she states in a letter written on 21 May 1912 to Lytton Strachey: "But the most interesting thing to observe […] is not these distinguished spirits, but the humble ones, the slightly touched, the eccentric" (*L I*, 499).

On the other hand, in presenting people through their dramatic talk in a dramatic manner, Woolf wants to explore the power of dramatic dialogues, which, in Woolf's eyes, Sir Walter Scott creates in *The Ravern Miscellany* (1933): "All I could have added would have been something about the dialogue and its relationship—I think the last in fiction of which that can be said—to the drama" (*L V*, 246). That is, in the first example, in constructing the arbitrary speech of Udall and Susanne, Woolf

wants to present people through their talk, like "Shakespeare's soliloquies in some of the old peasants speeches" (*L V*, 335). Or to use to Woolf's statements in her letter to George Rylands on 27 September 1934:

> My feeling, as a novelist, is that when you make a character speak directly you're in a different state of mind from that in which you describe him indirectly: more 'possessed', less self conscious, more random, and rather excited by the sense of his character and your audience. I think the great Victorians, Scott (no—he wasn't a Vn.) but Dickens, Trollope, to some extent Hardy all had this sense of an audience and created their characters mainly through dialogue. […] (I've a vague feeling that the play persisted in the novelist's mind, long after it was dead—but this may be fantastic: only as you say novelists are fantastic.) (*L V*, 334-5)

Creating "characters mainly through dialogues" in fictional writing as the playwright does in a play, the novelists can not only adopt an unconscious state so as to write in a more intense and freer manner, but they also have a more intense sense of their audience and the nature of their character. The novelists are thus able to escape their own personality in their writing while readers are merely attracted by their characters: "an abandonment, richness, surprise, as well as a redundancy, tediousness and superficiality when makes them different from the post Middlemarch characters" (*L V*, 335).

The dramatic narrative is used as a technique to create characters in a free and intense manner in the first example; while in the second example, dialogues, including that of Yeats and De la Mare, that between the author and Ottoline, as well as the author's silent talk—soliloquies, are used to convey the author's personal views: "So I am puzzled to see what form there is, save Dialogue, to carry the idea" (*L V*, 293); to highlight ideas as Henry James does in his work: "Henry James […] only used dialogue when he wanted a very high light" (*L V*, 335); as well as to grip readers' attention: "How does one make people talk about everything in the whole of life, so that one's hair stands on end, in a drawing room? How can one weight and sharpen dialogue till each sentence tears its way like a harpoon and grapples with the shingles

at the bottom of the reader's soul?" (*L III*, 36)

In short, both sorts of dialogues are the way in which Woolf tries to revive "the spoken word" of "the great Victorian characters" (*L V*, 335) and enrich "Shakespeare's soliloquies": "Perhaps we must now put our toes to the ground again and get back to the spoken word, only from a different angle; to gain richness, and surprise" (*L V*, 335).

Conclusion

In our analysis of Woolf's letters of facts, we have explored Woolf's art of writing. By representing a moment of being in the opera, by using Sickert's technique of leaving a silent space in his paintings, Woolf endows her writing with a suggestive power, which demands the reader's creative imagination and their necessary participation in her writing. At the same time, through the description of her figures' expression, Woolf challenges the art of the painter—the art her addressee, Quentin Bell, practices

> —how in Gods name can you be content to remain a painter? Surely you must see the infinite superiority of the language to the paint? Think how many things are impossible in paint; giving pain to the Keynes', making fun of one's aunts, telling libidinous stories, making mischief—these are only a few of the advantages; against which a painter has nothing to show: for all his merits are also a writers. Throw up your career, for God's sake. (*L III*, 493)

Then, by reconstructing her travel by car, Woolf not only uses the cinematic device to offer her addressee, Vanessa Bell, a visual effect in her narrative, but also aims to use the camera eye to represent the narrator's mind's eye. The form of the camera-eye narrative is capable of conveying the drive in a much more realistic manner and of presenting the movement of human consciousness "more effectively than by words" (*E IV*, 350). The description of the travel can be regarded as a phase of continuous

time in the author's life, which includes both moments of being in a hotel and moments of non-being on the road. In her two letters to Ethel Smyth, the first example of her musical narrative, the sonata-like afternoon of modern life only contributes to the description of outer life while the second example records an entire day of the author's life, which is composed like a symphony.

By using her addressee's musical skill, daily life becomes much richer and fuller, and it thus becomes continuous, "believable and habitual" (*L IV*, 97), as discussed in the introduction. However, Woolf is not satisfied. If letters are the writer's monologues and the vehicle to convey news and pleasure to addressees, Woolf wants them to become the media of her soliloquy, with which she can obtain a free manner beyond all conventions. In short, she wants to convey her own self in her letters and be herself while writing letters. The theatrical technique enables her to adopt a free, intense unconscious style so as to present herself and her own life, as well as other people and their lives. Woolf not only borrows the spoken words from the Victorian writers or Shakespeare's soliloquy, but she also aims to enrich and enliven them.

In terms of subjects, by using different artistic techniques borrowed from painting, cinema, music and drama, Woolf succeeds in presenting the lives of many strata of modern society: her own life—a middle-class writer, a wife and a woman—and the other classes: the lower and middle classes, the vagabond on the street, the hotel guests—20 old fishing men and women, Mr. Udall, the elementary school teacher, Amy Udall who writes children stories, and the French teacher Susanne; and the aristocratic life of Lady Ottoline Morrell. These descriptions not only include both moments of being and moments of non-being in the author's life, but also involve the world beyond her individual perception.

Albright, when discussing modernist writing, states: "Modernism was a movement associated with scrupulous choice of artistic materials, and with hard work in arranging them."[68] In Albright's eye, "[t]hroughout the modernist movement, the

[68] Daniel Albright, "Series Editor's Foreword", p. x.

major writers and composers both enforced and transgressed the boundaries among the various arts with unusual energy—almost savage at times."[69] At the same time, Albright argues: "The arts seems endlessly inter-permeable, a set of fluid systems of construing and reinterpreting, in which the quest for meaning engages all our senses at once. Thinking is itself looking, hearing, touching—even tasting, since such words as savoir are forms of the Latin *sapere*, to taste."[70]

Woolf's letters of facts throughout the six volumes are composed of her detailed reporting of the minutiae of life as Austen's letters are. It becomes apparent that Woolf's letters are, like those of Margaret Llewelyn Davies, contributing to "create a whole world" (*L VI*, 305). It is a world that Mrs Gaskell presents in her books, as Woolf indicates in "'Mrs Gaskell' (1910)": "One reads her most perhaps because one wishes to have the run of her world. Melt them together, and her books compose a large, bright, country town, widely paved, with a great stir of life in the streets and a decorous row of old Georgian houses standing back from the road" (*E I*, 343). Because life is "exciting [and] one would have to be a novelist to describe them" (*L I*, 388), the author wants to represent it in writing: "Oh how I wish I could write a novel! People and their passions, or even their lives without passions, are the things to write about" (*L I*, 388); because life is "odd that […] different versions of life should go on at the same time" (*L V*, 269), which stimulates her to write it down: "Life interests me intensely, and writing is I know my natural means of expression" (*L I*, 144), or "why do I always want to find a phrase for what I see?" (*L VI*, 315). Because life is better than any play, she uses different techniques to represent it as truthfully as possible.

For Woolf, facts can also be regarded as the essential material for fiction. Facts do not merely function as news that can maintain relationship; and writing facts in letters is not merely an outlet for the writer's desire; writing is also a way to bridge the time and space distance and to make life timeless: "I live almost as much with the

[69] Daniel Albright, "Series Editor's Foreword," p. xiii.
[70] Daniel Albright, "Series Editor's Foreword," p. viii.

Amberleys in the 80ties as here and now" (*L VI*, 73). Writing facts is instrumental in keeping the past, emotions, as well as people alive: "It was the MS of the famous account of our never to be forgotten […] punt disaster, [….] this account of the joys of an English summer. Oh how vividly that all comes back to me now!" (*L I*, 150), and "Does that bring her back to you?—her odious selfcomplacency; her extreme brutality—" (*L II*, 492). Writing is above all a way to appropriate facts which contain some truth: "Because if one collects facts, they are ones own; and cant be used by a second hand. This I tell you because I myself have a passion for truth" (*L V*, 299). Besides, writing down facts can also offer solace: "—I am jotting these facts down to soothe my own agitation" (*L IV*, 367).

Chapter Two: Letters of imagination

Introduction

1. Woolf's "appetite for facts" (*L IV*, 34) in letters and the functions of facts

In its discussion of Woolf's letters of facts, this chapter shows that Woolf keeps a keen observation of her daily life, cherishes its minutiae, and attempts to preserve them in her letters as fully, frankly and freely as possible. Moreover, throughout her life, Woolf also asks her addressees to give her facts from their respective lives and "write fully and freely and frequently" (*L IV*, 40).

For example, in a letter written on 13 June 1899 to Emma Vaughan, who "ha[s] been away a week" (*L I*, 25), Virginia Stephen asks her addressee to pay attention to her surroundings and relate them to her later in order to fulfill her curiosity: "I cannot write the multitude of questions that arise in my head when I sit down to write to thee—Especially when you are in such company I can only hope that you are noticing and treasuring every word, glance and gesture" (*L I*, 25). Or, during Violet Dickinson's travel abroad in August 1905, Virginia Stephen writes: "Lord, there are quantities of things I want answered at once" (*L I*, 205); and when the same addressee is travelling again in August 1908, she jots down: "O if you would only write your life!" (*L I*, 368) Similarly, in her letters to Vanessa Bell who is then in Paris, Woolf not only asks her painter sister to "describe a dinner at a café and […] artists talk, […] scribble down about pictures […] and the young artists nowadays" (*L II*, 472), but also constantly demands "an immense long letter" (*L I*, 358) about her addressee's daily life; at the same time, her demand often contains her own description of the effect of facts on her: "Do write me an account of Xmas at Seend—do you still have the carols after dinner? You know how every detail consumes me" (*L II*, 407), or "Oh how fascinating facts are—the Maggs, the magazine Club, the lamp with deers feet, […] and also the ink pot made from a hoof" (*L III*, 102).

Especially, the third volume of letters is permeated with Woolf's inquiries about

her addressees' lives. For example, Woolf not only wishes Vanessa to "give a literal account, no make up, of every instant of the day" (*L III*, 102), but also requires Katherine Arnold-Forster to write minutely about the physical world in Cornwall: "What I long for is a literal account of something like a badger. Now turn your paw to that, facts not fiction" (*L III*, 480). Writing to Ethel Sands, who is "a Chelsea hostess, exquisite and amiably" (*L IV*, 399), Woolf proposes fashion as a subject for her addressee's letter: "I only wish your letters were longer, and contained fuller details of everything. For instance your new hat—" (*L III*, 100). Writing to Edward Sackville West, Woolf describes herself as a person whose life relies on letters: "There's not going to be a post—damnation seize my friends for not writing for me. I'm dependent on crumbs falling down to me from life above" (*L III*, 286); and she asks her addressee to write "a long letter full of a sort of tangle of everything" (*L III*, 549). Woolf not merely asks Molly MacCarthy to write her "a diary letter: beginning 'I was woken by a sunbeam at 8 a.m.' going on through every detail until the schoolmaster calls in the evening" (*L III*, 6-7), but also advises her to treat letter writing as an employment: "Do, if you want an occupation, write letters to me, supposing me to be in Australia. I assure you, this book would be fascinating; probably filmed; your fortune made" (*L IV*, 91).

When meeting Ethel Smyth in later life, Woolf claims: "But my appetite for letters is measureless to man" (*L IV*, 153), and then asks her friend to send her "letters about everything—think when you're out, or at the dr's, that'll do for Virginia; or if you see a sunset or a butcher's boy or a shop full of cabbages, write and tell me. Writing letters comes as easy to you as rolling down a board does to a marble" (*L IV*, 211).[1] For Woolf, letters about minute facts "unfurl like flowers in water" (*L IV*, 302), and "every fact is valuable to [her]" (*L IV*, 211), however small it might be or whatever it might be: "Little things people say; nods and hints: these stick in my pelt; and not the arrows always of destiny" (*L IV*, 302). Woolf's ardent requirement for Ethel Smyth's thorough,

[1] See also Susan Seller, "Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters," p. 117.

detailed account of life can also be found in her letters to her nephew, Quentin Bell: "But then I am so pleased to get your letter—I like so much any scrap of offal that comes your way. So I must implore you to write at length. You know my appetite for facts. Nothing is too small, remote, large, or obscene" (*L IV*, 34).

Woolf's enthusiasm for her addressees' descriptions of their lives in their letters can be accounted for in various ways. First of all, the basic one is to maintain relationship, as Woolf indicates in one letter to Jacques Raverat: "the relationship—one has to spray an atmosphere round one; yet I do like yours and seem to be able to pierce through your spray, so may you through mine" (*L III*, 131). Moreover, for Woolf, letters from foreign countries are like a breeze of exotic culture: for example, reading Dorothy Brett's letters from New Mexico, in which Woolf asks to "[t]ell me how you spend your day, accurately, minutely" (*L IV*, 32), is "to breathe for a moment the very brilliant queer air" (*L V*, 202); while the one from Quentin in Switzerland is "a whiff of your air, contaminated as it is by the clergy" (*L V*, 281). Meanwhile, reading others' lives is also the way to share their feelings, in particular, pleasure, which is one essential intention of the author's "pin[ing]" (*L I*, 358) for letters. As Woolf repeats in the above quotations, facts in her addressees' lives are "fascinating", and they offer the letter readers "immense pleasure" (*L II*, 475).

Like other letter writers, sharing the others' lives and pleasure is also the fundamental way for Woolf to maintain relationship. However, in Woolf's letters, the descriptions of her own observations in daily life and her demand for her addressees' facts both expose her curiosity for people; and this curiosity is emphasised by Woolf herself in her two letters: in a letter written on 7 January 1926 to Vita Sackville-West: "I found him [Stephen Tomlin] rather an interesting object, for one reason in that he resembles me […] in this myriad minded innumerable curiosity about others" (*L III*, 226), while in another letter written on 19 August 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "Take away my love for my friends and my burning and pressing sense of the importance and lovability and curiosity of human life and I should be nothing but a membrane, a fibre, uncoloured,

lifeless to be thrown away like any other excreta" (*L IV*, 203). If Woolf's curiosity for people, which can be regarded as the second reason for her yearning for facts, functions as the driving force,[2] Woolf equally realises that real life and people are the crucial source of writing.

For example, in her letters to Vanessa, Woolf states that "the way to get life into letters was to be interested in other people" (*L I*, 406), and by comparing herself to her sister, Woolf compares the importance of human beings for writers to that of the natural world for painters: "You see I get from people what you get from vines. These distorted human characters are to me what the olive tree against the furrowed hill is to you" (*L VI*, 295). Here, Woolf's emphasis on the importance of people as the central element in writing is reminiscent of her essay, "Phases of Fiction (1929)": "however the novelist may vary his scene and altar the relations of one thing to another […] one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they are about people, they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life" (*E V*, 81).

Woolf's friends and addressees were aware that Woolf could use them and their lives as raw material for future writing. Jane Vaughan, for instance, states that her own experience has been used by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929):

> She loved miscellaneous facts, about other people's lives. Later, when I was qualified and had a job at University College Hospital, next door to Tavistock Square, I became interested in liver as a cure for pernicious anaemia, then a fatal disease. […] This, again, fascinated by Virginia. She followed all the details of my primitive chemical techniques, the fate of the dog on whom the extract was first tried, to see if it was safe, and then of the patient whom I cured. Finally, she wrote about it in *A Room of One's Own*. She used this activity of mine to illustrate how women have other interests besides what she called 'the perennial interests of domesticity'.

[2] Elke D'Hoker argues: "Interestingly, both 'Memoirs of a Novelist' and 'The Mark on the Wall' refer in a small remark to one of the driving forces behind Woolf's fiction: the curiosity about other human beings. […] This motif is explored in greater detail in the well-known essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' where Woolf calls this curiosity the central driving force of her writing" ("The Role of Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," *Journal of the Short Story in English*. *Special issue: Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Christine Reynier. 50, Spring 2008: p. 19).

> ‘Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together … these two young women were engaged in mincing liver, which is, it seems, a cure of pernicious anaemia’.[3]

Woolf herself acknowledges using her addressees’ letters as she does with Vanessa’s account of the moth, which will fuel *The Moths*, later published as *The Waves* (1931): “By the way, your story of the Moth so fascinates me that I am going to write a story about it. I could think of nothing else but you and the moths for hour’s after reading your letter” (*L III*, 372).

Similarly, her friends can be used as original models for her own characters. For example, while writing *The Pargiters* (1977) in December 1932, Woolf asks about Ethel Smyth’s “suffrage life” (*L V*, 137): “I hope you’re thinking […] how you will tell me all about Mrs Pankhurst and the suffrage. Why did you militate I am turning over that other little book [*The Pargiters*] in my mind; and want to know a few facts” (*L V*, 141). Ethel Smyth’s life as a member of the women’s suffrage movement finds its way among Woolf’s imaginary characters as Rose Pargiter’s life in her novel, *The Years* (1937), and her novel-essay, “*The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of THE YEARS* (1977).”

The act of sharing facts is also important for writers, as Woolf suggests in a letter written on 24 August 1925 to Vita:

> What I wish is that you would deal seriously with facts. […] What I want is the habits of earthworms; the diet given in the workhouse: anything exact about a matter of fact—milk, for instance—the hours of cooling, milking etc. From that, proceed to sunsets and transparent leaves and all the rest, which, with my mind rooted upon facts, I shall then embrace with tremendous joy. Do you think there is any truth in this? Now, as you were once a farmer, surely it is all in your head ready. Tennyson, you see, was never a farmer: Crabbe was a parson, which does as well. (*L III*, 198-9)

[3] Dame Janet Vaughan. “Cousin Virginia,” *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995: p. 10-1.

While advising her addressee, who is writing the poem, *The Land* (1926), to write about facts of daily life, Woolf reveals that her own background and her lack of experience in real life are a kind of shortage in her writing; on the contrary, those facts described in her addressees' letters make up for such a weakness. Again, the importance of sharing life for writers is emphasised in another letter to Jacques Raverat: "I often wish I had married a foxhunter. It is partly the desire to share in life somehow, which is denied to us writers" (*L III*, 163). For a writer like Woolf, facts from other people's lives can enlarge knowledge and counteract one's own weaknesses.

Facts, either in Woolf's own letters or those of her addressees, can reveal the "truth" about life, as Woolf states in a letter to Vanessa: "I am always on the look out for some huge revelation lurking in the boscage about life in your letters" (*L III*, 365). Finally, facts in letters can provide material for the imagination. For example, Woolf asks Lady Robert Cecil to write to her so that she can imagine her addressee: "Your letter was such a delight; and with only one post a day I beg of you to sit down at once and reply, so that I may imagine you again. I often do think of you—you'll be amused to hear" (*L II*, 64). Likewise, Jacques's letters from France help Woolf imagine his life: "I enjoyed your letter so much, and imagine your whole existence, no doubt a little wrong, as I walk with my dog, in Richmond Park" (*L II*, 592). Similarly, Woolf asks Ethel Sands, who lives in the North of France with Nan Hudson: "I dont know your address [Auppegard, near Dieppe]. Send me a picture post-card so that I may imagine your house" (*L III*, 188).

Woolf's "appetite for facts" is blatant in her letters and stems from her desire to maintain relationship, satisfy her curiosity, enlarge her knowledge and discover the reality of life, as well as fuel her imagination and her fiction. Facts and imagination thus don't seem to be at odds, as Woolf's imaginative descriptions to her addressees point out.

2. Imagination, people and writing

First of all, Woolf herself writes about her own life as being made of dreams, as

she does when describing her party at Lady Ottoline Morrell's in a letter to Ethel Smyth.[4] Her awareness of her own imaginative nature also comes out in her early letters to Violet Dickinson. For instance, Virginia Stephen not only regards herself as "a person of imagination" (*L I*, 208) but considers imagination to be her gift: "Here is the morning's post, like the morning's milk—20 letters for Miss Dickinson. Which will she open first? That fat one, with the large hand and the hand and the coronet and the sealing wax: so my genius tells me" (*L I*, 253). Imagination also comes out in Virginia Stephen's word-plays and the outpouring of her literary talent: "I swear that joke swelled on my, like a drop of perspiration—or did I mean inspiration?" (*L I*, 260) In her own eye, as a person of genius, which is "an accident" (*L I*, 276), Virginia Stephen not only possesses the capability to make stories while walking, but she is also able to present them in writing, such as letters: "I tramp the country for miles with a map, leap ditches, scale walls and desecrate churches, making out beautiful brilliant stories every step of the way. One is actually being—as we geniuses say—transferred to paper at this moment" (*L I*, 234).

Virginia Stephen's self-consideration as a person with imaginative power can also be supported by one of her friends, Lady Ottoline Morrell's words. In her diary, Ottoline shows that compared to Lytton Strachey, Woolf has more vigour and imagination: "She entered with such energy and vitality and seemed to me far the most imaginative and masterly intellect that I had met for many years. She played on life with her imagination as a Paderewski plays on the piano."[5]

Then, as quoted above, in "Phases of fiction (1929)," Woolf considers human being as the central element in all kinds of writing. In "Character in Fiction (1924)," Woolf also argues: "I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite […] that all novels […] deal with character, and that it is to express character—not to preach doctrines" (*E III*, 425). An ordinary woman—Mrs. Brown, sitting in the corner

[4] See Chapter One.
[5] Lady Ottoline Morrell. "The diary of Lady Ottoline Morrell," *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995: p. 27.

opposite the narrator in the train and suggesting a "tragic, heroic, yet with a dash of the flighty, and fantastic" (*E III*, 425)—stimulates the writer's desire to convey her in fiction: "Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her" (*E III*, 425). Mrs. Brown is created with both the writer's "impression" (*E III*, 425) of her physical, outward appearance and her imagination which is stirred by her appearance: "Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one's head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes" (*E III*, 425).

For Woolf, imaginative scenes go together with observation of real people and help the writer to construct characters and convey human nature in writing: "There she sits in the corner of the carriage […] from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature" (*E III*, 430). It is also the writer's task to portray such ordinary human beings: "May I end by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs Brown?" (*E III*, 435-6)

In "The Art of Biography (1939)," Woolf compares biography to fiction and, through twists and turns, comes to the same conclusion. She argues that biography is constructed on "facts" (*E VI*, 182): "The novelist is free; the biographer is tied" (*E VI*, 181); and in Woolf's eyes, "the majority of Victorian biographies are like the wax figures […]—effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin" (*E VI*, 182). However, at the end of the nineteenth-century, biographers such as Lytton Strachey, who are still "bound by facts" (*E VI*, 185), attempt to represent people and their world in writing as "a richer unity" (*E VI*, 186) with "a measure of freedom" (*E VI*, 182) of imagination: "For the invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only—the artist himself. Their authenticity lies in the truth of his own vision. The world created by that vision is rare, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made of authentic information supplied by other people" (*E*

VI, 185). Because a biographer creates a world that is at least true and real in his own eyes, Woolf considers him as "a craftsman, not an artist; and his works is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between" (*E VI*, 187). Furthermore, Woolf indicates: "for a tired imagination the proper food is […] sober fact, that 'authentic information' from which […] good biography is made" (*E VI*, 187). Since fact in biography is "the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders" (*E VI*, 187), Woolf declares: "By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest" (*E VI*, 187).

Whether biographer, essayist or novelist, the writer's task is to convey human nature by combining facts and fiction, impression and imagination.[6] Imagination is what determines the value of writing. According to Woolf, imagination is, besides facts and thoughts, an important component of epistolary writing, as can be seen in one of her letters to Lady Robert Cecil:

> I don't think that I have any news whatever. So what does one write letters about? You know, I imagine. But then you live in the world. You have a garden too, with trees against the sky, and a bonfire in the middle distance. I could make an exquisite story out of you—so don't imagine that all the insight is on your side. I can imagine you, from the moment you wake in the morning till you go to bed again, without leaving my chair. (*L I*, 397)

Virginia Stephen is able to create an imaginary day for her addressee. Reading through the imaginative descriptions in Woolf's six volumes of letters, one can see that her imagination is most often stirred by or centers on other human beings, in particular her addressees: "all my friends are, something I dreamt" (*L III*, 479). The imaginative descriptions of her addressees are based both on her memories and facts, as will be seen in the next chapter.

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[6] See also Elke D'Hoker, "The Role of Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," p. 18.

2.1. Imagination as the source of pleasure

2.1.1. The pleasure of imagination

The author's letters to her sister become frequent after Vanessa Bell married Clive Bell on 7 February 1907. An important subject that keeps recurring in these letters in the first volume is her imaginative description of their future meeting. For example, while travelling in Somerset in 1908, the author writes on 10 August:

> At this season we should be walking together; I am in just the mood to discuss winter plans. Leaves are falling, and there is a soft gusty wind, not too cold though; I should make you stay out till dinner time, and I have found the perfect evening walk, with such a view for the home coming, which was wont to be the best time. We had got excited, then, and were saying what we really thought, of our gifts and futures; and sometimes you said such delicious things, and I walked like a peacock, all aglow. I wonder if I ever said such things to you. Did you ever feel neglected? Well, your daughter will know one day more than I ever shall. (*L I*, 348)

The act of imagining scenes makes the author cheerful and relieves herself from her lonely mood caused by the separation between the two sisters, as she again shows in a letter written four days later, on 14 August 1908: "Ah, I cannot bear being without you. I was thinking today of my greatest happiness, a walk along a cliff by the sea, and you at the end of it" (*L I*, 355). Apart from the happy meeting, the pleasure of imagination involves the author's imaginative description of herself: "I walked like a peacock, all aglow." This can also be seen in another letter written at this period, on 12 August: "I walked to the top of a hill today, imagining that I was Christ ascending Calvary, and cheered myself so that I laughed aloud, and proceeded to think of Dobbins and Sheeps; and various quips of my own; but the weather is cold" (*L I*, 351). At the same time, by inventing this scene in her letter, the author also attempts to convey her affection to her sister.

The pleasure that Virginia Stephen derives from her act of inventing the scene of

her meeting with her addressee, who is absent but present in her mind at the moment she is thinking about her, is considered by Joseph Addison as the second pleasure of imagination in *Essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712).

> [B]y 'the pleasures of the imagination,' […] I divide these pleasures into two kinds: […] those primary pleasures of the imagination, which entirely proceed from such objects as are before our eyes; and […] those secondary pleasures of the imagination which flow from the ideas of visible objects, when the objects are not actually before the eye, but are called up into our memories, or formed into agreeable visions of things that are either absent or fictitious.[7]

In other words, this is the pleasure that people derive from their thoughts: the pleasure arises from invented visions, formed from one's ideas of the absent object called up by one's memory.

2.1.2. Imagination and desire

The act of imagination not only stirs a feeling of happiness in the author, it can also dramatise her surroundings. For instance, in one of her diary letters to Vita Sackville-West, who is travelling to Persia in February 1927:

> [Saturday, 5 February 1927] You are on the Caspian? Its lovely here: an early spring. You are being tossed up and down on a smelly ship—you and Dotty [Wellesley] and Leigh [Ashton] in his horn glasses—and I sit over the gas in my sordid room. […] *Monday 7th Feb* […] Now you are nearly at Teheran I make out, motoring across mountains; stopping at some shed I daresay for lunch, sandwiches, wine. You are very excited, all in a whirl, like a flock of birds flying across; Harold will be pacing up and down his room. I think of this journey so that I could write a book about not being a Passenger to Teheran: but its silly to tell you my version, as perhaps you have your own. […] *Tuesday 8th Feb*. / Now you're just arriving I make

[7] Joseph Addison. *Essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712). Originally published in *The Spectator*. London: Printed by and for Andrew Wilson, 1813: p. 5-6; see also Lorraine Sim. *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010: p. 124-7.

> out—driving into the gates of Teheran. Theres Harold come out to meet you. There you sit as proud as a peacock. Dotty is tactful. Well well, its all very exciting, even here in the studio with the rain coming through. (*L III*, 325-7)

In this letter, by constructing different imaginative scenes for Vita, Woolf tries to follow or accompany her addressee to Teheran in her mind. Here, Woolf's imaginative power not only enables her to be with her addressee at the moment when she is thinking of her addressee or writing about her imagination, but the excitement of Vita's journey in her imaginative "version", like sunshine, can also come through her mind and enter her life and her physical environment.

If in her letters to Vanessa Bell, it is the pleasure that Virginia Stephen derives from imagining her meeting with her addressee, here, it is the excitement which Woolf conjures up to characterise Vita's journey in her imaginative description that Woolf wants to share. The fact that she is able to share her imaginary emotion leads Woolf to imagine the same addressee while she is ill:

> How you'd laugh to see me stretched out comatose recovering from two days high temperature […] How I wish you'd walk into the room this moment, and laugh as much as you like. / Why do I think of you so incessantly, see you so clearly the moment I'm in the least discomfort? An odd element in our friendship. Like a child, I think if you were here, I should be happy. (*L III*, 351-2)

Woolf's joyful vision of Vita results from her childish desire of friendship with her addressee, as she suggests here.[8] In other words, it is in order to have a feeling of happiness to soothe her pain while she is ill that Woolf tries to imagine Vita. According to Woolf's own opinion in a letter written on 8 January 1929 to the same addressee, this act of visualising Vita that she uses to relieve her pain from illness and loneliness, is the fruit of her use of "psychology": to use imagination to oppose "a mixed mood, flying

[8] The discussion will be developed in chapter five.

before the fury of my own devils" (*L IV*, 3).

Woolf's psychological experience of happiness, which is achieved through her vision of Vita and results from her desire for her addressee when the latter is travelling abroad or she herself is ill, seems to echo G. E. Moore's theory of drinking wine in *Principa Ethica* (1903):

> The *idea* of the drinking causes a feeling of pleasure in my mind, which helps to produce […] 'desire.' It is, therefore, because of a pleasure, which I already have—the pleasure excited by a mere idea—that I desire the wine, which I have not. […] [A] pleasure of this kind, an actual pleasure, is always among the causes of every desire, […] of every mental activity, whether conscious or sub-conscious. […] it is the true psychological doctrine; […] And now, what is the other doctrine, […] It is this. That when I desire the wine, it is not the wine which I desire but the pleasure which I expect to get from it.[9]

Here, by taking wine as an example, Moore attempts to analyse two psychological doctrines: that is, man can experience again the pleasure he got from drinking through the act of thinking about it again; the very idea of wine can give man a sort of physical pleasure.

Moore's viewpoint about physical pleasure, which can be derived from thinking of wine or any other imaginative act, is not only "admire[d]" (*L I*, 364) by Virginia Stephen, but also "proved" (*L I*, 366) by her own experiment. For instance, in a letter written on 10 August 1908 to Saxon Sydney-Turner, she states: "I have been reading […] [G. E.] Moore […] with something like excitement. […] I sent myself to sleep last night by thinking what I feel at the prospect of eating an ice; and woke this morning convinced that Moore is right" (*L I*, 347). Again, in writing to Clive Bell on 19 August 1908, she indicates:

[9] G. E. Moore. *Principa Ethica* (1903). Cambridge: At the University Press, 1922: p. 69-70.

> I split my head over [G. E.] Moore every night, feeling ideas travelling to the remotest part of my brain, and setting up a feeble disturbance, hardly to be called thought. It is almost a physical feeling, as though some little coil of brain unvisited by any blood so far, and pale as wax, had got a little life into it at last; but had not strength to keep it. I have a very clear notion which parts of my brain think. (*L I*, 357)

2.1.3. Imagination as vicarious pleasure

Woolf's imaginative scenes about her addressee while she is ill become much richer in her letters to Ethel Smyth:

> Of course, of course, of course, I should like to have you sitting by me if I were ill. […] It seemed to me as I lay looking at the apples through the open door that you would heighten and establish and make everything right and cheerful and sound for me. If Ethel were here, then, instead of dangling my hand in all these books and papers, I said, I should hold her white cuff (of which I have a vivid memory) and she, who knows exactly how to settle the race and excitability of my mind, would tell me—oh what sort of wardrobe she has in her bedroom; And how did you get your Cook? I should say. Then at a certain moment Ethel would open her eyes, which are (here I was visited by an extremely vivid picture of your almost childish smile) so blue and laugh: and I should feel so set up, that I should lose whatever the pain happened to be—I think in my spine—no perhaps in my head—and toss life like a pancake; and then I should say, now Ethel, I am not going to talk, but you are going to tell me exactly what happened last August twelvemonth, so that I can build up that particular gap in my knowledge etc etc. I can't conceive that you would ever tire me; no; or agitate me; or harass me; but only make me feel like a good child, nestling its head into a perfectly fresh pillow. (*L IV*, 216)

Apart from the pleasures of imagination obtained through the act of imagination and of desiring her addressee to be with her, this passage also includes a third sort of pleasure that Woolf experiences by watching an imaginary figure, Ethel Smyth's behaviour in her mind. According to Woolf's own statement in another letter to Ethel Smyth on 19 May

1935, Ethel Smyth's imaginary figure in Woolf's "dream" (*L V*, 396) is created by her sense of "romance" (*L V*, 396), and the pleasure obtained by conjuring up this image is "a psychological phenomenon" (*L V*, 395): "what is called a vicarious" (*L V*, 395) experience.

This section has analysed Woolf's imagination from three points of view. First of all, the pleasure that Virginia Stephen derives from imagination in her letters to Vanessa Bell can be compared to the second pleasure of imagination in Addison's theory. Then, the fact that pleasure can be achieved through imaginative scenes, which result from Woolf's desire for Vita, can be accounted for with Moore's theory of the relationship between pleasure and desire. Lastly, it is the vicarious pleasure that Woolf gets from the imaginative scenes she consigns in her letters to Ethel Smyth, in which her addressee is featured as practical, valiant and content. That imagination is a source of pleasure is stated even more clearly in Woolf's diary, in the entry of 29 September 1924: "But how entirely I live in my imagination; how completely depend upon spurts of thought, coming as I walk, as I sit; things churning up in my mind & so making a perpetual pageant, which is to be my happiness" (*D II*, 315).

It appears that not only the act of imagination excites the author, but the act of writing about these imaginative scenes is also a source of pleasure for the letter writer; so is the act of reading them for both sorts of readers, Woolf's addressees and her public readers, ourselves. Accordingly, in her letters to Violet Dickinson in late 1906, Virginia Stephen's lies about Thoby's health and death may not be regarded merely as providing the pleasure she wants to give and as soothing her sick addressee, Violet, but they also embody the pleasure and comfort that she wants to derive from her own imagination and her own writing. In other words, the acts of imagination and writing in Woolf's letters, as ways to relieve from pain and obtain happiness, possess a psychotherapeutic function.[10]

[10] Janet Gurkin Altman argues: "Letters in [Saul] Bellow's novel [*Herzog* (1964)], metaphorically speaking, serve a psychotherapeutic function. Herzog's epistolary style of free association enables him to

2.2. Imagination as a bridge of space-time distance

If Virginia Stephen's lies about her brother's death in her letters to Violet Dickinson lead her to realise that imagination can be used as a sort of psychotherapy, in her letters to the same addressee, who is travelling abroad, Virginia Stephen also attempts to use her imagination to bridge the spatial gap that separates them. For example, on 27 August 1905, she writes to Violet:

> We watched the sea for the seven days *we supposed* that you were on it […] *I do wonder* how you got through the voyage in your tiny cabin. Did Nelly and you share it; and were there delicacies innumerable? *I can imagine* vivid blushes, and shouted confidences. […] *I suppose* you have permanently attached to yourself at least six fellow passengers, and that all the steerage wives bore their babies under your guidance. […] Have you bought any photographs yet? You dont go by Niagara, I hope. Lord, there are quantities of things I want answered at once. Not having a map here, you have now sailed *entirely out of my ken*. My mental geography ends at America. (*L I*, 205, *our emphasis*)

Virginia Stephen tries to find various ways to bridge the gap, but without success.

Similarly, in a letter written on 13 May 1908 while her addressee was travelling to America with Beatrice Thynne, Virginia Stephen tries to make "an attempt to follow the course of the Trent" (*L I*, 331), and to invent a scene about her addressees: "I try to imagine long hot days on deck, and meals, and odd little middle aged women, who will confide their histories to you, and Beatrice will scowl at them, but get a great deal of information from stewards and captains" (*L I*, 331). Apart from imagining travelling with her addressees, another purpose of imagination is to satisfy her curiosity about her addressees' life in a foreign country: "my chief curiosity is not about Barbadoes but is

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recall his past, to bring to the conscious level repressed emotions. In many cases we could speak analogically of a transference taking place within the letters, the shadow figures addressed in them being substitutes for the real objects of the repressed feelings. But as the visits to the psychiatrist's office have achieved maximum usefulness when the patient can give them up, so Herzog's abandonment of his scribbling at the end of his novel constitutes a declaration of mental stability. Letters in *Herzog* are both symptoms of the neurosis and the means for the cure" (*Epistolary Approaches to a Form*, p. 41-2).

simple: how do you and Beatrice get on?" (*L I*, 331) Moreover, in the same letter, Virginia Stephen also indicates that it is by recalling both the voice and the image of her addressees, such as those of Beatrice Thynne, that she writes her letters: "I must write to B; I try to call forth her laugh, as of a startled jay, and to imagine her figure, in the striped coat, in New York" (*L I*, 332).

As Virginia Stephen indicates in another letter written in June 1906 to Violet: "the Imagination, as the poet says, has wings" (*L I*, 226). Thanks to this awareness, the author defines two purposes for her imaginative descriptions, that is, bridge the spatial-time distance and transform the epistolary discourse into a sort of face-to-face talk. Making all kinds of endeavour to conceive her imaginative scenes as vividly as possible in her letters to the same addressee, it seems that, in a letter written on 13 May 1908, Virginia Stephen successfully achieves both her purposes:

> I suppose you are staying in some great house, where they dress for dinner, and drive about in brakes. I suppose you are very witty at dinner, and all the old generals confide in you. When the ladies go to bed, Lady Cynthia or Mildred comes to your room, and asks your advice. You are rather random and free spoken, which however, she finds the greatest refreshment: and says she never met anyone like you […]. You kiss each other, and next time I come to Manchester St Rose will tell me you are engaged with a young lady in the drawing room. (*L I*, 368)

Unlike the imaginative description in the previous quoted letters, in this passage, all the tenses—the present perfect, simple past as well as the future tense—are transformed into present tenses: the present continuous and the simple present. This transformation indirectly shows that Virginia Stephen's suppositions about her travelling addressee have bridged the space-time gap and that the epistolary discourse has already become a face-to-face talk. In this imaginative description, the addressee acts and moves in the author's mind as in real life.

Virginia Stephen goes on conjuring up her addressees from a distance in the

second volume. For instance, in a letter to Lytton Strachey, which is written while Woolf was travelling in Spain on 1 September 1912:

> As you can imagine, we mean to be very various and active in the winter. Just about this moment, you're settling down over the fire, having returned from a brisk walk among the Scotch firs in a Scotch mist, and saying (something I can't spell—it's French) to the effect that life holds nothing but copulation, after which you groan from the profundities of the stomach, which reminds you that there is venison?—partridge? Mutton?—for dinner, whereupon you take down Pope, your pocket copy, and proceed for the 150th time to read…, when the bell rings and the sandy haired girl, whom you wish was a boy, says "Dinner on the table"… whereas I'm just off to walk by the shores of the Mediterranean, by the beams of the dying sun, which is still hot enough to make a cotton dress and a parasol necessary, while the military band plays the Barcarrolle from Hoffman's Tales, and the naked boys run like snipe along the beach, balancing their buttocks in the pellucid air. (*L II*, 5)

By using the present tense, Woolf not only transcends the space-time distance, but also provokes in her letter readers a sense of the now of letter writing—"this moment": she speaks directly to her readers as though writer and readers were sharing the same physical time. Here, it seems that not only the epistolary discourse becomes a face-to-face talk, but also the letter becomes the vehicle of the juxtaposition of two different worlds—the imaginative and the physical worlds: "you're settling down over the fire […] whereas I'm just off to walk by the shores."

By using the epistolary present, Woolf shares the moment—now, and bridges the spatial distance between here and there. This intimacy and immediacy in Woolf's letters not only separates her writing from the recipient's reading; but more importantly, it draws her letter readers into her text. Furthermore, in the second part of the second volume, in her letters to Vanessa Bell, Woolf uses freely her capacity of imagination to visualise her sister: "I can see you" (*L II*, 199, 468) or "my vision" (*L II*, 263). For example, in one of her letters written on 24 October 1921:

> Well, so you have arrived [at St Tropez]. The vision of large hats against a translucent sea and the white legs of prostitutes is I admit very attractive; oh and the butterflies: how they make my mouth water—the apollos, the white admirals, the Sulphurs, the purple emperors; and Dolphin [Vanessa] sitting on a terrace in flowered muslin drinking coffee out of a glass, and first dipping an oblong piece of sugar in the coffee and nibbling the brown bit. / *Still I dont see why I should write you a letter about yourself.* But tell me—are there great spear shaped bunches of cactus? Oleanders? Perhaps Oleanders are too romantic. I have enough without them. (*L II*, 486, *our emphasis*)

Through a depiction of space, Woolf attempts to revive her memory about St Tropez so as to picture her sister in her mind for a while. At the same time, Woolf suggests that such a desire to visualise her sister is beyond her control.

Moreover, not only can Woolf visualise Vanessa in her imaginative scenes, but she is also able to converse with the imaginary figure in her mind: for example, in a letter written on 13 April 1922:

> Yes, I have been and got a box and cut the flowers, —and now must forage for string and paper all for love of you.
>
> Shall I get a letter in reply? Well, the pen is lost. No it isn't. Duncan had one that night to write his cheque with.
>
> You are wise not to come into the country, […] It is a very exciting life, entirely devoid of human beings. But, as you say, leads to damned dull letters. Well, can't you send me a little news? Do the cat and dog go out as much as ever? —or are they keeping the fire warm? […]
>
> We have got to spend the day at Gale [Chelwood Gate, Sussex] with the Cecils, all very old world; […] We are also going to stay with H. G. Wells. Why do we do such things? Just to catch a glimpse of life—it don't much matter what. All's milk that comes to my nest, as you would say. Must I for ever invent your sayings, or shall we ever drop into the old familiar gossip? (*L II*, 520)

Woolf's imaginative power not only enables her to deal with the space-time obstacles,

but also empowers her to transform the epistolary communication into an imaginary dialogue with her imaginative addressee. In other words, Woolf is fully aware of her letter readers while writing.

Woolf's imaginative description of Vanessa can also be found with those of Ethel Smyth in her later letters:

> Well Ethel dear this is very sad—that you're not with me at this moment but hitting some ball about on a cold grey lawn. Do you dress in white?—Do you wear a little straw hat with a blue ribbon, and a blouse fastened by a dragon fly in turquoises? Those are my ancient views of lawn tennis seen over a paling in Cornwall 30 years ago. But enough of these recollections. Were you here, in the arm chair opposite, we wouldn't recollect: we would—how d'you call it?—present. So you were very wrong-headed not to come. Yet I dont blame you. (*L V*, 66-7)

The absence of her addressee stimulates Woolf's imagination, which is partly based on facts stored in her memory—"recollections". The power of imagination not only makes Woolf hear her addressee's voice and see her eyes: "When I cant remember how your mouth goes, I can always see your innocent blue eyes" (*L VI*, 333), but it also enables Woolf to enter the imaginative world away from the physical one, as she shows in another letter written on 31 July 1933:

> What are you doing about Scotland? The Hebrides? How often I dream of the Hebrides! How I long to be walking on some solitary distant shore, with a gull or two, sandhills and a rising moon or setting sun—I dont much mind which: there is a little ship in the bay, one white cottage in the distance, and there am I walking alone by myself—but only in dreams. Here I walk on the hot downs; but then I see some villa and my gorge rises. And Lord Ethel, there's all relations in law at Worthing, oh how they turn me sick—coming over in their boots and furs, and talking talking—readymade reach me down chatter—hearts of gold, eyes brimming with sympathy—you'd like them: so do I: in the abstract. But this is my recurring summer malady—Worthing. (*L V*, 209)

In those letters to her absent addressees, the author uses her imaginative power to bridge the space-time distance and to transform the epistolary discourse into a face-to-face dialogue. She uses the letter as a space that can juxtapose two different worlds—the imaginary and the real worlds, and that can empower her to enter her own imaginative world.

Roger Fry, in a letter to Woolf, states that such a conversational mode of epistolary writing, which he achieves in his letters to Josette Coatmellec, embodies for him what a good letter should be: "I'm not afraid […] to talk to you and if I could write just as I talk I wouldn't mind but talking means the other person there and I never can or hardly ever can make the other person present to me. I could with Josette and that's why I wrote her almost the only good letters I've ever written."[11] The editors of Woolf's letters indicate that the reason for her addressees' keeping Woolf's letters partly is that she writes brilliantly as she talked brilliantly.[12] Gerald Brenan, for instance, was particularly impressed by her talk.[13] And, as Jane Austen writes, the face-to-face conversional mode of epistolary writing belongs to the true art of letter writing: "I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter."[14]

By using the present tense, Woolf not only creates an intimacy and immediacy in her writing, but she can draw her readers into her writing. Conversely, as readers, reading Woolf's imaginative descriptions, we are not merely Woolf's public readers, who can

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[11] Roger Eliot Fry. *Letters of Roger Fry. Volume Two*. Ed. Denys Sutton. New York: Random House, 1972: p. 554.

[12] See Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. Editorial Note. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1888-1912 (Virginia Stephen)*. 1975. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 1st American Edition. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975: p. ix.

[13] See Gerald Brenan. "Virginia in Spain," *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995: p. 45-6: "her conversation, especially when she had been primed up a little, was like her prose. She talked as she wrote and very nearly as well."

[14] Jane Austen. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. 4th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: p. 71.

overhear the correspondents' communication, but we are also spectators or audiences, who are able to watch their interactions, as we would do in an opera; and most importantly, we are also Woolf's fellow travellers in her imaginative perambulation. Moreover, this mode of epistolary writing enables Woolf to find her voice and position as an author, and to transform writing into an imaginary face-to-face talk between the writer and the reader, who are "fellow travellers" or "fellow passengers".[15]

2.3. Meta-fiction/biography in Woolf's letters

The dialogical mode of epistolary writing not merely enables Woolf to compose a good letter but Woolf herself is fully aware that her imagination based on facts in daily life, is the basic, essential and necessary means to transform her private epistolary writing into public writing.

In the essay, "The Role of Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," Elke D'Hoker investigates the meta-fictional properties of Woolf's short stories and explores the role and function of imagination. She regards imagination as a key term in Woolf's aesthetics and indicates that short stories which foreground, question or dramatise the role of imagination in both art and life can be found throughout Woolf's career.[16] For D'Hoker, "Memoirs of a Novelist (1909)" and "The Mark on the Wall (1917)" reveal that curiosity about other human beings is one of the driving forces behind Woolf's fiction; while in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown (1923)," Woolf herself suggests that this curiosity is the driving force of her writing.[17] D'Hoker argues that, "An Unwritten Novel (1920)," "Moments of Beings: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points' (1928)" and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection (1929)" attempt to imaginatively perceive the inner life of other human beings, but this imaginative quest for the true personality of the character is

[15] Woolf's sense of audience will be further examined in chapter seven.
[16] Elke D'Hoker, "The Role of Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," p. 18.
[17] Elke D'Hoker, "The Role of Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," p. 19.

at the end of the story checked and reversed by real facts. The impossibility to perceive the inner life of other human beings reveals the limits of imagination and the failure of the imaginative faculty.[18]

By employing D'Hoker's method, this section aims to explore the meta-fictional/biographical properties of Woolf's letters and to discuss how Woolf confronts her own failure at revealing her addressees' inner life in her imaginative descriptions.

2.3.1. The shift from epistolary writing to fictional writing

Janet Case, the Cambridge-trained classicist living with her sister Emphie in Hampstead,[19] begins to give Greek lessons to Virginia Stephen at the beginning of 1902 and remains her student's lifelong friend until her death on 15 July 1937.[20] In the second volume of letters, Janet Case also appears as one of Woolf's mystic friends in her dream. One example of Woolf's imaginative scenes about her Greek teacher can be found in her letter from 4 May 1919:

> By the way, we've taken three cottages on the Cliff in Cornwall, between St Ives and the Gurnards, for £15 a year; which will admit of another cottage somewhere here. But my dear Janet you *must* come and stay with us. When Violet Dickinson got into her house, she had a clergyman to read a service; I prefer to have mine hallowed by Janet Case. She need merely lie on a sofa and look at the Atlantic, while her pupil puts a few intelligent questions to her—which reminds me that Vanessa was asking whether you'd teach her little boys next autumn. (*L II*, 354)

This passage is an invitation or proposal for Janet Case's visiting the Woolf's Cornwall cottage. The third sentence begins in the simple past and refers to Violet Dickinson's activity as Woolf recalls it; it then shifts to the present tense to evoke Woolf's

[18] Elke D'Hoker, "The Role of Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," p. 20.
[19] See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 143-4.
[20] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 58, note 1; *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 145, note 1.

imaginative scene of herself and her addressee. At the same time, in this imaginative scene, by using the third-person pronoun—"Janet Case"—instead of the second person pronoun—"you", Woolf shifts her letter reader, Janet Case, who should have been the target of her epistolary discourse into the role of an audience or of the reader of her letter writing. Then, the first half of the fourth sentence also belongs to Woolf's imaginative scene, in which the first person pronoun of the epistolary narrative—"I"—is replaced by the third person pronoun—"her pupil". This replacement of the first person pronoun in the epistolary narrative by the third person pronoun implies that Woolf, as the subject of the epistolary discourse, becomes the author of letter writing.

In other words, in this imaginative scene, her addressee, Janet Case functions as the reader of Woolf's epistolary writing rather than the object of her epistolary discourse, and Woolf herself is no longer an epistolary narrator, but a writer of fiction. The shift of voice from the epistolary language—a first-second person discourse—to a third person narrative, though broken by Woolf's flight of mind at the end, reveals that Woolf succeeds in turning her epistolary writing into fictional writing, her private writing into public writing.

In Woolf's imaginative scenes, Janet Case is often presented as a scholar and a tutor: for instance, in another letter written on 23 July 1919, Woolf imagines: "I suppose you've now made a good many friends in the neighbourhood. Small children come and see you in the evening. There is an old lady who brings her sewing. In the intervals I daresay you read Meredith or somebody. Still this is rather a fancy scene on my part, for I don't know anything about the Old Cot" (*L II*, 379). In her mind, she conceives of her addressee as a character caught in her daily domestic life. Another example can be found in a letter from 4 November 1920: "your moon, I suppose, is struck among the apple trees and Emphie, having grown very weatherwise, foretells a fine day. Is that what happens? Janet meanwhile reads Greek with one hand, while she slices potatoes with the other" (*L II*, 446). Moreover, Woolf considers her imagination of her addressee, her "glimpse" (*L II*,

531) of her addressee in her mind, as "a peep show" (*L II*, 531).

In these imaginative scenes of Janet Case, Woolf transcends the boundaries of traditional letter writing and transforms the genre into fictional writing. By conjuring up her Greek teacher in her mind, Woolf also attempts to preserve her addressee in her letters as is brought home to her when Violet Dickinson sent her two volumes of her own old letters: "and there your name so often occurred, and I could see you coming up to my room at the top of the house and saying You've not done any work!" (*L VI*, 94)

2.3.2. Imaginative descriptions as the material of fiction

In the second volume of letters, we can see that, by depicting imaginative scenes involving her addressees, Woolf attempts to train herself as a fictional writer; concomitantly, it appears that she also treats her letters as a reservoir of material for her future published work, drawing on surroundings, her ordinary life and the people she knows. As mentioned in the first chapter, the critics, who analyse Woolf's painterly writing, investigate the influence of Roger Fry's formalist theory on Woolf's composition. Reading Woolf's letters to Roger Fry or about him will enable us to discuss the relationship between Woolf's letter writing and her fictional writing.

In her letters, Woolf expresses her appreciation of Roger Fry: for instance, in one of her letters written on 4 December 1928: "I venerate and admire you to the point of worship: Lord! you dont know what a lot I owe you!" (*L III*, 562) Woolf suggests that Roger Fry's artistic theory stimulates her writing, and she confirms this in another letter written on 24 April 1918: "I wish I had the chance of being thoroughly enkindled by you rather oftener. I suppose you dont know your own powers in that line, which I hesitate to call divine, but still the amount of spirit that radiates from you may […] come straight from a holy source" (*L II*, 234-5).

Like Janet Case, Roger Fry also reappears in Woolf's imaginative descriptions, for instance, in a letter written on 15 April 1918 to Nicholas Bagenal:

> Roger very nearly lost his senses. I've never seen such a sight of intoxication He was like a bee on a sunflower. Imagine snow falling outside, a wind like there is in the Tube, an atmosphere of yellow grains of dust, and us all gloating upon these apples. They really are very superb. The longer one looks the larger and heavier and greener and redder they become. The artists amused me very much, discussing whether he'd used viridian or emerald green, and Roger knowing the day, practically the hour, they were done by some brush mark in the background. (*L II*, 230)

Woolf depicts Roger Fry's character as representative of the "artists" who lose their consciousness or "senses" of the outer physical world while indulging in artistic contemplation. This ecstatic state of being in Roger Fry as a painter and an art critic is amusing and admired by others, including Woolf herself. This is made obvious in another letter written on 16 September 1925 to Roger Fry:

> When you withdraw into these altitudes of yours, Cassis, I mean—heat and light and colour and real sea and real sky and real food instead of the wishywashy watery brash we get here—then you become exalted above gossip. You don't want human beings. It's one of your peculiarities. (Do you perceive that I'm writing a character of you?—I must put you into a book one of these days). That is why you painters are, as a rule, such exemplary characters; why calm and well being exhale from you. Certainly this is true of Bell and Grant: I never saw two people humming with heat and happiness like sunflowers on a hot day more than those two. But you have a dash of the dragon fly about you. (*L III*, 209)

The natural world, and its sensuousness are the necessary condition for the painters' art to unfold, unlike the writer's art, which relies more on society and human beings. Painters, such as Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, as well as Roger Fry, can thus create a pleasant and peaceful atmosphere. In a letter written on 5 April 1928 to Quentin Bell, Woolf conveys this characteristic in Roger Fry—his unconscious state of being—through an imaginative scene where she pictures him undoing the knots of his handkerchief:

> Roger is fast crumbling, like a lump of sugar in hot milk; that is to say, he remembers nothing and invents everything. Sometimes his pocket handkerchief has eleven knots in it by nightfall; and he and Helen sit on the edge of the bed till the small hours untying them and trying to remember which is which. But his decline is beautiful as the sunset, and it is certain that he will be alive when you and Julian are old, old men, prodding each other in the back with umbrellas. (*L III*, 480)

Roger Fry's imaginary act of untying the knots of his handkerchief symbolises both his struggle to find new techniques and theories, and his struggle for memory in his later years. This vignette of Roger Fry echoes the fictional scenes staging Eleanor Pargiter in *The Years* (1937): "'If Edward's there tonight, do remind me—I'll tie a knot in my handkerchief….' / She opened her bag, took out a silk handkerchief, and proceeded solemnly to tie it into a knot… 'to ask him about Runcorn's boy'" (*TY*, 241-2). Like that of Roger Fry, Eleanor's "knot" also symbolises a question.

The imaginative descriptions of her friends in her letters can thus become the material for her future public writing. This similarity not only reveals the affinity between Woolf's letter writing and her fictional writing but also discloses how much she values her ordinary life and her friends. Moreover, this comparison also shows that there is hardly any difference between her private and her public writings.

2.3.3. Meta-biographies in Woolf's letters

As has been seen in the introduction of this chapter, a biography, for Woolf, is half-way between facts and art: the biographer writes the life of people on the basis of sober facts and uses his/her imagination to compose it into a whole. In "The New Biography (1927)," Woolf states that "the biographer['s] art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" (*E IV*, 478). Since her imaginative descriptions enable Woolf to transform her epistolary writing into fictional writing, since both her imagination and real people

can be used as material for her future public work, it might be argued that Woolf began to compose biographies of her friends in her letters.

Like Roger Fry, Saxon Sydney-Turner, a British civil servant, is also a member of the Bloomsbury Group. In Woolf's imaginative descriptions of him in her letters, Saxon always appears as a prominent classicist in his reading, as it is the case in a letter Woolf wrote half mockingly on 28 March 1921 while travelling to St. Ives: "I will buy you a cottage and 4 acres of moor on the top of Treferthen Hill. You could probably keep a cow, and sell peat; your firing would be gorse, the sublimity of your thoughts reading Greek in the morning, and Latin in the evening would in time to come invest your lodging with radiance" (*L II*, 462-3). In Woolf's vision, Saxon is not only a learned and serene figure, but he is also her reading partner, with whom she can discuss books in her imagination: "It is true that I might read the Sense of the Past, or practically any one of the works of Shakespeare, Scott, Balzac or Swinburne. I should much prefer to talk about them and if I had a ring, I would rub it and you should gently well up in the yellow arm chair, with your usual expression of sapient composure!" (*L II*, 181)

Furthermore, Saxon's life amuses Woolf, as she indicates in one of her letters written on 1 September 1921 when he is travelling in Finland:

> I enjoyed hearing from you immensely—but I was mystified by your ceaseless progress through the fogs and shades and summer nights and winter darks, which seemed to continue endlessly and bring you nowhere. It was so characteristic. I could see you tapering away in a crepuscular haze towards the North Pole—an exalted figure, bound on some quest—but what? / Did you reach it? Was there nothing there? And then, of course, you turn up still in a fog (this you admit is true) and drink old Brandy at Hull. Oh what a pleasure you are to me! But this is beside the point. (*L II*, 480)

In imagining Saxon's travelling adventures, Woolf actually uses, half-mockingly again, Saxon's aimless "quest" in the physical world, which is, according to her, "so

characteristic" as a symbol of his hazy pursuit in books.

Again, in the third volume, in a letter written on 20 September 1925, Woolf indicates: "it is in my brain that you chiefly live" (*L III*, 212); while in another letter written on 21 August 1927, Woolf regards her imaginative descriptions of Saxon as a complete life:

> I am reading a new classic every night. But what is happening to you? and to Barbara [Bagenal] and to Barbara's child and to Mrs Stagg and to your uncle the ichthyologist? This is the group, you see, in which I compose you. Then there's your great grandfather's life. Do you agree that one never thinks of Saxon or Barbara singly, but always as the centre of a nest of other objects? This fact has never been observed by the novelists—but my word, what a set of dunderheads and duffers they are! Even Scott has passages of an incredible imbecility. Trollope has gone up in my estimation however. But then, as its all a question of mood, and of what one's just read, or whom one's just seen, whats the good of criticism? And, anyhow, vile as they are, the novelists outdo the critics. You probably have no notion what the criticism of fiction amounts to—you, who have passed your entire life on the highest peaks of Parnassus where only a few asphodels grow in the snow. Grow and Snow ought not to be there; but there they are. (*L III*, 411)

Woolf's imaginative scenes for Saxon as an entire world, where her addressee is the essential element, again emphasise that, for her, people are the central component in all novels; according to her, this has been neglected by novelists.

Moreover, in a letter written on 3 February 1926 to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf shows that a novel is an entire imaginary world where characters—"imaginary people" (*L III*, 238)—live as they do in the real world: "Not that they are people: what one imagines, in a novel, is a world" (*L III*, 239). Meanwhile, as discussed above, in "The Art of Biography (1939)," Woolf redefines biography as an artistic work of imagination based on sober facts. Therefore, in reading Woolf's imaginative descriptions for her addressee, Saxon, in her letters, it seems that Woolf has succeeded in composing biographies of her

addressees for her future readers: "I wish I'd kept a note book labeled 'Saxon'; a small one would have done, but it would have been very choice. But then one can't always be thinking of posterity" (*L II*, 362).

It thus appears that from the third volume of her letters onwards, or more specifically, from the 1920s, Woolf has attempted to compose biographies of her friends in her letter writing. She herself points at the meta-biographical properties of her letters, although in a humourous tone, while writing to Pernel Strachey on 8 March 1928:

> —by writing an entire and truthful life of you, as I should like to do. Did you know that has been my ambition always? Ever since I discovered about your dusty ears and pearl buttons. Dusty Ears it will be called […]—but there! You must go back to your labours, while I, thank God, can sit over my gas fire and imagine the first chapter of Dusty Ears: a Biography. (*L III*, 470)

Composing her addressees' respective lives from facts of their daily lives and combining them with her imagination, Woolf transforms her epistolary writing into biographical work.

2.3.4. The limits of imagination

While attempting to compose her addressees' lives in her letters of imagination that turn into short biographies in the third volume of letters, Woolf also frequently grapples with her failure to depict the inner life of her addressees and is confronted with the untrue nature of her imagination. As D'Hoker indicates in her essay: "the imaginative quest for the 'true' personality of the character is at the end of the story checked—and reverse—by the 'facts' of reality," and "its inability to penetrate the innermost self of another human being."[21]

For example, in a letter written on 10 August 1923 to Gerald Brenan:

[21] Elke D'Hoker, "The Role of Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," p. 20, 23.

> Moreover I am too sleepy with the heat (it is as hot to-day as it was in Alicante) to visualise you, your room, Maria [servant at Yegen], the brassero, the mountains, the little begging children, the pigeons, the mules, the figure of Don Giraldo, in corduroys, with a knotted tie, sitting by a plate of grapes, from which he picks a handful now and then, while he reads—Then he jumps up. Then he goes to the other room. Then he writes. Then he tears up. Then he runs out up the mountain alone making phrases? stories? deciding profound matters of art? or scarcely thinking at all?—God knows. I do not pretend to know much about that young man, whom, at this moment—the church has just struck 6—I see with extreme plainness. Yes, but what is he thinking? How does it feel to be inside him? I am tormented by my own ignorance of his mind. And there is something absurd, and perhaps even insincere, in keeping up this semblance of communication in purple lines upon great white sheets. (*L III*, 66)

Woolf's imaginative descriptions of Gerald as a young writer living in the village of Yegen in Spain is based on her visit to her addressee in early 1923. While she can visualise Gerald at the very moment she is writing to him, at 6 p.m., she faces difficulties when she comes to his inner life: his "thinking", his "feel[ing]", and "his mind" remain inaccessible, as the circling movement of her thinking process suggests. Her frustration makes her aware of the lack of truth of her vision and makes her re-examine the nature of the conversional mode of the epistolary writing as imaginative face-to-face dialogues.

The same frustration surfaces in other letters, for example, in her letters to Vanessa Bell: "I am haunted by the thought that I can never know what anyone is feeling" (*L I*, 404), "And I utterly distrust my own insight into character. It is infantile" (*L III*, 451), or "my mind is utterly untrustworthy. I judge these things by the way people blow their noses" (*L IV*, 243). Or in letters to Ethel Smyth: "But you see; I make up stories; thats my downfall; imagine situations, and forget that the person concerned is flesh and blood, like myself, with feelings. I am therefore very treacherous" (*L IV*, 164).

While describing her addressees in her letters of imagination, Woolf also points out how untrue her imaginary figures may be. For example, in a letter to Barbara Bagenal

from 23 December 1920: “My private vision of you is so wildly romantic that it can’t be true” (*L II*, 452). In a letter to Saxon, Woolf considers her imaginary figure of her addressee is feeble: “how easily the image may be shivered” (*L III*, 212). In one of her letters to Vita, Woolf comes to define her own imaginative scenes: “Do we then know nobody?—only our own version of them, which, as likely as not, are emanations from ourselves” (*L III*, 245). In another letter to the same addressee, Woolf considers that her inability to know other human beings’ inner life incapacitates her for good fictional writing: “I suspect that my knowledge of the real people has queered the pitch for me […] The truth is, I dont grasp the people. And that, I suppose, one must do, in a novel” (*L V*, 333).

Woolf’s letters of imagination thus reveal how Woolf trains herself as a writer of fiction and how she turns her private, personal epistolary writing into public, fictional or biographical writing; through our analysis, the close affinity between her epistolary and fictional writings becomes perceptible.

Conclusion

This chronological analysis of Woolf’s letters of imagination has highlighted their threefold function: first, their psychological function: imagination can be used as a form of psychotherapy against pain, death and depression; epistolary imaginative scenes provide a sort of spiritual refuge. Second, imagination is used by Woolf to bridge the required epistolary distance—the space-time distance—and to create intimacy and immediacy in her letters. By transforming the epistolary discourse as first-person or second-person narratives into imaginary dialogues, Woolf succeeds in finding her voice and her position as an author, thus turning her private writing into fictional writing.

Woolf's addressees are both the readers and the objects of her epistolary discourse; and Woolf herself is both the author and the subject of her epistolary discourse.

Finally, Woolf's letters of imagination record the process of her becoming a writer; both this process and the contents of her letters provide the material for her future public work; and most importantly, Woolf's vision of her addressees read as incipient biographies. If Woolf's letters of imagination are tokens of her skill as a writer, they also bear witness to her struggle to become a writer.

Chapter Three: Letters of thoughts:

Woolf's theory of impersonality

Introduction: Letters as a vehicle for artistic thoughts

1. Letters and essays

In her letters of imagination, through the representation of her addressees in an imaginative manner, Woolf trains herself as a writer, finds an authorial voice and positions herself as a novelist; she also turns the objects of her epistolary discourse into her first readers of her fictional narrative. As for her letters of thoughts, they can be regarded as the central form of her artistic expression.

Randi Saloman, in examining Woolf's essays and essayistic writings in *Virginia Woolf's Essayism*, argues that Woolf seeks and locates an essayistic voice, which is explorative, empowering, open to self-doubt and prone to risky exchanges with its audience, rather than didactic, oppressive, instructing or authoritative; such a voice invites readers to a direct and equal dialogue, and to the intellectual exercise of an open debate.[1] According to Saloman, the novelist maintains authority and distance from her readers, while the essay is the most personal and intimate genre where the essayist's goal is to communicate directly with the reader; and the most natural and appropriate response to an essay is another essay. In other words, in the artistic debate, readers are the receptive, creative force, and are the essayist's fellow travellers and accomplices, as Woolf indicates in "William Hazlitt (1932)": "[I]f such criticism is the reverse of final, if it is initiatory and inspiring rather than conclusive and complete, there is something to be said for the critic who starts the reader on a journey and fires him with a phrase to shoot off on adventures of his own" (*E V*, 502). Saloman also indicates that, for Woolf, the essay is used as a format to solve her artistic problems, a place for her deepest questioning about herself as a writer and her writing process; it is also a model and testing-ground for new experimental techniques as well as a collaborative space between herself and her readers. Therefore, Woolf's essays demonstrate her lifelong commitment

[1] See also on dialogism Katerina Koutsantoni. *Virginia Woolf's* Common Reader. UK: Ashgate, 2009: p. 61.

to formal and generic innovation and her developing understanding of literary modernism itself. Saloman insists that, with the essayistic techniques, such as fragmentation, stream-consciousness style and free-indirect discourse, the essayist literally reveals the development of an individual mind in real time, which is more important than the subject matter.[2]

Defending a slightly different point of view, Juliet Dusinberre suggests that it is in the easy, vital and informal style of letter writing that Woolf wants to write literary criticism. For Dusinberre, Woolf's letters not only convey a powerful sense of the reader, but they also provide her with a unique space for articulating her thoughts to a captive audience. In Woolf's eyes, the letter is a trial form, whose ephemeral nature guarantees its experimental character; while criticism needs to capture the territory of the letter, reproducing its irreverencies and informalities, its provisional insights and kinetic energy. That is, the personal letter is the forging-ground of critical ideas and creates the conditions of conversation. Moreover, according to Dusinberre, it is the spirit in which literary criticism takes place in letters between friends that Woolf wants to revive in her own critical writing; and it is the conversational mode of epistolary writing that Woolf wants to use as a paradigm for how criticism should be written and read.[3]

Saloman's view on Woolf's essayistic writing and Dusinberre's analysis of Woolf's letter writing both point at the close relationship between the two genres and styles of the essay and the letter—their dialogic nature, their engagement with readers as well as their function as vehicles for artistic thoughts. Or, to use Woolf's own words in "Dorothy Osborne's 'Letters' (1932)": "The art of letter-writing is often the art of essay-writing in disguise" (*E V*, 384). Furthermore, our first two chapters have already shown Woolf's literary discernment, her eagerness to learn about her friends' reactions, as well as the functions of Woolf's letters as a central form of artistic expression and as

[2] Randi Saloman. *Virginia Woolf's Essayism*. Edinburg University of Press, 2012: see especially p. 2-3, 8, 15-19, 55-9, 65.
[3] Juliet Dusinberre, "Letters as Resistance: Dorothy Osborne, Madame de Sévigné and Virginia Woolf," p. 94-125.

the sites where her principles deriving from various types of writing, the epistolary, the fictional and the critical, can coalesce.

2. Essay-letter

Analysing *Three Guineas* (1938) as a written response to a letter requesting the author's opinion as to how war may be prevented and as an answer to three separate appeals for the donation of a guinea, Saloman considers that the book adopts the tone of a personal reply that has escalated to an impassioned open letter. In Saloman's view, by using the epistolary form to convey her critical thoughts, Woolf tries to bring the two forms to bear upon one another in ways that suggest a further avenue of expansion of the essay. Woolf's choice of the epistolary form reveals that the essayistic form is both intimate and entirely public.[4] Anne L. Bower adopts a different stance and thinks that Woolf's choice of publishing her critical thinking, *Three Guineas*, in an epistolary form, discloses her desire to combine the personal and the public. For Bower, in this book, in positioning herself as a letter writer and frequently picturing the actual person to whom she is writing, Woolf treats her essay readers not as an abstract force, but as situated, flesh-and-blood human beings.[5]

Saloman and Bower's discussions of the close formal, stylistic affinity between Woolf's essays and letters—a letter can be published as an essay or a critical work can be written in the epistolary style, suggest Woolf's generic transgressions. Moreover, this similarity between the public critical writing and the private epistolary writing immediately reminds readers of Woolf's letter-essay, "A Letter to a Young Poet (1932),"[6] and her essay-letter, written on Christmas Day 1922 to Gerald Brenan. Though the imaginative addressee, John, is a young poet in the essay while Gerald Brenan is a young

[4] Randi Saloman, *Virginia Woolf's Essayism*, p. 94, 96-7.
[5] Anne L. Bower. "Dear—: In Search of New (Old) Forms of Critical Address," *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*. Ed. Amanda Gilroy and W. M. Verhoeven. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000: p. 157-8.
[6] "A Letter to A Young Poet (1932)." *The Hogarth Letters*. 1933. Ed. Leonard and Virginia Woolf, John Lehmann. Intro. Hermione Lee. London: Chatto & Windus, 1985: p. 211-36.

novelist in her letter, the dominant theme in both Woolf's public and private writings is her view of the impersonal art of writing.

As Katerina Koutsantoni declares, impersonality is a strategy with which Woolf experiments from the beginning of her career, investigating its benefits and its drawbacks in the art of creation.[7] Focusing on Woolf's concept of writing in her essay, "A Letter to a Young Poet," her letter to Gerald Brenan written on Christmas day 1922 (*L II*, 597-600), as well as her other letters, in particular those to Ethel Smyth, we will explore Woolf's theory of impersonality in her letters of thoughts.

3.1. Writing as a "glass" (*L IV,* 155) for the self

In a letter written on 17 August 1923 to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Woolf states that old letters possess "this extraordinary power of bringing back a whole group—a whole attitude—more […] than mere facts" (*L III*, 68). Reading Flaubert's correspondence with George Sand, Woolf finds something different, "an immense lucid kind of mind, something like a natural force" (*L I*, 229); while, reading Roger Fry's letters to Helen Anrep, in which "he was extremely free and easy and self analytic" (*L V*, 448), is the way to "get more and more involved in his mind and character" (*L V*, 447). Moreover, Woolf "scrutin[ises]" (*L IV*, 312) her addressee's "character" (*L IV*, 312) and "penetrat[es] […] the dark damp deeps of [her] soul" (*L IV*, 372) while reading Ethel Smyth's letters; in her letters to the same addressee, Woolf advises her to quote Henry Brewster's own letters in her memoir, "Henry B. Brewster: A Memoir (1931),"[8] "because however delicate and discriminating the testimony of friends nothing describes character like a letter" (*L IV*, 245). In Woolf's eyes, Brewster's letter reveals "a mind

[7] Katerina Koutsantoni. "The Impersonal Strategy: Re-visiting Virginia Woolf's Position in *The Common Reader* Essays." *Women: A Cultural Review*. Volume 20, Issue 2. Taylor & Francis Group: Routledge, 2009: p. 157.

[8] Ethel Smyth. "Henry B. Brewster: A Memoir," *The Prison: A Dialogue*. Henry B. Brewster. Ed. Ethel Smyth. London: William Heinemann, 1931: p. 11-44.

with a very fine close texture […] a fine pattern, full sprigs and thorns, like the background in an Italian picture" (*L IV*, 254), "gives a general map of his psychology which […] explains much otherwise evasive" (*L IV*, 255), and his "personalities" (*L IV*, 255), as well as, "so much fineness; and continuity of thought and individuality" (*L IV*, 256). Therefore, reading Brewster's letters is to "unravel" (*L V*, 74) "the innumerable psychological filaments" (*L V*, 74) and "knit up in a remarkable picture" (*L V*, 74).

For Woolf, if the others' letters expose their author's personality, her own letters are like a mirror of her "own character" (*L IV,* 155), as she shows in a letter written on 6 April 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "I rush to the glass (this sheet is a glass) as if I'd been told my dress was upside down, or my nose bleeding" (*L IV,* 155). At the same time, the act of reading the others' letters is also a way for Woolf to discover her own mind, as she writes in another letter written on 22 June 1930 to the same addressee: "I send back Elizabeth [Williamson] very remarkable letter. What a terse and muscular mind she has! […] I shall try to see her, alone if I can; and try to rake her mind with my erratic harrow; […] I see her mind; and I see my mind" (*L IV*, 179).

Furthermore, according to Woolf, it is not merely epistolary writing that reveals the writer's personality; all kinds of prose writing do, as she remarks while reading R. C. Trevelyan's poetic letters addressed to his friends in *Rimeless Numbers* (1932): "Also, in the Letters especially, I like to trace the character of the writer, the peculiar humour and idiosyncrasy of his mind, a quality I find oftener in prose" (*L VI*, 348). For instance, in reading Princess Daisy of Plessis *From My Private Diary* (1931), Woolf "speculates upon her real character and life" (*L IV*, 337) and catches sight of "the British aristocracy['s] […] splendid bodies and wholesome minds, […] and her frankness [as] the highest human quality, […] combined with a housemaids sensibility and the sentimentality of a Surbiton cook" (*L IV*, 337); while Lady Fred Cavendish's diaries disclose "the mind cluttered with curtains and ferns" (*L VI*, 267): "Why is the artistocratic mind invariably middle class when the body is divine?" (*L VI*, 267)

Similarly, Lady Gwendolen Cecil's memoirs, *Life of Robert, Marquess of Salisbury* (1921), show her father's "queer character" (*L II*, 502), while "theres the shell of a distinguished mind" (*L V*, 305) in Edith Wharton's memoirs, *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography* (1934). When asking Lady Ottoline Morrell to write her memoirs in a letter written in January 1926, Woolf states that she wants to write "a character" (*L VI*, 509) of her friend; while reading Vita Sackville-West's biographical writing, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922), she writes to Vita and says: "you have a rich dusky attic of a mind" (*L III*, 429).

Like autobiographical prose, fictional writing can mirror the writer's "brain power" (*L III*, 212), tell "a story of [his/her] life and character" (*L VI*, 518), expose his/her psychology: "in order to say anything of interest about these notes [of Dostoevsky's *Stavrogin's Confession* (1922)] one would have to do deeply into the question of novel writing and into the whole question of Dostoevsky's psychology as a writer" (*L V*, 216); as well as unveil his/her self: "I'm reading her [Elizabeth Bowen] novel […] Whats so interesting is when one uncovers an emotion that the person themselves, I should say herself, doesn't suspect. And its a sort of duty dont you think—revealing peoples true selves to themselves?" (*L V*, 111) Prose, better than poetry, can be the material carrier of the writer's soul: "poetry—which […] is a hobbled, shackled tongue tied vehicle now for the voice of the soul, which […] now speaks in prose" (*L III*, 359). Equally, in her readers' eyes, Woolf's own writing can convey her personality, as Gerald Brenan states:

> There are writers whose personality resembles their work, and there are others who, when one meets them, give no inkling of it. Virginia Woolf belonged strikingly to the first category. […] her conversation, especially when she had been primed up a little, was like her prose. She talked as she wrote and very nearly as well, and that is why I cannot read a page of *The Common Reader* today without her voice and intonation coming back to me forcibly. No writer that I know of has put his living presence into his books to the extent that she has done.[9]

[9] Gerald Brenan, "Virginia in Spain," p. 45-6.

Moreover, in Woolf's eye, this ability is not restricted to writing; other forms of art can reveal the artist's personality: such is the case of Gwen Raverat's painting, which, for Woolf, reveal her personality: "I wish I could have gone to see your pictures, […] I should have liked to see them, not from artistic reasons, but to make up my idea of your character" (*L III*, 483); so does Ethel Smyth's music: "'How like she is to her music' L. said: a great compliment: for he sees you vividly and warmly" (*L IV*, 209). In short, for Woolf, art plays the role of a looking-glass mirroring the writer's mind, personality, and psychology. This seems to contradict her statement that "an art […] should be impersonal" (*L VI*, 63). The second section of this chapter will tackle this paradox.

3.2. Identity and depersonalisation

3.2.1. The self and the process of depersonalisation

3.2.1.1. The writer's self

While discussing "poetry and its death" (*THL*, 215) with an imaginative addressee, the young poet John, in "A Letter to a Young Poet," Woolf tries to define the poet's self. Woolf first advocates an equal and democratic position for the poet in the history of poetry: not "as a leader or as a follower, as a modern or as a conservative" (*THL*, 217). Then, she advises John to consider himself as a fascinating human being: "Think of yourself rather as something […] far more interesting—a poet in whom live all the poets of the past, from whom all poets in time to come will spring. You have a touch of Chaucer in you, and something of Shakespeare; Dryden, Pope, Tennyson—to mention only the respectable among your ancestors—" (*THL*, 217-8). The poet's literary identity emerges as partaking of all the traditional poetic values that he has inherited from his peers.

Woolf's view of the poet's literary identity as a conglomeration of the traditional

qualities of poetry echoes T. S. Eliot's in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)." Focusing on the relationship between the writer's personality and literary history in the first part of his essay, Eliot declares that the artist should not only develop his awareness of the whole literary past throughout his literary life, since "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling [for] the whole of the literature of Europe;" but should also realise that "the mind of Europe […] much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes [but] abandons nothing *en route*."[10] The reason for Eliot's insisting on the value of tradition in the artistic composition is that, according to the "principle of aesthetic […] criticism,"[11] to submit to tradition is the only way for the artist to acquire his own literary position in the world: "His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You can not value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."[12] Finally, Eliot declares that artistic development is a form of "refinement" rather than "improvement", since "art never improves, [and] the material of art is never quite the same."[13]

In short, both Woolf and Eliot consider the writer's literary identity as part of literary tradition—a unit continuing the different qualities of the great writers in history so that the writer can be depicted as "an immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character" (*THL*, 218).

3.2.1.2. From depersonalisation to impersonation

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot also argues that artistic development is a process of "depersonalization": "a continual surrender of himself […] a

[10] T. S. Eliot. "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. New York: Alfred A. Knope, 1921: p. 44, 46.
[11] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 44; See also Katerina Koutsantoni, "The Impersonal Strategy: Re-visiting Virginia Woolf's Position in *The Common Reader* Essays," p. 166.
[12] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 44.
[13] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 46.

continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."[14] Eliot further makes a distinction between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates": the former functions as a reservoir of material in daily life—"a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images"; while the latter engages in artistic creation, "digest[s] and transmute[s]" different "particles", and then combines them into a kind of "ordinary", but "not […] actual", emotions in poetry—art, rather than the poet's "particular emotions [which] may be simple, crude, or flat."[15] Within artistic creation, the poet appears as "a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways."[16]

This leads Eliot to criticise Wordsworth's poetic theory as expounded in his "Preface (1800)" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798): "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility."[17] Eliot claims that art results from "concentration", which he proceeds to define: "It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation."[18] "[T]he intensity of the artistic process" is beyond the artist's awareness.[19] Since "the historical sense […] makes a writer traditional" and art results from the artist's unconscious skill at combining his material, Eliot concludes: "Poetry […] is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."[20]

Woolf, like Eliot, also suggests that "unconsciousness" (*L V*, 239) or "concentration" (*L VI*, 367) is a condition of depersonalisation in the artistic process; but the implications are different. For Eliot, "concentration" refers to the unconscious state

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[14] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 47.
[15] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 48-9, 52.
[16] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 48, 50.
[17] William Wordsworth. Preface. *Lyrical Ballads, with other Poems*. 1798. Volume I. 2nd edition. London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees, Paternoster-Row, 1800: p. xxxiii.
[18] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 52.
[19] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 49.
[20] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 44, 52-3.

the artist is in when he combines different kinds of material into poetic emotion; whereas, in Woolf's case, concentration refers to the way the writer's self is unconsciously controlled by the ghosts of the writers of the past: "You have a touch of Chaucer in you, and something of Shakespeare; Dryden, Pope, Tennyson […] stir in your blood and sometimes move your pen a little to the right or to the left" (*THL*, 218). The poet is here shown to have internalised various techniques of the great poets and incorporated them into his own experience so that he can unconsciously retrieve them at the appropriate moment when he tries to convey his vision.

Though they both insist on the intensity of the artistic process and its being beyond the writer's control, Woolf departs from Eliot's theory of depersonalisation and defines depersonalisation as unconscious impersonation: using other great writers' techniques is like "dress[ing] up as Guy Fawkers" (*THL*, 218), putting on the other's garments in order to create style or beauty, as an actor does. Incidentally, this is exactly what Bakhtin says about language: speaking a language, using words is like wearing second-hand garments.[21] Woolf's theatrical metaphor in "The Leaning Tower (1940)" actually summarises her vision of tradition and depersonalisation as impersonation:

> In one word, they are aristocrats; the unconscious inheritors of a great tradition. Put a page of their writing under the magnifying-glass and you will see, far away in the distance, the Greeks, the Romans; coming nearer, the Elizabethans; coming nearer still, Dryden, Swift, Voltaire, Jane Austen, Dickens, Henry James. Each, however much he differs individually from the others, is a man of education; a man who has learnt his art. (*E VI*, 266-7)

Moreover, whereas Eliot considers that the artist's mind is a reservoir of material which is "digest[ed] and transmute[d]" merely during the artistic process; Woolf

[21] See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," p. 293: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own semantic and expressive intention," and p. 345: "In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's."

considers that the writer should first "absorb every experience that comes [his] way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that [his] poem is a whole, not a fragment" (*THL*, 230), then transform them so that they become part of his private writing property, and finally deposit them in his own mind. For Woolf, it is when the materials have "settle[d] down" that one can write: "only write when the sediment is firm and the water clear" (*L VI*, 381); then they can become visions—"the sights that one sees afterwards" (*L VI*, 66). This distance and lapse of time is necessary, otherwise "one cannot write, not for lack of skill, but because the object is too near, too vast. I think perhaps it must recede before one can take a pen to it" (*L II*, 599). Here, Woolf meets Wordsworth and his theory of poetry, as she does in her essay, "The Leaning Tower": "Do we strain Wordsworth's famous saying about emotion recollected in tranquillity when we infer that by tranquility he meant that the writer needs to become unconscious before he can create?" (*E VI*, 263-4)

3.2.2. The self, humanity and anonymity

3.2.2.1. The self and humanity

In the letter to Gerald Brenan, in the essay, "A Letter to a Young Poet," as well as in her letters to Ethel Smyth, one central subject keeps recurring: the relationship between the writer's "self […] and the world outside" (*THL*, 229).

First, in her letter to Gerald Brenan, Woolf states that it is impossible for the writer to "renounce" (*L II*, 597) human relationship; rather, he should: "take your chance, and adventure with your human faculties—friendships, conversations, relations, the mere daily intercourse" (*L II*, 599); for, as discussed in the second chapter, people are central element in all kinds of writing: "I don't see how to write a book without people in it" (*L II*, 598). More importantly, Woolf points out that the writer's personality is actually part of the human race: "Every ten years brings, I suppose, one of those private orientations which match the vast one which is, to my mind, general now in the race" (*L II*, 598).

Then, in "A Letter to a Young Poet," Woolf points out that the reason for John

being "in a fix" (*THL*, 218) is that he concentrates on his particular self and world in his poetry: "It is self that sits alone in the room at night with the blinds drawn. […] The poet is trying honestly and exactly to describe a world that has perhaps no existence except for one particular person at one particular moment" (*THL*, 226). She advises John to grant more interest and importance to other people, "look out of the window and write about other people" (*THL*, 228), and to regard himself as one element of the whole outside world: "Then let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows—whatever come along the street—until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole" (*THL*, 230).

Finally, in her letters to Ethel Smyth, whose autobiographical manuscript, *Female Pipings in Eden* (1933), she has been reading, Woolf insists that Ethel Smyth's writing should "be about other people, not E[thel]. S[myth]" (*L V*, 194), should "escape the individual", instead of foregrounding "*My* opera […] *My* mass" (*L V*, 194), "yourself" (*L V*, 195), "'I'" (*L V*, 195) or "personalities" (*L V*, 195). One reason for Woolf's emphasis on eliminating a particular self is "that there are a thousand others" (*L V*, 195).

The writer's self is a human being and as such, belongs to human nature and is part of the whole outside world. Therefore, in "A Letter to a Young Poet," Woolf claims that it is the writer's responsibility to both find this philosophical and dialectic relationship between the self and the outside world and to present it in his work: "That perhaps is your task—to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity" (*THL*, 230). Presenting the self as part of the human race is what Woolf does in her novels: the self is seen as part of a collective whole, what Jane Marcus analyses as Woolf's collective idea of character. Marcus also argues that, for Woolf, it is through the expression of collective consciousness that the poet achieves his authority.[22] This is confirmed by Woolf's letters.

[22] Jane Marcus. "Thinking Back through Our Mothers," *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jane Marcus. London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1981: p. 9-10.

3.2.2.2. The method of anonymity

In "A Letter to a Young Poet," Woolf insists that it is primarily from people rather than from his reading that the writer, including Shakespeare, learns the art of writing:

> The art of writing, that is […] "beauty," the art of having at one's beck and call every word in the language, of knowing their weights, colours, sounds, associations, and thus making them, as is so necessary in English, suggest more than they can state, can be learnt of course to some extent by reading […]; but 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? To take the obvious example. Can you doubt that the reason why Shakespeare knew every sound and syllable in the language and could do precisely what he liked with grammar and syntax, was that Hamlet, Falstaff and Cleopatra rushed him into this knowledge; that the lords, officers, dependants, murderers and common soldiers of the plays insisted that he should say exactly what they felt in the words expressing their feelings? It was they who taught him to write, not the begetter of the Sonnets. (*THL*, 233)

Woolf assumes that Shakespeare keenly and carefully observed people in real life and used them as models for his characters; then as time went by, he would reject their particular features and absorb their common representative characteristics as being typical of certain social groups or classes; finally, he would transform these characteristics into his own "knowledge". These characteristics include the common features of his characters' language, their ordinary way of expressing themselves or their familiar gestures and manners. Consequently, Shakespeare, with his imaginative power, would unconsciously and automatically impersonate the characters in his work while being unaware of his own identity, in order to convey what is common to human beings: "what we have in common than in what he has apart" (*THL*, 226).

This method of writing is detailed in a letter written on 31 July 1932 to John Lehmann where Woolf explains the failure of the young poet in "A Letter to a Young Poet":

> I do feel that the young poet is rather crudely jerked between realism and beauty, to put it roughly. I think he is all to be praised for attempting to swallow Mrs Cape; but he ought to assimilate her. What it seems to me is that he doesnt sufficiently believe in her: doesnt dig himself in deep enough; wakes up in the middle; his imagination goes off the boil; he doesnt reach the unconscious automated state—hence the spasmodic, jerky, self conscious effect of his realistic language. (*L V*, 83)

Woolf's method of eliminating her identity through unconscious self-imagining as fictional characters, or impersonation in writing can also be found in a letter to Gerald Brenan. Woolf indicates that it is by trying to be other people in writing that she tries to create her characters: "Perhaps you mean that […] one ought to be lyrical, descriptive: but not set people in motion, and attempt to enter them, and give them impact and volume? Ah, but I'm doomed!" (*L II*, 598)

In her letters to Ethel Smyth, Woolf advises her addressee to use both concentration and anonymity in order to eliminate her personality in writing: "But then, cut out Ethel, and the broth would miss its savoury. So I should advise concentration rather than elimination. I suspect that the amateur author feels the drag of the public more than the old hack: hence this skittishness: hence also this charm" (*L VI*, 367). Rather than foregrounding unconsciousness as she does with professional writers, such as John the poet and Gerald Brenan the novelist, she advocates concentration, a well-known device for musicians such as Ethel Smyth: that will help her loose awareness of her own identity: "Not to be aware of oneself" (*L V*, 239). Woolf also advises Ethel Smyth to use anonymity in order to eliminate her personality from her autobiographical writing: "I preach anonymity to you" (*L V*, 200).

Apart from the reasons stated above, there are many others for Woolf's "dislike of the personal in argument" (*L V*, 192), "details of personal lot" (*L V*, 191), or "personal snippets" (*L V*, 193). Here is a sample: "Leave your own case out of it; theirs will be far far stronger" (*L V*, 195), "I think the personal details immensely diminish the power of

the rest" (*L V*, 191), or "I envy you the abandon with which you can toss all your private—no, I mean personal—trinkets at the readers feet. But it a little blocks the road to the final grasp on the theme. The hat obscures Englands effort[23]" (*L VI*, 367). For Woolf, the writing of personality will not only weaken writing, but it might also create an impression of self-pity on the reader: "Oh a little mutual admiration society! a nest of friends, people will say" (*L V*, 192), "Oh the womans got a grievance about herself; Shes unable to think of any one else" (*L V*, 194), or "how vain, how personal, so they will, rubbing their hands with glee, women always are; I can hear them as I write" (*L V*, 195). On the contrary, Woolf prefers "the letter 'I' comparatively muted": "because I'm sure its much more persuasive and far carrying this way than the other" (*L V*, 249).

Woolf defines in her letters and her letter-essay her theory of impersonality while giving advice to her addressees who are either writers or musicians. Her method of eliminating one's self as a particular human being by imagining oneself as another, is similar to the actor's way of playing the part of characters who might be from any social class or nation, either man or woman, while hiding his own identity. The purpose of such a performance or the use of a persona is to universalise the writer's personality in order to convey characteristics common to human nature. This helps her position the writer's self as a particular human being belonging to a whole human community. It connects with her aim, which is to achieve anonymity in writing in order to convey the common, ordinary characteristics of human nature rather than a specific personality. In her last essay, "Anon," Woolf will claim that being anonymous means to be part of humanity, and conversely, that the anonymous world is the root or source of human nature: "That is the world beneath our consciousness; the anonymous world to which we can still return" (*E VI*, 584).

Furthermore, as she indicates in the same essay, "Anon," the reasons for being

[23] Ethel Smyth's article, *England's Effort* (1939), see *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1933-1941*, p. 366, note 3.

anonymous are not only to let the audience or reader share emotion: "Every body shared in the emotion in Anon's song, and supplied the story" (*E VI*, 581), but also to enable readers to participate in the writer's emotion, as the Greek dramatists do: "[Anon] was a simple singer, lifting a song or a story from other people's lips, and letting the audience join in the chorus" (*E VI*, 582). In "Anon," the ideal impersonal, anonymous writer becomes a representative of human nature rather than a physical human being: "[Anon] is the common voice singing out of doors. He has no house" (*E VI*, 582).

As such, the writer has a duty: he must assemble the scattered pieces into a whole, as Woolf explains in "A Letter to a Young Poet": "That perhaps is your task […] to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to re-think human life into poetry and so give us tragedy again and comedy by means of characters" (*THL*, 230). And wholeness is equated with humanness in "The Leaning Tower (1940)": "to be whole; to be human" (*E VI*, 273). On the whole, impersonality, anonymity and humanity are closely bound together for Woolf, as she states in "Anon": "Anonymity was a great possession. It gave the early writing an impersonality, a generality" (*E VI*, 597).

Conclusion

Focusing on the letter to Gerald Brenan, "A Letter to a Young Poet," and the letters to Ethel Smyth, this section has investigated two aspects of Woolf's theory of impersonal art—"unconsciousness" and anonymity: "Psychologically speaking, as a Russian friend of mine says, I believe unconsciousness, and complete anonymity to be the only conditions—[…] Not to be aware of oneself" (*L V*, 239). In other words, from a psychological point of view, Woolf suggests what the unconscious state of writing is like: in that state, the writer loses awareness of his own identity, as a writer or a human being, to become anonymous; he also automatically uses great writers' techniques, as if he were putting on their garments, and enters his characters' minds and bodies, as if he were

wearing their masks, so as to convey the common elements of human nature: "I dont think you can get your words to come till youre almost unconscious; and unconsciousness only comes when you've been beaten and broken and gone through every sort of grinding mill" (*L V*, 408).

The author's self hence becomes changeable, like Bernard's in *The Waves* (1931): "The tree alone resisted our eternal flux. For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly" (*TW*, 150). It is a self that has lost its physical substance and become a mere conglomeration of ideas, as Woolf states in *A Sketch of the Past* (1976): "that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself" (*MOB*, 72).

Universalising the writer's personality is the outcome of Woolf's theory of anonymity. Meanwhile, from a literary point of view, Woolf's anonymity refers to the elimination of the subject, "I", which is "so potent—such a drug, such a deep violet stain—that one in a page is enough to colour a chapter" (*L V*, 193), and "as large, and ugly as could be" (*L V*, 195). The method of anonymity enables the writer to transfer his personal experience onto objective facts, for facts are "very convincing, interesting, forcible" (*L V*, 191) and "all the impersonal objective part […] could […] be better, more musically, more persuasively, put. […] they are valuable in the extreme" (*L V*, 191).

According to Woolf, it is through the combined methods of unconsciousness and anonymity that the writer can transcend his own identity, smash his own identity into pieces and universalise the scattered elements of his personality through characters; he can reshape them through various techniques borrowed from great writers into a new whole identity, so as to convey the common ordinary characteristics of human nature:

such is Woolf's impersonal art in writing.

For some critics, Woolf's theory of "unconsciousness" and her "philosophy of anonymity" (*D IV*, 186) enable her to eliminate the boundary between genders or sexes: for example, George Ella Lyon suggests that Woolf wishes to be unaware of her sex when writing fiction because the sense of oppression and anger which comes with that awareness disrupts the unconscious state of the novelist;[24] whereas, Tuzyline Jita Allan stresses the female, feminine or feminist viewpoint in Woolf's theory of impersonality.[25] Nevertheless, Koutsantoni argues that feminist critics overlook Woolf's theory of impersonality and her efforts to erase gender boundaries; she indicates that Woolf's aim in *The Common Reader* essays is to suggest a sexless universe whereby men and women are equal and unhampered by gender difference.[26] Woolf's essays and *Orlando* (1928) seem to support Koutsantoni's argument.

For instance, in "Indiscretions (1924)," Woolf indicates that the self that the writer presents in writing is genderless or sexless:

> But there is a class which keeps itself aloof from any such contamination. […] Feminists or anti-feminists, passionate or cold—whatever the romances or adventures of their private lives not a whiff of that mist attaches itself to their writing. It is pure, uncontaminated, sexless as the angels are said to be sexless. But on no account is this to be confused with another group which has the same peculiarity. To which sex do the works of Emerson, Matthew Arnold, Harriet Martineau, Ruskin and Maria Edgeworth belong? It is uncertain. It is, moreover, quite immaterial. They are not men when they write, nor are they women. They appeal to the large tract of the soul which is sexless; they excite no passions; they exalt, improve, instruct, and man or woman can profit equally by their pages,

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[24] George Ella Lyon. "Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Body," *Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Chelsea House Publishers, 2005: p. 107; see also Katerina Koutsantoni, "The Impersonal Strategy: Re-visiting Virginia Woolf's Position in *The Common Reader* Essays," p. 162.

[25] Tuzyline Jita Allan. "A Voice of One's Own: Implications of Impersonality in the Essays of Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker," *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. Ed. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman. Indiana University Press, 1993: p. 133; see also Katerina Koutsantoni, "The Impersonal Strategy: Re-visiting Virginia Woolf's Position in *The Common Reader* Essays," p. 168.

[26] Katerina Koutsantoni, "The Impersonal Strategy: Re-visiting Virginia Woolf's Position in *The Common Reader* Essays," p. 168-9.

> without indulging in the folly of affection or the fury of partisanship. (*E III*, 462)

Equally, in "Anon," Woolf indicates: "Anon is sometimes man; sometimes woman. […] He had no name; he had no place" (*E VI*, 582). For Woolf, the great artists are "hermaphrodite" (*L III*, 381, 463), "androgynous" (*L III*, 381), like Duncan Grant and the poet William Cowper, or they have "[t]he double soul" (*L IV*, 106), as she also writes in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "Shakespeare was androgynous; and so were Keats and Sterne and Cowper and Lamb and Coleridge. Shelley perhaps was sexless. Milton and Ben Jonson had a dash too much of the male in them. So had Wordsworth and Tolstoi. In our time Proust was wholly androgynous, if not perhaps a little too much of a woman" (*AROO*, 98-9). By creating the sexless character of Orlando, Woolf also indicates that human nature—the "immaterial", is beyond gender boundaries and timeless.

For Woolf, the theory of impersonality is what Ethel Smyth implements in her speech: "I interpret to mean that you liquidated your whole personality in speaking and threw in something never yet written by being yourself there in the flesh" (*L IV*, 280). Equally, it is through unconsciously intertwining his/her fragmentary personal ideas with different techniques borrowed from different great writers that the writer presents his/her personality when writing under the guise of characters; this is what happens with Dante and Milton, who convey their religion in their work: "Dante's religion, […] or Miltons, […] I think all convictions, […] work it into the fibre, and one cant exclude it, isolate it, or criticise it. It becomes part and parcel of the whole" (*L VI*, 67).

Similarly, with this method of depersonalisation, Shakespeare creates "the queer impression of sunny impersonality" (*D IV*, 219), as Woolf writes in her diary: "Yes, everything seemed to say, this was Shakespeare's, had he sat & walked; but you wont find me not exactly in the flesh. He is serenely absent-present; both at once; radiating round one; yes; in the flowers, in the old hall, in the garden; but never to be pinned down" (*D IV*, 219). Here, the adjective, "sunny," plainly, vividly and effectively conveys the

way in which Shakespeare decentralises his personality, its atoms permeating into his work like sunshine, haunting his writing like an uncatchable ghost. In "Personalities," Woolf considers that this method in a great work, where readers can feel the personality of its author everywhere in the novel without being able to locate it in a particular passage or sentence, is the great artists' way to create a universal art: "These great artists who manage to infuse the whole of themselves into their works, yet contrive to universalise their identity so that, though we feel Shakespeare everywhere about, we cannot catch him at the moment in any particular spot" (*E VI*, 439).[27]

Woolf's viewpoint on the dialectic relationship between the writer's personality and his/her impersonal art is partly reminiscent of James Joyce's. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), through his hero's mouth, Joyce claims:

> The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.[28]

Finally, it is the particular self and the particular life that Woolf objects to in both John's poetry and Ethel Smyth's autobiographical writing. On the contrary, what Woolf perceives and admires in a great work, as discussed in the first section, are the common, ordinary characteristics of human nature: either attitude, mind, soul, psychology, character or self. These common elements also contain the writer's self and represent his new identity. Since reading is "a great test of taste" (*L V*, 14), the qualities that the writer absorbs in a great work can reflect his own character and soul; the choice of particular

[27] See also Christine Reynier. *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story*. Palgrave Macmillan: 2009, p. 24.
[28] James Joyce. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: B. W. Huebasch, 1916: p. 252.

elements in human nature can refract his own psychology and personality just as the way he organises his work of art does. As Ruth Perry argues: "The fiction is pervaded with the certainty that one cannot dissemble on paper, that once trapped into the act of writing, there is nowhere to hide—no way to simply smile and be impersonal and neutral. Words always express something of the self, give something away, share something with the reader."[29] Similarly, Bakhtin insists: "The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning, that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention," or "the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language."[30]

3.3. The "platform" (*L V*, 167) of writing

After reading Ethel Smyth's article, an "appreciation" of Clothilde Fielding,[31] in a letter written on 7 March 1937 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf indicates that the association between the writer's personality and his impersonal art also involves his manner of writing:

> I liked your thing about Clothild—oh how's she spelt?—in the Times. You have a gift of words. I'm much interested by your theory that I like you best in absence: also that I dislike your presence because it drags me to the surface. No—there are 2 ways of doing it: the reviewers way I hate; yours I feel on the contrary bracing and invigorating. But then to explain the difference I should have to write several rather involved pages of psychological analysis. I think Proust explains it, […] Something I mean about the soul, how its elements are united differently by different stimulants; shaken together like those scraps of colour in a funnel [kaleidoscope] that we played with as children. (*L VI*, 112)

[29] Ruth Perry. *Women, Letters, and the Novel*. New York, N. Y.: AMS Press, Inc., 1980: p. 128.
[30] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," p. 285, 294.
[31] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936-1941*, p. 112, note 1.

For Woolf, the dialectic relationship between the writer's "absence" and "presence" relates to his psychological activities and his position, attitude, tone or "pose in art" (*L V*, 167), which are either those of the reviewer or of Proust. To use Woolf's own words in another letter to Ethel Smyth, this refers to "the platform" (*L V* 167) of writing—the bridge that the writer creates between himself and readers. Thus, the following two sections will respectively explore Woolf's views on reviewing and Proust's narrative technique.

3.3.1. The reviewer's way of writing

While she was writing her first novel, *Melymbrosia: A Novel* (1912), Woolf gave the manuscript to Clive Bell and solicited his criticism, which she answers in a letter dated February 1909:

> Your objection, that my prejudice against men makes me didactic 'not to say priggish', has not quite the same force with me; […] I never meant to preach, and agree that like God, one shouldn't. Possibly, […] a man, in the present state of the world, is not a very good judge of his sex; and a 'creation' may seem to him 'didactic'. […] The only possible reason for writing down all this, is that it represents roughly a view of one's own. (*L I*, 383)

Defending novel-writing and character creation rather than didacticism or preaching is what Woolf also does in a letter written on 10 May 1930 to Dorothy Brett, where she dismisses contemporary novels for their method of preaching: "I hate preaching—and I can't read contemporaries; and I dont want to read novels, whoever writes them" (*L IV*, 167). The same denunciation of her contemporaries' method of preaching can also be found in "The Leaning Tower": "It explains the pedagogic, the didactic, the loud speaker strain that dominates their poetry. They must teach; they must preach. Everything is a duty—even love" (*E VI*, 272).

In a letter to Ethel Smyth dated April 1931, Woolf harps again on this method of writing: "I think: the fact about contemporaries is that they're doing the same thing on another railway line: one resents their distracting one, flashing past, the wrong way—something like that: from timidity, partly, one keeps ones eyes on one's own road" (*L IV*, 315); and she takes John Middleton Murry's writing as an example to justify her discontent with this method in another letter to the same addressee in the following month:

> Hence my unintelligible remark about 'not believing in causes.' This, as I see, now, reverts to Murrys life of Lawrence [*Son of Woma*n]; the whole doctrine of preaching, of causes; of converting; teaching etc […] I think what I mean is that all teaching at the present moment seems to me a blasphemy; this hooked itself on to your cause; and so obliquely, to Laura Riding, whom I despise for writing perpetually to explain her own cause when reviewers say what is true—that she is a damned bad poet. (*L IV*, 329)

What Woolf resents in this way of writing is that the writer writes in full awareness of his identity: "And all these people insist that one must aware of oneself" (*L V*, 239). For example, though she appreciates the "fascination" (*L V*, 418) of Murry's autobiographical writing, *Between Two Worlds* (1935), and "a kind of warm suppleness which makes him take certain impressions very subtly" (*L VI*, 33) in his book, *Shakespeare* (1936),[32] Woolf insists that his authorial position as a preacher makes him write with his "instincts" (*L III*, 115) rather than his "mind": "He said one must write with one's instincts. I said one must write with one's mind" (*L III*, 95). For Woolf, this choice leads Murry to convey his particular personality in writing rather than the common features of human nature: "My impression is that all his characters were embodiments of his own faults and his own entirely sentimental and unreal aspirations" (*L II*, 542). According to Woolf, this personal, untrue and inartistic method of writing analogous to

[32] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 33, note 5.

preaching makes Murry "a paltry weakling" (*L III*, 66) and diminishes the value of his writing, characterised by "feebleness" (*L III*, 66).

For Woolf, as her "remark about 'not believing in causes'" suggests, the writer should let readers interpret his writing rather than "perpetually […] explain[ing his] own cause," as Ethel Smyth or Laura Riding do.[33] "[C]onverting" the reader, as in the religious "conversion" (*L IV*, 333), is to shackle the reader's mind—"he's got finger in mind" (*L IV*, 333), to deprive him of the right of free thinking, to degrade him, as well as to "poison [his] mind" (*L IV*, 333): "what I can't abide is the man who wishes to convert other men's mind; that tampering with beliefs seems to me impertinent, insolent, corrupt beyond measure" (*L IV*, 333).

Similarly, despite her admiration for D. H. Lawrence—"a man of genius" (*L IV*, 315) with "the power of vision" (*L V*, 408), Woolf disapproves of his attitude in writing: "indeed I'm sure of his 'genius'; what I distrust is the platform; I hate the 'I'm right' pose in art" (*L V*, 167). In Woolf's eye, this "platform" of teaching is "a blasphemy", endangering Lawrence's position as an artist. Actually, in a letter to Gerald Brenan, Woolf writes: "there are no teachers, saints, prophets, good people, but the artists" (*L II*, 599); whereas, in "A Letter to a Young Poet," Woolf points at the humble position of the writer: "Think of yourself rather as something much humbler and less spectacular" (*THL*, 217-8). Woolf's opinion of the writer's humility might be partly due to the fact that the development of mass readership and the changed context of publishing urged authorship to undergo significant changes around the turn of the century, as D'Hoker explains,[34] and she herself makes clear in "A Letter to A Young Poet":

> For the first time in history there are readers—a large body of people, occupied in business, in sport, in nursing their grandfathers, in tying up parcels behind counters—they all read now; and they want to be told how to read and what to read; and their teachers—the reviewers, the lecturers,

[33] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 328, note 1.
[34] See Elke D'Hoker, "The Role of the Imagination in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," p. 17.

> the broadcasters—must in all humanity make reading easy for them; assure them that literature is violent and exciting, full of heroes and villains; of hostile forces perpetually in conflict; of fields strewn with bones; of solitary victors riding off on white horses wrapped in black cloaks to meet their death at the turn of the road. (*THL*, 216-7)

In short, as Woolf states in a letter written on 25 June 1935 to Stephen Spender, the "platform" of writing, which her contemporaries use to bridge the gap between themselves and the reader is a method that brings forth their own particular personalities in writing, and goes against the impersonal, humble art of writing: "your desire to teach and help is always bringing you up to the top when you should be down in the depths" (*L V*, 408).

3.3.2. The suggestive method

3.3.2.1. Proust's "persuasive" (*D II*, 322) method

In the same letter to Spender, as quoted above, Woolf also suggests: "It seems to me that artists can only help one if they dont try to" (*L V*, 408). As is made clear by Woolf, artists should let readers catch, understand and absorb their ideas according to their knowledge and preference, rather than compel them to accept them, as the reviewer does. To use Woolf's own words in "Character in Fiction (1924)," the purpose of writing is to "express character—not to preach doctrines" (*E III*, 425). It is the artistic method that Woolf finds in Proust's writing: "But then to explain the difference I should have to write several rather involved pages of psychological analysis. I think Proust explains it, […] Something I mean about the soul, how its elements are united differently by different stimulants; shaken together like those scraps of colour in a funnel [kaleidoscope] that we played with as children" (*L VI*, 112). Woolf's understanding of Proust's impersonal art of writing will be analysed here together with her own statements in "Pictures (1925)," and the section, "The Psychologists," in "Phases of Fiction (1929)," where Woolf classifies him as a "psychologist" (*L VI*, 50).

In "Pictures," Woolf explains how Proust uses "a third eye" (*E IV*, 244) to convey his personal views and personality in his writing, "mutely, mysteriously" (*E IV*, 245), as "the silent painters" (*E IV*, 245), such as Matisse, Cézanne, Derain, Picasso, or Sickert, do in their paintings: "Degas detaches a scene and comments upon it exactly as a great comic writer detaches and comments, but silently, without for a moment infringing the reticence of paint" (*E IV*, 246).

On the one hand, through the narrator's eye or that of his characters, Proust depicts the outside world. Nature, the inanimate, material things, as well as human activities, all of them are "at the command of Proust" (*E V*, 82), "dominated by an emotion which has nothing to do with the eye" (*E IV*, 244), and enveloped by a kind of consciousness, as Woolf shows in "The Psychologists":

> Proust, the product of the civilisation which he describes, is so porous, so pliable, so perfectly receptive that we realise him only as an envelope, thin but elastic, which stretches wider and wider and serves not to enforce a view but to enclose a world. His whole universe is steeped in the light of intelligence. The commonest object, such as the telephone, loses its simplicity, its solidity, and becomes a part of life and transparent. The commonest actions, such as going up in an elevator or eating cake, instead of being discharged automatically, rake up in their progress a whole series of thoughts, sensations, ideas, memories which were apparently sleeping on the walls of the mind. (*E V*, 66)

In other words, the description of the outside world can refract the observer's feelings and thoughts.

On the other hand, the outside world observed by his characters' eyes plays as a visual stimulant, not only titillating the characters' senses—smell, hearing, taste, and touch, but also stimulating their emotions, imagination and thoughts: "But it is the eye that has fertilised their thought; it is the eye, in Proust above all, that has come to the help of the other senses, combined with them, and produced effects of extreme beauty, and of a subtlety hitherto unknown" (*E IV*, 244). Using the painter's technique, Proust silently

describes the mental activities of human beings, "follow[s] the windings and record the changes which are typical of the modern mind" (*E IV*, 436)—"that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind" (*E IV*, 436), as well as "bring[s] before the reader every piece of evidence upon which any state of mind is founded" (*E V*, 70). Through the depiction of the outside world and the double function it plays, Proust creates his characters.

Consequently, according to Woolf, Proust creates his characters and their world by using the painter's technique of depiction while he himself remains silent. Both characters and the outside world lose their material characteristics and become "transparent". Moreover, for Woolf, it is through this silent description of the outside world by "a third eye" that Proust simultaneously conveys his own personal experience: "But the great writer—[…] the Proust—goes his way, regardless of private property, […] brings order from chaos, plants his tree there, his man here, and lets the robes of the deity flow where he will. In those masterpieces, where his vision is clear and he has achieved order, he inflicts his own perspective upon us so severely and consistently" (*E IV*, 333). The comprehensive account of his characters' mind actually also sheds a light on Proust's own personality: "By this distortion the psychologist reveals himself" (*E V*, 70).

In her diary, Woolf considers Proust's way of combining his characters' consciousness and his own into a whole, "persuasive" (*D II*, 322). Furthermore, for Woolf, his method of presenting human emotions—"complicated and varied emotions" (*E IV*, 42)—and the complexity of the human mind stirs the readers' desire, including Woolf's own, to understand their own emotions, as she says in another diary: "I am perhaps encouraged by Proust to search out & identify my feelings" (*D II*, 268), and to scrutinise their own mental activities, as she shows in "Sir Thomas Browne (1923)": "the nine volumes of M. Proust for example, makes us more aware of ourselves as individuals" (*E III*, 369). In Woolf's eyes, this sympathetic reactions of readers is more important and valuable than writing itself: "we turn to the work of Proust, where we find at once an

expansion of sympathy so great that it almost defeats its own object" (*E V*, 66).

Taking Proust's technique as an example in her letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf shows that the impersonal art can be implemented only through a suggestive method. Koutsantoni, in her analysis of *The Common Reader*, argues that dialogism is the strategy of impersonality, the technique through which the interaction between the subjective and the collective is achieved. It is through this strategy of impersonality that the author connects in her critical writings with the reader in the process of conversation.[35]

Nevertheless, in "A Letter to a Young Poet," where Woolf both imagines herself in John's position—"Let me try to put myself in your place; let me try to imagine […] what it feels like to be a young poet in the autumn of 1931" (*THL*, 218)—and presents her own feelings as a poetic reader—"Such at least is the hasty analysis I make of my own sensations as a reader" (*THL*, 223), she uses these imaginary situations to persuade John: "I refuse to think that the art is dead" (*THL*, 236). Similarly, in the letter to Gerald Brenan, it is through an account of her own experience as a writer that Woolf analyses Gerald Brenan's difficulties and indirectly suggests the importance of human relations for writers. Again, in her letters to Ethel Smyth, it is by showing both her opinions as a professional writer and her feelings as her addressee's first reader that Woolf convinces her addressee of the value of anonymous writing: "But to be told *My* opera was not played because—*My* Mass was only played once, […] makes me feel, and will I think any moderately intelligent moderately sensitive man or women feel—Oh the womans got a grievance about herself; Shes unable to think of any one else" (*L V*, 194). Therefore, it seems that it is the suggestive method, a method of indirection, rather than dialogism that Woolf uses as her impersonal strategy in her fictional as well as in her critical writing.

3.3.2.2. The suggestive method

If Woolf admires Proust—"far the greatest modern novelist" (*L III*, 365) —and

[35] Katerina Koutsantoni, "The Impersonal Strategy: Re-visiting Virginia Woolf's Position in *The Common Reader* Essays," p. 157-60.

his method of "persuasion" or indirection and suggestion, she also appreciates the suggestive method in other writers, including her friends. For example, in a letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf praises Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850): "O The Prelude. […] its so good, so succulent, so suggestive […] we only have a few piper on hedges […]—exquisite frail twittering voices one has to hollow one's hand to hear, whereas old Wth [Wordsworth] fills the room" (*L VI*, 73). When she comes to her friends' work, Woolf considers Roger Fry's *A Sampler of Castile* (1923) as "a perfect triumph" (*L III*, 68): "an amazing production, so subtle, so suggestive, so full of life" (*L III*, 69), and Clive Bell's *Civilisation* (1928) seems to her "full of really new and original things" (*L III*, 438), "most brilliant, witty and suggestive" (*L III*, 438).

Moreover, in her letters to Ethel Smyth, Woolf advises her addressee to use the suggestive method. For instance, Woolf thinks that to quote Brewster's letters in Ethel Smyth's memoirs can create a "persuasive effect" (*L IV*, 255), and those of Lady Ponsonby's letters in her autobiographical writing can suggest her character's nature: "What about quoting a few letters from her? They often shed a whole cuttle fish bag of suggestion, even when theyre not in themselves remarkable. You see I want shades and half lights" (*L V*, 354).

Woolf also praises Ethel Smyth's suggestive method in writing, as quoted above: "yours I feel on the contrary bracing and invigorating" (*L VI*, 112). She thinks Ethel Smyth's *Composers and Critics* (1931) "a very felicitous and persuasive article in your best style" (*L IV*, 347), and in a letter written on 6 June 1933, Woolf indicates her suggestive writing in *Female Pipings in Eden* builds a complete, vivid and alive entity of meanings: "I like immensely the imaginative and tranquil end; the suggestive end; the Pacific and the Hebrides. Thats what I call persuasion. […] I think that there are the bones and flesh and sinew of a very important statement in this; yet feel that they have not taken on perfect shape; bones flesh sinew in one body" (*L V*, 192-3). Again, in another letter written on 14 March 1935, Woolf appreciates Ethel Smyth's suggestive

method of characterisation in her article "Lady Ponsonby" in *As Time Went On* (1936), where she constructs Lady Ponsonby as a complete living human being:

> Anyhow you seem to me to have deepened and shaded it so that its a mass, […] and the qualities melt together […]. And it has, (the supreme excellence in this kind of writing), suggestiveness; so that the sentence runs on, I mean breeds meaning, after it is finished. I should now rest content that you've raised, not a monument, but a ghost; not a ghost but a presence. (*L V*, 378)

In Woolf's eyes, it is through "the supreme excellence" of the suggestive method that Ethel Smyth blends her own personal views into her characters and turns them into a whole: "your swing and ease sometimes affect me like Joyce [Wethered] playing a ball. I can feel that bat (thinking of cricket) melt into the ball, both become one" (*L V*, 378).

For Woolf, the suggestive method will produce such a persuasive effect on the reader that "one is persuaded unconsciously, profoundly from the roots" (*L V*, 211). At the same time, she compares this method of persuading readers, indirectly and imperceptibly, to the act of swallowing a pill without noticing it: "But I did read, […] and then cdn't stop—this refers to the [Canterbury] lecture: so you see you've slipped the pill into me in the most lubricous way" (*L VI*, 254-5). This method of suggestion is also what Woolf herself uses in her fiction: for example, when she begins her first novel, *Melymbrosia: A Novel*, she writes to Clive Bell on 29 December 1910: "My tendency would be to insinuate" (*L I*, 445). Again, in a letter to Trevelyan, Woolf shows that she wants to hint her characters in *Jacob's Room* (1922) rather than give a direct characterisation: "It is true, I expect, that the characters remain shadowy for the most part; but the method was not so much at fault as my ignorance of how to use it psychologically" (*L II*, 588); while in a letter to Lady Colefax, Woolf means to compose *Flush* (1933) as "a matter of hints and shades" (*L V*, 236). Woolf's suggestive method will be explored further in the second part of this thesis through an analysis of her style of "central

transparency".

Conclusion

Woolf's theory of impersonality, as it appears in her letters, has been analysed here as encompassing anonymity, "unconsciousness" or lack of awareness, indirection and suggestion. According to Woolf, thanks to the theory of impersonality, the writer can transcend the confines of his personality, find features common to human nature, as well as convey them in an objective and suggestive manner in his writing. The beauty of this impersonal art is evoked by Woolf in a letter written on 21 July 1939 to Trevelyan: "And often there's a special colourless (perhaps I mean unexaggerated, or impersonal) beauty that I find also lasting and possessing—not surprising, but stealing over one" (*L VI*, 348).

Discussing Woolf's theory of impersonality in "A Letter to a Young Poet" and her letters has revealed the close formal and stylistic affinities between her essays and letters. Like other letter writers, Woolf tries to blur the distinction between the epistolary genre and the essay, and to transform the epistolary form into a vehicle for her artistic emotions and a space for aesthetic debate. The comparison between these two literary genres has also shown that Woolf's wit sparkles more often in her letters than her essays, something she herself noticed about Roger Fry: "he did all his off hand art criticism in letters, and I think its sometimes better than the printed—so fertile, so suggestive" (*L VI*, 3). It is also noticeable that the letters in their style, rhythm and theme sometimes take on qualities that are so nearly the qualities of her essays that on occasion the reader doubts where the letter leaves off and the essay begins, an experience comparable to reading Emily Dickinson's letters which merge into poems.[36]

[36] See Marietta Messmer. *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001: p. 50: "The letters both in style and rhythm begin to take on qualities that are so nearly the quality of her poems as on occasion to leave the reader in doubt where the letter leaves off and the poem begins."

Conclusion to Part One

Following Woolf's description of what a letter may be, we have divided her letters into three types—letters of facts, imagination and thoughts—and discussed them in turn in this first part. Our analysis of Woolf's letters of facts in the first chapter shows how Woolf resorts to various artistic techniques—those of painting, cinema, music or drama—according to the nature of facts and her addressees, and so as to present her own life and that of others in a most authentic way. If the main function of Woolf's letters is to give pleasure, practice her own writing, or store material for her future published work, the facts in these letters are "atomic facts", which combine into the world: "The world is everything that is the case. […] What is the case, the fact, is the existence of atomic facts," as Ludwig Wittgenstein explores in *Tractatus Logica-Philosophicus* (1922).[1]

By resorting to imagination in her letters, Woolf aims to entertain herself more than her addressees. Imaginative descriptions, based on real facts and used to bridge the space-time distance between the letter writer and her addressees or as biographical sketches of her friends, enable Woolf to transgress the boundaries of epistolary writing and turn it into fictional writing. In her letters of thoughts, Woolf also blurs the confines between epistolary and critical writing. Abandoning strict generic distinctions, Woolf transforms her private letters into a public space and combines personal and public writings, as Flaubert does in his letters to George Sand, which she describes in a letter dated July 1906 to Madge Vaughan as follows: "They penetrate so far and sum up so much that is universal as well as individual" (*L I*, 229). The "whole and manysided picture" (*L VI*, 10) that Woolf, like Roger Fry, composes in her letters, together with her own specific theory of impersonality, could be summarised in her own words as follows: "nobody could feel nothing is too personal" (*LV*, 300).[2] Thus, Woolf's letters can be

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logica-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1922: p. 25.
[2] Woolf writes this about Julian Bell's letters.

regarded as a whole artistic and literary text in its own right.

Finally, if the letters of facts reveal Woolf's writing skill, they also bear the traces of Woolf's struggle with words; if the letters of imagination show Woolf's elegance, they equally display her humour and keen perception; if the letters of thoughts are impressive and witty, they actually convey Woolf's concern for people and life. Woolf's own words about Jane Welsh Carlyle's letters can best capture her own letters as a whole: "'Coruscations are more in letters'!! Such and so profound is my wisdom" (*L I*, 198).

Part Two: The Style of "central transparency"

"The beauty of my language is sick." (*Letter to Thoby Stephen*, 24 February 1897)

Introduction

1. Personality, emotion and writing

While describing her first memory in her autobiographical writing, "A Sketch of the Past (1976),"[1] Woolf first aims to give a self-portrayal and considers this self-analysis as the key factor to evaluate memoir writing: "But I should (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself" (*MOB*, 65). Woolf declares that one failure of the memoir writers is that they neglect to analyse their protagonist's particular character: "Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties—one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being" (*MOB*, 65). For Woolf, the difficulty is principally due to the fact that "[t]he person is evidently immensely complicated," but this very person is both the crucial and fundamental element, who endows his/her life with significance: "In spite of all this, people write what they call 'lives' of other people; that is, they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown" (*MOB*, 69). He/She is also the decisive cause, determining to what extent these events, including writing, play an important part in his/her life: "And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened" (*MOB*, 65).

In challenging the traditional method of writing memoirs in this autobiographical writing, Woolf not merely traces her first memories, but more importantly, she endeavours to scrutinise her own particular personality. For instance, in the first section, in describing her first memories, Woolf likens "the intensity of [her] first impression" (*MOB*, 65), in which "sounds indistinguishable from sights, [s]ound and sight seem to make equal parts" under "an elastic, gummy air" at St Ives, to "a picture that was globular; semi-transparent […] showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. Everything would be large and dim" (*MOB*, 66). Then, she

[1] Woolf writes "A Sketch of the Past" intermittently in 1939 and 1940.

compares "[t]he next memory—all these colour-and-sound memories hang together at St Ives—[…] much more robust; […] highly sensual" (*MOB*, 66), to vision—the sight which she "see[s]" and "watch[es]" "more real than the present moment" and to which "[she] can go back […] more completely than [she] can this morning" (*MOB*, 67).

For Woolf, these memories not merely involve colour, sound and sight, but concern her "strong emotion" (*MOB*, 67) and "sensation" (*MOB*, 72): "the purest ecstasy" (*MOB*, 65) while "lying half asleep, half awake" (*MOB*, 64) and "hearing this splash and seeing this light" (*MOB*, 65); "a complete rapture of pleasure" (*MOB*, 66); her "strong feeling of guilt" mixed with "the looking-glass shame" (*MOB*, 68) when she was "six or seven perhaps" (*MOB*, 67); her being "ashamed or afraid of [her] own body" (*MOB*, 68); "a state of despair", which includes both "a feeling of hopeless sadness, […] of [her] own powerlessness, [her] feeling horribly depressed" at the moment when "fighting with Thoby", and "a trance of horror" (*MOB*, 71) of hearing suicide: "It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it. […] I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralysed" (*MOB*, 67); as well as "a state of satisfaction" while discovering "the whole" or "a ring" at the sight of the flower—"it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; […] that was the real flower; part earth; part flower" (*MOB*, 71)—which becomes a "conception" that one's life or personality is inseparable from one's background: "It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool [moments of non-being]" (*MOB*, 73). As Hermione Lee points out, "In her 'Sketch of the Past', […] she insists that in biography and autobiography there must be a relation between the obscure areas of personality—the 'soul'—and forces like class and social pressures; otherwise 'how futile life-writing becomes'.[2]

[2] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 6.

Moreover, in considering these "more memorable" (*MOB*, 70), visual impressions as "exceptional moments" (*MOB*, 71), Woolf also queries the nature of her visual memory: "is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?" (*MOB*, 67), illustrates "the peculiarity of these […] strong memories" (*MOB*, 67), as well as explores her own "psychology" (*MOB*, 70) about moments of being and non-being.[3] Meanwhile, by regarding these "sensual" memories as "a sudden violent shock" (*MOB*, 71): "many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive," Woolf equally examines her own "desire[s] to explain" such a shock, to find "a revelation of some order" in it, to "make it real by putting into word," to "reach […] a philosophy" by "making a scene come right; making a character come together," as well as to disclose "a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (*MOB*, 72).

Among all these descriptions of the "characteristic of all childhood memories; […] strong, […] isolated, […] complete;" of her emotion and sensation: "I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture" (*MOB*, 67); of her psychology about being and non-being; of her "shock-receiving capacity […] mak[ing] [her] a writer;" of her writing functioning as a kind of psychotherapy: "It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me […] a great delight […] the strongest pleasure;" as well as of her "intuition" of seeing the "conception" from the flower that one's background constitutes one's life and personality; the crucial intention that Woolf wants to convey is that her identity, either her "complicated" personality, her "peculiarity", or her "intuition", is "given to [her], not made by [her]" (*MOB*, 72)—"inherited" (*MOB*, 68): "It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many

[3] See Introduction to Chapter One.

thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past" (*MOB*, 69).

For some critics, such as Diane Cousineau, Woolf attempts to show that in "A Sketch of the Past": "life begins with the sensations that connect the body to the world";[4] while in Hermione Lee's view, in "this uncompleted fragment of life-writing […] marked by hiatuses and stoppages, […] [t]he elusiveness of the self almost becomes the subject."[5] Moreover, as Lee indicates,[6] though Woolf dislikes any biographical writings in her lifetime, including Ethel Smyth's thought of writing about her (*L VI*, 39, 272), hates publicity (*L V*, 97, 237-9), refuses to sit for portraits (*L V*, 242, 277) or be photographed (*L VI*, 235, 342-3, 351),[7] and prefers anonymity;[8] "Virginia Woolf was an autobiographer who never published an autobiography; she was an egotist who loathed egotism. It's one of the words she most often uses, whether she is writing about herself or other people."[9] Lee argues that, though Woolf's "self-protectiveness is very strong in the feminist essays," Woolf is not only fully aware that "'Myself', for the writing self, is both material and instrument;" and though Woolf is "one of the most anxious to remove personality from fiction," she is also "one of the most self-reflecting, self-absorbed novelists who ever lived," for "[t]here is a personal basis to her published work which Virginia Woolf is at pains to conceal. Her life-story enters and shapes her novels (and her essays)."[10]

Like Lee, Mark Hussey, in outlining biographical approaches to Woolf's works in "Biographical approaches," points out: "A number of critics have remarked

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[4] Diane Cousineau. "Virginia Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past': Life-writing, the Body, and the Mirror Gaze." *a/b: Autobiography Studies* 8.1 (1993): p. 52-3; see also Mark Hussey. "Biographical approaches." *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*. Ed. Anna Snaith. Palgrave: Macmillan, 2007: p. 89-90.

[5] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 18.

[6] Hermione Lee states: "Certainly she would have hated to read a 'life' about herself, in her life-time, which gave her secrets away. She is horrified at the thought that Ethel Smyth might be thinking of publishing her letters or writing about her. The desire for anonymity, one of the crucial themes of her later years, involves a violent detestation of all journalistic intrusions on her life" (*Virginia Woolf*, p. 11).

[7] The related expressions for these four ideas can respectively be found in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936-1941*, p. 39, 272; *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V: 1932-1935*, p. 97, 237-9; *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V: 1932-1935*, p. 242, 277; *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936-1941,* p. 235, 342-3, 351.

[8] See Chapter Three.

[9] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 5.

[10] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 5, 17.

on the interrelations of Woolf's own auto/biographical writing and her fiction."[11] Hussey takes a few quotations from the work of these critics: for example, he shows that, in Linda Anderson's eyes, "Woolf […] understood the connection between identity and writing and the need to deconstruct realist forms in order to create space for the yet to be written feminine subject," and "the question of a life and its written form […] were inseparable and often made her blur the boundaries of genre, disrupting the authority enshrined in masculine convention."[12] For Mitchell A. Leaska, "[Woolf's] life and work were inseparable, and part of that life was inscribed in every novel she wrote;"[13] and according to John Mepham, it is "impossible to keep the literary analysis of Virginia Woolf's fiction separate from the study and interpretation of her life."[14] As for Julia Briggs, she thinks that Woolf's "exploration of the boundaries between fiction and biography opened the way for further experiments with existing forms;"[15] just as Daniel Ferrer does:

> Most critics have been aware of this impossibility of marking a boundary in the continuum which goes from the life to the diary or letters, from the diary to the autobiographical writings; from the autobiographical writings to a novel presented as autobiographical like *To the Lighthouse*; and thence to all the other novels and short stories.[16]

Hussey hence concludes: "Woolf was an artist explicitly concerned with the complex relationship between life and art, between narrative and self-consciousness; it is virtually impossible to find a work of Woolf criticism that is not in some sense

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[11] Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 70.

[12] These sentences that Mark Hussey quotes in "Biographical approaches," p. 84, 94, are in Linda Anderson. *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*. London: Prentice Hall and Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1987: p. 13, 47-8.

[13] This sentence in Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 94, is quoted from Mitchell A. Leaska. *Granite and Rainbow: The Hidden Life of Virginia Woolf*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998: p. 16.

[14] See Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 92, and this sentence is quoted from John Mepham. *Criticism in Focus: Virginia Woolf*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1992: p. 3.

[15] See Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 92, and the sentence is quoted from Julia Briggs. "Virginia Woolf and 'The Proper Writing of Lives'," *The Art of Literary Biography*. Ed. John Batchelor. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995: p. 254.

[16] See Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 94, and the passage is quoted from Daniel Ferrer. *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 6.

'biographical', whatever its writer may protest."[17]

Furthermore, in his article, Hussey emphasises the opinions of these three critics: Suzanne Nalbantian regards Woolf's method of transmuting life to art as the "common aesthetics of transmutation", which she shares with other writers, such as Proust and Joyce;[18] Galya Diment reasons that, through the egoistic writing in autobiography, Woolf develops "a special way of projecting inner conflicts onto multiple fictional selves;"[19] whereas, Mepham also shows that Woolf not only realises the close relationship between real life and writing and tries to transmute life to art, but she also surveys the affinity of other writers' personalities and their writing: "never have literary criticism and psychobiographic investigation been so intimately entwined as in the case of Virginia Woolf."[20] Here, Mepham's view echoes Woolf's consideration for the relationships between Dostoevsky's writing and his psychology, and between Proust's suggestive method of writing and his psychology.[21]

Consequently, according to both Woolf herself and critics, Woolf's writing, as one of events, involves her sensation, personality, as well as life. However, what character does Woolf show in her letters? And, what sort of style does Woolf conceive, which can represent both her "semi-transparent" impressions and strong feelings of life while protecting her privacy from her future public readers? As she equally queries in "A Sketch of the Past":

> [W]ill it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap [memories]? I see it—the past—as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. […] Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past. […] I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace. (*MOB*, 67)

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[17] Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 93.
[18] See Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 92, and the quoted phrase is in Suzanne Nalbantian. *Aesthetic Autobiography: From Life to Art in Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Anais Nin*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1994: p. viii.
[19] See Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 92, and the original phrase is quoted from Galya Diment. *The Autobiographical Novel of Co-Consciousness: Goncharov, Woolf, and Joyce*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994: p. 44.
[20] See Mark Hussey, "Biographical approaches," p. 94, and the sentence is quoted from John Mepham, *Criticism in Focus: Virginia Woolf*, p. 13.
[21] See Chapter Three.

Reading through the six volumes of letters, we can see that Woolf's feeling of shyness permeates throughout: for instance, in a letter written on 20 September 1902 to Violet Dickinson, Virginia Stephen states that her shyness prevents her from conveying feelings in her letters: "How could I write to you. What with feeling as shy as I do" (*L I*, 53); whereas, in another letter written on 3 June 1936 to the same addressee, she shows: "Nellie Cecil came here […] and we pretty well fixed it that it was your back I saw in a garden 2 years ago, when I was too shy to come up. / But shy and silent as I am, I remain devoted, grateful, humble and / Eternally yr / Sp[arroy]" (*L VI*, 43). The author's shyness can also be seen in her other letters: in her early letters to Clive Bell, Virginia Stephen indicates that her shyness inhibits her from expressing her feelings: "I am really shy of expressing my affection for you. Do you know women?" (*L I*, 345) or "I am still very shy of saying what I feel" (*L I*, 419); in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, she says directly: "Shyness, I suppose, makes it difficult to say that it is delightful to know you and like you as I do" (*L I*, 381); in a letter to George Rylands, Woolf considers "that bashful timidity [as] a mark of [her] nature" (*L III*, 194); in one of her letters to Harold Nicolson: "for some reason I feel profoundly and mysteriously shy" (*L III*, 392); as well as in her letters to Jacques Raverat, she not only considers that shyness prevents her from writing freely to her addressee—"I feel a little shy, do you?" (*L II*, 554) or "However, I'm awfully shy of saying how really and truly I would do a great deal to please you and can only very very dimly murmur a kind of faint sympathy and love" (*L III*, 137)—but she also indicates that shyness is one of the reasons for inhibiting her to talk about her writing with him: "I'm terrifically egotistic about my writing, […] partly from conceit, partly shyness, sensitiveness" (*L III*, 130).

As shown in her letter to Jacques, apart from mentioning shyness as one characteristic of her nature, Woolf also describes herself as a sensitive person, and this self-description can equally be seen in her other letters. For example, in a letter written in 1906 to Madge Vaughan, the author explains: "if I am heartless when I

write, I am very sentimental really, only I dont know how to express it, and devoted to you and the babies" (*L I*, 227); while in the letter written on 31 December 1933 to Ottoline, Woolf states: "Dear me, how I like people to be fond of me—how deeply emotional or perhaps sentimental I am. Perhaps in another age, one would never have thought of the word sentimental, and then life would have been simpler" (*L V*, 266). Woolf shows that her sensitive nature stirs in her different emotions, which complicate her view of life.

In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf indicates that life not only comprises impressions and emotions, but her body also acts as a receptacle of emotions; so does she feel in her letters. For example, to Clive, the author describes herself as composed of "[a] bundle of tempers" (*L I*, 391); while to Vita Sackville-West, she describes her life as spent in "the usual muddle of thoughts and spasms of feeling" (*L III*, 242), and feels herself as "a very polyp for emotion" (*L V*, 61). In particular, in her letters to Ethel Smyth, on the one hand, Woolf considers that emotions are the core of her being:

> But I am the most passionate of women. Take away my affections and I should be like sea weed out of water; like the shell of a crab, like a husk. All my entrails, light, marrow, juice, pulp would be gone. I should be blown into the first puddle and drown. Take away my love for my friends and my burning and pressing sense of the importance and lovability and curiosity of human life and I should be nothing but a membrane, a fibre, uncoloured, lifeless to be thrown away like any other excreta. (*L IV*, 202-3)

On the other hand, she opposes Ethel Smyth's underestimation of her feeling:

> No, I think you grossly underrate the strength of my feelings—so strong they are—such caverns of gloom and horror open round me I daren't look in—and also their number. […] everyone I most honour is silent—Nessa, Lytton, Leonard, Maynard: all silent; and so I have trained myself to silence; induced to it also by the terror I have of my own unlimited capacity for feeling—[…] I found that you are perhaps the only person I know who shows feeling and feels. Still I cant imagine talking about my love for people, as you do. Is it training? Is it

> the perpetual fear I have of the unknown force that lurks just under the floor? I never cease to feel that I must step very lightly on top of that volcano. No Ethel, there's a mint of things about me, I say egotistically, you've no notion of; the strength of my feelings is only one. (*L IV*, 422)

Moreover, possessing a great ability to experience these emotions—"the most ordinary emotions" (*L IV* 168): "I pass from hot to cold in an instant, without any reason" (*L I*, 496), Woolf is excited with these sensations, which are both intense—"I get an infinity of pleasure from the intensity of my emotions" (*L V*, 11)—and countless: "the diversity of my sensations" (*L IV*, 187)—"an infinite number of feelings" (*L V*, 315) "com[ing] only every other minute" (*L II*, 541), such as "mercenary […] affectionate […] desperate—and a thousand other things" (*L III*, 466), "go[ing] chasing each other all day long" (*L I*, 496), or "spasms of one emotion after another" (*L V*, 29).

For Woolf, these emotions not only contain the sort that is immediately provoked by the sensual stimuli, such as sight, as Woolf shows in a letter to Vita: "How I watched you! How I felt—now what was it like! Well, somewhere I have seen a little ball kept bubbling up and down on the spray of a fountain: the fountain is you; the ball me. It is a sensation […] It is physically stimulating" (*L III*, 540); they also consist of those engendered by thinking, as she shows in a letter written on 22 August 1936 to Ethel Smyth: "Isnt that odd? Absence; thinking of some one—then the real feeling has room to expand" (*L VI*, 66). The second sort of emotion belongs to the physical sensations that are produced by "an afterthought" (*L I*, 90), as the author shows in her letters to Violet: "a great tide runs from my toe to my crown, which is the thought of you" (*L I*, 245). This sort of emotion can also be seen in the author's other letters, and it might be horrible feelings, although referred to with tongue in cheek. For instance, writing to Emma Vaughan, the author shows: "My blood creeps at the thought of losing a […] book; it haunts me" (*L I*, 224); while to Saxon Sydney-Turner, she writes: "I saw Zimmern on a bookstall today, and a pang of horror went through me remembering all the times I had forgotten it" (*L I*, 487).

Moreover, "an afterthought" might also paralyse the author as she shows in some letters, although we may allow for overstatement: for instance, writing to Clive: "From sheer cowardice, I didn't bring the other chapters [of *Melymbrosia: A Novel* (1912)] here. If I thought 'There! thats solid and done with' I'm sure I should have palsy" (*L I*, 461-2); while to Molly MacCarthy: "I still wake in the night and bite the blanket through in spasms at the thought of the horrid things I've done" (*L IV*, 178).

Though she is shy and emotions are "profound and inexpressible" (*L II*, 541): "Of course I cant explain what I feel—these are some of the things that strike me" (*L I*, 496), the author yearns to voice them, as she shows in a letter written on 9 August 1908 to Clive Bell: "I am really shy of expressing my affection for you. Do you know women? I had a walk yesterday after tea, between the downs, that almost crazed me with a desire to express it; I gave up at last, and lay with tremulous wings" (*L I*, 345). She wants to explore her emotions; and more importantly, in a letter written on 8 April 1925 to Gwen Raverat, she states: "I want so much to understand my own feelings about everything, to unravel and re-christen and not go dreaming my time away" (*L III*, 177). Besides, in a letter written on 27 November 1916 to Saxon Sydney-Turner, Woolf indicates that it is civilisation that empowers human beings with the capability to "observe" (*L III*, 69) feelings:

> And, dear me, one never regrets feeling things in this life; not even if mere disappointment follows, […] in spite of being in some ways foolish, I am sensible in others. I know, being civilised as we are, we can't help watching our feelings, and being incredulous of them. But that I believe to be the proper way to feel, and later when things are less new, one loses this self-consciousness, and enjoys the fact that our feelings have been so watched, and are therefore so good— (*L II*, 128)

Equally, this sort of experience amuses her, as she shows in a letter to Vita: "I am observing with interest the fluctuations of my own feelings about France" (*L III*, 520).

Comparing herself to painters, such as her sister, Vanessa Bell, and Gwen Raverat, who "scarcely think" (*L II*, 541) but possess "simplicity" (*L I*, 408, 475), and

"marmoreal chastity" (*L III*, 363) "connect[ed] […] with some impermeability" (*L III*, 180), Woolf thinks that writers not only attach more attention to their emotions, but also want to present them with words, as she indicates in a letter to Vanessa:

> We literary people have been comparing our feelings a good deal. […] But he [Desmond MacCarthy] is writing an account of his feeling. I think I shall too. The dazed discontented aimless feeling was so queer; starting with such emotions and high passions, and getting gradually more and more sodden and depressed, and wanting to do something very exciting and not knowing what. (*L II*, 297-8)

The desire to describe emotions not only puzzles Woolf, as she shows in a letter to Ethel Smyth: "why do I always want to find a phrase for what I see?" (*L VI*, 315); but it is so strong that it agonises her, as she indicates in a letter to Vanessa: "The desire to describe becomes almost a torment; and also the covetousness to possess" (*L II*, 284). Her mind hence becomes "full of the ghosts of phrases" (*L I*, 418), "like a gently bubbling kettle—an ideal state" (*L I*, 454), or "such a hotch potch of different things, always on the bubble" (*L III*, 363). Nevertheless, writing to Quentin Bell, Woolf states that the myriad emotions and multitudinous words fail her to convey her meanings properly: "Then I am going to have tea with Ottoline, half of whose jaw has been cut away; and this will be awful, for I dont know what to say; your mother would put the matter in a nutshell; but being a writer, so many words are possible that one is almost bound to say the wrong ones" (*L III*, 506).

Moreover, in the author's own eye, being a prose writer rather than a poet, the characteristic of prose writing also prevents her from articulating her meanings and emotions, as she shows in a letter dated December 1910 to Violet: "It is a great pity that I am a prose writing and not a poetic animal. Then I could express my feelings, gratitude, contentment, spiritual joy, physical comfort, friendship, appreciation—all these you should take and shake, and make rhyme. There are many others. / When they all come together, one is really very enviable" (*L I*, 441). A similar statement can be found in another letter dated December 1926 to the same addressee: "I wish I could send you something to amuse you or write a poem, with Rhymes to Dickinson, in

your praise. A triolet for Violet. A Chicken song for Dickingsong—No. Cant be done. Prose is more my line" (*L III*, 306). Similarly, writing to Vita, Woolf states: "I write prose; your poetry" (*L III*, 200), and "But poetry is far from my thoughts" (*L IV*, 362).

These statements might contain three different implications. One belongs to the author's view upon the difference between poetry and prose. For Woolf, poetry makes "statements" (*L V*, 315), demands "greater intensity" (*L III*, 432), as well as must be "exact" (*L III*, 200). To use Woolf's words in the essay, "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia' (1932)," poetry "wish[es] to sum up, to strike hard, to register a single and definite impression" (*E V*, 371), while the poet acts as "the mouthpiece of God" (*L II*, 502). On the contrary, prose, possessing "more freedom of expression" (*L III*, 432), not only aims to offer readers "slow, noble and generalised emotions" (*E V*, 371) and "the fast flocking of innumerable impressions" (*E V*, 580), as Woolf respectively indicates in the two essays, "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia' (1932)" and "How Should One Read a Book? (1932)"; but also tries to present some abstract ideas, such as those that she insists on in a letter written on 10 July 1934 to Stephen Spender: "but aren't there some shades of being that it cant state? And aren't these just as valuable, or whatever the term is, as any other?" (*L V*, 315)

Woolf's view on poetry and prose echoes that of Sartre in *What Is Literature?*: "What do they have in common? It is true that the prosewriter and the poet both write. But there is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters."[22] On the one hand, according to Sartre, "the poet does not *utilize* the word", and "all language is for him the mirror of the world":[23]

> For the poet, language is a structure of the external world. […] The poet is outside of language. He sees words inside out as if he did not share the human condition, and as if he were first meeting the word as a barrier as he comes toward men. Instead of first knowing things by their name, […] he discovers in them a slight luminosity of their own and particular affinities with the earth, the sky, the water, and all

[22] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 19.
[23] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 14-5.

> created things. / Not knowing how to use them as a sign of an aspect of the world, he sees in the word the image of one of these aspects. […] he considers words as a trap to catch a fleeing reality rather than as indicators which throw him out of himself into the midst of things.[24]

On the other hand, Sartre claims that "[p]rose is, in essence, utilitarian", and he "define[s] the prose-writer as a man who *makes use* of words":[25] "The speaker is *in a situation* in language; he is invested with words. They are prolongations of his meanings […] He maneuvers them from within; he feels them as if they were his body; he is surrounded by a verbal body."[26] Then, he argues:

> The art of prose is employed in discourse; its substance is by nature significative; that is, the words are first of all not objects but designations for objects; it is […] a matter of knowing […] whether they correctly indicate a certain thing or a certain notion. Thus, it often happens that we find ourselves possessing a certain idea that someone has taught us by means of words without being able to recall a single one of the words which have transmitted it to us. / Prose is first of all an attitude of mind. As Valéry would say, there is prose when the word passes across our gaze as the glass across the sun.[27]

Moreover, Sartre defines the style and beauty of prose as follows:

> [T]here [is] a manner of writing, […] [a]nd […] the style makes the value of the prose. But it should pass unnoticed. Since words are transparent and since the gaze looks through them, it would be absurd to slip in among them some panes of rough glass. Beauty is in this case only a gentle and imperceptible force. […] in a book it hides itself; it acts by persuasion like the charm of a voice or a face.[28]

Briefly, in Sartre's view, the prose-writer "exhibits" and "illustrates" feelings or "a speaker [who] designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates" ideas through "a certain method of secondary action: […]

[24] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p 13-4.
[25] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 19-20.
[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 13.
[27] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 20.
[28] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 25.

action by disclosure"; and prose becomes a signifier rather than an object.[29]

The second meaning that the author implies in the statements—"I am a prose writing […] animal" and "Prose is more my line"—is that prose writing is more congenial to her shy and silent character, as the novel is to Henry James, according to Woolf's words in "On Re-Reading Novels (1922)": "The novel is his job. It is the appropriate form for what he has to say" (*E III*, 344). The third and last meaning refers to the fact that the insinuative way of prose writing to convey a general, abstract idea is more suitable to her "intuition" or "conception" concerning the affinity between people and their circumstances, which she indicates in "A Sketch of the Past." This characteristic of Woolf's vision towards or her perception of the world and people can also be seen in a letter written on 15 August 1930 to Ethel Smyth, when she defines this view as a sort of "perspective":

> As a psychologist I am myopic rather than obtuse. I see the circumference and the outline not the detail. You and Nessa say I am so frightful stupid because I dont see that fly on the floor: but I see the walls, the pictures and the Venus against the pear tree, so that the position and surroundings of the fly are accurately known to me. Say that you are a fly: what you actually do and say I many misinterpret; but your standing in the world being known to me, I never get you out of perspective as a whole. […] having sketched your ambit—your wall, statue and pear tree, no minor agitation in the foreground will upset me. You see I like your circumference. (*L IV*, 199)

In a letter dated 4 November 1923 to Jacques, Woolf writes: "And to convey feelings is too difficult. I try, but I invariably make enemies. […] but I never can resist the desire for intimacy, or reconcile myself to the fact that all human relations are bound to be unsatisfactory" (*L III*, 77). For Woolf, expressing one's affection is the only way to get a sort of intimate relationship with others. Here, the author's statements echoes her own words in her letters to Violet: to maintain human relationship not merely needs a frequent correspondence—"to keep a correspondence warm it should be constant" (*L I*, 367), it also involves the act of displaying one's

[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 18-20, 23.

affections in letters:

> Your letters come like balm on the heart. I really think I must do what I never have done—try to keep them. I've never kept a single letter all my life—but this romantic friendship ought to be preserved. Very few people have any feelings to express—at least of affection or sympathy—and if those that do feel dont express—the worlds so much more like a burnt out moon—cold living for the Sparroys [Virginia Stephen] and Violets. (*L I*, 75-6)

Violet's affection and her expression of affection in letters warm the author and are the main support for her to overcome all the difficulties that she undergoes as a young girl; therefore, in another letter to the same addressee, the author concludes: "Sparroy among other things was accused of […] shifting the burden of the world, which seems to consist of family affection, on to other shoulders! […] Such a nest of emotion we live in" (*L I*, 102). Moreover, emotion possesses a crucial importance for Woolf—reality, as she shows in her letters to Vita: by comparing Vita's affection for her to a ladder: "So we'll sit in the window, and I shall say, which rung Vita—which rung am I on?" (*L VI*, 350), or "And which rung are we on—my poor Potto and V?" (*L VI*, 351), Woolf states: "and indeed, my dearest creature, whatever rung I'm on, the ladder is a great comfort in this kind of intolerable suspension of all reality—something real" (*L VI*, 354-5).

The act of showing feelings also includes a sort of self-presentation, showing oneself as a particular person and one's personal life which is not far from showing off, so as to attract addressees' emotions. For example, writing to Violet, on the one hand, Virginia Stephen describes her own life as that of a character in Brontës' novels:

> There is a Greek austerity about my life which is beautiful and might go straight into a bas relief. You can imagine that I never wash, or do my hair; but stride with gigantic strides over the wild moorside, shouting odes of Pindar, as I leap from crag to crag, and exulting in the air which buffets me, and caresses me, like a stern but affectionate parent! That is Stephen Brontëised; almost as good as the real thing. (*L*

I, 221)

On the other hand, the author considers her descriptions of herself and her affection as follows: “Please dont dwell upon my exaggerated account of love; as a matter of fact I am a woman with very little sexual charm. Warming to the task, I often represent myself as irresistible” (*L I*, 392).

Furthermore, equally in her letters to Violet, such as the one written as early as in 1902, the author shows her ambition to compose “a great play”: “a man and a woman […] never meeting—not knowing each other—[…]—but when they almost meet—[…] they just miss—and go off at a tangent, and never come anywhere near again. There’ll be oceans talk and emotions without end” (*L I*, 60). Virginia Stephen’s description of these two characters in her play reminds the reader of Septimus and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). For the author, emotion is one crucial theme in writing, and it is also important from the viewpoint of the reader: “This bears out my theory, based on Aunt Fisher, and all the other sepulchral women, that what people like is feeling—it dont matter what” (*L I*, 440). Moreover, in a letter written in 1906 to Madge Vaughan, Virginia Stephen insists that it is emotion that gives souls to characters in fiction: “That is the kind of blunder—in literature—which seems to me ghastly and unpardonable: people […] who wallow in emotions without understanding them. Then they are merely animal and hideous. But, of course, any great writer treats them so that they are beautiful, and turns statues into men and women” (*L I*, 227). At the same time, as a reader, Woolf not only appreciates “the odd combination of incongruous emotions, and the flickering angularity of it” (*L III*, 550) as she does reading Julian Bell’s poems, but she also declares that it is the reader’s responsibility to disclose the writer’s emotions and identities, as she shows in a letter written on 18 October 1932 to Vita: “I rather think […] that her [Elizabeth Bowen] emotions sway in a certain way. I’m reading her novel to find out. Whats so interesting is when one uncovers an emotion that the person themselves, I should say herself, doesn’t suspect. And its a sort of duty dont you think—revealing peoples true selves to themselves?” (*L V*, 111)

In short, in Woolf's own eye, being a timid, sensitive and silent person, she has the desire to express her ordinary emotions, herself and her impressions of life, either to attract a sort of intimate relationship from her addressees in her letters or to raise the reader's interest in her public writing. Indeed, according to Martha C. Nussbaum, in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, emotions may have cognitive importance. For Nussbaum, emotions are not merely "animal energies or impulses that have no connection with our thoughts, imaginings, and appraisals"; on the contrary, "emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment" and "part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning".[30] Nussbaum insists that "the word 'feeling' now does not contrast with our cognitive words 'perception' and 'judgment,' it is merely a terminological variant of them."[31] She argues that emotions are always "*about* something: they have an object",[32] and the particular urgency connected with emotion is not irrational but instead is a sign of the object's importance to the feeling subject: "emotions look at the world from the subject's own viewpoint, mapping events onto the subject's own sense of personal importance or value."[33] Thus, Nussbaum not only declares that emotions are forms of thought—"it seems necessary to put the thought into the definition of the emotion itself"[34] or "forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person's own control great importance for the person's own flourishing"[35]—but also indicates that there is connection between emotion and rationality: "in [a] normative sense [emotions] are profoundly rational: for they are ways of taking in important news of the world."[36]

Then, in Woolf's eye, the direct way of prose writing fails to convey her intense emotions, as she states in a letter written on 30 May 1928 to Ottoline:

> How difficult it is to write to you! […] I have thought of you and wanted to tell you how sorry I was about your illness and how fond of

[30] Martha C. Nussbaum. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001: p. 1.
[31] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 60.
[32] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 27.
[33] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 33.
[34] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 30.
[35] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 22.
[36] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 109.

> you. But its just these words one can't say. I think perhaps if one had never written a word one would then be able to say what one meant. I dread so getting tangled in a mass of words that when I want most to write, I dont. So you must write all my affection for me; and make it very strong and also the real odd, recurring discomfort it is to me to think of you in pain. (*L III*, 504)

Nor do the epithets satisfy Woolf, as she shows in a letter to Ethel Smyth: "Dear me, yes, how nice (what a niminy piminy little word that is) it'll be—seeing you again" (*L VI*, 79). Besides, in another letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf opposes the way men and women usually label or summarise emotions, for their diversity and intensity are beyond words: "Where people mistake, as I think, is in perpetually narrowing and naming these immensely composite and wide flung passions—driving stakes through them, herding them between screens" (*L IV*, 200).

As mentioned above, writing to Jacques, besides "shyness" and "sensitiveness", Woolf also shows another aspect of her nature: "egotistic about writing; […] partly from conceit"; while Lee considers Woolf as "an egotist who loathed egotism." Woolf's self-consideration for being "egotistic about writing" can also be found in a letter written on 29 December 1910 to Clive: "I should say that my great change was in the way of courage, or conceit; and that I had given up adventuring after other people's forms, as I used. But I expect that I am really less sensitive to style than you are, and so seem more steadfast" (*L I*, 446). This quotation reveals Virginia Stephen's intention to invent an original style rather than an imitative one. Thus, in Woolf's writing, the word, egotism might mainly involve two aspects of meanings: one refers to the author's self-writing—self-expression and self-representation (herself and her own life); the other concerns her innovative, creative mind.

Consequently, the second part aims to discuss the hypothesis that "central transparency" is the "steadfast", congenial style of prose writing that Woolf develops and displays in her letters. In other words, we will explore how Woolf conveys ideas and emotions through this style, so that her addressees, as well as her future letter

readers, can absorb her emotions, as the way she does while reading her nephew, Quentin Bell's letters: "By attaching a small valve something like a leech to the back of your neck I shall tap all your sensations; the present system is a mere anachronism; that I should be here and you there and nothing between us but a blue sheet (of paper I mean)" (*L IV*, 238). Moreover, this style also belongs to Woolf's art of writing, as she shows in a letter written on 27 June 1919 to Ottoline: "Letters in general aren't so bad, but when one has to sum up one's feelings, to give thanks, to make Ottoline understand how happy she made one, and how the time seemed to lapse, like the Magic Flute, from one air to another—this is what I call, or Clive calls, a problem in art" (*L II*, 371).

2. Studies on Woolf's concept of "central transparency"

Woolf's conception of "central transparency" mainly phrased in four letters (Letters 1622, 1628, 1687 and 1718) to Vita Sackville-West has received considerable attention since the publication of her letters during 1975-1980. Some critics, such as Emily Blair, reduces Woolf's statement on "central transparency" in Letter 1718 to a comment on William Cowper's poem, *The Task* (1785): "She directly locates his 'incandescence' with the fertilizing power of domestic space. […] she praises *The Task* and its lyrical domesticity: its 'lovely domestic scenes' and its 'white fire'; its 'central transparency' and its 'triumph of style'."[37]

More studies mainly focus on Woolf's account of "central transparency" in Letter 1687 and consider it as her criticism on Vita's character or her writing, or on both. For instance, on the one hand, in Alma Halbert Bond's view, this passage not only reveals Woolf's "perceptiveness": "she had seen through the 'as if' nature of Vita's defenses and had recognized that Vita was not a 'real' person"; but also her disappointment that Vita doesn't meet her expectation and that her character prevents their relationship from a further development: "she brilliantly turns the tables on Vita by pinpointing her alienation and unyielding heart of stone. […] Out of her pain and

[37] Emily Blair. *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2007: p. 26.

grief, Virginia understood why their relationship was failing."[38] For Leaska, Woolf's analysis of Vita in the same passage is "a serious matter, this flaw in Vita, tantamount to some congenial character defect. How Virginia came to sense what Vita had tried so hard to conceal was baffling. It was a block nevertheless which Virginia thought muffled her feeling for people and impaired her writing."[39] Based on Leaska's study, Camille-Yvette Welsch also indicates: "Still, Virginia couldn't quite quell the critic inside; she studied Vita."[40] Similarly, Vanessa Curtis treats "central transparency" in this letter as Woolf's "less than friendly analysis of Vita's *own* character, […] [t]his clever, but hurtful assessment of Vita's tendency to distance herself emotionally in her writing."[41]

On the other hand, in discussing Woolf's statements in both Letter 1622 and Letter 1687, Bonnie Kime Scott thinks that Woolf transfers her phrase, "central transparency," which concerns her relationship, into a literary advice, with which Woolf leads Vita into modernist technique of fragmentation: "Woolf served as Sackville-West's advisor on literary form. In criticising her friend's poetry, Woolf conditioned a preference for modernist textual forms to a personal love relationship." Scott argues that in Letter 1687 Woolf's "identification of a missing element hit its mark with Sackville-West"; while with the criticism about "central transparency: Some sudden intensity" in Letter 1622, "[s]he led Vita toward modernist fragmentation."[42] Whereas, Catherine Milsum merely quotes Woolf's phrase of "central transparency" to estimate those of Vita's writings which are not very successful: "Her other work is not as well achieved artistically, betraying a lack of 'central transparency' (in Woolf's phrase)."[43]

Furthermore, Nigel Nicolson not only considers Woolf's view upon "central

[38] Alma Halbert Bond. "Vita and Virginia: The reality behind the masks," *Who Killed Virginia Woolf?: A Psychobiography*. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1989: p. 139-40.
[39] Mitchell A. Leaska, *Granite and Rainbow: The Hidden Life of Virginia Woolf*, p. 257.
[40] Camille-Yvette Welsch. "Biography of Virginia Woolf," *Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005: p. 49.
[41] Vanessa Curtis. *Virginia Woolf's Women*. London: Robert Hale, 2002: p. 155.
[42] Bonnie Kime Scott. *Refiguring Modernism, Volume 1: The Women of 1928*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995: p. 218-9.
[43] Catherine Milsum. "Vita (Victoria Mary) Sackville-West 1892-1962," *Women Writers of Great Britain and Europe: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Katharina M. Wilson and Paul and June Schlueter. 1997. New York: Routledge, 2013: p. 404.

transparency" in Letter 1687 as her "reservations ('a central transparency lacking')" about Vita's writing,[44] but he also argues that "central transparency" is the skill that Woolf tries to master in both letters and novels:

> The letters are records of her daily observation: the novels a distillation of it. In both she sought "clarity", avoiding triteness of thought and expression, disdaining convention and humbug. What mattered to her (as she once defined it for Vita Sackville-West), was "central transparency", by which she meant the precise analysis of common circumstances. She was not interested in the weird, but in the mystery of the normal.[45]

Meanwhile, Lee gives a deeper and more detailed analysis on Woolf's conception of "central transparency" in her biography. First, she indicates that Woolf's consideration in Letter 1622 about Vita's lack of "a little central transparency" in her poem, *The Land* (1926), is "the key to her dissatisfaction with Vita. To herself she complained (jealous of its success?) about its subject and manner: 'so smooth, so mild' (*D III*, 141)."[46] Then, Lee considers Woolf's "central transparency" in Letter 1687 as "a darker analysis of the limits of their intimacy": "this shrewd, cruel overlap between literary and personal criticism" on both Vita's poem and character.[47] Lastly, in discussing Woolf's form in the novel, *To The Lighthouse* (1927), Lee considers Woolf's thought in "How Should One Read a Book?", a lecture delivered on 30 January 1926, as "a note to herself" on the writing" of this novel: "She compares the 32 chapters of a novel to 'an attempt to make something as formed and controlled as a building: but words are more impalpable than bricks' (*E V*, 574)." Lee further argues that it is by creating "a strong structural basis and an appearance of fluid translucence (as in Proust)" that Woolf tries to achieve "a 'central transparency'" in the novel.[48]

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[44] Nigel Nicolson. Introduction. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1923-1928*. 1977. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 1st American Edition. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978: p. xx-xxi.

[45] Nigel Nicolson. Introduction. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1888-1912 (Virginia Stephen)*. 1975. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 1st American Edition. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975: p. xx.

[46] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 502.

[47] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 505.

[48] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 476-7.

Furthermore, critics such as Bond, Curtis, Bonnie Kime Scott, Welsch and Lee, when discussing Woolf's phrase "central transparency" often quote Vita's reaction, in a letter written on 20 November 1926 to her husband, Harold Nicolson, where her desire "to analyse herself with some anguish"[49] or "her feelings of inadequacy"[50] echo Woolf's opinion:

> I got a letter from Virginia, which contains one of her devilish, shrewd, psychological pounces—so true that I'll transcribe it for you […] Damn the woman, she had put her finger on it. There is something muted. […] Something that doesn't vibrate, something that doesn't come alive. […] It makes everything I do (i.e. write) a little unreal; gives the effect of having been done from the outside. It is the thing which spoils me as a writer; destroys me as a poet. But how did V. discover it? I have never owned it to anybody, scarcely even to myself. It is what spoils my human relationships too, but that I mind less.[51]

For example, Welsch shows that "Vita agreed with the diagnosis, and it put her ill at ease. It was looking a little too deeply into who she was; the rigid roles of the letters were a little more comfortable, and she tried to reinstate them in the letters that followed."[52] Lastly, Nigel Nicolson and Lee also regard "central transparency" as the style that Woolf aims to master in her own writing.

Nevertheless, it seems that these critics avoid addressing the very nature of "central transparency": what is "central transparency"? What does Woolf mean by "central transparency" when dealing with either human relationship or writing? Therefore, this part, consisting of three chapters, aims to both examine Woolf's concept of "central transparency" in the fourth chapter and explore her style of "central transparency" in writing in the next two chapters.

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[49] Vanessa Curtis, *Virginia Woolf's Women*, p. 155.
[50] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 505.
[51] Vita Sackville-West, and Harold Nicolson. *Vita and Harold: The Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1992: p. 173-4.
[52] Camille-Yvette Welsch, "Biography of Virginia Woolf," p. 49. See also Alma Halbert Bond, "Vita and Virginia: The reality behind the masks," p. 139-40; and Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism, Volume 1: The Women of 1928*, p. 219.

Chapter Four: Woolf's concept of "central transparency"

Introduction: Woolf's admiration for Vita Sackville-West and her writing

1. Woolf's admiration for Vita

In a letter to Vanessa Bell, written on 10 August 1922, several months before her first meeting with Vita Sackville-West on 14 December 1922,[1] Woolf writes: "Would you be so angelic as to look in Clives room for the Heir, by V. Sackville West, and bring it with you? She admires me; therefore I must try to admire her, which, of course, I shan't find difficult" (*L II*, 544-5). Later, in another letter written on 23 January 1924 to Clive Bell, Woolf's "gossip" (*L III*, 85) includes her high estimation of Vita: "Dear Vita has the body and brain of a Greek God" (*L III*, 85). Reading through Woolf's letters written in the last two decades of her life, one can easily see that Woolf admired Vita from their very first meeting. For instance, in a letter written on 26 December 1924 to Jacques Raverat, Woolf presents Vita as follows:

> Well, only a high aristocrat called Vita Sackville-West, daughter of Lord Sackville, daughter of Knole, wife of Harold Nicolson, and novelist, but her real claim to consideration, is, if I may be so coarse, her legs. […] but all about her is virginal, savage, patrician; […] She descends from Dorset, Buckingham, Sir Philip Sidney, and the whole of English history, which she keeps, stretched in coffins, one after another, from 1300 to the present day, under her dining room floor. (*L III*, 150)

Woolf's admiration for Vita's beauty can also be seen in another letter from 22 May 1927 to Vanessa:

> Then there was Vita, very striking; like a willow tree; so dashing, on her long white legs with a crimson bow; but rather awkward, forced indeed to take her stockings down and rub her legs with ointment at dinner, owing to midges—I like this in the aristocracy. I like the legs; I

[1] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922*, p. 600, Note 2: "Virginia first met Vita Sackville-West (Mrs Harold Nicolson) on 14 December 1922, dining with Clive. Four days later Virginia dined with Vita at her house in Ebury Street, with Clive and Desmond as the other guests. Vita had just published the history of her family, *Knole and the Sackvilles*."

> like the bites; I like the complete arrogance and unreality of their minds—[…]—the whole thing […] is very splendid and voluptuous and absurd. Also she has a heart of gold, and a mind which, if slow, works doggedly; and has its moments of lucidity. (*L III*, 380-1)

Vita's qualities are also praised by Woolf's friends, such as Clive, as she shows in a letter to Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson: "Not a quality, he [Clive] says, is lacking" (*L III*, 421). Among all these qualities of Vita, there are principally three that Woolf appreciates considerably and repeats both in her letters to Vita and those letters to her other friends. One is Vita's ingenuous sincerity, as witness one of Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth: "Vita of course is always such gold, pure, to the heart, that I love her at her most innocent" (*L V*, 135). Woolf's praise of Vita's being chaste and genuine can also be found in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell: "I remain always very fond of her—this I say because on the surface, she's rather red and black and gaudy, I know: and very slow; and very, compared to us, primitive: but she is incapable of insincerity or pose […] and is to my mind genuinely aristocratic" (*L V*, 266).

In Woolf's eye, Vita as a person is ingenuous and sincere while, as an aristocrat and an author, she is also "modest", as Woolf shows in a letter to Vita herself: "your modesty as an author is nothing to your fidelity as a friend" (*L VI*, 215), and in another letter to Ethel Smyth: "Vita: she dined t'other night; and seemed rather aged, I thought: but still […] a perfectly modest and […] sincere human being" (*L VI*, 219). Woolf's view on Vita's "complete modesty" (*L VI*, 56) can also seen in her other letters to Vita: for instance, in a letter from 27 October 1931:

> How I love that story [*The Waves* (1931)], better than any—though its true I'm said […] to be the greatest living poet; which I repeat not so much from vanity as from the noble desire to annoy another poet—one I could touch with a stick about as long as from here to Sevenoaks—but Lor' bless you, she don't mind—Thats the worst of Vita—she has no vanity. (*L IV*, 396)

By replacing the second-person pronoun—"you"—with the third-person pronoun—"another poet", "she" and "Vita"—in the epistolary discourse, Woolf tries

to turn her personal opinion of Vita into an objective truth. Moreover, in another letter written on 18 March 1933 to the same addressee, through a direct quotation of her own talk with Harold, Woolf aims to highlight her praise: "I saw Sibyl [Colefax] the other day; and she has seen Harold, and Harold had said you are a roaring raging success; which, I said, dont matter a straw with Vita. She'll shake her coat, and the grease and the oil will run down her. A great compliment to you" (*L V*, 169). By using a metaphor, Woolf conveys her abstract idea of Vita's humility through a visual image illustrating Vita's detachment.

The third and last quality that permeates Woolf's admiration for Vita is "magnanimity" (*L V*, 226). On the one hand, Vita's is "a generous and exemplary author" (*L VI*, 40) or "of all our authors Vita is the magnanimous Rose, the peach of perfection" (*L VI*, 441), who doesn't desert the Hogarth Press, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 15 September 1933: "He [Leonard] was rather in a stew, and thought we were making demands on your honour, integrity, friendship, magnanimity and so on. I said, Oh but Vita is like that. Then your letter[2] comes to confirm it. It was a noble act though, tossing 1000 guineas into the duckpond, or cesspool" (*L V*, 226). Again, in another letter written on 2 July 1934 to Vita, Woolf writes: "we always point to you as the one, or the most, perfectly disinterested and incorruptible and mild and modest and magnanimous of all our crew. All I feel sometimes […] is that we are fleecing you" (*L V*, 312). Equally, in a letter written on 29 June 1936, Woolf shows: "how angelically you behave to the Hogarth Press! Generous, humane, honourable" (*L VI*, 50). On the other hand, for Woolf, Vita is also "magnanimous" as a friend: "Aren't you one of the nicest and magnanimous of women?" (*L III*, 220) or, "Oh dear, you are a generous, golden hearted woman, dog, or whatever it may be" (*L VI*, 323). In particular, during the Second World War when supplies became insufficient, Vita still "shower[ed], like a goddess, from [her] cornucopia" (*L VI*, 75): "Lord,

[2] In her letter written on 1 September 1933, Vita writes: "Tell Leonard a rival publisher is trying to bribe me away [from the Hogarth Press] with £ 1,000—but I won't be bribed, and have said so." *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell A. Leaska. London, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg: Hutchinson, 1984: p. 408. See also *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V: 1932-1935*, p. 226, Note 1: "Vita to Virginia, 1 September: 'Tell Leonard a rival publisher is trying to bribe me away [from the Hogarth Press] with £ 1,000—but I won't be bribed' (*Berg*)."

Vita!—your broken po, your wool, and then on top your butter!!!" (*L VI*, 448)

Besides, as the above quotations display, in her letters, Woolf always praises Vita through the sentences composed with a series of epithets—"that exemplary economy of adjectives that [Ethel Smyth] so rightly admire[s]" (*L V*, 29); her compliments of Vita's nature, including her sincerity, modesty as well as magnanimity, are always conveyed together. For example, in a letter written on 7 October 1928 to Harold after her travel with Vita to France, Woolf writes:

> But I was going to thank you for having married Vita; and so produced this charming and indeed inimitable mixture— […] / Anyhow we had a perfect week, […] —Vita was an angle to me— […] indulged me in every humour, was perpetually sweet tempered, endlessly entertaining, looked lovely; showed at every turn the most generous and magnanimous nature. […] Only I wish she were not so humble. It is perfect nonsense that she should think so lowly of her gifts and works. (*L III*, 541)

Similarly, in a letter written on 26 November 1935 to Ethel Smyth: "Then Vita came; and you'll be amused to hear that […] my love of her character, so modest so magnanimous, remains unimpaired, […] You'd never think she could turn a phrase; only whip a dog; but she remains, as I say, to me always modesty and gentleness no longer incarnate, but as it were hovering above her, in a nimbus" (*L V*, 447).

2. Woolf's admiration for Vita's writing

In her letters, as Nigel Nicolson indicates, Woolf cannot "suppress a certain admiration for Vita's writing".[3] For instance, in a letter written on 26 December 1924

[3] In the Introduction to the third volume of Woolf's letters, Nigel Nicolson states: "Nor could Virginia suppress a certain admiration for Vita's writing. 'A pen of brass', as she once described it to Jacques Raverat, should not be allowed to stand as her verdict. She discovered in Vita's books a darting imagination, a gift for imagery, which she did not recognise in her conversation. Her 'rich dusky attic of a mind' continually surprised her. Virginia wrote with immense care, constant alteration. Vita produced her books at speed, and this Virginia somehow envied, wondering whether Vita might not be right to assume that the first thought to be put down on paper is probably the best. Her story *Seducers in Ecuador*, which the Hogarth Press published in 1924, was written in the Dolomites each night of a walking-tour, when she was tired, but it as so well-turned, so audacious in Virginia's own manner, that she wondered once again whether she might not have underestimated her friend. So with Vita's two Persian books, and *The Land*, and *Aphra Behn*, such different shapes formed out of so great a variety of material" (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1923-1928*, p. xx.).

to Jacques Raverat, Woolf shows that the fact Vita writes with "complete competency, and a pen of brass, is a puzzle" (*L III*, 150) to her. Equally in her letters to Vita, Woolf admires Vita's "natural powers": "she writes with incredible ease and fills up any odd space of time by dashing off a book" (*L IV*, 193); her "fecundity": "for the last ten years almost, you have cut back and pruned and root dug […] with the result that you write sometimes too much like a racehorse who has been trained till his tail is like a mouses tail and his ribs are like a raised map of the Alps" (*L III*, 521); as well as the fascinating charm in her poetry: "Do you know I think about your writing with interest? […] Very few people interest me as writers" (*L III*, 561).

When reading Vita's novel, *Seducers in Ecuador* (1924), which "looks very pretty, rather like a lady bird" (*L III*, 138), Woolf not only envies Vita, "finishing books straight off" (*L III*, 116); but also shows that Vita's writing stimulates a sort of inspiration for her own writing: "I felt rather spirited up by your story, and wrote a lot—300 words—perhaps, this morning, and have a comfortable feeling that I am going to enjoy reading you again—" (*L III*, 132) Woolf describes such a literary stimulus, "a particular kind of interest which I daresay has something to do with its being the sort of thing I should like to write myself" (*L III*, 131), as follows:

> I like its texture—the sense of all the fine things you have dropped in to it, so that it is full of beauty in itself when nothing is happening—nevertheless such interesting things do happen, so suddenly—barely too; and I like its obscurity so that we can play about with it—interpret it different ways, and the beauty and fantasticality of the details—the butterflies and the negress, for instance. (*L III*, 131)

Similarly, regarding *Passengers to Teheran* (1926), Woolf praises its "fresh unfadedness" and Vita's speed and freedom in writing: "And how did you do it, so fast and free?" (*L III*, 291); "the extent of [her] subtleties": "the sly, brooding thinking evading one" (*L III*, 290-1); as well as her "resources": "Indeed, it is odd that now, having read this, I have picked up a good many things I had missed in private life" (*L III*, 291). Again, Woolf appreciates the obscure texture of Vita's writing:

> The whole book is full of nooks and corners which I enjoy exploring Sometimes one wants a candle in one's hand though—[…] you've left […] one or two dangling dim places. Its a delicious method, and one that takes the very skin of your shape, this dallying discursive one. […] But in the main I think you've hit it off perfectly—the problem being to keep moving […] and yet somehow dally and encircle this and that and enclose them all in the one mesh. (*L III*, 291)

Apart from Vita's fictional writing, Woolf also approves of her critical writing: for instance, Woolf regards *Tolstoy* (1928) as Vita's "best criticism" (*L III*, 529); while during the war, Woolf uses the collection of Vita's articles, *Country Notes* (1939), "as a sedative: a dose of sanity and sheep dog in this scratching, clawing, and colding universe" (*L VI*, 373). Regarding Vita's poetic writing, in a letter written on 2 December 1928, Woolf appreciates her narrative style: "All your feet seem to be coming down on it now, not only the foreleg" (*L III*, 561), or, "Coming down with all her feet at once—thats what I like in a writer. Desmond shuffles, and I'm a jumper: never mind, I'll think it over and tell you" (*L III*, 562). Furthermore, *Sissinghurst* (1931) is considered as "a very harmonious and complete poem; and very stately and urban" (*L IV*, 257), in which Woolf values the permeable power of Vita's style: "I like its suavity and ease; and its calm; and its timelessness and shade; and its air of ring widening widening till they imperceptibly touch the bank. Thats what I like best in your work. And the sense that you have shed all the meretricious horrors of life and have taken to the water; fishlike, absolved" (*L IV*, 256).

In Vita's *Collected Poems* (1933), which is "very stately […] like a slab of ivory engraved with steel" (*L V*, 241), Woolf observes Vita's freedom in her use of technique: "I think I see how you may develop differently. You're an odd mixture as a poet. I like you for being 'out-moded' and not caring a damn: thats why you're free to change; free and lusty" (*L V*, 252). Equally, Woolf describes Vita's biography of her grandmother, *Pepita* (1937), as her "masterpiece, fascinating it sounds" (*L VI*, 72); "more masterly and controlled" (*L VI*, 175): "I think you hold the innumerable threads wonderfully tight and yet easy" (*L VI*, 175); or as Woolf shows in a letter to Ethel Smyth: "I think it's of its kind whatever that means, admirable: as easy to read as

velvet glove to slip into; and very skillful; and compact; […] great fun; and should certainly sweep the market, break the Bank" (*L VI*, 185). Similarly, in Woolf's eye, Vita's biography of Joan of Arc, *Saint Joan of Arc* (1936), is "a solid, strong, satisfactory, most reputable and established work; stone laid to stone; squared, cemented, and all weather tight, roofed in and likely to last these many years" (*L VI*, 49).

Nevertheless, in Woolf's eye, human relation just like reading, not only involves both sides' mutual physical feelings but also depends on individual personality, understanding, knowledge, ability as well as intelligence: "Love is so physical; and so's reading—the exercise of the wits" (*L III*, 570). Furthermore, reading is also a test of one's personal thoughts about "[t]he art of literature" (*L III*, 468): "I shall start reading it [James Elroy Flecker's play, *Hassan* (1922)] and testing my theories of modern poetry directly I am in a fit state" (*L III*, 4). Both in her friendship with Vita and in reading Vita's work, one main dissatisfaction that Woolf finds and repeats in her letters is Vita's lack of "central transparency". But what is "central transparency"?

4.1. "[C]entral transparency" as a sort of sympathetic vibration

4.1.1. "[C]entral transparency" in "human intercourse" (*L III*, 453)

4.1.1.1. Vita's lack of "central transparency" in "human intercourse" (*L III*, 453)

In a letter written on 19 November 1926—Letter 1687—to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf analyses herself as a person who possesses "some gift for intimacy" (*L III*, 302), or "insist[s] upon kindness" (*L III*, 233) as shown in a letter written on 26 January 1926—Letter 1613—to the same addressee. Then, she discloses her purpose in writing to Vita or attempting to create an intimate relationship with her: "to get your sympathy: to make you protective: to implore you to devise some way by which I can cease this incessant nibbling away of life by people" (*L III*, 302). At the

same time, Woolf considers "this aim in view" (*L III*, 233)—her desire for intimacy from Vita—as "[s]ome psychological necessity I suppose: one of those intimate things in a relationship which one does by instinct. I'm rather a coward about this pain in my back: You would be heroic" (*L III*, 302). Nevertheless, Woolf points out that there is a lack of "central transparency" in Vita in both their epistolary communication and their relationship:

> But you dont see, donkey West, that you'll be tired of me one of these days (I'm so much older) and so I have to take my little precautions. Thats why I put the emphasis on 'recording' rather than feeling. But donkey West knows she has broken down more ramparts than anyone. And isnt there something obscure in you? There's something that doesn't vibrate in you: It may be purposely—you dont let it: but I see it with other people, as well as with me: something reserved, muted—God knows what. Still, still, compare this 19th Nov—with last, and you'll admit there's a difference. It's in your writing too, by the bye. The thing I call central transparency—sometimes fails you there too. (*L III*, 302)

Rereading this letter when she analyses herself and Vita, Woolf is "ashamed of its egotism, and feel[s] tempted to tear it up, but ha[s] no time to write another" and thinks that she doesn't "lecture [Vita] nicely" (*L III*, 303). Indeed, in this letter, Woolf suggests that Vita's lack of "central transparency" involves her inability to convey her meaning or her feelings, both of which Woolf suggests through the literal account of her own life: "I put the emphasis on 'recording' rather than feeling." In other words, Woolf aims to devise her indirect method, thanks to which her meaning and affection are both hidden and revealed by the written words in her letters or her silence in her conversations, which should resonate as an echo does in Vita: "if you hadn't the eyes of a newt and the blood of a toad, you'd see it, and not need telling—" (*L III*, 303). But Vita doesn't meet Woolf's expectation, which might be due to both her "slow" (*L III*, 381; *L V*, 266) mind, as Woolf repeats in her letters to Vanessa and Ottoline quoted above, and her "standoffishness" (*L III*, 233) or her innate insensitiveness, as she indicates in a letter written on 2 August 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "it is not that she is

insensitive—merely that she is made that way" (*L IV*, 196).

Accordingly, from the viewpoint of epistolary writing, Woolf's conception of "central transparency" refers to the indirect method of conveying meaning and feeling. It is part of her self-protectiveness, "my little precautions", with which Woolf tries to prevent her future readers from getting too easily at her privacy in her letters. In terms of both written communication and face-to-face conversation—"that perilous undertaking which is called human intercourse" (*L III*, 453), "central transparency" refers to a sort of sympathetic resonance or vibration: the relation of affinity or harmony between people in which whatever affects one correspondingly affects the other. The skill of "central transparency" also relates to the author's natural shyness and her ability to convey ideas in silence. Moreover, "central transparency" not only requires the writer or the speaker's communicative skill; it also hints at the reader's or the audience's capability to recapture these silent ideas. The impact of "central transparency" might be similar to that of emotional resonance in human communication: the agreement or the emotional sympathy, which the writer or the speaker expresses in written or spoken words can be mirrored by the reader or the audience while reading or listening. In short, it signals a mutual form of understanding and acknowledgement.

4.1.1.2. "[C]entral transparency" in human relationship

In Letter 1687, Woolf also considers her desire for intimacy as a common human feature: "one of those intimate things in relationship which one does by instinct" (*L III*, 302). Woolf's view on such a characteristic of human psychology can also be seen in a letter written on 1 April 1931 to Ethel Smyth:

> No: what you give me is protection, so far as I am capable of it. I look at you and (being blind to most things except violent impressions) think if Ethel can be so downright and plainspoken and on the spot, I need not fear instant dismemberment by wild horses. Its the child crying for the nurses hand in the dark. You do it by being so uninhibited: so magnificently unself-conscious. This is what people pay £ 20 a sitting to get from Psycho-analysts—liberation from their

> own egotism. Never mind now—here's Vita coming like a ship in full sail. I think you're right – we all cry for nurses hand. (*L IV*, 302-3)

In Woolf's own eye, she herself "tower[s] above [Vita] in the intimacies of life" (*L IV*, 257); at the same time, "central transparency"—the sympathetic resonance hidden in "something reserved, muted" that Vita lacks: "There you are—staring at me; not very congenial" (*L IV*, 35-6)—can actually "vibrate" in herself and her other friends, as she also indicates in Letter 1687: "but I see it with other people, as well as with me" (*L III*, 302). Reading throughout the six volumes of her letters, "central transparency" can easily be seen to be at the core of Woolf's relationship with her other friends.

For instance, in a letter written on 2 September 1903 to Emma Vaughan, Virginia Stephen compares "central transparency" to a sort of supernatural or mystical power: "Some *spirit* surely connects us. As I sat writing to you on Sunday evening, I said to myself, or rather, as is the way with inspiration, had it said in to my ear—'The toad is at this moment writing to you'. I almost put this in my letter—except that I knew if I did it wouldn't be so—to such depths of *superstition* have I come" (*L I*, 93, *our emphasis*). Moreover, except for Vita, the other three female addressees, Violet Dickinson, Vanessa Bell and Ethel Smyth, to whom the author writes most of her letters, all seem "congenial" to her.

Above all, in her letters to Violet, Virginia Stephen not only indicates that they are "sympathetic": "only my Violet says the right thing, and feels it too" (*L I*, 94-5), but also tries to define "central transparency" in their relationship as "a very fine instinct wireless telepathy nothing to it—in women—the darlings—which fizzle up pretences, and I know what you mean though you dont say it, and I hope its the same with you" (*L I*, 98). With "central transparency" veiled by silence, Virginia Stephen the letter writer, knows which of her thoughts might be shared with her addressee, Violet: "Life would be so much simpler if we could flay the outside skin of all the talk and pretences and sentiments one doesn't feel etc etc etc—Thats why I get on with you isn't it? (here you must show great emotion.)" (*L I*, 97) On the other hand, for Violet the letter reader, reading her letter writer's self-description and her expression

of affection can stir in her a great "sympathy": "You do make me feel penitent. When I hear of your worries and wishes—I dont know if a pen is as fatal to you as it is to me—I feel positively fraudulent—like one who gets sympathy on false pretences" (*L I*, 280).

Similarly, in a letter written on 5 March 1927 to Vanessa, Woolf shows: "you and Angelica; whom I depend on entirely, I find, for congenial conversation" (*L III*, 340). For Woolf, her sister possesses "astonishing powers of sympathy" (*L III*, 451). In their epistolary communication, Vanessa can easily observe the author's "plaints", "the impression of such gloom" (*L I*, 357); and the impact of "central transparency" displays as follows: "If I were to hint at all the miseries which steal out when you dont lull them to sleep, I should only be chidden. I suppose all the blame rests with the post, and there is nothing to fear" (*L I*, 351).

Moreover, in her friendship with Ethel Smyth, Woolf thinks that, instead of herself, her addressee might share more "central transparency" with Gwen Raverat: "Really, there is a sympathy between you, I believe—shes everything thats brave and angular and honest and downright—a far better character than mine" (*L V*, 15). Meanwhile, Woolf's letters written in the two years of 1931 and 1932 to Ethel Smyth are permeated with her frustrated feelings about her communication with her addressee. For instance, in a letter written on 12 May 1931, Woolf repeats "the impossibility of one person understanding another" (*L IV*, 329): "No Ethel, dear, no; I didnt make my meaning plain. I wasnt alluding to any particular instance, of misunderstanding, so much as to the general impossibility, which overcomes me sometimes, of any understanding between two people" (*L IV*, 328). In another letter written on 16 August 1931, Woolf queries the value of friendship: "Lord! I exclaim again (not for the first time) what a farce friendship is!" (*L IV*, 368); and, "And if friendship is futile, and letters futile, and art futile, what remains?" (*L IV*, 369) Again, in another two letters written in September 1931, Woolf shows her disappointed feelings: "Here we sit in dark tunnels, tapping on the wall—Thats friendship—thats communication" (*L IV*, 373); and, "I admit I've been a wretch about writing, but O how I hate writing and the futility of all human intercourse has never seemed to me

greater and these feeble little efforts to patch up whats called understanding—how idiotic" (*L IV*, 382).

Woolf ascribes their difficulty in understanding each other to their opposite characters: "[d]ifferent as we are—O lord how different—" (*L IV*, 394), "We are both extreme in character" (*L V*, 85), or "two people as different as we are" (*L V*, 86). In particular, in Woolf's eye, contrary to her own character, Ethel Smyth "relish[es] praise", her "need of it", as well as her "desire for reverberation" (*L VI*, 59-60): "Only you, being so damned practical, for ever seek for understanding; and I, in whom Cambridge has bred a large measure of unalloyed melancholy, never look for it now" (*L IV*, 327). Despite their extremely different characters, their "misunderstandings" (*L V*, 81), as well as some "natural" (*L V*, 85) "incompatibility between [them]" (*L V*, 81; *L V*, 85), all of which have "blasted [her] belief in the possibility of friendships" (*L V*, 78); Woolf always realises and feels "the value of the thing itself—our friendship. Obtuse and variable as I am, I still think, seriously nothing more important than relationships—that they should be sound, free from hypocrisies, fluencies, palaver—" (*L V*, 86). In other words, Woolf appreciates sincerity and honesty in human relationship. Actually, the conflict conversely reflects both Woolf's and Ethel Smyth's sincere and honest attitudes to their relationship. Furthermore, three of them—conflict, sincerity and honesty—all provoke their desire to communicate and facilitate their communication, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 12 October 1940: "I dont think I've ever taken more time than it takes to form a word in writing to you. A proof of our intercommunicativeness. Hasnt it been a queer collocation, the two people who have nothing alike, except—well, I cant go into that" (*L VI*, 439). This sort of freedom or detachment is what Woolf aims to master in writing, as she shows in a letter written on 16 August 1931 to Ethel Smyth: "But I'm delighted that this version should be current, because the more people think V. W. a statue, chill, cold, immaculate, inapproachable,—a hermit who only sees her own set—the more free I myself am to be myself" (*L IV*, 368-9).

Notwithstanding, in Woolf's eye, Ethel Smyth also possesses the power of "central transparency", either in real life or their epistolary communication. For

example, in a letter written on 16 July 1930 after her visit to Ethel Smyth's house in Woking, Woolf shows: "But in your benignity and perspicacity—its odds how the image of the soaring aeroplane seeing to the bottom persists—you can penetrate my stumbling and fitful ways: my childish chatter. Yes—for that reason, that you see through" (*L IV*, 188). Meanwhile, the sympathetic resonance in their epistolary conversation is described by Woolf as follows: "You see, being an inexpert psychologist any help I can be given is very important to the health and stability of our friendship. Now, if I had alluded to a trait in me, you would have divined it at once, infallibly; and I cant and that worries me" (*L IV*, 195). In Woolf's eye, in their epistolary conversation, Ethel Smyth, "who [is] so comprehensive" (*L IV*, 214), with "a profound and penetrating insight into character" (*L IV*, 152), and her "supernatural apprehensiveness" (*L IV*, 280), "perceptiveness" (*L IV*, 288) and "attentiveness" (*L IV*, 291), not only "will understand [her] use of aesthetic" (*L IV*, 214) through her imaginative description—"I'm building up one of the oddest, most air hung pageants of you and your life" (*L IV*, 214), her "bookishness" (*L IV*, 214), but also: "sometimes you say a thing that I had it in mind to say" (*L V*, 366). In a letter written on 10 August 1935, Woolf uses a metaphor to characterise the "central transparency" in her relationship with Ethel Smyth:

> —aint it odd how free and easy we are together: and what pains over your heart is like a breeze over corn in mine. Now any critic, anyone trained in the art of letters at Cambridge, like your friend Peter Lucas, could tell from that last sentence, with its recurring rhythm, and visual emblem—why dont they make me Prof. of English—I'd teach em—would know from that sentence that I've just come in from a long hot walk over the downs and sat by myself in a cornfield. (*L V*, 423)

Apart from her female friends, there also exists a sort of "central transparency" between Woolf and her male friends: for instance, in a letter written on 18 May 1929 to Vanessa, Woolf indicates that Desmond and Molly MacCarthys seem "more congenial" (*L IV*, 59) to her. Besides Desmond MacCarthy, in writing to Clive Bell,

Virginia Stephen is amused by "central transparency": "So happy I am it seems a pity not to be happier; and yet when I imagine the man to whom I shall say certain things. […] Its strange how much one is occupied in imagining the delights of sympathy" (*L I*, 434). "[C]entral transparency" can excite the author and inspire her to have a further epistolary communication. Moreover, writing to Jacques and Gwen Raverats, Woolf defines "central transparency" as "the same language at heart" (*L III*, 155), which "all congenial spirits" (*L II*, 554), including the Raverats and Woolf herself, share in their correspondence: "You and I can chatter like a whole parrot house of cockatoos (such is my feeling)" (*L III*, 155). Meanwhile, "central transparency" in the epistolary communication between Woolf and Roger Fry belongs to "a movement […] of that sympathy which in spite of all you can say to the contrary, still unites us that made you write to me, the very same moment […] that sitting on my lawn I was saying to Leonard, Well, if I wrote to anybody, it would be to Roger" (*L III*, 208).

In a letter written on 25 August 1929 to Hugh Walpole, Woolf writes: "I was so harassed and badgered that the idea of writing a letter, not a note, not a cheque, not a postcard, not a telegram, but a letter of sympathy and affection was abhorrent" (*L IV*, 83). However, in the same year, in a letter written on 17 February to Quentin Bell, Woolf shows: "God! I had not meant to run on at this rate; but this big hand and the pleasure of writing to so CONGENIAL a CORRESPONDENT has—or have—seduced me" (*L IV*, 25). Woolf's contradictory emotions again reveal her honest attitude to letter writing and reveal the role of "central transparency" as the driving force behind her letters. This consideration can also be seen in Woolf's words in a letter written on 4 October to Gerald Brenan in the same year:

> Suppose one could really communicate, how exciting it would be! Here I have covered one entire blue page and said nothing. One can at most hope to suggest something. Suppose you are in the mood, when this letter comes, and read it in precisely the right light, by your Brazier in your big room, then by some accident there may be roused in you some understanding of what I, sitting over my log fire in Monks House, am, or feel, or think. It all seems infinitely chancy and infinitely humbugging—so many asseverations which are empty, and tricks of

> speech; and yet this is the art of which we devote our lives. Perhaps that is only true of writers—then one tries to imagine oneself in contact, in sympathy; one tries vainly to put off this interminable—what is the word I want?—something between maze and catacomb—of the flesh. And all one achieves is a grimace. And so one is driven to write books—(*L IV*, 97)

Woolf suggests that the art of letters or writing involves an assumption of "central transparency" between correspondents, or between the writer and the reader. In other words, imagining the sort of "central transparency" between herself and her addressees or the reader motivates her to write letters and other types of writings. Therefore, in epistolary or fictional writing, the reader becomes an ideal, implied reader; while "central transparency" becomes a meeting-point between the writer and the reader—a central space where the writer displays his/her own art of writing while the reader experiences aesthetic emotion. Woolf's view foreshadows Iser's theory of a virtual place in writing, where the writer's art and the reader's aesthetic almost meet.[4] Furthermore, in Woolf's life, this assumption of "central transparency" also plays a positive role, posited as it is between life and death: it functions as a support for her.

4.1.2. "[C]entral transparency" in literature

4.1.2.1. The technique of "central transparency" in descriptive facts

4.1.2.1.1. Vita's lack of "central transparency" in descriptive facts

According to the passage quoted from Letter 1687, Vita is incapable of achieving "central transparency"—the sort of sympathetic vibration—in her writing: "It's in your writing too, by the bye. The thing I call central transparency—sometimes fails you there too. I will lecture you on this at Long Barn" (*L III*, 302). Although Vita has a rich descriptive style that can render the dim or shaded beauty of texture or details, although her style possesses the solid, compact structure of architecture, although her material is varied and her treatment of language subtle, *Seducers in Ecuador* is not, according to Woolf, "altogether thrust through" and can be "tightened

[4] See "Section One" in Chapter One.

up, and aimed straighter" (*L III*, 131), *Passenger to Teheran* has "[t]he danger […] that one may let the discussion float off a little too high in the air" (*L III*, 291), and the descriptive method in *Saint Joan of Arc* (1936) is too loose so that Vita fails to characterise her protagonist:

> My only criticism is that you've been so damned fair that one feels now and then a kind of wretch towards the middle of the road, not quite enough rush and flight to make Jeanne angular: to make her I mean rise up identical above all these facts. I see the difficulties. And I expect this was the better way. Only as there is so little one can know for certain, I wished sometimes you had guessed more freely. Thats all. (*L VI*, 49-50)

In such "a perverted and personal criticism" (*L VI*, 50), Woolf suggests that Vita fails to convey a general view or emotion, her own opinion or idea in her writing: the technique of "central transparency" meant to make ideas transparent is clearly not hers. This criticism can also be seen in one of Woolf's letters, written on 20 July 1936 to Ethel Smyth:

> I thought her Joan lacked outline and angularity: was tied down by a myriad of tiny threads of fact; and never thus lifted herself off the ground: but praised V's fairness, in intention, though told her she sat too firm on the hedge for any picture to emerge. C. St. John I thought very much to the point (though carefully muffled) and should myself have said much the same.[5] Vita entirely agreed—with me, I mean. (*L VI*, 57)

Because Vita fails to master the technique of "central transparency", her biography of Joan of Arc is like "a schoolboys essay" (*L VI*, 185), Woolf writes in a letter to Ethel Smyth; and, in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Woolf describes Vita's fictional work, deprived of aim or purpose, as "those sleepwalking servant girl novels" (*L V*, 266).

[5] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936-1941*, p. 57, Note 1: "Christopher St John […] had reviewed *Saint Joan of Arc* in the *New Statesman* on 15 July. She wrote that Vita's 'inability to make up her mind what line to take has impaired the clarity of her narrative. … I have not been able to discover her personal opinion of "poor Jeanne"'."

4.1.2.1.2. The technique of "central transparency" in descriptive facts

In Woolf's debate about the art of literature in her letters to Vita, one major topic refers to her quest for the difference between poetry and prose. For instance, in a letter written on 1 September 1925, Woolf writes: "One test of poetry—do you agree?—is that without saying things, indeed saying the opposite, it conveys things" (*L III*, 199). While reviewing De Quincey's prose writing in her essay, "'Impassioned Prose' (1926)," in mid-1926, Woolf asks: "Are you writing poetry? If so, then tell me what is the difference between that emotion and the prose emotion? What drives you to one and not the other?" (*L III*, 272); or "I'm reading de Quincey […] I'm in the middle of writing about him, and my God Vita, if you happen to know do wire whats the essential difference between prose and poetry—" (*L III*, 281). Again, in a letter written on 4 April 1927, Woolf shows: "I am all the time thinking about poetry and fiction" (*L III*, 359). By probing the difference between poetic and prose writings, Woolf not merely enquires about Vita's opinion but tries to provoke Vita into awareness of the characteristics of prose writing, or descriptive facts, since "[i]f we talk of prose we mean in fact prose fiction. And of all writers the novelist has his hands fullest of facts" (*E IV*, 362), as Woolf indicates in "Impassioned Prose". The writer's opinion is conveyed through the description of facts.

Furthermore, in her literary discussion with Vita, Woolf also tackles the whole process of prose writing. First, in a letter written on 8 September 1928, Woolf points out that the stimulus hidden behind her desire for writing is the feeling of a "plausible and ephemeral" (*L III*, 529) idea:

> I believe that the main thing in beginning a novel is *to feel*, […] it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross: that its to be pulled through only in a breathless anguish. Now when I sit down to an article, I have a net of words which will come down on the idea certainly in an hour or so. But a novel, as I say, to be good should seem, before one writes it, *something unwriteable: but only visible*. (*L III*, 529, *our emphasis*)

In another letter written on 31 January 1927, Woolf likens her feeling of such an idea

to the act of catching the vision of a "fish": "I keep opening the lid and looking into my mind to see whether some slow fish isn't rising there—some new book" (*L III*, 321).

Such a feeling is again defined as "a sight, an emotion" in a letter written on 16 March 1926:

> As for the *mot juste*, you are quite wrong. Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. But on the other hand here am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm. Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words, a sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it: But no doubt I shall think differently next year. (*L III*, 247)

This sight or feeling acts as a hidden rhythm, which runs through the whole piece of work, dominates the composition of words and phrases, organises impressions, unifies different emotions, as well as bridges different parts of the work as a whole. In this wave of rhythm hidden behind the words, there are always ups and downs: different emotions voiced through words and sentences accumulate here or fade there, ebb and flow, like the movement of the wave. Woolf not only declares here: "Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm"; but also in a letter written on 7 April 1931 to Ethel Smyth, she shows that "the loudspeaker is pouring forth Wagner from Paris. His rhythm destroys my rhythm; yes, that's a true observation. All writing is nothing but putting words on the backs of rhythm. If they fall off the rhythm one's done—" (*L IV*, 303) Meanwhile, in discussing "'form' in literature" or "form in fiction" with Roger Fry in a letter written on 22 September 1924, Woolf insists: "I've been writing about Percy Lubbock's book [*The Craft of Fiction* (1921)], […] I say it is emotion put into the right relations; and has nothing to do with form as used of painting" (*L III*, 133).

In "On Re-reading Novels,"[6] Woolf approves of Lubbock's view on the novel as a form in *The Craft of Fiction*: form is "something lasting that we can know, something solid that we can lay hands on"; and it is "such a thing as the book itself" (*E VI*, 425), insisting on the importance of emotion: "both in writing and in reading it is the emotion that must come first" (*E VI*, p. 427). She argues that emotion is the reader's, "our material" (*E VI*, 427); while "form" or the "art" of writing, which "survives" in or during reading and can be "place[d] […] for ever among the treasures of the universe", is "inspired" by emotion but "beyond" it, "tranquillises it, orders it, composes it" (*E VI*, 427-8). Therefore, in the conclusion of this essay, Woolf claims: "First, that when we speak of form we mean that certain emotions have been placed in the right relations to each other; then that the novelist is able to dispose those emotions and make them tell by methods which he inherits, bends to his purpose, models anew, or even invents for himself" (*E VI*, 430). For Woolf, the aim of writing is to convey an idea or emotion; while in terms of style, this idea or emotion functions as a rhythm running through the whole writing.

Moreover, in a letter written on 31 January 1927 to Vita, Woolf also shows how to present such an idea or an emotion:

> I was trying to *get at something about the thing itself before its made into anything: the emotion, the idea*. The danger for you with your sense of tradition and all those words—a gift of the Gods though—is that you help this too easily into existence. I dont mean that one ought to strain, to write slowly, expressively, or so on: only that one ought to *stand outside with one's hands folded, until the thing has made itself visible*: we born writers tend to be ready with our silver spoons to early: I mean I think there are odder, deeper, more angular thoughts in your mind than you have yet let come out. […] I'm going to read the Land through as soon as I get a chance. (*L III*, 321, *our emphasis*)

Compared to poetry, in which the poets convey a single impression, idea or emotion through an exact, intensive statement, as discussed in the introduction of this part;

[6] An undated revision, which is first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 20 July 1920, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 423-32.

prose writers aim to suggest a presence or a feeling beneath the surface of their detailed description of facts. This indirect method of making an idea or an emotion transparent in silence is what Woolf means by "central transparency" in Letter 1687; it is what Vita fails to do in her writing, even in *The Land* (1926). In Woolf's eye, unlike poetry, the suggestive technique of "central transparency" involves both the beauty of prose writing and the writer's capacity to write, as she shows in a letter written on 1 September 1925 to Vita: "Now poetry being the simpler, cruder, more elementary of the two, furnished also with an adventitious charm, in rhyme and metre, can't carry beauty as prose can. Very little goes to its head" (*L III*, 200).

For Woolf, Proust succeeds in achieving such a technique of "central transparency" in his writing: as discussed in chapter three, his writing is enveloped by a kind of consciousness;[7] so is Katherine Mansfield's, as she shows in a letter written on 8 August 1931 to Vita: "I thought, because she had, as you say, the zest and the resonance—I mean she could permeate one with her quality; and if one felt this cheap scent in it, it reeked in ones nostrils" (*L IV*, 366).

4.1.2.2. "[C]entral transparency" in reading

According to Woolf, Vita is also unable to achieve "central transparency" when reading other writers' writing. For example, in a letter written on 1 June 1926, Woolf considers this suggestive method of conveying meaning through silence as "an aroma" that Viola Tree achieves in her memoirs, *Castles in the Air: The Story of My Singing Days* (1926):

> You are utterly wrong about Viola[8]. Why read memoirs as if they were poems? Don't you see her vulgarity is *not* vulgar, her irreticence is *not* unashamed: an aroma—she aims at that: life: fact: not the thing we go for—but I cant make you understand: try reading as if you were catching a swarm of bees; not hunting down one dart like dragon fly.

[7] See chapter three.

[8] In a letter written on 29 May 1926 to Woolf, Vita says: "And oh, dear, idolised Virginia that you are, how *could* you publish Viola? it makes me vomit. I don't like you to sell your soul" (*The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, p. 139). Or see *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 268, Note 1.

(*L III*, 268)

In order to attain a kind of "central transparency", to catch Tree's purpose transferred through her garrulous account of facts, Woolf advises Vita to feel Tree's memoirs instead of looking for one particular impression as she does when reading poems.

Reading this appears as a main topic in Woolf's letters to Vita. For example, in a letter written on 24 August 1925:

> What I wish is that you would deal seriously with facts. […] What I want is the habits of earthworms; the diet given in the workhouse: anything exact about a matter of fact—milk, for instance—the hours of cooling, milking etc. From that, proceed to sunsets and transparent leaves and all the rest, which, with my mind rooted upon facts, I shall then embrace with tremendous joy. Do you think there is any truth in this? (*L III*, 198)

In advising Vita to write both about the activities of animals and domestic life in a single day in her poem, *The Land*, Woolf suggests that facts can provoke emotion in the reader. This "truth" can be seen in another letter written in January 1929 to the same addressee: "the truth of one's sensations is not in the fact, but in the reverberation" (*L IV*, 5). If facts provoke in Woolf the reader a kind of reflection, reflecting on facts stimulates emotion. This process can be compared to throwing a pebble in a pool. Facts play the role of the pebble while the mind functions as a pool: emotions are not stirred in the reader by the pebble but by the ripples of water.

"[C]entral transparency" in reading refers to the sensation which is provoked in the reader who is reading. It is something Vita fails to experience but Woolf does. For instance, in reading Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927), Woolf describes her physical sensation in a letter written on 6 May 1922 to Roger Fry: "And at the moment such is the astonishing vibration and saturation and intensification that he procures—theres something sexual in it—[…] Scarcely anyone so stimulates the nerves of language in me: it becomes an obsession" (*L II*, 525).

In "On Re-reading Novels," Woolf also approves of Lubbock's view on

reading and indicates that the reason for the reader to "talk […] vaguely about novels" (*E VI*, 424) is due to "our first reading" (*E VI*, 425), and that the one for our failure to discover the form or emotion of the book is due to "our own incompetency": we don't "read the book as [the writer] meant it to be read" (*E VI*, 425). Woolf argues that for readers to achieve such "central transparency", that is, to experience the form or emotion of the book, involves "the very process of reading itself" (*E VI*. 26):

> To perceive this we should read at arm's length from the distractions we have named. We must receive impressions but we must relate them to each other as the author intended. And it is when we have shaped our impressions as the author intended that we are then in a position to perceive the form itself, and it is this which endures, however mood or fashion may change. (*E VI*, 425)

Through such a method of reading, we discover the general idea, the emotion, or the form of the book: "the presence of an alien substance which requires to be visualised imposing itself upon emotions which we feel naturally, and name simply, and range in final order by feeling their right relations to each other" (*E VI*, 427).

4.2. "[C]entral transparency" as intense sentences

While reading the typescript of *The Land* (1926), Woolf points out in a letter written on 1 March 1926, Letter 1622, another aspect of "central transparency" which is lacking in Vita's writing:

> I read a bit of your poem the other night—it must be good, I think: one can break off crumbs and suck them. […] I wish you'd not say 'profile' on the first page; its not right there: *outline*—something English would be better there. Like a rich cake, I can break crumbs off your poem. I imagine it wants *a little central transparency: Some sudden intensity*: I'm not sure. Send me something you've written. What I mean by a *sudden intensity* may be nonsense. (*L III*, 244-5, *our emphasis*)

Meanwhile, in another letter written one month later, on 13 April 1926, Letter 1628,

Woolf details this sort of "central transparency": "I expect I only meant something about descriptive poetry needing *a human focus* in the middle. Vegetables become rather crushing. I expect though it is there; only a little obscured by detail" (*L III*, 253, *our emphasis*).

In "On Re-reading Novels," commenting on Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple* (1877), Woolf points out and analyses those intense sentences in Flaubert's writing: the description of emotions as butterflies ("des papillons"); a brief psychological analysis of the mistress's kiss; as well as the interaction between the protagonist and the parrot, "l'oiseau" (*E VI*, 426). Woolf argues that, when impressions "arrive" and continue to "accumulate" in Flaubert's description of life, it is through "[a] sudden intensity of phrase", which is "emphatic" and constitutes "the final signal" with which Flaubert aims to "startle" his readers "into a flash of understanding" or "moments of understanding: "We see now why the story was written" (*E VI*, 426).

Furthermore, in "On Not Knowing Greek (1925)," Woolf states that, in Greek drama, the "central transparency" sentences belong to "something emphatic, familiar, brief, that would carry, instantly and directly, to an audience of seventeen thousand people perhaps" (*E IV*, 40). Though their plays are based on "legends" (*E IV*, 40), different playwrights compose such intense sentences with different techniques, so as to stimulate the audience's imagination and arrest both their attention (*E IV*, 39) and emotion: "a great fund of emotion is ready prepared, but can be stressed in a new place by each new poet" (*E VI*, 40).

For instance, in his play *Electra*, Sophocles uses his character's "cries of despair, joy, hate" to "give angle and outline to play" (*E IV*, 41). Such "[a] fragment of [characters'] speech" or "voices" (*E IV*, 42) is "a design […] which cut each stroke to the bone, would stamp each finger-print in marble" (*E IV*, 41). For Woolf, these fragmentary voices—"the very words that people might have spoken" (*E IV*, 45)—also are the technique that Jane Austen uses in her novels so as to "rise higher than the rest" of her writing (*E IV*, 41). These brief spoken sentences of Electra convey timeless, impersonal general ideas: "her words put on the assurance of immortality. […] they certainly throw no light upon the speaker's character or the

writer's. But they remain, something that has been stated and must eternally endure" (*E IV*, 43). In short, in Sophocles's and Jane Austen's writings, the intense sentences—the second sort of "central transparency"—belong to the fragmentary speech or voice of their characters, which not only can summarise the general, immortal idea in the whole writing, but in terms of structure, symbolise the climax of writing.

However, this technique may endanger the consistency between the actors' speech and their actions; the chorus, "the undifferentiated voices who sing like birds in the pauses of the wind", a type of "central transparency" in Greek drama, acts as "a means" to "comment, sum up, or allow the poet to speak himself or supply, by contrast, another side to his conception" (*E IV*, 43). In Woolf's view, though "to grasp the meaning of the play the chorus is of the utmost importance," it has "obscurities" (*E IV*, 43). Sophocles uses the chorus to praise "some virtue, or the beauties of some place" (*E IV*, 43), to "change, not the point of view, but the mood" (*E IV*, 44); while Euripides composes it with "flashes of poetry and questions far flung and unanswered" so as to create "an atmosphere of doubt, of suggestion, of questions" and "combine incongruities and thus enlarge his little space, as a small room is enlarged by mirrors in odd corners" (*E IV*, 45). Euripides's chorus not only "baffle[s] rather than instruct[s]" his readers, but also draws them in "the world of psychology and doubt" (*E IV*, 44).

The third type of "central transparency" in Greek literature that Woolf discusses in this essay relates to the metaphors Aeschylus uses in his plays: Aeschylus arranges "the very words that people might have spoken" (*E IV*, 45) in "companies" (*E IV*, 44) so that they have "in some mysterious way a general force, a symbolic power" (*E IV*, 45): "By the bold and running use of metaphor he will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid" (*E IV*, 45). This is the poetic language that Dostoevsky or Shakespeare also use:

> The meaning is just on the far side of language. It is the meaning which in moments of astonishing excitement and stress we perceive in our minds without words; it is the meaning that Dostoevsky (hampered as he was by prose and as we are by translation) leads us to by some astonishing run up the scale of emotions and points at but cannot indicate; the meaning that Shakespeare succeeds in snaring. (*E IV*, 45)

With this symbolic, poetic language, the prose writer transcends the limits of prose. The meaning of these metaphors is not conveyed in "the thing itself", but hidden beneath the surface of words and revealed in the reader's "reverberation and reflection" (*E IV*, 45) of the thing. In order to overcome the "ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry" (*E IV*, 44-5), readers need to read "quietly, carefully, and sometimes two or three times over" so as to capture this symbolist meaning.

The last type of "central transparency" in Greek literature that Woolf mentions in her essay refers to Socrates's dialogues, which invite readers to "seek truth with every part of us" (*E IV*, 47): "It is an exhausting process; to concentrate painfully upon the exact meaning of words; to judge what each admission involves; to follow intently, yet critically, the dwindling and changing of opinion as it hardens and intensifies into truth" (*E IV*, 46). In short, for Woolf, these four different types of "central transparency" in the brief, spoken, poetic Greek language, "so clear, so hard, so intense" (*E IV*, 49) have readers "most in bondage" (*E IV*, 48). They are also the reasons why Woolf considers Greek as "the only expression" (*E IV*, 49), "the impersonal literature" as well as "the literature of masterpieces" (*E IV*, 50).

4.3. The "mould" (*L III*, 333) of the style of "central transparency"

Our analysis of Woolf's statements about "central transparency" in her three letters to Vita (Letters 1687, 1622 and 1628) has shown that Woolf's concept of "central transparency" is twofold, referring as it does to the sympathetic vibration in descriptive facts and the outline, intense sentences. In a letter written on 18 February 1927 to Vita, Letter 1718, Woolf shows that both sorts of "central transparency"

constitute “the triumph of the style”:

> I read Cowper: The Task [1785]. Now there’s a man with a dash of white fire in him. It comes so strangely, among such flummery: one line, one phrase. […] The domestic scenes are lovely: and then this white fire: what I call central transparency. For a long poem of course you need a mould: and lines to fall smooth one after another: but also now and again what saves one is the wave rising solitary; a line about a hare perhaps; something said still with the formal lilt, but completely in his own voice. This seems to me the triumph of style. (*L III*, 333)

By taking William Cowper’s poem, *The Task* (1785), as an example, Woolf again tries to show to Vita that Cowper succeeds in conveying ideas both through descriptive facts—“such flummery” of “domestic scenes”—and the intense, symbolic sentence—“a dash of white fire” composed with the description of an animal, a “hare”. These two components form “a mould” for writing: when emotion gathers strength through the depiction of impressions about life, the intense sentence not only intensifies this emotion but also suggests some meaning or idea, which in turn echoes the one conveyed through impressions in the descriptive facts. Moreover, grammatically speaking, though the subjects of the intense sentence belong to non-human entities and are apparently irrelevant to other writing; such an expression is constructed with the rhythm, which is identical to those sentences contributing to the descriptive facts.

According to Woolf’s words on Cowper and Lady Austen in “Four Figures (1932),[9] one of Cowper’s “unnumbered” “hidden divinities” (*L III*, 570) refers to “this intensity of vision” of the natural world, which “gives his poetry […] its unforgettable qualities”, “makes passages in *The Task* like clear windows let into the prosaic fabric of the rest”, gives “the edge and zest to his talk”, as well as endows “the long winter evenings” and “the early morning visits” with “an indescribable combination of pathos and charm” (*E V*, 463). With the word “vision”, Woolf hints that the description of the natural world in Cowper’s poem is enclosed within a

[9] “Four Figures (1932),” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 459-494.

sympathetic human consciousness, the observer's: that is, this description exposes a reflection of the writer's state of mind. In such sympathy between man and nature, each enhances and sustains the other: man becomes a part of everything that is around him, while everything around him is a part of him. This view is what William Hazlitt argues in *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818),[10] which Woolf herself comments in "William Hazlitt (1932)".[11] In his book, Hazlitt shows that Cowper's description of his vivid impression about the landscape is imprinted upon "his own imagination" and belongs to "the fine natural mould in which his feelings were bedded". In other words, in Hazlitt's view, Cowper "puts his hearts into his subject, writes as he feels, and humanises whatever he touches. He makes all his descriptions teem with life and vivifying soul."[12] Hazlitt argues that such an imaginative description of nature embraced with a sort of consciousness in Cowper's poem can "transfer the same unbroken, unimpaired impression to the imagination of his readers"[13] and possess "the power of moving and infusing the warmth of the author's mind into that of the reader".[14] For both the writer and the reader, natural objects are thus associated with the strongest emotions and become part of their being.[15]

It is such a style of "central transparency" that Woolf means to show to Vita through her criticism of Cowper's poem in Letter 1718; she also advises Vita to appreciate it when reading. Moreover, by indirectly recommending Hazlitt's book in a letter written in March 1928, Woolf actually suggests the similarity between her own style and that of Cowper: "I have been reading Hazlitt. For 5 minutes my mind runs on the same rails that the book runs on. I can only think in the same curves. Could you tell me where I began to read Hazlitt and where I left off? Are you a critic? Now Vita,

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[10] William Hazlitt. *Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution*. London: Printed for Taylor and Hessey, 1818.

[11] "William Hazlitt (1932)" collected in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 494-505, is a revised version from former two essays: the first one is a signed essay, "Wm. Hazlitt, the Man", published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on 7 September 1930, while the second one is an unsigned essay with variations from the first one, entitled "William Hazlitt", as the leading article of *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* [1778-1830], published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 18 September 1930 (see *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 173, note 1).

[12] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution*, p. 171-3.

[13] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution*, p. 172.

[14] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution*, p. 180.

[15] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution*, p. 199.

sit down and think about yourself" (*L III*, 474).

Such a style is also what characterises George Crabbe's writing, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 1 September 1925:

> In bed I gave been fuming over your assumption that my liking for the poet Crabbe is avowed. […] I have read Peter Grimes[16] I daresay 6 times in 10 years; […] There is also a magnificent description of wind among bulrushes which I will show you if you will come here. But I find to my surprise that Crabbe is almost wholly about people. One test of poetry—do you agree?—is that without saying things, indeed saying the opposite, it conveys things: thus I always think of fens, marshes, shingle, the East Coast, rivers with a few ships, coarse smelling weeds, men in blue jerseys catching crabs, a whole landscape in short, as if I had read it all there: but open Crabbe and there is nothing of the sort. One word of description here and there—that is all. The rest is how Lucy got engaged to Edward Shore. So if you poem [*The Land*] is as you say all about the woolly aphis, I may come away from it dreaming of the stars and the South Seas. (*L III*, 199)

According to Woolf, the "mould" of the style of "central transparency" in George Crabbe's poetic letter, "Peter Grimes," is comprised of a large proportion of narrative focusing on humankind and some sentences about landscape. By using the brief description of the natural world to symbolise and summarise human beings' inner life, "Crabbe is the only poet who has attempted and succeeded in the *still life* of tragedy" (*E V*, 501-2), a comment quoted by Woolf from Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets* in her essay, "William Hazlitt (1932)."

Using Hazlitt's words, Crabbe appears as "the most literal of […] descriptive poets" and "his own landscape-painter, and engraver too", who "exhibits the smallest circumstances of the smalles things, […] gives the very costume of meanness; the non-essentials of every trifling incident".[17] Crabbe aims to solidify human emotions, in particular the negative ones, in his accurate description of the natural world: "Crabbe […] gives the stagnation of hope and fear—the deformity of vice without the

[16] The narrative poem in George Crabbe's collection of poems, *The Borough* (1810), arranged as a series of twenty-four letters.
[17] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution*, p. 190.

temptation—the pain of sympathy without the interest—and […] seems to rely, for the delight he is to convey to his reader, on the truth and accuracy with which he describes only what is disagreeable."[18] However, such a description can stimulate in readers, including both Hazlitt and Woolf, some associations of ideas. In this technique of "central transparency", which enables Crabbe to convey ideas in silence or use description as a mirror of ideas, lies the "charm" of his writing that Woolf not only "like[s]" (*L III*, 198) and "worship[s]" with "passion" (*L V*, 14), but also advises her addressee, Vita, to achieve in writing.

Moreover, referring to Vita's composition of *The Land*, Woolf suggests that a fragmentary description of the natural world can expand the limited scope of some writing, as Euripides does by creating an atmosphere of contradiction in his plays: "Euripides […] combines incongruities and thus enlarges his little space, as a small room is enlarged by mirrors in odd corners" (*E IV*, 45). Such writing also depends on the reader's capacity of imagination and knowledge.

As Woolf shows in "Phases of Fiction (1929)," Proust uses such a "mould" in his novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Woolf describes Proust's style of "central transparency" as "two faces to every situation" or "this double vision":

> In *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, however, there is as much poetry as in any of these books; but it is poetry of a different kind. The analysis of emotion is carried further by Proust than by any other novelist; and the poetry comes, not in the situation, which is too fretted and voluminous for such an effect, but in those frequent passages of elaborate metaphor, which spring out of the rock of thought like fountains of sweet water and serve as translations from one language into another. It is as though there were two faces to every situation; one full in the light so that it can be described as accurately and examined as minutely as possible; the other half in shadow so that it can be described only in a moment of faith and vision by the use of metaphor. The longer the novelist pores over his analysis, the more he becomes conscious of something that forever escapes. And it is this double vision that makes the work of Proust to us in our generation so spherical, so comprehensive. Thus, while Emily Brontë and Herman Melville turn the novel away from shore out to sea, Proust on the other

[18] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution*, p. 192-3.

> hand rivets his eyes on men. (*E V*, 79)

For Woolf, on the one hand, Proust uses prose writing to describe subjects and characters in detail, to penetrate them with his keen eye and to make them transparent through a comprehensive narrative. On the other hand, he composes metaphors with a brief, intense, poetic language so as to convey his ideas in silence.

Conclusion

The four letters to Vita can be regarded as Woolf's lecture on the style of "central transparency". In terms of structure, elaborate prose writing aims to convey a general view and create emotion; while the intense, symbolic sentences outline this view and intensify this emotion. Such a twofold style involves a method of suggestiveness, connected with Woolf's theory of impersonality. Moreover, this style is also what Woolf advises her nephew, Julian Bell, to achieve in his poems, for example, in a letter written on 16 October 1927: "I think you will have to learn to leave out details, even though they are good in themselves, so as to give a more generalised view" (*L III*, 432). Similarly, in another letter written on 2 May 1928, Woolf asks Julian to not only convey a general view through the description of the natural world, but also to use emotion as a general shaping power: "But I still think you need to get a broader view of nature as a whole before you can make your observations into poetry. They dont make poems yet; only lists of things one after another. This applies most to the natural history poems. I think you want some mood to give them unity and driving force" (*L III*, 491). She praises one of his poems where Julian creates such an emotion:

> But this doesn't apply to the later ones—more especially to the Ode to Jefferies. I think this is much more coherent and pulled through. There you have given one emotion which subdues the details instead of leaving them separate and unjoined. I like this very much. I hope you

> will try to give more emotion and less observation; or rather to combine them more. (*L III*, 491)

What remains to be seen is what kind of "central transparency" Woolf herself develops in her epistolary writing, in particular, in her letters to Vita Sackville-West.

Chapter Five: Woolf's style of "central transparency" (I): Imagery

Introduction

1. Woolf's style of "central transparency" as a feminine, "inward and intimate" style (*L I*, 212)

In a letter dated 1902 to her elder brother, Thoby Stephen, Virginia Stephen tries to describe a bird: "I saw a blue bird with a yellow chest and cheeks on my window sill, the other morning. What should you think he was. 'My dear Goat—no woman knows how to describe a thing accurately!'" (*L I*, 59) This quotation discloses that at that time, Virginia Stephen was already fully aware of her own feminine identity and of what men would consider as women's common weakness for writing. This awareness not only stirs in her the possibility of being laughed at but also inhibits her from writing a further description of the natural world, what Adrian Stephen, her younger brother, called "phrase making", as appears in a letter Virginia Stephen sent to Lady Robert Cecil in June 1908: "We went to Hampton Court yesterday, and to Kew the other day, and to Hampstead, and Dulwich, coming home at night—and the romance of the suburbs almost astounds me. There are enormous trees, and great lakes of water, and profound solitudes. This is what Adrian calls 'phrase making'" (*L I*, 435). Moreover, in a letter written on 22 March 1907 to Clive Bell, Virginia Stephen indicates that from a conventional point of view, either in letter writing or other types of writing, "a woman […] is always naked of artifice; and that is why she generally lives so well, and writes so badly" (*L I*, 289).

In another letter written on 19 February 1909 to Clive, Virginia Stephen states that for "generations of women", letter writing has been "the prosecution of their friendships" (*L I*, 385): "The intimate, emotional, and (it must be confessed) often irrational, though entirely delightful nature of their relationships is to be fixed on it. One cant write epigrams, or talk politics or housekeeping in one's dressing gown, with the hair about one's shoulders; one cant part without a kiss" (*L I*, 385). From the conventional point of view, though women's letters are characterised by intimacy and permeated with their affection, they are illogical and improvisational. As she shows in her other letters to Clive, as a woman, Virginia Stephen is "really shy of expressing

[her] affection" (*L I*, 345) for a man, e.g. Clive: "the d——d smugness overcame me. I am still very shy of saying what I feel" (*L I*, 419); she "always feel[s] self-conscious" (*L I*, 418) while writing to him; she is also afraid of being a "taunt" (*L I*, 418) and being "laugh[ed] at the natural trend of [her] letter" by him: "I have read it over, and half think to burn it" (*L I*, 330). Compared to her sister, Vanessa Bell, and her father, Leslie Stephen, Virginia Stephen is a person, who is, as she shows in a letter written on 16 August 1909 to Vanessa, "distract[ed]" by various "reflections", "intensif[ies] atoms", is "selfconscious" as well as "an egoist" with "imagination" (*L I*, 408).

Furthermore, in a letter dated February 1907 to Violet Dickinson, Virginia Stephen states that writing has an overwhelming power on her: "I dont know if a pen is fatal to you as it is to me" (*L I*, 280), and writes: "I do regret that I expressed myself so forcibly that day: it was only a passing melancholy" (*L I*, 280). Whereas, in a letter written on 22 March 1907 to Clive, she describes that such a powerful urge to express herself makes her lose her awareness of the outer physical world:

> Honestly, I withdraw into a strange upper world when I sit down before a table; very soon it will be withdrawn beyond sight, and belief. O God, the world it frets and rages: little chopped waves have surged to the very roof of the house. My room is a bare island in the midst. After luncheon I shall be swamped too. / Well then, how am I to write a letter? (*L I*, 289)

When writing letters, Virginia Stephen not only becomes passive but is also drawn into her own inner life. This state of being is described by Leonard Woolf as "a genius's method of composition and imagination": "In her diary, when she describes how she wrote the last page of *The Waves*, she says that suddenly, as she was writing, the pen as it were took control of her and her thoughts raced ahead of herself, and she followed her own thoughts."[1]

On the other hand, in a letter dated February 1907 to Clive, Virginia Stephen writes: "A true letter, so my theory runs, should be a film of wax pressed close to the

[1] Leonard Woolf. "Virginia Woolf: Writer and Personality," *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995: p. 147.

graving in the mind" (*L I*, 282). In her letters, she wants to explore her mind, as she shows in a letter written on 6 May 1908 to the same addressee: "I shall reach the uttermost corner, and crawl even into the crevices" (*L I*, 329). Thus, a true, natural letter is composed in "[her] garrulous tongue" (*L I*, 329) with "[a] horrible tone of egoistic joy" (*L I*, 416), and can then "reflect" "the virtues of [her head]" (*L I*, 454). Consequently, such letters and those addressed to Clive can expose "an incomprehensible and quite negligible femininity" (*L I*, 329), which includes both her "feminine weakness" (*L I*, 45) and "the feminine mind" (*L I*, 46), as Virginia Stephen shows in another two letters written in 1902 to Thoby. At the same time, this type of letter will be suffused with imagination and interwoven with reflections, both of which, like "some very tortuous and angular incisions" (*L I*, 282), might destroy the compactness and consistency of writing: "I see all you say of my looseness—great gaps are in all my sentences, stitches across with conjunctions—and verbosity—and emphasis" (*L I*, 330), but also break off a sort of coherence and logicality while reading: "There are various matters I should like to talk to you about; for, with my loose pen I am always afraid of inflicting gashes on your ears" (*L I*, 330).

Nevertheless, Virginia Stephen cannot resist the impulse to write: "my brain was full of the ghosts of phrases" (*L I*, 418), and "my head feels like a gently bubbling kettle—an ideal state" (*L I*, 454). Moreover, she wants to transcend all kinds of confines between woman and man and between the writer and the reader, so as to write "a true letter" or achieve a sort of free writing, in which she can be herself, present herself, as well as convey her ideas and emotions, as she shows in a letter dated May 1908 to Clive: "Isn't there a kind of talk which we could all talk, without these mystic reservations? That is what I grope after, and believe we ought to find" (*L I*, 334). She wants to challenge the conventional method of letter writing and to "vitiate John Bailey's stock phrase 'the art of letter writing is dying out—'" (*L II*, 12), which means to be "grammatical" (*L I*, 98) and to avoid "jerks and spasms" (*L VI*, 90). To use Woolf's statements in "A Letter to A Young Poet (1932)," for John Bailey, "[t]he penny post […] has killed the art of letter-writing. Nobody […] has the time even to cross their t's. We rush […] to the telephone. We commit our half-formed

thoughts in ungrammatical phrases to the post card" (*THL*, 213); on the contrary, Woolf not only replies: "Nonsense. The art of letter-writing has only just come into existence. It is the child of the penny post" (*THL*, 213), but also explains that "a true letter" (*THL*, 214) is "intimate, irreticent, indiscreet in the extreme" (*THL*, 214), and traces "the line of [the writer's] thought from the roof which leaks ('splash, splash, splash into the soap dish')" (*THL*, 214). This is an "illiterate and spasmodic letter" composed by "[the] writer's cramp and palsy of the brain" (*L I*, 93), and it actually displays the beauty of writing, as Virginia Stephen shows in a letter written on 18 April 1906 to Lady Robert Cecil: "But beautiful writing is like music often, the wrong notes, and discords and barbarities that one hears generally—and makes too" (*L I*, 223).

"What a mercy it is, my good woman, that I can write to you, […] with *perfect freedom*" (*L I*, 206), Virginia Stephen relieves her cry in a letter written on 27 August 1905 to Violet Dickinson. First of all, when writing to Emma Vaughan as early as in 1899, such freedom enables Virginia Stephen to get pleasure from her imaginative descriptions (*L I*, 24), to relieve "[t]he thoughts that arise in [her]" (*L I*, 26), to train herself to be a writer through imaginative descriptions: "But the great work is written with an imaginative elegance which few can rival" (*L I*, 29), and to satisfy her own desire for expression and communication: "Heavens! what a long letter this is! But it is Sunday morning, and I am sitting solitary in my room with no dear sheep dog [Emma] to talk to, and I cant help writing for the life of me, and you must be my receptacle" (*L I*, 34).

Violet Dickinson, to whom more than half the letters in the first volume are written, is also a "receptacle", as the author shows in a letter dated Autumn 1903: "What a universal receptacle you are!" (*L I*, 104) Writing letters to Violet with "*perfect freedom*", above all, Virginia Stephen stimulates her own potential for literature, that is her figurative language:

> Nessa […] had a long visit from Katie [Cromer], which she said was

> like the descent of Artemis or Aphrodite. Did Nessa ever say anything so literary? No—but Aphrodite pushing through fields of Amaranth, and plucking berries of amber, while jays twittered on her shoulder. If Katie should ever attain to that rank where a Court Poet or fool is needed—there is one—I need say no more. (*L I*, 322)

This poetic simile that Virginia Stephen uses in this letter dated January 1908 to tease her addressee not only contains her "Aesthetic Sense" (*L I*, 295), but also reveals "a sigh of the literary temperament" (*L I*, 95). Moreover, the poetic similes in her letters to Violet can convey Virginia Stephen's compliment to her addressee: "my Violet, who rises firm as a lighthouse above it all—what an apt simile. (Violet gets too many compliments)" (*L I*, 110). They can also suggest "the more truth" (*L I*, 307), as she shows in a letter written on 25 August 1907:

> From our garden we look over a dead marsh; flat as the sea, and the simile has the more truth in that the sea was once where the marsh is now. But at night a whole flower bed of fitful lighthouses blooms—O what a sentence!—but irritants are good I am told—along the edge; indeed you can follow the sea all round the cliff on which we stand, till you perceive Rye floating out to meet it, getting stranded halfway on the shingle, like—nothing so much as a red brick town. But then "read brick towns dont float; and these semi metaphors of yours are a proof that you dip hastily into a pocket full of words, and fling out the first come; and that is why your writing is so…" (*L I*, 307)

On the one hand, Virginia Stephen tries to find "simile[s]" to represent what she can see: "the marsh" is compared to "the sea" and the "flower bed". Such an indirect way of representation can stimulate her literary inspiration. On the other hand, while resorting to the "semi metaphor"—"Rye floating out", Virginia Stephen is aware of her addressee's potential criticism. Such an imaginative speech actually discloses Virginia Stephen's strong sense of audience while writing letters. Moreover, the "semi metaphor" is a token of the particularity of Virginia Stephen's peculiar vision: for her, "Rye" or "red brick towns" can float. Metaphors or images haunt her and control her mind: "I lose myself in metaphors when I begin to write, being dissipated, interrupted" (*L III*, 36) and are welcome since "in actually writing one's

mind […] gets into a trance, and the different images seem to come unconsciously" (*L V*, 422).

Moreover, as she shows in other letters to Violet, by using her "genius" (*L I*, 253) and her "wits" (*L V*, 49) to compose an "allegoric" (*L I*, 209) language in her letters to Violet, Virginia Stephen wants to write "a really pretty letter" (*L I*, 122) or make "a prettier sentence" (*L I*, 245); she means her addressee to "appreciate the metaphor" (*L I*, 59): "The truth is I want appreciation" (*L I*, 101); she wants to play a game of words with her addressee: "Don't let too pious and simple minded—too pure to associate with the battered Sparroy" (*L I*, 73); she turns words into toys for her addressee to play with: "I am going to see Kitty tomorrow, a curious woman with a soul the colour of an opal. Now I like wrapping up profound little sentences like that for you to unroll as you lie and look at your counterpane" (*L I*, 261); she wants to express "[her] intense feeling of affection" (*L I*, 500) to make the world warm: "Very few people have any feelings to express—at least of affection or sympathy—and if those that do feel dont express—the worlds so much more like a burnt out moon—cold living for the Sparroys and Violets" (*L I*, 75-6): "My food is affection", she adds (*L I*, 83); she would like her words to be timeless and beyond all kinds of boundaries, e.g. art: "How allegoric I am tonight! I feel that these words ought to be more durable than brass to travel all the way—where? Singapore, or Yokohama" (*L I*, 209); to create an impersonal "Style" of "Pathos" in order to convey a sort of universal meaning is her aim, as she shows in a letter to Lady Robert Cecil: "The one quality lacking in Japan is what the Greeks (and the Cockneys) call Pathos. A bare tree visible in the Light of Human Suffering means more than all the Pagodas in Tokio. I am trying to evolve a theory for tonight: that is the inward and intimate meaning of the last few remarks. Tell me honestly what you think of my Style?" (*L I*, 212) Imagery, which is obscure but suggestive, satisfies the shy, timid and self-protective Virginia Stephen in her attempt to voice her emotion, to create an intimacy with her readers, as well as to convey universal, impersonal ideas in her epistolary writing as in all her writing.

Considering herself as "rather a selfish brute to talk so much of [her] own

affairs" (*L I*, 181) with "perfectly unrestrained egoism" (*L I*, 214) in her letters to Violet, Virginia Stephen writes:

> You will probably suffer from many long, and diffuse, egoistical, ill written, disconnected, delightful letters, because solitary as I am, and fertile as a tea pot, it becomes necessary to empty the brew on someone; and there you are recumbent at Welwyn—what more can you expect, my good woman. "Those tiresome Stephens!" Ella's epigram. Ellas only epigram. (*L I*, 308)

Violet is also a "receptacle" for Virginia Stephen's "hoarded garrulity" (*L I*, 284), her "mournful egoistical" (*L I*, 100) "complaining" (*L I*, 133), her "long and egoistical grumble" (*L I*, 148). By writing herself in her letters to Violet, it seems that Virginia Stephen fulfils various purposes: she obviously relieves "the amount of pain that accumulates" (*L I*, 270) with the death of her mother, her half-sister, Stella Duckworth, her father and her brother, Thoby Stephen, which makes "the earth seem swept very bare" (*L I*, 270); she both expresses and tries to get affection from her addressee; she also means to develop an intimate relationship, for writing oneself or one's own life, as she shows in a letter written on 4 September 1924 to Jacque Raverat, is a necessary way to "spray an atmosphere round one" (*L III*, 131); finally, she trains herself to be a writer, but most of all, she is intensely self-conscious and curious about herself.

As the six volumes of her letters show, she is first of all, curious about her own mental state while writing. She is interested in her own psychology both as a person and a writer: for example, in the same letter to Jacques: "how interesting one's own psychology is—won't talk to you about my writing" (*L III*, 130); while in a letter written on 4 October 1929 to Gerald Brenan: "I daresay its the continuity of daily life, something believable and habitual that we lack. I give it up. No writing books I mean; only understanding my own psychology as a writer" (*L IV*, 96). Besides her mental and psychological idiosyncrasies, she is conscious of her every sensation and compares her emotions to "so many strange guests" (*L IV*, 205). As a writer, she "compar[es] [her] feelings a good deal" (*L II*, 297) and aims to describe them with words: "The dazed discontented aimless feeling was so queer; starting with such

emotions and high passions, and getting gradually more and more sodden and depressed, and wanting to do something very exciting and not knowing what" (*L II*, 298). She "get[s] an infinity of pleasure from the intensity of [her] emotions" (*L V*, 11), considers them as "the most ordinary emotions" (*L IV*, 168), as well as "grop[es] to express these different levels of emotion" (*L IV*, 105). She wants to present "the odd combination of incongruous emotions, and the flickering angularity of it" (*L III*, 550) in "a great play", as she shows in a letter dated 1902 to Violet: "There'll be oceans of talk and emotions without end" (*L I*, 60).

The author also "like[s] noticing physical symptoms", as she states in a letter written on 29 December 1928 to Vita Sackville-West: "But its true that the image of ones loves forever changes: and gradually […] from being a sight, to becomes a sense—a heaviness betwixt the 3rd and 4th rib; a physical oppression: These are the signs writers should watch for" (*L III*, 570). While she is ill, she observes her physical sensations: "Its odd how being ill even like this splits one up into several different people" (*L III*, 388); she notices "3 stages: pain; numb; visionary" (*L IV*, 183) and attempts to describe such an experience in a letter to Ethel Smyth written on 22 June 1930: "As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driblets, as sanity does. And the six months—not three—that I lay in bed taught me a good deal about what is called oneself" (*L IV*, 180). In short, like Henry James, she cherishes every fragment of her experience and wants to put each of them in words, as she shows in a letter written on 13 March 1941 to Elizabeth Robins: "But I remember a saying of Henry James—all experiences are of use to a writer. I think he was talking about a nervous breakdown. So may it be worth a broken bone" (*L VI*, 478).

By writing about emotions, the author wants her readers to "tap all [her] sensations […] between […] a blue sheet (of paper)" (*L IV*, 238), where, in elaborating her thoughts which are "too transitory" (*L III*, 245), like Proust, she wants to "solidif[y] what has always escaped—and make it too into this beautiful and perfectly enduring substance" (*L II*, 566). At the same time, Virginia Stephen is

amused by the power of her mind, as she shows in a letter dated December 1907 to Violet: "Now my brain I will confess, for I dont like to talk of it, floats in blue air; where there are circling clouds, soft sunbeams of elastic gold, and fairy gossamers—things that cant be cut—that must be tenderly enclosed, and expressed in a globe of exquisitely coloured words. At the mere prick of steel they vanish" (*L I*, 320). Therefore, through writing her "selfish" and "egotistical" letters, the author wants to make thoughts "visible […] something luminous in the middle of the laurel bush" (*L VI*, 94), as she shows in a letter written on Christmas Eve 1936 to Janet Case, who was dying. She wants to "print off [her] mind upon a sheet of blue paper about the size of the terrace" (*L IV*, 215), as she shows in a letter written on 19 September 1930 to Ethel Smyth. She tries to present a self, "Stephen Brontëised", as she shows in a letter written on 16 April 1906 to Violet:

> There is a Greek austerity about my life which is beautiful and might go straight into a bas relief. You can imagine that I never wash, or do my hair; but stride with gigantic strides over the wild moorside, shouting odes of Pindar, as I leap from crag to crag, and exulting in the air which buffets me, and caresses me, like a stern but affectionate parent! That is Stephen Brontëised; almost as good as the real thing. (*L I*, 221)

Virginia Stephen invites her addressee to use her own imaginative power to visualise her through this characterisation. Similarly, the author wants to depict herself as it were, from the future and in her memory, distancing herself from her present self, as she shows in a letter written on 8 May 1932 to Vita Sackville-West when she travels in Greece: "Yes it was so strange coming back here again I hardly knew where I was; or when it was. There was my own ghost coming down from the Acropolis, aged 23: and how I pitied her! Well: let me know if you're up and forgive scrawling scribbles" (*L V*, 62).

Presenting "her extreme transparency" (*L IV*, 168)—herself and her life, both professional and personal, in such a free and true way in her letters to Violet, Virginia Stephen succeeds in "get[ting] sympathy", as she shows in a letter dated February

1907 (*L I*, 280). At the same time, as this letters reveals, the author also enjoys this sort of exploration of her mind while writing: "I do regret that I expressed myself so forcibly that day: it was only a passing melancholy. I dont think I can do very good work just yet, but I take infinite delight in exploring my own mind" (*L I*, 280). Moreover, writing to Violet, the author is aware of saying "too much about I" (*L I*, 261) and repeats that she "did try and be unselfish" (*L I*, 261): "efface myself—efface myself and efface myself—" (*L I*, 256), "—O damn the i's in this English language!" (*L I*, 301), or, "I had to wrestle with my stout devil selfishness. Did you notice it? Sometimes it takes an hour before breakfast to subdue him. But then, what a glorious victory! What a snowy soul! What a delightful creature, in short!" (*L I*, 441) Nevertheless, she never succeeds, for she not only enjoys such a writing of herself (*L I*, 292), but also knows that this self-depiction will also amuse her addressee: "Indeed—how very interesting, Miss Stephen" (*L I*, 313). Furthermore, reading through her letters to her sister, Vanessa Bell, and her most intimate friends, Vita Sackville-West and Ethel Smyth, we notice that the author never manages to obliterate herself, as she never loses her curiosity about herself and her own life.

Consequently, Violet becomes the first reader of Virginia Stephen's writing, as she shows in a letter written on 20 July 1907: "So my good woman,—this is a specimen of my narrative style, which is far from good, seeing that I am forever knotting it and twisting it in conformity with the coils in my own brain, and a narrative should be as straight and flexible as the line you stretch between pear trees, with your linen on drying—" (*L I*, 300). Composing her letter with such a "narrative style", the author "pour[s] out the English without making a coherent story of it" (*L I*, 299)—a story about a book that she gets from an old Jew. The narrative is not only interwoven with the old Jew's fragmentary discourse in her memory: "'no one would wish for a complete set—I myself have never read it through, though I take it up often'—[…] 'Have you a friend with a garden, he said; who likes sullets—sullads you understand'", but is also interspersed with images: "So it dont matter that the book is without a title page, and 3 sheets of introduction: it is white as driven snow within, and outside like a ripe fiddle" (*L I*, 300). Apart from being free, this narrative also

suggests the author's mental particularity—"how [her] mind runs" (*L I*, 244): images can invade her mind quuickly and memory is fleeting and fragmentary. This is what the author conveys in her own words in the same letter: "If only my flights were longer, and less variable I should make solid blocks of sentences, carven and wrought from pure marble; or the Greek marble which absorbs colours" (*L I*, 300).

In fact, reading through her letters to Violet, we find that the "fertile" Virginia Stephen does make such a "brew" (*L I*, 308)—"solid blocks of sentences". On the one hand, imagery, contributing to the irrelevant description of non-human entities, is "carven and wrought" from the poetic language and used to embody incandescent ideas. On the other hand, both prose, which describes facts and life, and characterisation—Virginia Stephen's self-depiction, "absorb" emotions like "a sponge slowly drinking water": "The earth absorbs colour like a sponge slowly drinking water. It puts on weight; rounds itself; hangs pendent; settles and swings beneath our feet" (*TW*, 171). Every word hence possesses "their weights, colours, sounds, associations" and "suggest[s] more than they can state", as the author states in "A Letter to A Young Poet" (*THL*, 233).

Such an epistolary talk to Violet can function as a kind of "peace and balm" (*L I*, 114). On the whole, writing about her own thoughts, emotions and life to Violet first relieves her pain, as she shows in a letter written on 13 June 1910 to Saxon Sydney-Turner: "I write, more to mitigate my own lot than to please you" (*L I*, 426). As a female writer, Woolf also challenges the male world of writing and achieves some kind of freedom in writing. Reading through the six volumes of her letters, it seems that such a "brew" in her free writing involves Woolf's style of "central transparency", that is, making both ideas and emotions transparent so as to develop and master her own life, either through her letter writing or other types of writing.

Though in her letters to such male addressees as Lytton Strachey, the author writes with a full awareness of herself. This self-consciousness raises in Leonard Woolf and James Strachey a "mutual *gêne*" while editing the correspondence between the author and Lytton: "it occasionally gives an impression of

self-consciousness—even of stiltedness—[…] each was a little wary of the other: […] they were always on their best behaviour, and never felt so much at ease."[2] However, the author does try to transcend "these mystic reservations" (*L I*, 334). For example, in the first volume of her letters, when writing to Clive, Virginia Stephen composes her letters in "the natural trend" (*L I*, 330): in a letter written on 22 March 1907, she describes her mental state when writing as being "withdraw[n] into a strange upper world" (*L I*, 289), and in a letter dated May 1908, she presents her dreaming as being "plunge[d] about in a phantom world" (*L I*, 333). "How odd—that one writes oneself!" (*L I*, 434), she exclaims in another letter written on 4 September 1910 to Clive. When she is writing "'Lady Hester Stanhope' (1910)" in Cornwall, Virginia Stephen tries to present herself and her life in a letter written on 26 December 1909 to Clive, as Lady Hester Stanhope does in her memoirs. Similarly, in her letters to Lytton, for example, in a letter written on 28 April 1908. When she is revisiting Cornwall, Virginia Stephen not only voices her feeling of losing her own identity, which nature stirs in her, but also writes about the way she imagines Adrian Stephen: "I had begun to doubt my own identity—and imagined I was part of a seagull, and dreamt at night of deep pools of blue water, full of eels. However, Adrian came suddenly that very day, like some grim figure out of a Northern Saga—so I imagine—" (*L I*, 328).

Similarly, in the second volume, in a letter written on 1 September 1912 to Lytton when he is travelling in Spain, Woolf describes how she imagines Lytton's trip; while in a letter written on 1 September 1921 to Saxon Sydney-Turner, she imagines her addressee travelling. Although in a letter written on 5 February 1925 to Jacques Raverat, who is dying, Woolf writes: "Of course, I long to talk to you about myself, my character, my writings, but am withheld—by what?" (*L III*, 164), she does write about herself and her imagination, for example, in a letter written on 4 November 1923. Furthermore, in her letters written after Jacques's death to other male addressees, such as Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, Gerald Brenan, Hugh Walpole or her

[2] Leonard Woolf, and James Strachey. eds. Preface. *Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey: Letters*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956: p. vi-vii.

two nephews, Julian and Quentin Bells, Woolf becomes more and more free.[3]

In short, in order to get affection and sympathy from her letter readers, the author develops a technique so as to make her thoughts, emotions and life transparent. This technique is twofold: it consists both in the author's symbolic language and in her suggestive method of description. Such a technique is later defined by the author herself in her letters to Vita Sackville-West as the style of "central transparency". With this style, the author first transfers the epistolary writing to a common intimate space, where the reader can share her ideas and emotions almost at the same time as the writer is writing. This style helps the author to challenge conventional views on women's writing: mastering this style is part of the author's quest for a free type of writing. Consequently, chapter five will discuss how the author develops her symbolic language in her letters; while by focusing on Woolf's letters to Vita Sackville-West written during Vita's first travel to Persia in early 1926, chapter six will explore how Woolf displays her style of "central transparency".

2. Introduction to Chapter Five

The basic and principal functions of a letter are to exchange information and to express affection; thus, how to give as much pleasure as possible to her addressees by describing life and making her thoughts and emotions transparent is the method that Woolf attempts to achieve from beginning to end in her epistolary writing. In a letter dated January 1907 to Lady Robert Cecil, Virginia Stephen states that "a new school might arise, with new adjectives and new epithets, and a strange beautiful sensation, all new to print"; so that this new school of words can function as "the fur […] a very subtle and serious matter, wrapped round the most secret fibres of our consciousness" (*L I*, 278), including the writer's and the reader's. Such a school includes "that exemplary economy of adjectives" that Woolf has invented and sheds, somewhat paradoxically, like pearls rolling from a broken chain in her letters; it is "admire[d]"

[3] See also chapter two. We shall come back to the letters to Jacques in chapter five.

by Ethel Smyth (*L V*, 29), the addressee of letters such as that written on 14 August 1932: "I'd like to read one of Ethels most violent, disruptive, abruptive, fuliginious, catastrophic, panoramic, I cant think of any other adjectives—effusions" (*L V*, 90). These intense phrases and rows of epithets are intertwined with images: for example, in a letter written on 5 January 1931 to Quentin Bell, Duncan Grant's Russian friend is described as "sheep headed, bird witted, and not nice into the bargain" (*L IV*, 276). But, more importantly, it is by analogising or contrasting one subject to another that the speaker can present the original subject more vividly and emphasise its particularity, give shape to abstract ideas or convey meanings more clearly and convincingly. Therefore, all kinds of figures of speech—images, symbols, comparisons, similes, and metaphors—interspersed with epithets, invade almost every sentence in Woolf's letters.

To take examples from the first volume of the author's letters in chronological order, in a letter dated June 1900 to Emma Vaughan:

> I barely had courage to look at the Arch [Madge] Vaughan herself—but I thought she seemed very happy and as talkative as a jay. I really have an enormous crow to pluck with you—The first words Madge said were to ask me if I had heard about Will and Sedberg […] No said I—and then she explained what I suppose you and your fellow conspirator have been sitting on for the last 6 months—like two old mother birds on their eggs. (*L I*, 33)

On the one hand, Virginia Stephen compares Madge Vaughan's appearance to "the Arch" and her nature to a bird; on the other hand, talk is described as another bird and human relationship as the animals' incubation. Moreover, in Virginia Stephen's letters to Emma, people can be compared to figures in painting: for example, in the same letter, "the Paters—dressed in the oddest fashions—like Boticelli angels—" (*L I*, 33); while in her other letters, her "sight of Marny's [Vaughan] profile, like a sensitive Madonna—or a Whistler etching" (*L I*, 37), or "the haloed Marn" (*L I*, 93) "like a Madonna to which [she] pray" (*L I*, 88). Woolf's acquaintances are also compared to solid objects—"It seems to me absurd when she [Marny Vaughan] has just climbed to

the top of the mountain to let herself roll down again like a senseless stone" (*L I*, 35)—or light: "She [Dorothea Stephen] glows like a sunset over Mont Blanc (can you see Mont Blanc [in Switzerland] from the window to disprove my metaphor?) and says 'Shut up!'" (*L I*, 43-4)

Moreover, different people, who are contrasted with each other, can be described by a harmonious set of images: "Millicent [Isham] […] is like the sun through a fog—Adeline [Vaughan Williams] etc., are the fog" (*L I*, 57). In a letter dated June 1900, by contrasting different adjectives and two animal images—toads and blackbirds—, Virginia Stephen not only praises Emma and her sisters but also expresses her longing for her friends: "and various other pretty young ladies of that description—no dear charming old fashioned quiet *lovely* Toads—but flaunting and frivolous and as garrulous as blackbirds" (*L I*, 34). Again, in a letter written on 29 September 1907, by resorting to a pun on the image of the toad, the author tries to express her affection and admiration for Emma: "You are a good faithful little beast to write; I daresay damp, marshy, island places develop your virtues. There was a great toad at Rye, who used to climb on to my knee and exhibit his jewel, and I kissed him" (*L I*, 312).

Virginia Stephen's imagery becomes much richer in her letters to Violet Dickinson. There, painting is compared to food: "The picture is really first rate, and the heather too, which was rather like anchovies spread on bread and butter, or whether that pink paste is" (*L I*, 54); whereas, a sound is depicted as water: "I told her [Lady Robert Cecil] you and she and Kitty [Maxse] terrify me, as beings moving in a higher world, with voices like the ripple of Arcadian streams" (*L I*, 297). Similarly, people are compared to odour and food: "Nelly [Lady Robert Cecil] was like lavender and cream" (*L I*, 177); to plant: "The Quaker is like some glossy evergreen; I feel she will rustle her leaves over all our graves" (*L I*, 285); to an animal: "she [Aunt Anny Ritchie] roared at me, like a shaggy old Lioness with wide jaws" (*L I*, 211) or "All my friends are silent, like frogs when the moon rises; or house sparrows at sunset" (*L I*, 284); as well as to precious stones: "She [Vanessa Stephen] neither writes, reads, nor in any way toils or spins; but just exhales a great bounteous atmosphere—the essence

of amethyst and amber. Cant you imagine it?—well, it does want imagination" (*L I*, 252-3). The line between human beings and animals or minerals is blurred.

Moreover, people are often presented with more than one metaphor. For instance, one contributes to their appearance and the other to their action, and the effect is comic: "He [Clive Bell] blushed like a sunset over Mont Blanc, blinked like a windmill" (*L I*, 247). One aims to depict their character, the other their mind, here in a disparaging way: "My head spins with Vernon Lee, whom I have to review. What a woman! Like a garrulous baby. However, I suppose she has a sense of beauty, in a vague way—but such a watery mind" (*L I*, 400).

Writing to Violet, Virginia Stephen describes her own letter as "an inarticulate scrawl, like the twitter of some frozen sparrow in the graveyard behind [Violet's] house" (*L I*, 264); "a long drawn out piece of [her own] writing […] dwindles on like some elongate misshapen—tallow candle" (*L I*, 285); she herself is a kind of vine "climb[ing] round" her addressee—"an image which should appeal to [Violet's] feelings as a gardener" (*L I*, 202). Through these images, Virginia Stephen transforms abstract ideas into concrete things, such as sound, movement or a visual scene, so as to present her impressions and thoughts more vividly, efficiently and intensely. Moreover, besides symbolising their relationship, the image of the plant borrowed from Violet's garden exposes the author's affection for her addressee. Images of animals are used to the same effect in her letters to Violet: "I think with joy of certain exquisite moments when Rupert [the chow] and I lick your forhead [*sic*] with a red tongue and a purple tongue; and twine your hairs round our noses" (*L I*, 338). Sometimes, animals are used to suggest a painful feeling, but with a comic intent: "A great flea jumped on my Aeschylus as I read with [Janet] Case the other day—and now bites large holes in me. I was too polite to catch him with Cases eye on me" (*L I*, 72).

Similarly, in her other letters in the first volume, for example, to her writer and reviewer friend, Lady Robert Cecil, Virginia Stephen compares a sight to some fictional writing she does not fully appreciate: "Italy was really beyond words—even a trifle melodramatic—not unlike a Meredith novel—too brilliant to be quite natural.

This refers to the sight of Florence in sunset from the hills above" (*L I*, 399); conversely, her future "very interesting article" is compared "a Japanese watercolour, with an angular ivory face" (*L I*, 390). Again, people are described as animals: for example, "politicians and journalists must be the lowest of Gods creatures, creeping perpetually in the mud, and biting with one end and stinging with the other, in spite of your connections" (*L I*, 332). In her letters to Clive Bell, images for people become satirical and malicious: Mary Sheepshanks "flop[s] like some debauched and battered moth, round her own discontent" and is "as ugly as a dirty vain drop—a swollen one, that has run down a window, and got all the smuts in to it" (*L I*, 439); while George Duckworth "is almost circular with flesh, soft as a babies, infinitely respectable, and more clearly in the wrong […]—a mere lump of flesh, veined with sentiment" (*L I*, 391). Such a caricature of her half-brother contrasts with her own portrayal, in a letter to Clive, as "some swaying reed which swings with the steam" (*L I*, 339-40).

On the whole, imagery is the device that the author attempts to master at the very start of her writing career, as witness the first volume of her letters. The wealth of images she uses in the whole of her epistolary writing, for the most part, derives from her first letters. Sound, light, colour merge into one another. There is no clear boundary between plant, food, animals, and people. People's physical appearance, actions, character, mind or soul; and each of them are represented through images. The five senses—sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste merge into one another in a synaesthetic move. Abstract conceptions and solid objects are easily interchanged. Beauty and ugliness, or praise and malice can all be contrasted through various images in one sentence. Imagery is used by Woolf to give pleasure, express her feelings, request affection or depict herself. Different images in mixed metaphors not merely contribute to different subjects; one subject can be compared to an image, and the image can be further compared to another image. In terms of source, the material of the author's imagery mostly comes from her own life or is part of her addressees' lives. The choice of images discloses the author's keen observation of daily life, her insight, her humour, her satirical turn, her sensibility, as well as her imaginative

power. Moreover, images reveal the author's strong sense of an audience while writing, and create a form of total sympathy in her addressees. Furthermore, among the different forms of figures of speech Woolf uses, images and metaphors come first in her letters, often offering amusement and pleasure.

If impressions, thoughts and emotions are the major themes that the images convey, the animal images are the central ones. The next chapter will discuss how the author uses figurative language to present her impressions of life and people as well as to express her own emotions and thoughts. It will focus on the animal imagery, whereas, the last section will elaborate on the author's imagery in her letters to the following five addressees, in chronological order: Violet Dickinson, Vanessa Bell, Jacques Raverat, Vita Sackville-West, and Ethel Smyth.

5.1. Images of animals: "[a]ll the romance of life" (*L V*, 226) and the "play", "private side of life" (*L V*, 396)

Reading through the six volumes of Woolf's letters, the reader may be impressed by the number of animal images. Those images first reveal her interest in animals, which comes out in the very first letter Virginia Stephen wrote with her father on 20 August 1988 to James Russell Lowell. In this letter, she asks: "MY DEAR GODPAPA HAVE YOU BEEN TO THE ADIRONDACKS AND HAVE YOU SEEN LOTS OF WILD BEASTS AND A LOT OF BIRDS IN THEIR NESTS" (*L I*, 2).[4] Above all, writing to her family, especially, her brother Thoby Stephen, Virginia Stephen calls or signs herself "Goat" (*L I*, 3, 8, 12), "Goatus" (*L I*, 17), or "Goatus Esq" (*L I*, 2, 4, 6); to her half-brother, George Duckworth, she is also "Goat" (*L I*, 14, 15, 22).

Similarly, in her letters to her sister, Vanessa Bell, she sometimes calls herself "Billy" (*L I*, 466; *L III*, 401) and usually signs herself "B" (*L I*, 316, 342, 344) for

[4] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 1, note 1: "Although the Stephen children were not baptised, they had 'sponsors', of whom Lowell […] was Virginia's."

"Billy Goat".[5] On the other hand, in her earlier letters to other addressees, for example, Emma Vaughan, she uses "Sheep dog" (*L I*, 30), "sheep dog" (*L I*, 34), or "sheepdog" (*L I*, 40) to refer to Vanessa; while in her letters to Vanessa, she uses "honey Bee" (*L I*, 345), "honeybee" (*L I*, 349), "Honey Bee" (*L I*, 431), or "honey-buzzard" (*L I*, 475). After Vanessa married Clive Bell on 7 February 1907,[6] Virginia Stephen writes in a letter dated February 1907 to Clive:

> First, I think, to Vanessa; and I am almost inclined to let her name stand alone upon the page. It contains all the beauty of the sky, and the melancholy of the sea, and the laughter of the Dolphins in its circumference, first in the mystic Van, spread like a mirror of grey glass to Heaven. Next in the swishing tail of its successive esses, and finally in the grave pause and suspension of the ultimate A breathing peace like the respiration of Earth itself. (*L I*, 282)

Virginia Stephen compares her sister's beauty to that of a dolphin—"dolphin" (*L II*, 380, 443; *L III*, 176), "Dolphin" (*L I*, 304, 362; *L II*, 88) or "Dolph" (*L II*, 483; *LIII*, 33)—and this image later becomes an image for Vanessa herself. Vanessa together with her children—Julian, Quentin and Angelica Bells—are described as "the Dolphin family" (*L VI*, 293), "the Dolphin tribe" (*L III*, 175), "Dolphinry" (*L III*, 257), "dolphinry" (*L IV*, 331), or "Dolphinery" (*L IV*, 44).[7] Accordingly, though "B" usually remains the author's signature in her letters to Vanessa throughout her life, after her sister's marriage, the images of animals for the author herself are changed from "Billy Goat" to "Apekin" (*L I*, 357), "Apes" (*L I*, 377, 408), "apes" (*L I*, 434, 466) or "Ape" (*L I*, 409, 442); to "Singes" (*L I*, 395; *L II*, 87), "singes" (*L III*, 102), "Singe" (*L II*, 92), "singe" (*L II*, 429), or "Synge" (*L I*, 456, 466; *L II*, 212); as well as to "Wombat" (*L VI*, 493; *L I*, 437).

Similarly, in her letters to Leonard Woolf after their marriage, Leonard is usually called "Mongoose" (*L II*, 12, 21, 32-5), "mongoose" (*L II*, 33-4), "Goose M"

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[5] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 316, note 2: "In writing to Vanessa, Virginia usually signed herself 'B' for 'Billy Goat'."
[6] See The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I, p. 278, note 1.
[7] The discussion of Woolf's images for Vanessa will be developed further in the following section.

(*L II*, 191, 193), "Mong" (*L II*, 193; *L III*, 30-1), or "M" (*L II*, 191, 388); whereas, Woolf calls herself "Mandrill" (*L II*, 21, 35), "MANDRILL" (*L II*, 90; *L III*, 31), "mandrill" (*L II*, 33) or "M" (*L II*, 12, 32-6), and "Marmots" (*L II*, 90), "mots" (*L III*, 533, 537), or "marmots" (*L III*, 534, 537). Leonard is sometimes called "Wolf" (*L I*, 467, 470; *L III*, 155), and after their marriage, this image becomes the image for themselves, the "Wolves" (*L II*, 310; *L IV*, 131), or for the whole Woolf family.

If animal images are seldom used for her male addressees; they permeate her letters to her female addressees from the beginning to the end. For example, in chronological order, Emma Vaughan is usually the "little swampy reptile" (*L I*, 31) or "Reptile" (*L I*, 36, 38) that "inhabit[s] swamps" (*L I*, 24) and "a good amphibious little beast" (*L I*, 180)—"Toad" (*L I*, 12, 18-9), "Tods" (*L I*, 30), "Toadus" (*L I*, 24, 27), "Todkins" (*L I*, 27, 28, 30), "Todelkrancz" (*L I*, 33), "Todger" (*L I*, 43, 56, 64), or "Toadlebinks" (*L I*, 159, 179). In a letter written on 19 November 1926 to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf compares Vita's insensitiveness—Vita's inability to catch both her meaning and her emotion in her letters—to "ha[ving] the eyes of a newt and the blood of a toad" (*L III*, 303).[8] The image of the toad—her "toad-dark eyes" (*L I*, 150)—is also used about Emma and we can guess at her insensitive nature. On the contrary, in the author's own eye, "a person of true artistic soul", including herself, "gaz[es]—absorb[s]—sink[s] into the Sky" and "revels in the land", and hence "ha[s] ceased to be dwellers on the earth" but "grow[s] like a mediative Alderney cow" (*L I*, 27). Similarly, to Emma, Virginia Stephen herself is also "Goat" (*L I*, 21, 23, 24), "Goatus" (*L I*, 25, 27), "*Capra*" (*L I*, 26), or "G." (*L I*, 369).

For Virginia Stephen, Violet Dickinson is "a blessed hell cat and an angel in one" (*L I*, 57)—a mother bird angel: "You are an Angel with wings dipped in the skies (whatever your crooked old talons may be. They hold burning coals for little Wallabies soft snouts.)" (*L I*, 239), or "old birds peck their young ones from the nest when their season is over" (*L I*, 218). Violet is also the author's "mother wallaby" (*L I*,

[8] See chapter four, Woolf's analysis of Vita Sackville-West's character.

244) or "old Mum Wallaby" (*L I*, 262); and at the same time, Virginia Stephen wishes her addressee "were a Kangaroo and had a pouch for small Kangaroos to creep to" (*L I*, 79). Accordingly, Virginia Stephen is her addressee's young bird, "little Wallaby" (*L I*, 83), "Baby Wall" (*L I*, 267), or "small Kangaroo" (*L I*, 79). But in her whole life, she is Violet's "Sparroy" (*L I*, 55), "Sp." (*L I*, 56, 66), or "S." (*L I*, 70, 78). Sometimes this image is described as a "Sparroy plant" (*L I*, 86): "Sparroy is firmly planted in that cabbage patch you call yr heart" (*L I*, 131). It is often depicted as a bird, such as "a blind ostrich Sparroy" (*L I*, 90) or a bird, which can "sing to" her addressee and "leap from branch to branch" (*L I*, 306): "Have you a real affection for the Sparroy? She folds you in her feathery arms, so that you may feel the Heart in her ribs. Rather mild, but these emotions are very upsetting" (*L I*, 62). With such a set of images, Virginia Stephen both expresses her desire for affection from her addressee and her affection for her addressee.[9]

In the author's eye, Katherine Cox or Arnold-Forster[10] is the "Bear" (*L II*, 222)—"Bruin" (*L I*, 494, 495; *L II*, 6) or "Bru" (*L II*, 11). With this animal image, the author vividly conveys her friend's physical appearance, who is not only hairy: "your nice furry body" (*L II*, 70), "that faithful Cornish thick haired brute" (*L II*, 576), or "Bruin's pelt and soft wet paws" (*L II*, 557); but is also tall: "the soft bulk of the brute's body" (*L II*, 222). Besides, by describing this animal's activity, the author tries to present Katherine's gesture humourously. For example, in a letter written on 7 February 1912, the author compares her addressee's visit to "hear[ing] [her] pad on the stairs, and [her] snuff snuffle at the door" (*L I*, 489); while in a letter written on 19 March 1916, she compares Katherine's letter—"Bruin's letter came in"—to "a snuff-snuffling at the door" (*L II*, 83). Moreover, through the animal image, Woolf also wants to portray Katherine's character. For instance, in a letter written on 9 October 1919, Woolf attempts to portray her friend's motherhood:

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[9] The author's images for both Violet and herself will be detailed in the last section of this chapter.

[10] Katherine Cox married William Arnold-Forster on 9 September 1918, see Letter to Dora Carrington, Sept. 9th 1918, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 273-4; and they lived at Eagle's Nest, Zennor, Cornwall from November 1920, see Letter to Katherine Arnold-Forster, Nov. 30th 1920, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 448-9.

> Haven't I always said that I could practically see the shapes of little Bruins attached to your neck? It will be a superb nursery—the old mother bear occasionally rolling over to give her cubs a lick, and everything smelling so nice of milk and straw. But I can't pretend that I'm not envious. Well, well—I think all good mothers ought to consider me half their child, which is what I like best. (*L II*, 391)

Woolf also wants to be one of Katherine's "little Bruins". Similarly, in her other letters, Woolf uses this animal image to praise her friend: "one specimen" of "the rare old English bear […] at Zennor" (*L VI*, 96), who possesses "the steadymindedness and goodheartedness" (*L IV*, 33) with "its sturdy paws with its small round behind" (*L IV*, 22). Katherine is "a nice wise friendly Bruin, so sagacious too" (*L II*, 27), "nice and sensible and courageous" (*L II*, 102), "clean and capable", "padding round her lair so firmly wisely and decorously" (*L VI*, 42), whom Woolf "admire[s] […] so profoundly" (*L II*, 264). Through the imaginary description of the animal, "Bruin", the author succeeds in depicting her friend's appearance vividly and comically, portraying her action in a humourous tone, and praising her character in a theatrical way. It is through such a comic depiction of the animal that the author explores and presents the comic and essential side hidden in human beings, as she playfully shows in a letter written on 7 February 1912: "Do come back soon; you can't think how essential you are to the proper aspect of things; that is why animals were made; to balance human beings" (*L I*, 489).

Vita Sackville-West is called "Towser" (*L III*, 291, 559; *L IV*, 240) or "Towzer" (*L III*, 243), which might mean a "faithless sheep dog" (*L V*, 75, 121) or a "kind clever colly" (*L V*, 123): "Well, my faithless sheep dog, —yes, you'll be turned into a very old collie if you dont look out, blind of one eye, and afflicted with mange on the rump—why dont you come and see me?" (*L V*, 121) By changing from an animal image to another, Woolf tries to depict her addressee's character. Sometimes, the word "insect" (*L III*, 302, 321, 326) is also used by Woolf as a pet name for Vita in her letters. Moreover, the porpoise—"the porpoise in [her] bath—steel blue, ice cold, and loving hearted" (*L III*, 398)—that Woolf saw with Vita in a tank in the Sevenoaks

shop in December 1925, is sometimes used as a symbol for Vita in Woolf's memory: "Yes yes; I am still unfortunately attached to the woman I never see; the vision in the fishmongers shop. I was thinking of that scene the other night, and wondering if there was a porpoise in a tank, or whether that was merely an emanation of you—" (*L IV*, 365).

Meanwhile, to Vita, Woolf herself is not only "a weevil" (*L III*, 243-5), but she is also "the humble spaniel" (*L III*, 220)—one of Vita's "shabby mongrels", "mangy" but "always the most loving, warm hearted creatures" *(L III*, 253). Furthermore, when writing to Vita, Woolf invents another animal image—"mole" (*L III*, 433), "Mole" (*L III*, 440), or "moles" (*L III*, 442, 453)— a fantasy name for herself, and it is female: "And you would never offend your devoted poor mole whatever you said or did. except by letting her bore you" (*L III*, 433). Whereas, in a letter written on 21 February 1928 to Vita, Woolf names "some other of Virginias animals" as "Bosman's Potto and the Pinche Marmoset" (*L III*, 462). The animal image—"Bosman's Potto", "B. P." (*L III*, 456), "Bosman's" (*L IV*, 21), "Potto" (*L III*, 468), "Pot." (*L IV*, 117), or "P" (*L III*, 571)—remains as Woolf's "finer name […] more resonant" (*L III*, 456) for Vita in her whole life, and this animal image is male: "And Potto has a large warm heart, but then he can't write and its Virginia who writes" (*L III*, 468). Sometimes Woolf signs both her name and this animal image: "Yr Virginia / Potto" (*L III*, 470); or sometimes, this signature is accompanied with a sort of squiggly design, for example, in a letter written on 12 March 1928: "Please send me a long letter, on big paper, because Potto likes that best. Look [*squiggly design*] thats Potto: this is / Virginia" (*L III*, 472).

With this sort of signature in her letters to Vita, Woolf seems to divide herself into "the Male and Female parts" and to create a "hermaphrodite, androgynous" (*L III*, 381) identity, as "the poet [William] Cowper" (*L III*, 463) or "all great artists" (*L III*, 381) do,[11] "Potto" symbolising her male mind or her spiritual body; while "Virginia

[11] In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf states: "But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in

who writes" refers to her physical body and her real female identity. This foreshadows Woolf's fictional character, Orlando, who changes gender as s/he travels through time, in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Woolf's biography of Vita.[12]

Ethel Smyth, Woolf's most intimate female friend, is compared in Woolf's letters to "a wolf on the fold in purple and gold, terrifically strident and enthusiastic" (*L IV*, 146), "a giant crab" (*L IV*, 171) or a "great crab […] pertinaciously gripping [their] toes" (*L IV*, 182), "a game old Bird" (*L IV*, 257) or "a game old cock" (*L IV*, 277), an "old seamonster encrusted with barnacles" (*L IV*, 247), as well as "a plague of locusts […]—fine, vigorous insects" (*L V*, 146). Through these various animal images, Woolf not only present Ethel Smyth's "indomitable" (*L IV*, 146) character, her vigour, her "force" (*L IV*, 425), as well as "her energies" (*L V*, 273), but also conveys her own "hideous and horrible and melancholy-sad" (*L IV*, 171) feeling and her "respect and admir[ation]" (*L V*, 146) for her friend. Moreover, in a letter written on 12 May 1931 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf compares her addressee to "the indomitable and uncastrated cat" (*L IV*, 329-30):

> This instance—your behaviour about critics and your music—doesnt seem to me of importance. […] I can imagine, by imagining you as a whole, —with all your outriders and trembling thickets of personality, exactly why you do it; and sympathise; and admire; and feel the oddest mixture of admiration and pity and championship such as I used to feel for a white tailless cat of ours which we forgot to have castrated. This superb brute used to spend his nights fighting; and at last got so many wounds that they wouldnt heal; and he had to be put out of life by a vet. And I respected him; and I respect you. (*L IV*, 328-9)

By describing this "valiant uncastrated cat with the unhealed wound" (*L IV*, 407),

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each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous" (*AROO*, 93-4), and "One must turn back to Shakespeare then, for Shakespeare was androgynous; and so were Keats and Sterne and Cowper and Lamb and Coleridge. Shelley perhaps was sexless. Milton and Ben Jonson had a dash too much of the male in them. So had Wordsworth and Tolstoi. In our time Proust was wholly androgynous, if not perhaps a little too much of a woman" (*AROO*, 98-9).

[12] See also the last section of this chapter.

Woolf both suggests Ethel Smyth's "violence" (*L V*, 70) and valiancy, and conveys her own "affection and admiration" (*L IV*, 407) for her addressee; and such an animal then becomes Woolf's image for Ethel Smyth. Sometimes, Woolf uses variations to tease her addressee: for example, in a letter written on 27 June 1931: "the rough-haired, burr-tanged Cornish pig—[…] An uncastrated pig into the bargain; a wild boar, a savage sow" (*L IV*, 348); in another letter written on 23 July 1931: "the dripping cat, the uncastrated cat, the fighting indomitable cat, who began this letter by being a cock, then became a hen, and is all the time a Dame of the British Empire" (*L IV*, 361-2); as well as in a letter written on 5 July 1934: "Well you are without exception the most crossgrained, green eyed, cantankerous, grudging, exacting cat or cassowary I've ever met!" (*L V*, 314)[13]

Among other animal images for her female friends, "the yellow Parrokeet" (*L III*, 134) or "the blue parrokeet" (*L III*, 485) is the image for Mary Hutchinson;[14] while "Weazel" (*L VI*, 526-8, 471) is the pet name in her letters to Mary herself. Furthermore, Woolf's letters to her friends and her family are replete with images of animals. For example, Leonard Woolf's mother, Mrs Woolf, is described as "the size of a shrew mouse" (*L V*, 173), and is "as spry as a weasel" (*L V*, 190) or "a throstle" (*L VI*, 61), "as gay as a Robin" (*L V*, 332), and is "blind as a bat" (*L V*, 435). Duncan Grant is compared to a "faded" moth in one of Woolf's letter to him (*L II*, 144); while in Woolf's letters to Vanessa Bell, he is "the small white owl" (*L II*, 335) or "the dissipated old Owl" (*L II*, 429)—"a white owl perched upon a branch and blinking at the light, and shuffling his soft furry feet in the snow—a wonderful creature" (*L II*, 331). In her other letters to Vanessa, "Martie [Raymond Mortimer] was as fresh as a lark, and as chirpy as a sparrow, as lively as a trout" (*L III*, 415); while Angelica Bell "looked like a fantastic blue butterfly beside a tidy cob [Judith Bagenal]" (*L IV*, 340). In Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth, for example, Gwendolen Greene is portrayed as "bright eyes, feline ways", "[a]ll her colour had faded; her face was pouched", has "something arch and flamboyant", but her "action of the neck" is compared to that of

[13] See also the last section of this chapter.
[14] See also the following section concerning Woolf's imagery for Clive Bell.

"a rather absurd fantastic bird—reaching, pecking, sidling, retreating advancing and making sidelong dashes, as at an imaginary seed" (*L IV*, 254); while Kingsley Matin is presented as a "stupid, but entirely well meaning, but muddled but incredibly bat eyed, mole snouted, dark, grouting and grovelling in the mine of Fleet Street, man" (*L V*, 242).

To conclude, through the animal images, Woolf not only tries to present, as she does with other kinds of images, her impressions of people's appearance and character, but also to convey her own emotions. However, animals can both present the hidden essentials of a human character more efficiently and create a humourous and playful tone in a letter. For Woolf, animals not only "somehow represent[s] […] the private side of life—the play side" (*L V*, 396), as her dog Pinka does but have, from her own avowal, "played more part in [her] life than almost any other body or thing" (*L III*, 416) and from them comes "[a]ll the romance of life" (*L V*, 226). In Woolf's eye, "animals were made to balance human beings" (*L I*, 489).

Lady Ottoline Morrell, in her own diary, considers Woolf as "the most imaginative and masterly intellect" with "such energy and vitality". She states that Woolf has "a fantastic vision of them [human beings] as strange birds or fishes living in air or water in an unreal world", and shows that, in Woolf's eye, people and animals "always seem transposed".[15] She thus pinpoints Woolf's recurrent taste—and near obsession—with anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Indeed, for Woolf, friends are like "frogs when the moon rises; or house sparrows at sunset" (*L I*, 284), Bloomsbury members are "the ravens"—"fowls of darkness" (*L III*, 270), as well as the Woolves are "wet ducks" (*L V*, 411). People are also "slugs" (*L VI*, 77), "the fowls" (*L VI*, 177), "a swarm of locusts in the house" (*L V*, 327), or "an incredible collection of petrified culture-bugs" (*L V*, 453). The "millions of cyclists" that she sees while travelling in Holland are "flocks of swallows" (*L V*, 389) and "the dancing nuns" in Clifton are "birds doing some ceremony" (*L V*, 418). Meanwhile, the floor of home

[15] Lady Ottoline Morrell. "The diary of Lady Ottoline Morrell," *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995: p. 27.

becomes "the bottom of an alligators tank" (*L I*, 445), while life is a "squirrel cage" (*L IV*, 318). Gordon Square is "nothing so much as the lions house at the Zoo. One goes from cage to cage. All the animals are dangerous, rather suspicious of each other, and full of fascination and mystery" (*L II*, 451), or it is "a menagerie without cages. The animals prowl in and out" (*L II*, 573); while 52 Tavistock Square is "the homing of rooks: [they]'re all settling on the trees" (*L V*, 160). Similarly, Oxford is "as unreal as gingerbread lions or bonfires" (*L V*, 248); while London is "a vast rabbit warren, and the rabbits pop in and out" (*L II*, 30), "a parrot house, with all the fowls pecking and screeching at the same moment" (*L IV*, 408), "a parrot house and a bear garden" (*L VI*, 45), as well as "a parrot cage—a lion house—all thats roaring, glaring, cursed, and venomous" (*L VI*, 46).

Meanwhile, the mutual transposition of people and animals can easily be found in Woolf's letter writing: for instance, in a letter written on 19 February 1909 to Clive Bell, the author tries to compare a caterpillar to Vanessa Bell:

> For some reason I am tormented this morning by the image of a great brown woolly bear, which comes crawling across my page, and curls up into a ball when I touch it with my pen.[16] It is deliciously soft, and rolls about in the palm of my hand. I think it has something to do with Clarissa [Vanessa]. We used to be told when we were children that woolly bears could sting. (*L I*, 386)

While in a letter written on 10 August 1909 to Vanessa, the author likens the bull's eye to that of her sister: "We are rather austere, like monks and nuns, speak little, and—oh I long for you! There are bullocks here, with eyes like yours, and beautiful trembling nostrils" (*L I*, 406). As a letter written on 4 September 1931 to Ethel Smyth shows, the animal and Woolf's addressee possess similar characteristics and are interchangeable: "No: you're a completely befogged and besotted owl—One came into the orchard yesterday and let L[eonard]. catch him. He—a she—was brought to me, and I said instantly "Thats Ethel" The creature looks wise I admit, and doubtless

[16] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 386, note 1: "A caterpillar, possibly of the Tiger Moth."

thinks itself omniscient" (*L IV*, 374).

Furthermore, when she is on holiday in St. Ives in March 1921, Woolf compares seals to human beings: in a letter to her sister, Vanessa, she writes: "I am watching two seals barking in the sea at Gurnards Head. This is no poetic licence. There they were, with their beautifully split tails, and dog shaped heads, rolling over and living like two naked dark brown old gentlemen" (*L II*, 460); while writing to Saxon Sydney-Turner, Woolf depicts: "the seals may bob up, first looking like logs, then like naked old men, with tridents for tails" (*L II*, 462). On the contrary, in a letter written on 24 August 1922 to Dora Carrington, Woolf depicts the bathing scene of Sydney Waterlow: "My God! What a sight he looked bathing! like Neptune, if Neptune was a Eunuch—without any hairs, and sky pink—fresh, virginal, soft—I sat on the bank and peered through the rushes, for he asked me not to look" (*L II*, 551); then in a letter written on 23 August 1922 to Katherine Arnold-Forster, Woolf compares Sydney Waterlow to a walrus: "He has mellowed. Oh if you could have seen him bathing in the river Ouse, which could hardly close above his immense soft pink stomach, belching and bellowing like a walrus. As I say, he has improved" (*L II*, 549).

If animal images show Woolf's power of imagination and her ability to associate human beings and animals, as she does in her fiction, mainly in her short stories,[17] they also reveal the author's perception of people, her suggestive way of expressing feelings, as well as her careful observation of animals. In a letter written on 19 May 1926 to Vanessa, she writes: "James [Strachey] and Noel [Olivier], both grey as badgers and sleek as moles (I have just been to the Zoo, and noted these facts accurately.)" (*L III*, 265) Woolf's use of this image reveals how she composes purposefully her images from her real life. Her powerful memory also comes out in her use of animal imagery, as a letter written on 6 February 1930 to Clive Bell shows: "Julian goes booming about, like a gigantic dor-beetle. (When I was a child they always hit the wire netting when we were playing cricket—but the sound means

[17] See, for example, "The Shooting Party."

nothing to you.)" (*L IV*, 133-4) Moreover, these animal images do not merely exist in a timeless space in the author's mind: "All that remains of her in my mind is a cows black blubbering cunt: why that image persists I know not" (*L IV*, 52); they also turn into symbols of people, as in the case of Sydney Waterlow about whom Woolf writes: "But surely he's as innocent and amiable as—well, I always come back to the same image of a hollow pig—the kind you blow out through a hole in the tail" (*L II*, 411).

Furthermore, such animal images are not merely abstract ideas: writing about them, Woolf makes them real, thus experimenting the performative power of words: "Here, in our garden, jealousies and strifes, competitions, Queen Maries, all vanities are less than the slug on the Zinnia. The garden is full of Zinnias. The Zinnias are full of slugs" (*L VI*, 58). Moreover, this chiasmic structure echoes Woolf's own theory of letter writing: "A good way of writing a letter would be always to begin the next sentence with the last word of the one before" (*L III*, 410).

Besides, Woolf uses animal images for herself that are appear in the plural: for instance, to Vanessa, she refers to herself as "singes" or "apes", to Leonard as "marmots", to Vita as "moles". Through the plural form—"Virginias animals" (*L III*, 462), Woolf suggests that her mind is always filled with various "reflections that distract [her] so much" (*L I*, 408) and "an infinite number of feelings" (*L V*, 315). We shall come back to this in the following sections and discuss too Woolf's animal images for herself and her friends, Violet, Vanessa, Vita and Ethel.

5.2. Imagery for people

Introduction

In a letter written on 10 August 1909 to Vanessa Bell, Virginia Stephen states that her sister endows her letters with a sort of charm through the descriptions of people: "My conclusion was that the way to get life into letters was to be interested in other people. You have an atmosphere" (*L I*, 406). This characteristic of Vanessa's

letter writing provokes the author to invent a similar "style" or "form" of letter writing to "suit" her sister (*L I*, 343). Therefore, Woolf's letters, where "a little desiccated gossip" (*L V*, 57) is "skimmed" (*L II*, 350) in her real life by focusing on people, play as Woolf's "swan song" (*L II*, 256), her "juice" (*L II*, 334), "a sort of pouch" (*L II*, 104), as well as "a few crumbs" (*L II*, 110) in order to "tempt" (*L II*, 218), "entice" (*L II*, 349), "amuse" (*L II*, 505) her sister—"[her] gilded dolphin to the surface" (*L II*, 218) or to "make [her] fins water" (*L II*, 504): "These crumbs are artfully scattered on the rim of the deep lake, and I have already counted 3 bubbles which show that the spangled monster is meditating whether to rise—or not" (*L II*, 219). In this sort of letters, not only gossip satisfies her sister: "But you want gossip" (*L II*, 357; *L IV*, 243) and "it's only when you come to the gossip that you pay attention, more or less like a human being" (*L II*, 301); so do people: "But the thing you'll like to hear about is the resurrection of Sydney Waterlow" (*L IV*, 59). These letters can also function as "a thank offering for the loan of [Vanessa's] picture" or "a fair exchange" (*L II*, 199). In order to write such interesting letters to Vanessa, Woolf frequently highlights that it is for her sister that she attends social activities: "Then I went to tea—solely on your account—with Lady Cromer" (*L II*, 468). Such an emphasis can easily and frequently be seen in her letters to her sister: for instance, in a letter written on 9 December 1918, Woolf states: "Chiefly for your sake, I went to another concert at Shelley House yesterday, and there I saw Miss [Ethel] Sands, Morty Sands, Katie Cromer, John Bailey and daughters, Elena Richmond, Logan [Pearsall Smith]; Bowyer Nicholls" (*L II*, 301); or in a letter written on 24 February 1919: "I've collected a good deal of gossip, but domestic details swallow up my juice like sand. Chiefly for your benefit I went to a concert and a tea party yesterday, and sat between Sir Valentine Chirrol, Katie [Cromer], and Sir Henry Newbolt" (*L II*, 334).

Nevertheless, in writing about people to Vanessa, Woolf often doubts her own impressions of them: "And I utterly distrust my own insight into character. It is infantile" (*L III*, 451), and "but then my mind is utterly untrustworthy" (*L IV*, 243). Woolf also suspects Vanessa's perception of people: "About books and pictures our taste is respectable; about people, so crazy I wouldn't trust a dead leaf to cross a pond

in it" (*L IV*, 336). Woolf's self-doubt can also be found in her other letters: for example, writing to Vita Sackville-West, she "suspect[s] that [her] knowledge of the real people" (*L V*, 333) fails her when it comes to writing novels; while in a letter to Ethel Smyth, she shows: "I sat next Elizabeth [Williamson] at a concert the other night, […] Elizabeth looked—but I'm no judge of 'looks',—very well, and we had a little back chat over our seats" (*L V*, 433-4).

However, Woolf still wants to use imagery to convey her impressions about people's appearance, for: "I feel more and more convinced that advanced views are purely a matter of physiognomy. For instance the lady in green, with check trimmings in her hat and a face like a ruddy but diseased apple—one cleft asunder by a brown growth—had nother [*sic*] excuse for existence. The noise is terrific" (*L II*, 286). She also wants to use imagery for people to "pick out the soul of the party on a pin" and considers such a way of depicting people as "very brilliant on [her] part" (*L III*, 502). For example, in a letter written on 11 May 1929 to Quentin Bell, Woolf portrays her friend, Sydney Waterlow as follows: "Old Sydney Waterlow […] had a breakdown and is back again, ruminating, questing, like some gigantic hog which smells truffles miles and miles away. […] But then, my dear, you were too young to know him; so what does it convey to you, this reference of mine to a tortured soul? […] and still he quests like a hog for the Truth" (*L IV*, 56).[18] However, such an intense use of imagery might merely suggest a vague and general meaning, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 14 May 1930 to Quentin Bell: "I thought her [Helen Soutar] so like some warm blooded thick coated brown eyed sharp clawed marsupial in the Zoo that I cant attach any precise human value. That's the worst of writing—images, often of the most grotesque, oust the sober truth" (*L IV*, 170).

Furthermore, imagery might not only destroy the compactness and coherence of writing but also cause the author to lose a sort of self-awareness, as she shows in a letter written on 21 May 1923 to Molly MacCarthy: "I'm glad Squire is going to print your story, though Squire seems to me the common horsepond. Forgive this abrupt

[18] These images will be taken up in Woolf's short story "The Duchess and the Jeweller."

and what they call—I shan't remember my own name next—style. When you leave out everything that makes sense, they say you write *elliptically*" (*L III*, 41). By using the simile of the horsepond, Woolf briefly but accurately, conveys her view of J. C. Squire. On the one hand, Woolf's consideration of imagery as a style that can ruin coherent writing echoes Pater's words in *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style* (1889): "we have a literary domain where the imagination may be thought to be always an intruder."[19] However, Pater not only argues that such an imaginative, poetic power in prose should not be treated "as out of place […], but by way of an estimate of its rights, that is, of its achieved powers, there";[20] he also indicates that the true artist knows "the narcotic force" of imagery—"[p]arallel, allusion, the allusive way generally, the flowers in the garden"—"upon the negligent intelligence to which any *diversion*, literally, is welcome, any vagrant intruder, because one can go wandering away with it from the immediate subject."[21] On the other hand, in the explanatory sentence inserted between dashes, "—I shan't remember my own name next—", Woolf suggests that she "lose[s] herself in metaphors when [she] begin[s] to write, being dissipated, interrupted" (*L III*, 36), for "in actually writing one's mind […] gets into a trance, and the different images seem to come unconsciously" (*L V*, 422). Such an allusive, poetic and unconscious style of writing as imagery is the technique that Woolf has aimed to master throughout her career.

Though Woolf repeats that Vanessa is the driving force that leads her to meet people, she denies sand contradicts it while writing to Ethel Smyth on 27 May 1936: "Yes of course I'd like to meet Madame de P. [Princesse de Polignac] quietly (quite selfishly, not on Nessa's behalf—indeed I dont much believe in the efficacy of that)" (*L VI*, 42). Therefore, these people that Woolf depicts "artfully" (*L II*, 219) in her letters can be regarded as constituting her serious gossip. Describing, then, is a way to practice her writing and to store material for novels, since "all novels […] are about people" (*E V*, 81), even if her first aim is to amuse her addressees and perhaps, to

[19] Walter Pater. *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style* (1889). London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1889: p. 9.
[20] Walter Pater, Appreciations: with an Essay on Style (1889), p. 6.
[21] Walter Pater, Appreciations: with an Essay on Style (1889), p. 19.

arouse their interest in her characters to come in her fictional writing. It is clear from her letters that Woolf is curious about people: people fascinate, interest and excite her.

For example, Woolf finds her niece, Angelica Bell, "fascinating" (*L III*, 546); Lady Sibyl Colefax, "interests" (*L III*, 181) her; she considers too that Jacques Raverat, though a "foreigner", is "a highly interesting character" (*L II*, 553). Similarly, in a letter written to Clive Bell, she compares "most fascinating" Margery Snowden to "the pale and withered but still tremulous harehell": "so caustic still; so facetious. D'you remember the way she rolls ones' sayings into little pats of butter, so that nothing, nothing can be stated and left? But now an unalterable pathos pervades even the pats of butter" (*L III*, 447); while in a letter to Ethel Smyth, she compares Elizabeth Williamson, "most fascinating", to "the old 18th Century miniature […] and an astronomer as well" (*L V*, 347). While travelling, it is "fascinating" for Woolf too to observe foreigners, such as "the clergy and the old ladies" (*L III*, 362) in Palermo, or to "meet complete strangers" in "a charming dinner" (*L V*, 34). Moreover, in a letter to Jacques Raverat, though Woolf shows that there is some difficulty between her and Katherine Arnold-Forster, she states: "But these barriers have their fascination" (*L III*, 155). Writing to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf shows that she is "fascinated by Katherine Mansfield" despite "this cheap scent" (*L IV*, 366) permeating her writing. In the same letter to Vita, Woolf criticises John Middleton Murry: "there was Murry squirming and oozing a sort of thick motor oil in the background" (*L IV*, 366); however, writing to Roger Fry, she states: "But there is a charm in complete rottenness" (*L III*, 38), and again to Lady Ottoline Morrell, she writes: "But I read Murry on Murry[22] because carrion has its fascination, like eating high game" (*L V*, 418). Again, the repellent atmosphere in "a ghastly party at Rose Macaulays" can be "repulsively fascinating" (*L III*, 251); Gordon Square is "full of fascination and mystery" (*L II*, 451) just as London contains both "horror—fascination" (*L VI*, 140), it is "appalling, but also […] fascinating—in its meretricious way" (*L VI*, 294).

Though in a letter to Vanessa, Woolf shows that people make her "vomit with

[22] His autobiography, *Between Two Worlds*, 1935.

hatred of the human race" (*L III*, 265); her mind can be stimulated by them: "I find that when I've seen a certain number of people my mind becomes like an old match box—the part one strikes on, I mean" (*L II*, 143), and writing about them in her letters can be exciting: "its rather like hunting a Swallowtail [butterfly]—I get quite excited" (*L II*, 189). On the whole, Woolf's letters encapsulate her contradictory attitude to people, an attitude significant of the taste for contradiction and paradox her fiction betrays.

5.2.1. Imagery as a way to convey "the Aesthetic Sense" (*L I*, 295)

Lady Katie Cromer, who possesses "a splendid manner" (*L I*, 82), is one of "the magnificent aristocrats" (*L I*, 81) that Virginia Stephen frequently depicts in her letters to Violet Dickinson. Violet is "a gardener" (*L I*, 202) and travelled Greece with Virginia Stephen in 1906. Thus, in order to arouse a sort of sympathy as great as possible in her addressee's heart, the author often compares Katie to either plants, such as "a ripe mulberry tree" (*L I*, 313), or Greek architecture, such as "a bit of a Greek temple lying in the grass" (*L I*, 82), or both. For example, in a letter dated May 1907, Virginia Stephen tries to present her impressions of Katie at the opera:

> [T]he other night at the opera I looked up and saw Katie [Cromer] in the middle of the Royal Box; and all the house looked pale and stunted, and she blossomed like *a Rose*—you will know the kind; but whether it was imagination or truth, I never saw such a gigantic woman, flowing over regal arm chairs; and rearing herself like *some Matron on the Parthenon*; the *style* of thing you dont appreciate. Now had she been a ragged beggar at a street corner, with a string of onions and a patch work shawl, you would have crowed and chuckled. I am going to write a book upon *the Aesthetic Sense* in Violet and Nelly. (*L I*, 295, *our emphasis*)

Through the images of a flower and a Greek statue, Virginia Stephen respectively hints at Katie's beauty and magnificence. At the same time, through the contrast with their surroundings and the ironic association of beauty with gigantism, they are deflated. With such an ironic description of a female aristocrat, the author indirectly

conveys her own "Aesthetic Sense" (*L I*, 295) in her letters, her own true sense of beauty in women, such as Vanessa Bell, her painter sister, and the British aristocrat, Lady Ottoline Morrell, the two truly magnificent women who recur most frequently in Woolf's letters. We shall see how images capture their beauty.

5.2.1.1. Vanessa Bell—"a game of mine to find figures for her" (*L I*, 310)

In a letter written on 22 September 1907 to Elinor Monsell, Virginia Stephen uses a flower to depict her sister, Vanessa Bell: "Nessa is very well and beautiful and happy as some rich flower drawing nourishment tranquilly all day long. It is a game of mine to find figures for her; but they always perish before her" (*L I*, 310). Indeed, Woolf keeps lamenting her failure to capture her sister's beauty. Throughout the six volumes of letters, either to Vanessa or other addressees, she endeavours to do so, resorting to various types of images.

For the author, Vanessa is a "sheep dog" (*L I*, 34-5), "the old Butcher's dog" (*L I*, 446), or "a farmyard sheep dog" (*L II*, 155); she is her "yellow honey Bee" (*L I*, 345), her "sweet Honey Bee" (*L I*, 431), or her "poor honey-buzzard" (*L I*, 475); she is also "some proud sea monster" (*L III*, 176), a sort of "marine monster" (*L VI*, 38) or "swim seal" (*L IV*, 40); sometimes, she is "as monumental as a Sphinx" (*L IV*, 198) or "a South American forest, with panthers sleeping beneath the trees" (*L I*, 471); she is "the soul of the party" (*L II*, 387): "the star of the night […] really, like a bud slipping its sheath; virginal; auroral; but yet with all the sorrow of all the ages" (*L II*, 342), or "with all the bloom on, like great purple plums half hidden beneath their leaves" (*L II*, 350); finally, she is "the hub of the universe, a hum of wings round [her]" (*L VI*, 57).

In a letter written on 1 September 1907 to Violet Dickinson, the author compares Vanessa's beauty, her happiness as well as her serenity to a sort of light:

> Nessa is like a great child, more *happy* and *serene* than ever; sketching with Snow [Margery Snowden], draped in a long robe of crimson, or raspberry coloured silk, with clear drops of amethyst and things she calls 'cairngorm' about it, and old yellow lace.
>
> To be with her is to sit in *autumn sunlight*; but then there is Clive!

> Snow dined here last night, and says they are completely suited—completely happy. It bears in upon me more and more that we all so much *dry or green wood*, thrown on her *flame*; and it dont much matter to that portent what it feeds on: it "transmutes". (*L I*, 309, *our emphasis*)

Virginia Stephen uses another image for the two of them—"dry or green wood"—so as to highlight Vanessa's brilliant nature. In a letter dated February 1907 to Clive Bell, she compares her sister to an animal, a dolphin, in order to enhance Vanessa's beauty:

> First, I think, to Vanessa; and I am almost inclined to let her name stand alone upon the page. It contains all the beauty of the sky, and the melancholy of the sea, and the laughter of the Dolphins in its circumference, first in the mystic Van, spread like a mirror of grey glass to Heaven. Next in the swishing tail of its successive esses, and finally in the grave pause and suspension of the ultimate A breathing peace like the respiration of Earth itself. / If I write of books you will understand that I continue the theme though in another key; for are not all Arts her tributaries, all sciences her continents and the globe itself but a painted ball in the enclosure of her arms? But you dwell in the Temple, and I am a worshipper without. (*L I*, 282)

The image of the dolphin, which possesses all the qualities of earth and heaven, later becomes a symbol of Vanessa in the author's letters—"my vision of Dolphin in her majestic glory" (*L II*, 263). Considering herself as "a worshipper" of her sister, Woolf shows that, apart from being "a game", her imaginative depiction of Vanessa is also a tribute to her beauty.

According to the author herself, the use of different images to convey her sister's beauty becomes an invariable "theme" in her letters. These descriptions belong to "the great story of Vanessa" (*L II*, 350) that she aims to compose in her writing: "Still I remember the features of Mrs Dolphin [Vanessa] though—O dear; I must write a story about it" (*L II*, 370). This is what she did in *Night and Day* (1919) where Vanessa is the original model for Katharine Hilbery, as Woolf shows in two other letters to her sister: one written on 30 July 1916: "I am very much interested in

your life, which I think of writing another novel about.[23] Its fatal staying with you—you start so many new ideas" (*L II*, 109); and the other on 22 April 1918: "I've been writing about you all the morning,[24] and have made you wear a blue dress; you've got to be immensely mysterious and romantic, which of course you are; yes, but it's the combination that's so enthralling; to crack through the paving stone and be enveloped in the mist. You must admit that that puts the matter in a nutshell" (*L II*, 232-3).

For Woolf, Vanessa is a kind of goddess in the "Temple", and this image can be found in some other letters: for example, in a letter dated 7 July 1907 to Violet Dickinson: "—and then there is Nessa, like a wasteful child pulling the heads of flowers—beautiful as a Goddess (at which you always smile)" (*L I*, 299); or in a letter from 6 November 1907 to Madge Vaughan: "Nessa and Clive live, as I think, much like great ladies in a French salon; they have all the wits and the poets; and Nessa sits among them like a Goddess" (*L I*, 318-9); or again in a letter written on 17 April 1919 to Duncan Grant: "Vanessa is represented like a tawny old Goddess, all crusted with brine and barnacles shouldering her way out of the sea" (*L II*, 350). Through the image of the "Goddess"—"beautiful, beloved, chaster" (*L III*, 364), the author conveys her sister's beauty and her own affection for Vanessa. She also conveys Vanessa's generosity as a sister, who takes all the responsibilities during the period when their father, Leslie Stephen, and their brother, Thoby Stephen, were ill, as can be seen in a letter dated November 1906 to Violet Dickinson:

> The old fraud (so we call Nessa now—yes, I know she was exhausted by years of unselfish labour on behalf of a sister)—sits hung with variegated gems, by a large vase of roses, and a fire of hot coals. She neither writes, reads, nor in any way toils or spins; but just exhales a great bounteous atmosphere—the essence of amethyst and amber. Cant you imagine it?—well, it does want imagination. (*L I*, 252-3)

[23] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 109, note 1: "This was her first concept of *Night and Day*, in which Vanessa appears as Katharine Hilbery."
[24] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 232, note 2: "This is the first reference in the letters to *Night and Day*, which Virginia had begun to write early in 1917, and was to finish before the end of 1918. By 12 March she had written over 100,000 words. Vanessa was the model for Katharine Hilbery, the heroine of the novel."

Furthermore, this image of "Goddess" can also suggest Vanessa's motherhood, as in a letter written on 31 December 1918 (*L II*, 312); and in another dated 17 March 1921 (*L II*, 458). At times, as in a letter written on 11 March 1936 to Julian Bell when he was in China, the image conveys her sister's "womanhood" (*L II*, 299): "We're all very well; and I think Nessa seems more than usually cheerful. She's taken her own line in London life; refuses to be a celebrated painter; buys no clothes; sees whom she likes as she likes; and altogether leads an indomitable, sensible and very sublime existence" (*L VI*, 20). In the author's eye, Vanessa is a practical, sane, detached, and persevering woman.

Through various images Woolf conveys her sister's physical attractiveness and her moral charm while revealing her deep affection for her: "I wish dolphin were by my side, in a bath, bright blue, with her tail curled. But then I've been always in love with her since I was a green eyed brat under the nursery table, and so shall remain in my extreme senility" (*L VI*, 153). Furthermore, imagery sheds light on their relationship. Vanessa appears as a source of life for Woolf: "Nessa—my great resource" (*L VI*, 85) and a source of happiness: "I've seldom enjoyed myself more than I did with you, and I cant make out exactly how you manage. One seems to get into such a contented state of mind" (*L II*, 108); she is the backbone of the family, the prop on which Woolf relies: "you cant think how I depend upon you" (*L VI*, 177) although Woolf tries not to intrude too much: "But if I had come your perfect globe would have been smashed; you know how careful I have to be, too, to bait my hook with little minows [*sic*] and other tit bits to disguise my rapacity for your society with whats acceptable to you" (*L VI*, 296). Vanessa is clearly a driving force for her: "Oh what a joy to think you're coming back! I feel like a very old sponge that hears water dripping at the thought. I get so pulverised without you; youre somehow the breath of life; did I say water?" (*L VI*, 299) For Woolf, Vanessa—"Dolphin is inimitable, and life is dust and ashes without her" (*L III*, 476); "its deplorable to have no dolphinry" (*L IV*, 331); as well as:

> I feel a lost old crone without you all: you cant think how I depend upon you, and when you're not there the colour goes out of life, as water from a sponge; and I merely exist, dry, and dusty. This is the exact truth: but not a very beautiful illustration of my complete adoration of you; and longing to sit, even saying nothing, and look at you. (*L VI*, 177)

5.2.1.2. Lady Ottoline Morrell—"a real aristocrat" (*L VI*, 337), "a sense of Shakespeare" (*L VI*, 95)

If Vanessa Bell is "a Goddess" and "a Shakespeare character" (*L II*, 145), Lady Ottoline Morrell is "a real aristocrat" (*L VI*, 337) who possesses "a visual lust, and a sense of Shakespeare" (*L VI*, 95). First of all, in a letter dated May 1909 to Violet Dickinson, the author compares Ottoline's beauty to "an Arum lily; with a thick golden bar in the middle, dropping pollen, or whatever that is which seduces the male bee" (*L I*, 394). Later, in a letter dated May 1917 to Ottoline, Woolf associates her with the sea: "My images, after leaving you, were all of the depths of the sea—mermaid Queens, shells, the bones of the shipwrecked. I was incapacitated for normal life for some time after seeing you. It was a great pleasure, and reassurement to find that my memory had not been nearly mythical or romantic enough" (*L II*, 154). The seductiveness of Ottoline comes out through the image of the mermaid, together with her dangerous fascinating power that can wreck the other. Her "magnificence" (*L II*, 282) as well, which goes beyond all "mythical or romantic" dreams. The mermaid reappears in another letter in which Woolf humorously turns into a charmed sailor, a kind of Ulysses:

> However, I did rouse myself to go and see Ott. I was so much overcome by her beauty that I really felt as if I'd suddenly got into the sea, and heard the mermaids fluting on their rocks. How it was done I cant think; but she had red-gold hair in masses, cheeks as soft as cushions with a lovely deep crimson on the crest of them, and a body shaped more after my notion of a mermaids than I've ever seen; not a wrinkle or blemish—swelling, but smooth. (*L II*, 156)

In another letter from 24 May 1918 to Ottoline, Woolf asks: "Do you mind being looked upon rather as a mermaid in a divine aquarium? / But perhaps the image must be changed for another" (*L II*, 243). Moreover, in her other letters to Ottoline, Woolf uses, together with the siren, the image of the "streak of white lightning" (*L II*, 539) to praise Ottoline's "radiant" (*L VI*, 3) beauty; while in a letter written on 24 August 1927 to T. S. Eliot, Woolf "compare[s]" Ottoline's "mystic side" to "a Dolphin shedding its scales" (*L III*, 413).

Ottoline's majesty also comes out through other images, as a fairy: "I think of the thirty seven young men, and you waving your wand among them" (*L III*, 45) or, in a letter written on 7 February 1912 to Katherine Cox, as a sea animal "float[ing] about", a sort of "anemone at the bottom of an aquarium" (*L I*, 489). And in a letter written on Boxing Day 1912 to Lytton Strachey while describing a visit to the Aquarium where she sees "mackerel shooting endlessly round and round, like torpedo boats", Woolf compares Ottoline to the fish: "For some reason, the mackerel put me in mind of Ottoline and her troupe; she ought to be put in a tank; it's absurd to expect her to stand scrutiny for ways and motives, which is her lot at present" (*L II*, 15-6). It is through such "scrutiny" that Woolf discovers the characteristics common to solid objects, plants, animals or people.

Furthermore, in a letter to Vanessa, Woolf compares the majestic figure of Ottoline to "a shop walker in Marshall and Snellgroves" (*L II*, 214); while writing to Ottoline, she imagines Ottoline as a conductor: "I think of Ottoline, and her red gold curtains conducting a divine symphony in which even the sea lions and cormorants are dulcet as sirens (the reference is to Charles Morgan and E[thel] S[myth]) and wake recovered" (*L V*, 283). Similarly, in a letter written on 12 October 1918 to Lytton Strachey, Woolf compares the magnificent and majestic Ottoline—"(whose conduct seems to have surpassed itself—yet even in vice what a magnificence she has!)—at a party of the Sitwells to "the Spanish Armada in full sail" (*L II*, 282). The image of the Spanish Armada recurs in Woolf's letters to Ottoline afterwards. For example, in a letter dated February 1924, Woolf states: "When I was young and wore

a blue dress, and Ottoline was like a Spanish galleon, hung with gold coins, and lovely silkin [*sic*] sails. / But I'm romancing" (*L III*, 91). Thinking of herself as one of Ottoline's "troupe" who "perform in the ring for [Ottoline] in [her] exalted box" (*L VI*, 509), Woolf, in this letter, depicts herself as one of "the creeping creatures who race about so aimlessly in the grass" (*L III*, 91) in order to highlight Ottoline's majesty, even if with a pinch of salt.

Similarly, in a letter she wrote while she was ill in mid-February 1930 to Ottoline, Woolf compares her addressee to the Armada:

> I'm going to add Hispaniola to *Armada*. One of these days I shall *write about you*—what fun it would be—with the yellow silk sails all rent by shot, and the golden Eagles spread on the masts: but this is only *a joke*—I'm in bed with influenza and want to read your memoirs: and like making up stories about you. The *wilder* and *stranger* the better. (*L IV*, 138, *our emphasis*)

If Woolf states that her exotic description of Ottoline is meant to amuse her addressee, it seems in this quotation that such an imaginative feat is used by the author to entertain herself rather than her addressee. The same inflated imagery, with a slight satiric intention, is used when Woolf compares Ottoline to "Helen of Troy" (*L V*, 248) and compares her "picture" of Ottoline's walking in Whitehall—"advancing with feathers"—to "a Stuart princess in mourning" (*L VI*, 95). Hence, Ottoline's manor house, Garsington "never seems […] a house on the ground like other houses, but a caravan, a floating palace" (*L II*, 518).

Beauty, magnificence and majesty are the main qualities of "a great lady" (*L III*, 91) with "a high-minded manner" (*L VI*, 509), possessing a "natural genius" of leadership, whose "standard" Woolf herself "at once "flock[s] to" (*L III*, 392). Furthermore, in a letter written on 22 May 1917 to Vanessa Bell, Woolf states: "However, my tack is to tell her [Ottoline] she is nothing but an illusion, which is true, and then perhaps she'll live up to it" (*L II*, 156); while in another letter written on 5 August in the same year to Ottoline, Woolf shows: "You are again becoming almost too mystical to be believed in any longer. I catch scraps about you and the garden and

keep you going in my mind" (*L II*, 174). In Woolf's mind, Ottoline becomes a sort of mythical figure, like a deity in Greek mythology; at the same time, like an inflated figure, she threatens to lose all substance.

Praise and admiration are clearly counterbalanced by satire and in a letter written on 15 October 1918 to Roger Fry, Woolf openly criticises Ottoline:

> Did you pick out any of Ottoline's fine tail feathers the other night? I heard of her early morning raid upon Gordon Sqre, and how Nessa demolished her, and how *the angularity of her body appeared like that of a foundered cab horse in the morning light*. But with such a fund of dishonesty and vitality how is any arrow of ours to strike her heart?—it is a movable target—that, I believe, is what we find so disconcerting. (*L II*, 282, *our emphasis*)

Ottoline's dishonesty, behind her "fine tail feathers", is exposed. Similarly, while describing her "dinner with Ottoline [as] a frigid success" (*L II*, 336) in a letter written on 27 February 1919 to Vanessa Bell, Woolf criticises Ottoline's vanity and pokes fun at her: "She fishes for compliments worse than I do—I mean without that airy certainty which is so adorable in me that there is no limit to one's store and one has merely to shake the tree for them to fall thick as apple blossom in May. She shakes the tree—oh yes,—However, I did my best" (*L II*, 336). She voices the same criticism even more openly and harshly in a letter written on 13 November 1929 to Vita Sackville-West: "In truth, she's a nice woman, eaten with amorosity and vanity, an old volcanoe, all grey cinders and scarcely a green plant, let alone a shank left" (*L IV*, 108).

Quoting Ottoline's speech and fragmenting it, Woolf also derides Ottoline's passion for literature:

> [H]er mind vapours off about friendship and love and literature—"I could never love anyone who does not care for literature—that is my cross—my refuge, Virginia—when people are cruel—and they are cruel sometimes—And I suffer so terribly—my back gives me

> agonies—my feet are swollen with chillblains, and I am always, always tired. What would I not give to be able to work as you do—to create—to be an artist—" imagine crossing Holborn with this dribbling out, as painfully as two old witches on crutches. (*L II*, 336)

Or in a letter to Duncan Grant written on 11 February 1920 where she mercilessly compares her with a fowl, Woolf derides her passion for art: "Ottoline yesterday was in fine feather about your show. The poor old thing undulated and eulogised till really it was like talking to some poor fowl in delirium—her neck became longer and longer and you know how she always hangs to 'wonderful' as if it were a rope dangling in her vacuum—but as Nessa says, this is nonsense—" (*L II*, 422). Again in a letter dated 27 may 1928, it is through the direct quotation of Ottoline's speech in a staccato way that Woolf mocks her and through a comparison with an animal, here a horse, that she draws a satirical portrait of her: "'—There is a certain *beauty* in illness—one is alone—one reads—one thinks—one sees only the people one likes seeing'—Now its a very odd thing how spirited the old thing is, how beautiful, with her jaw in a nosebag like an old horse, and yet so idiotic. One cant stand very much of it" (*L III*, 502-3). However, if Woolf satirises Ottoline's dishonesty, in a letter she sent her on 23 February 1933, she acts in the same way, yet half-confessing her own dishonesty: "What we admired, we said, was your outrageous passion for – is it life? art? Anyhow we said that woman is a great liver:—and think how seldom talkers talk to one's advantage! No, I wouldn't like to overhear my friends on me" (*L V*, 162).

To other addressees, Woolf hovers between satire and praise. In a letter written on 1 September 1925 to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf mocks Ottoline's gaudy, exuberant way of dressing: "Ottoline in full dress and paint, white and gaudy as a painted tombstone erect on Tower Bridge in the midst of all the hoppers and bargees coming back home drunk on Bank Holiday" (*L III*, 199). Nevertheless, Woolf acknowledges that in "the intricacies of that corrupt and tanged mass, Ottoline's soul" (*L III*, 208) and behind her garish make-up, Ottoline is sincere. For instance, in a letter written on 15 May 1919 to Roger Fry, she states:

> We dined under the apple blossom last night with Ottoline, and though fairly garish in the moonlight […] and showed up the powder like snow on the higher reaches of the Alps, she was extremely charming; her soul seemed to be shedding its husks; she was frank and with Leonard on one side and me on the other kept strictly to the path of truth. She loped along it like a large white hare; and in fact we were convinced of her *fundamental integrity*. (*L II*, 356)

Through the image of the husk falling off hinting at the opening up of Ottoline's soul and the image of the hare hinting at her way of talking, Woolf praises Ottoline's sincerity.

Furthermore, this quality of Ottoline's is conveyed through another metaphor in another letter to Vanessa, which describes the same dinner:

> We dined in the garden; and she was simple and frank; I assure you this is true. No one will believe it. Anyhow she was trying to be so; like an old snake wriggling out of its skin. For example, she said her hands were red; when I looked, I saw they were not only red but very clumsy, with thick joints into the bargain. But why did she say so unless in a sudden spasm of honesty? (*L II*, 357)

The shedding of the skin echoes the shedding of the husk, the mask Ottoline usually wears, but Woolf makes her satire more biting here by comparing Ottoline to a snake, an animal traditionally seen as malignant. Later, Woolf will admire Ottoline's indifference towards deafness in her later years, as witness a letter written on 14 November 1930 to Ethel Smyth:

> —and I cried out […] Heavens Ottoline, are you deaf? And she replied with a sort of noble negligence which struck me very much "Yes, yes, quite deaf—" and then lifted the trumpet and listened. Does that touch you? Well it did me, and I saw in a flash all I admire her for; and think what people overlook, in the briarwood bramble of her obvious tortuousness and hypocrisy. (*L IV*, 253-4)

Woolf's ambiguous attitude to Ottoline can be traced through her letters. In a letter written on 22 October 1922 to Roger Fry, Woolf ironises about Ottoline's

generosity: “Ottoline redeeming her soul by some act of unparalleled magnanimity” (*L II*, 572); but writing to Ottoline, Woolf describes her addressee as one of those “enviable” people “who read and exist beautifully and generously” (*L V*, 16), considers her as “a born giver”—“the quality [I] humbly adore” (*L V*, 358), and praises her addressee’s hospitality: “Mark my words—the whole evening will be spent in talking of Stephen Spender, and when the stars are in the sky, I shall stumble to bed wondering by what alchemy you refine these rough youths to gold” (*L V*, 261). Even though in her later years, Ottoline becomes as “a relic—as something swept up on the beach after the defeat of the Spanish Armada she is admirable” (*L III*, 56); Woolf has “grown very fond of her [Ottoline]”, as she shows in a letter written on 8 May 1938 to Margaret Llewegaret Davies after Ottoline’s death: “she was changed; so shabby and humble and humorous; I always saw her alone. The parties were a grind; and she was so deaf” (*L VI*, 227).

Woolf’s brief, playful or ironic portrayals of Ottoline, now considered as “a joke” (*L IV*, 138) by herself, now as “nonsense” (*L II*, 422) by Vanessa Bell, convey her contradictory impressions of an English Lady, as witness another letter written on 25 October 1917 to Ottoline:

> […] *my* impression was of beauty mixed with the usual melancholy misunderstanding of all complex and sensitive people, the other day. […] The walk in the rain was romantic and so satisfactory from my point of view—but then I like you yourself, beneath the depressions and agitations and varieties of the surface. By this time surely, our degree of polish is scratched through, and we have come upon something—I have, anyhow—human and true beneath. (*L II*, 190)

According to Woolf, Ottoline is beautiful but melancholy, majestic but anxious. Through images, Woolf attempts to present the beauty, magnificence, and majesty of “incurably romantic” Ottoline (*L III*, 506): “I have this silly romantic but impossible to avoid sense of your beauty” (*L III*, 504). In a way, writing about the English Lady’s appearance reveals Woolf’s “Aesthetic Sense”. But Ottoline’s physical charm goes

together with her gaudiness, deafness and decline. Through different sets of images, Woolf succeeds in conveying the various facets of Ottoline's character: one refers to her generosity, sincerity, frankness, humanity, indifference and tenacity as well as to her sensibility and passion for life and art; the other involves dishonesty, vanity, and hypocrisy. Through these images, Woolf presents a sort of tainted beauty, that of an English Lady. Besides, Ottoline's own speech also fascinates Woolf and provokes in her both a sort of diffidence and sympathetic vibration or admiration, as witness a letter to Angelica Bell: "I had a long visit from Ottoline. I was late; and found her curled in my chair like a viper reading a book. We had a vipers talk; fascinating; about her life" (*L V*, 445).

Writing to other addressees, Woolf retains the same ambiguous posture. In a letter written on 10 November 1933 to Quentin Bell, Woolf shows that Ottoline "bamboozles" her: "Also Ottoline came to tea, like a weeping willow strung with pearls. She now wears globular moons at her ears—false. But on the other hand she is now all truth, humanity and loving kindness" (*L V*, 245); while in another letter written on 23 October 1934 to Rosamond Lehmann, Woolf states that Ottoline "daze[s]" her: "but she was all that a lovely leopard should be" (*L V*, 339). Whereas, writing to Ottoline, Woolf not only states that her addressee "intoxicate[s]" (*L III*, 91) her, but also shows that such an English Lady can both make "England suddenly take place" and stimulate in her "a visual lust, and a sense of Shakespeare" (*L VI*, 95).

Furthermore, in a letter dated July 1927 to Ottoline, Woolf shows that her friend's beauty stirs in her the desire to write about her: "It was very nice of you to write. As usual, you made my head swim with beauty,—I walk about London making up phrases about you. Isn't it a pleasure to you that you have this effect on people?" (*L VI*, 514) Whereas, in a letter written on 8 June 1924 to Jacques Raverat, Woolf is more biting although what she stresses is Ottoline's dual nature: "She flaunts about London, not without a certain grandeur, as of a ship with its sails rat-eaten, and its masts mouldly, and green sea serpents on the decks. But no image will convey her mixture of humbleness and splendor and hypocrisy" (*L III*, 115).

Ottoline also stirs in Woolf's a desire for intimacy, as she points out in a letter

written on 13 November 1929 to Vita Sackville-West:

> Lord! what a party? I flirted and I flirted—with Christabel [McLaren], with Mary [Hutchinson], with Ottoline [Morrell]; but this last was a long and cadaverous embrace which almost drew me under. Figure us, entwined beneath Cezannes which she had the audacity to praise all the time we were indulging in those labyrinthine antics which is called being intimate with Ottoline; I succumb: I lie; I flatter; I accept flattery; I stretch and sleek, and all the time she is watchful and vengeful and mendacious and unhappy and ready to break every rib in my body if it were worth her while. In truth, she's a nice woman, eaten with amorosity and vanity […]. And this is human intercourse, this is human friendship so I kept saying to myself while I flattered and fawned. (*L IV*, 108)

Such an intimate friendship may seem flawed and unsatisfactory. However, in her letters to Ottoline, Woolf states that such intimacy can "make life seem a little amusing and interesting and adventurous" (*L III*, 91): "Why is one so fond of one's friends? Partly egotism, I suppose. I felt that if Francis died I shall be 50 years older" (*L V*, 99). For Woolf, intimacy is an egotistical desire—as the previous quotation (*L IV*, 108) where the "I" is omnipresent, shows—a desire for "the presence of [Ottoline's] golden wing" (*L VI*, 140) that can give "a great excitement and illumination of the perfect dulness" (*L III*, 393) and "a merciful relief in that parrot house [party] of screeching chocolate boxes" (*L V*, 133). Indeed, in a letter to Vita written after Ottoline died on 21 April 1938, Woolf laments: "I was at Ottolines funeral services. I miss her; I mean Gower Street looks to me dumb and dismal" (*L VI*, 226). Woolf, in a letter to Molly MacCarthy, will come back to Ottoline, personifying a town she is visiting in France and further suggesting how she misses her: "The Wolves are on tour as you see, and this is a very nice town, a real aristocrat, like Ottoline or the Duchess of Montrose compared with Lewes and Brighton who are merely Sibyl Colefax and Dora Sanger" (*L VI*, 337).

Many letters reveal through their choice of images Woolf's affection, admiration, "gratitude and devotion" (*L V*, 358) to her friend. Woolf's imaginative descriptions composed with "romantic sentence[s]" (*L V*, 353) expose Woolf as a

"romantic", "emotional" (*L V*, 266), and "sentimental" (*L VI*, 510; *L V*, 266) letter writer. Besides, in her letters to Ottoline, Woolf repeats: "One of these days I shall write about you—what fun it would be—" (*L IV*, 138) and she confesses to her that she frequently regards her novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, as her "great Garsington novel" (*L II*, 539, 543), in which "that flamboyant female" (*L V*, 139), Mrs Dalloway, is the very image of Ottoline.

5.2.2. "[M]y jocose remarks upon your character" (*L III*, 65)

In a letter written on 12 or 13 May 1923 to the young writer, Gerald Brenan, after her visit to her addressee at Yegen in Spain in 1923, Woolf states that "all [her] memories of [him] are of an extraordinary pleasantness", in which Gerald is remembered "as a Saint on a hill top—someone who has withdrawn, and looks down upon us, not condescendingly but with pity" (*L III*, 36). This image of the saint which captures Woolf's perception of Gerald's character, echoes the speech of "the old ladies at Granada: "So sweet a nature, such tact, combined, my dear, with all an Englishman's dignity, and never in the way, and so considerate, with charming manners too. I can well believe that he will write something very very wonderful one of these days" (*L III*, 36). At the same time, in a letter written to Mary Hutchinson during this travel, Woolf states that the image of Gerald, "a very sympathetic, but slightly blurred character," persists in her memory, and she further describes him as bearing "some phantasmagoric resemblance to Shelley", "owing to solitude and multitudes of books" (*L VI*, 503). Through the image of the saint or of the Shelleyan poet, Woolf conveys her impression of Gerald's character.

Moreover, in a letter written on 10 August 1923 to Gerald, Woolf writes that these imaginary, perfectly subjective descriptions are part of her "jocose remarks" on her addressee's character: "But I am afraid of expressing these opinions, since my jocose remarks upon your character seemed to you so beside the mark. Remember, I was writing in the person of a poor old woman, to whom you had been kind: her view was made rosy on purpose" (*L III*, 65). Woolf also points out that, in Gerald's own eye, these romantic, humorous figurations might fail to capture his own character. To

use images in her letters as "jocose remarks" on her acquaintances' characters is also an important purpose Woolf pursues and a skill she tries to master in her fictional writing.

To take another example, we can turn to the images Woolf resorts to when addressing Ethel Sands: in a letter written on 31 May 1925 to her friend, Woolf, by playfully comparing Ethel Sands to "a heartless siren, who dives into the depths of the sea, and forgets all her human friends, till she rises up again about October the 10th", actually attempts to praise her addressee's "hostessry" (*L III*, 187) through this ironic description. While in a letter dated 24 April 1929, Woolf invents her own version of her addressee's travelling and portrait: "But I can't conceive where you are at this moment[25]—What wouldn't I give to see you, and to surprise you in some astonishing revelation! You may be just taking down your hair in a tent under a eucalyptus tree, the moon being obscured temporarily by a huge moth. Ah! You are a moth, I remember: red eyed, with a brown hood" (*L IV*, 46). Woolf turns Ethel Sands into a moth, thus suggesting her adventurous nature that leads her to chase sights as a moth chases light. Moreover, in other letters to Ethel Sands, Woolf "compare[s]" both Ethel Sands and Nan Hudson to "birds of paradise or sea-horse or something" (*L III*, 404) so as to praise them as painters, "so mute and highminded" (*L III*, 400), which creates a sort of "much higher moral and mental atmosphere" (*L III*, 519). In particular, in a letter written on 31 December 1929, Woolf compares them to "an avalanche or an eel or an iceberg when it comes to finding what represents your idiosyncrasy on a wet day in Brighton", a way for her to praise their "slippery" generosity that led them to read "the dove grey gloves, the pâté of foie gras" (*L IV*, 120) as Christmas gifts. In the same letter, Woolf further compares Ethel Sands to "the sperm of the sturgeon", which can "combine these qualities"—"Something dark, glistening, exotic, mothy, luxurious, soft, rich, rare" (*L IV*, 120). With such playful, private figurative language, Woolf tries to praise the qualities and peculiarities of her addressees.

[25] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 46, note 3: "Ethel Sands was now staying at the British Embassy in Constantinople."

Woolf sometimes resorts to nicknames to capture the characters of her friends. One of the most telling that she uses for Roger Fry is "Crusty" (*L III*, 225): "Well, if I wrote to anybody, it would be to Roger (or Crusty, as I call you, to those who, knowing your worth, yet find a certain truth in that description)" (*L III*, 208). The "truth" of this image in this letter written on 16 September 1925 to Roger Fry may be threefold. First of all, in a letter to Barbara Bagenal, Woolf states: "Roger, of course, is the nicest human being of any of us, and will as usual be incomparably more generous than one could suspect Christ to be, should Christ return, and take to painting in the style of Cezanne at the age of 56" (*L III*, 51); while discussing her biography of Roger Fry with Vanessa Bell, Woolf states that "Roger himself is so magnificent, I'm so in love with him" (*L VI*, 285). For Woolf, Roger Fry is magnanimous, studious and brilliant. However, with the image of "Crusty", Woolf attempts to mock Roger Fry's harsh and "grumpy" (*L III*, 150) temper: "the vicious old Roger, who has a febrile senility coming on, […] quite unlike our elderly benignity" (*L II*, 282). According to Woolf, Roger Fry has changed; his "manners are so unaccommodating, indeed he's grown so surly, biting aristocrats at sight" (*L III*, 187); and she regrets his bitterness:

> Lord! how bitter he is! Now I laugh at my friends, but not with a black tongue. First he abused Vita; then Ethel Smyth; then Maynard; then of course complained of his poverty and the neglect of his art—but not as of old with tolerant grumps: bitterly, savagely, with morosity. We think his mésalliance is souring him and Helen [Anrep] to wit. (*L IV*, 264)

Then, playing on the original meaning of the adjective "Crusty", that is, having a thin dry hard layer of something on the surface (crust), Woolf alludes to Roger Fry's "impeccable" and "incorruptible" (*L III*, 150) mind: "However, I am much better, and only swear to forego aristocratic society in future; which I'm sure is my undoing. Its being stupid thats so tiring—not being clever: […] Crusty never tries any of these things, so its no good appealing to him for sympathy" (*L III*, 208). Woolf admires Roger Fry's mind, as she shows in a letter written on 27 December 1928 to

Vanessa:

> Roger is the only civilised man I have ever met, and I continue to think him the plume in our cap; the vindication, asseveration—and all the rest of it—If Bloomsbury had produced only Roger, it would be on a par with Athens at its prime (little though this will convey to you) We dined with him, and came away—fed to the lips, but impressed almost to tears by his charm. (*L III*, 566)

"Crusty" also implies there is a soft substance inside, namely, Roger Fry's sensibility to art, as Woolf points out in a letter written on 17 December 1916 to Duncan Grant where she describes her visit to the Omega workshop: "I was taken round by Roger, and felt innumerable eggs crack beneath me. I was very much struck by his sensibility: he showed me minute patches of black, and scrapings of a sort of graining upon which the whole composition depended" (*L II*, 130). Within the crust there is also Roger Fry's erudition, which Woolf admires while travelling to Greece with him in 1932. For example, writing to Vanessa, Woolf compares erudite Roger Fry, who "oozes knowledge, but kindly warmly", to "an aromatic—what? Shower bath, it'll have to be" (*L V*, 49); while to John Lehmann, she uses a metaphor to describe Roger Fry's knowledge: "Roger is the greatest fun—as mild as milk, and if you've ever seen milk that is also quicksilver you'll know what I mean. He disposed of whole museums with one brush of his tail" (*L V*, 63). Through the watery metaphor (the bath, oozes) that symbolises Roger Fry's rich knowledge, Woolf transforms an abstract idea into a visual scene with a comic turn, noble knowledge being coupled with an ordinary shower bath. With the images of the "milk" and "quicksilver", Woolf praises Roger Fry's gentle disposition and acute mind, suggesting both his mildness and vivacity.

Moreover, while describing their travel to Greece in a letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf not only shows how much she values Fry's appreciation of life and art: "Roger, whom I meant you to rise at, with his rather cautious admiration of the Greek statues in the museums, is far and away the best admirer of life and art I've ever travelled with; so humane; so sympathetic, so indomitable" (*L V*, 59); but also unexpectedly

compares Roger Fry, who possesses "sensibility and vigour", to "a prodigiously fertile spider, where [they] are ants, hard, shiny, devoid of all filament whatsoever" (*L V*, 60). The two contrasting images of the spider and the ants emphasise Roger Fry's qualities while disclosing Woolf's own humble feeling and appreciation of him.

In Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth, Roger Fry is considered as "the most heavenly of men […] so rich so infinitely gifted" (*L V*, 330) and "the most intelligent of [her] friends", "profusely, ridiculously, perpetually creative", who "couldnt see 2 matches without making them into a boat. That was the secret of his charm and genius" (*L V*, 366). While in a letter written on 1 December 1923 to Gerald Brenan, while talking about Roger Fry, who "is close on sixty, and gets […] richer and suppler, richer and suppler", with a mind "far subtler and more richly stocked than Clives, never ceases for a second to glow, contract, expand", Woolf compares him to "some wonderful red-tinted sea anemone, which lives in the deepest water and sucks into itself every scrap of living matter within miles" (*L III*, 80), thus suggesting how he appropriates and digests all that he eagerly discovers. All of Roger Fry's qualities come out in a letter Woolf sent him on 15 May 1919:

> She [Lady Ottoline Morrell] spoke of you with enthusiasm. But then as everyone does that, such little tributes as I have to make pass unnoticed. For instance, the other day [John Middleton] Murry said "Roger Fry is far the nicest of all your friends"—to which I replied "My dear Murry, have you only just discovered that Roger is not only the most charming but also the most spiritually gifted of mankind? Where we have a rag, he has the whole cloak—" "His sweetness, his largeness, his magnanimity"—went on Murry—"and then the random fire of genius" I interrupted, "The most beautiful house in London" said Murry, "and his portrait of Edith Sitwell I think the best he ever painted". I interposed, "Oh his art I cant speak, but of his temperament, his generosity—" "O if we could all be like Roger!" I wound up, and plunged the whole party into gloom. This is strictly according to fact I assure you, but as Nessa would say, coals to Newcastle. (*L II*, 356)

Through a direct quotation of her talk with other people at a dinner, Woolf praises Roger Fry and conveys their and her admiration for him—while subtly criticising

Murry.

Woolf admires Roger Fry's artistic criticism, and in a letter written on 17 December 1934 to Ethel Smyth, she considers him "among the finest of critics" (*L V*, 354); she values his method: "One of Roger's eccentricities was that he never analysed character, but always art. I daresay the reason for his mastery" (*L VI*, 456) as well as his artistic talk: "there was always a substance, not mere froth in the talk" (*L V*, 452). Roger Fry is "far the most 'exciting' person to meet", for he is "always bubbling with new ideas and adventures" (*L VI*, 461). Roger Fry's artistic talk stimulates her and radiates into her own writing; Roger Fry has the power of light, as she suggest in a letter she sent him on 24 April 1918: "I wish I had the chance of being thoroughly enkindled by you rather oftener. I suppose you dont know your own powers in that line, which I hesitate to call divine, but still the amount of spirit that radiates from you may, for all I know, come straight from a holy source" (*L II*, 234-5). Roger Fry's book, *The Artist and Psycho-Analysis* (1924) is an incentive for her to think, as Woolf tells him in a letter written on 22 September 1924: "I have just finished your pamphlet, so I must write off at once and say how it fills me with admiration and stirs up in me, as you alone do, all sorts of bats and tadpoles—ideas, I mean, which have clung to my roof and lodged in my mind, and now I'm all alive with pleasure" (*L III*, 132). Roger Fry's theory about form in painting in this book particularly appeals to Woolf and leads her to reflect on form in writing:

> I'm puzzling, in my weak witted way, over some of your problems: about 'form' in literature. I've been writing about Percy Lubbock's book, and trying to make out what I mean by form in fiction. I say it is emotion put into the right relations; and has nothing to with form as used of painting. But this you must tidy up for me when we meet, which must be soon and often. (*L III*, 133)[26]

Comparing herself to "a gadfly in [his] flanks" (*L III*, 209) in the same letter, Woolf tries to understand her "own relations with Roger" (*L V*, 354):

[26] See Woolf's opinion about form in literature in chapter four.

> Your discussions on the novel sound fascinating and incredible […] however, you know my arguments in favour of English literature at any rate, and English eccentricity and quality—of which by the way, you're a prime specimen yourself, for there's no one I think of with greater relish than of you, deny it as you may. For example who but you would sit up in the corner of an express train and translate mediaeval French with such vitality? I think they're very good judging without the originals. Anyhow they have colour and character—how do you do it, in a train or at a table, I can't conceive. It makes me return to my old charge—that you must write more, and about literature. Let the idea simmer in your brain: one morning you'll toss it over, a perfect omelette. Think of the long dusky dampish evenings at Dalmeney, with the lumbago on you, and one colour much the same as another: however, I shall be at hand then, and I consider it one of my functions, as they say, to be a gadfly in your flanks. I will have a book out of you for next autumn season. (*L III*, 208-9)

Through the image of the gadfly, Woolf points out how she absorbs and assimilates Roger Fry's aesthetic ideas so as to innovate in her own writing technique.

In short, through the image of "Crusty", Woolf refers both to Roger Fry's character and artistic theory. Considering herself as one of Roger Fry's "devoted admirers" (*L III*, 133), Woolf shows deep gratitude to him: for example, writing to Roger Fry, she states: "I venerate and admire you to the point of worship: Lord! you dont know what a lot I owe you!—" (*L III*, 562), while in a letter to Pamela Diamand after he died on 9 September 1934, Woolf writes: "He was always the giver—no one excited and stirred me as he did" (*L V*, 335). To Lady Ottoline Morrell, Woolf expresses her deep sadness about Roger Fry's death: "Yes, we are all very sad, as I know you will understand. Roger was so much part of our lives—I dont know anybody gave more and life seems very dull and thin without him" (*L V*, 331-2); while in a letter written on 6 June 1935 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf uses figurative language—images and metaphors—to convey her sadness and the important part Roger Fry played in her life: "But the truth is I am in the cavernous recesses (excuse this language) because Roger is dead (I never minded any death of a friend half so much: its like coming into a room and expecting all the violins and trumpets and

hearing a mouse squeak)" (*L V*, 399).

5.2.3. "[W]hy is it so pleasant to damn one's friends?" (*L II*, 209)

In her letter written on Christmas Day 1930 to Vanessa Bell, while describing Roger Fry's "Crusty" character, Woolf is fully aware of the slight meanness in her words: "Roger [Fry] dined with us, and Lord! how bitter he is! Now I laugh at my friends, but not with a black tongue" (*L IV*, 264). Writing to Margaret Llewelyn Davies on 2 January 1918, Woolf adds that John Maynard Keynes and Katherine Cox "almost are" "lost to humanity"; and after this unkind, sharp remark, she asks: "However, I must stop; why is it so pleasant to damn one's friends?" (*L II*, 208-9) Not content with playfully satirising her friends, such as Lady Ottoline Morrell, or teasing others as she does with Gerald Brenan, Ethel Sands or Roger Fry, Woolf, in her letters, often relishes condemning them and frequently does so through images.

Although when writing to Katherine Cox, Woolf praises her addressee as "a remarkable and a very nice woman", whom they "feel very fond of" (*L III*, 312), "love and admire so much (for all sorts of qualities)" (*L IV*, 21); when writing to Leonard Woolf, she makes acrid remarks and criticises her friend's lack of intelligence through a derogatory comparison: "Ka is very nice, but as slow headed as an old cow" (*L II*, 43). After Katherine married William Arnold-Forster, Woolf, in her letters to Vanessa Bell, disapproves of their marriage: "So there. It is one of the most melancholy households you can imagine. It is founded upon pretending they enjoy, what they dont: upon slang, and heartiness, and art, and humanity" (*L III*, 312). In Woolf's eye, Katherine is "maternal, and tremendously well pleased with herself", "always so damned condescending" (*L II*, 393), "to some extent genuine" (*L III*, 312), and "beyond belief worthy, scraped, dismal, patronising oppressive" (*L III*, 462); through animal images, Woolf also conveys her disapproval of William: William is "as mild as a Guinea pig—a neurotic Guinea pig" (*L II*, 393), "hollow" (*L III*, 312), "very offhand and manly: but as vain as peacock" (*L III*, 462) about his own paintings.

Similarly, in her letters to Jacques Raverat, Woolf goes on criticising the

couple, for example, in a letter written on 25 August 1922:

> I have nothing whatever to say against Ka and Will. At first sight he is a mere sandhopper; but later I think he has some sort of spine—indeed, he's a muscular little man, considering his size. Ka, of course, keeps a medicine chest and doses the village, and gets into a blue dress trimmed with fur for tea, when county motor cars arrive, and she is much in her element. Is this malicious? Slightly, perhaps, but you will understand. (*L II*, 554)

While writing such a harsh offensive description of William and criticising Katherine sharply, Woolf realises her own hostility. However, such a "malicious" opinion becomes bitterer in another letter written on 4 November 1923 to Jacques, when Woolf describes her dinner with Katherine:

> Ka Cox dined with us two nights ago. Is malice allowed? Is it deducted from the good marks I have acquired or hope to acquire with the Raverat family? But when you've always known the worst of me—my incorrigible mendacity; my leering, sneering, undependable disposition. You take me as I am, and make allowances for the sake of old days. Well, then, Ka is *intolerably dull*. I am quoting my husband. I am not quite of that opinion myself: but why, I ask, condescend to the Woolfs? Why be so damned matronly? Why always talk about Will [Arnold-Forster]—that parched and pinched little hob goblin, whom I like very much but think an incorrigibly bad painter, as if he were Shelley, Mr Gladstone, Byron and Helen of Troy in one? I dont carry on about Leonard like that, nor yet Gwen about Jacques. What I suspect is that dear old Ka feels the waves of life withdraw, and there, perched high on her rock, makes these frantic efforts to pretend, to make the Woolfs believe that she is still visited by the waters of the great sea.
>
> Indeed, once upon a time, when we all swooned upon her in our love affairs and collapsed in our nervous breakdowns, she was. She was wetted punctually, and shone in her passive way, like some faintly coloured sea anemone, who never budges, never stings, never—but I am getting wrapped up in words.
>
> Anyhow, both Leonard and I lost our tempers. We said nothing. We went to bed in the devil of a gloom. Are we like that? we said. Are we middle aged and content? Do we look like old cabbages? Is life entirely a matter of retrospect and county families and trying to impress people

> with ringing up men at the foreign office about French conscription of Natives in Africa? No, no, no. Let us change the subject. (*L III*, 76-7)

Repeating the conjunction "why", Woolf criticises Katherine's dullness, pretence and self-complacency in the autumn of her life. This criticism is emphasised by two contrasting images referring to Katherine. By comparing Katherine to "some faintly coloured sea anemone" and using the image of the wave to symbolise human life, Woolf tries to convey Katherine's charm in her youth. This contrasts with the "old cabbages", an image suggesting the decay of life in the middle-aged, which Katherine, according to Woolf, refuses to face. However, the rhetorical questions following her criticism of Katherine actually reveals that Katherine's character and attitude in her middle-age not only amuse and puzzle Woolf, but also makes her examine her own character and life.

Furthermore, in another letter written on 24 January 1925 to Jacques, Woolf praises, if not her appearance, at least her character as well as her wisdom in her own life; at the same time, she criticises Katherine's insensibility to art:

> Then I have seen our Ka in her mother-in-laws grey suit and set of furs, a perfect specimen of solid county life, outwardly; but inwardly, much as usual; that is rather flustered and affectionate, and troubled, it seems to me, about her past; and life's discrepancies, very wise in her own way, which is not our way. She has no feeling whatever for the arts. This is the greatest barrier of all, I believe. You and I can chatter like a whole parrot house of cockatoos (such is my feeling) because we have the same language at heart: but with Ka, one looks across a wall. Whether what one says reaches her I doubt. But these barriers have their fascination. Only for living with, they're impossible. (*L III*, 154-5)

However, such a difference between herself and Katherine interests Woolf. I would argue that rather than being gratuitously and "fiercely critical of people", as Nigel Nicolson states,[27] Woolf betrays in these "malicious" remarks her fascination for different characters and different forms of life that provoke her so much.

[27] See Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. xviii.

Woolf's "malicious" remarks conveyed through images also concern Lady Sibyl Colefax. For example, in her letters to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf compares Sibyl to a "nice cherry in her own house" (*L III*, 272) and states that this image has been in her mind since their first meeting: "D'you know the first time I met her she struck me so hard and bright I compared her to artificial cherries in a servants hat—nor can I ever quite obliterate it" (*L III*, 375). Though in her letters to other addressees, Woolf repeats that Sibyl is "so nice" (*L III*, 272), "good kind simple"; with the image of cherry, she wants to satirise a "worldly Sibyl" (*L IV*, 59)—"a damned snob" (*L VI*, 143). This appears in other letters to Vita, for example, in a letter dated 19 November 1926:

> She is a woman of the world: Sybil Colefax. To me, an almost unknown type. Every value is different. Friendship, let alone intimacy, is impossible. Yet I respect, even admire. Why did she come, I kept wondering: felt so gauche, and yet utterly indifferent. This is a sign one never speaks the truth to her. She skated over everything, evaded, palliated, compromised; yet is fundamentally kind and good. Its odd for me, who have some gift for intimacy, to be nonplussed entirely. (*L III*, 302)

Though the difference between herself and Sibyl restrains her desire for an intimate, sincere relationship, Sibyl can stir in her a sort of respect and admiration. Similarly, writing to other friends, such as Hugh Walpole, Woolf mentions that Sibyl's secularity can "create an atmosphere of amiable insincerity instantly—not but that I like her. Its only—what? I wonder if you felt what we felt" (*L V*, 24); while to Clive Bell, Woolf shows that this insincere ambiance prevents her from a "congenial" (*L IV*, 59) relationship or communication with Sibyl: "Sibyl came to tea yesterday, now I come to think of it. And she stayed till past seven, and we advanced some inches in that perilous undertaking which is called human intercourse: a nice, good, discerning woman, I think her" (*L III*, 453).

In Woolf's eye, Sibyl is worldly, touchy and a snob, as she shows in another

letter written on 18 March 1933 to Vita: "I cut one of my silly jokes, and she [Sibyl Colefax] takes umbrage, like a dog—I mean, you know how huffy dogs look if you laugh at them. So do women of the world" (*L V*, 169-70). Nevertheless, Sibyl fascinates her, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 1 May 1925 to Gwen Raverat: "now to take tea with Lady Colefax, who interests me, as you would be interested by a shiny cupboard carved with acanthus leaves, to hold whisky—so hard and shiny and bright is she; and collects all the intellects about her, as a parrot picks up heads, without knowing Lord Balfour from Duncan Grant" (*L III*, 181). By comparing her interest in Sibyl to that of her addressee in furniture, Woolf derides Lady Colefax as well as her gaudiness, comparable to the shiny over decorated cupboard. Through the comparison with the parrot, another animal image, Woolf suggests Sibyl's snobbery, vanity and superficiality.

Woolf plays at mocking and imitating Sibyl's tone in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, further revealing her interest in Sibyl: "Welcome!!!??? (this is in imitation of Lady Colefax)" (*L III*, 392). Whereas, in a letter written on 22 November 1933 to Vita, Woolf both derides and half-pities the battered aristocrat: "Sibyl is like a signboard that has hung in the rain and sun since the King (George 3rd) was on the throne; and cant even curse poor woman. Her mind flickers like an arc lamp" (*L V*, 251). A few years afterwards, in a letter written on 2 June 1938 to Sibyl herself, Woolf more openly praises her; she not only compares her addressee to "a firefly or bird of Paradise, whose natural element is the fiery. Am I thinking of a salamander? That's what comes of writing over a wood fire"; but she also uses a contrasting pair of images—bat vs butterfly—disparaging herself so as to highlight Sibyl's character: "only, as I say, I'm a bat and you're a butterfly. And battishness grows on me. I shall nest in your hair. And aren't bats covered with fleas?" (*L VI*, 233)

But Sibyl is often depicted in an unflattering light: she "rattle[s] […] off like a weathercock" (*L III*, 303), "makes everyone stony, and breaks up talk with a hammer" (*L III*, 501), as well as "pester[s]" Woolf: "Colefax persistently pecking like parrot with corns on her toes" (*L V*, 338), "Sibyl is rampant" (*L V*, 340), or "Colefax threatens also" (*L VI*, 364). However, though Woolf "bid[s] Sibyl Colefax avaunt" (*L*

VI, 4), what comes out in these uncongenial meetings and conversations that Woolf appreciates, is Sibyl's "astonishing sensibility", which she points out in a letter written on 19 November 1924 to Jacques Raverat:

> Then, socially, what about Lady Colefax? Being the most successful, hardest mouthed hostess in London, she retains spots about the size of a sixpenny piece of astonishing sensibility on her person. Having left her umbrella here, I, in malice or sport, proceeded to describe it, glowing and gleaming among my old gamps. Whereupon this hard bitten old hostess of 50 flushed quire red, and said "Mrs Woolf, I know what you think of my umbrella—a cheap, stubby, vulgar umbrella, you think my umbrella: and you think I have a bag like it—a cheap flashy bag covered with bad embroidery". And it was too true. Only, if she saw it, must there not be depths in lady Colefaxt? Think this out, and let me know. (*L III*, 146)

By quoting Sibyl's speech that reveals her sensibility, Woolf also shows how sincere the woman is in a female relationship, which can also be seen in a letter written on 31 January 1927 to Vita: "Colefax came to tea. Why do people laugh at me? she asked. D'you know its a great thing being a eunuch as I am: that is not knowing what's the right side of a skirt: women confide in one. One pulls a shade over the fury of sex; and then all the veins and marbling, which, between women, are so fascinating, show out" (*L III*, 320).

Woolf also admires Sibyl's tenacity and "stoicism" (*L VI*, 28). After having had dinner with Sibyl, Woolf, writing to Vanessa, states that after losing all her money, "Sibyl has transformed herself into a harried, downright woman of business, sticking her fork in the pot; and has lost almost all her glitter and suavity. Even her voice has changed" (*L IV*, 243). This impression of Woolf about Sibyl's change and her tenacious character at dinner also surfaces in one of Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth:

> She said, I will not be beaten; and promptly turned house-decorator; ran up a sign in Ebury Street, sold her Rolls Royce, and is now, literally, at work, in sinks, behind desks, running her finger along

> wainscots and whipping out yard measures from 9.30 to 7. […]. All ease, hunger, shabbiness, tiredness even; no red on her nails, and merely lying in an armchair gossiping and telling stories of this sale and that millionaire, from the professional working class standard, as might be any women behind a counter. (*L IV*, 254-5)

Sibyl is "indomitable" (*L VI*, 101) despite the death of her husband, though such a quality is mentioned by Woolf half mockingly in a letter written on 21 April 1936 to Violet Dickinson: "Only I dont feel at my ease with people who take the deaths of husbands so heroically. They say its the good result of training in society—stoicism" (*L VI*, 28). So is Sibyl when she is ill, as Woolf shows in a letter to Dorothy Bussy: "Sybil Colefax—whose obsequies I attended; which means I was summoned to a farewell tete a tete among all the doomed furniture. There was a sale next day, and she, who is said to have cancer, appeared almost, not entirely, (I spied one crack), indomitable" (*L VI*, 101).

The various images used in Woolf's letters suggest now Sibyl's shallow character—her snobbery, vanity and superficiality—now her sensitive, sensible, tenacious, stoic, and indomitable nature. Describing her laughter, her "malicious" remarks or "Colefaxiana" (*L IV*, 45) in her letters, Woolf actually emphasises Sibyl's qualities, which she "like[s]", "respect[s]" and "admire[s]". For Woolf, Sibyl's superficiality conceals a harsh strong woman, a woman, "whose soul has been eaten away by the world, has no surface one can cut into" (*L V*, 368), a woman "who stuck on a very much larger mud bank" (*L IV*, 45) but "good, deserving, industrious, kindhearted" (*L III*, 501), as well as "the widow: plucky but so arid, so hard, so dust strewn—all the graves have added nothing to her but dry dust" (*L VI*, 27).

Furthermore, such a woman not only arouses Woolf's interest; she can also enhance her knowledge of human beings and in particular, of women and indirectly feed her fictional writing, as she shows in a letter written on 24 October 1938 to Vanessa Bell:

> Now to gossip. Jack Hutch, youll be glad to hear was let blood copiously, and has recovered. Mary [Hutchinson] says it was a slight

> attack. He is at work again. This was imparted to me as I sat talking to [Sibyl] Colefax. You see I get from people what you get from vines. These distorted human characters are to me what the olive tree against the furrowed hill is to you. Colefax is an essential part of the composition; wrinkled I admit. (*L VI*, 295)

Among all the addressees of Woolf's letters, Clive Bell is probably the one the author teases most maliciously, using various images. For instance, writing to Vanessa Bell, Virginia Stephen uses the animal image of the "Chipmonk" (*L I*, 349-50), to capture Clive's character, as can be seen in a letter written on 11 August 1908:

> Is Clive a genius? What is Clive like? An exquisite, fastidious little Chipmonk, with the liveliest affections, and the most tender instincts—a man of parts, and sensibilities—a man of character and judgment—a man with a style, who writes some of the best letters in the English tongue, and meditates a phrase as other men meditate an action—But a man of genius? (*L I*, 350)

Later in a letter written on 26 February 1915 to Lytton Strachey, through the half jocular and half ironic description of a parrot, and its ways, Woolf alludes to Clive's character:

> Also a bright idea strikes me. Let us all subscribe to buy a Parrot for Clive. It must be a bold primitive bird, trained of course to talk nothing but filth, and to indulge in obscene caresses—the brighter coloured the better. I believe we can get them cheap and gaudy at the Docks.
>
> The thing is for us all to persuade him that the love of birds is the last word in Civilisation—You might draw attention, to begin with, to the Pheasant of Saxby, which heard the guns on the North Sea before the Parson did—We must interest him in birdlife of all forms; he has already a pair of Zests [Zeiss] glasses. The Advantages of the plan in the first place that Vanessa, in his absence, could put the Parrot in the basement, or cover the cage with a towel—and secondly, he would very likely after a year or two, write another book on Birds—The fowl could be called Molly or Polly. I commend this to you: get subscriptions. I head the list with 6d. (*L II*, 61)

In this imaginative description of the bird, Woolf first suggests through a string of adjectives—"the brighter coloured the better", "cheap and gaudy"— that Clive is a "popinjay" (*L II*, 403), as she tells him directly in a letter. Woolf comes back to this idea in several letters: for example, in a letter to Vanessa, she writes: "I'm afraid the parrokeet is back at his tricks with the beau monde: I'm seeing him tomorrow" (*L II*, 506); while to Vita Sackville-West, she describes Clive as "an old dandy fixing false whiskers—this mania to be the master of some chit", which is "ridiculous" (*L IV*, 29). Secondly, through the phrase "to talk nothing but filth", Woolf points out Clive's passion for gossip. The implicit meaning is confirmed by some other letters where, writing to Vanessa, Woolf compares Clive to "the fountain and well" (*L II*, 377) of gossip; or to Edward Sackville West, she states that Clive has "a passion for being au fait with all goings on; and a little more", but she adds: "but I don't believe he [is] in the least malicious" (*L III*, 267). Finally, with the words "to indulge in obscene caresses" together with the whole of the second paragraph, Woolf reveals that Clive is "a great lover" (*L III*, 383), as is made plain in another letter to Vanessa: "Dadie [George Rylands] said that Clive was undoubtedly a great lover, and Clive was highly pleased, and seemed to think that he had been very gallant and adventurous and romantic during the last few months, and deserved a medal: so thats all as it should be—" (*L III*, 383-4).

Love is not only the subject of Clive's gossip, but it is certainly the main theme in Clive and Woolf's talk, when face-to-face or in their epistolary exchange. Woolf herself acknowledges this in a letter written on 28 February 1927 to Vita: "—Oh and does it strike you that one's friendships are long conversation, perpetually broken off, but always about the same thing with the same person? […] with Clive about love" (*L III*, 337). In a letter written on 5 March 1928 to Vanessa, Woolf compares Clive's talk as "caterwaul" of "the most lamentable housetop cat" and compares Clive to one of the "moulting nightingales" (*L III*, 466). Such a character as Clive, who believes "[l]ove is the only God […] and art and fame an illusion" and whose "bald head disappear[s] into the waves" of life (*L III*, 386), is again described

through another animal image in a letter written on 12 March 1928 to Vita: "Clive being ubiquitous and really I think, March-hare-mad: one hears his drumming through the Squares at night" (*L III*, 472).

In short, with the image of the parrot or its various variations, such as "the Yellow Cockatoo" (*L II*, 341) or the "[a]bsurd little cockatoo" (*L III*, 244), "the Yellow Bird of Bloomsbury" (*L II*, 348), "[t]he male parrokeet" (*L III*, 182) or "Parrokeet [—] one of the vainest and silliest of fowls" (*L III*, 401), Woolf disapproves of three main features of Clive's character: he is a gossiper, a "dandy", as well as "a great lover", which are "ridiculous" (*L IV*, 29), "[a]bsurd" (*L III*, 244), he is "such a flibbertigibbet" (*L VI*, 20). For Woolf, Clive is "Don Juan" (*L III*, 401), who she "wish[es] […] would progress beyond love where he has been stationed these many years to the next point in the human pilgrimage. One cant kick ones heels there too long. One becomes an impediment" (*L IV*, 55), as she states in a letter written on 11 May 1929 to his son, Quentin Bell.

Nevertheless, as Nigel Nicolson points out, "Clive Bell amused her; she liked him most when he was with her: he had a style, a gift for sharing enjoyment."[28] In Woolf's own words, in a letter to Vanessa, on the one hand: "Oh I'm so solitary, except for Leonard: Clive went this morning. We had an affecting farewell. I think I cried. I feel so fond of him, and then he's in an odd state—" (*L III*, 333); on the other hand, reading Vanessa's letters, she states: "Your Clive news intrigues me greatly" (*L III*, 334). Woolf has "affection for" (*L III*, 373) "good hearted" (*L III*, 163) Clive, and admits the pleasure she gets from his talk: "With Clive away its like a cage where they've forgotten to give the poor bird its groundsel. She has corns on her toes: she hops: she moults" (*L III*, 454). Here, the bird refers to Woolf herself. Without Clive, Woolf not only feels "so solitary" (*L III*, 187), but also feel all is dismal: "—but no Clive—And so in my world the lights are dim" (*L III*, 448).

Moreover, while describing Clive's lover, Mary Hutchinson, in a letter written on 7 November 1918 to Vanessa, Woolf considers the malicious criticism directed at

[28] Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. xviii.

her as “purely visionary remarks”:

> If you could have heard […] how I picked my way whenever Mary was mentioned with the foresight of an elephant—moreover, except to you I never find fault with Mary and the utmost I’ve ever said about her was that she was sleeping in a forest with the cockatoo’s singing their sweetest in the moonlight—purely visionary remarks, since to me she is little more (at present, and I suppose forever) than a highly sympathetic shade. (*L II*, 289)

Therefore, it might be more accurate to say that, rather than being malicious, Woolf’s own imaginative descriptions of Parrot are “visionary remarks” aiming to characterise Clive, his “romantic”, “visionary and aetherial presence brooding diaphanous over Gordon Square, like a silver spangled cloud” (*L III*, 428).

The images that Woolf uses to mock her friends, through their very wealth and variety, betray her interest in them as well as her fascination for them. Her descriptions of Katherine Arnold-Forster, Lady Sibyl Colefax or Clive Bell not only reveal their character but also give pleasure to her letter readers. The pleasure that Woolf herself derives from her “visionary remarks” does not stem only from her acts of damnation but also from her imaginative feats. The two are actually often inextricably intertwined. The reader’s pleasure comes from Woolf’s inexhaustible imagination as well as from her sharp wit and critical mind. Virginia Stephen herself considers, in a letter written on 11 December 1904, that “criticism [as] the only sound basis of appreciation” (*L I*, 165). As for Nigel Nicolson, he thinks that such a mocking manner of Woolf’s—“her mordant side”—is the hallmark of Bloomsbury:

> When friends fell ill, or were bereaved, or long absent abroad, or crossed in love, she could show great sympathy. But she never hesitated to lampoon them, put them at jumps which she knew they could not clear, and invent for them situations (‘I know what you have been doing this morning: you have been riding a white horse down Picccadilly’) which exposed them to ridicule. Her chaff was not confined to outsiders like Miss Cole. Members of Bloomsbury were

ruthless in criticism of each other's books, pictures and attitudes.[29]

5.2.4. "[A] horrible figure of speech" (*L III*, 6)

In a letter written on 19 January 1923 to Molly MacCarthy, Woolf teasingly advises her addressee to persuade Desmond MacCarthy to write a book for the Hogarth Press:

> Of course we will bully the old wretch. Perpetual letters? Telegrams? Telephone? What do you advise? He must be coerced. I hate to think that all his words vanish into the cesspool (a horrid figure of speech—but then, I sometimes think we ladies, of the old guard, you and I, that is, the solitary survivors, ought to invigorate our language a little)—I've been talking to the younger generation all the afternoon. They are like crude hard green apples: no halo, mildew or blight. Seduced at 15, life has no holes and corners for them. I admire, but deplore. (*L III*, 6)

Resorting to the metaphor of the cesspool, Woolf wishes Desmond MacCarthy's talent were not wasted. This "horrid figure of speech" appears between parentheses as if she wanted to make amends for using it; yet she calls for women of her generation to go beyond the limit of respectability and use strong or simply, plain language.

Such potentially shocking images pepper the six volumes of Woolf's letters: for example, people are compared to "innumerable newts" (*L I*, 353), "some inescapable grub" (*L V*, 433), or "the white and voluble slug" (*L VI*, 77). In a letter written on 2 April 1920 to Vanessa Bell, Woolf describes Lucy Clifford as follows: "Mrs Clifford—who was, indeed, all that you've ever imagined her to be—wattled all down her neck like some oriental Turkey, and with a mouth opening like an old leather bag, or the private parts of a large cow" (*L II*, 426). Besides people, such "a horrible figure of speech" can also be used to describe talk and writing. For instance, in a letter written on 28 December 1917 to Lytton Strachey, Woolf not only disapproves of Josiah Wedgwood's masculinity that permeates his speech at the 17

[29] Nigel Nicolson. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000: p. 32-3.

Club's inaugural meeting:[30] "I meant to tell you about the 17 Club; […] and how I surprised the secret of Jos's fascination; it's *virility*; (perhaps to lose one's parts sends the semen to the surface—it seemed to splash and sparkle like phosphorescent cod's roe from every glance)"; but also compares him to "a random untrustworthy mongrel, utterly incontinent" (*L II*, 206). Similarly, Edward Gosse's letter to Robert Ross—"How cold cautious and clammy"—is compared to "the writhing of a fat worm, red, shiny—disgusting" (*L IV*, 306);[31] while "egotism and uneasiness" in Dorothy Brett's letter is described as "[s]omething odious [which] oozes through—a kind of thick, impure scent" (*L V*, 230).

Furthermore, such provocative sexual or obscure imagery can be used to describe people's mind and behaviour, such as Julian Strachey's, as in a letter written on 18 January 1933 to Dora Carrington:

> I wish I could understand the psychology of Julia. Think of writing a whole book and then swallowing it back into the womb!—what a disgusting metaphor—the result of 3 hours talk with Ethel Smyth. Now its a queer thing, but all old women of high distinction and advanced views seldom talk of anything but the period and the W.C. How do you account for it? I rather think its the final effort at complete emancipation—like a chicken getting rid of egg shell. (*L V*, 7)

Ethel Smyth, who is "so downright and plainspoken and on the spot, […] so uninhibited: so magnificently unself-conscious" (*L IV*, 302), with "a directness",[32] a "morbid curiosity" (*L V*, 94), "that rough British honesty" (*L V*, 140), and "violence" (*L V*, 70), endows Woolf with both freedom and audacity to use such "disgusting"

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[30] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 206, note 1: "A club which had been founded in October, after long discussion. Its premises were in Gerrard Street, Soho, and its membership consists partly in left-wing politicians, from Ramsay MacDonald downwards, and partly in Bloomsbury intellectuals, including Leonard, Virginia and Lytton. The Club's first general meeting was held on 19 December"; and note 2: "Josiah Wedgwood, with whom Marjorie Strachey was in love. He has been seriously wounded in the groin at Gallipoli in May 1915. He made the speech at the Club's inaugural meeting."

[31] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 306, note 3: "Robert Ross (1869-1918). Born a Canadian, he became a journalist, art dealer and writer. He was literary executor to Oscar Wilde, and when the scandal about his friend broke, he received a letter from Gosse which Virginia thought cowardly."

[32] See Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1929-1931, p. xvii.

imagery in her letters so as to challenge the conventions of female writing that avoid referring to the very intimacy of female experience. For instance, in a letter written on 6 July 1930, Woolf describes the importance of solitude when writing as follows:

> But of course, what nobody, except you I daresay sees, is the difficulty of keeping one's atmosphere unbroken. If I could only live in my protected shell another 2 months, surrounded by the usual, I could finish this exquisitely irritating book [*The Waves*]. If I stay away […] I break the membrane, and the fluid escapes—a disgusting image, drawn I think from the memory of Vanessa's miscarriage. All the same, I shall come, for a night, and let the membrane break if it will. What a lark! (*L IV*, 185)

In Woolf's letters, John Middleton Murry—"a moon calf looking youth" (*L II*, 107)—becomes the main object of Woolf 's "spiteful" (*L II*, 515) imagery. First of all, in a letter written on 17 October 1921 to Roger Fry, on the one hand, Woolf shows that Murry's poems provoke in her such a repulsive feeling and she creates a sort of image mixed with "a new school" of "new adjectives and new epithets" (*L I*, 278) to describe his writing: "Murry has bred in me a vein of Grub Street spite which I never thought to feel in the flesh. He has brought out a little book of those clay-cold castrated costive comatose poems" (*L II*, 485). With these four epithets, each of which contains an image, Woolf suggests that Murry's poems, *Poems: 1916-20* (1921), lack humanity, strength, honesty, as well as artistic skills. This is confirmed by Woolf's letter to Janet Case from 20 March 1922: "Middleton M[urry]. is a posturing Byronic little man; pale; penetrating: with bad teeth; histrionic; and egoist; not, I think, very honest; but a good journalist, and works like a horse, and writes the poetry a very hack might write—but this is spiteful" (*L II*, 515). In another letter written on 18 May 1923 to Roger Fry, Woolf compares Murry to "[t]hat bloodless flea to talk about life! that shift ruffian who can't keep his hands out of other people's pockets to prate of honesty!" (*L III*, 38)

On the other hand, in a letter dated 17 October 1921 to Roger Fry, Woolf compares Murry to a kind of animal, which possesses canine teeth: "But his article on

you has draw his fangs for ever; he has no sting; all one hopes is that he may bite each one of us in turn before he is finally discredited and shuffled off to some 10th rate Parisian Café" (*L II*, 485). With this image of some aggressive animal, half wasp, half dog, Woolf suggests that Murry's criticism is incapable of interpreting properly Roger Fry's aesthetic theory and concludes: "poor little squint eyed Murry" (*L II*, 520). Murry's artistic inability also comes out in a letter written 29 August 1921 to Roger Fry, in which Woolf uses another metaphor to describe him, transforming Murry into a sort of witch: "I think Murry is profoundly perverted: I mean all his criticism, and his fury, and his righteousness, and his deep, manly, honest, sturdy, stammering, stuttering, endeavour to get at the truth seem to be a desire to stick pins—but he doesn't get them very far into you" (*L II*, 478). Unable to appreciate the writers of his own time, including herself, Murry, as she shows in a letter written on 3 February 1926 to Vita Sackville-West, arraigns them: "Murry, by the way has arraigned your poor Virginia, and Virginia's poor Tom Eliot, and all their works, in the Adelphi, and condemned them to death" (*L III*, 238).[33]

Similarly, in a letter written on 20 April 1931 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf disapproves of Murry's point of view in his biography of Lawrence, *Son of Woman: The Story of D. H. Lawrence* (1931) and compares him to a vulture: "I am reading Lawrence, Sons and Lovers, for the first time; and so ponder your questions about contemporaries. [J. M.] Murry, that bald necked blood dripping vulture, kept me off Lawrence with his obscene objurgations" (*L IV*, 315). Woolf's opposition to Murry's literary opinions also surfaces in her other letters. For example, Woolf compares his review of Catherine Carswell's book, *The Savage Pilgrimage: A Narrative of D. H. Lawrence* (1932), to "a disgusting pullulation" (*L V*, 157); while his book, *Reminiscences of D. H. Lawrence* (1933), is described as his "spurt of oil and venom and other filth"—"his foulest" (*L V*, 159). Furthermore, Woolf considers the English

[33] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 238, note 1: "In this month's *Adelphi* Murry asserted that both *Jacob's Room* and *The Waste Land* were 'failures' and would not be read in fifty years' time"; see also: p. 107, note 1: "In the *Nation* of 10 March 1923 Middleton Murry had said that Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf had 'no use for story. It is a kind of nursery-game for them. … The consequence is that the novel has reached a kind of *impasse*'."

literary journal, *The Adelphi*, which Murry founded and published between 1923 and 1955, as "deplorable" (*L III*, 59), as witness a letter written on 30 July 1923 to Jacques Raverat: "The spirit that inspires it, with its unction and hypocrisy, and God is love, which still leaves room for flea bites, pin pricks, and advertising astuteness, would enrage, were it not that there's something so mild and wobbly about that too that I can't waste good wrath" (*L III*, 59).

Similarly, Woolf disapproves of Murry's fictional writing: for instance, writing to Lady Ottoline Morrell, she compares Murry's technique—"a mania for confession"—in his novel, *The Things We Are* (1922), to "the mildew" (*L II*, 538) or "the damp spots […] com[ing] from within" (*L II*, 540). With these two images, Woolf opposes Murry's literary theory, and their dispute about writing is mentioned repeatedly in her letters to her friends, on 21 March 1924 to Lytton Strachey, on 28 May 1924 to Ethel Sands, or on 8 June 1924 to Jacques Raverat. To take the one to Lytton Strachey as an example:

> *He* forced himself upon me. He has rolling and oleaginous eyes. I said we were enemies. He said we were in different camps. He said one must write with one's instincts. I said one must write with one's mind. He said Bloomsbury was a tangle of exquisite sensibilities. I said come and see me there. He said no. I said very well. He said I like you. I said come and see me then. He said no. So I got up and flounced out of the room, saying Not for ten years—Undoubtedly, he has been rolling in dung, and smells impure. (*L III*, 95)

By opposing Murry's opinion about writing with "instincts" and insisting on writing "with one's mind", Woolf points out that the art of writing is cerebral, intellectual, the fruit of thinking rather than instincts. On the contrary, Murry's technique makes Woolf feel that "it was writ in dirty water" as "a whine in a corner": "all his characters were embodiments of his own faults and his own entirely sentimental and unreal aspirations. Simplicity and truth were represented by the landlady, and in consequence she was nothing but humbug" (*L II*, 542); his technique reveals "the power of muddleheaded mediocrity when combined with the manners of the servants

hall and the morality of a boarding school of officers widows—or is it a girls school I mean?—any place full of spite and backbiting and gush and highmindedness will do" (*L II*, 546).

With a series of images, Woolf criticises Murry's writing and Murry himself: "the creature himself is a paltry weakling, and I know if I met him I should at once succumb to his feebleness" (*L III*, 66). Nevertheless, Murry, as something "squirming and oozing a sort of thick motor oil in the background" (*L IV*, 366) or as "a screaming gull" (*L V*, 51), still interests Woolf and provokes her "amusement" (*L III*, 80), for "there is a charm in complete rottenness" (*L III*, 38). Though Woolf repeats in her letters to friends, such as Jacques Raverat, that she might be "too much prejudiced to be fair to him [Murry]" (*L III*, 59), she reads Murry with "that just mind and steadfast purpose which are necessary" (*L III*, 108). For instance, reading Murry's autobiography, *Between Two Worlds* (1935), she finds that "carrion has its fascination, liking eating high game" (*L V*, 418); while reading his *Shakespeare* (1936), Woolf states: "much though I hate him, I think he has a kind of warm suppleness which makes him take certain impressions very subtly" (*L VI*, 33).

5.3. A "doubt [of] my own identity" (*L I*, 328)

At the other end of the spectrum, Woolf's letters abound in images of beauty. In a letter written on 12 August 1899 to Emma Vaughan, Virginia Stephen describes her meditation on nature:

> I suspect you and Marny of ulterior motives in thus blackening our minds, or perhaps you are too unimaginative and soulless to feel the beauty of the place. Take my word for it Todkins, I have never been in a house, garden, or county that I liked half so well, leaving St. Ives out of account. Yesterday we bicycled to Hungtingdon—and paid a visit to our relatives [Lady Stephen]. Coming back we forgot our cares—(and they were many—Nessa and I each had a large string bag full of melons which bumped against our knees at every movement) in gazing—absorbing—sinking into the Sky. You dont see the sky until

> you live here. We have ceased to be dwellers on the earth. We are really made of clouds. We are mystical and dreamy and perform Fugues on the Harmonium. Have you ever read your sister in laws Doges Farm? [*Days Spent on a Doge's Farm* (1893)] Well that describes much the same sort of country that this is; and you see how she, a person of true artistic soul, revels in the land. I shall think it a test of friends for the future whether they can appreciate the Fen country. I want to read books about it, and to write sonnets about it all day long. It is the only place for rest of mind and body, and for contentment and creamy potatoes and all the joys of life. I am growing like a meditative Alderney cow. And there are people who think it dull and uninteresting!!!! (*L I*, 27)

For the author, the beauty of nature can provoke in people, such as herself, who possesses a gift of imagination and a "true artistic soul", "sudden spasms of sentiment" (*L I*, 36), which might not only make her to lose her identity, but also feel herself part of nature and its beauty. Such a "mystical and dreamy" feeling can also be found in a letter written on 28 April 1908 to Lytton Strachey when Woolf travels Cornwall: "I had begun to doubt my own identity—and imagined I was part of sea gull, and dreamt at night of deep pools of blue water, full of eels" (*L I*, 328).

According to Woolf, the impact of nature on people entails a process of dehumanisation, as she shows in her letters to Edward Sackville West: "Its too fine (its raining now) to do anything except sit on the downs; also, I'm de-humanised. I've sunk to the bottom of the world, and I only see the soles of peoples feet passing above. Does the country affect you like this?" (*L III*, 286), or "I feel entirely dehumanised by the sun now, and wish for fog, snow, rain, humanity" (*L III*, 295). At the same time, this process is also an intense, self-conscious one, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 8 May 1934 to Katherine Arnold-Forster: "It is a wonderful island, only why be so very selfconscious? But I cant go into that, and must stop" (*L V*, 301). In other words, according to Woolf, the sight of nature stirs in her a feeling of ecstasy, which brings with it a sort of dream state: "It has been almost beyond belief beautiful here—I walk and walk by the river on the downs in a dream, like a bee, or a red admiral, quivering on brambles, on haystacks; and shut out the cement works and the villas. Even they melted in the yellow light have their glory" (*L V*, 230).

In her letters, Woolf resorts to various images and metaphors to convey such an intense feeling of losing her own identity in nature. In a letter written on 21 September 1909 to Violet Dickinson, the author suggests shedding her human identity for a sea anemone: "Yesterday, I hired a gentlemans or ladies—it was bisexual—bathing dress, and swam far out, until the seagulls played over my head, mistaking me for a drifting sea anemone" (*L I*, 412). This image suggests the author's self-consciousness; in a letter to Vanessa Bell, Woolf sees herself as a fish: "I find myself undulating like a fish in and out of leaves and flowers and swimming round a vast earthenware jar which changes from orange red to leaf green—It is incredibly beautiful—" (*L III*, 365), and while writing to Quentin Bell, she turns into a frog: "It was spring when we came [April, 1927], and I used to sit in the gardens at the top of the steps and merely palpitate, like a frog, sucking in and out my flanks with sheer joy. Isn't it [Rome] infinitely beyond any other town—Munich, Berlin, London, Paris?" (*L IV*, 277) In these various ways, Woolf merges into the sea or the gardens in Rome. She is at one with her surroundings. Dehumanisation results in metamorphosis and a closer relation with nature.

Metamorphic images also convey in Woolf's letters all kinds of feelings about her own identity. For example, with friends or family, such as Lady Ottoline Morrell, the author "feel[s] like an anemone at the bottom of an aquarium" (*L I*, 489); talking to Lady Robert Cecil, who belongs to "the aristocracy" "entirely detached from sanity", she "feels like a fly on a ceiling" (*L II*, 85); "immensely impressed" by Saxon Sydney-Turner—"the most masterly man", she feels herself like "an old dirty clothes basket" (*L II*, 451); as well as "sitting by [her] mother in law's bedside", she "feel[s] like a rag just wrung by a washerwoman" (*L VI*, 112). Similarly, with strangers in public places, such as being with "French ladies—all unreproachable, elegant and composed" in the train, the author "feel[s] like a farmyard boy who has lately rolled in the gorse bush" (*L III*, 30); dining with publisher and other writers, she feels herself "like a cannibal" or one of "a dreadful set of harpies" (*L I*, 386); at another dinner with two American diplomats, who are "[q]uite nice, both of them, but like tin, biscuit

tin, empty, shiny", she has the "illusion" that she is "pebbles at the bottom of a river" (*L V*, 174). Furthermore, the author regards all human beings as "mere lumps of flesh, propelled about the world for a season, and our sufferings are shocks leading nowhere", and in particular, considers herself as "a worm, with a spade cutting through it" (*L I*, 361). In all these examples, the animals, objects and subjects Woolf compares herself with are of a low, humble nature. On the whole, these images suggest how humbling some relations are for Woolf.

Similarly, images can symbolise different states of beings and, first of all, a state of well-being: "When the truth is that like the wistaria and the lilac I droop in my remote suburb, chaste and unviolated save by the bees of Heaven—" (*L II*, 356) or of lethargy: "My lethargy is that of the alligator at the Zoo" (*L II*, 503), "I wither on like a last leaf" (*L III*, 134), or "The wind and sun, the bitter cold and violent heat, the driving all day along rocky or pitted roads, make one feel like a parboiled cactus" (*L V*, 55). More specifically, images can suggest fleeting moments of being in a humorous or ironic way: "I am rather now in the state of the cows who are munching the grass off our field—sleepy, contented, not much aware of goodness or badness" (*L III*, 518), "We came here this evening and I am at present in the exalted state of the newly veiled nun" (*L III*, 566), or "D'you know they're pulling down the houses next door? We're shored up; and feel very transitory, like crows in a tree thats being cut down. Dust fills every cranny; and when the hammering begins I shall fly" (*L VI*, 329); or, while writing to Elizabeth Robins to demand a book: "Thus you have put me into the position of a spider, dangling at the end of a thread, which it cant attach to anything, unless you will help it. I implore you to have pity on Virginia suspended on a thread. And I believe you've left lots of people in the same predicament" (*L VI*, 447).

Furthermore, similes and metaphors can have a self-reflexive function and be used to describe Woolf's act of reading: "now we sit over a fire and read novels like tigers" (*L II*, 3-4), "I used to go up to my room and fall upon a French novel like a starving dog" (*L II*, 148), "I read as a weevil, I suppose, eats cheese" (*L II*, 543); or refer to the act of writing: "I cant think why she [Olives Ilbert] wants to keep in touch

with me; her letter is full of hints, but I shall write—if I write—like a superb Elephant" (*L I*, 409), "I have had to borrow a long-necked ink pot from Mrs Berryman. One dips, like a sparrow, and how to blot is a problem, when I turn over" (*L I*, 433), or "—when I ought to be reading and reviewing. Isn't it damnable to have begun that again? and yet it's rather inspiriting. I feel like a child switching off the heads of poppies—it's such a joke now, writing reviews, and I once took it seriously" (*L II*, 12-3). Here again, we can see that most of the images are animal ones.

In a way, through imagery, Woolf successfully depicts her experience of possessing two different selves: one self is observing and writing about the other self, while the other self is experiencing different emotions, and transforming them into images. The writing self is not only able to see the experiencing self change in a second into "the Syren who stretches her arm through the water to pull the sailors on top down to her" (*L I*, 304), "some swaying reed which swings with the stream" (*L I*, 340), or "butterflies in the sun" (*L III*, 102); but it can also watch the experiencing self become gradually "as dry as a bone and as barren as a burnt moor" (*L III*, 512), "as neat as a coot" (*L V*, 163), or "as tipsy as a bee with pleasure in it" (*L VI*, 192). Similarly, the writing or observing self can see the chattering self as it sees some animal in "a cage full of parrokeets" (*L II*, 331).

For Woolf, the observing self can also both feel and watch part of the experiencing self change into various solid objects: for example, her head can "be guttering like a tallow candle" (*L I*, 182), "spring like fire" (*L I*, 307), be "ripe" "like a pear" (*L I*, 431), or be "a dahlia in disarray" (*L II*, 439), "a large balloon, which goes floating away" (*L III*, 190), "20 times exposed film" (*L V*, 139), "a spinning top" (*L V*, 395), "an old dry sponge" (*L VI*, 94), as well as "the towel L[eonard] uses to wash Sally [dog]: damp; dirty; dismal" (*L VI*, 212). Imagery can also be used to depict a changing process in Woolf's mind: for example, writing to Katherine Cox while travelling in March 1913, Woolf states: "We have been to Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Glasgow, and now end with the boot factory here. Many valuable things come into my head at once; it is as if the thaw were beginning—seeing machines freezes the top of one's head. It's the oddest feeling, providential, I suppose, so as to keep the

poor quiet" (*L II*, 19). Imagery can transform the abstract mind into a material scene, ideas into flamingoes, as it does in a letter to Quentin Bell, which also suggests the deadening effect of typing, reducing flamingoes as it does to geese: "My brain was packed with close folded ideas like the backs of flamingoes when they fly south at sunset. They are now all gone—a few grey draggled geese remain, their wing feathers trailed and mud stained, and their poor old voices scrannel sharp and grating—that's the effect of typing; every sentence has its back broke, and its beak awry" (*L IV*, 141). Similarly, the writing self sees the hand of the experiencing self become "stiff as carrots" (*L II*, 550), "stagger like a drunk crow in the evening" (*L V*, 127) or "a tipsy crow" (*L V*, 137), and function as "the cramped claw of an aged fowl" (*L VI*, 471).

We could argue that Woolf illustrates in her letters Friedrich Nietzsche's definition of the artist in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871):

> Given our learned view of the elementary artistic processes, there is almost something indecent about the primal artistic phenomenon adduced here in explanation of the tragic chorus. Yet nothing can be more certain than this: what makes a poet a poet is the fact that he sees himself surrounded by figures who live and act before him, and into whose innermost essence he gazes. Because of the peculiar weakness of modern talent we are inclined to imagine the original aesthetic phenomenon in too complicated and abstract a manner. For the genuine poet metaphor is no rhetorical figure, but an image which takes the place of something else, something he can really see before him as a substitute for a concept. To the poet, a character is not a whole composed of selected single features, but an insistently alive person whom he sees before his very eyes, and distinguished from a painter's vision of the same thing only by the fact that the poet sees the figure continuing to live and act over a period of time. What allows Homer to depict things so much more vividly than all other poets? It is the fact that he looks at things so much more than they do. We talk so abstractly about poetry because we are usually all bad poets. Fundamentally the aesthetic phenomenon is simple; one only has to have the ability to watch a living play (Spiel) continuously and to live constantly surrounded by crowds of spirits, then one is a poet; if one feels the impulse to transform oneself and to speak out of other bodies and souls, then one is a dramatist.[34]

[34] Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) *and Other Writings*. Ed. Raymond Geuss and

Starting from the conventional definition of the metaphor as an image and a substitute for something else, Nietzsche insists that metaphors, like characters, are alive. A metaphor is an emblematical figure that really unfolds before the poet as a substitute for a concept: "a representative image […] hover[ing] in front of him in the place of an idea;" while the character is a real human being: "a living person, insistently there before his eyes." The poet is therefore "constantly surrounded by crowds of spirit". This is certainly the case with Woolf. When writing, she seems to see a film unrolling in front of her eyes and characters moving about and talking. She looks at characters, and among them, herself, construing them and herself in the process.

Moreover, regarding herself as a "valetudinarian" (*L III*, 391; *L IV*, 20, 214), the author uses various images and metaphors to describe her state when she is ill: "I live the life of an old old Tom cat" (*L I*, 489), "but I live like a sultana among pillows and fowls and you are a lean old drudge and mother of millions" (*L II*, 318), "I have lain like a log, chiefly in bed, and when out, unvisited by ideas" (*L III*, 212) or "a torpid alligator" (*L V*, 276), as well as "influenza makes me like a wet dish cloth" (*L III*, 163). Such a state of being can be depicted in detail: this is what she does in a letter written to Vita Sackville-West: "I feel as if a vulture sat on a bough above my head, threatening to descend and peck at my spine, but by blandishments I turn him into a kind red cock" (*L III*, 221).

In her letters to Vita Sackville-West and Ethel Smyth, considering her "nervous system" as "such a crazy apparatus" (*L IV*, 20), Woolf fully depicts her state of being ill—"a state of nervous exhaustion—thats to say all the usual symptoms—pain, and heart jumpy, and my back achy, and so on. What I call a first rate headache" (*L IV*, 16). For example, in a letter written on 5 June 1927 to Vita, Woolf describes her experience of the division of her mind from her body, which she compares to a mare:

Ronald Speirs. Trans. Ronald Speirs. *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: p. 42-3.

> Its odd how being ill even like this splits one up into several different people. Here's my brain now quite bright, but purely critical. It can read; it can understand; but if I ask it to write a book it merely gasps. How does one write a book? I cant conceive. It's infinitely modest therefore, —my brain at this moment. Theres Vita, it says, able to write books: Then my body—thats another person. So, my body is a grey mare, trotting along a white road. We go along quite evenly for a time like this. … suddenly she jumps a gate … ^ … This is my heart missing a beat and making a jump at the next one. I rather like the gray mare jumping, provided she doesn't do it too often. (*L III*, 388)

While writing to Ethel Smyth, Woolf describes "medical details" (*L IV*, 144, 183): "—this influenza has a special poison for what is called the nervous system; and mine being a second hand one, used by my father and his father to dictate dispatches and write books with—how I wish they had hunted and fished instead!—" (*L IV*, 144-5). Woolf further divides her illness into three stages:

> There are 3 stages: pain; numb; visionary; and this stopped at pain, and only a little pain at that. And its gone; and I've been working, for me very hard. To continue medical details, though I think them rather sordid, it is 10 years since I was seeing faces, and 5 since I was lying like a stone statue, dumb to the rose—(no it should be blind, but I write in a hurry) (*L IV*, 183)

And in another letter to Ethel Smyth, she adds:

> Well I lay low, saw nobody and am better again—much better: indeed, when this book [*The Years*] is done, I expect a year or two of the highest health: I generally get a spurt on after one of these collapses. Thats what pulls me through—And psychologically they have their advantages—one visits such remote strange places, lying in bed. (*L VI*, 70)

According to Woolf, the visions she sees while she is ill have turned her into a writer.[35]

[35] The discussion about Woolf's self-description, vision and illness in this section will be detailed in chapter eight.

5.4. The art of letter writing and emotions

Introduction

In a letter dated January 1907 to Lady Robert Cecil, Virginia Stephen tries to express her "grateful" (*L I*, 278) feeling for her addressee's presents of "pheasants and furs" (*L I*, 277):

> Now the pheasants are long since gone, and I think they were specially nice pheasants, and I gave my solitary wing some special attention—considering it as a piece of tender meat, critically. Why is there nothing written about food—only so much thought? I think a new school might arise, with new adjectives and new epithets, and a strange beautiful sensation, all new to print. How generous I am! I might have kept this all to myself. But the fur is another matter. It is a very subtle and serious matter, wrapped round the most secret fibres of our consciousness; you dont know what a lot might be said and felt and thought—what reams, therefore might be written—about such a gift; and here am I going to squeeze all this in to the usual Thank you. (*L I*, 277-8)

The young Virginia Stephen expresses her thanks in a playful convoluted way, putting both items forward, devoting as much space to each yet mentioning herself and her own generosity rather than her addressee's so as not to be blatantly grateful. Considering both her thought about the "new school" of expression and this piece of letter writing as her way to express gratitude, she concludes: "O well—this is the way we writers write—when we wish not to say something. As you are a novelist yourself you need no further explanation" (*L I*, 278).

In another letter dated June 1912 to the same addressee, Virginia Stephen, who had just received her wedding present, "old glasses", writes: "Thank you again—I wish there was some new way of saying that which came out absolutely truthfully" (*L I*, 504). Similarly, in a letter written on 10 October 1916, in which she thanks Janet Case for offering her a "nightgown" (*L II*, 122), Woolf states: "Words fail me to express my thanks and admiration—" (*L II*, 121). Again, writing to Lady Ottoline

Morrell, for example, in a letter written on 27 June 1919, Woolf states that a letter of thanks, which necessarily involves emotion, concerns the "art" of writing: "Letters in general aren't so bad, but when one has to sum up one's feelings, to give thanks, to make Ottoline understand how happy she made one, and how the time seemed to lapse, like the Magic Flute, from one air to another—this is what I call, or Clive calls, a problem in art" (*L II*, 371).

This comes out even better in a letter from early July 1926 to the same addressee in which Woolf grapples with emotion, refrains from voicing it directly and sounds too sentimental:

> I have been meaning to write, but I wrote you such a charming and flattering (but sincere) letter in the train coming home,—I mean I made it up—that I find it difficult to write a real letter. It was all about being grateful to you and Philip for having taken so much pain these 20 years to give me pleasure. I became sentimental at the thought of Bedford Sqre, and Peppard. This is all very awful, I said to myself, as the train reached Paddington. One never does write these charming letters, partly, I suppose, because one is afraid of getting one's feelings wrong in writing. All you can know, therefore, is that I was very happy at Garsington, and very sentimental about you, Garsington and Philip in the train. (*L VI*, 510-1)

Her choice of voicing her feelings without really stating them is an aesthetic choice—which in her fiction is a choice of indirection. Not only does "a real letter" of gratitude worry Woolf; so does a letter of sympathy and affection, as she shows in a letter written on 30 May 1928 to the same addressee:

> How difficult it is to write to you! I have thought about it ever so many times—that is I have thought of you and wanted to tell you how sorry I was about your illness and how fond of you. But its just these words one can't say. I think perhaps if one had never written a word one would then be able to say what one meant. I dread so getting tangled in a mass of words that when I want most to write, I dont. So you must write all my affection for me; and make it very strong and also the real odd, recurring discomfort it is to me to think of you in pain. (*L III*, 504)

Such scruple and reserve can also be seen in a letter written on 5 June 1928 to Quentin Bell: "Then I am going to have tea with Ottoline, half of whose jaw has been cut away; and this will be awful, for I dont know what to say; your mother would put the matter in a nutshell; but being a writer, so many words are possible that one is almost bound to say the wrong ones" (*L III*, 506).

5.4.1. Letters of gratitude

Nevertheless, the main way for Woolf to express her thanks is through imaginative descriptions. She often compares playful imaginative scenes that stage the interaction between herself and the presents. She disguises her own person under various nicknames or masks, the Apes (L *I*, 377) or "Singes", "Wombat", "[t]he smaller monkeys", as well as "Mango",[36] as she does in a letter to Clive Bell from autumn 1910, where the moment of discovery is delayed, suspense is created and the present magnified.

> Dear Mr Bell,
>
> There was great excitement in the singeries last night when a tall black man, muffled in an overcoat, left a box at the door. There was straw in it. We opened it—Wombat got the straw for his litter. The pot is a beautiful pot. May we hope Mr Bell that you and Mistress will baptise it one of these days? The smaller monkeys we dont allow to touch it—young beasts are so quisitive and their fingers is so many claws. We shant allow them to drink out of it, as they might be drownded, all out of curiosity too. Mango always looks for his reflection in tea pots, what he is [is] a Vain Rake, and one day God will punish him. If you please sir, kiss our mistress when she's not looking and tell her its Us.
>
> Your obedient singes and Wombatts (*L I*, 437)

[36] The editors of the first volume of Woolf's letters explains that among these different images, "singes" refer to Virginia Stephen, but the "small monkeys" to Julian Bell and Quentin Bell, "Mango" to Adrian Stephen, as well "Wombat" to the dog Hans (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 437, note 1). However, in a letter written on 6 February 1907 to Vanessa Bell, in which Virginia Stephen congratulates Vanessa Stephen's marriage with Clive Bell, Virginia Stephen signs as Vanessa's "devoted Beasts", "Billy", "Bartholomew", "Mungo" and "Wombat" (*The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI, Appendix B*, p. 492-3). Thus, it seems that all these different images in both letters refer to Virginia Stephen herself.

In a much later letter written on 24 November 1932 to Duncan Grant, who has just sent her a carpet, Woolf proceeds in a similar manner, although her style is much more mature. She focuses on the "sensation", the pleasure the present has given her and voices it indirectly, as she did in her younger years, by imagining herself into another animal, here a fish, resorting to the metaphor of "the forest of emerald and ruby" to refer to the carpet and its gorgeous colours. The same playful tone is at work here where waves and forests come together—recalling, though, her taste for bringing together usually incompatible worlds.

> Dearest Duncan,
>
> I must seize my pen, though I am reeling with excitement, to tell you that we have just unrolled your carpet and it is perfectly magnificent. (I seldom underline a word, but on this occasion I must). It seems to me a triumphant and superb work of art and produces in me the sensation of being a tropic fish afloat in warm waves over submerged forests of emerald and ruby. You may well ask what sort of forest that is – I reply it is the sort of fish I am. As you know, it is the dream of my life to be a tropical fish swimming in a submerged forest; and now this is permanently gratified—with what effects upon my morals, my art, my religion, my politics, my whole attitude to reality, God only knows. For the moment I feel kindly disposed even towards Eddy [Sackville West] himself (whose last letter is a masterpiece—I must show it you) and further, I feel perfectly sure that I am not paying you a penny or even a halfpenny for all this subdued yet gorgeous riot (the forest that is)—you have made me a tropical fish gratis and for nothing—so that no expression of mine can really convey adequately my gratitude, which must remain as a lump of entire emerald (I said it would get into my style—thank God, my article on Sir Leslie is finished) until death us parts. I've just had a paean of praise of the room from Ott: Everyone seemed enthusiastic. I hope some cash will result.
>
> Now I am going to swim in my forest. / V.W. (*L V*, 129)

Sometimes, it is through a sort of humanised description of the gifts she has received that Woolf attempts to convey her grateful feeling, for example, in a letter written on 27 December 1936 to Vita Sackville-West:

> Well that is a pleasant kindly well meaning dauphin vulgaire[37]—d'you think its the very same that got caught and hung in the fishmongers shop at Sevenoaks [in 1925]? I rather think so. There's something—what they call *ingenuous*, a little foolish in its expression, that hints it might well have been netted. And then we stood and looked at it, and it *winked at* you in your pink jersey and white pearls. (*L VI*, 97, *our emphasis*)

Woolf humanises the gaze of the fish so as to materialise Vita's affection for her and thus voice her gratitude to her.

A similar device can be observed in a letter dated 19 June 1934 to Ethel Smyth: "Well that was, what they call, a sweet thought of yours; to come in from the roasting grill and find all white, all cool, all as fresh as a laundry. Your Simkins[38]—but this may be the result of sympathy and association—always smell sweeter to me than Oxford Street Barrow Simkins" (*L V*, 310). According to Woolf, it is through the observer's "sympathy and association" that these non-human entities, here, flowers, are endowed with a kind of human quality, sweetness. Similarly, all the non-human entities are able to possess a sort of human emotion. These examples can easily be found in Woolf's letters: in a letter to Vita, Woolf writes: "The flowers have come, and are adorable, dusky, tortured, passionate like you—" (*L III*, 303). Endowed with emotion, the flowers are endowed with the sender's qualities, an indirect way for Woolf to praise Vita.

5.4.2. Letters of admiration

Flowers also seem to be the vehicles of Woolf's admiration for her friends. For example, in a letter written on 20 September 1925 to Saxon Sydney-Turner, Woolf introduces a reference to "the aloe" to allude her addressee and thus suggest her admiration for his erudition and intelligence that have been revealed to the world on that rare occasion, an interview:

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[37] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 97, note 5: "a fish which Vita had sent Virginia for Christmas."
[38] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 310, note 2: "Mrs Sinkins, a dianthus."

> Nothing can be said to have happened—a visit from Clive, […] a visit from Lydia, […] a visit from Angus: but nothing said half so clever, I daresay, as what you said to Wittgenstein—the fame of that interview has gone round the world. How you talked without ceasing, some say in an obscure Austrian dialect, of the soul, and matter, till W. was moved to offer himself to you as bootboy at Hogarth House, in order to hear you still talk. I have always been one of those who maintained that the flowering of the aloe, once in a hundred years, was worth waiting for. I have compared it to snow falling by moonlight. The extreme rarity, I have said, of the loveliest things is part of their charm. And this had reference to you. (*L III*, 212)

Similarly, in a letter written on 26 May 1930 to Ethel Smyth, through the image of her addressee as a rose, which emerges in her mind while she is listening to her concert, Woolf conveys not only her gratitude but also admiration to Ethel Smyth for her music:

> If only I weren't a writer, perhaps I could thank you and praise you and admire you perfectly simply and expressively and say in one word what I felt about the Concert yesterday. As it is, an image forms in my mind; a quickset briar hedge, innumerably intricate and spiky and thorned; in the centre burns a rose. Miraculously, the rose is you; flushed pink, wearing pearls. The thorn hedge is the music; and I have to break my way through violins, flutes, cymbals, voices to this red burning centre. Now I admit that this has nothing to do with musical criticism. It is only what I felt as I sat on my silver winged (was it winged?) chair on the slippery floor yesterday. I am enthralled that you, the dominant and superb, should have this tremor and vibration of fire round you—violins flickering, flutes purring; (the image is of a winter hedge)—that you should be able to create this world from your centre. Perhaps I was not thinking of the music but of all the loves and ages you have been through. Lord—what a complexity the soul is! (*L IV*, 171-2)

Through imaginative descriptions of animals, non-human entities, such as flowers, Woolf humanises nature. According to Pater's statements in *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style*, such a technique consisting in raising non-human entities to the level of human kind so as to express thoughts and emotions belongs to the Lake

Poets, in particular, to Coleridge: "It is in a highly sensitive apprehension of the aspects of external nature that Coleridge identifies himself most closely with one of the main tendencies of the "Lake School"; a tendency instinctive, and no mere matter of theory, in him as in Wordsworth."[39] Pater argues that, by elaborating "a singular watchfulness for the minute fact and expression of natural scenery", Coleridge conveys his thoughts and emotions: "a closeness to the exact physiognomy of nature, having something to do with that idealistic philosophy which sees in the external world no mere concurrence of mechanical agencies, but an animated body, informed and made expressive, like the body of man, by an indwelling intelligence."[40]

Similarly, in Pater's eye, it is by "see[ing] nature full of sentiment and excitement" and "see[ing] men and women as parts of nature, passionate, excited, in strange grouping and connexion with the grandeur and beauty of the natural world"[41] that Wordsworth composes "images of danger and distress", and of "Man suffering among awful Powers and Forms".[42] So does Shelley: "And it was through nature, thus ennobled by a semblance of passion and thought, that he approached the spectacle of human life. Human life, indeed, is for him, at first, only an additional, accidental grace on an expressive landscape."[43] Accordingly, Pater considers the Lake Poets and Shelley, as "the masters, the experts, in this art of impassioned contemplation", for "[t]heir work is, not to teach lessons, or enforce rules, or even to stimulate us to noble ends; but to withdraw the thoughts for a little while from the mere machinery of life, to fix them, with appropriate emotions, on the spectacle of those great facts in man's existence."[44]

Besides, this way to endow inanimate things and nature with human characteristics, emotions and thoughts is described by John Ruskin as pathetic fallacy in *Modern Painters*. In order words, Ruskin characterises "the extraordinary, or false appearances" or "contemplative fancy"—"something pleasurable in written poetry

[39] Walter Pater, *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style (1889)*, p. 90.
[40] Walter Pater, *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style (1889)*, p. 90.
[41] Walter Pater, *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style (1889)*, p. 63.
[42] William Wordsworth. *The Prelude: the Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth. London: Penguin books, 1995, p. 307.
[43] Walter Pater, *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style (1889)*, p. 48.
[44] Walter Pater, *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style (1889)*, p. 62-3.

which is nevertheless *untrue*" and created by the poets "under the influence of emotion"—as "Pathetic fallacy": "a falseness in all our impressions of external things."[45] By this term, Ruskin criticises such poets as Coleridge, who "fancies a life" in his description of nature.[46] In Ruskin's eye, "pathetic fallacy" is the result of "a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them; borne away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion", and "a more or less noble state, according to the force of the emotion which has induced it."[47]

Ruskin's term appears in a letter written by Woolf on 3 September 1933 to Francis Birrell:

> And last time [on 5 July] it was such a hubbub—d'you remember: Sashie, Georgia, Brennans and all the rest of them in Helen's [Anrep] bedroom: and Mrs [Peter] Quennell, for whom I have the feeling of a rabbit towards a snake, bending all in black but not I think very agreeably—over the washstand. Why do I always envisage Roger's [Fry] parties in Helen's bedroom? What they call the pathetic fancy? Ruskin is that? God knows. (*L V*, 221)

The one used by Wolf when (mis)quoting Ruskin suggests that she adopts the Lake Poets' or Shelley's method and aims, by composing imaginative descriptions of inanimate things, to convey her thoughts and emotions.

5.5. "[A] cosmogony" (*L IV*, 84) of "Virginia Woolf's ghost[s]" (*L VI*, 224) and "my Style" (*L I*, 212) of imagery

Introduction

In a letter written on 25 August 1929 to Hugh Walpole, while asking a picture

[45] John Ruskin. *Modern Painters, Volume III*. New York: John Wiley, 1863, p. 158-9.
[46] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, Volume III*, p. 161.
[47] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, Volume III*, p. 162.

of her addressee's living environment in Sweden,[48] Woolf states her purpose in this demand:

> Please send me, what I'm sure there must be—a picture postcard of Hugh Walpoles house; or anyhow a view of the valley where he lives. I have a childish wish to consolidate my friends and embed them in their own tables and chairs, and imagine what kind of objects they see when they are alone. Of course it is quite true that I know nothing about human character, and to be frank, care less; but I have a cosmogony, nevertheless,—indeed all the more; and it is of the highest importance that I should be able to make you exist there, somehow, tangibly, visibly; recognisable to me, though not perhaps to yourself. (*L IV*, 84)

This "cosmogony" refers to the imaginary world of Woolf's visions about her friends. However illusory these visions may be, they are based on facts—their real living settings; and however unreal people may be in her visions, they live as they do in the real world. In this "cosmogony", Woolf's friends become, in her own words, "idols" or "ghosts": "perhaps real people have ghosts" (*L V*, 6). In a letter written on 1 March 1933 to Ethel Smyth, she asks: "Do you die as I do and lie in the grave and then rise and see people like ghosts?" (*L V*, 164), while in a letter from 7 October 1933 to Lady Ottoline Morrell, she shows "the Webbs sitting like idols on the platform" (*L V*, 230). If she perceives her friends' ghosts, she does the same with herself, as witness a letter written on 8 May 1932 to Vita Sackville-West while she is travelling in Greece for the second time: "Yes it was so strange coming back here again I hardly knew where I was; or when it was. There was my own ghost coming down from the Acropolis, aged 23: and how I pitied her!" (*L V*, 62)

Though these "ghosts" exclusively belong to her, and might not be "recognisable" to her friends through her imaginative descriptions, Woolf succeeds in making them tangible and visible to her letter readers. Building up this "cosmogony" actually goes together with shaping a specific style of imagery, so that not only visions can convey significance "of the highest importance", but all kinds of

[48] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 84, note 1: "Walpole was in Sweden working on his play, *The Limping Man*."

imaginative descriptions, as she shows early in a letter written on 10 November 1905 to Lady Robert Cecil, then travelling in Japan: "The one quality lacking in Japan is what the Greeks (and the Cockneys) call Pathos. A bare tree visible in the Light of Human Suffering means more than all the Pagodas in Tokio. I am trying to evolve a theory for tonight: that is the inward and intimate meaning of the last few remarks. Tell me honestly what you think of my Style?" (*L I*, 212)

Writing to Violet Dickinson, Vita Sackville-West, Ethel Smyth and Jacques Raverat, Woolf captures various "ghosts" with a specific imagery so as to express her own thoughts and emotions.

5.5.1. Violet Dickinson

5.5.1.1. Violet Dickinson: a "detached spirit" (*L I*, 259)

First of all, in her letters to Violet Dickinson, Virginia Stephen compares her addressee to "poles" for people who are like "creepers and clingers" (*L I*, 86), or to "a prop" that can help her, the "shaky Sparroy" (*L I*, 115), or again to the "spine" of "Herring" (*L I*, 379), or to "a rock in the quicksand" (*L I*, 100) in her life. Through this set of images, Violet Dickinson appears as a support to her friend and her "[f]riendship" becomes "the vineprop of life" (*L I*, 83). Such words echo Virginia Stephen's statements in her other letters to Violet: "Violet is the family friend we all cling to when we're drowning" (*L I*, 72), "You are the only sympathetic person in the world. Thats why everybody comes to you with their troubles" (*L I*, 75), or "I'm afraid everything points to a visit tomorrow, but my illegitimate Aunt [Violet Dickinson] is the happy background on these occasions as on all others. I turn to her when I am weary, and like the wicked cease from troubling" (*L I*, 90).

For Virginia Stephen, this intimate relationship might produce a sort of painful "motherhood", as she shows in a letter written on 27 November 1903 to Violet: "What a terrible thing motherhood, for instance, would be, if an intimacy increases the cares of daily life to this extent—" (*L I*, 109). In this friendship, Violet is the "old Stepdame" (*L I*, 218), while Virginia Stephen is her "original bantling" (*L II*, 495), or Violet becomes, like Virginia, a kangaroo. Appealing to Violet's maternal love, in a

letter dated 4 June 1903, Virginia writes: "I wish you were a Kangaroo and had a pouch for small Kangaroos to creep to" (*L I*, 79). While in another letter dated 25 November 1906, Virginia Stephen explains: "I went to the zoo this morning with Adrian; and a Kingajou [*sic*] hung on to my hand: O Kingajou, I said—if I were you! You will understand that that is exclamatory, and it is a poem too. And I saw the kangaroo, with its baby in its pouch, and it licked its nose, and wiped its eyes. That is Violet I cried" (*L I*, 251). Through this poetic association, Woolf suggests her friend's affection for her and vice-versa.

The kangaroo sometimes turns into a "mother wallaby", as in a letter from 14 November 1906:

> I know you are a celebrated invalid; if I didn't love you, I should be so d——d bored. But remembering the passage from Ostende to Dover,[49] and the lady who had to be screened with the cover of Madame Bovary—and the white cliffs and George and the tea basket and the bed pan—you see how my mind runs—remembering all this, I feel myself curled up snugly in old mother wallabies pouch. My little claws nestle round my furry cheeks. Is mother wallaby soft and tender to her little one? He will come and lick her poor lean mangy face. When you are at your worst do you think of Mrs Lyttelton, Mrs Crum, or me. Think this out. When you wake in the night, I suppose you feel my arms round you. (*L I*, 244)

Recalling memories is a way for Virginia Stephen to live her emotion and experience Violet's affection again. The mother wallaby metaphor hints at Violet's maternal love for her and their mother-daughter relationship. Another letter written one month later, on 14 December 1906, continues this: "Wonderful is the force of pen and ink. I like finding a pencil twitter on my plate at breakfast—old Mum Wallabys feeble voice, querulous with love (and chiding) for her offspring" (*L I*, 262).

Violet is also described as "a blessed hell cat and an angel in one" (*L I*, 57) or an angel of a bird—"Such a brilliant woman" that "all her friends cawing with open beaks for her to feed them—Sparroy widest agape of all" (*L I*, 110). With this image,

[49] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 244, note 1: "on 1 November 1906."

Virginia Stephen not only conveys Violet's mother-like behaviour but also presents her "beneficent powers" (*L I*, 142). However, this image begins to change in 1906, when the bird's talons are mentioned: "You are an Angel with wings dipped in the skies (whatever your crooked old talons may be. They hold burning coals for little Wallabies soft snouts.)" (*L I*, 239), and when the mother figure finally turns against her young ones, to enable them to fly from the nest: "It is sinful to see how old birds [Violet] peck their young ones [Virginia] from the nest when their season is over. I see Margaret Lyttelton and Katherine Horner, and [Elinor] Monsell and [Lucia] Creighton all poking their ugly beaks and chirping for more, where I used to snuggle in my baby days—" (*L I*, 218). Resorting to quite a different metaphor, Virginia Stephen compares Violet, in a letter written on 22 December 1906, to a "Mother Abbess" and herself to a nun being comforted by spiritual guidance:

> Further, my benefactress, there was your letter, which should rightly head the list of your charities. Really it was a pious searching letter such as Mother Abbesses might write to their nuns, in spiritual crises. For while it poured balm, it also pointed a higher way, and that is the kind of encouragement I value. You inspired a very affectionate letter to the old happy gipsy—and you so smoothed all the edges of my torn feelings that I have thought of her easily and without bitterness. (*L I*, 269-70)

Acknowledging that affection can function as "sugar in otherwise rather bitter tea" (*L I*, 91), Virginia Stephen thanks Violet for her spiritual support and loving comfort.

Violet is on the whole, "a kind of home for the orphaned and widow herself, flower grown too" (*L I*, 73), "the Sympathetic Sink" "in the crises of emotion" (*L I*, 76), a refuge "for harbouring colds" (*L I*, 110), "a universal receptacle" (*L I*, 104) for Virginia Stephen's epistolary talk, a "miraculous" source of "happiness" like "a pure fount of sweet water" (*L I*, 276). Above all, Violet, who possesses many qualities, is depicted as a light or beacon illuminating her life. For example, in a letter dated 1903, Virginia Stephen states: "This is only a d——d. scrawl—like those you send me—nothing much to say. Affection? heaps of it. You are a star, a comet rather

always wandering in our darkness" (*L I*, 102); or, in a letter written on 27 November 1903: "We have daily tea parties—oh so dull—[…]—all save my Violet, who rises firm as a lighthouse above it all—what an apt simile. (Violet gets too many compliments)" (*L I*, 110).

On other occasions, as in a letter written on 10 December 1906, Violet becomes a sort of "spirit":

> Are you in what state of body or mind? My plan is to treat you as detached spirit; maybe your body has typhoid; that is immaterial (you will be glad to hear) I address the immortal part, and shoot words of fire into the upper aer [*sic*] which spirits inhabit. They pierce you like lightning, and quicken your soul; whereas, if I said How have you slept, and what food are you taking, you would sink into your nerves and arteries and your gross pads of flesh, and perhaps your flame might snuff and die there. Who knows? (*L I*, 259)

A simile Virginia Stephen will refer to as a "joke" (*L I*, 260). However, comparing her addressee with a spirit suggests that for Virginia Stephen, Violet is not so much a real human being as an incorporeal symbol: only her "merits" (*L I*, 287) live in Virginia Stephen's mind. In other words, Violet has lost her physical features; what remains in Virginia Stephen's mind is the beauty of her nature. Such a statement echoes the author's essay, "A Letter to a Young Poet (1932)." As she points out in a letter written on 31 July 1932 to John Lehmann: "I do feel that the young poet is rather crudely jerked between realism and beauty, to put it roughly" (*L V*, 83).

As if to confirm her choice of beauty rather than realism, Violet repeatedly appears in Virginia Stephen's letters, as a light and a spirit, as in this example: "Well—I wish I ever saw you: a fine spirit, like some pale taper in a gale—Do you see yourself—flowing all night long—the flame streaming like a river" (*L I*, 389). Apart from its affectionate connotations, this image embodies the beauty and poetry of language, as Virginia Stephen playfully shows in another letter written on 15 February 1907: "I wonder—you wouldn't think it!—how you are, and whether you sleep at night, and when I may expect to find your body and soul harmonious again.

Your soul was floating like a captive balloon last time I saw you; a white globe, transparent and ethereal, veined with fire. O isn't that pretty?" (*L I*, 284) At that point, the images Virginia Stephen used to capture her addressee seem to change the nature of epistolary writing: here, letters are not so much used to exchange practical information as to create a sort of vibration in her addressee, to stimulate her emotions or her mind.

As Nigel Nicolson states in the introduction to the first volume of Woolf's letters, Virginia Stephen had known Violet since her childhood, for she was a friend of her half-sister, Stella Duckworth, and a frequent visitor to Hyde Park Gate.[50] In addition, during the summer of 1904, when Virginia Stephen has a mental breakdown, Violet took care of her in her own house at Welwyn.[51] That is why we seldom see Virginia Stephen's describing Violet in her own house—"the upper aer", in her letters, except for those written when Violet travelled abroad[52]. Because of their intimate relationship, Woolf's memory of Violet is so rich that she doesn't need to use her imagination. Memory itself becomes a sort of vision in her mind, as she shows in a letter written on 27 November 1919: "It was certainly your doing that I ever survived to write at all[53]; and I suppose nothing I could say would give you an idea of what your praise was one night [in 1902]—I can see it—sitting in a long room at Fritham [New Forest], after a walk on the Common: O how excited I was and what a difference you made to me!" (*L II*, 402)

While writing her letters, Virginia Stephen can easily and immediately visualise the scene. She can also see Violet's movements in her mind and recapture her reaction and her voice, as she does in a letter written on 25 August 1907, where she tries to recover Violet's comments on Lady Robert Cecil:

> Nelly [Lady Robert Cecil] wrote and told me: all I can say is, why do you see doctors? They are a profoundly untrustworthy race; either they

[50] See Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. xviii.
[51] See editors' summary in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 141.
[52] See chapter two.
[53] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 402, note 1: "Violet had looked after Virginia during her madness in 1904."

> lie, or they mistake.
>
> Still, you will say, what the d——does she know what it is to have a pain in the back—the worst thing about that little black devil is that she cant sympathise, once you get off her paper or her own spirits she feels nothing. Now, dirty devil (for your language is hot and strong—comes bubbling from the deep natural spring) amuse me. (*L I*, 306)

Similarly, while attempting to write a description in the same letter, Virginia Stephen cannot but phrase Violet's remarks on her letter writing and her style:

> From our garden we look over a dead marsh; flat as the sea, and the simile has the more truth in that the sea was once where the marsh is now. But at night a whole flower bed of fitful lighthouses blooms—O what a sentence!—but irritants are good I am told—along the edge; indeed you can follow the sea all round the cliff on which we stand, till you perceive Rye floating out to meet it, getting stranded halfway on the shingle, like—nothing so much as a red brick town. But then "read brick towns dont float; and these semi metaphors of yours are a proof that you dip hastily into a pocket full of words, and fling out the first come; and that is why your writing is so…" (*L I*, 307)

Letters are thus transformed into a sort of face-to-face dialogue in Virginia Stephen's mind between the writer and the spirit of her addressee: "Well—you see the advantage of writing to you is that I needn't see when you yawn, and look like a restive mare at Ella's [Crum] clock" (*L I*, 320). This results in a change in their relationship, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 16 December 1906: "You know my beautifully spiritual theory, that friendship is entirely a thing of the mind, and a thought is worth perhaps twenty dozen deeds. A profound truth is hid beneath that seemingly smooth surface. Break it, and dive beneath" (*L I*, 263).

5.5.1.2. Imagery as an "inward and intimate" "Style" (*L I*, 212)

Virginia Stephen's images for Violet Dickinson, which are meant to emphasise the importance of Violet in her life, bring forth another series of related images for Virginia Stephen herself, such as the little wallaby, the kangaroo and the young bird. As mentioned briefly, Virginia calls herself "Sparroy", which is

sometimes described as a bird, as she shows in the following three letters: “Have you a real affection for the Sparroy? She folds you in her feathery arms, so that you may feel the Heart in her ribs. Rather mild, but these emotions are very upsetting. / With deep affection” (*L I*, 62), “Sparroy only flaps her warm blooded paw, and says she has tender memories of a long embrace, in a bedroom” (*L I*, 71).

“Sparroy” is also a sort of vine, a plant with a long stem that climbs along a wall by clinging to it with its tendrils. First of all, in a letter written on 10 April 1903, Virginia Stephen states:

> Plant a flower for Sparroy. Heartsease or Forgetmenot, or something that climbs and is evergreen typical of much. Sparroy’s tendril heart for instance. A fruitful vine for Katie [Cromer]—What a start in life that child will have.
>
> Keep your own heart green and tender at least in that corner where Sparroy is planted. (*L I*, 73)

Similarly, in a letter written on 22 July 1903, Virginia Stephen states: “My intimate I know is happy and engrossed with her plants and livestock, but she must cultivate this particular Sparroy plant” (*L I*, 86), and in another one written on 4 March 1904: “My Violet—I hope to see you—but if not—Sparroy is firmly planted in that cabbage patch you call yr heart” (*L I*, 131). By describing herself as “this particular Sparroy plant” in Violet’s heart, Virginia Stephen not only presents her relation to Violet: “Sparroy is an appendage” (*L I*, 118) to Violet, like “the creepers and clingers” to “their poles” (*L I*, 86), but also expresses her desire for her addressee’s affection and support, as she shows in a letter dated July 1905: “I am going to make as much use of you as I can before you are beyond reach. O my Violet, why do you go when you have successfully trained me to climb round you? That is an image which should appeal to your feelings as a gardener” (*L I*, 202).

She also displays her taste for intertwining two different worlds, here the world of animals and the world of plants. This comes as a complement to the images

of the "small Kangaroo" (*L I*, 79) and the little wallaby mentioned earlier.[54] Through this recurring animal image, Woolf insistently asks for Violet's affection: "It's d——d hot. My wallaby paws stick to the paper as I write—and my letters are convulsive. Write to me, and tell me that you love me dearest. I wish no more. My food is affection!" (*L I*, 83), and, "Wall nuzzles in and wants love" (*L I*, 248) while concomitantly expressing her own affection for Violet: "My woman, are you a good happy woman, or a bony scratchy scrawly woman, and would you like to feel the Wallaby snout on your bosom?" (*L I*, 96)[55] These images are both affectionate and comforting for the letter writer and the letter reader.

During the period covered in the first volume by her correspondence with Violet Dickinson, the author herself confesses, as she rereads her own letters sent back by Violet in 1936, that she was "rather ground down harshly by fate" (*L VI*, 90). This period belongs to her "tragic past" (*L VI*, 90), for, besides her own illness in the summer of 1904 and that of Vanessa Stephen in 1906, Leslie Stephen died on 22 February 1904 while Thoby Stephen died on 20 November 1906: "O dear—the earth seems swept very bare—and the amount of pain that accumulates for someone to feel grows every day" (*L I*, 270). Therefore, Virginia Stephen needs someone like Violet to alleviate her lot (*L I*, 90), take "a lot of trouble" (*L I*, 120) and "shift the burden of the world" (*L I*, 102) from her shoulders. As she shows in her other letters to Violet, "letters are only fit for friendship" (*L I*, 72), "[f]riendship, relationship at anyrate consists in talk, or letter writing of some sort" (*L I*, 79), "our long and devoted friendship subsists on letters" (*L I*, 189) and "our intimacy is to live on ink" (*L II*, 22).

Letters are the most necessary and suitable way for Virginia Stephen to achieve such an intimate friendship—"Such a nest of emotion we live in" (*L I*, 102).

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[54] See also "little Wallaby" (*L I*, 83), "little Wallabies" (*L I*, 239), "Wallaby" (*L I*, 246), "Wall" (*L I*, 248), "Wallabie" (*L I*, 252), "little walls" (*L I*, 253) and "Baby Walls" (*L I*, 267).

[55] See also: "We send our love. Wall[aby] wags his soft tail" (*L I*, 242), "I feel myself curled up snugly in old mother wallabies pouch. My little claws nestle round my furry cheeks. […] He will come and lick her poor lean mangy face" (*L I*, 244), "Wall rubs his soft nose on the quilt. / He is a dear little beast, and loves his mother" (*L I*, 246), or, "Here is a line to wish you good night—whereas it will wish you good morning. And you must imagine the most compassionable and soft of Baby Walls just climbing on to your bed—one claw catches in the quilt and nurse raps his behind" (*L I*, 267).

As she states in a letter dated 4 May 1903:

> Your letters come like balm on the heart. I really think I must do what I never have done—try to keep them. I've never kept a single letter all my life—but this romantic friendship ought to be preserved. Very few people have any feelings to express—at least of affection or sympathy—and if those that do feel dont express—the worlds so much more like a burnt out moon—cold living for the Sparroys and Violets. This is because you think, or say, you oughtn't to write nice hot letters. (*L I*, 75-6)

Virginia Stephen not only "cherishes a secret passion" (*L III*, 304) for Violet, but Violet provokes in her a sort of "intense feeling of affection" (*L I*, 500): "The summer is winding up, and then two months will separate our friendship. It is astonishing what depths—hot volcano depths—your finger has stirred in Sparroy—hitherto entirely quiescent" (*L I*, 85). Nevertheless, shyness and words fail Virginia Stephen to express her feelings, as she repeatedly points out in her letters to Violet: "How could I write to you. What with feeling as shy as I do" (*L I*, 53), "I cant express my feelings about your back" (*L I*, 81), "You have been—but I find no words to express you!" (*L I*, 121), "But shy and silent as I am" (*L VI*, 43).

In her imaginative descriptions for her friend and herself, Woolf endows words with an "inward and intimate meaning" so as to express her affection and provoke a sort of sympathetic vibration in her addressee, as she shows in the letter written on 10 November 1905 to Lady Robert Cecil (*L I*, 212). Though, compared to poetry, her style needs more words to express feeling—"my style is too expensive" (*L I*, 280)—in the author's own eye, the suggestive way is much more consonant with her timid character—"Prose is more my line" (*L III*, 306). Moreover, in order to create sympathy in her addressee, Virginia Stephen not only expresses herself "forcibly" (*L I*, 280) but also represents herself as "irresistible" by her "exaggerated account of love" (*L I*, 392). For Virginia Stephen, such language is "allegoric", universal and " durable" (*L I*, 209).

Through her images, Woolf materialises affection, and letters of affection

hence possess "a round hard substance, as might have been a heart of flesh, but turn[s] out the same thing translated into gold and pearls" (*L I*, 64). Letter writing is simultaneously transformed into a kind of mental therapy: "Dont think me damned sentimental but its peace and balm to talk to you, and that is the only kind of good there is in the world. What all these tragedies are made for I believe. Otherwise it seems needless torture" (*L I*, 114). Accordingly, Violet becomes Virginia Stephen's "receptacle" (*L I*, 104) where she can "rake up the embers of [her] burnt heart" (*L I*, 64): "You will probably suffer from many long, and diffuse, egoistical, ill written, disconnected, delightful letters, because solitary as I am, and fertile as a tea pot, it becomes necessary to empty the brew on someone; and there you are recumbent at Welwyn—what more can you expect, my good woman" (*L I*, 308).

5.5.2. Jacques Raverat: "a divine sunset red" "in a sunset glow" (*L III*, 137) "on a hill top" (*L III*, 172)

In her correspondence with Jacques Raverat, Woolf seldom yields to self-depiction; she is more interested in her addressee's method of letter writing, as she shows in a letter written on 3 October 1924:

> Certainly the painters have a great gift of expression. A highly intelligent account you seem to me to give of the processes of your own mind when I throw Neo Paganism in. In fact I rather think you've broached some of the problems of the writer's too, who are trying to catch and consolidate and consummate (whatever the word is for making literature) those splashes of yours; for the falsity of the past (by which I mean Bennett, Galsworthy and so on) is precisely I think that they adhere to a formal railway line of sentence, for its convenience, never reflecting that people don't and never did feel or think or dream for a second in that way; but all over the place, in your way.
>
> I'm writing now, partly because I was so much intrigued by your letter, and felt more in touch, partly because this is my last evening of peace. (*L III*, 135-6)

For Woolf, Jacques possesses the ability to shape the stream of his thoughts with words; and this way of writing is what modernist writers endeavor to master,

challenging as they do the previous generation of Edwardian writers, such as Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy, those she calls "the materialists" in her essay, "Character in Fiction (1924)."[56] She opposes them to "the Georgians" (*E III*, 421), that is, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, who commit themselves to convey the inner life of human beings: they are "spiritual, concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its myriad messages through the brain" (*E III*, 34). This way of writing is also what Woolf herself tries to implement in her letters to Jacques, as she shows in the same letter: "I want, in my old age, to have done with all superfluities, and form words precisely on top of the waves of mind—a formidable undertaking" (*L III*, 136).

In her other letters to the Raverats, Woolf repeatedly shows her desire for epistolary communication with Jacques: "I find you easy to write to" (*L III*, 24), "You and I can chatter like a whole parrot house of cockatoos (such is my feeling) because we have the same language at heart" (*L III*, 155), "The thing that comes over and over is the strange wish I have to go on telling Jacques things. […] I believe I told him more than anyone, except Leonard; […] One could say anything to Jacques" (*L III*, 171) or "And I will certainly keep up the habit of garrulity, to which Jacques induced me" (*L III*, 179).

In a letter written on 30 July 1923, Woolf compares these letters with "febrile verbosity" (*L III*, 60) to a sort of "monologue": "What a letter! What a letter! It is like the interminable monologue of an old village woman standing at her door. Each time you say good day and try to move off, she bethinks her of something fresh and it all begins again" (*L III*, 60). She delivers this monologue in a jocular tone, "joviality" being "a convenient mask" (*L III*, 136). In other words, joviality prevents her from indulging in a free, open and frank type of writing, as an actor in an opera delivers his monologues with a mask that conceals his true identity in order to entertain his audience. This inhibition, which robs Woolf of the freedom to convey "the small catastrophes which are of such huge interest to [herself]", also surfaces in her other

[56] "Character in Fiction (1924)", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 420-38.

letters to Jacques. For instance, on 5 February 1925, Woolf states:

> Being bred a Puritan, (in the main—but I had a French great grandmother to muddle me) I warm my hands at these red-hot-coal men. I often wish I had married a foxhunter. It is partly the desire to share in life somehow, which is denied to us writers. Is it to you painter? Ever since I was a child I have envied people who did things—but even influenza shall not mislead me into egoistical autobiographical revelations—Of course, I long to talk to you about myself, my character, my writings, but am withheld—by what? (*L III*, 163-4)

In a letter written on 4 September 1924, Woolf tries to analyse such a feeling:

> What am I writing? I dont think I shall tell you, because, as you know perfectly well, you don't care a straw what I write; and, like you and Gwen for the matter of that, I'm terrifically egotistic about my writing, think practically of nothing else, and so, partly from conceit, partly shyness, sensitiveness, what you choose, never mention it, unless someone draws it out with red hot pincers, or like Forster, really takes an interest in my adventures. (*L III*, 130)

Yet she is "a little morbid about people reading [her] books" (*L III*, 154). In her other letters to Jacques, Woolf considers her deep shyness as a woman as the main reason for this "reservation": "I feel a little shy, do you? Not fundamentally, superficially" (*L II*, 554) and she adds: "I wish I could discuss the art of writing with you at the present moment. I am ashamed, or perhaps proud, to say how much of my time is spent in thinking, thinking, thinking about literature" (*L II*, 554), and she repeats: "However, I'm awfully shy of saying how really and truly I would do a great deal to please you and can only very very dimly murmur a kind of faint sympathy and love" (*L III*, 1501). For Woolf, not only does her awareness of her female identity prevent her from communicating freely with men, even in an epistolary conversation, but, at the time covered by her correspondence with Jacques, she thinks that the complete freedom and sincerity of human relationship can only exist between women—"women confide in one" (*L III*, 320), as she shows in a letter written on 24 January 1925 (*L III*, 155).

Such a reserved way of letter writing "irks" and discourages Woolf: "There is

very little use in writing this. One feels so ignorant, so trivial, and like a child, just teasing you" (*L III*, 172), not merely because it deprives her of freedom, but also imprints upon her "a kind of unreal personality": "But you know that if there is anything I could ever give you, I would give it, but perhaps the only thing to give is to be oneself with people" (*L III*, 171). Therefore, in the letter written on 4 September 1924, Woolf disapproves of these monologues in her letters, for they destroy a true relationship: "And I don't like my own letters. I don't like the falsity of the relationship—one has to spray an atmosphere round one; yet I do like yours and seem to be able to pierce through your spray, so may you through mine" (*L III*, 131).

Writing to Katherine Arnold-Forster, Woolf frequently shows her affection for Jacques Raverat: for example, in a letter written on 1 January 1920: "One of the curiosities of the past week has been the resurrection of Jacques at the Ballet—[…] I wish he would come back to us. I always had a deep affection for him—until he got talking about red and green and reality" (*L II*, 410), while in another written on 23 August 1922, she states: "I shall go and stay with Gwen and Jacques [Reverat] in January, I think. He wrote to me, and revived my ancient affection—you know how faithful hearted I am" (*L II*, 549). This sort of expression can also be seen in a letter written on 5 February 1925 to Jacques himself when he is dying:[57] "So now I must stop, and do a little cross stitch, and I shall dwell upon you, as indeed I have been doing a great deal, lying here—and though you'll snap my nose off for saying so—with considerable admiration as well as affection" (*L III*, 165).

As William Pryor states, after a silence of ten years, the correspondence between Woolf and Jacques is resumed in 1922, intensifies during the period when Jacques' health starts deteriorating in mid-1923 until his death in March 1925, and is continued by his widow, Gwen for several months. The remaining letters from Woolf to the Raverats prove to be an "interminable monologue", in Woolf's own words; but the subjects in their correspondence range far and wide, from news or gossip about

[57] Jacques Raverat died on 6 March 1925.

Bloomsbury friends, aesthetic views on writing and painting to their respective points of view on life, reality, humankind, friendship, love and the endurance of pain.[58]

Nevertheless, when writing these letters so as to "revive" their "ancient affection" for each other, the first thing that Woolf tries to do is to revive the Raverats and their life in her own memory. For example, while reading Jacques's letter, Woolf imagines his life in Vence: "Please write again, if it doesn't bore you. I enjoyed your letter so much, and imagine your whole existence, no doubt a little wrong, as I walk with my dog, in Richmond Park" (*L II*, 592). Even though travelling in Madrid in March 1923, she wants to refresh her memory about the Raverats' life in the Earls Court Road before they moved to Vence in 1920:

> Here we have been following the Crucifixion and the Last Supper through the streets, and again I felt entirely sympathetic, which one couldn't imagine doing in Piccadilly say, or the Earls Court Road—where you and Gwen once lived, if I remember, before you made your grand attack upon Bloomsbury and left us. Is this right? You see I am still reconstructing your past, from fragments, mostly false, I daresay. You were a man of convictions, in which you were confirmed by marrying a Darwin, of all races the most monolithic. (*L III*, 24)

If memory can be stirred by association of ideas, it can also be stirred by gifts, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 24 January 1925:

> I don't suppose you realise in the least how the flowers coming from you, on the eve of my birthday too, pleased me. There they are, against my painted walls, great bouquets of yellow and red and pink. They rather remind me of all your quips and cranks, and sitting by the river at the Grange, when you made me smoke one of Sir George's cigars— (*L III*, 156)

On the one hand, to conceive of such a picture, based on facts in her memory but constructed by her imagination, becomes a sort of game, as Woolf states in a letter

[58] See William Pryor. ed. Introduction. *Virginia Woolf and the Raverats: A Different Sort of Friendship*. Bath: Clear Books, 2003: p. 17-8.

written on 4 November 1923: "I still play my game of making up Jacques and Gwen as I walk about London" (*L III*, 78). On the other hand, this fancy picture, based on facts or pure imagination, can change into a sort of vision for Woolf. For example, after Jacques Raverat's death, in a letter written on 8 April 1925 to his wife Gwen, Woolf, who is staying at Cassis from 26 March to 7 April 1925, describes an imaginary scene that involves Jacques:

> I constantly thought of him at Cassis. I thought of him lying among those terraces and vineyards, where it is all so clear out, and logical and intense, and it struck me that, from not having seen him all these years, I have no difficulty in thinking him still alive. That is what I should like for myself, that there should be no breach, no submission to death, but merely a break in the talk. I liked that uncompromising reality of him: no sentimentality, and no beating about the bush. (*L III*, 177)

This imaginary scene becomes a visual reality, which can easily emerge in front of her mind's eye: "I can't tell you how that 10 days at Cassis has burnt upon my mind's eye the beauty and our happiness, and you and Jacques" (*L III*, 178); so does her memory, as she shows in another letter written on 1 May 1925 to the same addressee: "Do you remember an evening at the Grange, and the poplar trees, and Margaret talking about Pragmatism? It comes back to me, half visually, the lawn and the poplars" (*L III*, 180). In a letter dated 3 October 1924, Woolf writes: "You would never have guessed, I daresay, that Jacques and Gwen always appear to Virginia in a sunset glow?" (*L III*, 136-7), an image representing Gwen's and Jacques' passion for each other. Jacques' ghost, in a way, lives in Woolf's vision beyond the time-space distance, bridging the gap between death and life and changing the nature of Woolf's relationship with Jacques:

> The thing that comes over and over is the strange wish I have to go on telling Jacques things. This for Jacques, I say to myself; I want to write to him about happiness, about Rupert [Brooke], and love. It had become to me a sort of private life, and I believe I told him more than anyone, except Leonard; I become mystical as I grow older and feel an alliance with you and Jacques which is eternal, not interrupted, or hurt

by never meeting. (*L III*, 171)

Keeping the ghost of Jacques in her mind, Woolf develops a "private" conversation with him: letter writing becomes a way to be with his ghost.

5.5.3 Vita Sackville-West

5.5.3.1. Vita Sackville-West: "a lamp and a glow, and a shady leaf and an illuminated hall [in] my existence" (*L V*, 141)

As discussed in the fourth chapter, Woolf is fully aware of Vita Sackville-West's "standoffishness" (*L III*, 233), her "slow" (*L III*, 381; *L V*, 266) mind, and her innate insensitiveness (*L IV*, 196), all of which, in Woolf's eye, fail her in her writing and prevent her from achieving a "congenial" (*L IV*, 36) relationship. Nevertheless, Woolf appreciates Vita: "Dear Vita has the body and brain of a Greek God" (*L III*, 85). First of all, for Woolf, Vita, as "a high aristocrat" (*L III*, 150), "virginal, savage, patrician" (*L III*, 150) and "primitive" (*L V*, 266), possesses both "blazing beauties" and "the light of […] glory" (*L III*, 320). She has "those lovely pillar like legs" (*L III*, 253): "Oh they are exquisite—running like slender pillars up into her trunk, which is that of a breastless cuirassier" (*L III*, 150), and "her eyes that were the beaming beauty" (*L V*, 447). Then, Vita has "a heart of gold" (*L III*, 381) and a character "so modest so magnanimous" (*L V*, 447): "Not a quality […] is lacking" (*L III*, 421). She is also "humble" (*L III*, 541)—"without a vanity" (*L IV*, 196)—and sincere: "she is incapable of insincerity or pose" (*L V*, 266).

For Woolf, not only does Vita have an aristocratic mind—"I like this in the aristocracy. I like the legs; I like the bites; I like the complete arrogance and unreality of their minds" (*L III*, 380)—but her writing reveals in her "a rich dusky attic of a mind" (*L III*, 429)—"a mind which, if slow, works doggedly; and has its moments of lucidity" (*L III*, 381). Woolf admires Vita's writing, and in her letters, she compares her friend's successful writing to the moon rising: for example, in a letter written on 10 October 1926: "Yes: that yellow moon is rising on the horizon—Everyone admiring Vita, talking of Vita" (*L III*, 297). By comparing herself to one of the "lambs"

huddling on the Downs by moonlight (*L III*, 225), Woolf highlights Vita's success and conveys her admiration for her.

Vita, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 7 October 1928 to Harold Nicolson, presents "this charming and indeed inimitable mixture" (*L III*, 541), to which Woolf cannot help "succumbing" (*L III*, 381), as she states in a letter written on 22 May 1927 to Vanessa Bell. Writing to Ethel Smyth on 26 November 1935, Woolf states that, to her mind, the female charm Vita possesses loses its reality and becomes a sort of halo: "but she remains, as I say, to me always modesty and gentleness no longer incarnate, but as it were hovering above her, in a nimbus" (*L V*, 447). Furthermore, in a letter written on 9 October 1927 to Vita, Woolf indicates that it is this halo encircling and symbolising Vita's virtues that she wants to convey in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928): "But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind […]—suppose there's the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people, as the luster on an oyster shell" (*L III*, 428-9). The way in which Woolf aims to both "untwine and twist again some very odd, incongruous strands in [Vita]" (*L III*, 429) and preserve all these virtues of hers, is far more real to her than the real Vita; this is her challenge to conventional biographical writing—Woolf wants to "revolutionise biography" (*L III*, 429), and rid it of "the wax figures" (*E VI*, 182), as she indicates in the essay, "The Art of Biography (1939)".[59] Similarly, in her letters, in particular, those to Vita, Woolf not only tries to find a sort of vision for Vita, but also wants to use imagery to capture Vita.

For example, in a letter written on 24 August 1925, Woolf conceives Vita as a kind of satyr in her vision: "I have a perfectly romantic and no doubt untrue vision of you in my mind—stamping out the hops in a great vat in Kent—stark naked, brown as a satyr, and very beautiful. Don't tell me this is all illusion" (*L III*, 198). Though fully realising the nature of her vision is an "illusion", in another letter written on 7 September 1925, she continues to complete such an imaginary world where the figure

[59] See also chapter two.

of Vita can move, act and talk as in real life:

> I try to invent you for myself, but find I really have only 2 twigs and 3 straws to do it with. I can get the sensation of seeing you—hair, lips, colour, height, even, now and then, the eyes and hands, but I find you going off, to walk in the garden, to play tennis, to dig, to sit smoking and talking, and then I cant invent a thing you say—This proves, that I could write reams about—how little we know anyone, only movements and gestures, nothing connected, continuous, profound. But give me a hint I implore. (*L III*, 204-5)

Apart from Vita's movements and way of talking, Woolf fails to convey Vita's thoughts in her vision, as can be seen in an imaginative description of Vita, who is ill, in a letter written on 7 January 1926:

> This is simple to ask how you are—temperature 101, 102, 103? Feeling very miserable, half asleep, taking a little tea and toast, and then, I daresay, towards evening becoming rather luminous and remote, and irresponsible. All this takes place in a room in the middle of Knole—What takes place in all those galleries and ballrooms, I wonder? And then, what goes on in Vita's head, lying under her arras somewhere, like a tiny kernel in a vast nut? (*L III*, 226)

However, such a silent vision can still provoke in Woolf a sort of "sensation", which she compares to a peaceful dream later in the same letter:

> It would be better to talk—much better. But I cant talk yet without getting these infernal pains in the head, or astonishingly incongruous dreams. Two dull people come to tea, and I dream of precipices and horrors at night, as if—can they keep horrors and precipices concealed in them, I wonder? Then if you came, I should perhaps dream the other way about—of bumble bees and suet pudding. Read this over, you will see that a compliment is implied. (*L III*, 205)

With this sort of imaginative description, Woolf not only wants to praise Vita's "cool calm" (*L VI*, 56) and serenity, but also aims to convey her own peaceful feeling stirred by her friend. This is also perceptible in another letter written on 9 January 1926 when

Woolf was ill:

> No: I'm not susceptible to the mind: only the body (I think) and Tommie [Stephen Tomlin], tho' sprightly as an elf, is misshapen as a wood-pecker—Whereas Vita—beech trees, waterfalls and cascades of blue black paper—all so cool and fruitful and delicious, especially when one's got a little temperature. I'm so furious: I was to begin that wretched novel [*To the Lighthouse*] today, and now bed and tea and toast and the usual insipidity. Oh damn the body. / But it is a great comfort to think of you when I'm not well—I wonder why. (*L III*, 227)

When Woolf is ill or feels gloomy, thinking about Vita or being with her can both give her a sense of "serenity", "coolness and calm" (*L IV*, 272) as well as happiness. This echoes Woolf's statements in a letter written on 8 December 1926 to Vita: "Please come, and bathe me in serenity again. Yes, I was wholly and entirely happy. If you could have uncored me—you would have seen every nerve running fire—intense, but calm" (*L III*, 306-7), or in a letter written on 15 August 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "When I was ill, 4 years ago, and had to spend 3 months in bed, she took me to Long Barn: there I lay in Swansdown and recovered. The sense of peace dwells thus, about her—those are some of my associations" (*L IV*, 199).

Light is the image Woolf most often associates with Vita, as she does in a letter written on 23 September 1925:

> And then I'm going this winter to have one great gala night a month: The studio will be candle lit, rows of pink, green, and blue candles, and a long table laid with jugs of chocolate and buns. Everybody will be discharged into this room, unmixed, undressed, unpowdered. You will emerge like a lighthouse, fitful, sudden, remote (Now that is rather like you) This way of seeing people might be gigantically successful, and then your cousin [Eddy] has lent me his piano, and I intend to break up the horror of human intercourse with music. (*L III*, 214-5)

By imagining Vita as "a lighthouse" in her fancy scene, Woolf suggests that one of the functions of Vita is to relieve her of or "mitigate" (*L III*, 215) some negative emotions resulting from human relationships or social activities, such as "the horror"

or “the shock of human intercourse” and “the fear and shock and torture of meeting one’s kind” (*L III*, 215). The image of the lighthouse can also been found in another letter written on 31 January 1927 when Vita leaves for her second visit to Persia; she is “A lighthouse in clean waters” (*L III*, 319).

Woolf also uses other images of light to describe Vita, for example, in a letter written on 5 January 1926: “if ever a woman was a lighted candlestick, a glow, an illumination which will cross the desert [to Persia] and leave me—it was Vita: and thats the truth of it” (*L III*, 226), in a letter written on 1 November 1926: “Dazed and mazed with Ozzie’s [Oswald Dickinson] gossip—fountains, cascades, cataracts—shining through all one steadfast star—Vita: her character, charm, greatness, goodness—” (*L III*, 300), as well as in a letter written on 22 November 1927: “It was all very warm and cosy so long as you were here—odd that, driven and hunted as you are, you should yet be to me like a sunny patch on a hot bank” (*L III*, 440). This image of light can be created through pure imagination or can also be drawn from memory.

Memory can stir in Woolf feelings of dismay or happiness, as she shows in a letter written on 22 December 1925 to Vita:

> Also that I woke trembling in the night—what at? At the thought that I had been grossly inhospitable about lunch on Sunday. There it was smoking on the table—chicken and apple tart, cream, and coffee: and you, after motoring, spoiling, caring cosseting the Wolf [sic] kind for 3 days, sent empty along the pavement. Good God—how the memory of these things bites like serpents in the night! But the bite was assuaged by the pleasures. (*L III*, 224)

The pleasant memory refers to the moment when Woolf accompanied Vita to order fish in a Sevenoaks shop during this visit, as Woolf shows afterwards in the same letter: “I am dashing off to buy, a pair of gloves. I am sitting up in bed: I am very very charming; and Vita is a dear old rough coated sheep dog: or alternatively, hung with grapes, pink with pearls, lustrous, candle lit, in the door of a Sevenoaks draper” (*L III*, 224).

Writing to Vita, Woolf frequently mentions this memory, which contains the shining and colourful figure of Vita; and it becomes Woolf's vision, as she shows in a letter written on 2 December 1928:

> I'm coming on Thursday, just as the lamps are being lit in Sevenoaks, so that I can see you in the fishmongers in a red jersey holding a paper bad, rather heavy and damp. Full of smelts and then we turn up the lights in your room, and I get into my chair and you—ah well—too soon over, thats the worst of it. And I make it sooner over by my terrific sense (aged 46—thats what it does) of the flight of time, so that these moments are seen by me flying, flying; almost too distinct to be bearable. I discovered that in Burgundy; and could not invent any way of dimming my own eyes, which are, sometimes, too bright, aren't they? Couldn't we drop something into time to make it thick and dull? (*L III*, 561-2)

Furthermore, such a memory, which Woolf sees with her mind's eye, becomes emblematic of Vita, as she shows in a letter dated 5 February 1927: "Could you and Harold go on top of Tram up to Hampstead on a rainy Saturday afternoon? I kept trying to imagine it. Instantly all the lights went up and the whole tram became golden rosy. Aint it odd how the vision at the Sevenoaks fishmongers has worked itself into my idea of you?" (*L III*, 326) For Woolf, the light of this memory shines in her mind as soon as she thinks of Vita.

In short, as she shows in a letter written on 28 December 1932 to Ethel Smyth, Vita is "a lamp and glow, and a shady leaf and an illuminated hall [in] her existence" (*L V*, 141). Memory or fancy, such depictions come to symbolise Vita's character—"the most profound and secret side of your character" (*L III*, 469), such as her "standing gorgeous in emeralds" (*L III*, 288), her "blazing beauties" and "the light of [her] glory" (*L III*, 320), her "radiance and glamour" (*L IV*, 100), as well as her "lustre and activity, general splendour" (*L IV*, 248). For Woolf, Vita turns into a mythical figure as well as an illusion, as she shows in a letter written on 31 March 1928: "But we must do this together one day, Vita, my dear: unless you are, as I think all my friends are, a myth, something I dreamt" (*L III*, 479).

Images and visions are a way for Woolf to preserve in her letters, with words, such an elusive figure as Vita's, as she shows in a letter written on 2 December 1928:

> And I make it sooner over by my terrific sense […] of the flight of time, so that these moments are seen by me flying, flying; almost too distinct to be bearable. I discovered that in Burgundy; and could not invent any way of dimming my own eyes, which are, sometimes, too bright, aren't they? *Couldn't we drop something into time to make it thick and dull?* (*L III*, 561-2, *our emphasis*)

More importantly, through imagery and visions, Woolf aims to hint at the importance of Vita in her own life. Considering herself in a disparaging way as "the stinking tallow" (*L III*, 224), "a eunuch"—"not knowing what's the right side of a skirt" (*L III*, 320), a "valetudinarian" (*L III*, 391; *L IV*, 20), as well as "a mangy ill bred cur, with no tail" (*L V*, 251), Woolf not only wants to be with Vita: "Lord, how lovely today was; how hateful this blasted black town is! All I can do is to hop up and down on my perch like a parrot till Thursday; but to see you would be to me what—is it sugar or hemp or worms?—would be to a parrot" (*L IV*, 306); but also needs Vita in her imaginative world: "Yes, you are solidly lodged in my heart—such as it is: the cold heart of a fish: (by the way, Pinker eats a cod's head in the Square, is sick under my bed, and I say, beaming, Dearest Vita!)" (*L III*, 344) To capture such a visionary scene, ludicrous as it may be, is a way for Woolf to feel "charming" (*L III*, 224), "exciting" (*L III*, 238), "warm and happy" (*L IV*, 9): it empowers her: "Its weakness of mine. Part of your glamour, I suppose" (*L IV*, 13).

In a letter written on 19 November 1926, Woolf considers her need for Vita as a sort of "psychological necessity":

> What a bore I cant write, except to you. I lie in a chair. It isn't bad: but I tell you, to get your sympathy: to make you protective: to implore you to devise some way by which I can cease this incessant nibbling away of life by people: Sybil, Sir Arthur [Colefax], Dadie—one on top of another. Why do I put it on you? Some psychological necessity I suppose: one of those intimate things in a relationship which one does by instinct. I'm rather a coward about this pain in my back: You would

be heroic. (*L III*, 302)

Apart from the sympathetic vibration, the intimacy with Vita gives Woolf a feeling of protection as in a mother-daughter relationship, as she shows in a letter written on 23 March 1927: "Why do I think of you so incessantly, see you so clearly the moment I'm in the least discomfort? An odd element in our friendship. Like a child, I think if you were here, I should be happy" (*L III*, 351-2).

Nurturing visions of Vita enlightens Woolf's own "dull and damp" (*L III*, 1613) life: for example, in a letter written on 5 February 1927, Wolf imagines Vita then on her second travel to Persia and this vision illuminates her "sordid room" (*L III*, 325):[60]

> Now you're just arriving I make out—driving into the gates of Teheran. Theres Harold come out to meet you. There you sit as proud as a peacock. Dotty is tactful. Well well, its all very exciting, even here in the studio with the rain coming through. My God, to be with you and the 14 cream coloured ponies, and the young mare, and the lighted window in the fishmongers shop! (*L III*, 327)

In such cases, imagining or visualising Vita takes on a psychological significance and acts as a sort of psychotherapy. Even if she also makes it clear, in a letter written on 14 January 1938, that what she prizes is "the (purely aesthetic) pleasure [Vita's] presence gives" (*L VI*, 207), Woolf likes to imagine Vita in order to be with her, as she shows in a letter written on 16 February 1927: "I must post this, but like lingering over it, though my hand is so cold I cant write, in order to be with you" (*L III*, 331), or again, in a letter from 2 September 1939: "And if I'm dumb and chill, it doesn't mean I dont always keep thinking of you—one of the very few constant presences is your's, and so—well no more" (*L VI*, 355). "I always invent some lovely lovely phrase" (*L III*, 402, Woolf goes repeating: "—and I like dribbling on, for then I see a porpoise in a shop window at Christmas and pearls and a pink coat—a jersey was it?—anyhow you wore gaiters, and it was the sight of the gaiters—dont tell this to your audience—that

[60] See also chapter two.

inspired Orlando [on 18 December 1925]—the gaiter and what lies beyond—" (*L V*, 157).

For Woolf, vision is connected with affection: her mind settles on Vita " like a butterfly on a hot stone" (*L III*, 479); and the images she captures reveal the degree of her affection. Vivid visions convey her strong feelings for Vita: "You are sitting by the Kasran (I dont know what the name is) [Kasvin] Gate, and seeing us all as little bright beads in a plate miles beneath. You see us, and you think we dont see you. I assure you I'm conscious of you all day long, soaring above my head. And am I a bright bead, or a dull bead, in the plate? Or dont I exist?" (*L III*, 332) Or, on the contrary, a decline in her capacity for capturing visions suggests that her affection for Vita is getting weaker. For example, during Vita's first visit to Persia, in a letter dated 26 January 1926, Woolf shows that her vision is frustrated by Vita's departure for Persia: "Somehow, as you get further away, I become less able to visualise you; and think of you with backgrounds of camels and pyramids which make me a little shy" (*L III*, 231). Or, when Vita goes to Persia for the second time, Woolf suggests, in a letter written on 6 March 1927, the decline of her affection for her friend: "This year you seem to me, imaginatively, more unattainable; more pearled, powdered, white legged, gay, gallant and adventurous than ever. I can't imagine you in the basement" (*L III*, 342).

When affection fades, light vanishes from her vision, colours darken, and the symbolic image disappears, as can be seen in a letter written on 7 January 1933:

> I was seized with gloom when you left—ask Ethel. Isn't it odd what tricks affection—to leave it at that—plays? I dont see you for six weeks sometimes; yet the moment I know you're not there to be seen, all the fishmongers shops in the world go dark. I always think of you as a pink shop with a porpoise in a tank. Now there are no porpoises. No, Sissinghurst is grey; Sevenoaks a drab coloured puce. Here I sit at Rodmell, with a whole patch of my internal globe extinct. Yes—thats a compliment for you. (*L V*, 148)

Similarly, in a letter dated on 13/14 October 1927, by referring to catching "cold" and

through the changes of colour in her imagery, Woolf suggests a decline in their intimacy:

> The poor Wolves have been having colds in the head. Mine I caught in a dentist waiting room: but thats neither here nor there. The point is the incident symbolises our friendship. Now think carefully what I mean by that. There's a dying hue over it: it shows the hectic dolphin colours of decay. Never do I leave you without thinking, its for the last time. (*L III*, 429)

Later in the same letter, by indicating the death of the dolphin, Woolf symbolically suggests the end of their friendship: "Please tell me beforehand when you will come, and for how long: unless the dolphin has died meanwhile and its colours are those of death and decomposition" (*L III*, 431).

In another letter written on 29 December 1928, Woolf resorts to the image of the moon to signify the changes in their affection. The "shadow" of the moon symbolizes the waning of their affection, due to their infrequent correspondence:

> You never write to me, and your image has receded till it is like the thinnest shadow of the old moon: but just as Vita was about to vanish, a thin silver edge appeared, and you now hang like a sickle over my life again: thats why I am writing to you, hurry scurry, for Nelly'll be in with our gammon and eggs in a minute, instead of reading M. Maurois for an article. (*L III*, 568-9)

The image of the moon reappears later on and becomes larger and brighter because of Vita's Christmas present—a string of amber beads, "yellow beads" (*L III*, 568).[61] Affection can grow when gifts are given, it can also be strengthened by the act of letter writing, which is what Woolf hints at at the end of the letter through the image of the full moon: "Vita's moon is full" (*L III*, 570). Through the image of the moon Woolf materialises affection and its changes. At the same time, writing letters, Woolf experiences the changes in her own affection for Vita.

[61] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 568, note 1: "Vita had given Virginia a string of amber beads as a Christmas present."

Consequently, in a letter written on 2 July 1934 to Vita, Woolf considers her imaginative descriptions or "scene making" ("A Sketch of the Past") as her original style of letter writing:

> Here is Osbert [Sitwell] ringing up to ask me to lunch. No I wont. Vita never rings me up; but then she's sitting among the pigeons at the top of the pink tower watching the moon rise between the hop poles—(now, isn't that worth all that Dotty [Dorothy Wellesley] ever wrote and Squire ever praised; so spontaneous, universal, and full of deep feeling). (*L V*, 312)

She goes so far as to consider this style, even if half-jokingly in a letter dated 1 September 1925, as the very beauty of prose writing:

> And don't go striding above my head in the moonlight, exquisitely beautiful though the vision is.
>
> I must stop: or I would now explain why its all right for me to have visions but you must be exact. I write prose; you poetry. Now poetry being the simpler, cruder, more elementary of the two, furnished also with an adventitious charm, in rhyme and metre, can't carry beauty as prose can. Very little goes to its head. You will say, define beauty—
>
> But no: I am going to sleep. (*L III*, 200)

In describing her visions in her letters, Woolf induces Vita to use her wits to catch her meaning and affection behind her suggestive words, rather than read them as poetry.

However, Vita fails to interpret these "Lovely phrases" that Woolf composes for her in her letters, as Woolf shows in another two letters written in January 1926: "Your letter from Trieste came this morning—But why do you think I don't feel, or that I make phrases? "Lovely phrases" you say which rob things of reality. Just the opposite. Always, always, always I try to say what I feel" (*L III*, 231), and "After all, what is a lovely phrase? One that has mopped up as much Truth as it can hold" (*L III*, 237). Vita is apparently unable to grasp the hidden meaning—"reality" and "Truth"—and feelings in her "Lovely phrases" about vision. For Vita, rather than deriving from her affection, Woolf's vision is made up by the writer's intelligence, as

Woolf states in a letter written on 26 August 1924: "But really and truly you did say—I cant remember exactly what, but to the effect that I made copy out of all my friends, and cared with the head, not with the heart. As I say, I forget; and so we'll consider it cancelled. / I haven't time to inflict on you 20 reams to explain why I am so outraged at being taken for a writer" (*L III*, 127).

Vita is also unable to understand the importance of vision for the letter writer herself—the pleasure Woolf gets from her act of visualising Vita and writing about visions. This sort of pleasure can be compared to G. E. Moore's theory of drinking wine in *Principa Ethica* (1903): for the philosopher, physical pleasure can be derived from thinking about wine or any other imaginative act.[62] But Vita, who was probably unacquainted with Moore's doctrine, has difficulty in understanding this.

5.5.3.2. Imagery—"the bubble of affection, which is stupid and inarticulate" (*L III*, 480)

In her letters to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf also invents a series of animals for herself. For example, by considering herself as "the humble spaniel" or "the poor spaniel" (*L III*, 220), Woolf suggests her admiration for and devotion to her friend; while through the image of "a lively squirrel"—"a dear creature" with the most inquisitive habits", "nestling inside" Vita's "jersey" (*L III*, 233), Woolf conveys her affection for Vita. Similarly, in a letter written on 13 April 1926, Woolf depicts herself as one of "shabby mongrels" like her dog, Grizzle, thus expressing her affection for Vita who is travelling abroad at that time. She uses a moving and enticing image that may coax Vita into fidelity:

> But I want particularly to impress upon you the need of care in travel. Remember your dog Grizzle and your Virginia, waiting you; both rather mangy; but what of that? These shabby mongrels are always the most loving, warm hearted creatures. Grizzle and Virginia will rush down to meet you—they will lick you all over. So then, when you are tempted to folly, tremble on the brink of a precipice, sleep out on the Steppes, and so on […] remember how desolate we shall both be

[62] See chapter two.

> should you lose a hair of your head, or scratch one scratch on those lovely pillar like legs. (*L III*, 253)

Or in a letter written a little later on 22 November 1927, Woolf pictures herself as a mole:

> The poor little Mole [Virginia] died half an hour after you left: came up to snuggle: found no warmth; and so heaved once, and sighed, and was dead. Would you like the pelt kept for you? It was all very warm and cosy so long as you were here—odd that, driven and hunted as you are, you should yet be to me like a sunny patch on a hot bank. (*L III*, 440)

The image of the death of the mole conveys Woolf's mood, her loss of excitement and happiness when Vita is absent. Vita's presence or absence deeply influences Woolf's mood; for example, she writes to vita on 5 December 1927: "Oh what a tantaliser Friday night was—always a shoulder between us; damn Raymond, damn everybody. And I feel rather loving at this moment. Two poor moles born—died instantly" (*L III*, 442); while in another one written on 31 January 1928, she states: "But consider, honey—wouldn't you let me come down to you instead, and you stay quiet in bed and let me chatter to you about life in the tropics or any such subject, and you should cut my hair and lost of little moles would be born" (*L III*, 452-3). Again by employing the plural of "moles", as she does with "weevils", Woolf symbolises "the usual muddle of thoughts and spasms of feeling" (*L III*, 242) in her.

Moreover, in a letter written on 9 February 1928, Woolf conceives another animal image for herself: "But I'm longing to see you, and we could sit out in the sun; anyhow talk, talk, talk, and by the way I'm now called Bosman's Potto,[63] *not* V. W. by arrangement—A finer name, don't you think? more resonant" (*L III*, 456). And in the end of the same letter, Woolf signs herself "B. P."—"Bosman's Potto". Among other animal images, this image with the "finer" and "more resonant" name, suggests her devotion and affection, as can be seen in a letter written later in the same month:

[63] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 456, note 1: "Another name of Virginia's fantasy names for herself. A potto is a lemur."

> Here is Bosman's Potto and the Pinche Marmoset, and some other of Virginias animals—which will you keep for her till Friday.
>
> Lord! how I look forward already to seeing you again! […]
>
> Friday Vita: orange and rose, tipped with amethyst—
>
> Please see to it that its a fine day, that there's a bun for tea, a porpoise in the fishmongers. (*L III*, 462)

By imitating Vita's poetic writing and replacing the singular first-person possessive, "my", with her own name, "Virginia", Woolf not only creates a playful tone in this letter but also succeeds in embodying the animal and giving life to it: thing like all other real animals, "Potto" is a real living creature rather than merely a name or an image.

In Woolf's letters to Vita, "Potto", and its variations—"P" (*L III*, 571; *L IV*, 207) or "Pot." (*L IV*, 117), and "the Bosman's" (*L IV*, 28), "Bosman" (*L IV*, 82; *L V*, 456), or "Bosman Potto" (*L V*, 442)—becomes the main image for herself. If the image of the "mole" is female, Potto is a male animal, Vita's counterpart, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 6 March 1928: "My mind is at your service if you can us it. And Potto has a large warm heart, but then he can't write and its Virginia who writes" (*L III*, 468). This echoes Woolf's other imaginative descriptions for "Potto" in her letters: "Potto has gone out for a walk with Pinker so I cant get him to help" (*L III*, 474), or, "Is your new novel to be all about Potto? He thinks so. He is willing to help you in anyway he can. His past is full of adventure, he says; moreover the Bosman's were great people in their way, Sackvilles after a kind" (*L IV*, 28).

At the same time, in this letter, it is the first time in her correspondence with Vita, that Woolf signs herself "Yr Virginia / Potto" (*L III*, 470). Here, Woolf both separates her physical female self, "Virginia", from her spiritual male self, "Potto", and connects them, in an embodiment of the androgynous self. In other letters to Vita, Woolf goes on: "Suppose we start (you and I and Potto) on Saturday 22nd. Sleep in Paris" (*L III*, 528), "And why were you so splenetic? Haint you got Harold? So what do Potto and Virginia matters?" (*L III*, 571), "You want Potto and Virginia kept in their kennel—" (*L IV*, 10), or, "the poor man, who was sleek as a trout, merely

brushed his eyes over me, as if I, your most lovable Virginia and Potto, were pebbles at the bottom of a river" (*L V*, 174). The same sort of androgyny can also be seen in Woolf's signatures in some other letters: "Look [*squiggly design*] thats Potto: this is / Virginia" (*L III*, 472); "Yr Virginia / Woolf / Potto" (*L III*, 485), "[*squiggly design*] Potto and Virginia" (*L IV*, 21). In a letter written on 1 June 1938, Woolf implies that this sort of squiggly design can be read as the material proof of her affection for Vita: "Potto's autograph. He thinks you would like it [*squiggly design*]" (*L VI*, 232), or "Potto here licks the page in love of you [*squiggly design*]" (*L VI*, 388).

Moreover, Woolf also uses the imaginative description of this animal image to express her grateful feeling to Vita for her Christmas gift, as in a letter dated 29 December 1928:

> That wretched Potto is all slung with yellow beads.[64] He rolled himself round in them, and can't be dislodged—short of cutting off his front paws, which I know you wouldn't like. But may I say, once and for all, presents are not allowed: its written all over the cage. It spoils their tempers—They suffer for it in the long run—This once will be forgiven: but never never again— (*L III*, 568)

Like the "weevil" and "mole", this animal image is referred to in the singular before it turns plural, a change that suggests Woolf's multiple emotions. "Potto" can equally be used as an image of Woolf herself and can convey her affection for Vita: "Potto kisses you and says he could rub your back and cure it by licking" (*L IV*, 80), and, "however, now there's an end, with a soft wet warm kiss from Poor Potto" (*L IV*, 248).

In the letters written in the second part of the year 1931, "Potto", as the image of the "mole" is in other places, is used repeatedly to symbolise her affection for Vita. For example, in a letter from 25 July 1931, Woolf describes the death of Potto so as to hint at her dwindling affection for Vita:

> Yes, come at 5.30 to sign and return at 7.30 to dine. (That is a

[64] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 568, note 1: "Vita has given Virginia a string of amber beads as a Christmas present."

> poem—a lyric I think) But poetry is far from my thoughts. I have to break a sad piece of news to you.
>
> Potto is dead.
>
> For about a month (you have not been for a month and I date his decline from your last visit) I have watched him failing. First his coat lost lustre; then he refused biscuits; finally gravy. When I asked him what ailed him he sighed, but made no answer. The other day coming unexpectedly into the room, I found him wiping away a tear. He still maintained unbroken silence. Last night it was clear that the end was coming. I sat with him holding his paw in mine and felt the pulse grow feebler. At 7.45 he breathed deeply. I leant over him. I just caught and was able to distinguish the following words—"Tell Mrs Nick that I love her….She has forgotten me. But I forgive her and…. (here he cd. hardly speak) die…of…a….broken….heart!" He then expired.
>
> And so shall I very soon. Just off to spend Sunday with the Waterlows [at Oare, Wiltshire] Oh my God—my Potto.
>
> And Mrs Nick has deserted us.
>
> V. (*L IV*, 362)

Almost the whole letter consists in Woolf's imaginative description of "Potto", except the first paragraph in which Woolf indicates that this sort of description is the very prose that Woolf writes for Vita in her letters. Similarly, in a letter written on 30 July in the same year, Woolf supposedly quotes the last words of "Potto" to suggest what remains of her affection: "Potto's last wish by the way was that I should send you a jar of caviar to be eaten in his memory—so take it thus, eat. slowly. with tears" (*L IV*, 363).

However, affection can also be stirred and increased through epistolary communication, which Woolf suggests through references to the improving health of the animal, as in two letters written in August 1931: "I dont see much point in London in July with Vita, and Potto expiring. But you're right—he's not dead. I brought him here—put him on the terrace—he stirred yesterday—today he's nibbled on orris root which I happened to have by me" (*L IV*, 365), and "Potto is distinctly better" (*L IV*, 367). Finally, in a letter written at the end of 1931, Woolf hints that her affection for her friend is a thing of the past:

> Well, dearest Mrs Nick; there was once a woman called Virginia, and

> she had a small hairy animal called Potto. Does this bring anything back to mind? The sound of your lovely balmly voice coming across the marshes last night advising me to read Lady Somebodies Book—as I shall—stirred the embers of desire. […] And how happy the sound of your voice made me, coming over the fields, and lighting up the fish mongers window as it did this time how many years ago? Potto cant count after 5—so whats the good asking. (*L IV*, 420)

Potto plays here a symbolic function as it does in Woolf's letters written towards the end of 1934: for example, Woolf uses the illness of Potto to symbolise her frustrated feeling as "a mangy woman, and a tailless" on (*L V*, 342) at the end of her intimacy with Vita: "As for "forgotten"—Lor Lovaduk—the Vet said, when I showed him Potto's mangy tail "Has this animal suffered in his affections, ma'am?" Whereupon such a wail went up: and the name Nick, Mrs Nick resounded: and all the dogs barked and cats wailed. Forgotten, indeed!" (*L V*, 342) This comes back in a letter written in the end of this year: "Potto said he was drawing you a picture—3 robin red breasts against the moon—but its still unfinished. (Did you know that he has taken up art, to cure his heart? Neglect broke it. I told you didnt I, what the Vet. said)" (*L V*, 359).

If Woolf conveys her affection for Vita in her letters, by depicting Potto she concomitantly considers these various imaginative descriptions as a sort of tribute to her friend. By indicating that "Potto is the writer" (*L V*, 194), Woolf compares her letters of affection to "Potto's scrawl" (*L V*, 214), "Potto's drool" (*L VI*, 98), "Potto's kind of scratch at [Vita's] door" (*L VI*, 357); they are "an expression of faithful devotion on the part of poor dear Basman[']s Potto]" (*L V*, 456), "the bubble of affection, which is stupid and inarticulate, but risen from Potto's heart" (*L III*, 480); through them, "A thousand different varieties of love are rained upon you, like the showers from a gigantic watering pot by Virginia and Bosman" (*L IV*, 82).

Besides, while praising Vita in a letter written on 22 May 1927 to Vanessa Bell, Woolf shows that the female charm, such as Vita's, is of much greater interest to her than the male one:

> Also she has a heart of gold, and a mind which, if slow, works doggedly; and has its moments of lucidity—But enough—You will never succumb to the charms of any of your sex—What an arid garden the world must be for you! What avenues of stone pavements and iron railings! Greatly though I respect the male mind, and adore Duncan (but, thank God, he's hermaphrodite, androgynous, like all great artists) I cannot see that they have a glowworm's worth of charm about them—The scenery of the world takes no luster from their presence. They add of course immensely to its dignity and safety: but when it comes to a little excitement—! (I see that you will attribute all this to your own charms in which I daresay you're not far wrong). (*L III*, 381)

Here, Woolf states her admiration for a "hermaphrodite, androgynous" mind, such as Duncan Grant's. Such admiration can also be seen in another letter to her sister: "I can't believe your amazing stories of the Male and Female parts of the Renault. Do the French sexualise their engines? The Singer I know for a fact to be hermaphrodite, like the poet Cowper" (*L III*, 463). This letter is written on 21 February 1928; and it is exactly in this period that Woolf creates the image of "Potto": Woolf names herself as "Bosman's Potto" (*L III*, 456) for the first time in the letter written on 9 February 1928 while she defines this animal as male in the letter written on 6 March 1928.

Therefore, it seems that Woolf creates the image of Potto in an attempt to represent her own androgynous mind or emotion—like Duncan Grant's and William Cowper's—as well as a sort of androgynous or sexless writing. In that respect, Potto is clearly linked to the representation of the writer's self as sexless which can be found in her essays, such as "Indiscretions (1924)", "Anon" as well as, more famously, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Accordingly, if *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the fruit of Woolf's relationship with Vita, is a biography meant to depict the androgynous figure of her friend, it can also be considered as Woolf's account of her own experience of genderlessness.

5.5.4. Ethel Smyth

5.5.4.1. Ethel Smyth—"a red sun I could see and feel hot through the mist" (*L VI*, 66)

In Woolf's letters to other addressees, Ethel Smyth is compared to "a wolf on the fold in purple and gold, terrifically strident and enthusiastic" (*L IV*, 146), "a giant crab" (*L IV*, 171) or " that great crab […] pertinaciously gripping [their] toes" (*L IV*, 182), "that old seamonster encrusted with barnacles" (*L IV*, 247), "a game old Bird" (*L IV*, 257) or "a game old cock" (*L IV*, 277), "a dragoon" with "red hot egotism" (*L IV*, 334) like "fire" (*L IV*, 337), "a circulating thunderstorm" "whirl[ing] round" people (*L IV*, 365), "a plague of locusts […] fine, vigorous insects" (*L V*, 146), "that old wild cat" (*L V*, 159), "a thrush—hammer, hammer, hammer" "crack[ing]" "a snail" (*L V*, 160), "a buccaneer" "so deaf", "so violent", "very shrewd", "batter[ing] about the world" (*L V*, 259), "that old sea dog" (*L V*, 286), "that old Brigadier" (*L V*, 346), as well as "a termagant"—"that magnificent oak" (*L VI*, 120). Through these various images for Ethel Smyth, Woolf not only depicts her friend's character, as both "the most ingrained egotist" (*L V*, 291) and "a suffragist" (*L V*, 272), a "Poor old struggler" (*L V*, 312), who, however, "boil[s] over with a kind of effervescence of force" (*L IV*, 425), "energies" (*L V*, 273), "vigorous charm" (*L V*, 227), and braveness; but also conveys her own "powerless" (*L IV*, 337) feeling, "so badgered" (*L V*, 414) by her friend that "I say I'm like the Balfour, silent, submarine, profound, whereas the Smyths are foam and flurry on the surface" (*L IV*, 425).

While in her letters to Ethel Smyth, Woolf compares her friend to an uncastrated cat:

> No Ethel, dear, no; I didnt make my meaning plain. I wasnt alluding to any particular instance, of misunderstanding, so much as to the general impossibility, which overcomes me sometimes, of *any* understanding between two people. This instance—your behaviour about critics and your music—doesnt seem to me of importance. That is, if I give my mind seriously to it for five minutes—a thing I seldom to—I can imagine, by imagining you as a whole,—with all your outriders and trembling thickets of personality, exactly why you do it; and

> sympathise; and admire; and feel the oddest mixture of admiration and pity and championship such as I used to feel for a white tailless cat of ours which we forgot to have castrated. This superb brute used to spend his nights fighting; and at last got so many wounds that they wouldnt heal; and he had to be put out of life by a vet. And I respected him; and I respect you. (*L IV*, 328-9)

This animal—"the indomitable and uncastrated cat" (*L IV*, 329-30), "the poor cat—oh no I mean the happy the hirsute, the erect, the brindling and bristling cat—in fact the hedgehog" (*L IV*, 354), "the dripping cat, the uncastrated cat, the fighting indomitable cat" (*L IV*, 361), "the valiant uncastrated cat with the unhealed wound" (*L IV*, 407), one of "some wild cats, un castrated and entire" (*L IV*, 422), "my old uncastrated wild cat" (*L V*, 89), or "the most crossgrained, green eyed, cantankerous, grudging, exacting cat or cassowary" (*L V*, 314)—then becomes Woolf's image for Ethel Smyth. Though Woolf is unable to understand this violent element in Ethel Smyth's character and disapproves, for example, of her raging protest against the underestimation of her music, she "respect[s]" her.

Actually, in her letters to Ethel Smyth, Woolf harps on the difference between their characters, for example, in a letter from 25 October 1933: "Only I should put it that we are hopelessly and incorrigibly different, not right or wrong. So choose for yourself. But I admit I'm on edge and loathe these bickerings—these personalities" (*L V*, 237). Considering herself as representing the reserved side of Ethel Smyth's character—"I'm the very opposite—Lord how opposite!" (*L V*, 236), Woolf gives a full description of Ethel Smyth's personality in a letter written on 26 February 1934:

> I think Ethel Smyths the most attitudinising unreal woman I've ever known—living in a mid Victorian dentists waiting room of emotional falsity—likes beating up quarrels for the sake of dramatising herself, enjoys publicity and titles from universities and Kings, surrounded by flatterers, a swallower of falsehoods, why should I stand this manhandling, this bawling this bullying, this malusage? When I've friends that respect me and love me and treat me honestly generously and according to the fair light of day? Why pray why cowtow to the bragging of a Brigadier Generals daughter? Why? (*L V*, 270)

Though Woolf, when writing to Vita Sackville-West, shows that: "It is very difficult to be intimate with such a blazing egotist—the flames shrivel one up" (*L IV*, 272), she appreciates and likes Ethel Smyth: "On the whole—here comes a whopping whale of compliment, so make ready—I prefer Ethel with all her faults" (*L V*, 313). Woolf both "respect[s]" and "admire[s]" (*L V*, 146) such an original character as Ethel Smyth: in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf shows: "I respect her to the point of idolatry" (*L IV*, 257), while when writing to Ethel Smyth herself, she states: "I have the highest admiration for you besides affection" (*L V*, 82).

First of all, considering herself as "a don's daughter from Cambridge" while Ethel Smyth is "a General's daughter from Aldershot" (*L IV*, 327), "the daughter of an officer" (*L IV*, 241), a "soldiers daughter" (*L IV*, 332),[65] Woolf actually values such a lineage in Ethel Smyth: "Lord, what a wild psychologist you are—how random, how violent: but then thats part of being an uncastrated cat, and a generals daughter—which I like: so I dont complain; only marvel admire, and shout with laughter over your letter" (*L V*, 218). On the one hand, she admires her friend's capacity as an "uncastrated cat" in her music: "your military descent must account for the dominating masterful energy with which you vanquished even those who agree with you" (*L V*, 97). Though, here, this "great compliment" is conveyed by Woolf through reporting Maynard Keynes's utterance (*L V*, 97), such an appreciation of Ethel Smyth's power of control and command in music can also be seen in Woolf's words. For example, in a letter written on 26 May 1930, Woolf, by comparing Ethel Smyth to "a rose"—"this red burning centre"—while listening to her concert, depicts her addressee as a master of music:

> If only I weren't a writer, perhaps I could thank you and praise you and admire you perfectly simply and expressively and say in one word what I felt about the Concert yesterday. As it is, and image forms in my mind; a quickset briar hedge, innumerably intricate and spiky and thorned; in the centre burns a rose. Miraculously, the rose is you; flushed pink, wearing pearls. The thorn hedge is the music; and I have

[65] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 241, note 1: "Ethel's father, John Smyth, was a Major-General."

> to break my way through violins, flutes, cymbals, voices to this red burning centre. […] I am enthralled that you, the dominant and superb, should have this tremor and vibration of fire round you—violins flickering, flutes purring; (the image is of a winter hedge)—that you should be able to create this world from your centre. (*L IV*, 171-2)

Woolf not only admires this quality of Ethel Smyth in her music, "Lord—what a complexity the soul is!", but also envies her artistic life: "*Thats* what I call living; thats the quality I would give my eyes to possess" (*L IV*, 172).

On the other hand, Woolf also appreciates Ethel Smyth's "military" "energy" and appetite for life:

> I've been gathering, partly from your handwriting, that you aren't as I last saw you—a Rose in June—the day I waved my hand at your valiant back. Lord how I admire you! Leonard showed me a tiny snapshot of you in some paper: […] There she sat, with her little bow tie and her great forehead, my uncastrated cat, challenging the world, yet divinely compassionate of its (so to speak my) infirmities. (*L VI*, 439)

Such a character of Ethel Smyth includes her being "indomitable" (*L IV*, 146), her "uncautiousness" (*L IV*, 303), her "violences"—"part of your virtues" (*L V*, 86), her "d——d rashness" (*L V*, 126-7), as well as her "courage":

> What I would like to say, is how brave I think you. Why do I think so? When? At the dead of last night being sleepless I thought of you with a clap of admiration, exercising the puppy, writing the book—thought of you as a little tossing tug boat might think of a majestic sea going white-spread, fountain-attended dolphin-encircled ship—forging on and on. And I whip and tumble in your foam. Now I believe courage to be the greatest of human virtues, and the only gift we can impart. Do you sometimes think that […] that life is of a hardness that still fairly terrifies me. (*L VI*, 111)

Their opposite characters—"We are both extreme in character" (*L V*, 85)—might not only cause "some incompatibility" (*L V*, 81, 85), a sort of "quarrel", or "misunderstandings" (*L V*, 85), but also "put great difficulties in the way of

intercourse" or "prevent from intimacy" (*L IV*, 353). Nevertheless, as this quotation shows, Woolf needs such a different person in her life. Moreover, in Woolf's own eye, it is also this difference that unites them, as she shows in other letters to Ethel Smyth: "I recognise differences—always have—but I dont let them separate; in fact, so contrary are human souls, they serve to ally. I dont require a repetition of V. W.—not at all: what I want is a contradiction" (*L V*, 293), "Our minds are too entirely and integrally different: which is why we get on" (*L V*, 384), or, "So we approach, you and I, from different points of the compass" (*L VI*, 267).

Woolf also admires and needs Ethel Smyth's "sanity", as she shows in a letter written on 15 August 1930:

> But loving lights, pillows, and all luxury as I do, aesthetically largely, and often merely spectacularly, for I never acquire possessions myself, you, if I were ill, would be as soothing; no, not that; perhaps supporting would be the better word. Sanity is what I want. A robust sense of fact. Well, wouldn't you give me that? Haven't you—anyhow to my sense, warred with the world sufficiently to have made intervals of peace? (*L I*, 199)

This admiration for Ethel Smyth's sense of fact, which Woolf thinks she herself lacks, recurs in Woolf's letters to her friend: "Only you, being so damned practical, for ever seek for understanding; and I, in whom Cambridge has bred a large measure of unalloyed melancholy, never look for it now" (*L IV*, 327). In a letter written on 16 February 1931, Woolf praises this virtue in Ethel Smyth: "I should like to see somebody sane, wearing white cuffs, somebody frightfully intent on whats said. Thats a quality of yours—attentiveness: you respect facts, if I said its 6; you wd. confirm this by looking at your watch" (*L IV*, 291); and in a letter dated 11 March 1931, she repeats her appreciation: "(And without exaggeration you dont know how I have honoured and respected you—come, oddly, to depend upon your sanity)" and "But I venture it, trusting in your sanity as I do: and because of what I call my respect for you" (*L IV*, 298); again, in a letter written on 4 March 1932, she states: "Heavens how I admired your practical sense: typical of so much: the taxi; the dr: the pincers: the

splinter out: mushrooms and champagne" (*L V*, 29).

Moreover, if Woolf is sensitive to besides Ethel Smyth's "sheer force of honesty" (*L II*, 405) and " candid smile" (*L VI*, 332), she is also aware of her her "morbid curiosity" (*L V*, 94), and notices her being "shabby as a washerwoman" (*L IV*, 146). In a letter written on 16 July 1930 to her friend, Woolf also praises her perceptiveness and maternal kindness:

> But in your benignity and perspicacity—its odds how the image of the soaring aeroplane seeing to the bottom persists—you can penetrate my stumbling and fitful ways: my childish chatter. Yes—for that reason, that you see through, yet kindly, for you are, I believe, one of the kindest of women, one of the best balanced, with that maternal quality which of all others I need and adore—what was I saying?—for that reason I chatter faster and freer to you than to other people. (*L IV*, 188)

Ethel Smyth, with her "supernatural apprehensiveness" (*L IV*, 280) and her "insight" (*L IV*, 393), gives Woolf a feeling of freedom and brings about a form of sympathy in their talk, their letter writing, as well as their relationship. Her "maternal quality" also gives Woolf who has "formed this limpet childish attachment […]—wanting Ethel—" (*L V*, 29), a feeling of security, as can be seen in a letter written on 1 April 1931:

> No: what you give me is protection, so far as I am capable of it. I look at you and (being blind to most things except violent impressions) think if Ethel can be so downright and plainspoken and on the spot, I need not fear instant dismemberment by wild horses. Its the child crying for the nurses hand in the dark. You do it by being so uninhibited: so magnificently unself-conscious. This is what people pay £ 20 a sitting to get from Psycho-analysts—liberation from their own egotism. Never mind now—here's Vita coming like a ship in full sail. I think you're right—we all cry for nurses hand. (*L IV*, 302)

Reading through Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth, we cannot help noticing Woolf's desire to store all these aspects of her friend's character, which represent "that beaming Shakespearian character" (*L VI*, 26). In order to create her visionary

version of Ethel Smyth, Woolf, first of all, asks her friend for letters of facts:

> For what other purpose than to write letters to me brim full of amusement and excitement were you gifted with a pen like a steak of hounds in full scent? And the odds and ends you stuff in the better I like it, for I have a habit of making you up in bed at night. Lets imagine Ethel Smyth, I say to myself. We will begin with the servant bringing in the breakfast etc etc. (*L IV*, 151)

At the same time, Woolf tries to reconstruct Ethel Smyth's past from reading her friend's other letters and diaries, as she shows in another letter:

> I can tell you though, that I'm building up one of the oddest, most air hung pageants of you and your life; indeed this friendship […] is one of the strangest aesthetic experiences I have ever had; […] you see, I evolve you and your life and your friends and your whole tremendous intricacy backwards, from letters and diaries; since we were so ill advised as to live many years without contact. (*L IV*, 214)

Not only can Woolf draw Ethel Smyth's character from her writing but also from music, as she shows in a letter written on 26 May 1930: "I had read a good deal of this years ago in your books, and now I begin to read it and other oddities and revelations too in your music. It will take a long time not merely because I am musically so feeble, but because all my faculties are so industriously bringing in news of so many Ethels at the same moment" (*L IV*, 172).

Woolf's memories, even if unrelated to Ethel, are also a valuable source for her vision, as can be seen in a letter from 26 May 1932:

> Well Ethel dear this is very sad—that you're not with me at this moment but hitting some ball about on a cold grey lawn. Do you dress in white?— Do you wear a little straw hat with a blue ribbon, and a blouse fastened by a dragon fly in turquoises? Those are my ancient views of lawn tennis seen over a paling in Cornwall 30 years ago. But enough of these recollections. (*L V*, 66-7)

Moreover, some real sight of Ethel Smyth can itself become a sort of vision in

Woolf's memory, as she shows in a letter written on 30 October 1930:

> Well, I'm glad you caught your train. The guard said to me "She'll drop dead if she tries"—and I'm pleased that you did run, did not drop dead, and did catch the train. It seems to me marvelously gallant and efficient and sensible, as befits the daughter of an officer, and a good omen for the Prison. Its odd how little scenes like that suddenly illumine wherever one may be—Waterloo station. I could swear a ring of lights surrounded you me and the guard for one tenth of a second. (*L IV*, 241)

Woolf can also use her imaginative power to create her vision: "Well, what are you doing? I suppose Rottingdean is over; and you are back at Woking, carrying on the mysterious existence which I make up sometimes, in spite of the truth of your saying that I know less about human nature than anyone you ever met" (*L IV*, 159). At the time of her correspondence with Ethel Smyth, such a playful "habit" (*L IV*, 151) of Woolf has already become well-known: "Well, I wont begin on you and Vanessa, or I should draw some of those fancy pictures for which I am so famous—(a joke—if I had any red ink, I would write my jokes in it, so that even certain musicians—ahem!)" (*L IV*, 168) She can easily "sketch a fancy picture of a third class smoker from Woking to Waterloo. There Ethel between 2 city gents" (*L IV*, 192).

Woolf's vision of Ethel Smyth in her own house can easily be provoked by her friend's gift, as Woolf shows in a letter dated 18 and 19 June 1932:

> Yes Ethel, I was deeply touched by thinking of your picking pinks for me—[…] Isnt it odd what romance certain scenes hold of one—you this hot evening in your garden. picking pinks. Its the thought of the evening, and me coming in at the door, and shelling peas with you and the pinks smelling, and then a little dinner in the fading light Please if ever I come again, dont meet me—I meant to tell you this—but let me find you among your things—you cant think what a shock of emotion it gives me—seeing people among their things—I've lost such scenes in my head; the whole of life presented—the other persons life—for 10 seconds; and then it goes; and comes again; so next time dont meet me. (*L V*, 70)

Vision can also be stirred by thought and emerge in Woolf's mind's eye through a sort of pure fancy, for example, in a letter written on 22 August 1933:

> I wish I knew the geography of the British Isles. I dont at once visualise Hebrides, Skye, and the rest. I only see a black blot in mid air which is you, astride an aeroplane; firmly grasping a rail, keenly envisaging the seascape; and completely master of your feet and faculties. I daresay you drop down upon a British fortress and drink rum with the officers. Do they think you a jolly good fellow? Are you always moving on? Do you ever think?—read?—or are you dazed, as I am in the car, when we drive, and drive and drive, and my mind is a long peaceful smudge? (*L V*, 218)

Woolf considers that her different visions of Ethel Smyth—seeing "so many Ethels at the same moment" (*L IV*, 172)—make up as "one of the strangest aesthetic experiences" (*L IV*, 214) of their friendship:

> Only I must one day explain how oddly my visual sense kept tricking me that night. Ethels 18: Ethels 30: Ethels someone, noble and austere, I've never known—all this as you sat in the light of the single candle and logs fire. And thus pulped, my emotions became like so many strange guests: as if chapter after chapter of your life, panel after panel of your psychology were opening and shutting in the twilight. But why try to explain? (*L IV*, 205)

However these visions are different from one another in Woolf's imaginative world. There, the ghost of Ethel Smyth is always encircled with a sort of light, such as that of "the single candle and logs fire", or Ethel Smyth is a ghost of light: "I rather count upon your presence on the earth—your effluence, even if I dont come within the actual ray" (*L VI*, 332), or, "Extend your lighthouse Beam over this dark spot and tell me what you see" (*L VI*, 466). Moreover, in a letter written on 22 August 1936, Woolf compares Ethel Smyth to the sun: "Anyhow, lying in bed, or listlessly turning books I could hardly read, over and over again I've thought of you; and dwelt on your affection […] as if it were a red sun I could see and feel hot through the mist" (*L VI*, 66). With this image of light and warmth, Woolf hints at the importance of her

relationship with Ethel Smyth in her own life. This is in keeping with Woolf's other expressions of this friendship in her letters to Ethel Smyth: for example, "Ethels one of my kind keepers. I was awake in the night; suddenly terrified and laid hold of you, like a log" (*L IV*, 208), "for really I find your atmosphere full of ozone; a necessary element" (*L V*, 2), "I say, live, live, and let me fasten myself upon you, and fill my veins with charity and champagne" (*L V*, 29).

5.5.4.2. Imagery, "with its recurring rhythm, and visual emblem", as the most masterful technique in "the art of letters" (*L V*, 423)

According to the two letters dated March and May 1930 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf becomes "famous" (*L IV*, 168) for her "habit" (*L IV*, 151) of describing imaginatively her addressees in her letters. In a letter to Vita Sackville-West written on 2 July 1934, Woolf considers that the vision she created of and for Vita--"so spontaneous, universal, and full of deep feeling" (*L V*, 312), is the most triumphant skill in writing. Similarly, in Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth, we can see that images and metaphors become more natural, so as to suggest a sort of a common ideal or a general truth.

Meanwhile, as Woolf shows in her letters to Ethel Smyth, Ethel Smyth is "a miracle of psychological acuteness" (*L IV*, 374) and "a wild psychologist" (*L V*, 218), who, "being so terrifically psychologically minded", not only "like[s] the analysis […] of sensations" (*L IV*, 183), but also "think[s] [herself] such a fine psychologist" (*L IV*, 374) and "boast[s] [her own] psychological genius" (*L VI*, 185). For Woolf, Ethel Smyth possesses a sort of "morbid curiosity" (*L V*, 94) and "competent fact demanding fingers" (*L V*, 172). In their correspondence, Woolf considers her friend as "a magpie" (*L IV*, 199) and compares her self-analysis, such as the one she develops in a letter written on 15 August 1930, to an offerings to this bird: "As it is a pouring wet afternoon, I will write a few disjected observations, like offerings to a magpie. (These birds make their nests of straw, hair-combings, and other things that have been thrown away.) Ethels great grandmother on the paternal side was a Magpie" (*L IV*, 199). At the same time, when taking into account Ethel Smyth's analysis of her own

psychology, Woolf feels utterly humiliated and at the other's mercy, "like a mouse pinned out on a board for dissection" (*L IV*, 168). But she considers the analyses she makes of herself in her letters to Ethel Smyth as a form of "liberation from [her] egotism", the sort people "get from Psycho-analysts" (*L IV*, 302).

In her letters to Ethel Smyth, Woolf's criticism about writing—her own and the others'—, her statements about their relationship and her affection for her addressee are still the main subjects, as in her letters to other addressees. However, in this case, Woolf's self-depiction occupies an overwhelming space; so do the images and metaphors used to describe herself. For example, first of all, in a letter written on 28 December 1932, Woolf uses a metaphor to voice her opinion of Lady Radnor's memoirs, *From a Great-Grandmother's Armchair* (1927):[66]

> And do you remember Lady Radnor, a vast stout woman, who had you to lunch in Venice, so she says; and did she sing well; and what was the truth of her—her memoirs are mostly lies, but only because a pen is to her what a tassel is to a blind Arabian mare on Tuesday morning in the desert. Guess what I mean—surely I must mean something? (*L V*, 141)

The comic of the metaphor suggests that Lady Radnor's writing is aimless, deprived of skill, and perfectly grotesque. If Woolf's metaphors concerning literature are used in her letters to Vita to test her literary sensibility, here, they become a sort of game or riddle. At times, Woolf plays this game with Ethel Smyth to convey her affection for her friend and avoid being sentimental, as she does in a letter written on 18 June 1936: "You see I've no news, and not much fluency, and not much play of mind, but if you could see my heart it would be like a gold pincushion glowing with love. The words E…L.S.th [Ethel Smyth] are traced there; can you interpret the meaning?" (*L VI*, 48)

Similarly, in a letter dated 10 August 1935, Woolf uses a metaphor to depict her friendship with Ethel Smyth:

> Well, aint it odd, how, a mere four year old like you—for it is now

[66] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 141, note 2.

> precisely four years since you caught me a cuff over the head for telling you—[…]—aint it odd how free and easy we are together: and what pains over your heart is like a breeze over corn in mine. Now any critic, anyone trained in the art of letters at Cambridge, like your friend Peter Lucas, could tell from that last sentence, with its recurring rhythm, and visual emblem—why dont they make me Prof. of English—I'd teach em—would know from that sentence that I've just come in from a long hot walk over the downs and sat by myself in a cornfield. (*L V*, 423)

With the poetic image of the breeze over corn, Woolf turns the abstract note of sympathy in their friendship into a poetic and visual image, whose movement can be touched and watched. Woolf not only points out, at the end of this passage, that real life is the source of such a metaphor, but also considers that imagery is a masterful technique in "the art of letters".

Moreover, in a letter written on 26 November 1935, Woolf shows how imagery affects her while writing about it:

> Haven't I been good in respecting the furies of literary composition? Silence has dropped its mantle between us; and thats the greatest homage I can pay you. As a matter of fact though I did write, and was interrupted, and so sickened of the faded sheet, and thereupon invented this theory to justify myself, and became so enamoured with my image of the mantle of silence that I inhibited my own pen. What a thing it is to be a writer—to be so susceptible to one's own words that all ones instincts lie flat at their command, like sheep under a cloud: a fact which I think I've observed on the marshes at Rodmell. But no one respects my furies of composition. (*L V*, 446)

Woolf's "silence" in their epistolary talk was a way for her not to interrupt Ethel Smyth while she was writing her autobiographical volume, *As Time Went On* (1936). Woolf uses the image of the mantle of silence, an object that gives shape to this phenomenon. Writing about such an image, Woolf indicates that she is not only dazed but also controlled by it: that is, though an inventor of the image, Woolf becomes passive; the image not only provokes a strong emotion in her, but also controls and dominates her writing.

Apart from thoughts and scenes, images and metaphors can describe the creative process. For example, in a letter written on 28 September 1930, Woolf resorts to the metaphor of the diver and the fishing net to refer to the writer and the writing process:

> […] and I wrote this morning; and then took one of Leonards large white pocket handkerchiefs and climbed Asheham hill and lost a green glove and found 10 mushrooms, which I shall ear in bed tomorrow, with bacon, toast and hot coffee. I shall get a letter from Ethel. I shall moon slowly dressing; shall loiter talking, shall hear about the funeral of our [Rodmell] epileptic, Tom Fears, who dropped dead after dinner on Thursday; shall smell a red rose; shall gently surge across the lawn (I move as if I carried a basket of eggs on my head) light a cigarette, take my writing board on my knee; and let myself down, like a diver, very cautiously into the last sentence I wrote yesterday. Then perhaps after 20 minutes, or it may be more, I shall see a light in the depths of the sea, and stealthily approach—for one's sentences are only an approximation, a net one flings over some sea pearl which may vanish; and if one brings it up it wont be anything like what it was when I saw it, under the sea. Now these are the great excitements of life. (*L IV*, 223)

Similarly, shows in a letter from 22 December 1932, Woolf resorts to metaphors to convey her appetite for reading and her taste for the reading process itself: "I'm reading 20 books at once—masses of books—and feel like a walrus taking to the sea—so vast, so calm, so indifferent, with the whole Atlantic to wallow in—but that's an illusion because the Keynes's will be over: then the Gages; then the Bells: and the poor Walrus will climb on to its rock and bark—" (*L V*, 137).

Metaphors can be used to present Woolf's state of being in her London life: for example, in a letter written on 26 May 1932, London is compared to a "blazing cauldron" while she is herself but a "damnable whirled dead leaf blown by in an invisible sandstorm" (*L V*, 67). They can also present one of Woolf's moods, as she shows in a letter written on 2 August 1930: "Well it is extremely difficult to write letters here [*Monks House*]. One goes off, I find, into a kind of swoon; becomes languid as an alligator with only its nostrils above water. London keeps one braced;

take away the tension and ones mind opens like a flower, or an old glove, in water" (*L IV*, 194-5). The finest metaphors in her letters to Ethel Smyth come out when Woolf describes her feelings about herself, as she does in a letter written on 19 August 1930:

> "I dont suppose I am really very fond of anyone"
> I woke up in the night and said "But I am the most passionate of women. Take away my affections and I should be like sea weed out of water; like the shell of a crab, like a husk. All my entrails, light, marrow, juice, pulp would be gone. I should be blown into the first puddle and drown. Take away my love for my friends and my burning and pressing sense of the importance and lovability and curiosity of human life and I should be nothing but a membrane, a fibre, uncoloured, lifeless to be thrown away like any other excreta. Then what did I mean when I said to Ethel "I dont suppose I am really very fond of anyone"?" (*L IV*, 202-3)

Conclusion

Multiple and varied, images are certainly the main characteristic of Woolf's figurative language. With brief, intense phrases, Woolf not only attempts to describe people's characters, to "hit every bird through the head" (*L III*, 439), as an arrow does, but also aims to suggest her own emotions. This suggestive method is in keeping with Woolf's art of impersonality. Her images, mainly borrowed from non-human entities—solid objects, nature or animals—materialise abstract ideas and emotion while creating an intimate space between the writer and her readers in her own language. For Woolf, figurative language can not only stir the readers' emotions, but also resonate in their minds, as she shows in *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "And when a book lacks suggestive power, however hard it hits the surface of the mind it cannot penetrate within" (*AROO*, 97-8). This symbolical language is what Woolf admires in Aeschylus's plays[67] or in John Keats's poetry, as she shows in a letter

[67] See chapter four.

dated 30 December 1906 to Violet Dickinson: "I have been reading Keats most of the day. I think he is about the greatest of all—and no d——d humanity. I like cool Greek Gods, and amber skies, and shadow like running water, and all his great palpable words—symbols for immaterial things. O isn't this nonsense?" (*L I*, 273)

Woolf's style of imagery can also be compared to the technique Emily Dickinson aims to master in her writing. In his analysis of Emily Dickinson's prose writing in her letters, Robert Graham Lambert notes that: "If anything, her earliest attempts at metaphor show that genius must be developed as well as inherited"; but he also states: "Her puns, her metaphors and images are but promising pledges of greater artistry. They reveal a knack, conceal a genius."[68] While reading Emily Dickinson's letters, Harold Nicolson remarks, in a letter written on 10 October 1934 to Vita Sackville-West, that "[s]he is Virginia [Woolf] in 1860":

> Yet my admiration for her mind and personality throbs through this routine treatment. I know why it is. She is Virginia [Woolf] in 1860. "Then," she writes to Colonel T. W. Higginson, "there is a noiseless noise in the orchard which I let persons hear." "And so much lighter than day was it," she writes to Louisa Norcross, "that I saw a caterpillar measure a leaf down in the orchard… It seemed like a theatre, or a night in London, or perhaps like chaos." This was when a barn burnt at Amherst. But it is all superb, and gives me the excitement and increased awareness that Virginia gives. Has she read the book? Has she written about Emily Dickinson? Ask her. It is exactly her subject. Beg her to do an article. Really, darling, if there is such a thing as genius as definitive and recognisable as a cigar lighter—then this frail ugly little trout possessed it. "I am no portrait," she writes, "but am small like a wren; and my eyes, like the sherry that the guest leaves in a glass." That is superb. The whole little frail egoist is superb.[69]

Woolf's use of imagery seems to fit T. S. Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative" as defined in "Hamlet and His Problems" (1921).[70] Eliot refuses to accept

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[68] Robert Graham Lambert, Jr. *The Prose of a Poet: A Critical Study of Emily Dickinson's Letters.* University of Pittsburgh, 1968, p. 9, 14.
[69] Vita Sackville-West, and Harold Nicolson. *Vita and Harold: The Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1992: p. 264.
[70] T. S. Eliot. "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921: p. 87-94.

Hamlet as Shakespeare's masterpiece since he thinks that there is no relationship between the hero's personal emotions and the external world. This crucial element that Shakespeare's work lacks is what Eliot calls an "objective correlative":

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. […] The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*.[71]

Eliot points out that it is only through an "objective correlative" that the artist can accomplish his artistic ambition. By using symbolic images, scenes, events, literary allusions and quotations, as vehicles for his emotions, the artist can allow his creativity to develop, and give his words multiple meanings.

For Eliot, a mature artist should reconcile his irregular, natural emotions with his art, by putting his emotions into his work in a controlled and ordered fashion. By employing a series of changeable, flexible and multivalent symbols, the artist is able to transform his personal emotions into ordinary, impersonal ones. With such a technique, the artist can successfully convey his ideas about the purpose of writing, cultural criticism, human beings and philosophical thought. However, Eliot argues that Shakespeare doesn't balance his own emotions and his symbolic referents in *Hamlet*; Shakespeare's personality is too overpowering and intrudes upon the artistic composition. According to Eliot, this is Shakespeare's main artistic failure. Obviously, the "objective correlative" appears throughout Eliot's own writing, for example, *The Waste Land*. In this work, Eliot uses plenty of literary allusions to, or direct quotations from, other authors' works, such as Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Marvell and Baudelaire. In addition to these allusions, the five parts of the poem, "The Burial of the Dead", "A Game of Chess", "The Fire Sermon", "Death by Water" and "What the Thunder Said", offer evocative imagery and vivid symbols in order to suggest the

[71] T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," p. 92.

cultural collapse and spiritual sterility. The "objective correlative" certainly complicates the form of his poem, but it also endows the poem's imagery with flexible, overlapping meanings.

Moreover, Woolf's technique of imagery seems to echoe another concept of Eliot's the concept of impersonal art—"an escape from emotion" in "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)":[72] by using "an objective correlative", the artist conveys a universal, impersonal idea rather than a particular, personal one. By using imagery, which results from a sort of emotional intensity, Woolf succeeds in distancing herself so as to control her intense feelings and then escape them by a stylised formalisation of imaginative expression. At the same time, in terms of form and function, Woolf's imagery belongs to those transparent sentences—the intense sentences that Woolf regards as "a dash of white fire" in Cowper's poetry.

[72] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919)," p. 52. See also chapter three.

Chapter Six: Woolf's style of "central transparency" (II): Letters of soliloquy: Descriptive facts and "[T]he poetic speech" (*L V*, 103)

Introduction

Letter 1613, dated 26 January 1926, is the first of the eight preserved letters (Letters 1613, 1617, 1618, 1621, 1622, 1624, 1626 and 1628) written during Vita Sackville-West's first travel to Persia in the first four months of 1926, and it begins with Woolf's disappointment with Vita's inability to understand her imaginative descriptions—"Lovely phrases"—for her friend in the previous letters:

> Your letter from Trieste came this morning—But why do you think I don't feel, or that I make phrases? "Lovely phrases" you say which rob things of reality. Just the opposite. Always, always, always I try to say what I feel. Will you then believe that after you went last Tuesday—exactly a week ago—out I went into the slums of Bloomsbury, to find a barrel organ. But it did not make me cheerful. Also I bought the Daily Mail—but the picture is not very hopeful. And ever since, nothing important has happened—Somehow its dull and damp. I have been dull; I have missed you. I do miss you. I shall miss you. And if you don't believe it, you're a longeared owl and ass. Lovely phrases? (*L III*, 231)

In the first paragraph of this letter, by describing herself as a miserable human being with a lonely life in dismal Bloomsbury on Vita's departure day, Woolf tries to counter her addressee's opinion of "Lovely phrases". As we have seen earlier, the act of making up visions of Vita imparts the importance and meaning of Vita in Woolf's life: Vita can give Woolf pleasure and relieve her from agony in daily life. At the same time, it reveals Woolf's affection for Vita: it is her intense feeling for Vita that gives birth to such visions in her. And, writing about visions not only gives Woolf pleasure but it is also her way to express her affection. These four connected ideas contained in her imaginative descriptions belong to the "reality" that Woolf wants her friend to obtain while reading her letters.

In the eight letters to Vita, Woolf tries to explain the significance of her imaginative descriptions: for example, in Letter 1617, written five days later, on 31 January, Woolf writes: "After all, what is a lovely phrase? One that has mopped up as

much Truth as it can hold" (*L III*, 237). In two letters written respectively on 1 March and 13 April—Letter 1622 and Letter 1628, while criticising Vita's manuscripts of *The Land* (1927), Woolf tries to explain that those imaginative descriptions belong to the transparent sentences, which are absent from Vita's poem and are beyond Vita's understanding; they are the very sentences "humanised" by the writer so as to intensify her emotion and outline her idea: "a little central transparency: Some sudden intensity" (*L III*, 244) and "a human focus in the middle" (*L III*, 253). Moreover, in a letter written on 18 February 1927 while Vita goes to Persia for the second time, this sort of sentence is again considered as "a dash of white fire" (*L III*, 333), with which Woolf praises William Cowper's poem, *The Task* (1785).

In the same letters, Woolf changes her method of writing: she tries to make both her life and herself transparent so as to get intimacy from her friend; she tries to destroy Vita's "standoffishness" (*L III*, 233) while achieving "kindness" (*L III*, 233). According to Nigel Nicolson, this change is one of the literary stimuli that resulted from their relationship.[1] Another major change concerns the type of discourse she uses. If in her letters to Jacques Raverat, Woolf uses monologues so as to entertain her addressee while he is dying, here, writing to Vita, it is through the use of dramatic speech or soliloquy that Woolf attempts to present her life and reveal herself.

On the one hand, Woolf admires Vita's writing: for example, reading *Seducers in Ecuador* (1924), she shows that the "texture" with a sort of "beauty in itself when nothing is happening—nevertheless such interesting things do happen, so suddenly—barely too", its "obscurity", as well as "the beauty and fantasticality of the details" (*L III*, 131), inspires her: "I like the story very very much—[…] being full of a particular kind of interest which I daresay has something to do with its being the sort of thing I should like to write myself" (*L III*, 131), and "I felt rather spirited by your story, and wrote a lot—300 words—perhaps, this morning" (*L III*, 132). Similarly, in *Passenger to Teheran* (1926) Woolf appreciates Vita's "subtleties" and considers the "dim places", such as "nooks and corners", as "a delicious method", which endows

[1] Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. xxi.

the book with "fresh, unfadedness" (*L III*, 290-1). Through dramatic speech, Woolf attempts to invent her own original, obscure method to represent different facets of her life so as entice her addressee. On the other hand, in these letters of soliloquy, it seems that Woolf tries to develop a further level of soliloquy—a sort of "poetic speech"—in order to make herself, her thoughts and her emotions, transparent. Both sorts of soliloquies—dramatic speech and poetic speech—might be considered as Woolf's challenge to the conventional methods of fictional writing and characterisation; but most importantly, it can be regarded as Woolf's style of "central transparency".

Therefore, by mainly discussing the eight letters to Vita, this chapter will explore how Woolf develops two sorts of soliloquies—dramatic speech about facts and "poetic speech"—so as to present her daily life and reveal herself through letter writing. At the same time, the discussion will also try to analyse how Woolf constructs these letters with her own style of "central transparency".

6.1. The technique of descriptive facts

6.1.1. Descriptive facts: "without saying things" (*L III*, 199)

6.1.1.1. "[D]omesticity" (*L III*, 231)

After a short recollection and a failed attempt to imagine Vita's travel in the second paragraph in Letter 1613, the dramatic speech immediately focuses on "the present":

> But we'll leave that, and concentrate upon the present. What have I done? Imagine a poor wretch sent back to school. I have been very industrious, no oranges picked off the top of a Christmas tree; no glittering bulbs. For one thing, you must have disorganised my domesticity, so that directly you went, a torrent of duties discharged themselves on top of me: you cant think how many mattresses and blankets new sheets pillowcases, petticoats and dustpans I haven't had to buy. People say one can run out to Heals and buy a mattress: I tell you it ruins a day; 2 days: 3 days—Every time I get inside a shop all

> the dust in my soul rises, and how can I write next day? Moreover, somehow my incompetence, and shopkeepers not believing in me, harasses me into a nagging harpy. At last, at last,—but why should I go through it again? I sold 4 mattresses for 16 shillings; and have written I think 20 pages. To tell you the truth, I have been very excited, writing. I have never written so fast [*To the Lighthouse*]. Give me no illness for a year, 2 years, and I would write 3 novels straight off. It may be illusion, but […] What was I saying? Oh only that I think I can write now, never before—an illusion which attends me always for 50 pages. But its true I write quick—all in a splash; then feel, thank God, thats over. But one thing—I will not let you make me such an egoist. After all, why don't we talk about your writing? Why always mine, mine, mine? (*L III*, 231-2)

By both using, at the beginning of this letter, a rhetorical question and asking her absent friend to use her own imagination, Woolf invites Vita to participate in her domestic affairs so as to share her frustrated feeling. This frustration partly results from her incapacity to deal with domestic affairs. Partly, it is caused by the author's self-consciousness, which is not merely about her impractical weakness that makes her to feel like "a nagging harpy", but also concerns her being a Bloomsbury writer, that is, "being dowdy, dirty, shabby, red nosed middle classed and all the rest" (*L III*, 313), in contrast to Vita who is "a high aristocrat" (*L III*, 150). This torture also contains her agony at being unable to write her novel, *To The Lighthouse* (1927), on account of these domestic affairs. In short, by using soliloquy to recount her domestic affairs, Woolf tries to depict herself as an unhappy "soul".

6.1.1.2. Fictional writing—"a mirage" (*L III*, 241)

This painful feeling is counterbalanced by her excitement at writing a novel, which Woolf cannot help presenting in the same letter. Here, Woolf only defines such a life of writing as "illusion" and considers such talk as pure egotism, but such a topic recurs in her epistolary conversation of the period, for example, in Letter 1618, written on 3 February 1926:

> I am back again in the thick of my novel, and things are crowding into

> my head: millions of things I might put in—all sorts of incongruities, which I make up walking the streets, gazing into the gas fire. Then I struggle with them, from 10 to 1: then lie on the sofa, and watch the sun behind the chimneys: and think of more things: then set up a page of poetry in the basement, and so up to tea and Morgan Forster. I've shirked 2 parties, and another Frenchman, and buying a hat, and going to tea with Hilda Trevelyan: for I really can't combine all this with keeping my imaginary people going. Not that they are people: what one imagines, in a novel, is a world. Then, when one had imagined this world, suddenly people come in—but I don't know why one does it, or why it should alleviate the misery of life, and yet not make one exactly happy; for the strain is too great. Oh, to have done it, and be free. (*L III*, 238-9)

By describing both her state of being while writing and her way of writing, Woolf shows that writing a novel needs the greatest concentration; she will repeat this in a letter written on 18 October 1938 to Quentin Bell: "Writing is far too concentrated to be a human activity" (*L VI*, 293). Moreover, by comparing the writing activity to living in the fictional world the writer is creating, Woolf shows that, while she writes her novel, her fictional characters actually live, act, move or talk in front of her like real people in the real world; and, she herself lives more truly or completely in the imaginary world than in the real one.

Such a concentrated state, which makes Woolf lose consciousness both of her physical body and the real world, is described as both absorbing and a sort of illusion in another letter written on 17 in the same month, Letter 1621:

> — but I walk, nosing along, making up phrases, and I'm ashamed to say how wrapped up I get in my novel. Really, I am a little alarmed at being so absorbed—Why should one engross oneself thus for so many months? and it may well be a mirage—I read it over, and think it is a mirage: but I can scarcely do anything else. (*L III*, 241)

For Woolf, to write a novel is both to have fancy and to live in fancy, and this activity plays as an enchanted fancy; but she cannot obtain complete happiness from fictional writing, for concentration involves too extreme a tension of body and mind. However, fictional writing, as a free, ideal island where Woolf can be herself and live with her

"imaginary people" functions as a refuge that can relieve her misery in daily life. Or, it might be better to say that fictional writing has the power to tempt Woolf to escape her miserable self in real life.

6.1.1.3. "Gloomsbury" (*L III*, 242)

Writing can be attractive if the writing self can be "excited"; writing might also be a disagreeable activity if such a self is robbed of the freedom of imagination. Therefore, writing the "lecture for the school at Hayes Common" (*L III*, 233) becomes miserable and unpleasant, as Woolf shows in Letter 1617: "Only I found I had to write the lecture for the girl's school, and so had to stop writing To the Lighthouse. That began my misery" (*L III*, 235), and: "But this analysing reminds me of my lecture, which I am infinitely sick of—To explain different kinds of novels to children—to make little anecdotes out of it—that took me more time and trouble than to write 6 Times leaders" (*L III*, 237).[2] If being as a critic or a lecturer is sometimes difficult, her status as a Bloomsbury writer and her literary life in Bloomsbury can be loathsome for Woolf.

For example, in the second paragraph of Letter 1621, Woolf tries to present different characteristics of the Bloomsbury Group:

> What else has happened in the great world of politics and society? I have been considering the question of snobbery. Eddy very kindly gave me dinner at the Ivy. (D'you remember the Ivy?) Of course I said, driving home, Now I'll pay the cab. Eddy said nonsense. I said you're a damned aristocrat, and I *will* pay the cab. Which I did, and gave him not only my well known lecture upon Russells and Herberts but a new chapter, added for his benefit, called, How no aristocrat can write a book. So we quarreled over this for a bit, and next day, oddly enough, I had to defend him—against someone who shall be nameless—from the charge of being an *arriviste*. What motive can he have in coming to Bloomsbury etc? Well, I said, it shows his intelligence. But, they said, with that name and appearance, he can't be intelligent. Damn you, I said, thats Russells and Herberts the other way round all over again. So

[2] This lecture is given on 30 January 1926 at Hayes Court, a private's girls' school near Bromley in Kent and is later published as a signed essay, "How Should One Read a Book? (1926)," in the *Yale Review* in October 1926 (See *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 399, note 1).

> it is. And which is worse—Mayfair snobbery, or Bloomsbury? I've been awfully worried by elderly relations. Three old gentlemen, round about 60, have discovered that Vanessa is living in sin with Duncan Grant, and that I have written Mrs Dalloway—which equals living in sin. Their methods of showing their loathing is to come to call, to ask Vanessa if she ever sells a picture, me if I've been in a lunatic asylum lately. Then they insinuate how they live in Berkley Sqre or the Athenaeum and dine with—I don't know whom: and so take themselves off. Would this make you angry? And philosophically speaking as Koteliansky the Russian used to say, do 20 years in time make this gulf between us? (*L III*, 240-1)

Quoting directly two different dialogues[3]—one with Edward Sackville-West and the other with some Mayfair tycoons—without quotation marks in the first half of the paragraph, Woolf tries to convey two kinds of "snobbery": aristocratic and Bloomsbury snobbery. In the second half of the paragraph, dramatic speech immediately shifts into narration, through which Woolf presents Bloomsbury's modern attitudes towards marriage, love, as well as art—painting and writing. These attitudes reveal both freedom and evolution, not merely in human relationships, but also in the subject and material of Woolf's writing. This spirit of freedom and rebellion enables Woolf to create her original technique that challenges conventional writing. From the viewpoint of the older generation belonging to the upper middle-class, both the Group's view of life and their aesthetic method are abnormal, sinful and against Victorian tradition and convention.

The free attitude of Bloomsbury might also result in a sort of absurdity, as it is the case with Clive Bell's private life, at which Woolf frequently sneers in her letters to Vita, for example, in the third paragraph of Letter 1622:

> There have been masses of parties. But I cried off, after one at Clives

[3] The function of dialogues can be seen from Woolf's own words in a letter written on 20 April 1934 to R. C. Trevelyan: "I have read your stories, and with great enjoyment. […] My only doubt […] is about the dialogue form. I am always rather bothered by it. If you bring in people, then I want to know quantities of things about them, and here, of course, as you use them, they are kept severely to the rails. Thence, perhaps, what I used to feel with Goldie's [Goldsworthy Lowes Dickson] dialogues—something too restricted, too formed. Yet I feel, as I say, the interest, the subtlety of the thought, and the melody of the whole expression. So I am puzzled to see what form there is, save Dialogue, to carry the idea—" (*L V*, 293).

> with Lord Berners and Raymond, and one, a very quiet one, at Nessas. I shall never dine out again, I thought, in the middle of drinking Clive's champagne—because one always says the same things; well, that was the champagne, perhaps. One talks about Sybil [Colefax] and the Sitwells' Chrissie, and Eddie Marsh. Clive would parade a new affair of his. "I've been dealt a new hand" he kept saying: "It takes me, I'm glad to say, into the lower walks of society." Absurd little cockatoo! However there was lots of champagne—slabs of salmon—I don't know what; and your poor Weevil—if thats to be her new name—was as excited as usual. (*L III*, 244)

By quoting directly Clive's utterance, Woolf lets his talk reveal his way of life and his character. Moreover, in this paragraph, Woolf not only shows her disapproval of Clive's way of life, but of Bloomsbury's parties. The banal conversation with her Bloomsbury friends, which is short of original ideas, has lost its power to stimulate Woolf, as a Bloomsbury writer. For Woolf, Bloomsbury has lost its excitement and charm, and echoes Vita's jest—"Gloomsbury" (*L III*, 242), as Woolf shows in Letter 1621. In this description of Bloomsbury dull life, Woolf presents herself as a weary soul that desires to escape from it.

However, it may only be a posture, since Woolf confesses at the very end, how much she still enjoys those parties. And in other passages of these eight letters, Woolf still praises the members of the Bloomsbury Group, including herself, for their erudition and thirst for knowledge, for example, in Letter 1621:

> But dear old Lytton—he was infinitely charming, and we fitted like gloves, and I was very happy, we nosed about the book shops together, and remarked upon the marvelous extent of our own reading. "What haven't we read?" said Lytton. "Its a question of life, my dear Lytton" I said, sinking into an arm chair: And so it all began over again. (*L III*, 242)

At the same time, in Letter 1624, written on 16 March 1926, Woolf approves of the sincere and frank quality of conversation between writers who don't belong to the Group: "Then I met Rose Macaulay and George Moore […] What I say about writers is that they are the salt of the earth […] With both of these people, Rose and George,

one can tell the truth—a great advantage" (*L III*, 249).

6.1.1.4. The Hogarth Press

Following the descriptions of her domestic affairs and her writing, the third sort of daily life that Woolf presents in Letter 1613 involves the Hogarth Press:

> Have I seen anyone? Yes, a great many people, but by way of business mostly—Oh the grind of the Press has been rather roaring in my ears. So many manuscripts to read, poems to set up, and letters to write, and Doris Daglish to tea—A poor little shifty shabby shuffling housemaid, who ate a hunk of cake, and had the incredible defiance and self confidence which is partly lack of Education; partly what she thinks genius, and I a very respectable vivacious vulgar brain. "But Mrs Woolf, what I want to ask you is—have I in your opinion enough talent to devote my life entirely to literature?" Then it comes out she has an invalid father to keep, and not a halfpenny in the world. Leonard, after an hour of this, advised her, in his most decided voice, to become a Cook. That set her off upon genius and fiction and hope and ambition and sending novels to Tom Eliot and so—and so. Off she went, to Wandsworth; and we are to read her essay on Pope. (*L III*, 232)

Through this (snobbish) description of the visit of a "housemaid", who comes to ask Woolf's opinion about her wish to become a writer, Woolf shows how her life is disturbed by visitors and how her time is eaten up by the Hogarth Press. Here, the printing press is presented not only as depriving her of time but also as shattering her feeling of peace.

Furthermore, in Letter 1622, Woolf describes what the internal life of the Hogarth Press is like:

> We're in the midst of our worst week. It always happens—here are all the books coming out and our Staff collapses. Last year it was love: we abolished love [Mrs Joad], took an elderly widow instead; and now its measles. One little girl has measles; the other probably mumps—May she go off? So we're left to deal with the bills, the parcels, the callers—a gentleman who has been in Armenia, wants to write a book, and discourses for an hour about Bishop Gore, Leonard thinking him to mean Ormsby Gore—Hence misunderstandings. Then theres our Viola

> [Tree]—thrown from a taxi and bruised her ribs, and must go to Brighton to recoup. Will we correct her proofs? And Lady Oxford has been at them, and scribbled over every margin, "Darling Viola, don't use the word "naturally" please—I hate it. Don't call Ribblesdale 'Rib'. All this is trash—ask Mrs Woolf—" What is the printer to make of it? There must be a revise—So thats held over. And our fortunes tremble. If the books don't sell, I warn you I shall apply for the place of black Baby at Long Barn. Tomorrow I'm to meet Ottoline and Percy Lubbock: they say he has deserted Lady Sybil, and retires to his own mat weaving at Sevenoaks. Whats the truth? (*L III*, 245)

In a series of short hurried sentences, Woolf describes the press season, its bustle and its worries—the staff's illness, the "misunderstanding" between the editor and the writer, the writer's accident, as well as the disagreement between the printer and the writer. In Letter 1624, written about two weeks later, Woolf describes the bustle of the publishing life as "the usual Hogarth Press spasm" (*L III*, 247).

6.1.1.5. The upper class's parties

Woolf's meeting with Lady Ottoline Morrell and Percy Lubbock mentioned in the previous quotation from Letter 1622 is actually presented in Letter 1624:

> But I was going to talk about Ottoline: and the ghastliness of that party at Ethels. It was a blizzard, thunder and snow; and Dadie fetched me, and we had to cross London to Chelsea. Well, by the time I got there, my poor old hat (I never bought a new one) was like a cabmans cape: and a piece of fur, hurriedly attached by a safety pin, flapping. And those damned people sitting smug round their urn, their fire, their tea table, thought O Lord, why cant Virginia look more of a lady: which so infuriated me, through vanity I own, and the consciousness of being better than them, with all their pearl necklaces and orange coloured clothes, that I could only arch my back like an infuriated cat. As for Ottoline, she is peeling off powder like flakes on a house; yet her skirts are above her knees: I cant describe the mingling of decrepitude and finery: and all the talk had to be brought back to her. There was Percy Lubbock. We were egged on to discuss the passions. He mumbled like an old nurse that *he* never had such nasty things: whereupon, in the vilest taste, I contradicted him, never thinking of Lady Sybil, and he bubbled and sizzled on his seat with discomfort, and said, please Mrs Woolf leave *me* alone. And I felt inclined to leave them all alone, for

> ever and ever, these tea parties, these Ottolines, these mumbling sodomitical old maids (Leigh Ashton was there too.) (*L III*, 247-8)

"Virginia" does not seem to enjoy those upper-class parties any better than the Bloomsbury ones. The whole description of the party, of the guests, their dresses, their talk or relationship is fraught with a sort of ugliness and unpleasantness: "the ghastliness of that party" is enhanced by the weather—a day of "blizzard, thunder and snow"; the guests are "those damned people", "Virginia" is irritated, sensitive to their snobbery and probable mockery at her shabbiness. However, Woolf satirises here the smug aristocrats, and their cosy life; she draws a scathing portrait of Ottoline "peeling off powder like flakes" and an ironic one of Percy Lubbock's hypocrisy. She clearly enjoys herself drawing such a portrait of the Garsington Manor set, betraying in the end her taste for such parties.

Through the technique of the soliloquy, Woolf, in these eight letters, presents mainly her own life in Bloomsbury: her domestic affairs, her fictional writing, her literary activities, her occupation as a publisher in the Hogarth Press, and her parties in the upper class. Through these factual descriptions, Woolf not only presents herself as an unhappy weary soul longing for escape through fictional writing, but also tries to make both her life and herself transparent so as to provoke her addressee's emotion.

6.1.2. Descriptive facts: "saying the opposite" (*L III*, 199)

In these eight letters of soliloquy to Vita, telling about her own daily life is a direct way for Woolf to speak her agony and her tortured self; the reverse happens in her dramatic speech, as can be seen from Letter 1613 onwards:

> I'm going to have a little dramatic society—I mean a flashy actress came to see me, who having had her heart blighted, completely, entirely, irretrievably, has most unexpectedly got work, and says will I come and see her behind the scenes—I like the astonishing profusion of these poor creatures—all painted, glittering and unreal; with the minds of penny whistles; all desperate, what with being out of work, or

> in love: some have illegitimate children; one died on Sunday, and another is ill with typhoid. They think me a grotesque, semi-human gargoyle; screwed up like a devil in a Cathedral; and then we have tea, in some horrid purlieus of Soho, and they think this frightfully exciting—my unscrewing my legs and talking like a book. But it won't do for long. Its a snobbery of mine to adorn every society except my own. (*L III*, 233)

This description includes a short portrayal of the female actors and their life, Woolf's meeting with them, as well as a description of Woolf as seen from their point of view. Superficially, it seems that Woolf tries to convey to her addressee the self-contented, gallant quality of women in this social milieu as well as their tough life so as to share her fondness of them and her admiration for their life. Actually, this account conveys a totally different meaning, the description suggesting Woolf's self-depreciation and the feeling sha has of her own "worthlessness" as a woman of the upper-middle class, a feeling Woolf states explicitly in a letter written on 18 August 1929 to Vita: "—here is a great storm of rain, I am obsessed at nights with the idea of my own worthlessness, and it if were only to turn a light on to save my life I think I would not do it" (*L IV*, 80).

Vaunting the merits of lower class women so as to lessen those of the observer is a method Woolf uses in the other letters she wrote during this period. For example, in Letter 1621, Woolf describes her attachment to other women and the working class while having lunch with Lytton Strachey at the restaurant:

> Then I lunched with Lytton at Kettners. First I was so dazzled by the gilt and the warmth that in my humility I felt ready to abase myself at the feet of all the women and all the waiters; and really humbled at the incredible splendour of life. Halfway through lunch, reason triumphed; I said this is dross; I had a great argument with Lytton—about our methods of writing, about Edmund Gosse, about our friendship; and age and time and death and all the rest of it. (*L III*, 242)

What the observer admires and is impressed by in others—"the incredible splendour of life"—exactly reveals what she lacks and desires in her own life. Focusing in what

the women, the waiters (and the restaurants) have, reveals the qualities that are absent from her life and the virtues that she lacks as a woman: it is a method based on opposites.

In Letter 1622, Woolf describes their visit to one of Leonard Woolf's brother's house:

> The people who took us were Leonards brother and his wife. I promptly fell in love, not with him or her, but with being stock brokers, with never having read a book (except Robert Hitchens) with not having heard of Roger, or Clive, or Duncan, or Lytton. *Oh this is life, I kept saying to myself; and what is Bloomsbury, or Long Barn either, but a contortion, a temporary knot; and why do I pity and deride the human race, when its lot is profoundly peaceful and happy?* They have nothing to wish for. They are entirely simple and sane. She has her big dog. They turn on the Loud Speaker. When they take a holiday they go to the Spring of the Thames where it is as big as a man's arm, not big enough for a boat; and they carry their boat till they can put it in, and then they skull all the way down to Marlow. Sometimes, she said the river is level with the banks; and it is perfectly deserted. Then she said to me suddenly, as we were looking down at the wood from her window "Thats where the poet Shelley wrote Islam. He tied his boat to the tree there. My grandfather had a walking stick cut from that tree." You always run up against poetry in England; and I like this dumb poetry; and I wish I could be like that. She will live to be a hundred; she knows exactly what she enjoys; her life seems to me incredibly happy. She is very plain; but entirely unvexed, unambitious; and I believe, entirely right. Yes; that what I've fallen in love with—being a stockbroker. (*L III*, 243, *our emphasis*)

The letter, for a reader of Woolf's prose, may at first sight read as a pitilessly ironic portrayal of the dull life of a stockbroker, with its routine and lack of culture. However, behind the irony and snobbery, we can feel Woolf yearning for a simple life of enjoyment and uncomplicated happiness. Whereas in her fiction, the irony would prevail, here, we cannot help feeling that her words, "I wish I could be like that," are genuine. She genuinely admires their life of peace and happiness, their simplicity, practicality, serenity as well as their sense of purpose. Woolf's praise and admiration, together with her desire to be part of the middle class conversely suggest her

discontent with her own life in Bloomsbury. Irony fails to hide her longing for another lifestyle.

Similarly, in the second half of the fourth paragraph in Letter 1624, Woolf describes another visit to another of Leonard's brothers:

> Last week it was Lord Rothschilds agent—that is another brother of Leonards [Philip Woolf],—at Waddesdon. There again I fell in love—But Eddy says this is snobbery; a belief in some glamour which is unreal. They are again, entirely direct, on the top of every object without a single inhibition or hesitation—When my sister in law showed me her hunter (for hunting is the passion of her life) I had the thrill in the thighs which, they say, is the sigh of a work of art. Then she was so worn to the bone with living. Seven miles from a village: no servant will stay; weekend parties at the Great House; Princess Mary playing cross word puzzles after lunch, my sister in law stripping her one pair of shoes and skirt to ribbons hunting rabbits in the bushes by way of amusing Princess Mary; two babies; and so on. Well, I felt, nothing that I shall ever do all my life equals a single day of this. But Eddy says he knows about it: it is my snobbery. (*L III*, 248)

Here, Woolf gives a detailed description of Philip Woolf's family life; it is intertwined with her admiration for their frankness, candour, and lack of self-consciousness, her excitement for her sister-in-law's life as a practical woman and "huntress", as well as her desire to possess such a different life. Later in the same letter, Woolf considers such an attachment to these people's lives, which, in Edward Sackville West's eye, is pure Bloomsbury "snobbery", as "[her] rapture for the middle classes—the huntresses the stock brokers" (*L III*, 249). Again, these descriptive facts reveal a lack of glamour and excitement in the writer's life and the absence of these qualities in her own character. The irony she wields elsewhere may well be a mask for her deep yearnings.

Finally, in Letter 1628, the last letter written during this period, Woolf describes a middle-class party at a banker's:

> I had wanted to go into the matter of profound natural happiness, as

> revealed to me yesterday at a family party of an English Banker [Walter Leaf]; where the passion and joy of sons and daughters in their own society struck me almost to tears with self-pity and amazement. Nothing of that sort do we any of us know—profound emotions, which are yet natural and taken for granted, so that nothing inhibits or restrains—How deep these are, and unself conscious. There is a book called Father and Son [1907], by Gosse, which says that all the coast of England was fringed with little sea anemones and lovely tassels of sea weed and sprays of emerald moss and so on, from the beginning of time till Jan 1858, when, for some reason, hordes of clergy and spinsters in mushroom hats and goggles began collecting, and so scraped and rifled the coast that this accumulation was destroyed for ever—A parable this, of what we have done to the deposits of family happiness. (*L III*, 254)

What she retains is the happiness and lack of inhibition of the banker's family. Theirs are "profound", "natural", and "unself-conscious" emotions. The "self-pity and amazement" it entails in her is significant of her desire for such a free emotional life. In the second half of the quotation, Woolf focuses on Edmund Gosse's memoirs, *Father and Son* (1907), and analyses his work as a parable of the way the English dispossessed themselves of emotion and happiness in Victorian times.

Here, her appraisal of Gosse's work is much more positive than in Letter 1621,where she quoted her conversation with Lytton Strachey at the restaurant and showed her disapproval of Gosse's writing:

> Then I lunched with Lytton at Kettners. […] I had a great argument with Lytton—about our methods of writing, about Edmund Gosse, about our friendship; and age and time and death and all the rest of it. I was forgetting Queen Elizabeth—He is writing about her. He says that she wrote to an ambassador "Had I been crested and not cloven you would not have dared to write to me thus." "Thats style!" I cried. "It refers to the make and female parts" he said. Gosse told him this, adding that of course, it could not be quoted. "You need some excuse for lunching with Gosse," I said. But Lytton thinks me narrow minded about Gosse. I say I know a mean skunk when I see one, or rather smell one, for its his writing I abominate. (*L III*, 242)

Woolf's estimation of Gosse's writing is opposed by Lytton in this letter, which was

written on 17 February 1926; but according to Woolf's statement on his memoirs, in Letter 1628 written almost 2 months later, on 13 April 1926, it seems that her previous, negative opinion is also rejected by herself. In other words, in discussing Edmund Gosse's method of writing in his memoirs at the end of her last letter to Vita during this period, Woolf not merely praises his method of writing, but also concludes that her method used in this sort of descriptive facts is actually similar to Gosse's method in his autobiographical writing.

In the essay, "Edmund Gosse (1931)", Woolf considers Gosse as a writer of "genius" and his memoirs, *Father and Son* (1907) as "a classic doubtless, […] certainly a most original and entertaining book" (*E V*, 251), on account of his suggestive method: "He hints, he qualifies, he insinuates, he suggests, but he never speaks out, for all the world as if some austere Plymouth Brother were lying in wait to make him do penance for his audacity" (*E V*, 250-1). First, Woolf states that such an insinuative method reveals Gosse's character: "his respect for decorum, by his decency and his timidity dipping and ducking, fingering and faltering upon the surface", "his innate regard for caution", as well as his lack of both "greater boldness" and "further" "curiosity" (*E V*, 251). Then, Woolf indicates that Gosse tries to represent himself through his characters, "how young Edmund Gosse insinuated himself under cover of Dr. Fog into the presence of an irascible poet and won the day by the adroitness of his flattery", but such an indirect self-representation still reveals a sort of "fear" at being exposed:

> Fear seems always to dog his footsteps. He dips his fingers with astonishing agility and speed into character, but if he finds something hot or gets hold of something large, he drops it and withdraws with the agility of a scalded cat. Thus we never know his sitters intimately; we never plunge into the depths of their minds or into the more profound regions of their hearts. But we know all that can be known by someone who is always a little afraid of being found out. (*E V*, 251)

Finally, Woolf shows her admiration for Gosse's self-exposure in all sorts of his writings:

> To be oneself is, after all, an achievement of some rarity, and Gosse, as everybody must agree, achieved it, both in literature and in life. As a writer he expressed himself in book after book of history, of biography, of criticism. For over fifty years he was busily concerned, as he put it, with "the literary character and the literary craft." (*E V*, 253)

In short, in this essay, according to Woolf, Gosse's suggestive method of writing not merely reveals his character but meets his character, satisfies his purpose in writing to be himself. All these characteristics are exactly what Woolf wants to achieve while writing to Vita. First, reading Woolf's self-presentation in her letters to Vita, readers can feel her own shyness, precautions, reserves, as well as a slight dread at thus exposing herself in her letters, since she clearly knows that future readers will read them. Therefore, like Gosse but from a different angle, Woolf aims to praise other people and their lives, in particular other women and their lives, so as to suggest her own character and her own life, both of which are the very opposite of theirs.

Both Gosse's desire to be himself in writing and his purpose of disclosing himself in his writing are what Woolf wants to achieve in her letters to Vita. For Woolf, "to be oneself" is the only way to give happiness to the other in a human relationship, as she explains in a letter written on 11 March 1925 to Gwen Raverat: "I think I feel that I would give a great deal to share with you the daily happiness. But you know that if there is anything I could ever give you, I would give it, but perhaps the only thing to give is to be oneself with people" (*L III*, 171). This attitude opens onto a kind of freedom in writing, as she indicates in a letter written on 16 August 1931 to Ethel Smyth: "But I'm delighted that this version should be current, because the more people think V. W. a statue, chill, cold, immaculate, inapproachable,—a hermit who only sees her own set—the more free I myself am to be myself" (*L IV*, 368-9).

Moreover, in a letter sent as early as June 1906 to Madge Vaughan, Virginia Stephen wishes to explain that writing is the fruit of the writer's personality, as Gosse does in his letters: "My only defence is that I write of things as I see them; and I am

quite conscious all the time that it is a very narrow, and rather bloodless point of view. I think—if I were Mr Gosse writing to Mrs Green! I could explain a little why this is so from external reasons; such as education, way of life etc" (*L I*, 226). While, in Letter 1624 to Vita, after her development on "Style", Woolf immediately tries to explain the relationship there is between her character and her writing:

> Then there's my character (you see how egotistic I am, for I answer only questions that are about myself) I agree about the lack of jolly vulgarity. But then think how I was brought up! No school; mooning about alone among my father's books; never any chance to pick up all that goes on in rages with my half brothers, and being walked off my legs round the Serpentine by my father. This is an excuse: I am often conscious of the lack of jolly vulgarity but did Proust pass that way? Did you? Can you chaff a table of officers? (*L III*, 247)

In this explanation for "the lack of jolly vulgarity" in her writing, Woolf shows that, as for other great writers, both her own writing and its theory are the fruit of her own character and life.

In the letters under study, Woolf, on the one hand, describes her daily life, her domestic affairs, her writing, her literary life in Bloomsbury, her work for the Hogarth Press, as well as her social activities in the upper class, exposing herself in the process as a cynic, a self-conscious Bloomsbury writer, a weary publisher, a misanthrope in the upper class society. On the other hand, Woolf praises the virtues and the life of the lower classes, in particular, of women. Presenting her life directly, Woolf attempts to make herself transparent whereas by focusing on the others, she hopes to turn them into mirrors that can reflect her own life and character. Both techniques make up Woolf's suggestive method.

6.2. “[T]he poetic speech” (*L V*, 103)

6.2.1. “[T]he poetic speech” (*L V*, 103)

Reading these eight letters of soliloquy, it appears that, besides dramatic speech, Woolf explores another level of soliloquy, for example, in Letter 1617:

> —Enough of Gertrude Bell; now for Virginia. Shall I write the letter I made up in bed this morning? It was all about myself. I was wondering if I could explain how miserable I have been the past 4 days, and why I have been miserable. Thought about, one can gloss things over, bridge them, explain, excuse. Writing them down, they become more separate and disproportioned and so a little unreal—Only I found I had to write the lecture for the girl’s school, and so had to stop writing To the Lighthouse. That began my misery; all my life seemed to be thwarted instantly: It was all sand and gravel; and yet I said, this is the truth, this guilty misery, and the other an illusion; and then, dearest, people began ringing me up to go to lunch and tea. (*L III*, 235-6)

In this passage, Woolf herself becomes the heroine and her life the subject of her letters. “Virginia” appears as a literary creation and the letter itself as “Virginia[’s]” soliloquy in solitude. On the one hand, in her letters to Vita mainly written in 1927, Woolf shows that she not only “prefer[s] solitude” (*L III*, 396) but also wants to write about it (*L III*, 347). If for Dante, “Solitude—ones soul” (*L III*, 352), for Woolf, “It is the last resort of the civilised: our souls are so creased and soured in meaning we can only unfold them when we are alone. […] It may be our form of religion” (*L III*, 358). She compares solitude to “little nuggets of gold, drops of pearl” (*L III*, 409), and considers that it is in solitude that “[o]nes mind fills up like a sponge” (*L IV*, 13) and that “profound profound thoughts survive” (*L IV*, 276), as she shows respectively in a letter written on 4 February 1929 to Vita and another letter written on 5 January 1931 to Quentin Bell.

On the other hand, in a letter written on 22 September 1926 to Edward Sackville West, Woolf shows that it is in agony that human beings, including herself, reveal their soul and tell the truth: “I like people to be unhappy because I like them to have souls. We all have, doubtless, but I like the suffering soul which confesses itself.

I distrust this hard, this shiny, this enameled content. We old creatures are all crusted over with it. Now unhappiness means vapour, atmosphere, interest. I am often unhappy" (*L III*, 294). Accordingly, in Letter 1617, Woolf attempts to reveal "Virginia['s]" true, unhappy life through the soliloquy of a true, miserable soul in solitude.

Composed of "short sentences torn from [Virginia's] heart" (*L I*, 506), her soliloquy involves her unhappy life in "the past 4 days", that is, ironically enough, lecture writing, social activities, domestic affairs, as well as a Bloomsbury party. In this description, Woolf intensifies her unhappy feeling and taste for it, turning her letter into a eulogy of unhappiness. Through the figure of accumulation recurring in the letter, she builds up tension and lets "Virginia['s]" agony, caused by her being unable to writer her novel, gather strength.

This sort of soliloquy emanating from a solitary soul in agony reminds the reader of Shakespearean soliloquies. Actually, in a letter written on 12 September 1932 to Hugh Walpole, Woolf states that the modernist writers should revive Shakespeare's spoken words in their work, as Sir Walter Scott does in *The Antiquary* (1816): "One of the things I want to write about one day is the Shakespearean talk in Scott: the dialogues: surely that is the last appearance in England of the blank verse of Falstaff and so on! We have lost the art of the poetic speech—" (*L V*, 104).[4] "Virginia['s]" soliloquy could be said to belong to Woolf's own revival of Shakespeare's "art of the poetic speech".

Woolf's inclination to renew the "the poetic speech" comes out clearly in a letter written on 27 September 1934 to George Rylands:

> I don't know that I had anything very definite in mind about dialogue—only a few random generalisations. My feeling, as a novelist, is that when you make a character speak directly you're in a different state of mind from that in which you describe him indirectly: more 'possessed', less self conscious, more random, and rather excited by

[4] Woolf also writes in another letter: "Also, I wish you'd read the hated Antiquary and see whether you can't discover the last relics of Shakespeare's soliloquies in some of the old peasants speeches" (*LV*, 334-5).

> the sense of his character and your audience. I think the great Victorians, Scott (no—he wasn't a Vn.) but Dickens, Trollope, to some extent Hardy all had this sense of an audience and created their characters mainly through dialogue. Then I think the novelist became aware of something that can't be said by the character himself; and also lost the sense of an audience. (*L V*, 334-5)

Woolf's desire, as voiced in this letter, to revive "Shakespeare's soliloquies" and let her characters speak directly is implemented in the letters to Vita where she creates the character of "Virginia" and gives her a soliloquy, as "the great Victorians" did. There, the writer allows the character to act and talk freely, beyond the writer's control; the character can communicate freely and directly with the reader. In Letter 1617, Woolf succeeds in letting her character, "Virginia", expose herself to her readers, as the characters in Shakespeare's plays or Scott's *The Antiquary* do: "And [Scott] is perhaps the last novelist to practise the great, the Shakespearean art, of making people reveal themselves in speech" (*E VI*, 436).[5] With such a dramatic technique, the writer can be fully aware of her character and forget her own personality. Such a way of writing could be said to echo Woolf's theory of impersonality.[6]

6.2.2. The cry of agony and "[a] dialogue between the different parts of [one]self" (*L V*, 294)

6.2.2.1. The cry of agony

"Virginia['s]" "poetic speech" can be regarded as Woolf's challenge to characterisation. This speech also contains "Virginia['s]" cry of agony: "Only I found I had to write the lecture for the girl's school, and so had to stop writing To the Lighthouse. That began my misery; all my life seemed to be thwarted instantly: It was all sand and gravel; and yet I said, this is the truth, this guilty misery, and the other an illusion" (*L III,* 235). In this anguished expression, the four days spent writing her

[5] See *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 436, note 1: "An undated revision, first published in *Mom* [*The Moment and Other Essays*] and reprinted in *CE* [*Collected Essays*], of a sighed essay in the *N & A* [*Nation & Athenaeum*], 22 November 1924."
[6] See chapter three.

lecture for the girls' school appear as "this guilty misery", "the truth", whereas her ordinary life becomes "an illusion"—a "spectral world" (*L III*, 229) which "Virginia" "see[s], as through a telescope". "Virginia['s]" outburst of agony conveys her suffering at realising her whole life and commitment to writing may be illusory. As such, this outcry of suffering is reminiscent of the way Henry James uses dialogue, as Woolf shows in a letter to Goerge Rylands: "Henry James of course receded further and further from the spoken word, and finally I think only used dialogue when he wanted a very high light" (*L V*, 335).

In terms of both significance and structure, this short, intense sentence, which not only outlines the whole passage but creates a sort of intensity of emotion, is also similar to Electra's cries in Sophocles's play, *Electra*, and Emma's speech in Jane Austen's novel, *Emma* (1816), as Woolf states in "On Not Knowing Greek (1925)":

> Her [Electra] words in crisis are, as a matter of fact, bare; mere cries of despair, joy, hate / ['Oh, miserable that I am! I am lost this day!'][7] / But these cries give angle and outline to the play. It is thus, with a thousand differences of degree, that in English literature Jane Austen shapes a novel. There comes a moment—"I will dance with you," says Emma—which rises higher than the rest, which, though not eloquent in itself, or violent, or made striking by beauty of language, has the whole weight of the book behind it. (*E IV*, 41)

Therefore, it can be said that within "Virginia['s]" "poetic speech", "Virginia['s]" cry of agony stands for "[s]ome sudden intensity" or "a dash of white fire" in the "mould" of Woolf's "central transparency": it is meant to synthesise the whole passage, intensify emotion as well as symbolise the climax of "Virginia['s]" emotion.

Moreover, with this outcry, it seems that Woolf wants to train herself, like George Gissing, as "one of the extremely rare novelists who believes in the power of the mind, who makes [her] people think" (*E V*, 536), as she writes in "George Gissing (1932)". In this essay, Woolf further analyses Gissing's writing:

[7] The English translation is quoted from *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 51, note 6.

> But the brain works, and that alone is enough to give us a sense of freedom. For to think is to become complex; it is to overflow boundaries, to cease to be a "character", to merge one's private life in the life of politics or art or ideas, to have relationships based partly on them, and not on sexual desire alone. The impersonal side of life is given its due place in the scheme. […] They [Gissing's books] owe their peculiar grimness to the fact that the people who suffer most are capable of making their suffering part of a reasoned view of life. The thought endures when the feeling has gone. Their unhappiness represents something more lasting than a personal reverse; it becomes part of a view of life. Hence when we have finished one of Gissing's novels we have taken away not a character, nor an incident, but the comment of a thoughtful man upon life as life seemed to him. (*E V*, 536)

Like Gissing and through "Virginia['s]" outcry, Woolf not merely attempts to create a character but more importantly, to turn this particular cry of agony into a symbolic sentence so as to convey some universal idea, an outlook on life and its misery, the painful feelings of a tortured soul.

6.2.2.2. "A dialogue between the different parts of [one]self" (*L V*, 294)

As in Letter 1622, the cry of agony is followed by the rhetorical question, "and why do I pity and deride the human race, when its lot is profoundly peaceful and happy?", "Virginia['s]" "poetic speech" in Letter 1617 also contains such a question: "Why did this make me desperate? I said." This sort of rhetorical question seems to belong to a sort of dialogue between her different selves—the very technique Woolf advises R. C. Trevelyan to experiment in a letter written on 20 April 1934:

> I'm always wanting you […] to break through into a less formed, more natural medium. I wish you could dismiss the dead, who inevitably silence so much and deal with Monday and Tuesday—I mean the thing that is actually in your eyes at the moment. A dialogue between the different parts of yourself perhaps, now, at the moment. (*L V*, 293-4)

Woolf attempts to create "an atmosphere of doubt, of suggestion, of questioning", as Euripides does through the choruses in his plays and as she shows in "On not

Knowing Greek":

> In Euripides, however, the situations are not contained within themselves; they give off an atmosphere of doubt, of suggestion, of questioning; but if we look to the choruses to make this plain we are often baffled rather than instructed. At once in the *Bacchae* we are in the world of psychology and doubt; the world where the mind twists facts and changes them and makes the familiar aspects of life appear new and questionable. What is Bacchus, and who are the Gods, and what is man's duty to them, and what the rights of his subtle brain? To these questions the chorus makes no reply, or replies mockingly, or speaks darkly as if the straitness of the dramatic form had tempted Euripides to violate it, in order to relieve his mind of its weight. […] He [Euripides] can be acted in the mind; he can comment upon the questions of the moment; more than the others he will vary in popularity from age to age. (*E IV*, 44)

For Woolf, these "flashes of poetry and questions far flung and unanswered" (*E IV*, 44) endow Euripides with a freedom in thinking and writing so that he not only presents the psychological and mental activities of his characters but also urges the audience to think about life from a different angle. If these "unanswered" questions about life can provide relief to the dramatist from incongruities in his mind, on the contrary, they produce a sort of confusion and bewilderment in his audience. However, these questions possess an immortal power and people of all times can answer them. Woolf's statements on the dramatic power of Euripides's choruses are reminiscent of "Poetry, Fiction and the Future". In this essay, Woolf advises the fictional writer to use "the poetic drama of the Elizabethan age" (*E IV*, 430) in order to create "an atmosphere of doubt and conflict" (*E IV*, 429-30) in the "so-called novel" (*E IV*, 435). For Woolf, by dramatising prose writing, the writer c an produce an emotional vibration: "Yet he covets the explosive emotional effect of the drama; he wants to draw blood from his readers, and not merely to stroke and tickle their intellectual susceptibilities" (*E IV*, 438).

With "Virginia['s]" outburst, which summarises "the obscure terrors and hatred which come so irrationally in certain places or from certain people" (*E IV*, 439),

Woolf endows her prose with a dramatic power so as to present the psychological and mental activities of human beings, produce an emotional sympathy in the reader, and make her language universal. Furthermore, these unanswered questions reveal "Virginia['s]" inconclusive mind, akin to the Russian mind that Woolf analyses in "Modern Novels":

> More accurately indeed we might speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind. It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair. (*E III*, 36)

At the same time, the questions which intensify "Virginia['s]" emotion in the excerpt quoted from Letter 1617, succeeds in catching the reader's attention. This is what the function of dialogue should be, as Woolf indirectly explains in a letter dated 12 or 13 May 1923 to Gerald Brenan: "How can one weight and sharpen dialogue till each sentence tears its way like a harpoon and grapples with the shingles at the bottom of the reader's soul?" (*L III*, 36)

Rhetorical questions can also be found in other letters. For example, in Letter 1613, while describing her domestic affairs, Woolf uses rhetorical questions not only to intensify her unhappy feeling at being unable to write her novel: "—Every time I get inside a shop all the dust in my soul rises, and how can I write next day?", but also to suggest some sort of doubt: "At last, at last,—but why should I go through it again?" (*L III*, 232) Similarly, in Letter 1621, Woolf uses such a question to outline her state of being when writing and interrogate the meaning of writing: "—Why should one engross oneself thus for so many months?" (*L III*, 241) Again, in Letter 1622, while describing the bustle of the Hogarth Press, Woolf uses questions to create an atmosphere of conflict and contradiction: "—May she go off?", "Will we correct her proofs?", as well as "What is the printer to make of it?" (*L III*, 245)

In various ways, the particular human being, "Virginia", is endowed with a

heightened and symbolical significance, like the characters created by Thomas Hardy in his novels, as Woolf shows in "The Novels of Thomas Hardy (1932)": "In short, nobody can deny Hardy's power—the true novelist's power—to make us believe that his characters are fellow-beings driven by their own passions and idiosyncrasies, while they have—and this is the poet's gift—something symbolical about them which is common to us all" (*E V*, 566). In other words, "Virginia" is not a person, but an idea, a symbol, which aims to convey the common characteristics of human nature. The function of "Virginia" is similar to that of actors in Greek drama, as Bernard Knox indicates: "the masked actors presented to the audience not only historical figures from their past but also poetic symbols of their life and death, their ambitions, fears and hopes."[8] The symbolic nature of "Virginia" thus possesses freshness, vitality and immortality, like "Scott's characters, […] Shakespeare's and Jane Austen's, [who] have the seed of life in them", as Woolf indicates in "'The Antiquary'": "They change as we change. But though this gift is an essential element in what we call immortality, it does not by any means prove that the character lives as profoundly, as fully, as Falstaff lives or Hamlet" (*E VI*, 434-5).

Besides, both the dramatic technique of "the poetic speech" and the symbolic nature of characters make readers lose their position as spectators: without any self-consciousness, they regard themselves as one of the characters or identify with them. According to Woolf's statements in "The Russian Point of View (1925)," this feeling of empathy is what Dostoevsky creates in his novels:

> The novels of Dostoevsky are seething whirlpools, gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil and suck us in. They are composed purely and wholly of the stuff of the soul. Against our wills we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a giddy rapture. […] We are souls, tortured, unhappy souls, whose only business it is to talk, to reveal, to confess, to draw up at whatever rending of flesh and nerve those crabbed sins which crawl on the sand at the bottom of us. But, as we listen, our confusion slowly

[8] Bernard Knox. "Greece and the Theater," *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles. Trans. Robert Fagles. Intro. Bernard Knox. Penguin Books, 1984: p. 23.

> settles. A rope is flung to us; we catch hold of a soliloquy; holding on by the skin of our teeth, we are rushed through the water; feverishly, wildly, we rush on and on, now submerged, now in a moment of vision understanding more than we have ever understood before, and receiving such revelations as we are wont to get only from the press of life at its fullest. (*E IV*, 186)

Therefore, when reading Dostoevsky's novels, "[w]e are souls, tortured, unhappy souls"; when reading Hardy's, we feel that his characters are our "fellow-beings"; when reading Scott's, "[w]e know, […] what his characters are, and we know it almost as we know what our friends are by hearing their voices and watching their faces simultaneously" (*E VI*, 434); when reading "Virginia['s]" "poetic speech", we become the anguished soul. Such empathy is similar to the effect Sophocles's plays had on the audience while they were watching his Theban plays, as Knox states:

> These grim reverberations are especially powerful in tragedies concerned, as these three plays are from start to finish, with destiny, divine dispensation and the human situation. The audience, with its knowledge of the past and the future, is on the level of the gods; they see the ambition, passion and actions of the characters against the larger pattern of their lives and deaths. The spectator is involved emotionally in the heroic struggles of the protagonist, a man like himself, and at the same time can view his heroic action from the standpoint of superior knowledge, the knowledge possessed by those gods whose prophecies of the future play so large a role in Sophoclean tragedy.[9]

Since the dramatic effect of empathy on readers is what Woolf aims to create through "Virginia['s]" soliloquy, we can say the latter belongs to her style of "central transparency".

[9] Bernard Knox, "Greece and the Theater," p. 24.

Conclusion

In these eight letters to Vita, by using the dramatic technique of soliloquy, Woolf attempts to make herself, "Virginia", and her life transparent. Apart from dealing with her addressee and trying to get her sympathy, this series of letters constitutes Woolf's "mould" of "central transparency". As we have seen, through this specific style, Woolf tries to show that the letter, like "the 'book itself', is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel" (*E III*, 340). Moreover, by resorting to the soliloquy rather than the monologue, by combining the soliloquy, dramatic speech and "the poetic speech", Woolf challenges the conventional method of epistolary writing as well as fictional writing. If, technically speaking, Woolf's use of soliloquy rather than monologue signals a change in her letter writing, in terms of material, Woolf's self-representation of "Virginia" and her daily life also reveals a change of perspective that will have an impact on her future fictional writing.

As Woolf indicates in "Phases of Fiction (1929)" and in "Robinson Crusoe (1926)", it is by describing their personal lives and presenting their particular personalities that the great writers can disclose some universal ideas. Therefore, it seems that, like Hardy, Proust or Dostoevsky, Woolf wants to regard and use her own particular experience as the source of writing: however particular her own experience, however private her own life, they can be used as material for her fictional writing and be given some general or universal significance.

Such writing or letter writing is best described by Woolf in "A Sketch of the Past": "It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy […] that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (*MOB*, 72). Nevertheless, she is aware that life represented in writing, even in autobiographical writing, still remains distant from the real one: "Writing them down, they become more separate and disproportioned and so a little unreal" (*L III*, 235). In her letters, Woolf suggests the unreality of her self-representations. At the end of Letter 1621, she wishes that her life, as presented in

her letters, were not so largely compressed and reduced: "What bosh letters are, to be sure! I dont think this gives you much idea of what I have done for the last fortnight. There are immense tracts unnamed. I daresay the dumb letters are better" (*L III*, 242); she also shows how little of reality goes into the unreality of her letters: "But what I was going to say was that none of this letter is really very true, because I have been a great deal alone, two days, not able to write rather tired (but not ill—very well for the most part); and the rest of the time the usual muddle of thoughts and spasms of feeling. None of this does one ever explain" (*L III*, 242).

In the letters, we see how the technique of soliloquy and the suggestive method based on the style of "central transparency" are closely connected with Woolf's intense affection for her friend, Vita. The same could be said about *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), which can be regarded as another fruit of Woolf's relationship with Vita—and the fictional biography of her friend. We could also argue that the suggestive method and the style of "central transparency", which Woolf implements in this series of letters to Vita, lead her to compose another fictional biography, for herself—*The Moths*, later published as *The Waves* (1931). Indeed, as Woolf writes in her diary, in one entry for 30 September 1926: "At present my mind is totally blank and virgin of books. I want to watch and see how the idea at first occurs. I want to trace my own process" (*D III*, 313). Similarly, in the diary entry of October 20 of the same year, Woolf notes that through "a dramatisation of [her] mood", she tries to compose "a book of ideas about life" so as to convey "something mystic, spiritual; the thing that exists when we aren't there" (*D III*, 114). This will become *The Waves*. There, by abandoning all the conventional methods of fictional writing, Woolf endeavours to compose her novel as a "play-poem" (*D III*, 139): "The Waves is I think resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies. The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves" (*D III*, 312). By "giv[ing] the moment whole" of "[t]he Lonely Mind" (*D III*, 251), which is "a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea" (*D III*, 209), she wants to make writing, ideas and emotions transparent: "I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate. That is what I want to do in The Moths. It must include

nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent" (*D III*, 210).

Though in Woolf's own eye, *The Moths* is "an abstract mystical eyeless book: a play poem. And there may be affectation in being too mystical, too abstract" (*D III*, 203), she considers it as her own autobiography: "Autobiography it might be called" (*D III*, 229). In particular, Woolf's description of "Virginia" in Letter 1617 is reminiscent of her character, Rhoda in *The Waves*. As it does for "Virginia", life becomes painful and dreadful for Rhoda, like a "monster": "With intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger, life emerges heaving its dark crest from the sea. It is to this we are attached; it is to this we are bound, as bodies to wild horses. […] This is part of the emerging monster to whom we are attached" (*TW*, 37). Similarly, Rhoda admires the others, for instance, Susan and Jinny: "See now with what extraordinary certainty Jinny pulls on her stockings, simply to play tennis. That I admire" (*TW*, 24). In order to get rid of this difference between them, Rhoda tries to become one of them, but with a disappointing result: "As I fold up my frock and my chemise, […] so I put off my hopeless desire to be Susan, to be Jinny" (*TW*, 14). The similarity between "Virginia" in her letters and her character in her novel again reveals the affinity between Woolf's autobiographical writing and her fictional writing. Lady Ottoline Morrell's words, reported in Woolf's diary entry for February 4, 1932, confirm that, for Woolf, her own life could provide material for her future fiction and she herself could be the original model of fictional characters: "Rhoda made me cry with a vision of you" (*D IV*, 73).

Conclusion to Part Two

Since "[n]obody is better than anybody else" (*L IV*, 80), since "happiness and sorrow are equally good, and beautiful" (*L I*, 310), Woolf attempts to describe every sort of human being, every feeling or mood, putting them all on a par, as she states in a letter from 10 July 1934 to Stephen Spender: "but aren't there some shades of being that it cant state? And aren't these just as valuable, or whatever the term is, as any other?" (*L V*, 315) Such a description also includes Woolf's own feelings of "misanthropy" (*L III*, 65), which are conveyed through a sort of thin veil, as Keats does in his poems and as she remarks in "Poetry, Fiction and the Future (1927)": "He makes no contrast. In his poem sorrow is the shadow which accompanies beauty" (*E IV*, 433). In fact, in a letter written on 24 February 1897 to Thoby Stephen, Virginia Stephen defines her own writing in similar terms: "The beauty of my language is sick" (*L I*, 5).

The style of "central transparency" also fulfills Woolf's desire to "give shape to all sorts of things which normally run off in talk or thinking to oneself" (*L III*, 69). Such a free style, which combines poetic, dramatic and prose techniques challenges conventional writing, characterisation, form or technique, as she shows in a letter written on 16 March 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "Being vain, I will broach the subject of beauty—[…]—and then they say I write beautifully! How could I write beautifully when I am always trying to say something that has not been said, and should be said for the first time, exactly. So relinquish beauty, and leave it as a legacy to the next generation. My part has been to increase their stock in trade, perhaps" (*L IV*, 151). Woolf wants to "invent a name by the way which [she] can use instead of 'novel'" (*L III*, 221). In "Poetry, Fiction and the Future," Woolf compares "this unnamed variety of the novel" (*E IV*, 438) to a "cannibal […] which has devoured so many forms of art [and] will by then have devoured even more" (*E IV*, 435). At the same time, Woolf describes such a novel as follows:

> It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted. […] [T]his book […] may serve to express some of those feelings which seem at the moment to be balked by poetry pure and simple and to find the drama equally inhospitable to them. (*E IV*, 435)

It is in prose indeed that "emotions [are] sketched in such rude outline and imputed to the modern mind" (*E IV*, 434). "[T]he democratic art of prose" has "the precious prerogatives"—"its freedom, its fearlessness, its flexibility", as well as its humility: "prose is so humble that it can go anywhere; no place is too low, too sordid, or too mean for it to enter" (*E IV*, 436). Prose can hence "give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life"; can "take the mould of that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind" (*E IV*, 436); can keep a distance from life, "stand […] back from life" (*E IV*, 438), by conveying "the wide, general ideas" (*E IV*, 434) or "a larger view" "in sweeps and circles"; it can also "keep at the same time in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life" (*E IV*, 438).

Reading the six volumes of her letters, it appears that it is through the style of "central transparency" that Woolf wants to "work [herself] free from a bondage which has become irksome to [her]" and to find the "attitude so that [she] may once more stand easily and naturally in a position where [her] powers have full play upon important things" (*E IV*, 439). Woolf's search for a free attitude in writing goes together with her mastering the style of "central transparency"; it is with this style that Woolf wants to change the nature of writing—to create "this unnamed variety of the novel". Consequently, Woolf refuses to call herself a novelist, as can be seen in a letter written on 20 October 1939 to Hugh Walpole: "Oh no—I'm not a novelist. Always wanted to name my books afresh" (*L VI*, 365); and she explains in a letter dated from 1918:

> I can assure you, being an expert on these matters, that you can't get

> any pleasure—not real pleasure, worth having—from things being pulled off, and technique being clever, and words magical, and all so beautiful—[…] I am still a good deal bothered with the infernal headache, so have to think about writing, instead of writing, and find all these problems awfully difficult. What is form? What is character? What is a novel? Think them out for me. The truth is of course that no one for 100 years has given a thought to novels, as they have done to poetry: and now we wake up, suffocated, to find ourselves completely in the dark. But its an interesting age, you'll admit. Only, for a novelist, confusing. (*L III*, 211)

What is then, the style that Woolf invents to challenge traditional prose, epistolary and fictional writing?

Part Three: Letter writing, addressees, and the letter writer

"There should be threads floating in the air, which would merely have to be taken hold of, in order to talk. You would walk about the world like a spider in the middle of a web. In 100 years time, I daresay these psychical people will have made all this apparent—now seen only by the eye of genius. As it is—how I hate writing." (*Letter to Lady Robert Cecil*, 12 April 1909)

Introduction

In *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form*, Janet Gurkin Altman indicates that the essential characteristics, which distinguish epistolary writing from other forms of autobiographical writing, involve both its reciprocal nature—"The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him"—and "[the] desire to incorporate a specific reader response within the world of the narrative": "The epistolary reader is empowered to intervene, to correct style, to give shape to the story, often to become an agent and narrator in his own right."[1] She concludes: "Thus epistolary writing, as distinguished from simple first-person writing, refracts events through not one but two prisms—that of reader as well as that of writer."[2] At the same time, Altman also suggests that "[w]e as external readers must always interpret a given letter in the light of its intended recipient", or "we read any given letter from at least three points of view—that of the intended or actual recipient as well as that of writer and our own."[3]

In other words, Altman first points out that "depending on the writer's aim", the letter can be either "a faithful portrait" or "a deceptive mask"[4]—"the letter's dual potential for transparency (portrait of soul, confession, vehicle of narrative) and opacity (mask, weapon, event within narrative)."[5] She considers the writer, who might, honestly or unconsciously, reveal his own voice in the first type of letter, as the actual writer, while the writer, who might, purposefully or consciously, create a mask as a sort of barrier between himself and the reader in the second type, as the intended writer. Accordingly, Altman concludes that a letter is composed of both conscious and unconscious language: "In numerous instances the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers

[1] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 88, 91.
[2] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 92.
[3] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 92, 111.
[4] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 70, 185.
[5] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 186.

of epistolary works."[6] And at the same time, she declares that "one need not wait for Freud to know that unconscious language is often more revealing than conscious language".[7]

Then, Altman defines "a specific character represented within the world of the narrative, whose reading of the letters can influence the writing of the letters" as "the *internal* reader", while "we, the general public" as "the *external* reader", "who read the work as a finished product and have no effect on the writing of individual letters."[8] For Altman, the internal reader consists of the intended recipient and the imagined/intended external reader. On the one hand, Altman considers the epistolary discourse is "interior dialogue", "pseudodialogue",[9] or "imaginary dialogue", in which the writer uses "[i]magination", "[m]emory and expectation" to "conjure up" "*you*"—"an image of the addressee who is elsewhere"—"[i]n the absence of the real addressee" so as to "converse comfortably".[10] She defines this "image of a present addressee" "conjured up by the act of writing" in this false, imaginary face-to-face conversation as the intended recipient.[11] On the other hand, Altman insists: "As a tangible document, even then intended for a single addressee, the letter is always subject to circulation among a larger group of readers."[12] As soon as the letter possesses the potential for publication, for the letter writer, the imagined addressee not merely refers to the intended recipient, it also consists of the probable, public readers. This sort of public readers—intended external recipients—who exists in the letter writer's mind while she is writing, also belongs to the internal readers.

Briefly, according to Altman, a letter belongs to the co-creation of the writer and the reader: it "depends on reciprocality of writer-addressee", represents "a union of writer and reader", as well as belongs to the fruit of both the writer and the reader's consciousness and unconsciousness. At the same time, it is the internal reader that

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[6] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 4.
[7] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 98.
[8] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 112.
[9] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 137.
[10] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 139-40.
[11] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 139-40.
[12] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 109.

determines the writer's mask—"a determinant of the letter's message".[13] That is, the writer is fully aware of his probable audience at the moment when he is composing the letter, and it is to this internal reader that the writer adapts his style and subject matter. First of all, Altman's statement about the internal reader seems consonant with Iser's definition of the implied reader. In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser defines the particular reader, whom the writer has in mind and who is partly represented in the text, as the implied reader. He argues that, contrary to the real, flesh-and-blood reader, the implied reader is merely "a concept"—"a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him"—whose aim is to "designate a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text."[14]

Like Altman and Iser, who both emphasise the writer's intense sense of audience, Bakhtin, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, considers the writer's audience-sense as the unique characteristic of epistolary writing: "A characteristic feature of the letter is an acute awareness of the interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed. The letter, like a rejoinder in a dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other's possible reactions, the other's possible reply."[15] While Sartre, in *What Is Literature?*, declares that, in all sorts of writing, the writer always has readers in mind: "One cannot write […] without a *certain* public which historical circumstances have made, [and] without a *certain* myth of literature which depends to a very great extent upon the demand of this public. In a word, the author is in a situation, like all other men."[16]

Similarly, Altman's view on the letter's dual potential as both a faithful portrait of soul and a deceptive mask of the writer is also approved by other critics. For example, Rosemary O'Day argues that, possessing "a specific audience in mind", the letter writer might "tak[e] up a position" and then invent a sort of persona—"constructing and presenting a case and/or an image or version of him of

[13] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, p. 88, 187.
[14] Wolfgang Iser. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 34.
[15] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. 1984. Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. Intro. Wayne C. Booth. *Theory and History of Literature, Volume 8*. Eighth Printing. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 205.
[16] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, p. 150.

herself for the benefit of the recipient"—in letter writing: "On occasion this was perhaps a very self-conscious activity; at other times the composer of the letter perhaps wrote haphazardly and with little if any deliberate guile."[17] However, Patricia Rosenmeyer insists that "[a]ll letter writers consciously participate in the invention of their personas; there is no such thing as an unself-censored, 'natural' letter, because letters depend for their very existence on specific, culturally constructed conventions of form, style, and content."[18]

Furthermore, Ruth Perry, in *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, indicates that the purpose of the letter writer's act of fantasising a "shadow" of his addressee is to "slake some psychological thirst for externalized consciousness".[19] She states that "[a] habitual letter-writer […] did not care if there were answers to his letters or not"; for him, "words are not there to inform anybody else of anything; they are simply the only way of dealing with an insoluble problem."[20] At the same time, letters allow the letter writer to "keep a relationship going in the imagination, away from tarnishing actuality".[21] In taking examples in order to prove her own ideas, Perry argues that, by "creat[ing] a caricature of his father" and "invent[ing] a version of [his father's] thoughts in order to answer them" in *Letter to His Father*, which never got sent, Kafka treats his letter as "the medium for a complex evolution of two voices" so as to "draw out his real feelings of anger and frustration", as "a particularly potent medium for [his] fantasy because [it has] the magical ability to bring people to life; addressing others on paper evokes their palpable presence", and as a place to "formally externalize[…] his own thoughts".[22]

According to Perry, in the entirely one-sided correspondence, *Five Love-Letters From a Nun to a Cavalier*, the Portuguese nun, Marianne, also transforms the epistolary discourse into a sort of "internal conversation" so as to

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[17] O'Day, Rosemary. "Tudor and Stuart Women: their Lives through their letters," *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700*. Ed. James Daybell. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001: p. 128-9.
[18] Patricia A. Rosenmeyer. *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The letter in Greek literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 10.
[19] Ruth Perry. *Women, Letters, and the Novel*. New York, N. Y.: AMS Press, Inc., 1980, p. 101-2, 112.
[20] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 112-3.
[21] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 114.
[22] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 103-4, 106.

"carry on their relationships in [her] imagination": by "imagin[ing]" the French soldier and "fabricate[ing] *his* responses", Marianne "plays both parts, providing for herself the cavalier's possible responses and then answering them."[23] In Perry's view, Marianne realises the fact that "she is writing for herself and not for him. The act of writing itself, her imaginings of the affair and her own consciousness have become more important to her than the man who is presumably to receive her letters."[24] Perry further states, "[s]uffering brings consciousness in its wake, the consciousness of self, of psychological process, and although writing relieves the suffering somewhat, it also insists upon a simultaneous awareness of the pain"; but more importantly, through writing, "the agonized individual consciousness resolves itself by being converted into some kind of public-mindedness."[25] In other words, for Perry, Marianne's letters "resolve the subjectivities into objective facts—love into a contract, individual awareness into a social consciousness."[26] Moreover, in analysing the correspondence between Héloïse and Abélard, Perry declares that Abélard tries to "transmute his private sentiments into public feelings, his personal passion into impersonal grace": "the subjective consciousness is always struggling to objectify itself."[27]

Writing with personae or not, some letter writers regard the letter as a way to externalise their mind. For example, in Emily Dickinson's eye, letters are merely the material carrier of her thoughts: "A letter always seemed to me like Immortality, for is it not the mind alone, without corporeal friend?"[28] According to Karen Lori Lebow, Emily Dickinson uses her letters to "reduce herself to a 'mind alone' and therefore presents her identity as a trace of thoughts on paper".[29] Thus, Lebow declares that, for Emily Dickinson, a letter is "an imaginative meeting of minds" and "a purely mental

[23] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 100, 102.
[24] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 111.
[25] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 112, 116.
[26] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 116.
[27] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, p. 114-5.
[28] Emily Dickinson. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson: 1845-1886* (2 Volumes). Ed. Mabel Loomis Todd. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906: p. 354.
[29] Lori Karen Lebow. "Autobiographic Self-Construction in the Letters of Emily Dickinson." Diss. University of Wollongong, Australia, 1999: p. 166.

activity".[30] Lebow also argues that, by depicting "a moment of self-consciousness" to put her best self or selves forward" in her letters, Emily Dickinson aims to "deliberately create unique textual identities" so as to "suit each recipient", to "meet audience expectations", as well as to "develop the desired relationships".[31] Lebow hence declares that, for Emily Dickinson, "[t]he letter text becomes an emblem of the self, and the inscribed page represents a physical extension of the writer's identity."[32]

Marietta Messmer not merely indicates that Emily Dickinson's "epistolary selves—rather than presenting unmediated self-revelatory chronicles of real-life experiences from the perspective of a unified 'self'—become discursive constructs created for and addressed to a specific audience", but more importantly, she insists that Emily Dickinson's "discursive strategies of self-fashioning often simultaneously also ascribe specific roles to her addresses, thus manipulating them into playing a prescribed part."[33] In other words, in Messmer's view, it is through a purposeful re-creation of a particular epistolary self that Emily Dickinson actually aims to impel her addressee to refashion his/her own self so as to meet her own need, to facilitate her future narrative style, as well as to suit her own capacity: "In this way, Dickinson uses textually constructed roles to tailor her *addressees* to suit her *own* expectations. As a result, the genre of the private letter is turned into a radical tool of control, manifesting itself in Dickinson's reconstructions and redefinitions of her respective addressees' roles."[34]

Robert Graham Lambert treats Emily Dickinson's "finest letters […] both as conscious works of art—her drafts and revisions reveal the pains she took over them—and as unconsciously revealing statements about her soul."[35] He not only declares that for Emily Dickinson, "[a]lthough" these letters are an overflow from the

[30] Lori Karen Lebow, "Autobiographic Self-Construction in the Letters of Emily Dickinson," p. 166.
[31] Lori Karen Lebow, "Autobiographic Self-Construction in the Letters of Emily Dickinson," p. 4, 15.
[32] Lori Karen Lebow, "Autobiographic Self-Construction in the Letters of Emily Dickinson," p. 44.
[33] Marietta Messmer. *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001, p. 134, 136.
[34] Marietta Messmer, *A Vice for Voices: Reading Emily Dickinson's Correspondence*, 136.
[35] Robert Graham Lambert Jr.. *The Prose of a Poet: A Critical Study of Emily Dickinson's Letters*. University of Pittsburgh, 1968: p. iv.

heart, they are nevertheless carefully managed by the mind,"[36] but also insists: "The conscious or unconscious artistry" of the letters written by such poets as Emily Dickinson, Keats and Dylan Thomas, suggests that their letters "might well be read as art rather than autobiography, and the stylistic qualities of this 'unofficial' writing compared to the features of their prose and poetry written for publication. In short, reading a great letter can be as vital an aesthetic experience as reading a great lyric or sonnet."[37]

Similarly, in Kafka's eye, a letter merely belongs to the writer's mental activity:

> The easy possibility of writing letters—from a purely theoretical point of view—must have brought wreck and ruin to the souls of the world. Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one's own ghost, which secretly evolves inside the letter one is writing or even in a whole series of letters, where one letter corroborates another and can refer to it as witness. How did people ever get the idea they can communicate with one another by letter![38]

On the one hand, Kafka not only admits the letter writer's sense of audience, but also realises the falseness of the addressee: the person present in his mind when he is writing the very letter is merely an imaginary figure conjured up by himself rather than the real recipient. On the other hand, Kafka suggests that letter writing is also a process where the letter writer converses with the imaginary figures of his own different selves. Therefore, in indicating two types of "ghosts", Kafka opposes the basic function of a letter as a way of communication; rather, he redefines epistolary discourse as a conversation between the letter writer and his imaginary figures. Since both sorts of imaginary audience are created by the letter writer himself, epistolary discourse might be regarded as a sort of soliloquy or a dialogue between his different

[36] Robert Graham Lambert Jr., *The Prose of a Poet: A Critical Study of Emily Dickinson's Letters*, p. 96.
[37] Robert Graham Lambert Jr., *The Prose of a Poet: A Critical Study of Emily Dickinson's Letters*, p. 196-7.
[38] Franz Kafka. *Letters to Milena*. Trans. and Intro. Philip Boehm. New York: Schocken Books, 1990, p. 223.

selves.

The consideration of letters as co-creation of writer-addressee seems to accord with Woolf's own view, as she shows in a letter written on 18 July 1934 to R. C. Trevelyan: "I think the presence of a human being at the end of your poem is an admirable device—because like all good letter writers you feel a little of the other's influence, which breaks up the formality, to me very happily" (*L V*, 317). Analysing Trevelyan's poetic letters, *Rimeless Numbers* (1932),[39] Woolf points out that the letter writers, including her addressee, are fully aware of their letter readers; accordingly, this sort of letter writing can reveal the addressee's particular personality, background, interest or capacity.

Similarly, in a letter written on 4 October 1929 to Gerald Brenan, Woolf indicates that it is by hypothesising a specific sort of reader—the implied reader, who possesses a sort of sympathetic resonance with the writer and is able to share his intentions— that writers, including the letter writer, are able to write:

> Suppose one could really communicate, how exciting it would be! Here I have covered one entire blue page and said nothing. One can at most hope to suggest something. Suppose you are in the mood, when this letter comes, and read it in precisely the right light, by your Brazier in your big room, then by some accident there may be roused in you some understanding of what I, sitting over my log fire in Monks House, am, or feel, or think. It all seems infinitely chancy and infinitely humbugging—so many asseverations which are empty, and tricks of speech; and yet this is the art to which we devote our lives. Perhaps that is only true of writers—then one tries to imagine oneself in contact, in sympathy; one tries vainly to put off this interminable—what is the word I want?—something between maze and catacomb—of the flesh. And all one achieves is a grimace. And so one is driven to write books— (*L IV*, 97)

[39] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 317, note 1: "In May 1932 the Hogarth Press published Trevelyan's *Rimeless Numbers*, which contained a number of poetic letters addressed to his friends, with titles like, 'Epistola ad D.M.' [Desmond MacCarthy]; 'ad A.W.' [Arthur Waley]; 'ad L.P.S.' [Logan Pearsall Smith] etc. He also addressed one to Virginia and sent her a copy, but did not publish it until after her death, when it appeared in his *Aftermath* (Hogarth Press, 1941)."

In Woolf's eye, the writer's sense of audience—the ability to reconstruct her addressee through her memory, imagination and expectation—involves "the art" of writing. At the end of this letter, Woolf again confirms such a sense of audience: "It is an interesting question—what one tries to do, in writing a letter—partly of course to give back a reflection for the other person" (*L IV*, 98). Meanwhile, Woolf admits the falseness of this hypothesis—"a grimace". In other words, for Woolf, not only such a reader has no reality, but also the idea of a sympathetic resonance is an illusion.

All in all, for both critics and letter writers, including Woolf, epistolary writing is the fruit of the writer's and reader's co-creation. Woolf's view will be detailed in the first half of this part, Chapter Seven, which will explore various characteristics of Woolf's letter writing. Whereas, Chapter Eight will mainly explore what self Woolf, as a letter writer, presents in her letters.

Chapter Seven:

Letter writing as writer's and addressee's co-creation

7.1. Male friends

7.1.1. Thoby Stephen

In the six volumes of her letters, Thoby Stephen, who went to preparatory school, then to Clifton College, and from there to Cambridge, is Virginia Stephen's first addressee.[1] Thoby died on 20 November 1906, and there are only twenty-two letters preserved.[2] The author's epistolary writing to her brother reveals a strong awareness of her female identity as a girl who was educated at home, mainly by their parents and partly by borrowing books from their father's library.[3] For example, in a letter dated 1902, such a self-consciousness even inhibits her writing: "I saw a blue bird with a yellow chest and cheeks on my window sill, the other morning. What should you think he was. 'My dear Goat—no woman knows how to describe a thing accurately!'" (*L I*, 59) This self-consciousness is actually produced by the author's sense of audience, which can also be revealed through her imaginary criticism from her brother.

Virginia Stephen's self-consciousness and her sense of audience can both be seen in the very first letter written on 6 March 1896 to Thoby:

> It is so windy to day, that Miss Jan [Virginia herself] is quite afraid of venturing out. The other day her skirt was blown over her head, and she trotted along in a pair of red flannel drawers to the great amusement of the Curate who happened to be coming out of Church. She swears that she blushed the colour of the said drawers, but that must be taken for granted. I have nothing to tell you, Your Highness. (*L I*, 2)

In order to get rid of this restraint, Virginia Stephen uses "Miss Jan" to replace the first person singular pronoun—"I". By writing herself as the other in her memory, the author not only possesses a much freer manner, but also is able to bring such a scene

[1] See the editors' introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 1.
[2] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 248, note 2: "Thoby Stephen had died that morning, 20 November 1906."
[3] See editors' introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 1.

of self-representation under her control, to distance it, as well as to command it. This scene can also suggest a change in the author's epistolary writing: it is not merely her private writing; rather, it can be regarded as the practice or the embryo of her future fictional writing. This sort of epistolary writing can also be seen in another letter written on 24 February 1897 to her brother, when she describes her seeing Queen Victoria with her half-sister, Stella Duckworth: "After this excitement we had to recross the street—Poor Janet [Virginia] was almost crushed by the agitated ladies (they were almost all stout females from the country) who were also making for the pavement—" (*L I*, 6).

Thoby provokes the author's potential for fictional writing; thus, her epistolary writing can be considered as the site of her creative writing. Moreover, Virginia Stephen wants to treat their correspondence as a sort of literary debate. For example, in a letter written on 29 January 1902:

> My real object in writing is to make a confession—which is to take back a whole cartload of *goatisms* which I used at Fritham and elsewhere in speaking of a certain great English writer—the greatest: I have been reading Marlow, and I was so much more impressed by him than I thought I should be, that I read Cymbeline just to see if there mightnt be more in the great William than I supposed. And I was quite upset! Really and truly I am now let in to [the] company of worshippers—though I still feel a little oppressed by his—greatness I suppose. I shall want a lecture when I see you: to clear up some points about the Plays. I mean about the characters. Why aren't they more human? Imogen and Posthumous and Cymbeline—I find them beyond me—Is this my feminine weakness in the upper region? But really they might have been cut out with a pair of scissors—as far as mere humanity goes—Of course they talk divinely. I have spotted the best lines in the play—almost in any play I should think— (*L I*, 45)

Almost the whole letter consists in Virginia Stephen's reflections on plays and characters—"*goatisms*".[4] Being aware of her own female identity and her education, she wants Thoby to enlighten her on reading. By expressing her own ideas, Virginia

[4] See chapter five, the animal, goat, is an image that the author creates for herself in her letters to her brother.

Stephen not only attempts to provoke her addressee, but simultaneously she controls the subjects of their epistolary conversation so as to satisfy her own needs.

Briefly, in her letters to Thoby, both the style of writing and the content reveal Virginia Stephen's sense of audience and her consciousness of her female identity—either "my feminine weakness" or "the feminine mind" (*L I*, 46). Both types of awareness can stimulate the author's potential for fictional writing and reveal her desire for a literary or intellectual conversation with a male addressee. Thus, for Virginia Stephen, letters become a practice field for her writing and a forum of artistic debates rather than a private sphere.

7.1.2. Bloomsbury Group members

Reading the author's letters to other Bloomsbury Group members, we can see that her letter writing not only reveals her sense of audience but implements the two functions that her letters to Thoby Stephen do: they are mainly a practice field for writing and a forum of artistic debates. Clive Bell, who later becomes her brother-in-law, is her first male friend in her letters. In a letter dated 31 December 1909, Virginia Stephen indicates that her sense of audience provokes in her a strong self-consciousness: "But why do I always feel self-conscious when I write to you? I wish you would think that out and tell me" (*L I*, 418). Such consciousness of being a woman letter writer stirs in her a feeling of shyness—"I am really shy of expressing my affection for you. Do you know women?" (*L I*, 345) or "I am still very shy of saying what I feel" (*L I*, 419)—and "the d——d smugness" (*L I*, 419) while writing letters. At the same time, as shown in a letter written on 6 May 1908, Virginia Stephen is afraid that he may "laugh at the natural trend of [her] letter" (*L I*, 330), which is composed with Virginia Stephen's truthful scrutiny of her own mind—"I shall reach the uttermost corner, and crawl even into the crevices. Now there are 3 hard cs already; they dog me, and pepper my page with their brazen rings" (*L I*, 329)—and her "incomprehensible and quite negligible femininity" (*L I*, 329) which is mainly reflected through her "looseness" (*L I*, 330): "gashes" or "great gaps are in all my sentences, stitches across with conjunctions—and verbosity—and emphasis" (*L I*,

330).

If the sense of audience may function as a sort of psychological barrier to free writing, it may also play the role of stimulant: "Isn't there a kind of talk which we could all talk, without these mystic reservations? That is what I grope after, and believe we ought to find" (*L I*, 334). In other words, Clive provokes Virginia Stephen to contemplate the nature of letter writing. Actually, in the first volume, letter writing is the major subject of the epistolary conversation between the author and Clive, for example, in a letter dated February 1907:

> Your letter surely craves a premeditated answer; yet how did the correspondents of Gibbon achieve their share of the task? did they perambulate the study table too, casting periods as the angler casts his line or did they commend themselves to the sheet as simply as the child betakes itself to the Lords Prayer? I have a fancy that the great man was content with little eloquence in his friends if their attitude was pious.
>
> A true letter, so my theory runs, should be a film of wax pressed close to the graving in the mind; but if I followed my own prescription this sheet would be scored with some very tortuous and angular incisions. Let me explain that I began some minutes since to review a novel and made its faults, by a process common among minds of a certain order or disorder, the text for a soliloquy upon many matters of importance; the sky and the breeze were part of my theme. (*L I*, 281-2)

The author opposes Clive's method of letter writing: letters are treated as a means of persuasion to obtain an expected response or as an act of confession. On the contrary, in Woolf's eyes, the letters of great men, such as Edward Gibbon, are able to conquer their correspondents not by their "eloquence," persuasion or confession; but by their true, "pious," verbal representation of thoughts and their honest way to record the disconnected and dissonant nature of the ordinary brain activity. This sort of letter is what the author herself writes, as she shows in a letter dated March 1911: "My head feels like a gently bubbling kettle—an ideal state; though perhaps you wont see the virtues of it reflected here" (*L I*, 454).

Besides, for the author a true letter is not only able to translate the writer's

mind but also the writer's soliloquy. In terms of drama, a soliloquy consists in speaking one's thoughts aloud when by oneself or regardless of any hearers. Here, in defining a letter as a soliloquy, the author seems to suggest that a true letter should be written unconsciously, as a speech addressed, basically and essentially, to oneself. In short, in the author's eye, a letter is composed with the dramatic technique of soliloquy. Similarly, in a letter written on 28 August 1908, the author again conveys her opinion of letter writing: "I expect that we differ a little in our view of what a letter should be, for I expect (as I read them) that you think more *pains* are needed than I do. […] the only view I will put forward is that you might put your style at the *gallop* rather more than you do. After all, the only way of *expanding* it is to try to *grasp things that you dont quite grasp*" (*L I*, 361-2, *our emphasis*). This advice on letter writing to her addressee reveals that, for Virginia Stephen, letter writing should be free, trace the writer's fleeting consciousness, explore every atom of thought, as well as elaborate his inner life with words.

In a letter written on 22 March 1907 to Clive, while describing her difficulty in writing a letter at the time when she was moving into a new house,[5] Virginia Stephen alludes to the conventional perception of women's letters: "And I put 'he' because a woman, dear Creature, is always naked of artifice; and that is why she generally lives so well, and writes so badly" (*L I*, 289). Thus, by redefining a true letter, the author attempts to challenge the convention of letter writing. However, such a redefinition of a letter as a soliloquy seems to go against the author's opinion of the writer's sense of audience or her idea of writing differently to different people, as can be seen in a letter written on 28 February 1927 to Vita Sackville-West: "Oh and does it strike you that one's friendships are long conversations, perpetually broken off, but always about the same thing with the same person? With Lytton I talk about reading; with Clive about love; with Nessa about people; with Roger about art; with Morgan about writing; with Vita—well, what do I talk about with Vita?" (*L III*, 337) Here, the author suggests that the subjects of her letters are chosen on purpose to address a

[5] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 289, note 2: "Virginia and Adrian were leaving Gordon Square the next week for their new house."

specific person.

Nevertheless, if considered much more carefully, each of the author's statements mentioned previously appears to possess a different significance. In other words, by referring to the writer's sense of audience, the author shows that letters should be intentionally composed from the readers' perspectives, from what is familiar to them, according to their life experience or their artistic knowledge, in order to reduce the distance between the writer and her readers and to make the readers participate in the writer's experience of writing. Therefore, in such a letter, the content of the letter or its style should offer as much pleasure as possible to addressees. Whereas, in her definition of a true letter as a soliloquy, the author emphasises that the act of writing letters should be performed freely, fully and unconsciously.

Furthermore, the difference in opinion there is between Clive and herself on letter writing leads Virginia Stephen to stick to her own thoughts about the true nature of a letter; so do their different opinions about critical writing, as she shows in a letter written on 29 December 1910: "But I read your review with great pleasure—here you snort; partly derived from comparing it with what I should have written (this sounds natural) partly, from its own merits. You are much sturdier on your legs than you were; you stride over the ground, and plant words firmly, in a way I admire. My tendency would be to insinuate" (*L I*, 445). Though Clive's direct method of expressing his opinions in his critical writing differs from her own method of suggestiveness, Virginia Stephen appreciates and values Clive's writing. At the same time, such a comparison makes the author realise the importance of the suggestive method in writing.

Clive, as a reviewer and journalist, is also the author's first reader and critic of her first novel, *Melymbrosia*, which was published as *The Voyage Out* (1915). He gives Virginia Stephen his "encouragement" (*L I*, 361, 383), "praise" (*L I*, 383), as well as "assurance" (*L I*, 383). Apart from being the site of their literary debate, letter writing is also Virginia Stephen's central form of artistic expression. For example, in a letter dated 7 February 1909, in which she answers Clive's criticism of *Melymbrosia*, she mentions that the suggestive method should also be her style in fictional writing:

"I never meant to preach, and agree that like God, one shouldn't" (*L I*, 383), that the writer always has a particular reader in mind while writing: "It is very difficult to […] ignore the opinion of one's probable readers" (*L I*, 383), and that she aims to convey ideas in her novel rather than write for descendants: "The only possible reason for writing down all this, is that it represents roughly a view of one's own. My boldness terrifies me" (*L I*, 383), and "we need not always be thinking of posterity" (*L I*, 383).

Similarly, writing letters to Clive is also part of the author's practice of fictional writing, in particular when one of them goes travelling. For example, Virginia Stephen composes a letter around nine to ten at night on 26 December 1909 in a village hotel, when she revisits Cornwall. First of all, the letter begins with Virginia Stephen's description of the village life at this particular hour on a festival night:

> It is past nine o'clock, and the people still sing carols beneath my window, which is open, owing to the clemency of the night. *I am* at the crossroads, and at the centre of the gossip of the village. The young men spend most of the day leaning against the wall, and sometimes spitting. Innumerable hymns and carols issue from barns and doorsteps. Several windows, behind which matrons sit, are red and yellow, and a number of couples are wandering up and down the roads, which shine dimly. Then there is the [Godrevy] lighthouse, seen as through steamy glass, and a grey flat where the sea is. (*L I*, 416, *our emphasis*)

In this description, as in other paragraphs in this letter, Virginia Stephen tries to adopt or imitate the tone and prose of Lady Hester Stanhope whose memoirs she is reading in order to write her article, "'Lady Hester Stanhope' (1910)."

This description is immediately followed with Virginia Stephen's presentation of her own view, thought, and feeling:

> There is no moon, or stars, but the air is soft as down, and *one* can see trees on the ridge of the road, and the shapes of everything without any detail. No one seems to have any wish to go to bed. They circle aimlessly. Is this going on in all the villages of England now? After dinner is a very pleasant time. *One* feels in the mood for phrases, as

> *one* sits by the fire, thinking how *one* staggered up Tren Crom in the mist this afternoon, and sat on a granite tomb on the top, and surveyed the land, with rain dripping against *one's* skin. (*L I*, 416, *our emphasis*)

The subject shifts from the first person singular, "I", at the beginning of the paragraph to the indefinite impersonal pronoun, "one". The first "one" suggests that Virginia Stephen regards herself as part of the people in the village, and her views and thoughts become general ones. While in the second half, Virginia Stephen uses "one" first to describe her feelings and then to present herself in her memory; she thus transforms her personal epistolary writing into a sort of impersonal writing so as to avoid egotism in her letters as much as possible: "A horrible tone of egoistic joy pervades this sheet I know" (*L I*, 416). Such a way of using the indefinite pronoun in order to change a personal opinion into a general one can also be seen in the passage where the author describes her own feelings while reading Lady Hester Stanhope's memoirs at the end of the first paragraph in this letter: "Then I have run through a great part of Lady Hester Stanhopes memoirs, […] One reads like an express train—from tea to bedtime. […] One gradually sees shapes and thinks oneself in the middle of a world" (*L I*, 416).

Accordingly, this letter can be regarded as Virginia Stephen's experimental ground: by imitating Lady Hester Stanhope's tone or changing pronouns, Virginia Stephen trains herself to be a writer. Such practice can also be found in the letters written to Clive around 1929-1930 when he is staying in France. By composing "the growing incoherence of this letter" (*L IV*, 51), dated 2 May 1929, when Clive was at Cassis, Woolf attempts to describe her life in detail so as to make it transparent. Similarly, in another letter written on 18 January 1930 when Clive was in Paris, Woolf composes "this long ill considered and ill written letter" (*L IV*, 130) in order to present "the course of [her] life" (*L IV*, 127). First, in these descriptions of impressions of her own life, the subject of "Virginia" (*L IV*, 49, 130) suggests that Woolf herself becomes the other, who exists independently in her memory. Meanwhile, in representing "[l]ife […] made up of trifles" (*L IV*, 49) as detailed as possible, Woolf seems to develop a new perspective in her writing.

In a letter written on 4 October 1929 to Gerald Brenan, Woolf explains:

> You say you can't finish your book because *you have no method, but see points, here and there, with no connecting line*. And that is precisely *my state* at the moment, beginning another [*The Waves*]; What do all the books I have written avail me? Nothing. Is it the curse of our age or what? The will o' the wisp moves on, and I see the lights (when I lie in bed at nights, or sit over the fire) as bright as stars, and cant reach them. *I daresay its the continuity of daily life, something believable and habitual that we lack.* I give it up. Not writing books I mean; only understanding my own psychology as a writer. I thought I had anyhow learnt to write quickly: now its a hundred words in a morning, and scratchy and in [hand-]writing, like a child of ten. *And one never knows after all these years how to end, how to go on:* one never sees more than a page ahead; why then does one make any pretensions to be a writer? *Why not pin together one's scattered sheets*—I daresay one would be wise to. (*L IV*, 97-8, *our emphasis*)

Like Gerald, Woolf encounters her own difficulties in writing *The Waves* (1931), which, apart from nine brief third-person interludes evoking a coastal scene throughout a single day, is composed of six soliloquies. If moments of being or fragmentary impressions make up the proper stuff that the writer is responsible for in writing so as to record the process of mental activity and explore the human mind, as Woolf repeats in her essays and as she is doing at that time in *The Waves*, it seems that, while writing this novel, Woolf begins to realise that moments of non-being possess the same importance as moments of being in fictional writing.[6]

This is confirmed by Woolf's own words in "A Sketch of the Past": "The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being. I think Jane Austen can; and Trollope; perhaps Thackeray and Dickens and Tolstoy. I have never been able to do both. I tried—in *Night and Day*; and in *The Years*" (*MOB*, 70). Accordingly, writing to Clive during this period, Woolf attempts to record the course of her own life—both moments of being and non-being—as "fully frankly freely" (*L IV*, 313) as possible so as to present "the continuity of daily life, something believable and habitual". This

[6] See also introduction to chapter one.

sort of letter writing can also be regarded as the author practising for her next novel, *The Years* (1937).

In the first volume of her letters, we can see that the Bloomsbury Group members not only arouse Virginia Stephen's interest and admiration, but also make her feel that she might be intellectually inferior to them. Indeed, in a letter written on 28 April 1908 to Lytton Strachey, she writes: "You terrify me with your congregations of intellect upon Salisbury plain.[7] My reverence for clever young men affects me with a kind of mental palsy. I really cannot conceive what the united minds of all those you name produced in the way of talk. Did you—but I can't begin to consider it even" (*L I*, 328). In Virginia Stephen's letters, Lytton appears as the second male addressee. If writing to Thoby, the author feels herself intellectually or educationally inferior to her brother; if writing to Clive, she is conscious of herself as a woman letter writer; while writing to Lytton who is a writer, she undergoes a sort of experience as a female writer.

For example, in a letter written on 4 June 1909, Virginia Stephen states: "I am absorbed in [Jules] Michelet. Is it really a vile book? It is thus that I should write the history of the Restoration if I were a man" (*L I*, 398). While writing her own novel, *Melymbrosia*, at the time, she cannot help imagining herself as a writer while reading others' writing. Similarly, in a letter written on 22 April 1908 while travelling to Cornwall, the author attempts to imitate John Galsworthy's style:

> The only notepaper to be had in the county of Cornwall is this—what they call commercial. Indeed, if you could see under what circumstances I write a letter you would think me something of a moralist. I have a sitting room, which is the dining room, and it has a side-board, with a cruet and a silver biscuit box. I write at the dining table, having lifted a corner of the table cloth, and pushed away several small silver pots of flowers. This might be the beginning of a novel by

[7] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1888-1912*, p. 328, note 1: "Lytton had been staying in a small hotel on Salisbury Plain with James Strachey (his younger brother), Maynard Keynes, R. C. Trevelyan, G. E. Moore (the Cambridge philosopher), R. G. Hawtrey (the economist), Rupert Brooke, and Charles Sanger (the lawyer)."

Mr. Galsworthy. (*L I*, 327)

In Leonard Woolf's eye, the correspondence between Lytton and the author reveals "[t]heir mutual *gêne*": "it occasionally gives an impression of self-consciousness—even of stiltedness—[…] each was a little wary of the other: in writing to each other they were always on their best behaviour, and never felt so much at ease."[8] Based on Leonard's view, Nigel Nicolson gives a further analysis:

> This needs some qualification, for Virginia's behaviour was not at its best in any sense except the literary. In writing to Lytton she became inordinately malicious. She wishes him to think her clever more than delectable. The slide of her ski turns into the cut of a skate. There is a certain defensiveness in her manner towards him, a touch of conceit tempered by her fear of appearing ridiculous, of finding her irony turned against her. She was alarmed by him, and faintly jealous.[9]

Nigel Nicolson's perception of Virginia Stephen's "conceit" and "jealousy" echo her own statements, as in a letter written on 9 August 1908:

> I then turned to Lytton's poems […] Yes, they are exquisite, […] But […] there is something of *ingenuity* that prevents me from approving as warmly as I should; do you know what I mean when I talk of his *verbal felicities*, which somehow evade, when a true poet, I think, would have committed himself? "Enormous mouth", "unimaginable repose", "mysterious ease", "incomparably dim"; when I came upon these I hesitate; I roll them upon my tongue; I do not feel that I am breasting *fresh streams*. But then I am a contemporary, a jealous contemporary, and I see perhaps the marks of the tool where Julian will see the entire shape. I sometimes think that Lytton's mind is too *pliant* and *supple* ever to make anything *lasting*; his resources are infinite. Jealousy—no doubt! (*L I*, 344, *our emphasis*)

Virginia Stephen appreciates Lytton's poetic writing, but in this critical appraisal, she points out that Lytton's style of writing, which seems crafty and apt in phrase making,

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[8] Woolf, Leonard, and James Strachey. ed. Preface. *Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey: Letters*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956: p. vi-vii.
[9] Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1888-1912*, p. xx.

lacks inspiration.

In a letter written on 1 February 1909, Virginia Stephen shows that Lytton's letters arouse her desire to develop her literary opinions: "You always tempt me to run on, and justify myself and explain myself, with your hints and subtleties and suggestive catlike ways" (*L I*, 382). The stimulating power hidden in this sort of critical reading seems more important for a writer. In other words, besides dissatisfaction, Lytton's style provokes Virginia Stephen to invent her own style so as to challenge male or conventional writing. Such a challenge can also be seen in her own letters to Lytton, for example, in a letter written on 30 August 1908: "Yes, Clive spoke very highly of your poems, and I got them out of Nessa at last. […] Compliments I know mean nothing to you; nor my green blushes, nor any other form of adulation. If you think of me as a woman of sound common sense, I have a vivid picture of you—an oriental potentate, in a flowered dressing gown" (*L I*, 365). Virginia Stephen highlights herself as "a woman of sound common sense" and uses an imaginary scene to praise Lytton as a young writer. Thus, this figurative language endowed with a symbolic power may be considered as the beginning of the author's challenge to the conventional style of male writing.

In the first volume of letters, Virginia Stephen also asks Saxon Sydney-Turner to illuminate the difficulties that she encounters in reading, as she shows in a letter written on 14 August 1908: "I have been reading a good deal, and make some way with Moore, though I have to crawl over the same page a number of times, till I almost see my own tracks. I shall ask you to enlighten me, but I doubt that I can even ask an intelligible question" (*L I*, 352-3). Such a request for providing some insight into G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) also reveals the author's admiration for her friend and her feeling of being intellectually inferior to him. However, from the second volume of her letters onwards, Woolf becomes an innovative writer and gradually gains enough confidence in her own judgment and talent; her letters to her Bloomsbury Group friends partly play the part of literary debates rather than "lecture[s]" (*L I*, 45) and partly become the site for her practice of writing. There, her

imaginative descriptions, which involve her challenge to conventional epistolary writing, her teasing in order to amuse her addressees as well as material for her future fictional writing, occupy a large portion. At the same time, as has been shown, these friends or other friends can function as protagonists in her epistolary writing and their lives offer a rich source for her writing, including her future published work.

Nevertheless, reading through the other five volumes of her letters, we can see that Roger Fry may be the only male friend in the Bloomsbury Group that Woolf has constantly admired, deriving from him some sort of stimulation until he died on 9 September 1934. For example, in a letter written on 24 April 1918, Woolf states: "I wish I had the chance of being thoroughly enkindled by you rather oftener. I suppose you dont know your own powers in that line, which I hesitate to call divine, but still the amount of spirit that radiates from you may, for all I know, come straight from a holy source" (*L II*, 234).[10] At the same time, since her friend is a painter and an art critic who was among the first to apply formalist analysis to contemporary art in *Vision and Design* (1909), Woolf seems to practice her form of writing purposefully in her letters to him.

For instance, in a letter written at Monk's House on 29 August 1921: apart from the brief beginning and ending, the main body of this letter consists in two paragraphs. The first paragraph begins with Woolf's description of her country life:

> Then, having become very ambitious about our garden, we hear that the Squire [J. M. Allison] is going to build a villa overlooking it. He is only a sham Squire too; and altogether the prospect of having Ted Hunter in the orchard is so distressing that we are off to look at a farm in the meadows near Ripe [Sussex]. There's nothing I enjoy more than looking for houses, and imagining that I am going to find the very thing, so I don't much mind. But the truth is this bit of the country is becoming picturesque. Old gentlemen sit sketching—I watch them through field glasses. You know how they do it—a grassy road—a few cows—a child in pink—perhaps a goose in the foreground. (*L II*, 477)

Then, these prospective sights or figments of her imagination are interrupted by a

[10] See also chapter five.

sight of the outer world: "Now a dead horse has just gone by in a cart" (*L II*, 477). The event of a cart passing by with a dead horse, which the letter writer catches abruptly from the window, happens simultaneously with the letter writer's mental activity—presenting her thoughts and recollecting her impressions of the country scenery—in the course of writing.

Then, after a short transition, about the writer's reaction to this sight: "You know my passion for sensation. I try to make Leonard come and look at it—but he won't—He is writing a review" (*L II*, 477), the letter immediately and smoothly shifts from the first subject—country life—to another subject, literature. This style of letter writing echoes Woolf's conception of a good letter, as she tells Saxon in a letter written on 21 August 1927: "A good way of writing a letter would be always to begin the next sentence with the last word of the one before" (*L III*, 410).

Then, Woolf focuses on John Middleton Murry's review of the addressee's, Roger Fry's article, *Architectural Heresies of a Painter* (1921):

> What he [Leonard] longs to do is to find some excuse for exposing Murry publicly. Every week there is an article in the Nation which sends the blood to his [Murry] head. Last week it was about you—the architecture pamphlet—too futile, I thought; all about the greatness of Professor Lethaby, which you don't realise. *(Now another horse has gone by—this time a brown one, alive).* I think Murry is profoundly perverted: I mean all his criticism, and his fury, and his righteousness, and his deep, manly, honest, sturdy, stammering, stuttering, endeavour to get at the truth seem to be a desire to stick pins—but he doesn't get them very far into you. (*L II*, 477-8, *our emphasis*)

The letter writer's thoughts about Murry's artistic incapability and his lack of insight are again interrupted by another sight from the outer world—a horse, "alive", this time, has ambled along her window. This evocation of the outer world appears within parentheses. If criticism has to do with thoughts and inner life, it seems that, through the use of parentheses, Woolf tries to insert the description of the physical world into the inner world. Accordingly, such punctuation marks may be considered as corporeal signs that enable Woolf to present the physical and mental worlds together, as going

on simultaneously.

The next paragraph refers to Woolf's opinion of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902):

> I have been reading Henry James—the Wings of a Dove—for the first time. I have never read his great works; but merely pretended. Certainly this is very remarkable—I am very much impressed. At the same time I am vaguely annoyed by the feeling that—well, that I am in a museum. It is all deserted. Only you and I and Melian Stawell and some wretched little pimpled spectacled undergraduate, and say Gilbert Murray, are to be seen. It is vast and silent and infinitely orderly and profoundly gloomy and every knob shines and so on. But—I am too feeble minded to finish—besides, little though you believe it—they are actually burying the white horse in the field; a man has arrived with two pick axes. (*L II*, 478)

By comparing Henry James's writing to a museum, Woolf expresses her admiration for his technique, as she does in her essay "'The Method of Henry James' (1918)": there, she expatiates on Henry James being "a great writer—a great artist. A priest of the art of writing in his lifetime, he is now among the saints to whom every writer, in particular every novelist, must do homage" (*E II*, 348). She praises the "perennial fascination" of his language: "as the writer who could make words follow his bidding, take his inflection, say what he wished them to say until the limit of what can be expressed seems to be surpassed, he is a source of perpetual wonder and delight"; but more importantly, Woolf considers "the design" as the essential art in his writing: "something more abstract, more difficult to grasp, the weaving together of many themes into one theme, the making out of a design" (*E II*, 348). Here, in this letter, the museum has become "deserted" and "gloomy". Woolf's disappointment at the lifelessness of his world is palpable. This leads her directly to the description of the physical world—the burying of the dead horse.

In short, having her addressee in mind, Woolf attempts to practice her idea of form in writing. She tries to present the inner world and the outer world in writing. In particular, parentheses function as concrete bars that both materialize and erase the

boundaries between the two worlds. If a letter is defined as a representation of the letter writer's inner life, these descriptions of the physical world may be considered as intrusions or interruptions. At the same time, from a philosophical point of view, this letter reveals that the physical world exists beyond one's individual perception, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 22 December 1932 to Ethel Smyth: "How odd that the world goes on just the same whether I look at it or not!" (*L V*, 137)

7.1.3. Other male addressees

Among other male addresses, Jacques Raverat, Gerald Brenan, Hugh Walpole, as well as her nephews, Julian and Quentin Bells, are those to whom Woolf writes much more frequently. In Woolf's letters to these five addressees, as we have shown, literary conversation is her major topic. Moreover, her imaginative descriptions for them can also be seen as her way to amuse them, a game she plays with her addressees. We can add that the representation of her own life may be considered as her practice of writing. It seems that while writing to Jacques Raverat, Woolf undergoes a particular experience of letter writing.

The third volume of Woolf's letters, written between 1923 and 1928, exposes the writer's contradictory feelings. On the one hand, Woolf repeats that her passion for writing is fading away. For example, in a letter to Saxon Sydney-Turner, she writes: "I *hate* and *detest* writing letters" (*L III*, 515). A similar emotion can also be seen in a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies: "As I grow old I hate the writing of letters more and more, and like getting them better and better" (*L III*, 53). According to Woolf herself, the reason for her growing dislike for writing letters is that letters lose their function as carriers of meaning, for instance, in a letter to Hope Mirrlees, Woolf states: "I have chosen the worst hour possible for answering you, and, so I see, convey nothing—nothing" (*L III,* 3). Moreover, letters may distort the letter writer's original intention, as she writes to Edward Sackville West: "I'm terrified of letter writing: worse than writing books; all one's meanings get wrong" (*L III*, 563). Instead of being a way to keep friendship alive, the act of letter writing may result in misunderstandings, as Woolf shows in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell: "I'm going to

give up writing letters—I always say, or convey, the exact opposite of what I mean" (*L III*, 268).

Worst of all, apart from the letter's failure to convey the writer's meanings and to revitalise old friendships, misunderstandings may result in some hostile feelings, which may break off a friendly relation, as Woolf shows in a letter to Jacques Raverat: "And to convey feelings is too difficult. I try, but I invariably make enemies" (*L III*, 77). Accordingly, in a letter to Pernel Strachey, Woolf concludes that "[l]etter writing as a game is not safe" (*L III*, 63), since some letters, which are written in "the habit of profuse and indiscriminate letter writing[:] this system (the unthinking one)" (*L III*, 63), "have had semi-fatal results: poor Mrs Eliot had a relapse; Margaret Davies wired at once; someone else has cooled and hardened; others have fired and irrupted" (*L III*, 63).

Though these "semi-fatal results" seem to discourage the author, the large amount of letters itself justifies Woolf's zest in letter writing in this volume: apart from those to Vanessa as her lifetime correspondent, one third are written to Jacques Raverat during his illness and to his widow, Gwen, after his death; while the other two thirds are to Vita Sackville-West. To use Nicolson's statement: "the wonder of her correspondence is that it never drooped, in quantity or vitality, as long as she lived."[11] Woolf's passion for writing letters can be illustrated by her own words in this volume. In her letters to Roger Fry and Logan Pearsall Smith, the author views herself as a sort of "chatterbox" (*L III*, 40, 87). Similarly, in her letter to Barbara Bagenal, she compares herself to a "cockatoo": "I am chattering like a pink and yellow cockatoo" (*L III*, 52). In the same letter to Barbara Bagenal, Woolf also expresses her pleasure in writing letters: "I have cheered myself up by writing to you" (*L III*, 52).

Again, to Jacques Raverat, who is dying, Woolf regards her own talk in her letters as that of some garrulous countrywoman: "What a letter! What a letter! It is

[11] Nigel Nicolson. Introduction. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1923-1928*. 1977. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 1st American Edition. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978: p. xvi.

like the interminable monologue of an old village woman standing at her door. Each time you say good day and try to move off, she bethinks her of something fresh and it all begins again. […] This must be my excuse for febrile verbosity" (*L III*, 60). In this quotation, Woolf considers her "habit of profuse and indiscriminate letter writing" as the performance of a character in a play giving a speech with "febrile verbosity"—"the interminable monologue".

Woolf's description of her own epistolary writing points into two directions. On the one hand, as William Pryor states,[12] after a silence of ten years, the correspondence between Woolf and Raverat is resumed in 1922, intensified during the period from the deterioration of Raverat's illness in mid-1923 until his death in March 1925, and is continued with his widow, Gwen for several months. These existent letters from Woolf to the Raverats reveal that, not only their length echoes Woolf's word, "the interminable monologue;" but the subjects in their correspondence also range far and wide, from news or gossip about Bloomsbury friends, to aesthetic views on writing and painting, or their respective standpoints about life, reality, humankind, friendship, love and the endurance of pain.[13] On the other hand, the word "monologue" Woolf uses, highlights another characteristic of her letter writing. Etymologically, according to the O.E.D., the word "monologue," from the Greek, *monologos*, means speaking alone. In a performance, a monologue is a long speech delivered by a single performer for the entertainment of other characters. Accordingly, we may say that Woolf's epistolary monologues are purposely composed in order to offer pleasure to her addressee, Raverat, who is dying. While the main function of her letters is to be carriers of pleasure, Woolf writes them with her audience, the Raverats, in mind. Or to use Pryor's own term, Woolf writes these letters self-consciously.[14]

In another letter to Raverat, written on 3 October 1924, Woolf considers her conscious act of letter writing is meant to entertain her addressees just as the

[12] William Pryor. ed. Introduction. *Virginia Woolf and the Raverats: A Different Sort of Friendship*. Bath: Clear Books, 2003.
[13] See William Pryor, Introduction, p. 17-8.
[14] See William Pryor, "Introduction," p. 19: "It is striking how almost nervous—certainly self-conscious—the Raverats and Virginia are of each other."

performance of a character delivering a monologue with a mask is:

> The difficulty of writing letters is, for one thing, that one has to simplify so much, and hasn't the courage to dwell on the small catastrophes which are of such huge interest to oneself; and thus *has to put on a kind of unreal personality*; which, when I write to you for example, whom I've not seen these 11 years, becomes *inevitably jocular*. I suppose *joviality* is *a convenient mask*; and then, being a writer, *masks irk me*; I want, in my old age, to *have done with all superfluities*, and *form words precisely on top of the waves of mind—a formidable undertaking*. (*L III*, 136, *our emphasis*)

In short, in Woolf's own eye, those letters, in the first third of the volume, consist in monologues, which, like an actor, she delivers in a conscious manner in order to entertain her addressees. However, writing her letters consciously with a mask and with an audience in mind irritates Woolf and prevents her from composing a true letter. How, then, can Woolf master the unconscious art of letter writing? This will be discussed in the next section of this chapter focusing on Woolf's letters to Vita Sackville-West in the second part of the third volume.

7.2. Female companions

Introduction: The female charm

The fact that most of the author's letters are written to women is already a demonstration of her preference for women. The overwhelming space devoted to women in the author's letters, as we have seen, goes the same way. And Woolf herself confirms this. In a letter written on 1 October 1905 to Violet Dickinson, the author states: "Oh women are my line and not these inanimate creatures [two Cambridge youths]" (*L I*, 208), while in a letter written on 22 September 1907, she declares: "I was talking today—singing rather—the praises of that exquisite constellation—Nelly [Lady Robert Cecil] and Violet and Ly. G. God: Osborne. Like a hot goat, I am pining

for my garden of beautiful women" (*L I*, 311). In another letter dated February 1903, the author shows that women's beauty stirs her desire for affection and intimacy:

> I am so susceptible to female charms, […] But first by a long way is that divine Venus who is Katie [Lady Cromer] and you and Nessa and all good and beautiful (which are you I wonder?) women—whom I adore. I weep tears of tenderness to think of that great heart of pity for Sparroy locked up in stone—never to throw her arms round me—as she [Katie] would, if only she could—I know it and feel it. (*L I*, 69-70)

Unfortunately, in the author's eye, Lady Katie Cromer cannot satisfy her desire. Still in another letter written on 2 October 1903, the author shows her appreciation of sincerity and candor in female relationship: "You remember there is a very fine instinct wireless telepathy nothing to it—in women—the darlings—which fizzle up pretences, and I know what you mean though you dont say it, and I hope its the same with you—" (*L I*, 98)

Such a preference can also be seen in the author's letters to other female addressees. For example, in a letter written on 16 May 1913 to Katherine Cox, Woolf again displays her taste for female companions: "When are you coming back? I search the world for the like of you, but haven't found her; and if there's one thing I love it is female society" (*L II*, 27). In another letter written on 9 October 1919 to the same addressee, Woolf not only praises her friend's motherhood: "Haven't I always said that I could practically see the shapes of little Bruins attached to your neck? It will be a superb nursery—the old mother bear occasionally rolling over to give her cubs a lick, and everything smelling so nice of milk and straw" (*L II*, 391),[15] but also states: "Well, well—I think all good mothers ought to consider me half their child, which is what I like best" (*L II*, 391). Indeed, as we have shown in Chapter Six, the characteristic common to Violet Dickinson, Vanessa Bell, Vita Sackville-West, and Ethel Smyth that Woolf admires and desires is their maternal instinct. When writing to other female addressees, her discourse is not very different. For example, in a letter

[15] See also chapter five.

written on 17 August 1930 to Janet Vaughan: "Anyhow, incoherent and harried as I am, I send, dear Janet, what is really a token of deep affection, remembering Madge [Margaret Vaughan], and feeling dumbly and curiously some feeling of maternal affection (though I've no right) in her place for you" (*L VI*, 528).

Similarly, in a letter written on 15 February 1925 to Marjorie Joad, Woolf imagines an agreeable female companionship at her own party: "You and I will give a party in the summer, for compatibles only, in the studio. I insist upon a sufficiency of young women. Oh the innumerable dull young men I know!" (*L III*, 168); or in a letter from 13 May 1921 to Vanessa Bell, Woolf writes: "I'm universally hated by women, they say, for being such a domineering character, so crafty, dishonest and insinuating. Yet I adore them—" (*L II*, 470); in another letter written on 9 April 1927, while travelling in Palermo, Woolf states: "Much though I love my own sex, my gorge heaves at the traveling female" (*L III*, 361). Moreover, in a letter written on 22 May 1927 to her sister, Woolf points out the difference between the two sexes:

> You will never succumb to the charms of any of your sex—What an *arid* garden the world must be for you! What avenues of *stone pavements and iron railings*! Greatly though I respect the male mind, and adore Duncan (but, thank God, he's hermaphrodite, androgynous, like all great artists) I can*not* see that they have *a glowworm's worth of charm* about them—The scenery of the world takes *no luster* from their presence. They add of course immensely to its dignity and safety: but when it comes to *a little excitement*—! (I see that you will attribute all this to your own charms in which I daresay you're not far wrong). (*L III*, 381, *our emphasis*)

For Woolf, contrary to her sister who appreciates the male charm, it is the female charm, its humanity and its beauty that enriches her life, excites her, as well as amuses her.

As shown in Chapter Five, in Woolf's eye, female beauty plays the role of light warming her, illuminating her life as well as supporting her. In her letters indeed, the image of light is frequently used to describe such a charm as the Vaughan sisters, Violet Dickinson, Vanessa Bell, Lady Ottoline Morrell, Vita Sackville-West, Lady

Sibyl Colefax, or Ethel Smyth possess. At times, light becomes a chemical phenomenon, phosphorescence, and the image is used to evoke the beauty of other women: for example, the "evanescent" beauty of Lady Robert Cecil's niece "suggests phosphorescent" (*L I*, 467), Alix Strachey "flow[s] with a queer phosphorescent beauty" (*L V*, 45), as well as "She's [Vioctoria Ocampo] immensely rich, amorous […] with eyes like the roe of codfish phosphorescent: whats underneath I dont know" (*L VI*, 310). The author's impressions of the transitory beauty of women are always conveyed in terms of light.

Furthermore, in a letter written on 23 May 1931 to her sister, Woolf indicates that it is "some mystic charm" (*L IV*, 336) in women that provokes in her a sort of illusion: "I suppose its something to do with the illusion of sex: the male sex illudes you; the female me: Thus I see the male in its reality; you the female" (*L IV*, 336). In other words, the female charm functions as a catalyst that stimulates her imagination. This stimulating effect of women can also be seen in a letter written on 19 August 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "Women alone stir my imagination" (*L IV*, 203). Vita Sackville-West herself remembers, while recollecting her travel with Woolf at the end of September 1928, that Woolf said to her: "women stimulate her imagination, by their grace & their art of life."[16]

Conversely, Woolf shows her taste for women while writing to Vita. For example, in a letter written on 31 January 1929, she shows her longing for a female companion: "Dr Rendel can't imagine why I want to see Mary, (her cousin). There is such a thing as womanly charm I reply" (*L IV*, 10). Similarly, Woolf also expresses her appreciation of the sincere relationship between women: for instance, in a letter written on 31 January 1927, she points out: "women confide in one. One pulls a shade over the fury of sex; and then all the veins and marbling, which, between women, are so fascinating, show out" (*L III*, 320); while in a letter written on 12 February 1929, she writes: "But how fascinating sincerity between women is—how terrifically exciting!" (*L IV*, 20)

[16] Vita Sackville-West. "A Week in France with Virginia Woolf." *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995: p. 35.

Such expressions can also be found in Woolf's letters to Jacques Raverat: for example, in a letter written on 19 November 1924: "One reflection occurred to me, dealing with our Mrs Joad, the other basement dweller—how much nicer young women are than young men. I hope to get a rise out of you. Nicer, I say, humaner, less conceited, more sensitive,—not cleverer" (*L III*, 145); while in a letter written on 24 January 1925: "Then the ladies, either in self protection, or imitation or genuinely, are given to their sex too. […] they interest me" (*L III*, 155). For Woolf, women have the merits of humanity, modesty, sensitiveness, candour; they also seem more sympathetic to her, as she shows in another letter written on 5 February 1925 to this friend:

> Much preferring my own sex, as I do, or at any rate, finding the monotony of young mens' conversation considerable, and resenting the eternal pressure which they put, if you're a woman, on one string, find the disproportion excessive, and intend to cultivate women's society entirely in future. Men are all in the light always: *with women you swim at once into the silent dusk*. (*L III*, 164, *our emphasis*)

In short, in Woolf's eye, the female charm involves the beauty of their physical appearance and the virtues of their character, such as their maternal instinct, sincerity, humanity, sensitiveness, as well as modesty. Both types of charm can function as a support, a source of illumination and warmth for Woolf; at the same time, they make her imagine all sorts of fanciful scenes for them. What remains to be seen is the important role Woolf's four main female addressees—Violet Dickinson, Vanessa Bell, Vita Sackville-West, and Ethel Smyth—play in her epistolary writing or even, her fictional writing.

7.2.1. Violet Dickinson

Almost all of the author's letters to Violet Dickinson were written between the end of 1902 and 1907. During that period, her father, Leslie Stephen, was ill and finally died on 22 February 1904, and then her brother, Thoby Stephen, was ill and died on 20 November 1906. Life was overflowing with pain, and the author "certainly

was rather ground down harshly by fate" (*L VI*, 90), as she later states in a letter written on 6 December 1936. As is plain to the reader, Virginia Stephen desires affection and intimacy, and fortunately, the enormity of the isolation that she feels is reduced by Violet's assistance to the Stephens' family and her affection for the author.[17] Violet's affection not only resonates in Virginia Stephen but also arouses a much stronger affection in her, as she shows in a letter dated 7 July 1903 to her friend: "The summer is winding up, and then two months will separate our friendship. It is astonishing what depths—hot volcano depths—your finger has stirred in Sparroy—hitherto entirely quiescent" (*L I*, 85). Out of her desire for affection and the strength of her feelings, Virginia Stephen created an intimate relationship in their epistolary communication, so that she could not only relieve herself from her feelings but also make them vibrate in her addressee: "I feel slightly melancholy and undomesticated; nor can I write well; and altogether mine is a case that needs affection and sympathy" (*L I*, 222).

However, the style of epistolary writing first fails Virginia Stephen, as she shows in a letter written on 30 August 1903:

> Nessa has written to you about your plans. I tried to but my literary style was choked and strangled, and I have come to the conclusion that letters are a fraud, and what shall I do when I have to write to the tradespeople—being the wife of a poor curate, and the mother of six children, born in 3 and 1/2 years? I shall go to the nearest post of office and write for Violet!!! That is practically what I spend my time in doing. (*L I*, 91)

Having both the recipient in mind and the subject matter—"your plans"—in hand, the author excercises a form of self-censorship, but she is unable to find a proper posture and adapt her style to this recipient. Nevertheless, Violet gives "*perfect freedom*" (*L I*, 206), so that Virginia Stephen can merely satisfy her own desire to compose "selfish" (*L I*, 99, 276) and "egoistical" (*L I*, 133, 276, 285) letters or letters "with perfectly unrestrained egoism" (*L I*, 214).

[17] See also chapter five.

In this sort of self-representation and self-expression, Virginia Stephen first creates a persona for herself, which is later called "that flyaway girl" (*L VI*, 89) in a letter written on 2 December 1936. In an earlier letter to Ethel Smyth from 28 June 1932, Woolf explains that such a frivolous persona in her letters to Vita Sackville-West and this addressee was initially part of a game she played with her sister, Vanessa Bell when they were children and which was meant to demand affection:

> I had meant […] to explain my idiotic or rather childish refrain "Do you like me better than—?" / This is not to be taken seriously. It is only a relic of childish days when I used to pull Nessa's amethyst beads. Say, please say you love me best: and then she'd shade her head; and then I'd go over her friends and relations, like beads; and so on. This habit comes over me still with you and Vita: and its not to be taken as a serious demand that you should soberly search your affections. Far from it. (*L V*, 72-3)

In her letters to Violet, by putting on this playful, frivolous mask and using various images, Virginia Stephen plays a game of love and "motherhood" (*L I*, 109) with her addressee so as to both demand and convey affection: Violet is her "W/woman" (*L I*, 55-7)—her "beloved Woman" (*L I*, 75) or her "G/good W/woman" (*L I*, 116, 225), her "child" (*L I*, 62, 71), as well as her "old Stepdame" (*L I*, 218); while Virginia considers herself as Violet's baby or "her offspring" (*L I*, 262).[18] Resorting to the impersonal, symbolic, and figurative language of images and to a compressed, intense style of writing—the "Style" of "Pathos", which not only contains "the inward and intimate meaning" (*L I*, 212) but also "ought to be more than brass to travel all the way" (*L I*, 209) through space and time. Virginia Stephen is able to escape her miserable self but also to convey her affection for her addressee in a playful manner so as to amuse her.

For Virginia Stephen, the powerful symbolism of imagery functions as a means to relieve her emotional burden; the act of writing itself offers the chief

[18] See chapter five.

comfort as the author's letters recurrently show: "Dont think me damned sentimental but its peace and balm to talk to you, and that is the only kind of good there is in the world. What all these tragedies are made for I believe. Otherwise it seems needless torture" (*L I*, 114); "It is a comfort to write to you" (*L I*, 130); "I wish I didn't exhaust you over my affairs, but you cant think what a relief it is to have someone—that is you, because there isnt anyone else to talk to" (*L I*, 136); and "My Violet—it is a help even to write this to you" (*L I*, 136). Concomitantly, the effort she makes to express her feelings gives the author a lot of pleasure, as she shows in a letter dated February 1907: "I do regret that I expressed myself so forcibly that day: it was only a passing melancholy. I dont think I can do very good work just yet, but I take infinite delight in exploring my own mind" (*L I*, 280).

For Virginia Stephen the letter writer, words can be an outlet for emotion and a tool to demand affection and sympathy, while the act of writing possesses a therapeutic effect; similarly, for Virginia Stephen the letter reader, words and reading can also function as a sort of remedy. Her correspondence with Violet makes Virginia Stephen realise the power of words and the significance of the act of reading. For instance, in a letter written on 25 January 1903, Virginia Stephen states that her addressee's words in "a letter of affection" have the power to materialise her abstract affection—"infinite tenderness and sentiment" and "a certain pathos", and they hence become something of "a round hard substance", like "a heart of flesh", "gold and pearls" (*L I*, 65). In a letter dated late September 1903, the author even suggests, playing on the name of her addressee, that, reading such letters, she can feel the letter writer's affection as she smells a sort of perfume: "Yrs. are like the scent of proface Violets on my plate at breakfast, such as grow in the unhallowed part of a churchyard, where *I* shall be buried one day" (*L I*, 95). Consequently, for Virginia Stephen, Violet's letters become a sort of "balm on the heart" (*L I*, 75) or "balm […] smooth[ing] all the edges of [her] torn feelings" (*L I*, 269-70).

The realisation of the significance of words and of writing as well as reading makes Virginia Stephen aware of the function of their correspondence. Again and again, in her letters to Violet, the author points out the importance of letters for their

friendship: “letters are only fit for friendship” (*L I*, 72), “Friendship, relationship at anyrate, consists in talk, or letter writing of some sort” (*L I*, 79), “our long and devoted friendship subsists on letters” (*L I*, 189), or “our intimacy is to live on ink” (*L II*, 22); the frequency of letters is just as important: “to keep a correspondence warm it should be constant” (*L I*, 367). For Virginia Stephen, such letters are both the linchpin of their relationship and the proof of their intimacy, as she shows in a letter written on 25 January 1903: “My dear woman, it [Violet’s letter of affection] is full of infinite tenderness and sentiment to me—it has a certain pathos, as though it had held *the hair* of long dead Sparroys and Violets—and now it shall descend to the illegitimates as *a pledge* that their mother had the friendship of very respectable women once” (*L I*, 65, *our emphasis*).

But, how is one to write to an addressee who is travelling abroad at a time when sending and receiving letters takes so long? This is what Virginia Stephen points out in a letter written on 1 October 1905 when Violet goes on a world cruise with Lady Robert Cecil: “Writing to you at this distance is like talking to someone in the dark; and beggarly pen and ink though the staff of my life […] carry a very short way” (*L I*, 208). Such a difficulty stimulates Virginia Stephen to find a solution, as she shows in a letter written on 10 December 1906:

> Are you in what state of body or mind? My plan is to treat you as detached spirit; maybe your body has typhoid; that is immaterial (you will be glad to hear) I address the immortal part, and shoot words of fire into the upper aer [*sic*] which spirits inhabit. They pierce you like lightning, and quicken your soul; whereas, if I said How have you slept, and what food are you taking, you would sink into your nerves and arteries and your gross pads of flesh, and perhaps your flame might snuff and die there. Who knows? (*L I*, 259)

Woolf’s “joke” or “inspiration” (*L I*, 260) not merely suggests that to her mind, her addressee becomes a sort of “immortal”, spiritual symbol, but also reveals that such a symbolic image of her addressee becomes the implied reader in the act of writing.

The experience of having the implied reader in mind while writing, together with the possibility of exchanging feelings and creating an intimate relationship in a letter, lead Virginia Stephen to think about the nature of a letter. In a letter written on 16 December 1906, Virginia Stephen attempts to define a letter: "A letter should be flawless as a gem, continuous as an eggshell, and lucid as glass" (*L I*, 264). Through three similes highlighting the perfection, value and transparency of a letter, the author points out that a letter is the material representation of one's mind and thoughts, that is, as she later indicates in a letter dated February 1907 to Clive Bell: "A true letter […] should be a film of wax pressed close to the graving in the mind" (*L I*, 282)—a sort of stream of consciousness—and it is the letter writer's "soliloquy" (*L I*, 282). The "*perfect freedom*" that Violet gives her fulfills the author's desire to compose such letters.

However, in a letter written on 20 July 1907, the author states that the flight of the mind is fragmentary, discontinuous and in disorder—"If only my flights were longer, and less variable" (*L I*, 300); thus, writing such a true letter is bound to destroy the conventional style of epistolary writing: "So my good woman,—this is a specimen of my narrative style, which is far from good, seeing that I am forever knotting it and twisting it in conformity with the coils in my own brain, and a narrative should be as straight and flexible as the line you stretch between pear trees, with your linen on drying—" (*L I*, 300). Nevertheless, it is such an ordinary mind and the common process of mental activities that Virginia Stephen tries to present in her letters, as she shows in a letter dated December 1907: "Now my brain I will confess, for I dont like to talk of it, floats in blue air; where there are circling clouds, soft sunbeams of elastic gold, and fairy gossamers—things that cant be cut—that must be tenderly enclosed, and expressed in a globe of exquisitely coloured words. At the mere prick of steel they vanish" (*L I*, 320).

The author's appraisal of a letter as the verbal representation of the human mind is her challenge to the conventional method of letter writing, such as it is

defined by John Bailey.[19] For example, in a letter written on 2 October 1903 to Violet, the author defines her own letter writing as ungrammatical, which will be opposed by Baily: "I've written this letter without any effort to make it grammatical. John Bailey wouldn't approve" (*L I*, 98). In another letter written on 6 December 1936 to the same addressee, the author again considers her own letters, without easiness and smoothness, as deviating from Bailey's view: "As John Bailey must have said, letters aren't written nowadays: compare these with the 18th century: what jerks and spasms they come in" (*L VI*, 90-91). Actually, in a letter written on 6 December 1921 to Violet, Woolf directly opposes Bailey's conception of letter writing: "Who admires John Bailey? I dont; and I gather that Lytton Strachey feels quite safe against John's version of old Victoria. Still poor John is thin; he must be protected; you are his old friend and yet you laugh at him" (*L II*, 496). Such a disapproval of the eighteenth-century letters can also be traced in a letter written on 16 November 1912 to Lytton Strachey: "Really, if you go on writing, you will vitiate John Bailey's stock phrase 'the art of letter writing is dying out—' Of course my objection to letters is that they were all written in the 18th century, an age I find unlovable. Still, there seems no reason why we shouldn't write letters even upon the 16th of November—anyhow why you shouldn't" (*L II*, 12).

Moreover, by insisting that the human mind is the only proper stuff in letter writing, Virginia Stephen also challenges the conventional method of fictional writing, as she shows in a letter dated October 1903 to Violet: "I cant understand all these facts and figures for the life of me—and all the rest talk glibly. Do you understand? The British brain feeds on facts—flourishes on nothing else—but I cant reason. Do you mind—do you think it'll make me a foolish writer?" (*L I*, 100) Such disapproval is later developed in her argument about the duty of the novelists in "Modern Novels (1919)", the revised version of which is "Modern Fiction (1925)".[20] In both essays, Woolf argues that the novelists should convey the disorder and discontinuous

[19] See Introduction to this thesis.
[20] "Modern Novels (1919)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 30-7; "Modern Fiction (1925)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 157-65.

fragments of the inner life in an ordinary mind, according to their "own feeling[s]" (*E IV*, 160) and without their intentional interference or any purposed arrangement. This is her challenge to the conventions or "custom[s]" (*E III*, 33) of fictional writing, adopted by such "materialists" (*E III*, 32) as Edwardian H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy (*E III*, 421), as she shows in "Character in Fiction (1924)".[21] On the contrary, Woolf argues that "the Georgians" (*E III*, 421)—E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Lytton Strachey, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot as well as herself—, who commit themselves to conveying the inner life of human beings and making it endure in their writings, are "spiritual, concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its myriad messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious" (*E III*, 34).

Moreover, the fact that, while writing, the letter writer has in mind the "detached spirit" of the addressee rather than the real recipient and that letter writing is by nature a verbal sign of mental activity turns the epistolary conversation into a sort of imaginary meeting of minds, as she shows in a letter written on 12 April 1909 to Lady Robert Cecil: "There should be threads floating in the air, which would merely have to be taken hold of, in order to talk. You would walk about the world like a spider in the middle of a web. In 100 years time, I daresay these psychical people will have made all this apparent—now seen only by the eye of genius. As it is—how I hate writing" (*L I*, 389-90). These characteristics of Virginia Stephen's letters echo those of Emily Dickinson and Kafka. Furthermore, such a characteristic of letter writing also makes the author rethink the nature of human relationships, as she shows in a letter written on 16 December 1906 to Violet: "You know my beautifully spiritual theory, that friendship is entirely a thing of the mind, and a thought is worth perhaps twenty dozen deeds. A profound truth is hid beneath that seemingly smooth surface. Break it, and dive beneath" (*L I*, 263).

It can be said that, on the whole, Violet serves as a catalyst to the author's

[21] "Character in Fiction (1924)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1919-1924*: p. 420-38.

intense emotional explorations, as a model reader responsive to her figurative language, and as first critic of her epistolary writing.[22] Though writing to Violet in December 1936 while reading all these letters, the author considers them as "all those childish scribbles" (*L VI*, 89) or "all those scattered fragments of [her] very disjected and egotistic youth" (*L VI*, 90); they belong to the very first practice of the author's writing. Thus, Virginia Stephen's letters to Violet possess both a therapeutic and aesthetic value. Furthermore, for Virginia Stephen, Violet is also the first reader and critic of her fictional and critical work. During the years 1903 to 1905, Virginia sends her exercises in fictional writing—"that literary effort" (*L I*, 82)—and her "manuscripts" (*L I*, 103, 173) of her reviews—"the miserable article" (*L I*, 177) and "two wretched little attempts" (*L I*, 202), and asks her opinion: "you have to pump up Compliments. Poor Violet. I think literary advice is a very ticklish thing. Of course I should be grateful for *criticism* as all writers are—the candider the better" (*L I*, 82), "I think you quite a first rate critic! and I'm not sure I shant appoint you Critic in Ordinary" (*L I*, 164), "You are the person I can best stand criticism from—which aint saying much" (*L I*, 173), as well as "What a mercy you approve! I really did get depressed about that thing, as I especially wanted it to be good. You are an honest woman in what you say? Really that is a load off my mind if you like it, because I can trust your judgment in these matters" (*L I*, 176). This kind of letter demonstrates Violet's readerly and critical partnership in the development of the author's talent. Consequently, it can be said that the ties that form the friendship between the author and her friend are both of an emotional and an intellectual nature.

7.2.2. Vanessa Bell

The author's letters to her sister become frequent after Vanessa Bell married Clive Bell on 7 February 1907 and would remain so until her death. During the years 1916 to 1921, Vanessa is the addressee to whom Woolf sends most of her letters. Nigel Nicolson indicates that, in this sisterhood, "Vanessa is rocklike in Virginia's

[22] See Chapter Five.

life"[23] and "the more powerful person of the two."[24] Whereas, in Woolf's own eye, as she shows in a letter written on 18 May 1929 to her sister, their relationship is "a question of being magnets and being steel" (*L IV*, 60). For the two sisters now living apart from each other, letters not only become the essential means to carry on their relationship, but also a way to give pleasure to each other.

Nevertheless, while travelling alone to Wells in Somerset and then to Manorbier in Wales in August 1908, Virginia Stephen states in a letter written on 7 August to Vanessa Bell that the intimacy of sisterhood causes some difficulty in finding an appropriate way of writing:

> Does it strike you that this letter is neatly written, in a hand that would do no discredit to Margaret, and that the sentences, though dull, are much of a size, and finish neatly? That is because you told me that I wrote you careless letters. *But the truth is we are too intimate for letter writing; style dissolves as though in a furnace; all the blood and bones come through*; now, to write well there should be a perfect balance; and I believe […] that if I ever find a form that does suit you, I shall produce some of my finest work. As it is, I am *either too formal, or too feverish.* There, Mistress! (*L I*, 343, *our emphasis*)

Intimacy makes it impossible for Virginia Stephen to wear a mask or persona when writing to her sister. Neither is the author able to choose the right subject matter in her letters, as she shows in a letter written on 12 August: "What should I tell you? I wish, someday, you would write down what you need in a letter; some facts I know; but as for the padding, the reflections and affections, I never know your taste" (*L I*, 351); nor can she create the imaginary figure of her sister in her own mind while writing, as she shows in another letter written on 26 August: "I dont see how I am to stagger to the end of this sheet when I dont know whether you are in a state to read it" (*L I*, 361).

All these difficulties drive Virginia Stephen, the lonely traveler, to re-think the nature of a letter between members of the same family. In a letter from 30 August written during the same travel to her sister, Virginia Stephen states:

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[23] Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. xvii.
[24] Nigel Nicolson, Introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. xvii.

> This is gibberish tho'; and if I were a vain woman, vain of my letters that is, I would never let this go: I wish you would consider what I say about burning letters. I admit that it flatters me to think they are kept; but it also hampers me in the least literary of my intercourse. Did you ever read the beautiful poem in which Browning (now in what tone of voice do you deliver that, I wonder?) explained how one writes to one, 'and one only'?
>
> I fancy you stumbling through these words—sometimes coming to a stop altogether, and muttering 'well, if she will write such balderdash' and then there will be half a minutes interruption while Clive makes you repeat your next word. (*L I*, 366)

As the second paragraph of this quotation shows, such a close intimacy between sisters not merely makes the creation of a persona unnecessary, but it empowers her to immediately imagine her sister's possible response and reaction while reading the very letter. This can also be seen in the author's own words in a letter written on 13 April 1922 to her sister: "We are also going to stay with H. G. Wells. Why do we do such things? Just to catch a glimpse of life—it don't much matter what. All's milk that comes to my nest, as you would say. *Must I for ever invent your sayings*, or shall we ever drop into the old familiar gossip?" (*L II*, 520, *our emphasis*) Moreover, the author's strong sense of her addressee while writing makes her agree with Robert Browning's claim in his poem, *One Word More* (1855):

> This: no artist lives and loves that longs not
> Once, and only once, and for One only,
> (Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language
> Fit and fair and simple and sufficient—[25]

Virginia Stephen suggests that she adjusts her texts—including their subject-matter, style, and "tone of voice"—so that they match her sister's "taste" (*L I*, 351), interest, needs, and capacity, as other writers do with their individual readers, including Browning while dedicating this poem to his wife.

[25] Robert Browning. *One Word More* (1855), in *Men and Women*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856: p. 345.

That the style should vary according to the addressee and the subject-matter be chosen on purpose to suit his individual needs and capacities is what Woolf comes back to in a letter written on 28 February 1927 to Vita Sackville-West:

> —Oh and does it strike you that one's friendships are long conversations, perpetually broken off, but always about the same thing with the same person? With Lytton [Strachey] I talk about reading; with Clive [Bell] about love; with Nessa [Vanessa Bell] about people; with Roger [Fry] about art; with Morgan [E. M. Forster] about writing; with Vita—well, what do I talk about with Vita? Sometimes we snore—I must go in and crouch over the fire. (*L III*, 337)

Having different readers in mind, she not only writes differently to different addressees but proceeds in a similar way in her fictional and critical writing: for example, writing to Clive Bell on 7 February 1909, she shows, as quoted earlier, that it is according to "the opinion of one's probable readers" (*L I*, 383) that she composes her first novel, *Melymbrosia*; while in a letter sent on 29 January 1925 to Vita, she shows that such way of writing also applies to critical writing: "I've been engaged (in fact it gave me the influenza) violently arguing with Logan Pearsall Smith the morality of writing for Vogue and Heinemann, as against the Times Lit. Sup. and the Hogarth Press. Do you write differently for different people?" (*L III*, 159)

Meanwhile, while receiving her sister's letters during hers travel to Wales, Virginia Stephen shows her admiration for Vanessa's style of writing: for example, in a letter written on 10 August: "You have a touch in letter writing that is beyond me. Something unexpected, like coming round a corner in a rose garden and finding it still daylight" (*L I*, 349); while in a letter written on 29 August: "I had your charming letter this morning—for your letters have charm and you know it; and if you pretend to fear our sense of style, it is only because you despise it" (*L I*, 363). Similarly, in a letter written during her travel to Bayreuth with Adrian Stephen and Saxon Sydney-Turner in August 1909, Virginia Stephen states: "Adrian has just brought me your letter, for which I thank God; I was fretting the drought. You are a tawny devil to talk of your letters being dull! My conclusion was that the way to get life into letters

was to be interested in other people. You have an atmosphere" (*L I*, 406). Vanessa's angle of attracting her readers' interest through a focus on people in her descriptions of life stimulates the author to invent a similar treatment in her own letters, not merely to her sister, but also to her intimate friends.

Such letters function as an experimental field for the author and can be regarded as drafts of her fictional writing since "people" are the crucial subject matter of fiction, as she indicates in "Phases of Fiction (1929)": "But however the novelist may vary his scene and alter the relations of one thing to another—and as we look back we see the whole world in perpetual transformation—one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they are about people, they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life" (*E V*, 81). However, in the author's eye, her sister's opinion of people is different from hers, as she later shows in a letter written on 23 May 1931: "About books and pictures our taste is respectable; about people, so crazy I wouldn't trust a dead leaf to cross a pond in it" (*L IV*, 336); at the same time, she distrusts her own perception of people's minds, as she shows in a letter written on 8 August 1909 to Vanessa: "I am haunted by the thought that I can never know what anyone is feeling, but I suppose at my age it cant be helped. It is like trying to jump my shadow" (*L I*, 404). Then, how to compose a letter so as to present life and people as objectively as possible—not "too formal, or too feverish" (*L I*, 343)—seems to be the technique that the author has endeavoured to find from the beginning of their correspondence.

Like Violet Dickinson, Vanessa gives Virginia Stephen a sense of freedom in writing, as she shows in a letter written on 16 August 1909 to her sister:

> These are the humours, sweet honeybee; writing seems to me a queer thing. It does make a difference. I should never talk to you like this. For one thing, I dont know what mood you are in, and then—but the subtleties are infinite. The truth is, I am always trying to get behind words; and they flop down upon me suddenly. When I write to Ottoline or Lytton, I honour all the conventions, and love them. (*L I*, 408)

Such freedom enables Virginia Stephen to abandon all the traditional principles of letter writing; she merely has to devote herself to tracing the flight of her thoughts and exploring her impressions so as to describe life and people truthfully, fully, and objectively.

Consequently, the author first adopts a dramatic technique: like a playwright, she hides behind her writing and records people's dialogues, actions and movements. This sort of presentation of people can easily be found in the second volume of her letters: in particular, in "a sketch […] of Marny's [Margaret Vaughan] conversation" (*L II*, 199) that she composes on 9 December 1917 after meeting their cousin.[26] The author gives a further development of the playwright's craft in her letters to Ethel Smyth.[27] And it is through this dramatic technique that the author later composes *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), as she suggests in a letter written on 16 August 1940 to Ethel Smyth:

> Of course I dimmed those lights deliberately. That was my intention—to lead my reader on, till without my showing him, he (in this case she) saw. Now Vita didn't see: but your letter I thought a miracle of discernment. It was an experiment in self suppression; a gamble in R's [Roger Fry] power to transmit himself. And so rich and to me alive and various and masterly was he that I was certain he would shine by his own light better than through any painted shade of mine. (*L VI*, 417)

Through this technique, the author succeeds in getting rid of personal voice in her writing—"the invisible V [Virginia Woolf]—the submerged V" (*L VI*, 418); rather, she gives her protagonist, Roger Fry, the freedom to reveal himself, as a character in a play does. She thus turns her biographical writing into an objective, impersonal writing. Moreover, in her later letters to Vanessa, the author also adopts a cinematic technique to present real life more effectively.[28]

By using either a dramatic or a cinematic technique, Woolf develops an

[26] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 200-202.
[27] See chapter one.
[28] See chapter one.

objective language so as to get rid of her own personality and avoid the difficulty of "the diversity of human opinion in this world" (*L III*, 594); instead, she lets her reader make her own opinion for herself. Furthermore, Vanessa's faceless figures in her pictures provoke the author to invent her own writing so as to play with her sister;[29] while her Post-Impressionist technique of painting, together with that of Roger Fry, help the author to develop her style of "central transparency", including her symbolic, figurative language and her suggestive of method.[30] Though, according to the author, this sort of letter is a game, a form of thanks or a way of exchanging gifts—writing for painting, as she shows in a letter written on 9 December 1917 to Vanessa: "I enclose a sketch—in fact it's word for word true—of Marny's [Margaret Vaughan] conversation, as a thank offering for the loan of your picture; and if you think it a fair exchange, we might do traffic on these lines" (*L II*, 199); in a later letter from 1 May 1927, she exclaims: "Damn it all—I'm afraid I shall have to make an end of our agreement and lose my picture. Directly I get back I'm told that Clive is making Raymond etc in Paris roar with accounts of my rhapsodies about Italy—how they were obviously all humbug—how horribly bored we both were etc. etc." (*L III*, 368). Such gossip is treated seriously and involves the author's "finest work" (*L I*, 343).

On the whole, it seems that it is when writing to Vanessa that the author realises the importance of the sense of an addressee in writing. Moreover, in a letter written on 17 August 1937 to Vanessa, she considers that her sister and herself observe life in the same way even if they represent it through two different artistic forms: "Do you think we have the same pair of eyes, only different spectacles?" (*L VI*, 158) Having this particular reader in mind, Woolf treats her letters as a space in which to develop or practice her literary techniques. Apart from sustaining their relationship, Woolf's private letters to her sister also develop an art of pleasing, which is better explained by her own words in "Lord Chesterfield's Letters to his Son (1932)":

> Private though these letters are, and apparently spontaneous, they play

[29] See chapter one.
[30] See chapter six.

> with such ease in and about the single subject which absorbs them that it never becomes tedious or, what is still more remarkable, never becomes ridiculous. It may be that the art of pleasing has some connection with the art of writing. To be polite, considerate, controlled, to sink one's egotism, to conceal rather than to obtrude one's personality, may profit the writer even as they profit the man of fashion. (*E V*, 413)

7.2.3. Vita Sackville-West

After their first meeting on 12 December 1922, Woolf keeps a constant correspondence with Vita Sackville-West, in particular during the years of 1924 to 1929, Vita is the person to whom she writes most frequently. As the second part of this thesis shows, when writing to Vita Sackville-West, who is a poet, Woolf's letters become her "lecture" (*L III*, 321) about writing, for example, in a letter written on 19 November 1926: "The thing I call central transparency—sometimes fails you there too. I will lecture you on this at Long Barn" (*L III*, 302), or "And don't I lecture you nicely Thats what comes of attacking your poor Virginia and dog Grizzle. They bite instantly" (*L III*, 303). If when writing to Violet Dickinson, freedom enables the author to develop a symbolic language which is consolatory, when writing to Vita, her desire for her sympathy—as well as Vita's innate insensitiveness—leads the author to make herself transparent—through the style of "central transparency"—in her letters, in particular, those written in early 1926 when Vita travels to Persia for the first time.[31]

If in her letters of soliloquies to Violet, the author addressees her thoughts with a mask of images and frivolity; if when writing to her male friend, Jacques Raverat, at the beginning of the third volume, her letters still take the form of monologues; in her letters to Vita in the last part of the third volume, it seems that Woolf wants to get rid of all personae and aims to present fragments of her life so as to arouse her addressee's sympathy. Accordingly, Vita may be considered as a catalyst for such a change in the author's letter writing. Nevertheless, by considering

[31] See chapter six.

the six volumes of the author's letters as a whole, we can see that this change may stem from another reason.

In a letter written on 6 September 1932 to Lady Ottoline Morrell, after Lytton Strachey's death in January 1932 and while publishing his letters in late 1932, the author states:

> Do you think people (I'm thinking Lytton and [Hugh] Walpole) do write letters to be published? I'm as vain as a cockatoo myself; but I dont think I do that. Because when one is writing a letter, the whole point is to rush ahead; and anything may come out of the spout of the tea pot. Now, if I thought, Ottoline will put this letter in a box, I should at once apply the tip of my finger to the end of the spout. When one was very young perhaps one did; perhaps one believed in immortality. I think Lytton's letters were freer as he got older and rid of this illusion: hence they're not printable. (*L V*, 98)

The author shows that young people may write their letters with posthumous publication in mind; whereas later in life, they begin to write letters regardless of publication, and more in deference to their own preference and mood: "anything may come out of the spout of the tea pot." In other words, when becoming aware that "immortality" is an "illusion," letter writers, such as Lytton, Hugh Walpole, or the author herself, throw away their masks and the primary and crucial aim of writing letters then becomes to satisfy the letter writers' own desire. Meanwhile, the writing not only becomes freer and opener, the act of writing becomes the letter writer's own private and intimate act.

In a letter written on 5 February 1925 to Jacques Raverat, the author shows her desire for a free, frank, epistolary communication with her addressee: "—but even influenza shall not mislead me into egoistical autobiographical revelations—Of course, I long to talk to you about myself, my character, my writings, but am withheld—by what?" (*L III*, 164) Reading her letters to Raverat, we can see that the author does try to present her thoughts much more freely, fully and openly, and this comes out as well in her own words in a letter written on 11 March 1925 to Gwen Raverat after the death of Jacques Raverat: "The thing that comes over and over is the

strange wish I have to go on telling Jacques things. […] It had become to me a sort of private life, and I believe I told him more than anyone, except Leonard" (*L III*, 171). Accordingly, it might be said that Raverat's death, by making Woolf aware of mortality, influences her letter writing and makes it shift from the monologue or soliloquy with a mask to the soliloquy of a true naked self. The author's awareness and the influence of death transpires in her words, as in a letter written on 19 November 1926 to Vita: "Do you know this interesting fact. I found myself thinking with intense curiosity about death? Yet if I'm persuaded of anything, it is of mortality—Then why this sense that death is going to be a great excitement?—something positive; active?" (*L III*, 303)

Writing to Raverat also gives the author a kind of philosophical knowledge of what giving pleasure means, as she suggests, in the same letter to Gwen Raverat: "I want to make you enjoy life. […] I would give a great deal to share with you the daily happiness. […] but perhaps the only thing to give is to be oneself with people. One could say anything to Jacques" (*L III*, 171). The importance of the self and of being oneself when writing letters or fiction can also be gathered from a letter written on 18 August 1929 to Vita: "Nobody is better than anybody else—I like people—I dont bother my head about their works. All this measuring is a futile affair, and it doesn't matter who writes what. But this is my grey and grizzled wisdom—at his age I wanted to be myself" (*L IV*, 80); or from one to Ethel Smyth written on 13 or 14 May 1930: "—being myself I think the truthfullest of people" (*L IV*, 168). Paradoxically enough, it is the public's stereotypical image of Woolf that, according to her, gives her the possibility to be herself, as she states in a letter written on 16 August 1931 to Ethel Smyth: "I exclaim again (not for the first time) what a farce friendship is! But I'm delighted that this version should be current, because the more people think V. W. a statue, chill, cold, immaculate, inapproachable,—a hermit who only sees her own set—the more free I myself am to be myself" (*L IV*, 368-9). Letter writing thus appears as a game of hide and seek.

7.2.4 Ethel Smyth

Among the four most important women in her life, there is Ethel Smyth, who receives most of the author's letters from 1930 until her death. At the very beginning of their friendship, in a letter written on 27 February 1930, Woolf labels their future epistolary communication as a "book" of "talk": "I too feel that the book—not that book—*our* book—is open, and at once snatched away. I want to talk and talk and talk—About music; about love; about Countess Russell. Dont you think you might indulge me this once and tell me what she said thats so interesting?" (*L IV*, 145) Indeed, Ethel Smyth, as a musician, a feminist and a sincere friend, gives Woolf all the freedom she needs when writing letters—as well as her sympathy, through her insight and understanding[32]—, as she shows in a letter dated 16 or 17 September 1930 to her friend: "I feel great freedom, even after your angry letter, with you" (*L IV*, 214).

Freedom and sympathy can be enough for Woolf to compose her letters with her mind— her "play of mind" (*L VI*, 48): "—see how flighty I am—" (*L V*, 308), or "This is all very disjected; but you'll only have scraps of the day, and threads of a mind" (*L V*, 369). In her epistolary exchange with Ethel Smyth, Woolf can "chatter faster and freer to [her] than to other people" (*L IV*, 188), and write: "—I who have spoken to you so freely of all my weakness" (*L IV*, 297). Such free writing allows Woolf to disregard grammar and coherence, and present her "stammered and inadequate description of a very […] exciting experience" (*L VI*, 80): "Excuse irrelevance, illspelling, psychological flaws" (*L IV*, 163), "Well, this should be rewritten, to comb out the tangles, but I'm writing in a hurry" (*L IV*, 188), "If I'm inarticulate at the moment it is that the tide of the brain in me is so capricious I cant make it flow at all some days" (*L IV*, 205), "I'm ashamed of this invertebrate jerkiness" (*L IV*, 268). This allows for the letters to be filled with Woolf's "flood of egotism" (*L IV*, 288): "My God what an egoist I am; and that was the only twangling wire in the whole composition" (*L IV*, 188), "Heavens what an egotistic medical scrawl!" (*L V*, 122), or "Oh I've said nothing about your ears and your liver—excuse this outburst of

[32] See chapter four.

egotism: next time I'll be less absorbed" (*L V*, 286).

Though such letters are meant to present the letter writer's mind, they fail to record its whole process, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 10 August 1931 to Ethel Smyth:

> What a farce letter writing is to be sure! Why do we want letters? All I say is false. I mean, so much has to be left out that what remains is like the finger print in salt of some huge pachydermatous quadruped which no private house could contains. My brain is rather on the hop; I rip and skip: haven't settled, as I should, to read all Donne, all Sidney, all a writer you've never heard of called Lord Brooke. (*L IV*, 367)

As mentioned before, Woolf realises while writing *The Waves* (1931), that both moments of being and non-being are important in writing. Together, they make "the continuity of daily life, something believable and habitual" (*L IV*, 97), as she tells Gerald Brenan in a letter written on 4 October 1929. As Woolf states in "A Sketch of the Past", such great writers as Jane Austen, Trollope, Thackeray, Dickens or Tolstoy are able to present both sorts of moments in their work. Such awareness leads Woolf to treat letter writing as the best way to train herself to be a great writer since letters are the verbal signs closest to the mind, as she shows in a letter written on 19 September 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "(But its tantalising to think what letters I could write, if, as I say I could merely print off my mind upon a sheet of blue paper about the size of the terrace, where Leonard is now instructing Percy on, perhaps, cabbages)" (*L IV*, 215). In other words, Woolf aims to write a letter that, like an electroencephalogram, would trace the exact course of her mind and present all her impressions on an ordinary day, so as to convey life as intact and exact as possible. Letter writing also requires the letter writer to overcome her reserve and write unhindered, as Woolf reveals in a letter written on 1 November 1933 to the same addressee: "I want more—now what is it?—just *saying things as they come into one's head*. I cant catch him [Henry Brewster] *off his guard*" (*L V*, 242, *our emphasis*). Letter writing here becomes an experiment in spontaneous automatic writing, similar to the Surrealists'.

Woolf wants to "write fully frankly freely" in her letters as the way that she advises Ethel Smyth to do in a letter written on 15 April 1931: "One more shot, and so goodbye Ethel dear, and do write fully frankly freely; for I shall be so pleased to see the thick white envelope among the W's in the wire cage" (*L IV*, 313). However, such a "full, frank, free" letter writing not merely requires a free attitude in the letter writer but also audacity and a willingness to expose herself, as well as indifference to such self-exposure; on top of that, it necessarily requires an addressee, who has a similar attitude to letter writing and can be an appropriate opponent in the letter writing game. Moreover, Woolf needs an addressee that can act as a catalyst and stimulate her desire to write: it is a prerequisite for epistolary writing, as she shows in her letters to Ethel Smyth: for example, in a letter written on 2 June 1935: "I'm sorry I've been so incommunicative, but I can only write letters when my mind is full of bubble and foam; when I'm not aware of the niceties of the English language. You dont know the bother it is, using for one purpose what I'm perpetually using for another. Could you sit down and improvise a dance at the piano after tea to please your friends?" (*L V*, 396); or in a letter written on 19 September 1937: "I'm writing, though I've nothing to say. How was it that in such circumstances our ancestors at once wrote such letters as could be printed verbatim?" (*L VI*, 171)

As Woolf's letters show, Ethel Smyth is "so terrifically psychologically minded" (*L IV*, 183) and considers herself "such a fine psychologist", "a miracle of psychological acuteness" (*L IV*, 374), a "psychological genius" (*L VI*, 185), or a "Virginia psychologist" (*L VI*, 353). Indeed, Ethel Smyth is curious about Woolf's character, and she analyses it with Vanessa Bell, as comes out in a letter Woolf wrote on 13 or 14 May 1930: "Also, what with you and Vanessa, I feel rather like a mouse pinned out on a board for dissection" or "I wont begin cutting about the poor mouse, who is distracted enough without that" (*L IV*, 168). Furthermore, Ethel Smyth is interested in Woolf's illness, as is exemplified in Woolf's letter dated 18 August 1932: "About the faint—I wish I could gratify your morbid curiosity, but one packs about 10 lives into these moments—I could write 3 volumes—how odd it is to break

through the usual suddenly and so violently" (*L V*, 94). This does not prevent Ethel Smyth from being curious about her own character, as Woolf points out in a letter written on 13 or 14 May 1930: "By the way, why do you take so much interest in your own character? Or dont you? Why are you so fiercely and savagely aware of what is to me a transient and fitful flame?" (*L IV*, 168-9)

According to Woolf and like herself, Ethel Smyth is a fierce "egotist": for example, in a letter written on 23 May 1931 to Vanessa Bell, Woolf not only states that Ethel Smyth's complaint about her "iniquitous treatment by Adrian Boult" is "all fabricated, contorted, twisted with red hot egotism", but also considers such an egotistic complaint as insane: "I dont feel I can even face her unless 2 keepers are present with red hot pokers—at the same time, considering her age, I suppose she's a marvel—I see her merits as a writer—but undoubtedly sex and egotism have brewed some bitter insanity" (*L IV*, 334). Woolf repeatedly complains of Ethel Smyth's egotism in her letters to Vita Sackville-West: "It is very difficult to be intimate with such a blazing egotist—the flames shrivel one up" (*L IV*, 272), "That woman's egotism is scarcely credible, and she is now in full blood with a new grievance gainst Boult and the BBC" (*L IV*, 337), "I pity you today, roasting in the hot fire of Ethel's egotism—though I cant lay all the blame of my headache on her entirely, poor old woman" (*L IV*, 338), or "she's the most ingrained egotist ever I knew" (*L V*, 291). And Woolf does not shy away from complaining about this to Ethel Smyth's face, as she does in a letter written on 7 July 1931: "'Ethel. D'you know you're a damned Harlot.—a hoary harpy—or an eldritch shriek of egotism—a hail storm of inconsecutive and inconsequent conceit—Thats all'" (*L IV*, 354).

However, Ethel Smyth is "so downright and plainspoken and on the spot, […] so uninhibited: so magnificently unself-conscious" (*L IV*, 302), as Woolf states in a letter written on 1 April 1931, that Woolf cannot help admiring her and her indifference to other people's judgments, as she shows in another letter written on 7 April in the same year: "But also the most egotistical—no I think, with all due respect, Ethel's that. Lord, Ethel, did you think I was ever so blind as to say that you, of all people, had conquered egotism? It is only that you ride it so magnificently that one

doesn't care if its egotism or altruism—its your uncautiousness I envy; not your selflessness" (*L IV*, 303). Accordingly, Woolf compares the curious letter writer, Ethel Smyth, to "a magpie" (*L IV*, 199) and her letters to "frantic and flying sparks from her anvil" (*L IV*, 198), "the torrents of Coign [Ethel Smyth's house at Woking, Surrey]" (*L VI*, 40), or "a gale, all on one note—Every morning I get one" (*L VI*, 68).

Through her gushing nature, Ethel Smyth creates a particular charm in her letter writing, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 26 October 1930:

> Yes, Ethel dear, disgracefully gushing as your letter was, I enjoyed it all the same. You almost tempt me to gush, but then I shouldn't do it with the speed and abandonment and lavishness and generosity with which you […] achieve these incomprehensible pinnacles. I daresay I shall catch the hang of it one of these days—but you must allow for the fact that many kinds of writing are forbidden the professional write—a sad fact, but a fact. (*L IV*, 234)

With such lack of self-consciousness, Ethel Smyth merely chases after her thoughts as quickly as possible in her letters so as to satisfy her own desire and needs, either her egotism or her curiosity about others. According to Woolf, such letter writing also reveals the natural process of brain activity, as she suggests in a letter written on 24 January 1939: "I knew I didn't deserve a letter, as I never answered the long one—the charming one—the one that jumped and tumbled and wandered in and out of corners that you wrote the other day" (*L VI*, 311). In a letter written on 2 September 1931, Woolf shows her admiration for such a style:

> But of course […] you have Style. Never a postcard without it. Its the flight and droop of the sentence; where the accent falls, the full stop. Ah, how beautifully you wing your way from phrase to phrase! When one feels something remote, separate, pure, thats style. And, I think, almost the only permanent quality, the one that survives, that satisfies. (*L IV*, 373)

For Woolf, such lack of self-consciousness creates an impersonal art in letter writing, which she appreciates and praises: for example, in a letter written on 27 February

1939: "But will write a comment on your charming humble letter—as if the Lioness took to eating bread and milk out of a thimble" (*L VI*, 319); or in a letter written on 14 May 1939: "oh but I mustnt go asking questions, or you'll seize your old staggering pen. In fact, your hand is a Greek Goddess compared with mine" (*L VI*, 332).

Similarly, Woolf admires Ethel Smyth's descriptive style in her memoirs, *Female Pipings in Eden* (1933), as witness a letter written on 19 November 1933:

> —they seem much more together; profound, and harmonious. But then they dont preach; they *expound*. There you *gallop over turf as springy as a race horse*—I'm thinking of Pankhurst and HB [Henry Brewster], which I've just re-read; and kept thinking how *fresh*, how *full*, how *wise* they are. There you seem to dip your pen into *a deeper, richer pot*: no vinegar, no sand. I wish, vainly, you'd write more biographies, *like the south wind blowing through the grass*. I assure you, you have a thousand natural gifts that way which we hacks have long lost. (*L V*, 249, *our emphasis*)

Moreover, Woolf appreciates Ethel Smyth's treatment of personality in her writing: for example, in a letter written on 24 January 1931, Woolf states that Ethel Smyth is able to infuse her speeches with her own personality: "Your speech,[33] meanwhile was divine and entirely expressive—Leonard says about the best of its kind he ever heard, and done he says with supreme skill, wh. I interpret to mean that you liquidated your whole personality in speaking and threw in something never yet written by being yourself there in the flesh" (*L IV*, 280); while in a letter written on 14 March 1935, Woolf praises Ethel Smyth's ability to convey her own opinion through her protagonist in her article, "Lady Ponsonby," in her memoirs, *As Time Went On* (1936): "Isnt it odd, this is sincere, but your swing and ease sometimes affect me like Joyce [Wethered] playing a ball. I can feel that bat (thinking of cricket) melt into the ball, both become one. And I'm an old trained writer, and cant do it" (*L IV*, 378).

Through this artistic technique, Ethel Smyth is also able to create a self in

[33] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 280, note 1: "On 21 January Virginia and Ethel spoke to a meeting of the London National Society for Women's Service on professions for women. Virginia's speech is printed in *The Pargiters* (ed. Mitchell A. Leaska, 1978), the novel-essay on feminism which she begun in 1932 and ultimately developed into *The Years*."

music, as she shows in a letter written on 26 May 1930:

> If only I weren't a writer, perhaps I could thank you and praise you and admire you perfectly simply and expressively and say in one word what I felt about the Concert yesterday. As it is, an image forms in my mind; a quickset briar hedge, innumerably intricate and spiky and thorned; in the centre burns a rose. Miraculously, the rose is you; flushed pink, wearing pearls. The thorn hedge is the music; and I have to break my way through violins, flutes, cymbals, voices to this red burning centre. […] I am enthralled that you, the dominant and superb, should have this tremor and vibration of fire round you—violins flickering, flutes purring; (the image is of a winter hedge)—that you should be able to create this world from your centre. Perhaps I was not thinking of the music but of all the loves and ages you have been through. Lord—what a complexity the soul is! (*L IV*, 171-2)

For Woolf, such a new "soul", which she compares to a rose, "this red burning centre", is composed with "so many Ethels at the same moment" (*L IV*, 172); music holds them together.

Woolf also appreciates her friend's journalistic style in *England's Effort* (1939):

> Was it whether you were parodying your own style? Well, I think my observation would be that, writing I suppose for *your favourite Everyman*, you dissipate your forces a little to the distraction of that eccentric individual V.W. I see the *attraction*—I cant imitate it—of *the personal style*—"my heads too large for my hat—my puppy…my" this that or the other. And I envy you *the abandon* with which you can *toss all your private*—no, I mean *personal—trinkets at the readers feet*. But it a little blocks the road to the final grasp on the theme. The hat obscures Englands effort. And, absorbed in the humours of the omnibus,—well, I mean one flies off at a tangent; which in a short article, leaves one too little to perch upon. But then, *cut out Ethel, and the broth would miss its savoury*. So I should advise *concentration* rather than *elimination*. I suspect that the amateur author feels the drag of *the public* more than the old hack: hence this *skittishness*: hence also this charm. But is that true?—*Do you I mean feel when you write that the curtain rises and the stage is lit? and so increase, unintentionally, your gesticulations*? (*L VI*, 366-7, *our emphasis*)

Woolf not only admires Ethel Smyth's strong sense of audience as suggested in her article but also her frank and unreserved style of writing. At the same time, she approves of her friend's treatment of her privacy as the stuff of writing so as to attract the reader's attention and interest. In order to achieve an impersonal art of writing, Woolf advises her friend to present her "personal" matters in a concentrated way so as to get rid of personality or lose the consciousness of herself when writing.

On the whole, Ethel Smyth's profession, her character, her attitude to writing—"so downright and plainspoken and on the spot, […] so uninhibited: so magnificently unself-conscious", her "speed and abandonment and lavishness and generosity"—all stimulate Woolf to invent new techniques of epistolary writing, but also stir in her the desire to do away with her natural reserve so as to meet her own desire for an unconscious or automatic style of writing.

If Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth, like her letters to her other friends, offer a space where she can develop her theories of prose writing and lecture her addressee on the art of writing, they also play a more particular role. Ethel Smyth is indeed, one of those "old women of high distinction and advanced views [who] seldom talk of anything but the period and the W.C." (*L V*, 7) and their correspondence fulfills Woolf's aim to "invigorate" or emancipate female language. Since Ethel Smyth is a musician, Woolf's letters to her also become a platform where she can practice her musical language, not merely to suit her addressee's taste, but to fulfill her own desire to compose her own writing like music, as she explains in a letter from 18 April 1906 to Lady Robert Cecil: "But beautiful writing is like music often, the wrong notes, and discords and barbarities that one hears generally—and makes too" (*L I*, 223).[34]

As discussed in Chapter One, such musical language becomes the most convenient method for Woolf to present the course of her daily life as faithfully as possible. Furthermore, in a letter written on 5 October 1930, Woolf writes: "(what a pity there aren't accents to convey tone of voice [*signs*] and so on, to mean I'm

[34] See chapter five, chapter one, chapter three, and chapter four.

laughing, I'm ironical, I'm glum as the grave—)" (*L IV*, 225-6). However, in her letters to Ethel Smyth, Woolf develops a series of verbal rhythms: for example, in a letter written on 12 January 1941, while describing her walk in London, Woolf uses various prepositions, which are placed in front of short phrases and seem to function as a series of beats: "D'you know what I'm doing tomorrow? *Going up* to London Bridge. Then I shall walk, *all along* the Thames, *in and out* where I used to haunt, so *through* the Temple, *up* the Strand and *out into* Oxford Street, where I shall buy macaroni and lunch" (*L VI*, 460, *our emphasis*).

Similarly, conjunctions, sometimes together with punctuation, can also be used as a series of repetitive rhythms, for example, "and"/"or" and colons/semicolons, in a letter written on 17 February 1937:

> I met Elizabeth [Williamson] at a picture gallery*: and* hope one day to see her. *And* I've been working with the usual rash joy, *and* have got committed to a Broadcast*: and* so far the new manager is doing well*; and* I still regret Miss West*; and* long for a holiday in the sun*; and* now must try to write that other cursed letter*: or* can one simply leave it undone? *And* hows the dog? *And*... but Lord! I must stop. (*L VI*, 108-9, *our emphasis*)

Sometimes, adjectives, adverbs, different kinds of verbs in different tenses, as well as nouns, all of which are placed at the beginning of short sentences, play the part of beats, for example, in a letter written on 11 June 1936: "Back yesterday. Keeping very quiet. Refused all invitations. Gnats swarming—Sit within like light or lantern. (This is my new telegraphic style to save mental strain) / And how are you? And are you fond of me? Reading Joan (of Arc) in a drowse. Why 20 words where 2 are enough? Better: did 3/4 hr proofs today: then lay down. Duck for dinner. Wish you'd write another book *instantly*" (*L VI*, 47). All these descriptions are the "melodies" (*L V*, 394) and "song[s]" (*L VI*, 352) that Woolf composes for Ethel Smyth. They also constitute Woolf's exploration of rhythm, a sort of music for writing, as she shows in a letter written on 6 December 1940: "I have an ulterior motive. I want to investigate the influence of music on literature" (*L VI*, 450).

If all these letters can be considered as Woolf's conscious letter writing meant to partly amuse her addressee and partly to satisfy her own desire, how does she succeed in practicing unconscious writing, a form of writing devoid of all self-consciousness, where writing and the mental activity almost happen simultaneously? First of all, we can say that writing to Ethel Smyth, Woolf transforms epistolary discourse into soliloquies, as she does in her letters to Vita Sackville-West. Woolf herself makes this explicit in some letters to Ethel Smyth: in a letter written on 27 December 1930: "and please excuse this awful drivvle and the egotistic soliloquy" (*L IV*, 266), or in a letter written on 6 February 1931: "I'm rather ashamed—but have no time to explain—of my egotistic soliloquy—God knows what set me off—on what was true and what fiction. But I entirely trust to your perceptiveness" (*L IV*, 288).

In a letter written on 18 November 1934 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf again advises Ethel Smyth to be concentrated when writing:

> Aim I should say at *continuity*, *avoid tempting bye paths*—I say this, and then half wish to unsay it. Because the longer I live the less I think one person can amend the ways of another; and the more I believe that *the soul of writing only issues when the person is open and at full pressure*; and at full pressure she must let fall some small inconveniences and oddities. Thats in fact why I never show my own MSS to any one; and only let L. read them when theyre hard and fast finished. (*L V*, 347, *our emphasis*)

For Woolf, intensity is a key word for a writer. In order to achieve such an intense and concentrated state, Woolf attempts to write her letters at top speed and in total discomfort. Examples can be easily found in Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth: "Now here is Leonard and I must hastily close; isnt this a gallant effort—only 6 inches left to fill, and the whole letter, brimfull of cogent political argument, love, divinity, literary criticism with some domestic comment thrown in, has wasted precisely 10 minutes of my valuable day. Can you write as quick as this?" (*L V*, 320), "I hope thats plain—thats what comes of writing 5 minute letters. And this might be perhaps a $2\frac{1}{2}$ minute letter, as I must go and fetch the gammon from the public house" (*L V*, 322),

or "I'm so sleepy I cant even fill this little square, and have only $5\frac{1}{2}$ minutes" (*L V*, 338). By writing under both sorts of "pressure"—little time and an inconvenient situation, Woolf creates a form of tension so that she has to lose awareness of herself, and can only let her pen trace the flights of her mind.

Thus, through such tension coupled with the dramatic technique of soliloquy, letters become a dramatic stage for Woolf herself: by mixing all kinds of sounds in her letters, Woolf turns herself as an epistolary writer into an actor on a dramatic stage. For example, in a letter written on 21 November 1931, Monks House (*L IV*, 406-7), she broaches three different topics. The main one is Woolf's epistolary narrative of life: her own reading of Henry Brewster's letters, her daily life and social activities, a figurative description of the Monks House evening, her account of such wireless music as "Western European folk songs" (*L IV*, 406), "the Earl of Moray" (*L IV*, 406), "Jacobite ballads" (*L IV*, 407), as well as "Helen Fair" (*L IV*, 407).

By sandwiching fragmentary accounts of wireless music into the epistolary narrative of life, it seems that Woolf not merely uses the music as an inspiration for her epistolary writing[35] but also changes its function into that of the chorus in a drama. Like a chorus, the music accompanies her epistolary narrative and highlights the arbitrary and disjointed letter writing: "Well Ethel this is a long letter—the longest far I've written this six weeks, and all in ten minutes too, so its thick as a bun with howlers, solecisms, and no true expression, I daresay, of my affection and admiration for the valiant uncastrated cat with the unhealed wound" (*L IV*, 407).

Such a type of writing can be found in Woolf's other letters to Ethel Smyth, for example, in a letter dated 27 April 1934 (*L V*, 296-7). While she is travelling in Pembrokeshire, Woolf writes a letter "in the hotel lounge, with a couple of sporting gentry, who read out from the Times about cricket" (*L V*, 296), and uses the couple's conversation as a sort of background music for her soliloquies: "'But isnt it very odd to try a steeplechaser flat racing?", "'Can I have a small whiskey and soda please?'",

[35] See Émilie Crapoulet's statement in "Beyond the boundaries of language: music in Virginia Woolf's 'The String Quartet'", p. 201: "it is hardly surprising that music was an art which directly inspired Virginia Woolf's own literary compositions, playing a central role in her work as a writer."

and "'One and six for that tiny spot!"(*L V*, 296-7) Similarly, when she is in Skye, on 26 June 1938, Woolf writes a letter in "a lounge with the Old English sheep dogs,—the hearty hoary old ladies and gents. in tweeds—all a blowing and a puffing round me" (*L VI*, 246). In the first paragraph of this letter, Woolf uses the old ladies and gentlemen's talk as musical background: "'Of course my spaniels are all gun trained. They'll carry anything, except a hare...'", "'Are you going to…Well, its worth seeing. But the Inn to stay at etc etc…'", as well as "'How unlucky about the Kings visit to Paris! All the decorations will have to be removed…'" (*L VI*, 246-7) On another occasion, in a letter written on 18 September 1936, from Monks House (*L VI*, 72-3), it is the noise of "mending the church" which is used as a sort of music: "Tap tap tap…", "Oh this tap, tap….", as well as "and tap tap tap…" (*L VI*, 73) If the voices act as a chorus or background music and give rhythm to the letter, the insertion of voices and words coming through the wireless seems to point at Woolf's desire to combine the physical world and another impalpable, invisible world, both absent and present, as she does in the letter to Roger Fry, discussed earlier, where the physical and mental worlds are brought together.

In these soliloquies, Woolf makes various thoughts transparent, such as about human relationship, as she does in a letter written on 1 March 1933:

> After all, there are tides in the affairs of men—an ebb and a flow: why should not the tide of Ethel recede, there, from the hall, that night, in the gaslamps, with the taxis drifting by, and the ruby light from the restaurant cloaking it—our friendship—in flowing purple? Why do these moments, all draped and apparelled, overwhelm me so completely? and then recede? To witness tonight, when again perhaps I think Ethel was not so completely damned towards me—I mean the crack was not so complete—as I thought. And so, instead of dreaming in my chair I write almost as dreamily. Lord I've forgotten everything, everybody A chrysalis must feel as I do. You know how their tails twitch—well mine just does that tonight. It is the cold, the spring. (*L V*, 164)

Or again in the one paragraph long letter written on 26 February 1934:

> No "I'll tell this" to copy your style at its sweetest, when I get a letter from you, beating your breast, and going into all the usual attitudes, "how have I wasted my affection—what a serpent Virginia is—what a genius, what an Undine—" then I harden harder, and colden cooler, for *I think* Ethel Smyths the most attitudinising unreal woman I've ever known—living in a mid Victorian dentists waiting room of emotional falsity—likes beating up quarrels for the sake of dramatising herself, enjoys publicity and titles from universities and Kings, surrounded by flatterers, a swallower of falsehoods, why should I stand this manhandling, this bawling this bullying, this malusage? When I've friends that respect me and love me and treat me honestly generously and according to the fair light of day? Why pray why cowtow to the bragging of a Brigadier Generals daughter? Why? / V. (*L V*, 279, *our emphasis*)

Starting with a quotation of Ethel Smyth's remark in a letter on Woolf's character and a playful sketch of her addressee's disappointed reaction, the letter goes on with Woolf's soliloquy as it reveals her opinion of her friend's character and her perception of their relationship. Through this dramatic technique, letters become the verbal signs of the author's stream of consciousness. Thus, Woolf's letters of soliloquies can be regarded as the fruit of both a conscious and an unconscious process.

It is this type of letter that Woolf endeavours to write throughout her life, as she points out in a letter written on 3 October 1924 to Jacques Raverat: "I want, in my old age, to have done with all superfluities, and form words precisely on top of the waves of mind—a formidable undertaking" (*L III*, 136). Moreover, Ethel Smyth's curiosity for people's character makes Woolf aware of her own character, as she shows in a letter from 6 April 1930: "I know nothing about myself. And you coming in with your rapidity and insight probably see whats what in a flash […] You'd be amused to see how I fret and worry when I am suddenly made aware of my own character" (*L IV*, 154-5). It also leads Woolf to contemplate her own personality and life, as in a letter from 16 July 1930: "I can assure you I dont romanticise quite so freely about myself as a rule—It was only that you pressed some nerve, and then up started in profusion the usual chaos of pictures of myself—some true, others

imaginary; more were true than false, I think, but I ought not to have been so profuse" (*L IV*, 188). Actually, it might also be said that Ethel Smyth's interest in psychology answers Woolf's desire for analysing her own psychology, as appears in a letter from 19 August 1930: "And remember […] what a crazy piece of work I am—like a cracked looking glass in a fair. Only, as I write this, it strikes me that *as usual I am romancing, led on irresistibly by the lure of some phrase*; and that in fact Virginia is so simple, so simple, so simple: just give her things to play with, like a child. But enough" (*L IV*, 203, *our emphasis*).

Through the use of soliloquies, her letters become a new platform, on which Woolf can present herself, analyse her own character and probe her own psychology, as freely as her friend does. For example, Woolf attempts to analyse her own particular angle of perception in a letter written 15 August 1930: "As a psychologist I am myopic rather than obtuse. I see the circumference and the outline not the detail. […] your standing in the world being known to me, I never get you out of perspective as a whole" (*L IV*, 199), and in a letter written on 29 November 1930: "I have noticed more small things, ways of eating and sitting (I get things through odd channels, thats all) which have built up by this time a very decisive portrait, than you imagine. I daresay I know as much about you as you about me" (*L IV*, 259). Woolf also suggests in a letter written on 19 September 1930 that she is always trying to capture her own psychological characteristics in her letters: "The trouble is, I'm so at sea with other people's feelings […] That is I think a true note upon my own psychology. And I have many other notes, but look, I have written so much and at such a pace that the words scarcely cover the ideas—these are horrid splits,—and the writing is only an attempt to encircle a few signs" (*L IV*, 217).

Woolf's own emotion is what she mostly focuses on in her self-analysis: for instance, in a letter written on 13 or 14 May 1930: "I have a strong suspicion that I'm the simplest of you all, and that its my extreme transparency that baffles you too otherwise gifted women. I dont think I ever feel anything but the most ordinary emotions" (*L IV*, 168); while in a letter written on 19 August 1930:

> I woke up in the night and said "But I am the most passionate of women. Take away my affections and I should be like sea weed out of water; like the shell of a crab, like a husk. All my entrails, light, marrow, juice, pulp would be gone. I should be blown into the first puddle and drown. Take away my love for my friends and my burning and pressing sense of the importance and lovability and curiosity of human life and I should be nothing but a membrane, a fibre, uncoloured, lifeless to be thrown away like any other excreta. (*L IV*, 202-3)

Woolf also often analyses her own affection for Ethel Smyth: for example, in a letter written on 16 July 1930: "Yes—for that reason, that you see through, yet kindly, for you are, I believe, one of the kindest of women, one of the best balanced, with that maternal quality which of all others I need and adore—what was I saying?—for that reason I chatter faster and freer to you than to other people" (*L IV*, 188).[36]

In short, as Nigel Nicolson indicates, in these soliloquies, Woolf writes to Ethel Smyth "about matters that hitherto she had scarcely mentioned to anyone, her madness (2254), her feeling about sex (2218), the inspiration for her books (2254), and even her thoughts of suicide (2341). For Ethel she was reliving her entire life."[37] While in the letter written on 1 April 1931, Woolf compares these "egotistic soliloqu[ies]" (*L IV*, 266) with a visit to a psycho-analyst: "This is what people pay £ 20 a sitting to get from Psycho-analysts—liberation from their own egotism" (*L IV*, 302). Woolf is not only puzzled by her own singularity, but also wonders if anybody else is like her. For example, in a letter written on 1 March 1933: "Do you die as I do and lie in the grave and then rise and see people like ghosts?" (*L V*, 164); and on 22 August 1936: "Isnt that odd? Absence; thinking of some one—then the real feeling has room to expand. like the sights that one only sees afterwards: Is that peculiar to me, or common to all?" (*L VI*, 66); or on 6 February 1939: "why do I always want to find a phrase for what I see?" (*L VI*, 315); or again on 1 March 1941: "Do you ever get glued, on a fly paper, as I do, when I'm trying to make myself master of

[36] See also (*L IV*, 188) and (*L IV*, 29).
[37] Nigel Nicolson. Introduction. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1929-1931*. 1978. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 1st American Edition. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979: p. xvii.

something?" or "Do you feel, as I do, when my head's not on this impossible grindstone, that this is the worst stage of the war?" (*L VI*, 475) As we shall see in the next chapter, Woolf's self-presentation in her letters to Ethel Smyth goes together with self-exposure.

The analysis of these letters has also disclosed that Woolf has a particular reader in mind while writing. This is something she herself alludes to: for example, in a letter written on 14 May 1939, Woolf suggests that she can visualise her addressee's expression: "Why do I like boring Ethel with all this? Because of her candid smile. When I cant remember how your mouth goes, I can always see your innocent blue eyes. You, Max Beerbohm and Bernard Shaw all have the same eyes—as if you'd just awakened in Heaven—" (*L VI*, 332-3); while in a letter written on 1 March 1941, she shows that she can also hear her friend's voice when writing: "But if you wrote to me I should recover the tone of your voice at least. Do tell me, what are you doing? Pan's lice. Mary [maid]: anything. Excuse this drivel" (*L VI*, 475). Woolf's sense of audience in her letters to Ethel Smyth is also e revealed through her imaginative response tor her addressee while reading this very letter: for example, in a letter written on 1 July 1930: "'There now' as you say 'I won't refer to the subject again'—unless you, being so terrifically psychologically minded like the analysis (oh I cant spell) of sensations" (*L IV*, 183), or in a letter written on 8 October 1930: "But Lor! (as you would say) what punishment can be inflicted on Harley Street for these entirely false verdicts—and all the agony they give", "Lor! (as you would say) the egotism of the male!", or "Lor (as you would say) what a go domestics are!" (*L IV*, 226-7)

For Woolf, her letters to Ethel Smyth should not be shared with other readers, as she shows in a letter written on 21 May 1934: "Talk of my obstinacy and folly in not liking my letters to be quoted!" (*L V*, 305) One of reasons might be due to her ungrammatical writing, as she suggests in a letter written on 3 October 1931: "Lord! do you really read my letters to your friends—to Elizabeth [Williamson], whom I dont know? Well, in future they shall be of a primness, of an exemplary decorum suited to the company you keep. Every t crossed, every i dotted" (*L IV*, 386). It is also partly

because of Woolf's strong self-protectiveness,[38] since writing to Ethel Smyth involves a certain amount of self-exposure, as she states in a letter written on 7 and 8 August 1932: "When you say for example that you're going to write something about me and publish parts of my letters—I am flabbergasted. I swear I couldn't do such a thing where you're concerned to save my life" (*L V*, 86). Partly, the thought of letters being read by others inhibits Woolf and prevents her from writing freely, as she shows in another letter written on 17 October 1933:

> As for letter writing—no—I cant write to you. I know its absurd, but every time I think "This will be shown to someone—" Yes, thats what you said—I re read your letter. What you call "killingly funny letters" you always show; all my letters are thus parched at birth. I daresay yours is the right method—full of free publicity—but I'm the very opposite—Lord how opposite! You see, I couldnt show a letter of yours to any one, niece or nephew. Well—cant be helped. (*L V*, 236)

Nevertheless, in a letter written on 16 August 1931 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf wonders: "And if friendship is futile, and letters futile, and art futile, what remains?" (*L IV*, 369) Through the whole discussion of the author's letters in this chapter, we have seen that, for Woolf, letters are always the best way to maintain relationship, to practice her writing, to develop her artistic style, and to voice her artistic theories. For these reasons, letters can be published posthumously, as she states in a letter written on 17 September 1938 to Ethel Smyth: "Let leave the letters till we're both dead. Thats my plan. I dont keep or destroy but collect miscellaneous bundles of odds and ends, and let posterity, if there is one, burn or not. Lets forget all about death and all about Posterity" (*L VI*, 272).

Conclusion

By discussing Woolf's letters to her male and female addressees, this chapter

[38] See also chapter four.

has explored their different functions: male addressees come out as acting the part of intellectual stimuli while with the female addressees, a much more emotional tie develops. Woolf's letters to her female friends are the sites of an intense emotional experience and of the practice and development of her craft and creative writing. However, the function of addressees as catalysts is dependent on Woolf's discursive strategies of self-fashioning, that is, writing differently to different people. Like Emily Dickinson, Woolf presents different pieces of her own self and her own life and tailors her addressees to meet her own needs so as to manipulate them into playing a prescribed part in the game of letters. This discussion of different characteristics of Woolf's letters to different addressees, together with her conception of letters, has also shown how strong her sense of audience is and how her letters depend on the collaboration between herself and her addressees, a co-creative process.

Chapter Eight: Letter writing as the site of self-discovery: "[T]he 4 dimensions of the mind" (*D V*, 96)—"I: & the not I: & the outer & the inner" (*D IV*, 353)

Introduction

1. Woolf's view on autobiographical and historical writing

While she was composing *The Waves* in the late 1920s, Woolf became aware that moments of non-being are as important as moments of being in writing. Indeed, she writes, as mentioned in the previous chapter, to Gerald Brenan on 4 October 1929: "I daresay its the continuity of daily life, something believable and habitual that we lack" (*L IV*, 96). We can argue that when she began to write her novel, Woolf had already begun to depict the natural course of a whole day in her own life in her letters to Clive Bell or Ethel Smyth, so as to master the representation of the two forms of moments in her fiction to come.

Similarly, in a letter written on 28 December 1932 to Hugh Walpole, Woolf tries to define what literature is and moments of being do not feature in her definition:

> I can assure you that I liked your present[1] better than any—better than the peach fed Virginian *ham* even, for *literature* […] *is something* […] *more than ham*. Well, anyhow, this book of yours is to me, anyhow, more than ham, first because I love finding myself quoted and called mysterious on the first page—considering I'm wallowing in ham and grilled turkey—and then because as you know, of all literature (yes, I think this is more or less true) *I love autobiography most*. / In fact I sometimes think only *autobiography is literature*—novels are what we peel off, and come at last to *the core*, which is only you or me. And I think this little book [*The Waves*]—why so small?—peels off all the things I dont like in fiction and leaves the thing I do like—you. Seriously, soberly […] I do think this is a very charming and attractive book. (*L V*, 141-2, *our emphasis*)

The letter amounts to a eulogy of autobiography. Autobiographical writing, such as Walpole's memoirs, *The Apple Trees* (1932), which refers to people and their

[1] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 142, note 1: "Hugh Walpole's *The Apple Trees*, a volume of reminiscences, which was published for Christmas 1932. The first words of the book are: 'There is a fearful passage in Virginia Woolf's beautiful and mysterious book *The Waves*, which when I read it, gave me an acute shock of unanticipated reminiscence.' He then quotes a long passage from *The Waves* (pp. 19-20 in the Penguin paperback edition), which contains the sentence: 'The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared'."

ordinary lives, hence becomes the genre that best represents literature. Thanks to this new perspective on the nature of literature, Woolf can appreciate the value of autobiographical writing and voice her deep fondness for it. In the same letter, she even asks Walpole to write his own autobiography: "I think it your duty when Herries [*The Herries Chronicle*][2] is finished to do Hugh" (*L V*, 142).

Woolf comes back to Walpole's memoirs in another letter written on 23 August 1933:

> And then, being in a gloom the other night, I took down your Apple Trees [1932] and enjoyed it so much, more the second reading even than the first, that I invented a theory to the effect that you being a born romantic, and I not being one, what I like is *when you turn your rich lanthorn upon facts, because then they become rimmed and haloed with light but still remain facts in the centre*. So I want you to go on writing your memories. It struck me today on my walk, that I like [Sir Walter] Scott's diaries better than all but three or four of his novels for this reason. And Vanessa—to end the argument—will have more fact in it than the others; what fun, *if I'm there in the flesh*!—or my name's there. (*L V*, 218-9, *our emphasis*)

According to Woolf, facts in real life not only mirror the whole historical, social background but also empower the reader to enter the text and live there as in real life. Apart from facts, Woolf also appreciates the human character that writers present in their autobiographical writings, as is made clear in a letter written on 8 November 1931 to Walpole:

> I am reading […] Ford M. Ford's memoirs[3]—fascinating, and even endearing; but I long to know the truth about him—the truth which I'm sure you know, as you know the truth about all these great figures. I wish, to please me, you'd write your own memoirs—why not? The

[2] Hugh Walpole's *The Herries Chronicle*, including four novels, *Rogue Herries* (1930), *Judith Paris* (1931), *The Fortress* (1932), and *Vanessa* (1933), is a period family saga, which begins in the 18th century and follows a Lakeland family through generations up to modern times. See also *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 177, note 2: "*Vanessa* (1933), the last of Walpole's four novels describing a family's history over a period of a century, of which the first volume, *Rogue Herries* (1930), was often regarded as his best book."

[3] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 402, note 3: "The first of Ford Madox Ford's three autobiographical volumes, *Thus to Revisit* (1921)."

> truth and nothing but the truth. / Anyhow come and see us; for we must discuss Reality and Ford M. Ford at length. (*L IV*, 402)

Again, Woolf asks her addressee to write his own memoirs, for in her eye, it is autobiographical writings, such as Ford's memoirs, *Thus to Revisit* (1921), that contain writers' true or real characters—"truth" and "Reality".

Woolf's preference for autobiographical writings also transpires in her other letters to Walpole: for example, in a letter written on 17 August 1932, Woolf advises her addressee to present every minutia of his daily life:

> Now if I were you, I would add that to my days work—autobiography for 30 minutes daily; please do write a colossal book—sweep every crumb in to it—the days work: and everybody, what you eat, read, think, love, hate, laugh at,—all: considering your mobility and your versatility, and how many loves and hates you have—what a book! what a book! I cry, green with envy. (*L V*, 93)

And a few months later, in a letter from 15 April 1933 to Walpole, Woolf encourages again her addressee to write his autobiography and compares the genre favourably with contemporary fiction: "I shall like our own times—its some deficiency of mine that I cant like fiction with a historical date to it. But what I really want is your autobiography, and that must be in 15 not 4 vols" (*L V*, 177).

Woolf reiterates her demand for autobiographical writing in her letters to Walpole—"go on with your autobiography" (*L V*, 264) or "do write more autobiography" (*L VI*, 388)—and also in her letters to other friends. For example, writing to Jacques Raverat on 19 November 1924, Woolf asks her addressee to write his autobiography freely and fully: "Please write it with a view to this, and let it be the waste paper basket, conduit pipe, cesspool, treasure house, and larder and pantry and drawing and dining bed room of your existence. Write about everything, without order, or care. Being a Frog, you won't of course: you will organise and compose. Still, let me see it, and get on with it" (*L III*, 145). Such a demand is often

accompanied with a disapproval of fiction: for instance, in a letter written on 18 August 1932 to Lady Cecil: "Now, Lady Cecil, (this is meant to mark a change of tone, from the gossiping to the hortatory) whatever you do, write your Memoirs, bringing in all that romantic past; please do; I loathe novels; nobody will write poetry: here am I told to keep quiet: write your memoirs and send them to me instantly" (*L V*, 96); while in a letter written on 14 February 1933 to Lady Ottoline Morrell: "English literature, though I can read the least scrawl of any old char so long as its not fiction—which alas it generally is—seems at its worst and weakest at the moment. I wish I could read in the Times Lit Sup Lady Ottoline Morrell's memoirs in 5 vols will be out on Tuesday next" (*L V*, 159).

Again, in a letter written on 22 December 1934 to Victoria O'Campo, Woolf demands: "I'm so glad you write criticisms not fiction. […] I hope you will go on to Dante, and then to Victoria Okampo. Very few women yet have written truthful autobiographies. It is my favourite form of reading (I mean when I'm incapable of Shakespeare, and one often is)" (*L V*, 356). For Woolf, the honest autobiographical writing, including that of women, occupies the same important position as Shakespeare's plays. Meanwhile, writing to Ling Su-Hua around 1938 to 1939 during the Second World War, Woolf not only repetitively asks her addressee to write her own autobiography but also points out the historical significance of such an objective writing: "But please think of this: not merely as a distraction, but as a work that would be of great value to other people too. I find autobiographies much better than novels" (*L VI*, 221), "And the only thing of any interest I had to say was to ask you to write your autobiography, and to say I will gladly read it and give it any correction it needs" (*L VI*, 222), and "Please write whenever you like; and whatever happens please go on with your autobiography; for ever though I cannot help yet with it, it will be a great thing to do it thoroughly. I am giving you the advice I try to take myself—that is to work without caring what becomes of it, for the sake of doing something impersonal" (*L VI*, 328).

Writing to Ethel Smyth on 21 October 1932, Woolf asks her friend to write more memoirs and uses a simile to describe the value of this sort of writing: "Please

please please write more—also write the Empress. I could write a book about your memoirs. Surely, if you sat over the fire o'nights, after music, you could drop out some more, like pearls—pearls that have got into one's underclothes" (*L V*, 112). Woolf not only appreciates Ethel Smyth's descriptions of facts in her memoirs, but also admires her portrayal of people, such as Lady Ponsonby, in *As Time Went On* (1936), as she shows in a letter written on 25 September 1940: "A very nice letter from Arthur Ponsonby about Roger [Fry]. I'm telling him I live in her youth owing to your brilliant portrait.[4] D'you remember how she cut her nails? Thats what I call portrait painting. This naturally leads to the next vol. of your autobiography. Please clear the schoolroom table and set to" (*L VI*, 434). For Woolf, both facts and protagonists in Ethel Smyth's memoir writing possess a sort of impersonal, eternal and timeless power. Thus, in a letter written on 27 August 1934 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf insists: "So please I beg of you to devote yourself to memoir writing for posterity […] This I consider your most sacred duty" (*L V*, 326); while in another letter written on 14 July 1936, Woolf also asks her addressee to compose historical writing and biographies of people: "Please scribble off a history and a portrait, as you alone can" (*L VI*, 56).

Besides Walpole's reminiscences, Scott's diaries, Ford's autobiography, as well as Ethel Smyth's memoirs, Woolf also values other people's autobiographical writing, for instance, in a letter written on 5 January 1920 to Janet Case: "I am reading […] a book called the Education of Henry Adams. I find it absorbing so far, but autobiographies always begin well and to my mind never can be dull, so I don't know if you should at once order it or not" (*L II*, 416); while in a letter written on 9 April 1926 to Clive Bell: "I am reading Mrs Sidney Webbs autobiography and find it enthralling. As for Walter Raleigh I find him disgusting" (*L III*, 252). Equally, in a letter written on 21 May 1934 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf shows her appreciation of Edith Wharton's memoirs, *A Backward Glance* (1934): "And then I lit the fire and read Mrs

[4] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 434, note 1: "Ethel's description of Lady Ponsonby appeared in *As Time Went On* (1936)."

Wharton's Memoirs[5] and she knew Mrs Hunter [Ethel's sister], and probably you. Please tell me sometime what you thought of her. Theres the shell of a distinguished mind; I like the way she places colour in her sentences, but I vaguely surmise that there's something you hated and loathed in her. Is there?" (*L V*, 305)

Though opposing John Middleton Murry's personal style of writing because he argues that "one must write with one's instincts" (*L III*, 95), which is, according to him, what Bloomsbury denies (*L III*, 115).[6] Woolf claims in a letter written on 17 July 1935 to Lady Ottoline Morrell, that she is taken by his autobiographical writing: "But I read Murry on Murry[7] because carrion has its fascination, like eating high game" (*L V*, 418). Similarly, though disapproving of Maurice Baring's fictional writing (*L VI*, 68), she states, in a letter written on 26 August 1936 to Ethel Smyth, that she is fond of his autobiography, *The Puppet Show of Memory* (1922): "Of course the autobiography I enjoyed immensely: but thats different: that doesn't come across my line of vision. I see it as it is" (*L VI*, 68).

Such a taste for life-writing may be connected with and account for her liking for history. Apart from Walpole's historical novels of the Herries series, Woolf likes Jules Michelet's *L'Histoire de France* (1833-43): for example, in a letter written on 31 January 1928 to Clive Bell: "I am reading Michelet.[8] Does it strike you that history is one of the most fantastic concoctions of the human brain? That it bears the remotest likeness to the truth seems to me unthinkable. Consider the character of Louis 14th. Incredible! And those wars—unthinkable. Ought it not all to be re-written instantly? Yet he fascinates me" (*L III*, 454); while in a letter written on 26 February 1928 to Julian Bell: "I am reading Michelets History of France—God knows why. I find it fascinating, but wholly fictitious. Do you think any history is even faintly true?" (*L III*, 465)

What autobiographical and historical writing may have in common is facts,

[5] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 305, note 1: "Edith Wharton (1862-1937). Her Memoirs were called *A Backward Glance*, 1934."
[6] See Chapter Three.
[7] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V*, p. 418, note 4: "His autobiography, *Between Two Worlds*, 1935."
[8] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III*, p. 454, note 2: "Jules Michelet, *L'Histoire de France* (1833-43)."

whether truthful or fictional. Woolf's taste for the two genres helps her to deal with the facts of her own life and redefine the art of the self-portrait in her letters.

2. Autobiographical writing as the site of self-discovery for the modern writer

In "The Leaning Tower (1940),"[9] Woolf compares the writer's birth and education to "a chair" and "a tower":

> By his chair we mean his upbringing, his education. It is a fact […] that all writers from Chaucer to the present day, with so few exceptions that one hand can count them, have sat upon the same kind of chair—a raised chair. They have all come from the middle class; they have had good, at least expensive, educations. They have all been raised above the mass of people upon a tower of stucco—that is their middle-class birth; and of gold—that is their expensive education. (*E VI*, 265)

Woolf points out that "[i]t is a tower of the utmost importance" (*E VI*, 266), for it is such a tower of "middle-class birth and expensive education" (*E VI*, 267) that "decides [the writer's] angle of vision" and "affects his power of communication" (*E VI*, 266). However, the First World War has destroyed this "tower": "All through the nineteenth century, down to August 1914, that tower was a steady tower" (*E VI*, 266). The "crash" (*E VI*, 266) causes a series of worldwide revolutions and changes: "Everywhere change; everywhere evolution. […] The whole of civilisation, of society, was changing. […] But even in England towers that were built of gold and stucco were no longer steady towers. They were leaning towers. The books were written under the influence of change, under the threat of war" (*E VI*, 267).

Accordingly, Woolf labels the modern writers—"the group which began to write about 1925 and, it may be, came to an end as a group in 1939" (*E VI*, 267)—as "the leaning-tower writers" (*E VI*, 273), and the literature of that period as "leaning-tower literature": it is characterised by its tendency "to be down on the ground with the mass of human kind" (*E VI*, 273) and its taste for their depiction of inner life. This taste had to be shaped; it did not come right away:

[9] "The Leaning Tower (1940)," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 259-83.

> During all the most impressionable years of their lives they were stung into consciousness—into self-consciousness, into class-consciousness, into the consciousness of things changing, of things falling, of death perhaps about to come. There was no tranquillity in which they could recollect. The inner mind was paralysed because the surface mind was always hard at work. (*E VI*, 273)

Later came unconsciousness. For Woolf, "Unconsciousness, which means presumably that the under-mind, works at top speed while the upper-mind drowses, is a state we all know" (*E VI*, 263). It is in such an unconscious state that the modern writer presents his impressions of life—"the thing […] simplified, composed" (*E VI*, 263), which attracts his interest and is involuntarily preserved in his mind, such as "the sights and sounds and sayings that […] swam to the surface, apparently of their own accord; and remained in memory; what was unimportant sank into forgetfulness" (*E VI*, 263). In Woolf's eye, such a unconscious state of writing echoes "Wordsworth's famous saying about emotion recollected in tranquillity when we infer that by tranquillity he meant that the writer needs to become unconscious before he can create" (*E VI*, 263-4).[10]

In specific historical circumstances, "the leaning-tower writers" attempt to present their self-portraits in various types of writing, especially, their autobiographical writings of the 1930s:

> They have been great egotists. That too was forced upon them by their circumstances. When everything is rocking round one, the only person who remains comparatively stable is oneself. When all faces are changing and obscured, the only face one can see clearly is one's own. So they wrote about themselves—in their plays, in their poems, in their novels. No other ten years can have produced so much autobiography as the ten years between 1930 and 1940. (*E VI*, 273)

For Woolf, "the leaning-tower writers", "with help from Dr. Freud" (*E VI*, 274), wrote about themselves in their autobiographies "honestly, therefore creatively"

[10] See also chapter three.

(*E VI*, 273): "They told the unpleasant truths, not only the flattering truths. That is why their autobiography is so much better than their fiction or their poetry. Consider how difficult it is to tell the truth about oneself—the unpleasant truth; to admit that one is petty, vain, mean, frustrated, tortured, unfaithful, and unsuccessful" (*E VI*, 273). Woolf not only emphasises the importance of such truthful self-analysis (*E VI*, 274) but also insists that such an "unconscious" state of writing should be further developed by the next generation of writers:

> The writers of the next generation may inherit from them a whole state of mind, a mind no longer crippled, evasive, divided. They may inherit that unconsciousness which […] is necessary if writers are to get beneath the surface, and to write something that people remember when they are alone. For that great gift of unconsciousness the next generation will have to thank the creative and honest egotism of the leaning-tower group. (*E VI*, 274)

Woolf herself belongs to one of these "leaning-tower writers". In a letter written on 5 February 1925 to Jacques Raverat, she voices her desire for "egoistical autobiographical revelations—Of course, I long to talk to you about myself, my character, my writings, but am withheld—by what?" (*L III*, 164) Though such a desire is inhibited in her letters to her friend, it is satisfied in her letters to Vita Sackville-West from the beginning of 1926 onwards, and in those to Ethel Smyth. *The Waves* and its exploration of the consciousness of six characters, is also a proof of Woolf's being a "the leaning-tower writer". In the six volumes of letters, we can see that the author constantly attempts to depict herself, though self-depiction varies widely depending on the degree of the author's self-control, the intimacy of her relationship with her addressees as well as the latter's gender.

Like other "leaning tower writers," Woolf tries to use the psychoanalytic method to explore her own nature, as she shows in a letter written on 29 November 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "No, I dont think that L[eonard]. or I 'snarl'—we analyse each other's idiosyncrasies—(you will like that phrase) in the light of psycho-analysis

walking round the square" (*L IV*, 259). And in a letter from 29 June 1936 to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf states: "My perception or your perception is far finer that any 2 womens in 1456" (*L VI*, 50).

Furthermore, in the diary entry for 18 November 1935, while she is composing *The Years* (1937), Woolf mentions that her writer's mind has four different layers:

> It struck me tho' that I have now reached a further stage in my writers advance. I see that there are 4? Dimensions; all to be produced; in human life; & that leads to a far richer grouping & proportion: I mean: I: & the not I: & the outer & the inner—no I'm too tired to say: but I see it: & this will affect my book on Roger. Very exciting: to grope on like this. New combinations in psychology & body—rather like painting. This will be the next novel, after The Years. (*D IV*, 353)

A similar description of her own mind can also be found in another diary entry written on 22 June 1937: "I'm trying to get the 4 dimensions of the mind . . life in connection with emotions from literature—A days walk—a mind's adventure: something like that. And its useless to repeat my old experiments: they must be new to be experiments" (*D V*, 96).

What these four dimensions of Woolf's mind are is what this chapter hopes to reveal by discussing Woolf's observation of her own psychological or mental characteristics while writing her letters, in particular, those to Ethel Smyth. The first half will examine how Woolf presents and develops the first two dimensions—"I: & the not I"; while the second will explore the last two dimensions—"the outer & the inner".

8.1. "[T]he worlds—3 and 4" (*L VI*, 400): "I: & the not I" (*D IV*, 353)

In "A Sketch of the Past (1976)," Woolf considers that every single day is composed with moments of being and non-being, the former referring to the time that we live consciously and are able to remember while the latter refers to the largest part

of a day that we live unconsciously and forget. As seen previously, Woolf defines consciousness in "The Leaning Tower (1940)," as a state in which "the under-mind, works at top speed while the upper-mind drowses" (*E VI*, 263). Our perception of the outer physical world is different in such moments.

This is particularly true of nature, as can be seen in an early letter to Emma Vaughan written on 12 August 1899:

> I suspect you and Marny [Margaret Vaughan] of ulterior motives in thus blackening our minds, or perhaps you are *too unimaginative and soulless to feel the beauty of the place*. […] Yesterday we bicycled to Hungtingdon—and paid a visit to our relatives [Lady Stephen]. Coming back we *forgot our cares*—(and they were many—Nessa and I each had a large string bag full of melons which bumped against our knees at every movement) *in gazing—absorbing—sinking into the Sky*. You dont see the sky until you live here. *We have ceased to be dwellers on the earth. We are really made of clouds. We are mystical and dreamy and perform Fugues on the Harmonium.* Have you ever read your sister in laws Doges Farm?[11] Well that describes much the same sort of country that this is; and you see how she, *a person of true artistic soul, revels in the land*. […] I want to read books about it, and to write sonnets about it all day long. […] I am growing like *a meditative Alderney cow*. And there are people who think it dull and uninteresting!!!! / This all flowed from my lips without my desire or knowledge. (*L I*, 27, *our emphasis*)

According to the author, people with enough imaginative power are sensitive to the beauty of nature: they can enter a sort of ecstatic state in which, through intense contemplation of nature—here the sky and the clouds—they become, as it were, part of it. So self-conscious are they of their emotions at that point that they feel at one with nature.

Such descriptions of nearly ecstatic experiences in which the beauty of nature entails a loss of consciousness of the physical world while the body itself becomes at one with nature, pervade the six volumes of letters, in particular, the letters of travel. In a letter written on 28 April 1908 to Lytton Strachey when she is travelling to

[11] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 27, note 1: "Margaret Symonds' [Madge Vaughan] *Days Spent on a Doge's Farm*, 1893."

Cornwall, the author, deeply affected by the beauty of the landscape, describes her sense of her own body melting into that of a bird: "I had begun to doubt my own identity—and imagined I was part of a seagull, and dreamt at night of deep pools of blue water, full of eels" (*L I*, 328). Similarly, writing to Clive Bell on 3 August 1908 when she is travelling in Somerset, the author describes, though half jokingly, such a feeling as ecstasy: "Perhaps I shall enjoy an ecstasy upon the summit of the downs, from which Mrs Wall once, some 40 years ago, saw the sea" (*L I*, 340); while in another letter written on 4 September 1910 when she is visiting again Cornwall, she indicates that nature dehumanises her: "You cant imagine, though, how little human I have become. One is a very nice animal, apart from books and culture, but almost dumb" (*L I*, 433). Woolf's statement of such a feeling of dehumanisation is even more explicit in her letters to Edward Sackville-West, especially, in two letters written respectively in August and September 1926, Monks House: "Its too fine (its raining now) to do anything except sit on the downs; also, I'm de-humanised. I've sunk to the bottom of the world, and I only see the soles of peoples feet passing above. Does the country affect you like this?" (*L III*, 286), and "I feel entirely dehumanised by the sun now, and wish for fog, snow, rain, humanity" (*L III*, 295).

Similar descriptions can also be found in Woolf's letters to her female addressees. Writing to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Woolf shows that the landscape in Rodmell enchants her: "Its incredibly beautiful here at the moment, in spite of the devils who plant red boxes on the top of the downs. I sit down in a hollow and look and look—one becomes an opium eater in ones eyes—merely sitting and looking at cornfields, blue wagons and sheep is enough" (*L V*, 107), and "It has been almost beyond belief beautiful here—I walk and walk by the river on the downs in a dream, like a bee, or a red admiral, quivering on brambles, on haystacks; and shut out the cement works and the villas. Even they melted in the yellow light have their glory" (*L V*, 230). Such an illusory feeling aroused by nature not only delights Woolf but also bewilders her, as she shows in a letter written on 8 May 1934 to Katherine Arnold-Forster, when she is travelling in Dublin: "It is a wonderful island, only why be so very selfconscious? But I cant go into that, and must stop" (*L V*, 301).

When writing to Ethel Smyth, in a letter written on 2 August 1930, Woolf describes her enchanted feeling for her country life at Monks House: "Well it is extremely difficult to write letters here. One goes off, I find, into a kind of swoon; becomes languid as an alligator with only its nostrils above water. London keeps one braced; take away the tension and ones mind opens like a flower, or an old glove, in water" (*L IV*, 194-5). The pleasure she gets from this dreamy state in nature can at times provide some consolation, as witness a letter written on 6 June 1935 to her friend:

> How can I cure my violent moods? […] Oh such despairs, and wooden hearted long droughts when the heart of an oak in which a toad sits imprisoned has more sap and green than my heart: and then d'you know walking last evening, in a rage, through Regents Park alone, I became so flooded with ecstasy: part no doubt caused by the blue and red mounds of flowers burning a wet radiance through the green grey haze: […] But the truth is I am in the cavernous recesses […] because Roger is dead […] And Nessa is staying abroad till October: and Vita, I foretell, is dead and buried for 3 years to come. So forgive moods—incurable moods— (*L V*, 399-400)

Ecstasy can soothe her depression and her loneliness.

Woolf compares such a flood of rapture to "an airball" in a letter written on 26 June 1938 when travelling to Skye:

> Yes, I never saw a country more to my liking than the wall [the Roman Wall in Northumberland]: d'you know how suddenly a country expands an airball in ones mind—I mean states a mood completely that was existent but unexpressed, so that at every turn of the road, its like half remembering, and thinking it can't be coming, but then it does?—a feeling a dream gives? and also that it is oneself—the real Virginia or Ethel, the dormant, the eternal? (*L VI*, 246)

The exciting feeling she derives from the beauty of the landscape has a sense of déjà vu and enables her to become aware of her "real", latent self. Such a "dehumanised", "unconscious" or latent self, which is beyond expression and yet visible, with a

corporeal presence that can be felt, may well be what Woolf calls in her diary—"the Not I" (*D IV*, 353).

Apart from nature, art can function as a catalyst and stir such a loss of consciousness of the physical world, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 23 April 1901 to Emma Vaughan: "The only thing in this world is music—music and books and one or two pictures. I am going to found a colony where there shall be no marrying—unless you happen to fall in love with a symphony of Beethoven—no human element at all, except what comes through Art—nothing but ideal peace and endless meditation" (*L I*, 41-2). For the author, the act of reading books, listening to music or watching a painting requires the observer's total absorption and solitude; hence, art can become a sort of refuge from all trouble. Though the author seldom describes an ecstatic feeling aroused by music or painting, she often refers to reading as initiating such a feeling.

Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) intoxicates Woolf, as she shows in her letters: for example, in a letter written on 21 January 1922 to E. M. Forster: "Every one is reading Proust. I sit silent and hear their reports. It seems to be a tremendous experience, but I'm shivering on the brink, and waiting to be submerged with a horrid sort of notion that I shall go down and down and down and perhaps never come up again" (*L II*, 499); or in a letter written on 3 October 1922 to Roger Fry: "My great adventure is really Proust. […] I'm only in the first volume, […] but I am in a state of amazement; as if a miracle were being done before my eyes. […] One has to put the book down and gasp. The pleasure becomes physical—like sun and wine and grapes and perfect serenity and intense vitality combined" (*L II*, 565-6). The intensity and sensuality of the pleasure she feels take her breath away and induce Woolf to ignore the outer world and plunge into contemplation.

Descriptions of the author's mind absorbed in reading can also be found in other letters, to Lytton Strachey, on 3 September 1927: "I was going to recommend the Mysteries of Udolpho;[12] they send one into a mooney trance which is very

[12] Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794.

refreshing; but also Mrs Radcliffe has her moments of inspiration" (*L III*, 418); to Lady Ottoline Morrell on 8 February 1934: "How I wish people would write books I like to read! For instance Ottoline's memoirs. If I had them, in 6 volumes, by me, I should spend the day in a haze of rapture" (*L V*, 275). The author at times uses animal images to describe her in such a state: for example, in a letter written on 19 November 1908 to Madge Vaughan: "I am deep in Venetian history [13] at this moment—fascinated, like a Lizard in the sun" (*L I*, 373), or in a letter written on 11 February 1922 to Lady Robert Cecil: "I read two lines [of Cecil's letter], and go off into a trance, quite pleasant, like an animal in a hot house" (*L II*, 502), or again in a letter written on 23 September 1925: "[…] I cannot criticize poetry, only buzz outside like an old intoxicated frantic bee: whereas you go about your business calmly within. How I envy you!" (*L III*, 215) The soothing effect of reading is also mentioned in her letters to Vita Sackville-West: on 31 January 1927: "I […] must now finish this, and post it, and try to read a little, and so get control of my fidgets" (*L III*, 321), and on 3 December 1939: "I shall keep it [*Country Notes* (1939)][14] by my bed, and when I wake in the night—no, I shant use it as a soporific, but as a sedative: a dose of sanity and sheep dog in this scratching, clawing, and colding universe. The war makes one horribly bad tempered" (*L VI*, 373).

In particular, writing to Ethel Smyth, for example, in a letter written on 29 July 1934, Woolf considers reading as her paradise:

> I've not read so many hours for how many months. Sometimes I think heaven must be one continuous unexhausted reading. Its a disembodied trance-like intense rapture that used to seize me as a girl, and comes back now and again down here, with a violence that lays me low. Did I say I was flying? How then can I be low? Because, my dear Ethel, the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the *ego*; and its the ego that erects itself like another part of the body I dont dare to name. (*L V*, 319)

[13] Pompeo Molmenti, *Venice: Its Individual Growth from the Earliest Beginnings to the Fall of the Republic*, 1906.
[14] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 373, note 1: "*Country Notes*, 1939, a selection of Vita's articles on country matters, including an account of the journey she made through Burgundy with Virginia in 1928."

For Woolf, the act of reading has the power to suddenly project her out of the physical world into the inner world, so that she loses her consciousness of her own body and feels like some sort of spirit in that inner world, imbued merely with pleasure. Thus, Woolf considers reading as a way to escape her own particular personality—"I" (*D IV*, 353), the "*ego*" or self-consciousness.

Reading, like "a kind of rhapsody" (*L V*, 395), can function as a sort of psychotherapy, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 11 January 1936 to Ethel Smyth: "D'you know what I'm reading—merely *pacify* myself—all Borrow.[15] […]—But this wont amuse you as much as it *amuses* me. But Lord, how I wish I could write that particular racy English eccentric East Anglian nonconformist style. It *enchants* me as Hardy does—another *refuge* in time of headache—his Trumpet Major [1880]—" (*L VI*, 3-4, *our emphasis*). Reading becomes Woolf's mental retreat, especially during the Second World War, as witness a letter from 17 May 1940 to the same addressee:

> D'you know what I find?—reading a whole poet is consoling: Coleridge I bought in an old type copy tarnished over, yellow and soft: and I began, and went on, and skipped the high peaks, and gradually climbed to the top of his pinnacle, by a winding unknown way. So then I bought a Shelley: tea stained, water marked; but also no edited anthology cabinet piece. Him too I'm going to explore in the same sauntering under the bramble way. I find the poets and Ethel Smyth very effective when I wake between the worlds—3 and 4. (*L VI*, 399-400)

For Woolf, reading poetry becomes an exciting mental adventure or ramble in solitude. Moreover, Woolf also suggests that, apart from reading, the thought of Ethel Smyth can empower her to escape her anguished self.

Reading can hence be used to anaesthetise the anguished self but also to protect oneself, as a gas mask does in wartime, or as a support in life, as Woolf suggests in a letter written on 9 June 1940 to Ethel Smyth: "I read myself into a state

[15] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 3, note 4: "George Borrow (1803-81). Virginia had been reading, among other of his books, *Wild Wales*, 1862."

of immunity. And, as you know, I find your drug very potent. I dont think I was alone for 3 days for one moment; and each brought a little jab of the war—each time the door opened or the telephone rang it was war and war—" (*L VI*, 401-2).

However, at times, reading can turn into a far less exciting experience. In a letter written in 1902 to Violet Dickinson, the author shows that reading or learning Greek not only gives her a feeling of peace but also of dehumanisation, even if this is mentioned half jokingly, half stand-offishly: "What I fear is that much digging will give your soul a peace such as no Sparroy [Virginia] will disturb. I feel the same thing with Greek. Time spent with dead Greek is de-humanising—scraping about in the earth is de-humanising" (*L I*, 58). And in a letter from 16 August 1907 to Lady Robert Cecil, the author uses the metaphor of embalming to describe how her mind is absorbed and affected while she is reading Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907): "I am embalmed in a book of Henry James: The American Scene: like a fly in amber. I dont expect to get out; but it is very quiet and luminous" (*L I*, 304). This emblematic figuration of reading as deadening comes back in a letter written two days later to Clive Bell and is clearly not to James's advantage: "I am reading Henry James on America; and feel myself as one embalmed in a block of smooth amber: it is not unpleasant, very tranquil, as a twilight shore—but such is not the stuff of genius: no, it should be a swift stream" (*L I*, 305).

As for writing, it can be exhilarating as reading is, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 14 November 1940 to Ethel Smyth: "I am almost—what d'you call a voracious cheese mite which has gnawed its way into a vast Stilton and is intoxicated with eating—as I am with reading history, and writing fiction [*Pointz Hall*][16] and planning—oh such an amusing book on English literature"[17] (*L VI*, 445). But Woolf comes back repeatedly to the idea that writing is a way to escape the anguished self or

[16] *Pointz Hall* is published posthumously as *Between the Acts*, 1941.

[17] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 430, note 2: "For some time Virginia had been toying with the idea of a book on social history and its effect on literature, both British and possibly foreign. She worked on it intermittently until the end of her life, but left it unfinished. At first she called it *Reading at Random* or *Turning the Page*, and the first chapter was entitled *Anon* in her manuscript, and the second, *The Reader* (both *Berg*)."

a "drug" to anaesthetise it. Writing to Lady Robert Cecil in January 1907, the author shows that writing, like reading, can function as a sort of medicine anaesthetising her agony: "What I meant I think was that there are times when my company seems an infliction to myself, and therefore a curse to others; but whereas I can drug *it* (that is me) in a book, or an ink pot, you would have the creature crude and naked, and therefore it would be best to keep within reach of drugs for the present" (*L I*, 278).

The author reveals that the act of writing letters has also the power to intoxicate her, like wine, as she points out in a letter written on 22 December 1904 to the same addressee: "I dont know why I have written such a long letter when you didn't really particularly want it, but there are no books, and when I see a pen and ink, I cant help taking to it, as some people do to gin" (*L I*, 168). Writing creates an intimate and private space for the author to dramatise herself in silently; therefore, in a letter dated July 1905 to the same addressee, Woolf compares writing to "an irreticent thing to be kept in the dark—like hysterics" (*L I*, 196). At the same time, in a letter dated February 1907 to Violet Dickinson, the author indicates that letter writing is beyond her consciousness and her control: "You do make me feel penitent. When I hear of your worries and wishes—I dont know if a pen is as fatal to you as it is to me—I feel positively fraudulent—like one who gets sympathy on false pretences" (*L I*, 280).

Similarly, writing to Clive Bell, for example, in a letter written on 22 March 1907, the author shows that one difficulty for her in writing letters is due to the fact that writing has the power to take her into her inner world:

> Honestly, I withdraw into *a strange upper world* when I sit down before a table; very soon it will be withdrawn beyond sight, and belief. O God, the world it frets and rages: little chopped waves have surged to the very roof of the house. My room is a bare island in the midst. After luncheon I shall be swamped too. / Well then, how am I to write a letter? (*L I*, 289, *our emphasis*)

While in a letter written on 4 September 1910, she states that the act of writing letters also involves a loss of self-consciousness: "I fumble the words, awkwardly, with a

kind of awe, like a rustic. *That world* becomes astonishingly far away. How odd—that one writes oneself!" (*L I*, 434, *our emphasis*) Such an effect of writing not only amuses the author but also bewilders her, as she shows in another letter written on 31 January 1928 to the same addressee: "[…] my head is now recovered enough to let me begin writing a few feeble fancies in the morning; and as you know, this habit has much of the irrational intoxication for me that certain other habits not connected with the pen, have for you" (*L III*, 454).

Moreover, in a letter written on 18 October 1938 to Quentin Bell, Woolf states: "Writing is far too concentrated to be a human activity" (*L VI*, 293). Indeed, in such a "concentrated" state, writing becomes an automatic act beyond her control, as she explains in a letter written on 1 August 1935 to John Lehmann: "But in actually writing one's mind, as you know, gets into a trance, and the different images seem to come unconsciously. It is very interesting to me, though, to see how deliberate it looks to a critic. Of course most of the work is done before one writes and the concentration of writing makes one forget what the general effect is" (*L V*, 422). Writing thus means living in an imaginary world, which exists independently from the real world, as she shows in a letter written on 25 October 1939 to Edward Sackville-West: "It was nice of you to write to me about the Waves. Its the only one of my books that I can sometimes read with pleasure. Not that I write it with pleasure, but in a kind of trance into which I suppose I shall never sink again. And a word of praise from a reader like you almost persuades me that I could get back to that world in spite of the war" (*L VI*, 365-6).

Woolf develops the same idea when writing to Vita Sackville-West: in a letter dated early November 1925, Woolf shows that she is "intoxicated" (*L III*, 220) by writing, so much so that she enters an imaginary world where the novel being written becomes a delusion of the mind or mirage, as she states in a letter written on 17 February 1926: "I'm ashamed to say how wrapped up I get in my novel. Really, I am a little alarmed at being so absorbed—Why should one engross oneself thus for so many months? and it may well be a mirage—I read it over, and think it is a mirage: but I can scarcely do anything else" (*L III*, 241); and again, on 30 August 1928:

"Please write your novel, and then you will enter into the unreal world, where Virginia lives—and poor woman, can't now live anywhere else" (*L III*, 521).

To Ethel Smyth, Woolf points out in a letter written on 22 December 1932 that when she is writing, the physical world retreats beyond her consciousness: "How odd that the world goes on just the same whether I look at it or not! Do you find that when you're writing—the world goes out, except the precise part of it you want for your writing, which becomes indeed indecently clear" (*L V*, 137). On the contrary, the imaginary world takes hold of her consciousness and she is steeped in an enchanted dream-like state, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 1 March 1933: "And so, instead of dreaming in my chair I write almost as dreamily. Lord I've forgotten everything, everybody A chrysalis must feel as I do. You know how their tails twitch—well mine just does that tonight" (*L V*, 164).

Moreover, in a letter written on 9 February 1935, Woolf shows that fictional writing robs her of her sense of reality:

> When a person's thick to the lips in finishing a book, (like you) its no use pretending that they have bodies and souls so far as the rest of the world is concerned. They turn the sickle side of the moon to [the] world: the globe to the other. This profound psychological truth I've so often proved, and now respect in you, so dont write. One of these days our moons shall shine broad in each other's faces—when I come to Woking. (*L V*, 368)

Writing becomes a small, independent world—"[the] world—where the writer inhabits as an idea or a spirit, rather than the real self with "bodies and souls" in the real world—"the other". Woolf is not only fully aware of the "psychological" experience she undergoes when writing, but also that in this "concentrated" state, writing becomes the fruit of her "instincts" instead of being under her control: "What a thing it is to be a writer—to be so suggestible by one's own words that all ones instincts lie flat at their command, like sheep under a cloud: a fact which I think I've observed on the marshes at Rodmell" (*L V*, 446). Accordingly, writing, like reading, isolates her from the real world, as is made clear in a letter dated 1 March 1941: "But

I'm cross and irritable from the friction of village life. Isn't it foolish? But no sooner have I bound myself to my book, and brewed that very rare detachment, than some old lady taps at the door" (*L VI*, 475).

Analysing the author's descriptions of her own state of mind when she is enchanted by the beauty of nature or art, when she is reading or writing, we have found that the physical world is for Woolf, doubled by an inner one inhabited respectively by the "I: & the not I". Her letters display her ability to go in and out of these two worlds at will, as her letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell from 4 October 1935 confirms: "Now Leonard has turned on the wireless to listen to the news, and so I am flicked out of the world I like into the other. I wish one were allowed to live only in one world, but thats asking too much" (*L V*, 429).

Becoming "the not I" or being "unconscious" while writing is a capacity Woolf shares, according to her own words, with other poets, such as Christina Rossetti and W. B. Yeats. In a letter written on 25 December 1906 to Violet Dickinson, the author praises this ability in Christina Rossetti: "Also I am reading my dear Christina Rossetti […]. She doesn't think, I imagine; but just throws up her head and sends forth her song, and never listens, but makes another" (*L I*, 271-2). "[T]he not I" is also similar to what W. B. Yeats calls "the unconscious soul" (*L IV*, 250) or "the third state of the soul in contemplation" (*L IV*, 253). In a letter written on 8 November 1930 to Vanessa Bell and one on 14 November 1930 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf describes her party at Lady Ottoline Morrell's on 7 November 1930 with two poets—Yeats and Walter de la Mare, and she respectively writes: "[…] he [Yeats] believes in the unconscious soul, in fairies, in magic, and has a complete system of philosophy and psychology—it was not easy altogether to understand: at the same time, I agreed with many of his views; and he also is surprisingly sensible" (*L IV*, 250), and:

> And on one side of the fire sat the poet Yeats on the other the poet de la Mare—and what were they doing when I came in? Tossing between

> then higher and higher a dream of Napoleon with ruby eyes, and over my head it went—for what do I know of the inner meaning of dreams, I whose life is almost entirely founded on dreams […] I mean I know nothing of the spiritual significance of ruby eyes, or a book with concentric rings of black, purple and orange. But Yeats said, as it might be a man identifying a rather rare grass, that is the third state of the soul in contemplation (or words to that effect—it will not surprise you if I got them wrong). (*L IV*, 253)

For Yeats, "the philosophic voices"[18] or the ultimate reality created in a sort of automatic writing involves a psychological process, in which the writer, who is in an unconscious state, lets the "Spirit" or the "ultimate", "common" self or soul—"Daimon"—form general universal ideas.[19]

We can suggest that Woolf's "not I" and Yeats's "Daimon" both resemble Jung's "collective consciousness":

> My thesis, then, is as follows: in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a

[18] W. B. Yeats, *A Vision: A Reissue with the Author's Final Revisions* (1937. Eighth Printing. New York: Collier Books, A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), p. 22.

[19] According to Yeats's statements in *A Vision*, "the third state of the soul in contemplation" refers to "Daimon" or "the Ghostly Self": "Mere 'spirits', my teachers say, are the 'objective', a reflection and distortion; reality itself is found by the Daimon in what they call, in commemoration of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Ghostly Self. The blessed spirits must be sought within the self which is common to all" (22). Yeats first "identif[ies] the *Celestial Body* with the First Authentic Existant of Plotinus, *Spirit* with his Second Authentic Existant, which holds the First in its moveless circle; the discarnate *Daimons*, or *Ghostly Selves*, with his Third Authentic Existant or soul of the world (the Holy Ghost of Christianity), which holds the Second in its moving circle" (193-4). Then, he argues that "Daimon"—"soul of the world"—is the "ultimate self" (83) of one particular man, which is the common self that is inherited from generation to generation and embodies their common characteristics of a particular civilisation: "Nations, cultures, schools of thought may have their *Daimons*. These *Daimons* may move through the Great Year like individual men and women and are said to use men and women as their bodies, to gather and disperse those bodies at will" (209). In Yeats's eye, any sort of "Daimon" is eternal: "All things are present as an eternal instant to our *Daimon*" (193), and they belong to those "monads much greater than those of individual men and women" (209).

For Yeats, the "*Spirit*" is "the *Daimon*'s knowledge" (83) and at the same time, "all spirits inhabit our unconsciousness, or, as Swedenborg said, are the Dramatic personae of our dreams" (227). The "*Spirits*" or "phantoms", which are "free like itself", "may seek the assistance of those living men into whose 'unconsciousness' or incarnate *Daimon*" so as to fulfill their aim "as a form of perfection", which is "a shared purpose or idea" (233-4). Thus, Yeats declares: "the creative power of the lyric poet depends upon his accepting some one of a few traditional attitudes, lover, sage, hero, scorner of life. They bring us back to the spiritual norm. They may […] so act upon the events of our lives as to compel us to attend to that perfection which, though it seems theirs, is the work of our own *Daimon*" (234).

> collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.[20]

Like Yeats, Woolf, while in a state of unconsciousness, succeeds in writing freely and automatically and conveys the "unconscious", "collective", "universal", "impersonal", or "common" soul. Such a writing method involves Woolf's theory of impersonality and is exactly the method that Woolf advises Ethel Smyth to master in her autobiographical writing.[21]

8.2. "[T]he different strata of being: the upper under" (*D IV*, 258)—"the outer & the inner" (*D IV*, 353)

In a diary entry dated 1 November 1934, Woolf shows that she tries to convey two different sorts of being in *The Pargiters*, later published as *The Years*: "About novels: the different strata of being: the upper under—This is a familiar idea, partly tried in The Pargiters. But I think of working it out more closely; & now, particularly, in my critical book: showing how the mind naturally follows that order in thinking: how it is illustrated by literature" (*D IV*, 258). In other diary entries, she states that in *The Pargiters*, the "upper air scenes" (*D IV*, 282, 321, 353) refer to the scenes describing the characters' activities in the physical world. In the chapter entitled "1910" in the novel itself, Eleanor experiences the sensation of living in two different strata of being:

> There's no other way, I suppose, she thought, taking up her pencil again. She made a note as Mr Spicer spoke. She found that her pencil could take notes quite accurately while she herself thought of

[20] C. G. Jung. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconsciousness*. 1959. *Collected Works, Volume 8, Part One*. Ed. Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Second edition. London: Routledge, 1968, p. 43.
[21] See chapter three.

> something else. *She seemed able to divide herself into two. One person* followed the argument—and he's putting it very well, she thought; *while the other*, for it was a fine afternoon, and she had wanted to go to Kew, walked down a green glade and stopped in front of a flowering tree. Is it a magnolia? she asked herself, or are they already over? Magnolias, she remembered, have no leaves, but masses of white blossom…She drew a line on the blotting paper. (*TY*, 129, *our emphasis*)

Attending the Committee, Eleanor divides herself into two halves: the physical half simultaneously listens and takes notes among other human beings, while the visionary half, which she consciously feels, has already gone beyond her physical surroundings and rambles about in her imaginary world. Therefore, it seems that, for Woolf, the "upper" stratum of being refers to what one lives in the physical outer world with one's physical body, while the "under" stratum of being belongs to the other sort of being that one experiences with one's visionary body in the visionary inner world.[22]

Accordingly, for Woolf, the two dimensions of the mind—"the outer & the inner"—belong to "the different strata of being: the upper under", that is, the juxtaposition of two sorts of being.

Memory may be considered as belonging to the first sort of being that the author sees with "[her] mind's eye" (*L III*, 178). For example, in her letters to Violet Dickinson, such as the one written on 30 December 1906, the author shows that she is able to see her brother's expression in her memory: "When I think of father and Thoby and then see that funny little creature twitching his pink skin and jerking out his little spasm of laughter I wonder what odd freak there is in Nessa's eyesight" (*L I*,

[22] In *Between the Act* (1941), Woolf further implements this theory. She presents both the state of unconsciousness and "the upper under" strata through her characters: the former can be found in her description of Isa: "She came in like a swan swimming its way; then was checked and stopped; was surprised to find people there; and lights burning" (*BTA*, 4), while the latter can be seen in Mrs. Swithin, who indulges in her own imagination but is interrupted by Grace: "It took her five seconds in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue china on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green steaming undergrowth of the primeval forest. Naturally, she jumped, as Grace put the tray down and said: 'Good morning, Ma'am.' 'Batty,' Grace called her, as she felt on her face *the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron"* (*BTA*, 9, *our emphasis*).

273). Such a power of visual perception—"eyesight"—not only puzzles the author, but brings her back to her addressee, as in a letter written on 13 May 1909: "I often think of you; twice shot through Welwyn[23] lately, and seen your yellow road" (*L I*, 226). Vision not only bridges the spatial distance but also the temporal one, as the author shows in a letter from 27 November 1919: "It was certainly your doing that I ever survived to write at all[24]; and I suppose nothing I could say would give you an idea of what your praise was one night [in 1902]—*I can see it*—sitting in a long room at Fritham [New Forest], after a walk on the Common: O how excited I was and what a difference you made to me!" (*L II*, 402, *our emphasis*)

The author's descriptions of her memory, her ability to remember, as well as her ability to visualise her memories, keep recurring in her letters, as in the one written on 21 March 1912 to Sydney Waterlow: "My weekends in Cambridge [with the Quaker] make lurid pictures, like cheap lantern slides in my mind" (*L I*, 493). Visualising memories transforms the human mind into a magic lantern, while individual memories function as slides projected onto the screen of memory. The capacity of memory and the quantity of memories it can store both amuse and surprise the author, as can be seen in a letter written on 25 February 1918 to Saxon Sydney-Turner:

> I can remember Jebb coming to dinner with us, and sitting at the far end of the room with Nessa and Thoby. I there and then saw and perhaps said that he had the soul and innumerable legs of a black beetle. I am appalled at the number of things I can remember. Meredith, Henry James; a great many others too, if I could think of their names; Lowell, Mrs Humpgry Ward; Herbert Spencer, once; John Addington Symonds, and any number of Watts', Burne Jones' and Leightons. (*L II*, 221)

So does the clarity of her memory, as she shows in a letter written on 13 August 1918 to Katherine Cox: "I suppose you couldn't tell Mrs Brooke, if you wish, that I remember her with the greatest clearness, at St Ives, when Rupert was 5 and I was 10

[23] Violet Dickinson's house at Welwyn.
[24] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 402, note 1: "Violet had looked after Virginia during her madness in 1904."

and Dick [his brother] played cricket with us, and we all went fishing. I can see her winkles at this moment—" (*L II*, 268). A similar description can also be found in a letter written on 2 December 1928 to Vita Sackville-West:

> I'm coming on Thursday, just as the lamps are being lit in Sevenoaks, so that I can see you in the fishmongers in a red jersey holding a paper bag, rather heavy and damp. Full of smelts and then we turn up the lights in your room, and I get into my chair and you—ah well—too soon over, thats the worst of it. And I make it sooner over by my terrific sense (aged 46—thats what it does) of the flight of time, so that these moments are seen by me flying, flying; almost too distinct to be bearable. (*L III*, 561)

All these different memories form a sort of a recess or a hollow area in her mind, as is made clear in a letter written on 21 September 1922 to Barbara Bagenal: "Are Saxon's Aunts 7 children also in the bedroom? Why has it been kept so dark? Please tell me whether they are the children of the icthyologist (which means fish something). If so, I have a niche for them in my memory" (*L II*, 558). Memory is composed with facts, and as soon as those facts are endowed with "wings" of "the Imagination" (*L I*, 226), they can form imaginary pictures in front of the author's mind's eye. As discussed in Chapter Two, from the second volume of letters onwards, the author's imaginative scenes, which are based on facts from real life, not only bridge the spatial-temporal distance so as to transform the epistolary discourse into an imaginary face-to-face conversation, but they constitute visions that the author sees in her mind and that look as real as in the physical world. Such a way of writing imaginative descriptions turns letter writing into an experimental field where the author can practice her fictional writing, transform her private writing into fictional writing, and turn her letters into a reservoir for her novels; this enables the author to find her own voice and position as an author as well as trains her to develop a sense of audience. Most importantly, the imaginative descriptions help the author to discover her own gift of scene making, as described in "A Sketch of the Past", and make her aware of her own singularity in possessing simultaneously two different worlds, a

physical and a visionary world.

Indeed, like her fictional character, Eleanor Pargiter, the author often experiences a feeling of being two persons while carrying on her social activities. For example, in a letter written dated May 1908 to Clive Bell:

> If I could make you see the state in which half my days are spent you might realise many things. When you and Adrian are talking I plunge about in a phantom world, and wonder who the people are in hansoms, and what is going on in a certain place in the New Forest. But I dont see that these matters are very exalted, or any better than your manly talk. Nevertheless I am sometimes (to be candid) bored by general conversation, and usually very much excited by what I am thinking myself. (*L I*, 333)

Visions become a way to relieve the author's negative feelings and also serve as an outlet for her irony, as seen in chapter five. Visions also exert their transformative power on the author herself, whose body, as witness a letter written on 3 August 1908 to Clive Bell, is metamorphosed under their influence, here into a reed: "But—if you could see me under the influence of Lytton, Saxon and Miss Sheepshanks—'Miss Stephen do you ever think!' you would liken me rather to some swaying reed which swings with the stream" (*L I*, 339-340).

Under the power of vision, abstract concepts or ideas can also turn into solid objects in the real world, as can be seen in a letter dated February 1907 to Clive Bell: "I read then, and feel beauty swell like ripe fruit within my palm: I hear music woven from the azure skeins of air; and gazing into deep pools skimmed with the Italian veil I see youth and melancholy walking hand in hand." (*L I*, 282) The concrete bodies of these concepts can only be observed by the mind's eye and described approximately by words. Similarly, Woolf gets hold of new ideas for her writing as she catches sight of objects in real life, as is made clear in a letter written on 31 January 1927 to Vita Sackville-West: "Then its not writing novels: this journalism is such a thin draggled straining business, and I keep opening the lid and looking into my mind to see whether some slow fish isn't rising there—some new book" (*L III*, 321).

Visions such as that of Ethel Smyth at the station (*L IV*, 241) or Roger Fry at Charleston haunt Woolf and rather than being merely like sparks in her mind, they become insistent and timeless, as she shows in another letter written on 24 September 1934:

> And I have been thinking about the deaths of my friends. I have been thinking at a great rate—that is with profuse visibility. Do you find that is one of the effects of a shock—that pictures come up and up and up, without bidding or much control? I could almost see Roger yesterday in the room at Charleston. Nessa sits surrounded by her children doing needlework—dear, dear! So I break off. (*L V*, 334)

How visions emerge in her mind puzzles Woolf; so does their completeness, as Woolf states in a letter written on 22 August 1936: "Isnt that odd? Absence; thinking of some one—then the real feeling has room to expand. like the sights that one only sees afterwards: Is that peculiar to me, or common to all?" (*L VI*, 66)

For Woolf, the retina functions like a camera. It is only when one develops a negative in a dark room that one can perceive some details in a photograph. Similarly, memory can suddenly illuminate recollections that one has stored in one's mind. Woolf's description of her memory can be compared to Ebbinghaus's early description of involuntary memory:

> Often, even after years, mental states once present in consciousness return to it with apparent spontaneity and without any act of the will; that is, they are reproduced *involuntarily*. Here, also, in the majority of cases we at once recognise the returned mental state as one that has already been experienced; that is, we remember it. Under certain conditions, however, this accompanying consciousness is lacking, and we know only indirectly that the "now" must be identical with the "then"; yet we receive in this way a no less valid proof for its existence during the intervening time. As more exact observation teaches us, the occurrence of these involuntary reproductions is not an entirely random and accidental one. On the contrary they are brought about through the instrumentality of other, immediately present mental images. Moreover, they occur in certain regular ways which in general terms are described

under the so-called 'laws of association.'[25]

Visions can also be prospective and synonymous with imagination, as we have seen earlier. Woolf can imagine Ethel Smyth travelling in Scotland (*L V*, 218), give shape to her absent friend and give shape to friendship and other human relations. Similarly, when evoking the writing process, she can give shape and substance to her ideas, as lights or pearls in a letter written on 28 September 1930:

> […] light a cigarette, take my writing board on my knee; and let myself down, like a diver, very cautiously into the last sentence I wrote yesterday. Then perhaps after 20 minutes, or it may be more, I shall see a light in the depths of the sea, and stealthily approach—for one's sentences are only an approximation, a net one flings over some sea pearl which may vanish; and if one brings it up it wont be anything like what it was when I saw it, under the sea. (*L IV*, 223)

Not only ideas are given substance but form and style are also evoked in physical terms in Woolf's vision, as it is the case with Colette's style that Woolf compares to an iceberg in a letter written on 9 November 1938: "This refers to Sido [Colette][26] which I've only read once. And once isn't enough—except to show me something gleaming, like an iceberg of which the roots are underwater. Its a shape I haven't grasped" (*L VI*, 301).

We have seen in chapter five how Woolf evokes what being ill means through various images. For the author, illness is also connected with vision. Writing to Jacques Raverat on 10 December 1922, Woolf indicates that being ill also involves visions: "I find that unless I weigh $9\frac{1}{2}$ stones I hear voices and see visions and can either write nor sleep" (*L II*, 592), and in another letter dated 8 March 1924, she suggests how important illness is in her life: "We Stephen's are difficult, especially as

[25] Hermann Ebbinghaus. *Memory. A Contribution to Experimental Psychology*. 1885. Trans. Henry A. Ruger and Clara E. Bussenius. New York City: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1913: p. 2.
[26] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI*, p. 278, note 2: "[Sidonie-Gabrielle] Colette's memoirs of her mother, 1929."

the race tapers out, towards its finish—such cold fingers, so fastidious, so critical, such taste. My madness has saved me; but Adrian is sane—that's all the light I can throw" (*L III*, 92-3). Similarly, in a letter written on 27 March 1927 to Violet Dickinson, Woolf states that illness becomes a sort of adventure: "Being ill is rather nice in some ways: it brings one in to touch with oddities" (*L III*, 355).

Illness has "a disastrous effect upon the nervous system" (*L IV*, 17) or "the usual amazingly ineffective state of what is called my nervous system", as Woolf mentions repeatedly in her letters (*L II*, 560). Writing to Vita Sackville-West, she depicts herself as a "valetudinarian" (*L III*, 391; *L IV*, 20) whose "nervous system" is "a crazy apparatus" (*L IV*, 20). If she expatiates on the physical symptoms of her illness (*L III*, 570) and how it affects her body and temperature, how painful it is (*L IV*, 16, 19), Woolf also insists on how illness is a mental or psychological experience, as she does in a letter written on 5 June 1927:

> Its odd how being ill even like this splits one up into several different people. Here's my brain now quite bright, but purely critical. It can read; it can understand; but if I ask it to write a book it merely gasps. How does one write a book? I cant conceive. It's infinitely modest therefore,—my brain at this moment. […] Then my body—thats another person. So, my body is a grey mare, trotting along a white road. We go along quite evenly for a time like this….suddenly she jumps a gate… ^ …This is my heart missing a beat and making a jump at the next one. I rather like the gray mare jumping, provided she doesn't do it too often. (*L III*, 388)

When she is ill, Woolf experiences a split between her physical self and the experiencing, observing self or consciousness.

Furthermore, Woolf wonders about the significance of illness. In a letter written on 21 January 1922 to E. M. Forster, she states: "Not that I haven't picked up something from my insanities and all the rest. Indeed, I suspect they've done instead of religion. But this is a difficult point" (*L II*, 499). Again, in a letter to Vita from 15 August 1929, Woolf suggests that her illness may have some sort of mystical or religious significance:

> These headaches leave one like sand which a wave has uncovered—I believe they have a mystic purpose. Indeed, I'm not sure that there isnt some religious cause at the back of them—I see my own worthlessness and failure so clearly; and lie gazing into the depths of the misery of human life; and then one gets up and everything begins again and its all covered over. (*L IV*, 78)

The depression caused by physical suffering leads Woolf to think about the meaning of life and her own worth, as in a letter written three days later:

> [William] Plomer is a nice young man, rather prim and tight outwardly, concealing a good deal I think; though I'm completely bored by speculating as to poets' merits. Nobody is better than anybody else—I like people—I dont bother my head about their works. All this measuring is a futile affair, and it doesn't matter who writes what. But this is my grey and grizzled wisdom—at his age I wanted to be myself. And then,—here is a great storm of rain, I am obsessed at nights with the idea of my own worthlessness, and if it were only to turn a light on to save my life I think I would not do it. These are the last footprints of a headache I suppose. Do you ever feel that?—like an old weed in a stream. What do you feel, lying in bed? (*L IV*, 80)

Woolf's descriptions of "medical details" (*L IV*, 144, 183; *L V*, 89) is a major subject in her epistolary conversation with Ethel Smyth (*L IV*, 214, 285), even if Woolf realises that these descriptions may give her addressee the impression that she is excessively concerned with her own health: "(Lord, how conscious I am, over conscious, of the exact poise of my health)" (*L IV*, 216).

In a letter written on 1 July 1930 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf describes the three stages involved in illness: "But this is only to say that I must have misled you about this particular headache. There are 3 stages: pain; numb; visionary; and this stopped at pain, and only a little pain at that" (*L IV*, 183). The first stage is further evoked in two letters from 1 and 3 September 1930, where Woolf considers her "jumping heart—stops and jump, like a mulish pony" (*L IV*, 206) and pain as "the rat gnawing pain" (*L IV*, 207). The second stage is described, for example, in a letter from 4

September 1930:

> The pain has gone; but the next stage is complete drowsiness. I cant think how I ever walked to the fishpond—seems like an expedition to the Pole; yet I did this yesterday. I read one line and go into a trance like smoke. Slept the whole afternoon. I'm like an alligator, nostrils only visible. […] One day I'll write the history of my spine: I think I can feel every knob: and my whole body feels like a web spread on the knobs, and twitchy and sagging and then sinking into delicious rest. (*L IV*, 208)

But it is the third stage that is most beneficial to Woolf's writing. Images suddenly flood her mind, as she shows in a letter written on 31 May 1934: "The fever has gone, and I am left serene, and even begin to feel the stream running and lifting the reeds again. Excuse these metaphors—they come in flocks when I am recumbent—I cant shoo them off: thousands and thousands make themselves in my brain—I suppose the result of not using my brain" (*L V*, 307). Moreover, in the letter written on 1 July 1930, Woolf states: "it is 10 years since I was seeing faces, and 5 since I was lying like a stone statue[27]" (*L IV*, 183). For Woolf, it is these visions, which she is ill, that provide most of the stuff for her writing, as she explains in a letter written on 16 October 1930:

> One of these days I will write out some phases of my writer's life; and expound what I now merely say in short—After being ill and suffering every form and variety of nightmare and extravagant intensity of perception—for I used to make up poems, stories, profound and to me inspired phrases all day long as I lay in bed, and thus sketched, I think, all that I now, by the light of reason, try to put into prose (I thought of the Lighthouse then, and Kew and others, not in substance, but in idea) […] I shall never forget the day I wrote The Mark on the Wall—all in a flash, as if flying, after being kept stone breaking for months. The Unwritten Novel was the great discovery, however. That—again in one second—showed me how I could embody all my deposit of experience

[27] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 183, note 1: "In her diary for 8 August 1921, Virginia wrote of 'all the horrors of the dark cupboard of illness once more displayed for my diversion….The dark underworld has its fascinations as well as its terrors' [*The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 125-6] (quoted by Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, II, 83-4). From mid-August to November 1925 she was intermittently in bed after collapsing at Charleston."

> in a shape that fitted it—not that I have ever reached that end; but anyhow I saw, branching out of the tunnel I made, when I discovered that method of approach, Jacobs Room [1922], Mrs Dalloway [1925] etc—How I trembled with excitement. (*L IV*, 231)

Woolf confirms how productive illness can be in a letter to Ethel Smyth from 22 June 1930: "As an experience, madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lave I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driblets, as sanity does" (*L IV*, 180). This statement is close to her own words in "A Sketch of the Past": "It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine" (*MOB*, 72).

Illness, as she states in a letter written on 22 June 1930, also enables her to know herself better: "And the six months—not three—that I lay in bed taught me a good deal about what is called oneself" (*L IV*, 180). For all these reasons, illness has an important value, both for her writing and her self-discovery, as she points out in a letter written on 4 September 1936: "Well I lay low, saw nobody and am better again—much better: indeed, when this book [*The Years*] is done, I expect a year or two of the highest health: I generally get a spurt on after one of these collapses. Thats what pulls me through—And psychologically they have their advantages—one visits such remote strange places, lying in bed" (*L VI*, 70). In a playful tone, Woolf comes back to what she wrote in her diary on 8 August 1921: "The dark underworld has its fascinations as well as its terrors" (*D II*, 125-6).

Conclusion

According to Woolf, the unconscious self is the real self, and visions are reality, her refuge, as well as her happiness. In this diary entry from 10 September 1928, Woolf calls vision "a consciousness", "reality": "a thing I see before me;

something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist. Reality I call it." If vision as "the most necessary thing" to her, it also plays the role of "a sanctuary", "a nunnery", "a religious retreat"; it is essentially ambivalent, bringing with it suffering while it is rewarding. Vision is made "of great agony once; & always some terror", "of loneliness: of seeing to the bottom of the vessel"; but it is also what Woolf considers as her gift as a writer, which "distinguishes [her] from other people", for "it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that" (*D III*, 196). In another diary entry for 27 November 1935, Woolf writes: "Two many specimen days—so I cant write, yet, Heaven help me, have a feeling that I've reached the no man's land that I'm after, & can pass from outer to inner, & inhabit eternity. A queer very happy free feeling, such as I've not had at the finish of any other book" (*D IV*, 355).

In terms of writing, Woolf aims to reach her unconscious self—real, universal, impersonal, common—while writing and convey her visions. Woolf is fully aware that, for other people, the physical world, rather than vision, is real, as she points out in a letter written on 7 November 1922 to Will Arnold-Forster: "How you and Leonard see anything solid where to me it is all phantasies and moonshine, only mudcoloured moonshine, I can't conceive" (*L II*, 582). Moreover, for Woolf, the boundary between reality and vision is not so clearly delineated, as witness a letter dated June 1906 to Madge Vaughan: "But my present feeling is that this vague and dream like world, without love, or heart, or passion, or sex, is the world I really care about, and find interesting. For, though they are dreams to you, and I cant express them at all adequately, these things are perfectly real to me" (*L I*, 227).

Even in a letter written on 1 February 1940 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf still advocates that it is visions, which are partly based on facts in real life, and partly invented by their imagination, that great writers like Hardy or Tolstoy aim to convey (*L VI*, 381). And in a letter written on 24 January 1939 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf adds: "Anyhow we artists have that anciliary—whats the word—other world outside the real world I mean. If this is real" (*L VI*, 312).

Conclusion to Part Three

In a letter dated as early as July 1906 to Madge Vaughan, while reading Flaubert's correspondence with George Sand, the author shows her admiration:

> I sent back today—at last—the Flaubert[1] which you lent me. […] I think no letters I have read interest me more, or seem more beautiful and more *suggestive*. I know his novels but I know them much better now. *She brings out all his peculiar qualities so finely* that no autobiography could *tell so much* as he tells almost *unconsciously*. I have read none of her novels: but only the autobiography. It is *an immense lucid kind of mind*, something like *a natural force*—with *no effort or consciousness* about it. I think I understand his *artistic creed* better: I knew all his *features and boundaries*—but I sink into her and am engulphed! I wanted to enforse, and add to, your pencil marks; whole passages seemed to start up as though writ in old ink. They *penetrate* so far and *sum up* so much that is *universal* as well as *individual*, and they say *things that almost can't be said*. (*L I*, 229, *our emphsis*)

For the author, Flaubert's letters also function as the site where he crystallises his literary theories and opinions; at the same time, due to the characteristics of the subject matter, they are both impersonal and private. But most importantly, George Sand plays the role of a catalyst that stimulates Flaubert's mind, and such stimulation enables both of them to probe more deeply into the essence of things, as no other form of conversation could do.

In a letter written on 1 July 1918 to Vanessa Bell, Woolf , while describing "a most interesting talk with Waller [Hills],[2] at Rays [Strachey] party" (*L II*, 256), directly quotes Hills' talk about education:

> "You say Vanessa has decided against the public school for her boys. Well, my dear, its a gamble, yes, its a gamble. The public school is far from perfect. *But its the intellectual stimulus of companionship that one*

[1] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I*, p. 229, note 1: "His correspondence with George Sand."
[2] See *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, p. 219, note 1: "John Waller Hills, the widow of Stella [Duckworth], Virginia's half-sister."

> *gets there.* Yes, Eton did more for me than Balliol; but I suffered all my life from having no sisters. I never knew the woman's side of life until met your family. All boys ought to know that." (*L II*, 256-7, *our emphasis*)

Such a quotation may also reveal Woolf's approval of Hills's opinion according to which the stimulating function of friends at school is more important than education; his acquaintance with the Stephen sisters helped him to know the characteristics of the other sex.

These two letters explain the reasons why letters are crucial and essential to Woolf's artistic development, why Woolf writes differently to different people, as well as why self-presentation is at the heart of her letters. By composing a letter with a certain style and selecting certain fragments of her own life and thoughts, the author not merely aims to meet her addressees' needs, tastes, and capacities or to amuse them, but actually attempts to tailor her addressees to meet her own needs. This echoes the opinion she voices in a letter written on 13 June 1910 to Lady Robert Cecil: "I had the great pleasure of seeing your exquisite but not altogether incredible niece the other day. It was like watching a white moth quiver over a flower. One couldn't call it conversation. If my shadow had fallen she would have been out of the window" (*L I*, 426). Meanwhile, the importance of audience can also be seen in a letter written in wartime, on 13 March 1941 to Elizabeth Robins: "Its difficult, I find, to write. No audience. No private stimulus, only this outer roar" (*L VI*, 479).

Self-presentation or letter writing become the radical tools with which the author attracts her addressees so that they may help her discover the dormant power in herself. These characteristics of letter writing redefine the roles of addressees and turn the genre of the private letters into the site of self-discovery. Letters hence become "a funnel [kaleidoscope]" of Woolf: every fragment of her letter writing functions one of "those scraps of colour" (*L VI*, 112), which reflects one facet of her character. Like Hardy, Proust or Dostoevsky, Woolf also treats her own self as a source of writing. Meanwhile, it is the reader's task to discover these fragments of the writer's selves, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 18 October 1932 to Vita Sackville-West: "Whats

so interesting is when one uncovers an emotion that the person themselves, I should say herself, doesn't suspect. And its a sort of duty dont you think—revealing peoples true selves to themselves?" (*L V*, 111)

Furthermore, for Woolf, in letter writing, the addressees tend to be implied readers rather than real ones, the stuff of letters is made of visions, and the letter writer tends to be the unconscious self. Accordingly, letters become imaginary conversations between ghosts in the world of vision; they can be compared to wireless signals, as the author shows in a letter written on 12 April 1909 to Lady Robert Cecil:

> When you wrote to me you did not think I should answer on a great sheet like this—however, it is very doubtful whether I shall finish it. / The effect of this ghastly [bank] holiday which leaves me alone in London, and shuts all the shops, and gives all the postmen a day off, is to make me turn to my friends. There should be threads floating in the air, which would merely have to be taken hold of, in order to talk. You would walk about the world like a spider in the middle of a web. In 100 years time, I daresay these psychical people will have made all this apparent—now seen only by the eye of genius. As it is—how I hate writing. (*L I*, 389-90)

This quotation also reveals that the author is fully aware that her letters will be published and read posthumously and that the reader might uncover everything that she presents and conveys in her letters, directly or indirectly. This further proves that the author writes her letters with a future public reader in mind, and that these are not merely private, individual, but also universal and impersonal.

Conclusion

Letters, throughout our analysis, have come out as a space in which the author practices writing, trains herself as a writer, and develops a congenial style of "central transparency". As such, letters are both an experimental ground and a space crystallising the author's artistic theories. They are also necessarily connected with her own life and experience and Woolf uses them to discover and uncover her own self, to herself and her addressees. In her letters, Woolf writes about herself and her own life but also about various people and various lives, trying in that way, to suggest some universal and impersonal ideas. Letters are also a stage for the author to perform the silent drama of her real life and to deliver her own monologues or soliloquies. Through various techniques examined in this work, the author turns her letters into the verbal signs, or electroencephalogram, of the mind. Letter writing is also a form of conversation, now a dialogue between the author's different personae, now a conversation between the self and her addressees.

As Ethel Smyth states in her letter of condolence to Vanessa Bell, Woolf's letters are her highest achievement as a writer: "I remember your saying once & my agreeing—that perhaps 'The best thing she does are her letters' & I'm going to have them typed (as sometimes her script was cryptic) & bound."[1] According to the author herself, letters as a form of autobiography, are the true form of literature: "In fact I sometimes think only autobiography is literature" (*L V*, 142). As for us, we hope to have shown that Woolf's letters can be regarded as works of art.

Epistolary writing occupies a middle space between the private and the public spheres, the writer writing for both herself and a reader. Such a specific type of writing resorts to a language that is both, as we have seen, conscious and unconscious. When reading Woolf's conscious writing, we can be sensitive to its beauty, as we are to paintings or music; with her "unconscious" writing, reading becomes a matter of feeling and reflection: we not only feel the writer's emotion and are privy to her mind and her

[1] Dame Ethel Smyth. "Ethel Smyth's letter of condolence to Vanessa Bell (1941)," *Virginia Woolf: Interviews and Recollections*. Ed. J. H. Stape. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995: p. 174-5.

self-exposure. There, we are also confronted with thoughts that will resurface in her fiction; "unconscious" writing, in Woolf's letters, thus often produces ideas that can be regarded as embryos of her artistic theories. Such is the case of her concept of "central transparency", that we have explored at length.

Woolf implements her style of "central transparency" in her fictional writing. For example, the "design" that Woolf uses in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), as she points out in a letter written on 27 May 1927 to Roger Fry, can be said to be a form of "central transparency":

> I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one things another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. (*L III*, 385)

The architectural design of prose writing contributes to the creation of emotion, together with metaphors and symbols. It is similar to the construct Lily Briscoe attempts to paint: "She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral" (*TTL*, 48). In Woolf's elaborate prose, subjects and subject-matter become transparent, lucid, and incandescent, while the whole work is constructed as "a pyramid", which is, as Virginia Stephen discovered in Constantinople in 1906, the origin of the beauty of St Sophia: "there was St Sophia, like a treble globe of bubbles frozen solid, floating out to meet us. For it is fashioned in the shape of some fine substance, thin as glass, blown in plump curves; save that it is also as substantial as a pyramid. Perhaps that may be its beauty. But then beautiful & evanescent & enduring" (*APA*, 347-8).

Such "architecture" (*L IV*, 354) can also be found in *The Waves* (1931), which

Woolf constructs by "moving one pillar in the Waves half an inch to the right, having moved it yesterday three quarters of an inch to the left" (*L IV*, 354). On the one hand, characters are created through their soliloquies while the few pages of interludes are symbolic. On the other hand, both characters and interludes are dominated by a central rhythm, as Woolf shows in a letter written on 28 August 1930 to Ethel Smyth: "I think then that my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot. […] And thus though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw to the reader. This is rough and ready; but not willfully inaccurate" (*L IV*, 204).

Technically speaking, for Woolf, to write a novel is to convey some abstract ideas that can however be perceived: "I believe that the main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross: that its to be pulled through only in a breathless anguish. […] But a novel, as I say, to be good should seem, before one writes it, something unwriteable: but only visible" (*L III*, 529). By using the suggestive beauty of the style of "central transparency"—the "fabric" of "shades and half lights" (*L V*, 354) in between "a high light" and "a dark spot" (*L V*, 353), Woolf composes her poetic, dramatic or prose writing so as to make "visible" the ideas in her mind—"a light in the depths of the sea, and stealthily approach—for one's sentences are only an approximation, a net one flings over some sea pearl which may vanish; and if one brings it up it wont be anything like what it was when I saw it, under the sea" (*L IV*, 223). Consequently, in *The Waves*, characters look more like symbols or ideas than real people, as Woolf herself suggests: "I didn't mean real people, only ghosts—but perhaps real people have ghosts" (*L V*, 6). And when writing about *Flush: A Biography* (1933), she states that it is also "all a matter of hints and shades" (*L V*, 236). Ethel Smyth adds in her 1936 article, "Lady Ponsonby" in *As Time Went On*, that through "suggestiveness", Woolf not only "raise[s], not a monument, but a ghost; not a ghost but a presence", summarizing Woolf's efforts, the architectural nature of her

writing and its paradoxical achievement consisting in giving substance to the unsubstantial or making visible the invisible. Her personal experience is necessarily at the basis of such an achievement, as many letters suggest.

Like Keats, Woolf turns words into "symbols for immaterial things" (*L I*, 273), as she herself points out in a letter dated December 1906 to Violet Dickinson. Like her painter sister, Vanessa Bell, Woolf becomes the "mistress" of her own writing, as she indicates in a letter written on 5 March 1927: "I think we are now at the same point: both mistresses of our medium as never before: both therefore confronted with entirely new problems of structure. Of course your colour intrigues me, seduces me, and satisfies me exquisitely" (*L III*, 341). Similarly, like Vanessa, who uses her art to present her impressions of human life, Woolf composes her novels with impressions: "But I maintain you are into the bargain, a satirist, a conveyer of impressions about human life: a short story writer of great wit and able to bring off a situation in a way that rouses my envy. I wonder if I could write the Three Women in prose" (*L III*, 498). This is also what Hardy insists on, as Woolf shows in "The Novels of Thomas Hardy (1932)": "A novel 'is an impression, not an argument', he has warned us" (*E V*, 568). By describing impressions, the writer tries to convey emotion; "[t]herefore the 'book itself' is not form which you see, but emotion which you feel, and the more intense the writer's feeling the more exact without slip or chink its expression in words" (*E III*, 340), Woolf states in "On Re-reading novels (1922)". Moreover, like Vanessa, Woolf resorts to vision to draw her characters or friends, as she explains to her sister in a letter written on 8 October 1938, when writing *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940): "Its rather as if you had to paint a portrait using dozens of snapshots in the paint. Either one ought to dash it off freehand, red, green, people out of ones inner eyes; or toil like a fly over a loaf of bread" (*L VI*, 285). She clearly does not choose to toil like a fly.

Woolf's style of "central transparency" is also connected with music. Indeed, as she points out in a letter written on 6 December 1940 to Ethel Smyth, Woolf aims to

explore the musical characteristics of writing: “I have an ulterior motive. I want to investigate the influence of music on literature” (*L VI*, 450). This influence is immediately perceptible through the use of punctuation in the letters, which would deserve a study by itself. The author uses colons to convey the speed and wealth of her thoughts as they come to her, and as if she had no time to jot them down. She uses semicolons as the material mark of her train of thoughts and parentheses as corporeal signs materialising the four dimensions of her mind. As for dashes, they seem to fulfill a double and contradictory purpose: they make syntactic connections, conveying breathlessness, but also suggest the author’s hesitations. They at times introduce a pause, giving room to silence or reflections, and signaling where the writer’s work ends and the reader’s begins. They are connected with the work of memory as well as with contemplation and imagination. Dashes create the irresistible fascination of Woolf’s letters, introducing disruptions as they do and inviting the reader to fill in the blanks. These material signs of the author’s mental activity challenge the linear progression of the sentences and create a specific rhythm.

In terms of method, Woolf suggests her meaning in her prose writing as her musician friend, Ethel Smyth, uses semitones: “Thats the trouble with the daughters of generals—either things are black, or they’re white; either theyre sobs or they’re ‘shouts—’ whereas, I always glide from semi-tone to semitone; and you never hear the difference between one and another” (*L V*, 217). Structurally speaking, Woolf, like a musician, suggests how layered feelings or ideas can be: “I should like to write four lines at a time, describing the same feeling, as a musician does; because it always seems to me that things are going on at so many different levels simultaneously” (*L V*, 315). And this idea or emotion becomes a major theme as in a symphony: “But it was all very minute and wire drawn; merely what one thinks when someone else is talking—[handwritten]: in fun; by way of playing a tune on the bass. / I like trying to play tunes while people are talking—with a view to the whole sympathy” (*L V*, 354).

Consequently, the style of "central transparency", gives Woolf's writing a dynamic and stimulating power, which is what she likes in the books she admires: "I keep speculating—which is what I enjoy most in all books: not themselves: what they make me think" (*L VI*, 50). As the silent painters, such as Walter Sickert and Cézanne, do in their painting, Woolf creates "a zone of silence" (*E VI*, 39) in her writing, "the silent land" (*E VI*, 44), and aims to "make fools of us as often as [she] choose[s]" (*E IV*, 245).[2] Through silence, Woolf conveys meaning: "I think perhaps if one had never written a word one would then be able to say what one meant" (*L III*, 504). However, such suggestive writing might also result in ambiguity or obscurity. So, how can we hope to capture meaning in her silence, and how can we "twitch aside the veil" (*L II*, 203), "shading [her] meaning" (*L VI*, 461), in order to "penetrate to the heart which perversely enough resists the solemn and premeditated assaults" (*L II*, 203) from the reader?

For Woolf, to solve such difficulties actually requires the reader's active participation, as she shows in "On Re-reading Novels": "What have we not, indeed, to expect from M. Proust alone? But if he will listen to Mr Lubbock, the common reader will refuse to sit any longer open-mouthed in passive expectation" (*E VI*, 430). While reading, the reader should also make their minds function as a sponge to absorb all the fragmentary elements and feelings, as Woolf indicates in "Phases of Fiction (1929)": "The mind feels like a sponge saturated full with sympathy and understanding; it needs to dry itself, to contract upon something hard" (*E V*, 71). The reader's mind also plays as "a deep reflecting river" (*L III*, 480). It should also be a mind with imaginative power, a mind in which the seed of facts can grow and develop into new ideas. Woolf not only thinks she possesses such a mind, as she shows in Letter 1613: "you cant think how, being a clever woman, as we admit, I make every fragment you tell me bloom and blossom in my mind" (*L III*, 232), but also advises her friend to have it while reading, as she shows in a letter written on 10 October 1926:

[2] See chapter one.

> I've been walking to the river and back:—But what was I going to say? Oh yes—begin your history of a Kentish village at once. Plan it out roughly on a great sheet: Let each little note branch and blossom in the night, or when you're walking (the beauty of this subject is that everything will come in—cabbages, moon, church steeple): Occasionally open some old history, or life of some unknown man, but not to read carefully—to dream over. So in a week—no, 3 or 4 days, the whole poem will be foaming and bubbling in your head: and meals seem but a temporary contrivance barring the way—(Not wine; this don't apply to Spanish wine) (*L III*, 297)

In order to catch the implied meaning, the reader should also possess the capacity to read the symbols, and some imagination; or, to use Woolf's own words in "How Should One Read a Book? (1932)", in order to catch the writer's meaning, readers should "refresh and exercise [their] own creative powers" (*E V*, 576), "must be capable […] of great fineness of perception [and] great boldness of imagination" (*E V*, 575). Woolf's reader is not so different from Barthes's active one and her style of "central transparency" may be compared in some way with his definition of the plural text. To say that a text is plural, Barthes famously writes in *Image, Music, Text* (1977): "Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning […]. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination."[3]

Woolf herself indirectly suggests that her style of "central transparency", may owe something to Henry James. James describes his own technique in his "Preface" to *The Awkward Age* (1899):

> —the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distances about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title,

[3] Roland Barthes. "From Work to Text," *Image, Music, Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977: p. 159.

> and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects.[4]

In "The Method of Henry James (1918)," Woolf evaluates such a design or conception of his novel: "One has to look for something like that in the later books—not a plot, or a collection of characters, or a view of life, but something more abstract, more difficult to grasp, the weaving together of many themes into one them, the making out of a design" (*E II*, 348). She considers this "design" is what makes James "a great writer—a great artist" that later generations should appreciate: "A priest of the art of writing in his lifetime, he is now among the saints to whom every writer, in particular every novelist, must do homage" (*E II*, 348). However, we have seen that in her letters, she is more severe about James's achievement, especially, about the lack of life and emotion in his novels. Indeed, what Woolf adds to James's "design" is, in the style of "central transparency", emotion. Like the "book itself", letters are "not form which you see but emotion which you feel" (*E VI*, 427).

[4] Henry James. Preface. *The Awkward Age*. St. Martin's Street, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1922: p. xviii.

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Summary

This dissertation means to explore the aesthetics of Woolf's epistolary writing. For Woolf, letters become a vast field, a free space for experimenting her original theories of writing, developing her unique techniques and perfecting her style of modern writing. They also provide a space for finding her authorial voice, position and self. Delving into the six volumes of Woolf's private letters, we first explore how they depict the author's daily life, its wealth and intensity. Through her exchanges with her numerous addressees, Woolf redefines the epistolary genre: apart from their informative function, letters offer artistic descriptions of life and people, which are composed by Woolf in a specific manner, often fuelled by various other arts—painting, cinema, music, or drama. Such a representation transforms the most private epistolary genre into a public, dialogical and inter-medial genre. Intimacy and self-protectiveness, together with a desire for self-exposure stimulate Woolf to develop a style of "central transparency"—her figurative or suggestive method that enables her to express emotion and represent herself.

Keywords: Woolf, letters, epistolary writing, impersonality, "central transparency", emotion, imagery, soliloquy, "unconsciousness", vision, private/public; self-protectiveness, self-exposure.

Les Lettres de Virginia Woolf comme laboratoire d'écriture

Cette thèse explore l'esthétique des écrits épistolaires de Woolf. Pour cet auteur, les lettres sont un vaste champ d'expérimentation de ses théories originales d'écriture, un espace où elle peut développer sa propre technique narrative et perfectionner son style moderne. Les lettres sont aussi un espace qui lui permet de trouver sa voix et sa position en tant qu'auteur ainsi que son moi. Dans les six volumes de lettres privées de Woolf, nous explorons d'abord la façon dont elles décrivent la vie quotidienne, riche et intense, de l'auteur. A travers des échanges fréquents avec ses destinataires, Woolf redéfinit le genre épistolaire. En dehors de leur fonction informative, les lettres offrent des descriptions artistiques de la vie et des gens qui sont composées d'une manière particulière, souvent irriguées par d'autres arts (peinture, cinéma, musique ou théâtre). Cette forme de représentation transforme le plus privé des genres en un genre public, dialogique et intermédial. L'intimité et le désir de se protéger en même temps que de s'exposer incitent Woolf à développer ce qu'elle nomme un style de « transparence centrale », méthode de représentation ou de suggestion qui lui permet d'exprimer l'émotion et de se représenter.

Mots-clés : Woolf, lettres, écriture épistolaire, impersonnalité, « transparence centrale », émotion, images, soliloque, « inconscience », vision, privé/public, protection de soi, dénudement.