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**Reading Virginia Woolf with
Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy:
Theoretical Resonances, Intercorporeality, Fiction**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates Virginia Woolf's literary production through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy. After situating the two authors within their own original contexts, their transnational trajectories and theoretical resonances will be examined in the light of subsequent critics' renegotiations of their works. In particular, this thesis focuses on the phenomenological notion of intercorporeality, namely on the theory that subjects are embodied and relational, entangled in a process of constant material and ideological becoming. This notion is adapted to a study of Woolf's fiction through a phenomenological and ecological approach to character. This feminist and philosophical lens sheds new light on Woolf's essays, autobiographical sketches, and fiction, thereby showing the productivity of pluralistic perspectives in literary studies.

Résumé

Cette thèse analyse la production littéraire de Virginia Woolf au prisme de la philosophie de Simone de Beauvoir. Après avoir situé les deux autrices dans leurs contextes originaux, leurs trajectoires transnationales et leurs résonances théoriques seront examinées à la lumière des renégociations de leurs œuvres par les critiques ultérieurs. En particulier, cette thèse se concentre sur la notion phénoménologique d'intercorporéité, c'est-à-dire sur la théorie selon laquelle les sujets sont incarnés et relationnels, enchevêtrés dans un processus de devenir matériel et idéologique constant. Cette notion est adaptée à une étude de l'œuvre romanesque de Woolf à travers une approche phénoménologique et écologique du personnage. Ce regard féministe et philosophique jette une lumière nouvelle sur les essais, les esquisses autobiographiques et les romans de Woolf, démontrant ainsi la productivité des perspectives pluralistes dans les études littéraires.

Abstract

Questa tesi indaga la produzione letteraria di Virginia Woolf attraverso la filosofia di Simone de Beauvoir. Dopo aver collocato le due autrici all'interno dei loro contesti originari, le loro traiettorie transnazionali e le loro risonanze teoriche saranno esaminate alla luce delle rinegoziazioni delle loro opere da parte della critica successiva. In particolare, questa tesi si concentra sulla nozione fenomenologica di intercorporeità, ovvero sulla teoria secondo cui i soggetti sono incarnati e relazionali, invischiati in un processo di costante divenire materiale e ideologico. Questa nozione viene adattata allo studio della narrativa di Woolf attraverso un approccio fenomenologico ed ecologico al personaggio. Questa lente femminista e filosofica getta nuova luce sui saggi, gli schizzi autobiografici e la narrativa di Woolf, mostrando così la produttività delle prospettive pluralistiche negli studi letterari.

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List of abbreviations

AROO = *A Room of One's Own*

BA = *Between the Acts*

CDA = *La Cérémonie des adieux*

CJ = *Cahiers de jeunesse*

CSF = Virginia Woolf's *Complete Shorter Fiction*

D = Virginia Woolf's *Diaries*, followed by volume number

DSa = *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 1

DSb = *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 2

E = Virginia Woolf's *Essays*, followed by volume number

EA = *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, translated by Bernard Frechtman

ESdB = *Les Écrits de Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier

ESN = *L'Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations*

FA = *La Force de l'âge*

FCa = *La Force des choses*, vol. 1

FCb = *La Force des choses*, vol. 2

FW = Simone de Beauvoir's *Feminist Writings*

JR = *Jacob's Room*

L = Virginia Woolf's *Letters*, followed by volume number

LV = *La Vieillesse*

MB = *Moments of Being*

MD = *Mrs Dalloway*

O = *Orlando*

OLW = Simone de Beauvoir's *The Useless Mouths and Other Literary Writings*

PhW = Simone de Beauvoir's *Philosophical Writings*

PolW = Simone de Beauvoir's *Political Writings*

SS = *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier

TCF = *Tout compte fait*

TG = *Three Guineas*

TW = *The Waves*

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Both Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, as this thesis will argue, believe in the fundamental nexus between life and writing. As a consequence, it is inevitable to devote part of this thesis to an acknowledgement of all the material and affective support other people have provided me with during the three years of my doctorate. Within each group, the names will be provided in alphabetical order so as not to create hierarchies.

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Introduction.

Thinking back *through/between/beyond* our mothers

In any course on feminism, the names and works of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are bound to be evoked. Despite, or perhaps precisely in view of this obvious feminist connection, sustained academic studies of their intersections and resonances have not been produced yet, as Chapter 1 will show. This thesis is an attempt to build on the existing scholarship on the two ‘mothers’ of second-wave feminisms (and beyond) in order to trace some interesting trajectories that may illuminate not only their similarities but also their differences.

Because of necessary disciplinary specifications and because of my own educational background and research interests, however, this thesis is first and foremost a study of Woolf through the philosophy of Beauvoir, with a particular focus on the notion of the body as a situated, relational, living subject – a notion which in critical phenomenology is generally encapsulated in the noun ‘intercorporeality’. While Woolf’s literary production will be analysed across generic distinctions, some prefatory remarks are in order regarding the status of Beauvoir as a woman philosopher.

As is customary in patriarchal societies, women and philosophy have long been seen as mutually exclusive categories, with an oppressive and powerful machinery working against those authors who identified as both. It ought to be noted from the outset that the meaning of both ‘woman’ and ‘philosophy’, like that of any other socio-historical category, is mobile and contextual, entangled as it is in power structures and discursive practices both individual and collective. Ancient philosophy, what was called ‘natural philosophy’ in modern times, and what we call ‘philosophy’ or ‘theory’ today, while presenting some continuities, are best treated in their dissonances as well as their resonances. The same principle applies to the category of ‘woman’, which much feminist theory has mobilised, rejected, reclaimed, deconstructed depending on the specific needs and goals it was subjected to. As Adrienne Rich famously argued in “Notes towards a Politics of Location” (1984), the specific location of any given subject or category ought to be highlighted before we can discuss its potential meanings:

I wrote a sentence just now and x’d it out. In it I said that women have always understood the struggle against free-floating abstraction even when they were intimidated by abstract ideas. I don’t want to write that kind of sentence now, the

sentence that begins “Women have always...” We started by rejecting the sentences that began “Women have always had an instinct for mothering” or “Women have always and everywhere been in subjugation to men.” If we have learned anything in these years of late twentieth-century feminism, it’s that that “always” blots out what we really need to know: When, where, and under what conditions has the statement been true? (Rich 1986: 214)

As we will see, this notion of location, though differently formulated, is one to which both Woolf and Beauvoir subscribed, intent as both authors were – though often in different capacities or with different tools – on describing the complexity of reality or, more simply put, ‘life’. Although they were both white, bourgeois, queer women,¹ Woolf and Beauvoir seem at times to gesture to more expansive notions of womanhood in their essays and fiction, and their writings have doubtless prompted both differently situated, contemporary women and subsequent generations of feminists and critics to engage with their oeuvre from a pluralistic perspective, one which has effectively produced an extension of their voices beyond the particularly located bodies they inhabited. Precisely because of the privilege they possessed and the central position they occupied in their times, Woolf and Beauvoir must be re-read today not only within the safe boundaries of their location but also from the margins, which, as bell hooks famously stated, are “also the site[s] of radical possibility, [spaces] of resistance” (hooks 1989: 20). Three kinds of margins will be activated and mobilised in this thesis.

The first margin is national. In line with the rise to prominence of global modernisms and the ‘new modernist studies’, Woolf scholarship has been attempting to approach the English author from a transnational perspective, highlighting not only the ‘reception’ of her translated works in other countries but also the resonances they have produced as travelling objects with permeable boundaries. Similar attempts have been made in relation to Beauvoir, though sadly only in reference to her *magnum opus*, *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Because of their iconic status, which they still possess though in different vestments, Woolf and Beauvoir have been the object of endless struggles of resignification, as Chapter 1 will show. Following these transnational trajectories does

¹ In line with common parlance, I purposely use the category ‘queer’ to refer to Woolf and Beauvoir because, unlike other labels like gay or lesbian, the term preserves both a somewhat vague definition – queer as something that is not heterosexual – and a more subversive political potential than gay or lesbian. Defining them as queer helps us to bear in mind the fact that their sexuality transcended the heterosexual norm – both of them had sexual or romantic attachments to women, for instance – while not forcing upon them a more fixed label, like gay or lesbian, that is of more recent coinage and significance.

not simply mean forgetting the original context of their emergence; rather, it means subscribing to a more mobile and ecological view of what texts are, valuing the contributions of critics and (more) ‘common readers’ alike.

The second margin is disciplinary. Reading Woolf with Beauvoir’s philosophy clearly entails abandoning, though perhaps only briefly, any categorical distinctions between literature and philosophy, between character and subject, between fiction and reality. Approaching Woolf and Beauvoir necessitates a transdisciplinary perspective not just because they engaged with different disciplines – literature, philosophy, science, technology, as will emerge in Chapter 2 –, but because their own distinctions, as was hinted above, are not the same as our own, because their intellectual work did not have to subscribe to academic understandings of what constitutes a ‘subject’ or ‘field’, because they were interested in a much broader interpretation of reality which can only be captured if disciplinary boundaries are momentarily suspended. This does not amount to flouting them; rather, going beyond them initially will make possible a return that emphasises the specific benefits that each of them may garner in the end.

The third margin is feminist. With a fourth wave of feminisms engaging with, and actively contributing to the existing policies and mentalities today, going back to Woolf and Beauvoir cannot necessarily involve a divestment of our modern preoccupations. If we have to locate them in their own times, it is also just as necessary to remain mindful of the more recent developments in feminist theory which their work has generated. Italian literary scholar Daniela Brogi has recently argued for an activation of the off-screen space (*fuori campo attivo*) in relation to the space of women: in films what remains outside of the shot, unseen, is called off-screen; far from being neutral and passive, this unobserved space is fundamental to the action that we see on the screen, and watching entails an activation of this marginal space (Brogi 2022: 18 and *passim*). After all, postcolonial critics like Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had already pointed to the colonial space’s material and ideological reliance on colonised territories, thereby subverting the white supremacist and patriarchal order which posits the binary between centre and periphery, West and Rest. If we look at Woolf and Beauvoir from a pluralist feminist perspective, we are effectively activating these marginalised spaces and showing how they can be productive instruments in our exploration of the two Western authors’ theories.

In response to an ever more global feminist movement, one which embraces all the different intersections in which women can find themselves, Black, queer, trans feminisms will be mobilised in order to engage with Woolf and Beauvoir without necessarily filtering out specific contextual distinctions their literary and philosophical productions relied on. Rather, these pluralistic perspectives will be made to resonate with parts of their theories so as to show what kind of reverberations they can produce while at the same time drawing attention to potential gaps in their theories which later generations attempted to fill.

By employing a transnational, transdisciplinary, and transfeminist lens, this thesis will highlight the international and interlinguistic trajectories which Woolf and Beauvoir have followed from their own original contexts until now. The central critical concept which will allow us to trace these trajectories is the notion of resonance, as elaborated by Wai Chee Dimock in an oft-cited 1997 article in *PMLA*. In opposition to a synchronic understanding of historicism, Dimock argued for a “diachronic historicism” which “tries to engage history beyond the simultaneous, aligning it instead with the dynamics of endurance and transformation that accompany the passage of time” (Dimock 1997: 1061). As the critic points out,

Diachronic historicism suggests that human beings are finite, bringing short-lived meanings to long-lived words. It intimates that a reading is topical, circumstantial, the effect of an ephemeral existence, and bound to appear obtuse to future readers who, living among other circumstances and sensitised by other concerns, bring to the same words a different web of meaning. (Ibid.)

Woolf and Beauvoir – or Woolf/Beauvoir, as this thesis will propose at times so as to better highlight their being yoked together in spite of, and in view of their differences – are signifiers with varying meanings and significations depending on who is claiming the authority to ‘read’ them and what vested interest they have in doing so. This is not to maintain that there is no such thing as Woolf/Beauvoir in the first place, but to grant a certain level of legitimation, however briefly, to the material and ideological attachments that the core of their work can grow in different times, places, and languages. By mobilising the “primarily aural and primarily interactive concept” of resonance, Dimock puts forth a proposal to understand the literary text as “an object with an unstable ontology, since a text can resonate only insofar it is touched by the effects of its travels”: “Across time, every text must put up with readers on different

wavelengths, who come at it tangentially and tendentiously, who impose semantic losses as well as gains. Across time, every text is a casualty and a beneficiary” (ibid.).

In view of this notion of textuality and temporality, this thesis has the ambition to not only ‘think back through our mothers’, as suggested in *A Room of One’s Own* and subsequently elaborated upon by second-wave feminist literary criticism; rather than subscribe to a linear understanding of temporality, we will show how productive it can be to think back *between* our mothers, as it were, by listening to the slow rippling out of textual echoes across time, languages, and situations. Taking this concept further, it will be shown how it is also important to think back *beyond* our mothers, if we can stretch the expression further, precisely by bringing into the dialogue more critics and scholars who have looked back on their work, making it new. While Chapter 1 will reconstruct what Beauvoir read and wrote of Woolf so as to better situate both in a transnational context, Chapter 2 will be dedicated to the notion of intercorporeal identities as explored through Woolf’s essays and Beauvoir’s philosophy. After these theoretical resonances have been investigated, Chapter 3 will consist in a close reading of three of Woolf’s late novels: *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), and *Between the Acts* (1941). Far from being understood as three separate stages or processes, the three prepositions – thinking back *through/between/beyond* our mothers – are meant to interact with each other in order to create an echo chamber where previously unheard resonances may emerge.

My selection of novels is, like any other similar choice, admittedly arbitrary and limited, but rests on three main reasons. First, as will be argued in Chapter 3, there are constitutive dis/continuities in the three texts which make them particularly suitable for a reading of intercorporeal subjectivity in the texts. Second, it ought to be noted that Woolf started writing as early as 1905, but her first published novel, *The Voyage Out*, came out in 1915. Both in terms of the number of novels (10, including *Flush* and the unfinished *Between the Acts*) and in terms of her activity as a writer of volumes, inaugurated in 1915, 1928 seems to be the right watershed to make this kind of (admittedly arbitrary) division between ‘early’ and ‘late’ Woolf. 1928 also marks the year in which Woolf’s sales began soaring (cf. Table 7.1, in Mephram 1991, which aggregates data from Leonard’s autobiography, MacLaurin and Majumdar 1975, and Kirkpatrick’s *A Bibliography of Virginia Woolf*), which meant that her success as a highbrow literary writer was complemented by a commercial success which secured her

a better source of income. If the novels going from *Jacob's Room* (1922) to *To the Lighthouse* (1927) are generally deemed to constitute Woolf's 'mature' phase, it is also evident that *Orlando* (1928) would benefit from an association not only with *A Room of One's Own* (1929) – as indeed most critics concur in saying – but also with Woolf's 1930s literary production, as Chapter 3 will show. The third and final reason is connected to Woolf's literary career in France, which, as we will see in Chapter 1, is launched on a larger scale when she won the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais in 1928 for *To the Lighthouse*. Although part of her work had already been published in periodicals, more famously perhaps the middle section of the 1927 novel, "Le temps passe" as translated by Charles Mauron in 1926 for *Commerce*, it is her winning the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais that convinces publishers to acquire the rights to publish her first French translations – *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* – in 1929.

Mainly working on 'late Woolf', however, does not mean discarding everything that came before. On the contrary, this temporal limit ought to be understood as a sort of fourth margin which this thesis wants to question and activate. In view of the 'field' within which this kind of critical work is inscribed (English literature) and in order to prevent our discussion from slipping into arguments that are too philosophical, Chapter 1 will propose a Beauvoirian reading of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Chapter 2 will bring some of the resonances expounded in the more theoretical part of the thesis closer to *Jacob's Room* (1922), thereby showing both a continuity in Woolf's broader literary production and a productivity of a less chronological interpretation of time.

Now and then, the arguments will leave a blank space so as to let some of the theories expounded sink in. These moments ought to be understood as breathing spaces which facilitate the dis/continuous reading of the text while at the same time dividing it into less unwieldy sections. There is also a certain (clearly Woolfian) idea of circularity and meandering involved in this way of arguing, as linearity can too often solidify into hard-and-fast rules, neat categories, and water-tight compartments. In the spirit of a more fluid understanding of boundaries, the form of the text will subscribe to academic rules pertaining to argumentation while attempting to straddle some of its policed borders.

As was anticipated above, when we consider Beauvoir to be a philosopher, a few introductory observations are in order. By the look of it, Beauvoir's curriculum is not too far from a traditional understanding of a Parisian philosophical training, though of course her being a woman, as Toril Moi famously showed in her 1994 monograph, prevented her from accessing certain prestigious positions like the *École Normale Supérieure* attended by Sartre. At any rate, it is clear that Beauvoir trained as a philosopher at the Sorbonne and her intellectual background, while always steeped in literature, was undoubtedly informed by contemporary understandings of the discipline: unlike Woolf, who never received an institutionalised form of education, Beauvoir, partly because she belonged to the next generation, was able to navigate those male academic circles that were mostly barred to women in early twentieth-century England.

However, after passing with flying colours the difficult and prestigious *agrégation de philosophie* in order to qualify as a secondary-school teacher in 1929, coming second only to Sartre, Beauvoir would time and again cast herself as a literary writer and Sartre as the 'real' philosopher. This disidentification from philosophy has been amply commented on and criticised in Beauvoir scholarship, most vehemently by those (mainly U.S.) feminist scholars who saw in the French intellectual a model of inspiration for their own philosophical research. Among this early generation of Beauvoir scholars who took an interest in Beauvoir as the latter was still alive and well in the 1970s, the name of Margaret A. Simons stands out: she is often cited as the first U.S. philosopher to write a doctoral thesis on Beauvoir in 1977 after spending several years collaborating with her between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, and from that time onwards her unwavering commitment to demonstrating that Beauvoir was a philosopher after all has positively shaped the direction of international Beauvoir scholarship to this day.

In the wake of her work, as well as that of many other feminists – Toril Moi, Michèle Le Dœuff, Kate and Edward Fullbrook, Meryl Altman, Yolanda Patterson, as well as younger scholars, like Kate Kirkpatrick, Manon Garcia, and Marine Rouch, to name but a few – it can safely be stated that Beauvoir *was* a philosopher despite not identifying as one. In a 1979 interview with Simons and Jessica Benjamin, Beauvoir ends up admitting to coming up with a concept later (re-)elaborated by – and at the time commonly attributed to – Sartre, thereby showing how her own self-depiction as

Sartre's disciple had much more to do with the patriarchal nature of philosophy as an academic and intellectual field than with her own presumed lack of 'originality' and 'value'. All these issues will be better explored in Chapter 1, where the main trajectories in Beauvoir scholarship will be highlighted so as to better situate our reading.

In the same 1979 interview with Margaret A. Simons and Jessica Benjamin, Beauvoir was asked whether she had any particular (feminist) models when she was working on *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and Woolf's name is the first that springs to mind:

MS: [...] *The Second Sex* is important for us, because it gives us a theoretical foundation. But when we look at *The Second Sex* it seems to be isolated from other feminism. What do you consider the feminist theoretical foundation for *The Second Sex*? You mentioned Virginia Woolf and Colette; you mentioned the woman's situation.

SdB: Virginia Woolf. But in any case, I wrote *The Second Sex* from my own experience, from my own reflections, not so much from some influences. Of course, I encountered Virginia Woolf in my readings. I liked *A Room of One's Own* very much. But I cannot say that I was influenced by it. I believe that I truly wrote the book in a very spontaneous manner, as one response to the questions that I asked myself, that I began to ask myself about the fact of being a woman. Then, at the time, I read books by men, by women, as well as books by antagonists such as Montherlant, Lawrence, who influenced me insofar as I understood how they understood women and how this was detestable. But I cannot say that there was someone in whose path I followed. The closest to me on this plane was, certainly, Virginia Woolf.

JB: When you read *To the Lighthouse*...

SdB: Ah! *To the Lighthouse*!... I don't recall that novel very well...

JB: I was curious because that is her most clearly feminist...

SdB: *Three Guineas* is also very feminist. But I had not even read it when I wrote *The Second Sex*. No, I cannot say that I was influenced by anyone in particular in *The Second Sex*... Or perhaps I was influenced by everyone. It was my stance with respect to the world and to literature, as I saw them. (Simons 2001: 11-2)

These statements in the 1979 interview seem to suggest that Woolf was a fundamental 'mother of thought' to look back on for Beauvoir when she was writing *Le Deuxième Sexe* but they also interestingly indicate that there are more resonances between some of Woolf's (narrators') statements in *A Room of One's Own* and Beauvoir's philosophical

perspective on woman. In particular, when she admits in the interview that she was “influenced by everyone”, that she expressed her “stance with respect to the world and to literature, as [she] saw them”, Beauvoir is in some way echoing *A Room of One’s Own’s* idea that “the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (AROO 49).

This is an idea that Beauvoir openly avows in the same interview, when she is asked whether she considers herself to be a philosopher:

MS: It bothers me that you say you are not a philosopher. I don't know why. I suppose it is because I spend so much time treating your work philosophically. I don't know, maybe it is the definition in America that is looser.

SdB: Maybe... Yes... Because for me, a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or like Sartre: someone who builds a great system, and not simply someone who loves philosophy, who can teach it, who can understand it, and who can use it in essays, etc., but it is someone who *truly* constructs a philosophy. And that, I did not do ... I never cared so much about doing it. I decided in my youth that it was not what I wanted. (Simons 2001: 11)

Philosophy, in Beauvoir’s view, *must* build a system, otherwise it cannot be conceived of as philosophy. Perhaps it could be argued that this difference between Simons and Beauvoir is not, as Simons tentatively suggests, just cultural (Anglo-American vs French), but disciplinary and patriarchal too: in Dan Zahavi’s understanding of the tradition, phenomenology is tasked with “reconnect[ing]” philosophy “to the richness of everyday life” (Zahavi 2019: 9), thereby privileging *perspectives* on phenomena – which are then reduced and universalised – over lofty systems; if philosophy is still a heavily male-inflected discipline, this has less to do with the fact that women cannot produce philosophy – as a certain misogynist view of women would suggest – and much more to do with the fact that it was founded on patriarchal notions of thought and reason (cf. Lloyd 1984). While men may feel as if their position in the world is neutral because of a series of blinding privileges, many marginalised and oppressed categories – with feminists among and often even in front of them – have been repeating time and again, with more than a Beauvoirian tinge in their tone, that “authors” are “socially situated beings with a specific location in history” (Fricker and Hornsby 2006: 2). That Beauvoir favours situated perspectives, then, is not only the outcome of her phenomenological work, but also the product of a feminist undertaking: philosophy and feminism are not mutually exclusive categories.

In view of this disidentification from philosophy as a discipline which Beauvoir reinforces time and again in her autobiography as well as in interviews, this thesis wants to read her 'in counterpoint': it will be fundamental, as the next Chapters will show, to consider her work beyond her public statements and, at times, even beyond the often rigid conclusions she draws from her perceptive theorising. This contrapuntal reading is not meant simply to callously critique her work; rather, its primary goal is to empathetically extend a sense of legitimacy to her philosophy which she deprived herself of throughout her lifetime, reducing herself as she did to a literary writer drawing inspiration from the man commonly associated with her.

In order to highlight some sort of temporal continuity between Woolf and Beauvoir, as we saw, this thesis will mainly address Woolf's 'late' literary production (from 1928 onwards) and will principally engage with Beauvoir's 'early' philosophy (until 1949). However, in the 1960s Beauvoir produced a series of texts for public events which both looked back on, and elaborated upon her early work, effectively infusing it with new life. For this reason, it is mostly at 1966 that this thesis stops – at least in terms of Beauvoir's theory –, that is, just before the second wave of feminist movements originates in France and Britain in 1968.

Writing about feminism in the twenty-first century entails stating from what place one speaks, and this is all the more essential if it is Beauvoir's philosophy one deals with. The idea for this thesis occurred to me in 2018, after reading and loving *Le Deuxième Sexe* for the first time for my module on contemporary women's history in Bologna. As a Woolf enthusiast, I immediately thought of creating a dialogue between Beauvoir's philosophy and Woolf's literary production, but it was not until I started looking into the existing scholarship that I realised I was sitting on an academic goldmine. As Chapter 1 will show, sustained academic studies of Woolf and Beauvoir together are in short supply, possibly because their obvious feminist connection, specific historical conjunctures, and the sheer importance and volume of their literary and philosophical productions discouraged critics from looking at them more closely. The fact that it is a scholar who has been socialised as man that is doing it perhaps for the first time sparked different reactions in the people who were assessing my doctoral project as well as in myself. Suffice to mention here, as a funny anecdote, the professor who told me that

men doing research in feminist topics are like Catholic priests who want to preach what marriage is to those who are about to enter into holy matrimony. She was not enraged as a feminist – rumours have it that she is far from being one –; rather, her reaction was possibly motivated by ulterior motives that are not worth delving into here.

Although not all feminists would support similar positions, men's relationship with feminism is a troubled one to say the least, and the reasons are not far to seek. In 1987, a collection of essays edited by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, titled *Men in Feminism*, was published by Methuen. This publication was one of the first attempts to question and problematise the entrance of men into what had been constituted as a women-only space, namely women's and feminist studies as a field. Penned by Stephen Heath, the first contribution in the collection articulates quite well how uneasy men's position in feminism can be. The beginning of the essay is illuminating in this sense:

Men's relation to feminism is an impossible one. This is not said sadly nor angrily (though sadness and anger are both known and common reactions) but politically. Men have a necessary relation to feminism – the point after all is that it should change them too, that it involves learning new ways of being women and men against and as an end to the reality of women's oppression – and that relation is also necessarily one of a certain exclusion – the point after all is that this is a matter for women, that it is their voices and actions that must determine the change and redefinition. Their voices and actions, not ours: no matter how "sincere," 'sympathetic' or whatever, we are always also in a male position which brings with it all the implications of domination and appropriation, everything precisely that is being challenged, that has to be altered. Women are the subjects of feminism, its initiators, its makers, its force; the move and the join from being a woman to being a feminist is the grasp of that subjecthood. Men are the objects, part of the analysis, agents of the structure to be transformed, representatives in, carriers of the patriarchal mode; and my desire to be a subject there too in feminism – to be a feminist – is then only also the last feint in the long history of their colonisation. (Heath 1987: 1)

Impossible and yet necessary, men's relation to feminism is often looked askance at, and understandably so. Many times during my doctorate, I felt the urge to change the topic, leave it to somebody who had been socialised and identified as a woman, find something that was 'closer' to my subject position. Although in these years I have often questioned, tacitly or vocally, my sense of myself as a man, I also have to admit that I

have never been identified or socialised as a woman, and for this reason, I have enjoyed the privileges associated with the ‘first sex’. In this sense, regardless of the terrible backdrop of capitalism in academia, which constantly threatens to turn our subject positions into research brands – our identities sold on the intellectual marketplace like unwanted family relics –, I have often felt uneasy in my dealing with the feminist side of my project.

As Peter Aliunas aptly describes it, men in women’s studies courses find themselves in a paradoxical position, one characterised by in/visibility, “always somewhere between sticking out like a sore thumb and completely hidden”, “at once [...] anomaly and object of suspicion” (Aliunas 2011: 215, 211). The body of the male student in women’s studies courses is almost inevitably perceived to be masculine and even virile, for, as Patrick Hopkins remarks in reference to his own participation in such courses, “Whether interpreted biologically or as an unavoidable social construction, my *maleness* of *being a man* was assumed to be central to who I was, how I would think, and constitutive of where my energy would go” (Hopkins 1998: 39). Although this seems a problematic assumption to make from a theoretical point of view, especially after Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity, it is more than understandable that in a social and political reality these suspicions may be raised in relation to men entering women-only spaces. My own subject position as a person who was socialised – and still comes across – as a man ought to be clearly stated in a project on Woolf and Beauvoir, not simply because of a sort of Catholic ethos that prescribes a formally codified *mea culpa* to every man doing research in things that do not strictly relate to his subject position; rather, as Beauvoir’s philosophy emphasises, and as Woolf’s essays often implicitly reinforce, any scholar doing work on a specific topic is always already situated, their words emanating from a particular position within the world that needs to be acknowledged, lest it can lay claim to a feigned universality.

As the preceding part of the Introduction has hopefully shown, the way that I have found to complement my subject position is to mobilise the margins of my research topic, while at the same time honouring the names and scholarship of feminist critics who have made my own research possible. In time, I have learnt to occupy the last rows of the rally, to take a vow of silence when feminists or women can articulate a critique of what is happening far better than I ever could. My theoretical and political experience

with feminism is one of marginality, of pushing myself to the corners of the figurative rooms in order to listen to what women have to say about the patriarchy and take notice, hoping in the meantime to be able to amplify women's and feminists' voices. I do not think this position entitles me to claims regarding women or the feminist struggle, but I have often found that it does encourage me to co-organise events and workshops, to co-author papers and articles with feminist friends, to support the work of early career researchers around me, to adopt a pro-feminist citational practice whereby women's scholarship can be made visible and women authors' contribution to intellectual history can be emphasised. It is for this reason, for instance, that I decided to organise a conference on Woolf and Beauvoir while I was working on my thesis and it is for the same reason that I will attempt to get these contributions by other women published before my own monograph. This is, after all, what critical masculinity scholars like Francis Dupuis-Déri have emphasised time and again: as women are being empowered as political subjects, men who support the feminist struggle need to learn a form of *disempowerment*, namely a process of "reducing one's power over women individually and collectively", of "making oneself available to feminists by becoming auxiliaries" (Dupuis-Déri 2008: 153).² In this sense, while this project and my own subject position may have been inspired by feminism, I, like Dupuis-Déri, prefer to use the term *pro-feminist* to describe my scholarship and my political mobilisation.

My subject position is one also foreign to Anglo-American and French scholarship from a national point of view. Although the very notion of nationality has come under critical scrutiny and has famously been termed by Benedict Anderson an 'imagined community' (cf. Anderson 1983), we still live in a world where specific linguistic and cultural barriers exist between different countries, not least in academic institutions and practices.³ For this and for other reasons related to career progression, I could not simply ignore my own nationality in dealing with Woolf and Beauvoir, and indeed my language skills have encouraged me to consider the important work of Italian scholars – generally available in Italian – alongside the more conventional sources in

² The original sentence reads: "Les hommes proféministes pourraient avoir comme premier objectif de s'engager dans un processus de *disempowerment*, c'est-à-dire de réduction du pouvoir qu'ils exercent sur les femmes individuellement et collectivement, et d'une mise à disposition pour les féministes, dont ils se constitueraient auxiliaires."

³ Of course, Anderson did not simply mean to say that nationality or nationalism are 'imaginary', simply that they are *imagined*, i.e. the product of a socio-cultural process rather than an historical given.

English or French. In this sense, this project is also a first attempt to triangulate, as it were, Anglo-American and French studies of Woolf/Beauvoir with other Italian sources, in the belief that a transnational approach to the two authors must benefit from unusual juxtapositions with other countries and languages.

Some final editorial remarks ought to be specified here. Because of the sometimes problematic status of her English translations, reference will be made to the French texts produced by Beauvoir, but a translation will always be provided in footnotes, usually in the latest rendition available. Where a translation is not available, or the text has not been accessed for other material reasons (e.g. libraries not offering that particular translated text), my own translation will be offered. As a general rule of thumb, if a text is not referenced at the end of a translated passage, the translation is my own.

In order to avoid interlanguage leaps mid-sentence, however, English will be preferred for segments of sentences, but the French original will always be provided in brackets in the text. Working from a transnational perspective, after all, implies attending to the specificities of each language in its original presentation as much as engaging with the interlinguistic and intercultural medium that is translation. Although of course neither English nor French is my first language, I have learnt a lot from this constant back and forth between languages.

For the sake of consistency, all the quotations originally organised according to American spelling rules have been conformed to British orthography. References to primary texts are through abbreviations followed by page number, and a list of these acronyms may be found right after the Table of contents. The rest of the texts in the bibliography are referenced through the author-date system.

Chapter 1.

Intersecting and situating Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir

Although Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are often mentioned in one and the same breath, studies detailing their relationship have been but few and far apart. In *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe* (2002), Pierre-Éric Villeneuve's chapter drew attention to the reception of Woolf's writing in France through three important intellectuals: Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, and Maurice Blanchot. In his view, the originality of Beauvoir's understanding of Woolf was her intention to emphasise the materialist character of her theories on womanhood. During her lecture tour in Japan, and in particular during the talk titled "La femme et la création" ("Woman and creation", 1966), where Woolf is referenced directly, Beauvoir may be regarded as an atypical Woolf reader if considered within the context of the French reception of Woolf: as Villeneuve argues, "within the context of Woolf scholarship of that time, de Beauvoir was certainly among the first to suggest a materialist agenda in Woolf's exploration of a social feminine subject" (Villeneuve 2002: 26).

Indeed, it could be argued that at the time Beauvoir was also anticipating some of the main aspects that would characterise the 1970s feminist recovery and revision of Woolf's persona and oeuvre in the English-speaking world. Amongst others, Beth Rigel Daugherty has proposed a schematic summary of the (Anglo-American¹) development of feminist literary criticism:

During the 1970s, for example, feminism was determined to open the canon to literature by and about women; *recovery and revision* predominated as feminist strategies. In the 1980s, *border crossings* resulted in the growth of hybrid feminisms, interdisciplinary women's studies programmes, and the intersection of Anglo-American feminism and French theory. The 1980s interest in *material circumstances* and a concomitant focus on the body, female sexuality, and gender difference encouraged the focus on *political, historical, and cultural contexts* in the 1990s. Through it all, feminist literary criticism has tried, not always successfully, to remain *self-aware*, critical of its own exclusionary tactics, committed to openness, and vigilant about both pragmatic politics and theoretical questions. As we head further into the twenty-first century, calls for *going beyond* current impasses in feminist criticism can be heard. (Daugherty 2007: 100)

¹ 'Anglo-American' will be used in this thesis to refer to Britain and the United States together.

Thus, Beauvoir's 1966 take on Woolf – and, as will be shown in the first chapter, even her discussion of Woolf in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) – seems to pave the way for the rediscovery of a materialist quality to Woolf's notion of womanhood not just in France but in the Anglosphere too. Laura Marcus seems to corroborate this view in her insightful chapter on "Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf": while "the immediate post-war generation tended to perceive Woolf's as an essentially pre-war sensibility", "Woolf's emphases on education and experience as the necessary conditions for women's cultural and intellectual life" came to constitute a "'sociology' of culture", and her "'materialism' – as in her emphases in *A Room of One's Own* on the importance of financial independence and autonomous space – became central to the socialist-feminist approaches to Woolf of the 1970s", as evidenced for instance by Michèle Barrett's *Virginia Woolf: Women & Writing* (1976) (Marcus 2010: 142, 146). In this sense, Beauvoir seems to be an original reader of Woolf in the context of international Woolf studies, in that she emphasised those aspects of the English author's writings that would be in dire need of revision by the 1970s.

Interestingly, Beauvoir did not just align herself with Woolf's arguments in her essays – and in particular in *A Room of One's Own* (1929)² – but also tended to prefer her experimental narrative style to a French woman writer like Colette, as Helen Southworth has shown: despite "refer[ring] to Colette's life and work in *Le deuxième sexe* more than she does any other female author" (Southworth 2004: 129), Beauvoir, much like Marguerite Yourcenar and Nathalie Sarraute, "seems to identify more closely with Woolf in terms of style, and in terms of her writer's gift" (p. 126). In a 1965 interview with Madeleine Gobeil for *The Paris Review*, Beauvoir admits that "Virginia Woolf is one of the woman writers who has interested me most" and goes on to stress how "in a way, she interests [her] more than Colette. Colette is, after all, very involved in her little love affairs, in household matters, laundry, pets. Virginia Woolf is much broader" (Gobeil 1965: 25).³ This *envergure*, as she calls it in the original French (cf.

² As will be shown in the next chapter, Beauvoir's understanding of the tensions in Woolf's (narrators') arguments is not exactly correct, but for the moment suffice it to say that she rightly emphasises the materiality of women's oppression in Woolf's essay and in doing this, she anticipates trends in Woolf studies that would only emerge – *erupt* would perhaps be a better word for it – in the 1970s.

³ References to this interview are provided in English translation as the full text is only available in English. In French, parts of this interview have been reprinted in *L'Herne Beauvoir* (2012), edited by Éliane Lecarme-Tabone and Jean-Louis Jeannelle, pp. 187-9; equally, other excerpts have appeared in the

Lecarme-Tabone and Jeannelle 2012: 187), is the capability of the woman writer to discuss themes that go beyond the domestic and the (patriarchal) feminine, something she censures Colette and other women writers for not being able to do in their work in *The Second Sex* too, as section 1.3 will show.

In the same interview, Beauvoir declares she has read Woolf in the original English because she “read[s] English better than [she] speak[s] it” (Gobeil 1965: 25), and while this may seem true at first, it is also clear – and, in a way, most natural – that she relied on the French editions of Woolf’s works available on the market. For instance, in *The Second Sex*, as will be shown in section 1.3, she references and quotes Woolf in the French translations available at the time and never really questions the French text. This is of course to be expected of any writer of her time, as translation studies as a discipline would only emerge at a later stage – and at any rate even today it does not necessarily inform the practice of non-academic readers.

Even in her unpublished writings, Beauvoir registers her dialogue with Woolf: a cursory look at her references to Woolf in her unpublished diary reveals that Beauvoir had access to Woolf’s posthumously published *A Writer’s Diary* (1953) only when it reached the French marketplace in 1958, which is incidentally the year when Beauvoir started publishing her own autobiographical writings with *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* (1958).⁴ In the 25 May 1958 diary entry, Beauvoir refers to reading Woolf’s diary using the present tense (“Quand je lis le *Journal* de Virginia Woolf, je suis passionnée”), and in a later diary entry dated March 1961 she writes “Est-ce fuite, paresse d’entreprendre le livre qu’il faudra bien écrire quand j’aurai fini de parler de moi ? ou la suite d’inspiration que j’ai eue en 58, après avoir lu le journal de V. Woolf?”, thereby confirming that her own autobiographical project was partly inspired by – or at any rate in dialogue with – Woolf’s life-writing.⁵ Thus, 1958 marked the year in which Beauvoir read Leonard Woolf’s selection of Woolf’s diaries, freshly translated into French in April, as well as the year in which, a few months later, on 6 October, *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* was published by Gallimard in the Blanche series. It

Québécois magazine *Cité Libre*, Vol. 16, No. 69, August-September 1964, pp. 30-31. In neither of these two texts in French, however, all the references to Woolf that Beauvoir makes have been maintained.

⁴ I thank Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir for giving me access to the references to Woolf contained in Beauvoir’s unpublished diary.

⁵ “When I read Virginia Woolf’s *Diary* I’m passionate”; “Is this a flight, is this an unwillingness to start the book that I will have to write once I’m done speaking about myself? or is it the rest of the inspiration I had in 1958 after I read V. Woolf’s diary?”.

ought to be mentioned here that Beauvoir had been working on *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* since 1953, when Leonard Woolf edited and published *A Writer's Diary* in English. These coincidences create a resonant space between Woolf and Beauvoir which Chapter 2 will expand on in order to trace the similarities and differences in Woolf's and Beauvoir's representation of the self as an intercorporeal subject in their essays. At any rate, based on the unpublished diary entries, it seems safe to argue that Beauvoir read the first French translation of *A Writer's Diary*, that by Germaine Beaumont for the Éditions du Rocher, rather than the English original.

As for Beauvoir's familiarity with Woolf's other works, her reader's card for Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare & Company lending library shows that she borrowed *The Years* on 12 April 1937 but gave it back on the next day, which suggests that perhaps she did not like it much considering that she kept all the other books for more than one day and that she never references that novel in her writing.⁶ In the *Paris Review* interview, Beauvoir says she has read: *Orlando*, which she never mentions elsewhere; *Mrs Dalloway*, which she quotes several times in *The Second Sex* in the first French translation by Simone David; *The Waves*, mentioned several times in *The Second Sex* in the creative French translation by Marguerite Yourcenar, although she admits in this interview that she "[doesn't] care much for [it]" (Gobeil 1965: 25); *Flush*, which she says she is very "fond of" (ibid.) but never mentions elsewhere; Woolf's diary, which she says is "fascinating" but "foreign" to her because Woolf is "too concerned with whether she'll be published, with what people will think of her" (ibid.), in contrast to what she wrote in her own private diary in 1958 and in 1961; and, finally, *A Room of One's Own*, whose argument about Judith Shakespeare she paraphrased in *The Second Sex* but could not quote directly as the first French translation, by Clara Malraux, would only come out in 1951, two years after Gallimard published *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

At any rate, Beauvoir never borrowed any other English-language books by Woolf from Shakespeare & Company despite her renewed membership in several months of 1932, 1936, 1937 and 1940. Looking back on this period in her life, Beauvoir writes in *La Force de l'âge* (1960) that she read "tous les Virginia Woolf" ("all of

⁶ For a complete overview of Beauvoir's loans from Sylvia Beach's lending library, see the Shakespeare & Company Project funded by Princeton University at <https://shakespeareandco.princeton.edu/members/beauvoir-simone-de/> [last accessed 05/11/2022 at 12.15].

Woolf”) in those years, and she recalls the three sources she used for her reading: “Je retournai de temps en temps à la Nationale ; j’empruntai pour mon compte chez Adrienne Monnier ; je m’abonnai à la bibliothèque anglo-américaine que tenait Sylvia Beach” (FA 69).⁷ Alongside Shakespeare & Company, then, Beauvoir also drew on the Bibliothèque Nationale de France – the library where she also researched and wrote *The Second Sex* – as well as on Adrienne Monnier’s lending library. Monnier was a famous writer, poet, publisher, and librarian who opened the bookshop *La Maison des Amis des Livres* in 1915 which, as Shakespeare & Company would do four years later, doubled as a lending library.

It is clear even from this quick summary of Beauvoir’s public declarations on Woolf’s writings that her statements, as is natural, cannot always be taken at face value: while in the interview she could say she did not appreciate *The Waves*, she used three passages from it in *The Second Sex* to comment on the little girl’s formative years (Jinny at college and Susan as a country girl) and on the married woman’s situation (Susan later in the text) (DSb 140-1, 259). If it could be argued that quoting a text is not per se indicative of one’s positive view of it – after all, Colette, as Southworth has shown, is the most referenced woman writer in *The Second Sex* although she is far from being Beauvoir’s favourite novelist –, it is at least curious to notice the discrepancies between Beauvoir’s public declarations and her impression of Woolf’s writings. Indeed, one may wonder whether in the interview in which she said she did not like *The Waves* she was not perhaps thinking of *The Years* instead.

Literary conjectures aside, the distance between an intellectual’s public persona and his or her private views is understandable, but in order to be more precise and rigorous, it will be fundamental never to take at face value any public statement by Beauvoir, be it in interviews or in her writings. The idea behind this thesis is that only by digging deeper and by deconstructing and reconstructing Woolf’s and Beauvoir’s works will it be possible to generate a real dialogue between the writers which can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their individual literary and philosophical productions beyond received ideas about their obvious feminist connection. If it is true, as Marcus writes in passing, that Woolf and Beauvoir may be numbered among those women writers “whose work spans both feminist polemic and

⁷ “Time and again I went back to the National Library; I borrowed books from my account at Adrienne Monnier’s [bookshop]; I subscribed to Sylvia Beach’s Anglo-American bookshop”.

fiction” (Marcus 2010: 142), limiting oneself to drawing parallels between them is ultimately a self-defeating critical practice which can only work when one looks at them from afar.

Other than Villeneuve and Southworth, few scholars have paid attention to the intersections between Woolf and Beauvoir. Suzanne Bellamy has recently drawn attention to the legacy of Woolf’s *Three Guineas* within the context of the “Post-War Left”, especially in Beauvoir’s and Hannah Arendt’s work (Bellamy 2020). While at times her approach seems to tip slightly to the biographical side, Bellamy is right to point out how fundamental Woolf was to Beauvoir’s understanding of the oppression of women, suggesting some interesting parallels between the political fortune of *Three Guineas* and that of *The Second Sex* in the following decades. Nonetheless, these similarities between Woolf, Beauvoir and Arendt should not overshadow their differences, and much is to be gained from a more precise, though perhaps less inspiring, critical stance.

Maggie Humm has also proposed a reading of Woolf and Beauvoir in some of her work. Her 2007 chapter, which was originally presented at a 2005 international conference in Bath, focuses on the notion of the maternal in Woolf and Beauvoir and offers an overview – albeit sometimes in very schematic terms – of Beauvoir’s reading of Woolf (Humm 2007). More recently, Humm has devoted a chapter to the similarities between the writing of Woolf, that of Beauvoir, and the cinematic experimentalism of Swedish film director Mai Zetterling (Humm 2021). Although a stylistic approach to Woolf and Beauvoir is in principle more than welcome, these chapters by Humm, like that by Bellamy, may sometimes be perceived as furnishing too simplistic an approach to the two writers’ work.

In the most authoritative collections of essays on Woolf, Beauvoir is hardly mentioned (Snaith 2007; Randall and Goldman 2012; Berman 2016; Fernald 2021); equally, Woolf is only mentioned in passing when discussing Beauvoir in an Anglophone context, but no attention has been paid to their intersections in Beauvoir scholarship (Simons 2006; Hengehold and Bauer 2017; Altman 2020). Interestingly, the latest biography of Beauvoir, penned by Oxford philosopher Kate Kirkpatrick and published by Bloomsbury in 2019, has as its epigraph a quote from *A Room of One’s Own* coupled with a quote from *The Second Sex*, both citations illuminating the

difficulty of writing about women without relegating them to the ‘difference’ from men (cf. Kirkpatrick 2019) – a clear reference to how Jean-Paul Sartre’s importance in Beauvoir’s life and work has prevented critics and common readers alike from truly appreciating her oeuvre as a work in its own right.⁸ Although Woolf’s literary reputation never suffered much from the proximity of her husband and fellow writer Leonard Woolf, the initial response to her work was affected by many patriarchal notions about women and writing that only second-wave feminist literary criticism managed to dispel. Moreover, as Jane Goldman suggested, Woolf was introduced into the modernist canon “first as the handmaiden to the literary men of modernism (Joyce, Lawrence, Conrad, Ford, Eliot, Pound and Yeats)” and as “a proponent of Bloomsbury aesthetics[...], defined with reference to the philosophy of G. E. Moore, and the theories and achievements of Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Duncan Grant, Desmond MacCarthy, Maynard Keynes and Leonard Woolf” (Goldman 2007: 35-6); only at a later stage would Woolf assist “in the feminist ‘unmanning’ of modernism” (ibid., p. 36), a project initiated and invigorated by the legacy of feminist literary criticism. Thus, at the risk of stating the obvious, both Woolf and Beauvoir have been subject to the patriarchal prejudices of academic (and non-academic) discourse, and the following sections will attempt to sketch out the different trajectories that their work followed in France and in the English-speaking world (mostly Britain and the United States).

Outside of the academic context, a *Guardian* article by Rachel Cusk explored the meaning of ‘women’s writing’ on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the publication of *A Room of One’s Own* and in the wake of Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier’s newly published English translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 2009 (Cusk 2009).⁹ Cusk’s article is more of a reflection on women’s writing today than anything else, as it draws attention to how some of the theories proposed by the two ‘mothers’ of second-wave feminisms still resonate today with women writers who struggle to overcome the material difficulties inherent in their position within an oppressive patriarchal system. The article is not intended as a critical appraisal of Woolf and/or Beauvoir, but, considering the stature Cusk now enjoys in Britain as a (woman) writer,

⁸ The next section in this chapter will also address this issue in the reception of Beauvoir in Anglo-American (and French) criticism.

⁹ The next section will equally summarise the notorious importance of the first English translation of *The Second Sex* in the reception of Beauvoir in Anglo-American criticism as well as in English-speaking feminist circles.

the fact that she created a conversation with Woolf and Beauvoir ought to be mentioned here.¹⁰

The *Guardian* article seems to corroborate the view that the two authors are still perceived by many (women) writers as fundamental ‘mothers’ to look back on, and much is to be gained from extending the selection of writers who took an interest in, and elaborated on, Woolf and Beauvoir’s literary and philosophical productions: to mention but a few, authors as diverse as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Annie Ernaux, Marguerite Yourcenar, Nathalie Sarraute, Jeannette Winterson, Ali Smith, Violette Leduc and Virginie Despentes have been or were very much in conversation with Woolf and/or Beauvoir; while this thesis focuses more closely on Woolf and Beauvoir, it is hoped that this contribution will also pave the way for other scholars to investigate the intersections and resonances of the two ‘mothers’ of second-wave feminisms beyond their own writings and into the next century, thereby confirming Daugherty’s intuition that feminist literary criticism in our century is all about “*going beyond* current impasses in feminist criticism” (Daugherty 2007: 100).

In the wake of a fourth wave of feminisms worldwide, the time is ripe to transcend the limitations of previous feminisms, but, in order to do so, it is essential to ‘think back through our mothers’, which, as Daugherty has aptly phrased it, means “going back, picking up stray threads hidden or invisible in the past, pulling them into the present, and re-weaving them into new patterns” (Daugherty 2007: 103). It is, after all, about palingenesis, about going back in order to go forward, about rebirth and resignification, as the modernists taught us: a process that is far from linear and progressive, made up as it is of breaks, discontinuities, circular movements, and misunderstandings. The next sections will attempt to explain the paucity of studies on Woolf and Beauvoir within Anglo-American feminist studies by showing a number of misconceptions that have been or were present in Woolf studies and in Beauvoir studies in the last few decades. This will shed light on the historical and cultural conjunctures that prevented Woolf studies and Beauvoir studies from intersecting before the twenty-first century.

¹⁰ After spending many years writing about traditionally ‘feminine’ topics like motherhood or pregnancy, Cusk published the *Outline* trilogy of novels – *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016), *Kudos* (2018) – to much critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. In particular, she has been praised for deconstructing narrative character, a feat that she undoubtedly shares with Woolf (cf. Sandberg 2014). However, Cusk’s latest novel to date, *Second Place* (2021), seems to have fallen short of critics’ expectations.

1.1 Simone de Beauvoir in Anglo-American criticism

As was anticipated above, Beauvoir's stature in France and abroad was very often overshadowed by that of her life-long companion, Jean-Paul Sartre. Much scholarly ink has been spilt in an attempt to disentangle Beauvoir's work from Sartre's influence, but, in spite of this, an eminent Beauvoir scholar like Margaret A. Simons understandably felt the need to describe Sartre's influence on Beauvoir as "an impasse" in Beauvoir studies even in recent times (Simons 2010). In the wake of the first (*post-mortem*) biography of Beauvoir penned by Deirdre Bair in 1991, where Beauvoir is often represented as subservient to Sartre, many scholars, most of them feminist and women, have provided an alternative interpretation of their relationship: to mention but the most important volumes in this respect, Michèle Le Dœuff suggested as early as 1989 that a closer look at Beauvoir's philosophy shows she was a much more perceptive philosopher than Sartre despite never considering herself as such (Le Dœuff [1989] 2008); Sara Heinämaa famously pointed out how Beauvoir was much more indebted to Edmund Husserl's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology than Sartre's philosophy (Heinämaa 2003); Edward and Kate Fullbrook's interesting volume recentred Beauvoir in the Sartre-Beauvoir relationship and went so far as to suggest that it was actually Sartre who 'stole' Beauvoir's philosophical ideas (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008). Meryl Altman recently argued that, because of this generous and generative intellectual work,

it is no longer necessary to defend Beauvoir against the idea that she was simply Sartre's over-devoted acolyte, her work ruined by the influence of an apolitical, sexist, outdated philosophical system, her feminism vitiated by a life as his devoted slave (or as a kind of grass widow). (Altman 2020: 7)¹¹

While this may be true in the context of Anglo-American (and specialist) criticism, this statement does strike me as somewhat optimistic when we see Beauvoir's reception alongside Woolf's, and in particular if we take into consideration the global resonance that the English author has enjoyed in recent times as opposed to the almost total lack of scholarship outside of France, Europe, or the United States from which the

¹¹ Although the tone here may sound hyperbolic, Altman is thinking of Deirdre Bair's 1991 biography of Beauvoir, where she is often portrayed as a derivative thinker; "grass widow" is how Karen Vintges summarised Bair's position, as Altman specifies in a footnote.

French intellectual still suffers. Recently, *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Contemporary Global Culture* (2021) has drawn attention to the resonances between Woolf and various places in the world, such as Romania, Australia, South America, Russia, Germany, Estonia, the Arab world, Sub-Saharan Africa, Japan, and China (cf. Dubino *et al.* 2021); *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Transnational Perspectives*, which is to come out in 2024, equally insists on a planetary understanding of Woolf's work and investigates both the reception of her literary production and the rippling effect it has generated all over the world (cf. Bolchi *et al.* 2024).

The international interest in Woolf is also testified to by the sheer number of societies dedicated to her: besides the International Virginia Woolf Society, which hosts an annual international conference on Woolf where participants often come from all over the world, the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain, the Société d'Études Woolfiennes in France, the Italian Virginia Woolf Society, and the Virginia Woolf Society of Japan all share the task of making Woolf's works ever present in different countries in Europe, Asia, and North America, both in academia and among the general public. As regards Beauvoir, only the International Simone de Beauvoir Society is active and, although it is based in the United States, its annual conferences have often taken place in other European countries, with an important branch operating now in the Philippines. Despite this international presence, one that could be seen as even 'more' international than its (U.S.) Woolfian counterpart, Beauvoir's status as a philosopher or as a writer is far from canonical, and this clearly has repercussions on the existing scholarship on Beauvoir.¹²

As a matter of fact, little scholarship so far has investigated the reception of Beauvoir's literary or philosophical production outside of an English-speaking context. A recent issue of the international journal *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* was devoted to the question of translation and reception of *The Second Sex*: while the countries considered in the articles are sometimes far flung from a Western perspective (Mexico, Bolivia, Czechoslovakia, Iran), all of the articles consider only Beauvoir's *magnum*

¹² This is not to say that *The Second Sex* does not usually feature as a canonical text in feminist theory syllabi. While in terms of specialised knowledge (women's history, feminist philosophy, etc.) Beauvoir is a well-known and sometimes even beloved author, the broader (patriarchal) context tends to neglect her work and regards it as derivative – much in contrast to the canonical status that Woolf has enjoyed now for at least 40 years.

opus (cf. Chaperon and Rouch 2021). In May 2023, an edited collection on the same topic was published by Routledge: bearing the title *Translating Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. Transnational Framing, Interpretation, and Impact*, the volume, edited by Julia C. Bullock and Pauline Henry-Thierney, offers a cultural approach to the translation and circulation of Beauvoir's best-known essay in English, Spanish, Hungarian, Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic. These two examples show how, unlike Woolf's, Beauvoir's oeuvre is very often reduced to her *magnum opus* when it comes to reception studies.

Even in Beauvoir's country of origin, Beauvoir still suffers from a series of misconceptions about her work and has been subjected to a general neglect which scholars like Toril Moi and Manon Garcia have highlighted in no uncertain terms. Moi pointed out in her ground-breaking 1994 monograph how she could produce serious academic scholarship on Beauvoir from her privileged position in the United States, as "To live and work in France [...] is to expose oneself to an intellectual milieu where most people take Simone de Beauvoir's lack of intellectual and literary distinction as a basic article of faith" (Moi [1994] 2008: 33). A few decades later, the situation seems not to have changed much, as Manon Garcia suggests: "Par une forme d'ironie de l'histoire, [...] le travail philosophique de Beauvoir est mondialement reconnu, commenté, travaillé, partout sauf en France, où elle apparaît généralement comme l'austère compagne de Sartre et parfois comme une auteure à succès" (Garcia 2018: 35).¹³ The recent inclusion of Beauvoir's autobiographical writings in the prestigious Pléiade series for Gallimard has done much to cement her reputation as a *mémoiriste*, but her novels and her philosophical essays, except perhaps for *The Second Sex*, still remain excluded from the list of canonical intellectual works of her time.¹⁴ As a matter

¹³ "By a form of historical irony, [...] Beauvoir's philosophical work is recognised, commented on, worked on all over the world, everywhere except in France, where she generally appears as Sartre's austere companion and sometimes as a successful author" (the translation is my own as this passage has been omitted in the U.S. version of the text: cf. Garcia 2021). It is not a coincidence perhaps that Manon Garcia, after finishing her prestigious French education at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, has expatriated to Yale, Harvard, and now the Freie Universität in Berlin.

¹⁴ As Jean-Louis Jeannelle, one of the editors of the Pléiade, clarified in a Beauvoir webinar in 2022, the choice of texts for the series was only dictated by the number of sales and did not depend on an editorial decision (the recording of the webinar is available at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQv2XDSIOcg&ab_channel=BeauvoirSociety [last accessed 10/11/2022 at 11.52]). Surely, considering that *The Second Sex* was an instant best-seller and has never really been out of print, thematic or generic concerns were also raised by Gallimard, as only her autobiographical writings were included in the Pléiade series.

of fact, even though *The Second Sex* is generally an omnipresent read in women's history courses or in feminist theory modules, its status in philosophy departments is far from canonical. Despite this longstanding neglect, however, France has recently decided to integrate Beauvoir among the philosophers studied by high-school students preparing for the *baccalauréat*, a sign perhaps that something is changing, after all.

In their introduction to the special issue of *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* dedicated to the global translations of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Sylvie Chaperon and Marine Rouch argue that, by and large, the text was received in three different phases. In the 1950s and 1960s, the opus started being translated into different languages (mostly by men), and in most cases it was framed as a philosophical text thanks to how existentialism was 'in vogue' at the time and by virtue of Sartre and Beauvoir's international tours in these decades. In several countries (East Germany, Yugoslavia, Russia, China), however, this was also the period in which the text was censored. Oddly enough, the fact that *Le Deuxième Sexe* was placed by the Vatican in the list of prohibited books in 1956 did not prevent Italian publisher Il Saggiatore from producing a philosophical translation in 1961, although the Vatican's ban did have a negative effect on Québec, where most bookshops refused to sell the book without an agreement signed by a bishop.¹⁵ The second phase, which would start in some countries in the 1960s and in others in the 1970s, witnessed the rise of what Chaperon and Rouch term "les porte-parole beauvoiriennes" ("Beauvoir's spokeswomen", Chaperon and Rouch 2021: 183): through a combination of amplification and renegotiation, many feminist activists and authors promoted (a specific view of) Beauvoir's *magnum opus* in their countries, thereby shaping its reception in productive ways.

With the institutionalisation of women's and feminist studies, especially in the United States, Beauvoir was recovered and revised as an important 'mother' to look back on between the late 1970s and the 1990s. Although Chaperon and Rouch point to Margaret A. Simons as the first philosopher to write a doctoral thesis on Beauvoir in 1977 in the United States, it was in fact in 1972 that the first French thesis on Beauvoir's philosophy – in particular, her notions of ethics and existence – was produced by a Croatian émigrée, Zlata Knezović, who went on to become an important woman philosopher in her country and continued her work as cultural mediator between

¹⁵ For more information on the Italian case, cf. Rampello 2016; for an overview of the reception in Québec, cf. Descarries 2002.

Croatia and France throughout her life. She worked under the supervision of André Canivez at the University of Strasbourg, and a doctoral degree was at the time awarded after one or two years, which suggests perhaps that Beauvoir's status as not only a woman philosopher, but as a *feminist* philosopher may have been a decisive factor in Knezović's choice. Knezović was, however, not the first doctoral student to work on Beauvoir: Annie-Claire Jaccard finished her thesis simply titled "Simone de Beauvoir" in Zürich in 1968 and published it with Juris Druck und Verlag; Thai émigrée Amphan Otrakul finished her doctorate on Beauvoir's female protagonists at the University of Paris VIII under the supervision of Jean Levaillant in 1971; and Claire Cayron completed her doctoral project on the place of nature in Beauvoir's novels and autobiography at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne in 1972.¹⁶ All these examples show how Beauvoir was generally regarded as a literary author rather than a philosopher until feminist theory and militancy placed her under the limelight for her role in the French women's movement. Moreover, it is interesting to notice how, of the first five people working on Beauvoir in France, two were not originally from France.

Across the Atlantic, the International Simone de Beauvoir Society was founded by Yolanda Patterson and Jacques Zéphir in the United States in 1983, and it continues to attract both philosophers (mostly from other countries) and literature scholars. With the emergence of culturalist approaches to translation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a plethora of comparative analyses of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and its various translations was inaugurated, and thus Beauvoir's philosophical essay began to have a more global resonance, as Chaperon and Rouch conclude in their introduction. It is quite striking to notice how Italy, despite being Sartre and Beauvoir's country of choice for their summer holidays from the 1950s onwards, still does not feature in international volumes dedicated to Beauvoir's reception.

Moreover, the neglect to which Beauvoir has been subjected in Italy is not only visible in the paucity of monographs dedicated to her¹⁷ but can also be traced back to

¹⁶ I have been able to retrieve these data from the French official database, which, prior to 1985, was Sudoc (now, it is theses.fr).

¹⁷ Some monographs appeared in Italian in the 1980s, shortly before Beauvoir's death in April 1986, for example Enza Biagini, *Simone de Beauvoir* (La nuova Italia, 1982) and a collection of essays on Colette, Beauvoir, and Marguerite Duras titled *Il mestiere di scrivere* (Bastogi, 1983). In the 2010s, other monographs appeared, mostly translated from the French, for instance the oft-cited volume penned by Julia Kristeva, translated into Italian for Donzelli in 2018, Spanish novelist and women's biographer Ariadna Castellarnau's *Simone de Beauvoir* (RBA, 2019), and German philosopher Wolfram Eilenberger's essay

Sartre's influence on her work and, of course, to the patriarchal criteria that still regulate our understanding of culture, literature and philosophy. Until a few years ago, even the prestigious Treccani encyclopaedia described Beauvoir first of all as "Sartre's life-long companion", a definition which I criticised in a long message to Treccani; only then did they alter what sounded like a dated and androcentric understanding of Beauvoir as an intellectual. More recently, in view of the sixtieth anniversary of the first Italian publication of *The Second Sex* in 2021, some publishers ventured to publish books on or by Beauvoir. For instance, L'orma Editore issued a well thought-out collection of essays by Beauvoir aptly titled "Femininity, A Trap" (*La femminilità, una trappola*), from Beauvoir's 15 March 1947 *Vogue* article, with a clever selection of those short pieces by Beauvoir that had not appeared yet on the Italian marketplace.¹⁸

The publisher Donzelli chose instead to commission a monograph on Beauvoir for its Saggine series to a retired Sartre scholar, Sandra Teroni. The paratextual apparatus itself suffices to give the idea that Beauvoir can only be looked at as a mirror of Sartre: the cover reproduces the famous picture of Sartre and Beauvoir at Madame Morel's in Juan-les-Pins in August 1939, a picture that sees Sartre pensively smoking a pipe while looking at his companion and Beauvoir smiling back at him (cf. Teroni 2021). The chapter that opens the monograph is of course dedicated to the question of 'love' – something which, as Beauvoir scholars have emphasised time and again, never happens in monographs or conferences on Sartre, although he was part of the (in)famous couple too. This strengthens the impression that the alpha and omega of Beauvoir's life and work is her 1929 pact with Sartre, although many a Beauvoir scholar and several posthumously published texts have done much to show who Beauvoir was outside of the rather long shadow cast by Sartre over her life and work.

The rest of Teroni's monograph, despite neglecting Anglo-American scholarship almost completely – a problematic aspect in the context of Beauvoir studies, as the work of Moi and Garcia shows –, navigates Beauvoir's philosophical and literary oeuvre in more rigorous terms. It ought to be mentioned, nonetheless, that during a series of book

on the philosophy of freedom through the oeuvres of Hanna Arendt, Beauvoir, Ayn Rand, and Simone Weil for Feltrinelli in 2021. There are surely cases where collections of essays on Beauvoir by important women and feminists were published, and much more work should be done to unearth these histories, for instance in relation to Italian intellectuals like Elsa Morante, Alba De Céspedes, and Rossana Rossanda.

¹⁸ All the pieces in French were gathered in *L'Herne Beauvoir*, edited by Éliane Lecarme-Tabone and Jean-Louis Jeannelle in 2012.

presentations in Italy, whether in academic contexts or not, Teroni stressed how Beauvoir was an inferior writer and philosopher in comparison to Sartre and she even went so far as to suggest – within the framework of a series of talks dedicated to the “feminine genius” – that between the two, Sartre was the ‘real’ genius, whatever the latter term means in her view. Incidentally, Beauvoir was also described as a narcissist because she always wrote about herself, even if reference was made to her fictional works, while at the same time the intersubjective quality of her philosophy did not go unnoticed during the lecture and the following discussion.¹⁹ This admittedly Eurocentric example shows how Altman’s view of Beauvoir as an intellectual in her own right is far from being common in other countries.

In France, recent scholarship has tried to return to the question of Sartre and Beauvoir to tease out the tensions animating their literary and philosophical relationship. The most interesting contributions seem to have come from those scholars who did not simply suggest that one was ‘more’ of a philosopher or a ‘better’ author than the other, as this sort of justification is very much at odds with a complex understanding of their relationship. Far from incarnating the ‘standard’ romantic, sexual, monogamous, strictly heterosexual and reproductive couple, Sartre and Beauvoir have paved the way for dissident forms of sexuality and relationships despite being often reduced, in their common reception as a ‘couple’, to the mainstream understanding of what a man-woman couple is – and of course, Beauvoir as the woman in the relationship has had to bear the grunt of these misconceptions.

Unlike what could be said of Beauvoir studies in France, as suggested by Moi and Garcia, the field of Sartre-Beauvoir studies has produced generative perspectives, not least in the terms that have been produced by scholars to find a new taxonomy that better describes their relationship. Cathérine Poisson’s “Sartrebeauvoir” is one example for this, a term which has had quite an important resonance in France: it was first introduced by Poisson in her 2002 study (Poisson 2002: 104) but other important scholars like Jean-Louis Jeannelle (Jeannelle 2008: 83) and Delphine Pierre (Pierre 2016: 23) resorted to it in the following years, and indeed the most recent publication to date on their (writerly) relationship has used this coinage as the title of the introduction

¹⁹ A recording of this book presentation is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNjHcvHvAfg&ab_channel=AccademiaLaColombaria [last accessed 10/11/2022 at 12.17].

(Bourgault and Jeannelle 2021b). To Poisson we equally owe the fortunate notion of “géméllité” (literally, “twinness”; Poisson 2002: 96) and that of “ambi-bio-graphie”, with the latter term bringing together the (received) notion of their common writing practices and the idea that this generates ambivalence and ambiguity in their discrete literary and philosophical productions (ibid., p. 17). More recently, Jean-François Louette has described their writing practice as “entre-écriture” (literally, “inter-writing”) to highlight how the two literary and philosophical productions have to be analysed in their intricate and intimate relationships in order to reveal their full potential, something he sets out to do in his resourceful monograph (Louette 2019: 19). For all its past neglect of Beauvoir as a thinker and writer in her own right, then, France seems to be still interested in this (in)famous couple, and this scholarship has produced new insights into their works: in 2021, an intertextual genetic analysis of their texts resulted in an issue of *Genesis* that presents cutting-edge research not only on the two authors as a couple but also on Sartre and Beauvoir individually (cf. Bourgault and Jeannelle 2021a).

Besides the towering figure of Sartre shaping her reception, Beauvoir’s reputation also suffered from a series of misconceptions even in Anglo-American feminist circles because of a fundamental mistranslation of her *magnum opus*. As early as 1952, the first English translation was produced for Alfred Knopf in the United States. Because Beauvoir’s text was erroneously considered to be a sort of Kinsey report on women, H. M. Parshley, a zoologist, was commissioned to undertake the translation although he did not have a background in philosophy or translation. As a consequence, his rendition of the original French was inevitably flawed, and Beauvoir’s sophisticated references to other philosophers, considering they were often implicit, went completely over Parshley’s head. The result was a poor rendition of the original that obviously affected the reception of Beauvoir’s theories even among feminist scholars. To mention but a couple of them, Jean Leighton argued in the 1970s that the overall view of women in *The Second Sex* was extremely negative, stating in no uncertain terms that

Even if Simone de Beauvoir's intentions were to defend woman's character and qualities the actual reading of *The Second Sex* seems to confirm the opposite view. That is, she castigates all the misogynist platitudes of Aristotle, St. Paul, Balzac, Michelet, Luther *et al.*, but she herself almost seems to illustrate their opinions. (Leighton 1975: 39-40)

Ten years later, Mary Evans would argue that were it not for *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir would never be identified as a feminist, as “one might discern, in de Beauvoir's fiction, that the author is French, a socialist, and a philosopher, but there is little to identify the author as a feminist” (Evans 1985: x), thus falling prey to what is now perceived to be a biography-based mistake of associating her theories with her personal life – a mistake perhaps encouraged by Beauvoir’s own admission that before *The Second Sex*, she never perceived herself as a(n oppressed) woman.

As a matter of fact, even those scholars who have offered a more positive view of Beauvoir could not but draw attention to how *The Second Sex* sometimes reproduced masculinist and patriarchal notions of humankind and of (women’s) writing. However, Le Dœuff and Moi, as French speakers, managed to move beyond this view of Beauvoir to argue that, for instance, despite adopting Sartre’s notion of transcendence, Beauvoir’s emphasis on immanence is an original feature of her thought and one that is at odds with a Sartrean philosophical framework (Moi [1994] 2008: 174) or, to give another example, that *The Second Sex* is a truly philosophical work because it starts off using certain patriarchal categories and shows how these can be undone by resorting to a plurality of phenomenological sources (cf. Le Dœuff [1989] 2008; Garcia 2018).²⁰ Although sometimes these processes are not exactly conscious on Beauvoir’s part, attentive critics like Moi, Le Dœuff, Garcia or Altman have been quick to notice that a contrapuntal reading of her philosophy, one not solely based on the surface of her arguments, her statement of intent, and her biography, can truly illuminate the depth and nuanced character of her writing. Reading Beauvoir *against herself*, as it were, these scholars have ensured that the French author’s writings be able to speak to our times as much as hers. Ultimately, this approach to her oeuvre does not simply amount to a trenchant critique of her arguments; rather, reading Beauvoir in counterpoint means very often being more generous to her philosophy than she was during her lifetime.

As Ursula Tidd aptly summarised it, Parshley’s rendition of *The Second Sex* was “marred by philosophical *contresens*, unacknowledged omissions (approximately fifteen percent is excised from the original French), and rewritings on almost every page” (Tidd 2008: 201). A quote from Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* was also expunged from *The Second Sex*, and section 1.3 will look at the effect this had on Beauvoir’s

²⁰ For other misconceptions on Beauvoir generated by a plethora of critics cf. Mahon 1997: 155-185; Moi [1994] 2008: 93-112.

argument. Apart from Woolf, many references to texts penned by women, as is natural in a text so heavily reliant on women's writings, were excised, and this prompted scholars like Simons to point out how this "selecting" was unabashedly "sexist": "Parshley obviously finds women's history boring [but] he was quite content to allow Beauvoir to go on at length about the superior advantages of man's situation and achievements" (Simons 1983: 561-2). Elizabeth Fallaize and Toril Moi also worked considerably on Parshley's translation and came to similar conclusions (cf. Fallaize 2002; Moi 2002). It is thanks to this careful work of comparing and contrasting the original French and Parshley's rendition and to a concomitant pressure exerted upon publishers that a new English translation was commissioned to two Franco-American translators, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, in 2008. In spite of the fact that the result did not fail to create dissatisfactions among the specialists (cf. Moi 2010; Bauer 2011), the 2009 text was the first complete translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in English and, although "it is still flawed and not perfect" like any other translation (Daigle 2013: 340), it is a major improvement on the 1952 text. After all, Beauvoir herself was made aware of the problematic English translation in a 1985 interview with Simons and after saying that she was "altogether against the principle of gaps, omissions, condensations, which have the effect, among other things, of suppressing the whole philosophical aspect of the book" she urged posterity to produce a translation that was "more complete and more faithful" (Simons 2001: 93-4): this is doubtless what Borde and Malovany-Chevallier's rendition is, in spite of Moi's scathing review.²¹

Christine Daigle is right to draw attention to how Ingrid Galster's volume on *The Second Sex*, published after one of the events that marked the 50th anniversary of the French publication, destabilised the idea that there is 'one' *Deuxième Sexe*. In fact, Galster invited scholars to compare the published (French) version of the text and the manuscripts held at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, pointing out how Beauvoir's difficult and quick handwriting often generated doubts in transcribers and these, as a consequence, realised how many textual differences could emerge even within one

²¹ It ought to be mentioned that the two translators are not Beauvoir scholars, but they asked specialists for advice about certain difficult passages. However, as is natural, they often received even widely divergent suggestions and they had to make choices that inevitably ended up displeasing critics. For a complete overview of this debate on the translation, old and new, cf. Mann and Ferrari 2017, which gathers the field-defining articles by Simons and Moi, the reviews of the 2009 translation, and newly commissioned articles on the topic.

section of this lengthy work (Daigle 2013: 340-1; cf. Galster 2004).²² This work was meant as a preparation for the Pléiade edition of Beauvoir's works, but eventually, as was anticipated above, the prestigious edition excluded *Le Deuxième Sexe* although it was probably one of the best-selling books by the French author. Although there seems to be no work underway on a critical edition of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Kate Kirkpatrick received a prestigious British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship in 2021 to produce a philosophical commentary on *The Second Sex* in English – another indication, perhaps, that Beauvoir as a philosopher enjoys a better reputation abroad than in her own motherland.

In 1952, Hannah Arendt was asked by William Cole at Alfred Knopf to provide a report on *The Second Sex*. She admitted that she “did not like the book” but thought “that it [would] have a considerable success” in that it would “[fill] a public demand for the never published Kinsley [sic] report on the Female”, which would actually come out the following year, in 1953 (quoted and reproduced in Coffin 2020: 53-6). Her review confirmed the publisher's suspicions that *Le Deuxième Sexe* was a book about sex. Reading Arendt's report with the benefit of hindsight, one cannot but see the irony of her statements that the book could use some more references to ‘serious’ literature – that is, literature produced by authors like “Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles”, the “complete oblivion” of whom “lower[s] the level of discussion to a point where almost every opinion becomes more or less arbitrary” (ibid.). Ironically, Parshley's translation had excised references to women's texts, but other references to men's literature were maintained, including Shakespeare, Homer, and Sophocles.

Arendt also complains that “the introduction of philosophical categories into the discussion [...] does not help; they are and function like preconceived notions which exclude both historical evidence and tangible experience” (ibid.). This idea was doubtless the product not just of a cursory read of the text, but especially of Parshley's incapability to comprehend – and consequently to render in English – Beauvoir's philosophical vocabulary. The last reason she mentions for not appreciating the text is the lack of “a sense of humour and a reverential awe for love”, which results in “a certain tendency to become plain ridiculous because of the special nature of the subject

²² Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir tried to amend some textual errors in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, but the ‘folio essais’ edition by Gallimard does not say whether the text is the revised version or not. As a general rule, if the text was printed after 2004, these amendments have been made.

matter” (ibid.). It could be argued that Arendt’s response to the text is indicative of a reading of *The Second Sex* that could only rely on the first English translation and could not see the text’s full philosophical implications: as pointed out by Stella Sandford, these are “the gendering of phenomenological experience”, which until that time was supposedly universalist (and hence, based on straight white bourgeois men’s experiences), and “the posing of a novel question (albeit in a classical philosophical form) for existential ontology: What is a woman?” (Sandford 2017: 15), the full resonances of which Beauvoir pursues in an explicitly political and materialist fashion. Arendt’s reading, then, may be taken to be typical of her time and situation: that of a ‘serious’ intellectual reading a philosophical work that has suffered the mutilation and misunderstanding of a poorly chosen translator.²³

In her generous introduction to a 1992 special cluster on Beauvoir in the prestigious feminist journal *Signs*, Mary Dietz emphasised how the French author and her *magnum opus* were initially received as ‘too French’ in the United States, as attested by a couple of U.S. reviews of the 1952 translation and by Betty Friedan’s passing mention of Beauvoir in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The latter text is generally conceived of as the U.S. feminist movement’s “own manifesto”, which acquired that status, in Dietz’s account, because it was “far less radical than Beauvoir’s” text and because “it was also more accessible and in the end better suited to the reformist, essentially middle-class political culture of the United States” (Dietz 1992: 78). It is for these reasons – partly tied up with Parshley’s editing and poor rendition of the original French – that Dietz somewhat sternly maintains that “when viewed in this light, Beauvoir herself appears less as a ‘first generation Mother’ to American feminism than as a far-distant aunt” (ibid.) – an argument which acts as a counterpoint to Simons’ and the International Simone de Beauvoir Society’s work in the late 1970s and in the 1980s.

Although Parshley was censured for his “sexist” editing of the text, recent scholarship suggests that the considerable excision of the text as well as some lexical choices regarding Beauvoir’s difficult philosophical terminology were rather suggested by the editorial team at Alfred Knopf. Anna Bogic’s compelling article shows how an analysis of the correspondence between translator and publisher reveals a “tug of war regarding even the most minute details”, concluding that

²³ After all, Arendt never identified as a feminist, although her work has sometimes been interpreted through this lens (cf. Maslin 2013).

The translator had to negotiate the choice of style and had to defend or change his choice of vocabulary when called upon to justify his methods. Throughout the translation process, Parshley was actively sharing his ideas and taking into consideration the suggestions or demands of other participants as well. He was most certainly not alone in this translation process. (Bogic 2009-10: 85)

Indeed, Bogic shows how in his letters, Parshley even expressed concern about the excessive cuts demanded of him, pointing out, for instance, that Beauvoir was “dealing with profound and difficult ideas, and [the text] is therefore not to be made simple without misrepresentation of the original work”, or stating “I hope that you will bring up in your editorial conferences my strong belief that this work is in its way a classic and that any further considerable cutting would be detrimental to it” (ibid., p. 86).²⁴ Thus, a sociological understanding of the translation process sheds new light on what was perhaps simplistically described as a sexist individual practice, revealing all the compromises Parshley had to make with other people involved in the process as well as, indirectly, with editorial and capitalist notions of readability and functionality of the target text. This is not to say that Parshley was the perfect translator for *Le Deuxième Sexe*, or that some of his choices cannot be described as sexist at all, but, if considered in its intricate network of relations, the translation process cannot be seen as individual or linear.

The third and final aspect that had a negative impact on the reception of Beauvoir in Anglo-American criticism is once again tied up with the evolution of feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s. As was suggested by Daugherty in the quote reported at the opening of this chapter, Anglo-American feminists discovered what would solidify as “French feminism” in the 1980s, but many a French feminist noted even at the time that what English-speaking scholars wanted to see as ‘French feminism’ was only a marginal part of what the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF) was. As a matter of fact, not only was it marginal, but it came from a minor fraction of women – some of whom never identified as feminists in a narrow sense – who were organised around the group *Psychanalyse et politique*, or *Psych et po*.

²⁴ Bogic’s work seems to corroborate, and expand upon, Yolanda Patterson’s previous, though shorter pieces on Parshley and his correspondence with the U.S. publisher (cf Patterson 1992; Patterson 2002).

As Claire Goldberg Moses emphasised, Psych et po “figures prominently in the U.S. construction of French feminism,” but “was just one” group “of many”, “most” of which “went unnamed at the time and remain so in [feminist] histories” (Moses 1998: 243). What was regarded at the time as problematic was not, generally speaking, the fact that one fraction within the movement gained wider currency abroad as the work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray attracted international attention and came to coincide with French feminism *tout court*; the problem was first and foremost that this marginal part of the movement ended up registering the trademark for MLF with funds of dubious origin, so much so that a collective publication came out in 1981, *Chronique d'une imposture. Du MLF à une marque commerciale* (literally, “Chronicle of an imposture. From the MLF to a commercial brand”), with an introduction by Simone de Beauvoir herself, in order to unmask this ‘imposture’. In her foreword, Beauvoir does not refrain from defining the women of Psych et po a “secte de féministes antiféministes, de capitalistes anticapitalistes, d'idéologues mercantiles”: war was declared.²⁵ Three years later, Beauvoir would describe in an international feminist publication how this appropriation of the movement endangered it. In the article, she describes Psych et po as the “school of neo-femininity” whose goal was not political activism but a “symbolic revolution” that could only happen behind closed doors (Beauvoir 1984: 311-2). As Beauvoir concludes,

The French women’s movement thus is alive and well. But it is in constant danger, because of the existence of such groups as Psych. et Po. which pass themselves off as *the* women’s movement and exert considerable influence, thanks to the unfortunately all-too-warm reception the general public has given their ideology—a convenient neo-femininity developed by such women writers as Hélène Cixous, Annie Leclerc, and Luce Irigaray, most of whom are not feminists, and some of whom are blatantly *anti-feminist*. (Ibid.)

Although Julia Kristeva “never associated herself with the MLF or with feminism – indeed, she often railed against both in the popular press – and these histories [of the women’s movement] make no mention whatsoever of her or her work” (Moses 1998: 245), she was integrated into ‘French feminism’ because of the similarities between her psychoanalytic theories and those of Cixous or Irigaray. What resulted from this

²⁵ “a sect of anti-feminist feminists, of anti-capitalist capitalists, of mercantile ideologues”. The volume was a collective publication and did not have any page numbers. Cf. VV.AA. 1981.

historical conjuncture was what French materialist feminist Christine Delphy described as the “invention of ‘French feminism’” in Anglo-American criticism, as “an ideological content [...] [was] given a geographical location”, a process whereby this kind of essentialist, psychoanalytic theory was naturalised as inherently ‘French’ (Delphy 1995: 193, 191).²⁶ This fabrication was made up of two movements, in Delphy’s words: “internal homogenization and external differentiation”, two processes that result in the fact that “French authors are seen as a group which is defined by, and only by, its difference to the group which has the power to name; thus they are constituted as an Other”, a fate that was imposed in the same years upon ‘French theory’ too (ibid., p. 214). By exoticising this particular brand of feminism, Anglo-American discourse managed to redeem psychoanalytic essentialism as a useful critical theory at a time when social constructivism had gained the upper hand; moreover, Delphy argues, this invention of ‘French feminism’ resulted in “putting Women’s Studies scholars ‘in dialogue’ again with male authors” such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan (ibid., p. 221).

Although it could be argued that both Delphy and Beauvoir had a vested interest in critiquing so vehemently the prominence of ‘French feminism’ as both intellectuals were part of, and believed in, a totally different kind of feminism, their statements are indicative at the very least of a profound cultural change in Anglo-American feminist theory – and Daugherty corroborates this view. French historian Sylvie Chaperon has drawn attention to how, after an initial period of “assimilation” in France, Beauvoir’s theses on womanhood and her intellectual persona were challenged in 1965 by texts like Ménie Grégoire’s *Le Métier de femme* and Geneviève Gennari’s *Le Dossier de la femme*, where more essentialist arguments were proposed; to this first “divide” (*clivage*), another break was added in 1970 with the rise to prominence of *Psych et Po* (Chaperon 2012: 277, 279; cf. Chaperon 2000). French feminism was thus divided into two main factions: on one side, there was *Psych et Po*, organised around Antoinette Fouque and her library and press *des femmes*, both of which are still active today; on the other side, there were all the heterogeneous groups that identified as socialist or materialist, among whom were (militant) authors like Beauvoir, Delphy, Colette

²⁶ Following Delphy’s argument, and for the sake of clarity, this thesis will refer to the U.S. construction as ‘French feminism’ or ‘French feminists’ (in scare quotes), whereas the MLF and its other practices will be kept as French feminism (no quotes).

Guillaumin, Monique Wittig, and Nicole-Claude Mathieu and periodicals like *Questions féministes* (1977-81, then re-founded in 1981 as *Nouvelles questions féministes*). What Chaperon has qualified as a *fracture* in France seems to have given rise to a similar divide in Anglo-American criticism, where however French feminism was homogenised as an essentialist, psychoanalytic tendency that had little relation to the variety and complexity of the French women's movement. It was in particular through the 1981 anthology *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle De Courtivron, that this invention of 'French feminism' was concretised in Anglo-American scholarship.

Interestingly, Woolf is very much linked to this resignification of French feminism: Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) introduced 'French feminism' as a sort of ideological corrective to the Anglo-American feminist tradition which in those years was revising previous misconceptions regarding Woolf's work and women's writing more broadly; meanwhile, Kristevan psychoanalytic theory was put in the service of textual analysis, most notably by Makiko Minow-Pinkney in *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (1987). Beauvoir features but marginally in Moi's 1985 text, and her notions of feminist theory are at any rate at a distance from those of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva. In this context, although in 1994 Moi went on to publish a monograph on Beauvoir which functioned as a watershed in her reception, in the 1980s the Norwegian critic seems to have contributed to the constitution of this 'Other' feminism which was far from representing the variety of political movements and feminist theories that informed the MLF.

At a time when Anglo-American feminist criticism was turning to France to renew their own understanding of feminist theory, then, Beauvoir's work, despite being fundamental to the MLF and to the radical, socialist or materialist feminisms in France, was already signalled as somewhat dated, and even Woolf scholars resorted to the psychoanalytic, mostly essentialist 'French feminism' in order to release the potentialities that still lay dormant in Woolf's texts. The next two sections will consider the reception of Woolf in Britain and France respectively in order to better explore how and why the intersections between the two authors have never been the object of a sustained academic study until now.

1.2 Virginia Woolf in Anglo-American criticism

As was anticipated above, Woolf's reception suffered, too, because of the patriarchal strictures of academic discourse in literary studies. Modernism as a useful category in literary periodisation emerged after the Second World War and, in Goldman's words, was "deployed to account for the wide and diverse range of experimental and avant-garde literature of the first three or four decades of the twentieth century" (Goldman 2007: 35). With the rise of New Criticism in the 1930s, largely based on notions of impersonality derived from the essays of T. S. Eliot, the canon of modernist authors was by and large made up of "The Men of 1914" – T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound, though William Butler Yeats also features sometimes in these early studies – and the ultimate criterion whereby works were established as canonical depended on formalist notions of what literature is and does, thereby discarding all the subversive political potential of texts.²⁷ Although "at its inception" the term modernism itself was often naturalised as serving "a neutral, mostly descriptive, non-controversial and certainly non-polemical function", academics now concur that even at the turn of the twentieth century, when the word first started to circulate, 'modernism' emerged "already and first of all as a fighting word, being fraught from the start with strident and contestable claims about the meaning of the experience of history in general and contemporary history in particular" (Sherry 2017b: 1).

In its etymological sense, Vincent Sherry points out, 'modernism' derives from the Latin *modo*, "just now", already associated in late antiquity to "an immense sense of eventful change", "a special present, a brink of time, a precipitous instant, all in all, a crisis time" (*ibid.*, p. 2). Through its suffixation, the disruption-signalling term "adds a self-conscious awareness to this special experience of the 'modern' moment, turning the uncertainty of instantaneous time into not just a feeling but an idea, maybe even a faith or belief in this condition of constantly disruptive change" (*ibid.*). This change seems to be variously perceived as positive or negative depending on the individual thinking about it, so much so that critics have tended to emphasise "the ambiguity of modernism at its core: a doubleness of anxiety combined with immense hope" (Cuddy-Keane, Hammond, Peat 2014: 140).

²⁷ For an historical overview of the phrase "The Men of 1914" as well as a critical reassessment of its usefulness, cf. Lamos 2017. For a canonical study of "The Rise of English", cf. Eagleton 1983: 17-53.

In terms of critical attention, what prevailed from the 1940s to the 1960s, when the category of ‘modernism’ was first used “as a working term” in “postwar universities in England and (especially) America” (ibid., p. 1), was the modernists’ formal experimentation, their stylistic changes and their particularly challenging aesthetics, as these were often perceived to be at odds with a more ‘popular’ understanding of literature’s function. As Michael Whitworth has remarked, in those years “modernism was understood primarily in terms of experiments in form and style; reference to the outside world was of secondary importance” (Whitworth 2010: 108). It is in those years, for instance, that Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) was located: in the chapter dedicated to Woolf, Auerbach famously shed light on Woolf’s masterful use of narrative focalisation in *To the Lighthouse* but refrained from connecting this formalist study to a broader cultural and political framework.²⁸

As Goldman summarises it, “Modernism’s Woolf, [...] in its more formalist manifestations, focuses on her stylistic changes, often at the expense of our understanding of the relevance of the cultural and political changes” that affect(ed), and emerge in, her work (Goldman 2007: 59). We have to wait at least until the 1970s for what Goldman has aptly termed “the feminist ‘unmanning’ of modernism” (ibid., p. 36), when other women writers started being foregrounded in modernist studies, as evidenced, for instance, by the well-received critical anthology *The Gender of Modernism* (1990), edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, where, alongside that male canon, room is made for women writers like Djuna Barnes, Willa Cather, Nancy Cunard, Mina Loy, Dorothy Richardson, H.D., Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Mansfield. In her recent reappraisal of the significance of 1922 as the *annus mirabilis* of Anglo-American modernism, Valérie Favre has insightfully described the series of circumstances that led to what she aptly terms “the construction of Woolf as the token woman of modernism”

²⁸ Towards the end of the “Brown Stocking” chapter, Auerbach does seem to gesture towards those socio-historical factors that contributed to distancing the experimental fiction of Woolf, Proust, Gide, Thomas Mann and Knut Hamsun from the realism of authors such as Stendhal, Dickens or Balzac, but he never highlights the political, subversive potential of their fiction; rather, he seems to locate their narrative experimentation in a specific cultural context and thus to see it as a direct consequence of it rather than a productive (and political) engagement with it (cf. Auerbach 2003: 550ff). Of course, Auerbach originally wrote his essay in German during his self-exile in Turkey, between 1942 and 1945: although he does not belong to Anglo-American criticism in terms of geographical location or language, his study was quickly translated into English in 1953 – like *The Second Sex* – and gained a broad resonance in Anglo-American criticism. In this sense, Auerbach’s monograph *did* contribute – in its translated form – to the Anglo-American context.

(Favre 2022: 334), highlighting the various ways in which most (male) critics justified their choice of texts in many anthologies of this period of literary history. As Whitworth had already pointed out, early critics “did not reflect on when modernism was; their concern was to win acceptance for writers and works that had been deemed controversial on aesthetic and legal grounds”; as a result, they were not concerned with “the dating of modernism, but the identification of the important figures; the dates of modernism followed by default” (Whitworth 2016: 122f.). That we still tend to think of 1922 as the modernist year of wonders is thus by now more of a long-standing convention than anything else – a convention which, incidentally, 2022 could not be exempt from honouring.

From the 1970s onwards, however, a more culturalist approach to Woolf came to the fore, as we saw, and this was mainly the result of the workings of what Harold Bloom notoriously dubbed “the school of resentment” (Bloom 1994: 4 and *passim*), namely those approaches to literature that tend to emphasise specific cultural and political aspects of an author or their work, such as poststructuralism, Marxism, feminism, postcolonial critique, or New Historicism. From the text, attention shifted to the *context*, to the material production of literature, and to its function within a broader cultural framework. Clearly, the change was not quite as radical as Bloom would have it: while it is definitely true that critics started to pay more attention to previously neglected qualities of texts such as their positionality within power structures (white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.), this did not always happen at the expense of the aesthetic quality of the texts being examined. As a matter of fact, as Goldman concluded, “How precisely aesthetic revolution and change interpenetrate with cultural, social and political revolution and change is where the study of Woolf’s modernism begins” (Goldman 2007: 59): her modernist project, as several critics concur in saying, is clearly informed by more political aims that do not sit well within the confines of the ‘purely’ aesthetic (cf. Goldman 1998, Hite 2017) – if, indeed, there is such a thing as a ‘purely’ aesthetic work of literature. The aesthetic-political dichotomy is unworkable in the case of Woolf – and, it could be argued, in literary studies more broadly – as textual complexity cannot be reduced to a simple binary.

Even the paradigmatically New Critical T. S. Eliot has been the object of critical and political re-appropriation and contestation in recent years, especially in relation to

the #MeToo movement and the culture wars that have been raging in humanities departments in the Anglosphere. In 2019, Megan Quigley edited the “Reading ‘The Waste Land’ with the #MeToo Generation” on *Print Plus*, the online, peer-reviewed platform of the prestigious journal *Modernism/modernity*. The following year, she responded to some vitriolic attacks she received from established Eliot scholar and editor Christopher Ricks in her introduction to another *Print Plus* cluster on “#MeToo and Modernism”, concluding that her aim was “to open the door to new and underrepresented voices and approaches to Eliot’s poetry” but he was unwilling to listen to what younger generations could see in Eliot (Quigley 2020; cf. Quigley 2019). This reaction by Ricks seems to be very much in keeping with Harold Bloom’s legacy and clearly has more than one echo in Woolf’s essays. Suffice it to think here of Professor X in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), who writes a “monumental work entitled *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of The Female Sex*” (AROO 24) – possibly an indirect reference to Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1906) – but his book, like all the other books by men on women, the narrator concludes, is “worthless for my purposes”: “they were worthless scientifically, that is to say,” for “they had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth” (ibid., p. 25); “All that I had retrieved from that morning’s work had been the one fact of anger” (ibid., p. 26). Resentment, *pace* Bloom and Ricks, may also be detected in the patriarchal structures’ response to an opening, and consequently a critique, of disciplines and categories.

Faced with this opening up of new spaces for marginalised writers within the modernist canon, some volumes on modernism from the 1990s onwards have sometimes resorted to the pluralised form of the noun, *modernisms*, to emphasise the incredible variety this period displayed in spite of attempts to homogenise it under one heading (cf. Nicholls 1995; Friedman 2015). As Rita Felski argued, even modernity itself “is not a homogeneous *Zeitgeist* which was born at a particular moment in history”; rather, the term “comprises a collection of interlocking institutional, cultural, and philosophical strands which emerge and develop at different times and which are often only defined as ‘modern’ retrospectively” (Felski 1995: 12). Susan Stanford Friedman’s 2001 article is insightful in this sense, as it collects all the different theories on modern, modernity and modernism available to the critic of her time and concludes that all the different models are steeped in self-contradiction and conflict. After

concurring with Fredric Jameson that “The problem of periodization and its categories, which are certainly in crisis today [...] seem to be as indispensable as they are unsatisfactory for any kind of work in cultural study” (Jameson 1981: 28), Friedman points out how “the binarist, circular, and metonymic problems inherent in definitional acts” which she has just expounded should not be regarded – or at any rate she does not regard – “as dead ends but rather as opportunities for interrogation that lead right into the heart of the dialogic meanings of *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernism*” (Friedman 2001: 509).

This situation has led critics towards an “expansive tendency [...] in what we might think of as temporal, spatial, and vertical directions” (Mao and Walkowitz 2008: 737): that is to say, places, times, and genres not previously considered to be influenced by, or typical of, modernism, have recently been the object of sustained critical attention, and the name of “new modernist studies” has been advanced to capture this sentiment (cf. Mao 2021). In a similar fashion, some critics have found the notion of *feminisms* more accurate to account for the variability of the concept itself according to different spatial and temporal categories (cf. Delap 2020): as Friedman has insightfully encapsulated it,

Emerging out of the volatile and deep divisions within national and international kinds of feminism by the late 1970s, the politics of pluralization forcibly interrupted the tendency of some (especially white, heterosexual, western feminists) to attempt to speak for all, as if patriarchy were a monolithic cultural formation, as if women were the same everywhere, as if the female subject of feminism were homogeneous. (Friedman 1999: 4).

In both cases, then, what was perceived as a singular and monolithic category came to be expanded beyond its initial boundaries and was placed in dialogue with places, times, and genres which had previously passed undetected under critical radars.

Before drawing a comparison with Woolf in France, this chapter will look at two important misconceptions that informed the reception of Woolf in Anglo-American scholarship: Woolf as a snobbish and ethereal aesthete out of touch with mass culture, and Woolf as an anti-feminist woman writer. While the former may be located in what is now called modernist studies, the latter relates more closely to feminist (re)interpretations of Woolf. As will be shown in what follows, these misconceptions,

unlike those related to Beauvoir, were dispelled at quite an early stage in the academic reception of Woolf, so much so that since the 1990s Woolf has been regarded, in Brenda Silver's description, as "a powerful and powerfully contested cultural icon, whose name, face and authority are persistently claimed or disclaimed in debates around art, politics, sexuality, gender, class, the 'canon,' fashion, feminism, rage, and anger" (Silver 1999: 3). This is not to say that Beauvoir cannot be considered as an icon – after all, she is probably one of the most easily recognised names and faces of Western feminism; rather, it could be argued that, compared to Woolf's, her iconicity is far from guaranteeing a sound knowledge of her life and work precisely because of the three factors that were expounded above. As a matter of fact, perhaps only *The Second Sex* and (parts of) her autobiography may be regarded as iconic texts, with the rest of Beauvoir's writings usually being paired with Sartre's or being positively neglected by academic discourse. At any rate, Beauvoir's *magnum opus*, like Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, is often reduced to pithy sententiae – "One is not born..." springs to mind – which seem to render it a nodding acquaintance foremother's work rather than a complex work of feminist scholarship with which scholars critically engage in non-specialist circles.

It ought to be noted that, as Silver perceptively suggests, every cultural icon is an historical construct, a site of debate and even conflict whose aesthetic, ethical and political value has had to be established and re-negotiated over time – and Woolf is no exception. Among the criticisms that were levelled at her public persona and her writing is the notion that she was a snob, an intellectual whose work was (and possibly still is) incomprehensible to, and disdainful of, the masses. By and large, Woolf's literary production was initially perceived to be out of touch with reality, intent as it was on recreating or even revolutionise narrative form and style. As David Bradshaw remarked in 2010,

while it has long been agreed that [Woolf's novels] are geared towards broadening our aesthetic responsiveness – as we read Woolf's novels, we are prompted to question how and why we read fiction and to acknowledge the limitations of our answers – it is only relatively recently that the degree to which her novels seem designed to extend our ethical and political 'sympathies' has begun to be recognised. (Bradshaw 2010: 124)

In his endnote, Bradshaw points to a series of studies that highlighted, from the 1980s onwards, Woolf's emphasis on the material and the socio-political, such as Alex Zwerdling's *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1987). In his introduction to the volume, Zwerdling rightly points out how before Quentin Bell's 1972 biography of his aunt, a single volume covering the whole of Woolf's literary production could well have been produced, a feat which seemed impossible in 1987; the reason why Bell's biography was pivotal in this regard was "not so much because of its interpretation of Woolf's life as because it revealed that there existed an enormous body of unpublished material of the highest quality" (Zwerdling 1987: 1). As this material found its way into print in the next dozen years or so, "the pretense that all the important forces that engaged her attention could be accounted for in a single book [was] quietly abandoned" (ibid., p. 2). Moreover, and perhaps more crucially, these newly published writings made it "increasingly clear that the visible writings rested on a previously unknown foundation" (ibid.): namely, "her concern with the ways in which private and public life are linked", how

her sense of the subject is deepened by her understanding of the interrelationship of the social forces at work – familial, institutional, ideological, historical – and by her awareness of the range of individual human response – internalization, compliance, rebellion, withdrawal, and all the combinations and contradictions such different reactions can produce. (Ibid., pp. 4-5)

While the question of the subject will be analysed in more depth in Chapter 2, for the moment it is enough to take stock of this evolution in Woolf scholarship from aesthetics to materiality and politics, an evolution which did not fail to generate and subsequently dispel many misconceptions of Woolf's work.

In this context of a prolonged literary production, it could be argued that the posthumously published writings of Beauvoir, such as her correspondence with U.S. author Nelson Algren in 1998, her *Cahiers de jeunesse* (2008), *Les Inséparables* (2020) or the recently published *Lettres d'amitié* (2022) between Beauvoir, Elisabeth Lacoïn (Zaza), and Merleau-Ponty, have similarly functioned as a distancing device from Sartre's long shadow – although, as it was shown above, this shadow has produced interesting insights in both authors' work in recent times. In both cases, Woolf's and Beauvoir's literary productions have enjoyed a new renaissance of studies that, thanks to these posthumously published texts, have shifted attention away from the beaten path

set by patriarchal notions of literature and often reinforced by those men (Sartre, Leonard Woolf, Quentin Bell) who contributed in some shape or form to the relativisation of their stature.

In spite of Zwerdling's landmark monograph, John Carey's *The Intellectual and the Masses* (1992) managed to generate quite a heated debate around the distance between public intellectuals such as Woolf and the masses. As Whitworth has noted, "Mass society was for many modernists a key characteristic of modernity" (Whitworth 2010: 115), and more recent scholarship has kept investigating the relationship between modernist literature and modernity in a broad, interdisciplinary understanding of the term: Rachel Crossland, for instance, has explored the "shared discourse" on the crowd between scientific theories like Brownian motion, social and psychological accounts of it like Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* (1895; translated into English in 1896), and modernist writers like Woolf and D. H. Lawrence (Crossland 2018: 129ff). The relationship between modernism and modernity is thus one of interest even today.

By and large, "'modernism' refers to an aesthetic movement, while 'modernity' refers to its social context" (Whitworth 2016: 125), although of course the term 'modernity' itself has been associated with different historical, social, and technological phenomena in the last few decades. Broadly speaking, modernity was characterised by, as Whitworth has summarised it,

mechanisation and the industrial revolution; urbanisation; democracy and socialism; professionalisation, specialisation and Taylorisation; unequal social development, or unequal participation in it; early modern humanism; and Enlightenment and its legacy. (Whitworth 2010: 109)

Other critics have emphasised different socio-historical factors in their discussion of modernism and modernity: for instance, Michael Levenson numbered "The catastrophe of the First World War, and before that, the labour struggles, the emergence of feminism, the race for empire" among the "inescapable forces of turbulent social modernisation" that affected modernism and he went on to point out how these forces "were not simply looming on the outside as the destabilizing context of cultural Modernism; they penetrated the interior of artistic invention" (Levenson 1999: 4). In her perceptive study of daily time and everyday life in modernist literature, Bryony Randall similarly considered "technological change [...], the First World War, the rise of the women's movement, and the development of psychology" as the socio-cultural

backdrop for the rise to prominence of dailiness and the everyday in modernist culture (Randall 2007: 3). By expanding the temporal as well as spatial framework normally employed in modernist studies, Friedman has located modernity not just in “war between nation-states” but in “seismic conflict among and within global empires”, a conflict which “constituted a planetary geopolitics with deep effects among peoples they colonized, including not only the humiliations of colonialism but also intensified and at times creative contact among diverse peoples and cultures” (Friedman 2015: 216). In all these accounts, what seems to emerge as a defining characteristic of modernity is the mass in its various manifestations, an entity that is variously perceived as dangerous, fundamental, inevitable, alienating or essential for political mobilisation (cf. Crossland 2018: 129ff).²⁹

In contrast to critics who emphasised the importance of mass society at the turn of the twentieth century, Carey argued that the mass is largely “a fiction” created by intellectuals’ “mass thinking” (Carey 1992: vii). His approach to Woolf is biased in its attempt to discover a sort of primitivist prejudice in the representation of the beggar woman in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), for, as is often the case with blanket statements about Woolf’s writing, his interpretation silences those parts of the text that do not fit in with his theory, as Whitworth has shown (cf. Whitworth 2010: 115-7) – and Beauvoir seems to enact a similar reading strategy in *Le Deuxième Sexe* in relation to *A Room of One’s Own*, as will be shown below. At any rate, Carey’s partial reading of Woolf as an intellectual disdainful of the masses owes much to the misconception of Woolf as “the least political animal that has lived since Aristotle invented the definition”, as Leonard Woolf famously – or perhaps notoriously – described her (Woolf 1967: 27), a view which was also shared by Quentin Bell in his biography, where, to name but one example, he suggested that in 1934, “as yet Virginia was not really worried about politics” (Bell 1974: 179), a dubious statement to say the least.

Melba Cuddy-Keane’s monograph, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (2003), did much to correct this view of Woolf as an apolitical writer uninterested in the masses. In her view, Woolf ought to be regarded as a “democratic highbrow” (Cuddy-Keane 2003: 13), as her use of the latter word is far from implying

²⁹ For an overview of the terms and concepts associated in the modernist period with community and group thinking, cf. Cuddy-Keane, Hammond, Peat 2014: 40-5. For an overview of the concept of crowd across different languages, cf. Schnapp and Tiewws 2006.

one's belonging to an upper class, and especially because of how Woolf was "working for the integration of literature in our daily lives" regardless of how (un)privileged readers may be (ibid., p. 114). Thus, her work, far from being inaccessible to the working class or to the masses, intended to prompt readers to think for themselves about literature and culture more broadly, and indeed her involvement with the BBC and the Women's Co-operative Guild has been regarded in more recent scholarship as evidence for Woolf's more active – though sometimes ambivalent – participation in the public sphere (cf. Black 2004; Jones 2015; Livingstone 2022). To sum up, it is in the 1980s that Woolf's engagement with the materiality of the world comes to the fore in Anglo-American criticism, as the "construction" of Woolf, as Anna Snaith has perfectly encapsulated it, moves from an "apolitical, frail, asexual and private" intellectual to one "firmly back in the 'real' world" (Snaith 2000a: 3) – and of course this political reappropriation was very much indebted to second-wave feminist literary criticism, which, as Goldman pointed out, was resolved to amplifying the voices of modernist women writers.

In feminist studies, as was suggested above, Toril Moi's 1985 monograph contributed to bringing 'French feminism' to an Anglo-American readership and, arguably, to reinforcing the French-vs-Anglo-American-feminism dichotomy. In her introduction, Moi famously argued for the recovery and revision of Woolf in feminist scholarship: in her view, "quite a few feminist critics" were at the time "afraid" of Woolf (Moi 1985: 1), as the title of Edward Albee's play reads, because her writing was very much anticipating – or at any rate could better be explained by – some of the main tenets of poststructuralism and 'French feminist' psychoanalysis. Both of these philosophical traditions, Moi argues, deconstructed the notion that there is a monolithic self that can be pinned down and analysed in all its literary manifestations. As the critic goes on to argue, "If a similar approach is taken to the literary text, it follows that the search for a unified individual self, or gender identity or indeed 'textual identity' in the literary work must be seen as drastically reductive" (ibid., p. 10).

Moi then proceeds to find in Kristeva's philosophy an echo of Woolf's textual strategies and considers a few contributions to the field of Woolf studies only to find them wanting. Even Jane Marcus's work, which was possibly one of the first feminist

and militant interpretations of Woolf and did much to recover and revise the author for feminists, is criticised for “unproblematically evok[ing] biographical evidence to sustain her thesis about the nature of Woolf’s writing” and for its “emotionalist arguments” (ibid., p. 17) – in fact, it could be argued that these two aspects are perhaps what may alienate today’s critics if they (re)discover Jane Marcus’s work on Woolf. In Moi’s perceptive description, Marcus “fall[s] back into the old-style historical-biographical criticism much in vogue before the American New Critics entered the scene in the 1930s” (ibid.). This tendency was detrimental not only to Woolf studies, but, as was pointed out above, also to Beauvoir scholarship, as the two authors’ work risks being reduced to simple understandings of their arguments that need to be backed up by biographical evidence, a process which ultimately deprives them of the authority and the authorship that are pre-conditions for all creative endeavour.

Thus, although poststructuralism and the prominence of ‘French feminism’ contributed to labelling Beauvoir’s theories and approach as dated in Anglo-American criticism, they were at the same time fundamental to the unearthing of those aspects of Woolf’s works that critics were too easily dismissing as uninteresting or alienating to the reader. Despite being very often named as the ‘mothers’ of second-wave feminisms, Woolf and Beauvoir were distanced from one another precisely by this turn towards poststructuralism and ‘French feminism’. Interestingly, Moi remarked at the end of her introduction that Woolf was at the time either “rejected by [her feminist daughters in England and America] as insufficiently feminist, or praised on grounds that seem[ed] to exclude her fiction” (Moi 1985: 18). While the former argument will be explored below, the latter conclusion points to another similarity between Beauvoir’s trajectory in Anglo-American criticism and Woolf’s: both of the ‘mothers’ of second-wave feminisms were considered mostly as writers of non-fiction, because their essays spoke to subsequent generations of feminists who were looking for new ways in which they could deconstruct patriarchal thought. While Woolf’s narrative texts have now been explored at length in the existing scholarship, Beauvoir’s novels and short fiction have suffered much neglect in Beauvoir studies, with the argument often being proposed that she was only recreating in fiction what she was experiencing in her real life. This idea is very much in keeping with the biographically inflected approaches to her philosophical production and, as is natural, to her autobiographical project; much more work needs to

be done to distance critics from the received idea that Beauvoir could not but write about herself or her own life.³⁰

The most important misconception of Woolf as an anti-feminist writer was generated by the now notorious debate around the concept of androgyny, a concept which she mobilises in *A Room of One's Own* and may be seen to be represented in some shape or form in *Orlando* (1928). While the 1928 novel will be analysed in Chapter 3, it is important to recall the critical debate that Elaine Showalter's monograph, *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), generated in Woolf studies from the late 1970s to the 1980s and beyond. As Marie Allègre has encapsulated it in a recent contribution, Woolf's androgyny has been "Broadly perceived as either a dissolution of sexual difference, a reinforcement of this difference, or even as a third option beyond binaries" and thus "remains a riddle and still triggers much ambivalence" (Allègre 2020).

Showalter's suggestion in 1978 that "androgyny was the myth that helped [Woolf] evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition" (Showalter 1978: 264) acquired a notorious reputation in the following years. While Showalter termed Woolf's theory of androgyny as discussed in *A Room of One's Own* as a "flight into androgyny" and even went so far as to argue that far from being "liberating", "the concepts of androgyny and of the private room [...] have a darker side that is the sphere of the exile and the eunuch" (ibid., p. 285), several critics pointed out how androgyny, for instance, "radically undermine[s] the notion of the unitary self, the central concept of Western male humanism and one crucial to Showalter's feminism" (Moi 1985: 7). In her Kristevan study of Woolf, Minow-Pinkney criticised Showalter's naïve conceptions of identity and subject-object dichotomy and argued that Woolf's androgyny is "radical" in that it "open[s] up the fixed unity into a multiplicity, joy, play of heterogeneity, a fertile difference" (Minow-Pinkney 1987: 12). Later in the text, Minow-Pinkney concluded, in a markedly poststructuralist tone, that "The ideal androgynous mind does not – *pace* Showalter – flee into asexuality and eunuchism, but is rather 'a constant alternation' between the inside and the beyond of culture and the sign" (ibid., p. 121). In a similar vein, Pamela L. Caughie suggested that the notion in Woolf is far from providing a stable point of

³⁰ Indeed, it could be argued that much more work should be done to accept the idea that even if an author *does* transpose his or her own life into fiction, that does not diminish his or her 'worth' as an intellectual.

view and is very much in keeping with poststructuralism as it represents rather “an oscillation between positions”, a “sexual” as well as “textual” ambiguity (Caughie 1989: 44). Once seen as an elusive, anti-feminist concept, androgyny in Woolf was recovered and revised by poststructuralist feminists in the 1980s to the effect that now it need no longer be defended against Showalter’s allegations.

As Allègre suggests in her perceptive reading of Woolf’s androgyny, this notion was explored at length by psychoanalysis on both sides of the English Channel. As she summarises it,

While Woolfian androgyny can be read as a fusion that engulfs the woman’s perspective within a pretence of universality/neutrality/objectivity which only hardly hides a hegemonic masculine vision, other critics side for a productive undecidability which acknowledges the generative aspect of Woolf’s writing. They read Woolf’s androgyny, especially in *Orlando*, not as a simultaneous combination (or fusion) of the ‘feminine’ and the ‘masculine’, but as a dialectic, a constant play between roles that are themselves highly contextual and never immanent. Amongst this later group who tends to root for the alternation camp, we find most psychoanalytic critics. (Allègre 2020)

It is thus thanks to (some) psychoanalytic critics, most of whom seem to be indebted to Kristevan theory and feminist philosophy, that the creative, ambivalent power inherent in Woolf’s androgyny was restored as a useful hermeneutic category. While, on the one hand, the advent of Lacanian psychoanalysis and poststructuralism – very often termed ‘French theory’ in Anglo-American discourse, as shown by Delphy – rehabilitated Woolf, on the other, Beauvoir and existentialism were regarded by most as resting upon dated and problematic notions of self, consciousness and will that seemed to be out of touch with the linguistic turn in philosophy and in cultural as well as literary studies.

Thus, in Anglo-American criticism Woolf and Beauvoir have been regarded as authors with widely divergent perspectives on the notion of self, and this view, coupled with patriarchal notions about authorship and women’s writing, has in fact prevented critics from looking at the intersections and resonances between Woolf and Beauvoir beyond a simple, chronological and ‘bird’s-eye’ view of matrilinearity. Besides being the two ‘mothers’ of second-wave feminisms, the two authors’ literary and philosophical productions can benefit from a cross-examination of their work and reception that does not content itself with the surface of their writings. While the

following two chapters will be an attempt to draw comparisons between Woolf's oeuvre and Beauvoir's philosophy, the next section will map out the trajectory that Woolf has followed in France since the 1920s in order to see where it might intersect with Beauvoir. Moreover, an overview of the French Woolf scholarship will be provided to trace any similarities or differences with the Anglo-American criticism that was explored above.

1.3 French Woolf – English Beauvoir

In France, critical attention for Woolf has never really waned.³¹ While all the references to Woolf in French periodicals cannot be listed here, some interesting contributions will be highlighted so as to reproduce some of the main resonances she generated across the English Channel. Woolf first surfaced in French literary studies in the 1920s, when Marc Logé – a male pseudonym adopted by translator and woman of letters Mary Cécile Logé – numbered her among the “impressionists of English fiction, a group doubtless spearheaded by May Sinclair” (“impressionistes de la fiction anglaise dont May Sinclair est indubitablement le chef”, Logé 1925: 754) in the 21 November 1925 issue of the French periodical *La Revue politique et littéraire*.³² In this contribution, Logé introduced Woolf as a writer endowed with “such personal qualities” as “meticulous observation bordering on intuition” and “a biting, perceptive irony” (“qualités si personnelles”: “observation minutieuse qui frise l’intuition”, “ironie mordante et perspicace”, *ibid.*). Despite Logé's emphasis on Woolf's “impressionism”, here the term does not seem to be an indictment of Woolf's presumed frivolity, a psychologism patriarchally associated with women writers, or a supposed inability to write ‘well’, as for instance happened in Britain when Woolf started publishing her essays and reviews, as shown by Michael Kauffman (cf. Kauffman 1997: 116) and as pointed out by Sara Sullam (cf. Sullam 2020: 32).

Having translated not only Agatha Christie, Mary Augusta Ward and Lafcadio Hearn, but also the novel *A Romantic* (1920, trans. 1922) by May Sinclair, Logé is able

³¹ A useful timeline with the translations, criticism, and other events or presences of Woolf in France (and Europe) can be found in *The Reception of Virginia Woolf in Europe* (cf. Luckhurst and Caws 2002: xxi-xxxv), although of course much more work needs to be done to complement this information.

³² The translation is my own. The whole issue of *La Revue politique et littéraire* has been digitised and is accessible at this link: <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/la-revue-politique-et-litteraire/21-novembre-1925/2057/4435785/26> [last accessed 06/12/2022 14.14].

to deftly highlight Woolf's stylistic and thematic achievements in *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1918), and *Jacob's Room* (1922). What is particularly striking at first glance is the fact that although *Mrs Dalloway* was published in England on 14 May 1925, Logé did not seem to have heard of it when she published this piece on 21 November 1925.³³ Moreover, the idea that May Sinclair was, in Logé's view, the foremost English woman writer does sound somewhat unusual today, considering she was one of the modernist women writers that had to be salvaged from patriarchal oblivion by feminists from the 1970s onwards, in particular through the republication of her works by Virago. However, as Suzanne Raitt points out in a recent contribution dedicated to the author's "chequered history" in modernist studies, although Sinclair's name may not be the first to spring to mind when we think of English modernism today, she was a best-selling author and an experimental writer before Woolf became one (Raitt 2017: 21, 22-3), so Logé's account is in fact pretty accurate.

At any rate, it is Sinclair's stylistic bravado and her writerly versatility that are highlighted in the article, especially in reference to the acclaimed novel *The Divine Fire* (1904); her study *The Three Brontës* (1912) and the ensuing novel *The Three Sisters* (1914); *Tasker Jevons* (1916), presented here as a study of a modern English writer, usually said to portray H. G. Wells or Arnold Bennett; the autobiographical novel *Mary Olivier* (1919) which inaugurates precisely that "English impressionism" Logé associates Woolf with; and many others. Sinclair's merit resides, in Logé's view, in a synthesis of character traits and scenes which can dispense with the unessential without reducing fiction to social commentary.

Alongside Woolf and Sinclair, Logé also discusses the novels of (Margaret) Storm Jameson, Rebecca West, and Clemence Dane, before gesturing towards other important women writers towards the end of her article, writers such as Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, Margaret Kennedy, and Sheila Kaye-Smith. Her conclusion is that the important renewal of form in the English novel owes much to these women, an aspect which, as was pointed out above, tended to be overlooked in Anglo-American modernist studies until the 1970s. In this respect, Logé's closing paragraph is worth reporting in full here:

³³ Of course, Logé may have worked on the piece months before its publication or may not have heard yet of the latest Woolf novel. The first hypothesis seems easy to discount, as *La Revue politique et littéraire* was a weekly: it is highly unlikely that Logé prepared her draft six months before its publication.

Ainsi, les romancières anglaises contemporaines se révèlent non seulement des émancipatrices, mais aussi des créatrices : les lettres modernes leur doivent plusieurs des œuvres les plus parfaites de cet impressionnisme littéraire qui a succédé, depuis la guerre, au réalisme. Et cela n'est pas peu dire. (Logé 1925: 756)³⁴

Far from simply arguing for women's emancipation, these modernist writers have inaugurated a change in literary history: to the realism of pre-First World War fiction, they have in fact opposed a beautifully crafted "literary impressionism" that is not devoid of political undertones. In Logé's article, the aesthetic-political dichotomy is shown to be far from representing these modernists' ambition and scope, as these writers were not just "émancipatrices" but also "créatrices": aesthetics and politics clearly go hand in hand, as will be recognised in Anglo-American criticism only when the impersonality of New Criticism will come out of fashion in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1926, one year before the novel was published in English by the Hogarth Press, Charles Mauron's famous translation of the "Time passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* was published in *Commerce*, the prestigious journal founded by Paul Valéry, Léon-Paul Fargue, and Valéry Larbaud.³⁵ This was the first translation of Woolf's works to reach a French readership, and several critics have noted the fecund dialogue Mauron's work established with Woolf's (cf. Haule 1983; Coates 2002; Goldman 2018). On 13 August 1927, a first interview with Woolf appeared in the pages of *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*. The interview was conducted in Auppegard, Normandy, by the French author and painter Jacques-Émile Blanche, and the same issue of the periodical included a translation of Woolf's short story "Kew Gardens" (1919) (cf. Blanche 1927).³⁶

Blanche seems to have been pivotal not only in bringing Woolf to France but also, in broader terms, in figuratively bridging the English Channel. As an Anglophile, he created a productive dialogue between French and English authors in his two volumes

³⁴ "Thus, contemporary English women novelists prove to be not only emancipators, but also creators: modern letters owe them several of the most perfect works of that literary impressionism that has succeeded realism since the war. And that is no small thing."

³⁵ The translation appeared in the last 1926 issue of *Commerce*, published on 1 December. "Le temps passe", along with all the issues of *Commerce*, has been digitised and is now available on Gallica. See this link for the 1 December 1926 issue: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k15239837/f15.item.zoom> [last accessed 14/12/2022 16.47].

³⁶ A transcription of the article is available online at this link: <http://www.woolfonline.com/?node=content/contextual/transcriptions&project=1&parent=31&taxa=62&content=6379&pos=0> [last accessed 06/12/2022 14.14].

titled *Portraits of a Lifetime* (1937) and *More Portraits of a Lifetime* (1939), both of which were meant to be published by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press but eventually came out for J. M. Dent & Sons in London. The two volumes recount first-hand experiences of French authors like Marcel Proust, André Gide, Édouard Dujardin, and Edgar Degas, and of English-speaking authors like Henry James, Max Beerbohm, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Walter Sickert. As Georges-Paul Collet underlined in his informative contribution, "a special clause of the contract" with J. M. Dent & Sons "stipulated that the two books should not be published in French" (Collet 1965: 78), but a French edition of Blanche's writings on or of Woolf – amongst which are not only letters and interviews but also translations, literary reviews, and personal memories – is now available from the publisher Ombres (cf. Blanche 2015).

Besides Mauron and Blanche, another fundamental cultural mediator was André Maurois, an Anglophile intellectual who had many ties with the Bloomsbury Group. Working as an interpreter in the French army during the First World War, Maurois went on to become an important intellectual and writer. His first novel, *Les Silences du colonel Bramble* (1918), fictionalised part of his first-hand experience in the war, was translated into English in 1919 and garnered the critical acclaim of both countries. His continued engagement with English literature is evidenced in his role as editor at Stock, where he commissioned translations of, and wrote prefaces to such modernist works as Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and David Garnett's *Lady Into Fox* (1922). Moreover, he continued to produce biographies and studies of English literature throughout his life: besides the volumes he dedicated to the life and works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1923), Benjamin Disraeli (1927), and Lord Byron (1930), all of which were immediately translated into English, he also wrote, like Blanche, an overview of recent English authors – in his case, Charles Dickens, Hugh Walpole, John Ruskin, and Oscar Wilde.

His important role as biographer on both sides of the Channel culminated in his giving the prestigious Clark lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, the year after E. M. Forster's oft-cited lectures on the novel. While Forster's volume, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), is often mentioned because of his privileged status in England, Maurois' comparable book, *Aspects of Biography* (1929), tends to get short shrift: oddly enough, in the most authoritative and recent accounts of Bloomsbury, his name is barely mentioned (cf. Caws and Wright 1999; Rosner 2014; Ryan and Ross 2018). There are

two notable exceptions: Claire Davison swiftly reminded modernist scholars that Woolf's essay "On Not Knowing French" (1929) was originally published on the first page of *Le Figaro* and was meant to review Maurois' novel *Climats* (1928) (Davison 2020: 19); more recently, Laura Marcus reintegrated Maurois among the intellectuals who were discussing the 'new biography' in England in the 1920s (cf. Marcus 2021: 214). Although this cursory look already points to the untapped potential represented by Maurois as a cultural mediator between England and France, a more substantial enquiry into Maurois' work seems to this day to be missing.

Maurois, Mauron, and Blanche, in sometimes different capacities, also functioned as intermediaries in, or contributors to the publication of the first French translations of Woolf's novels for Stock (*Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* in 1929, *Orlando* in 1931), as pointed out by Collet (1965: 75) and Nicola Luckhurst (2002: 3-5). While Blanche is portrayed as a more active intermediary between Woolf and Stock, it ought to be noted that Maurois wrote a preface to Simone David's translation of *Mrs Dalloway* while Mauron wrote a foreword to his own translation of *Orlando*, both of them thus shaping the initial reception of Woolf's novels in French. Because of the prestigious position of French among European languages, as Luckhurst has pointed out, these intellectuals' mediation paved the way for subsequent translations of Woolf into French as well as into other European languages:

As French was, at this time, the *lingua franca* of Europe, these translations in turn made Woolf's writing available to readers who did not yet dispose of translations of Woolf into their mother tongue. In the case of Portugal, for example, French would continue to be the language of cultural mediation until 'well into this century' [...]. (Luckhurst 2002: 5)

Part of the reason why Woolf's fiction started being translated into French in 1929 derives from a prestigious literary prize, the Prix Femina – Vie Heureuse Anglais (1919-1940), which was awarded to Woolf in 1928 for *To the Lighthouse*. This prize has not quite received the critical attention it deserves, but Clara Jones' forthcoming article in *Modernism/modernity* will hopefully inaugurate more studies of the cultural institutions and the often voluntary, collective work – in this case performed by women – that shape the reception and significance of English modernism across national boundaries. A closer look at the untapped archival material held at Cambridge University Library has enabled Jones to recover the history of the committee, "a who's

who of British women writers from the first half of the twentieth century”, and revise our understanding of modernism in a transnational, collective perspective (Jones 2024: 2-3).³⁷ As Jones powerfully summarises it,

Committee rooms were spaces where the administrative abutted the ideological and studying them reinforces our sense of the period’s literary culture as variegated and imbricated in the socio-political. [...] Thinking about the role committee work played in ‘making modernism’ involves a shift in emphasis from individual moments of creative rapture and the decisive actions of savvy and self-promoting individuals, to the more hum-drum work of collective reading, consensus building and decision making. In short, the Prix Femina committee, with its compelling combination of institutional history and women’s labour, ‘weakens’ other ‘muscular’ narratives of modernism. (Ibid., p. 3)

Thus, observing Woolf from the other side of the Channel helps us to situate her in a different position, one that is less influenced by the rise of New Criticism and more imbricated in a socially embedded, collectively inflected understanding of modernism. As a result, our own interpretation of this period in literary history is extended beyond national boundaries as well as beyond received ideas of “single and solitary births”, in favour, perhaps, of a recovery of “the body of the people [...] behind the single voice” (AROO 49): modernist networks are more expansive than we tend to assume, and cultural mediators and translators play a more significant role in them than the ‘muscular’ narratives of Anglo-American modernist studies generally propose. This does not mean, as we will see, that France ‘understood’ Woolf much better than her own country; rather, it is by travelling *between* these two countries – and *beyond* – that a more global interpretation of Woolf’s oeuvre may be reached.

The fact that it was a painter like Blanche who did much to introduce Woolf into France shows how the initial critical reception of Woolf’s fiction in France tended to emphasise the stylistic impressionism not only of Woolf but more generally of British modernism, and especially of modernist women writers, as Logé herself argued in the 1925 article. Woolf herself seems to be very Francophile in her letters to Blanche, for instance when she says that the English are a “barbarous people” and stresses “how much [she]

³⁷ I thank Clara Jones for giving me access to a pre-publication draft of the article. Page numbers are only intended to be indicative.

rejoice[s] that [her] great grandmother was a Frenchwoman” (quoted in Collet 1965: 75)³⁸, or when she laments the British reviews of *Orlando* and praises Blanche for his, concluding that this “bears out [her] theory that the French carry a much sharper pen in their hands than [the British] do” (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 77). In a letter dated 22 December 1931, Woolf goes so far as to say “I always feel that I owe a great deal of the interest that the French take in my work to you”, before adding that “A professor Delattre has actually written a book on me!” (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 78). She is referring here to Floris Delattre’s *Le Roman psychologique de V. Woolf* (1932), the first monograph on Woolf published in France and in Europe: although the year 1932 saw the publication of Winifred Holtby’s *Virginia Woolf* too, Delattre’s volume was published on 25 May and Holtby relates in her author’s note that, although she had been working on her book for two years, Delattre’s book as well as new writings by Woolf, such as *The Waves* and *A Letter to a Young Poet* (1932), had in the meantime come out, which made it necessary for her to alter the original draft (cf. Holtby 1932: 7).³⁹ It is thus in France that the first monograph on Woolf was published, at a time when only a small section of her works – *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* – had been translated into French.⁴⁰

This is not to say, however, that Delattre’s monograph ought to be taken as evidence for France’s illuminating and praiseworthy understanding of Woolf. Delattre nonchalantly admits that Proust and Joyce are literary giants while Woolf tends rather to ‘simplify’ (*simplification*) or ‘refine’ (*affinement*): with more than a tinge of patriarchal prejudice, Delattre candidly states, for instance, that “Elle tend, non à la force massive dont elle serait incapable, mais à l’harmonie delicate” (Delattre 1932: 169).⁴¹ As Anne-Laure Rigeade has argued,

³⁸ In a footnote, Collet reports another letter to Victor Sackville-West where Woolf admitted that she was “trying to prove [her] Great-Aunt’s descent from a French Marquise” (Collet 1965: 75, n. 5).

³⁹ While the book acknowledges the place of publication and printing, it does not state on what date the book was published exactly; it is clear, however, from the author’s note as well as from the note closing the text (Holtby 1932: 205) that Delattre’s monograph was already available at the time Holtby was finishing her draft.

⁴⁰ In her diary, Woolf laments the first publications dedicated to her in 1932: “Two books on Virginia Woolf have just appeared in France and Germany. This is a danger signal. I must not settle into a figure.” (D4: 85). She is referring here to Delattre’s monograph and to the first dissertation on her produced by Ingeborg Badenhäusen in Marburg, titled “Die Sprache Virginia Woolfs” (“Virginia Woolf’s language”), which was never published. This dissertation would soon be followed by another two equally unpublished theses, as expounded by Nünning and Nünning 2002: 75f.

⁴¹ “She tends to express not incredible force – which she would be incapable of – but a delicate harmony.”

La comparaison est lestée de valeurs genrées (la force aux hommes, la délicatesse aux femmes), non sans hiérarchie : l'adjectif « incapable » trahit le jugement derrière la description ; l'écrivain femme apparaît comme ayant quelque chose en moins par rapport à ses modèles masculins ! (Rigeade 2014: 72)⁴²

In contrast to Logé's positive account of Woolf and other modernist women writers as not only emancipators but also creators, Delattre's volume seems to be much more attuned to capturing Woolf's 'delicate' – and inherently 'feminine' – psychologism than, for instance, a woman writer like Winifred Holtby is. The latter is in fact shown by Laura Marcus to be anticipating the recovery and revision of Woolf as a feminist author that would only happen in the 1970s, especially in reference to androgyny and to womanhood (cf. Marcus 2010: 158).

The kind of patriarchal prejudice that Delattre's volume concealed in plain sight was also shared by Stock, the first publisher to place Woolf's novels on the French marketplace: while *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and later – after some insistence – *Orlando* were published thanks to Blanche, Mauron, and Maurois as intermediaries, the feminist polemics were discarded by Stock as 'too English'. As Laura Marcus has argued, "It would seem that Woolf's most overtly feminist texts were received by Stock as untranslatable in cultural terms, their topics and its treatment specific to England" (Marcus 2002: 331). While *A Room of One's Own* was described by the publisher in 1930 as "too special and too exclusively related to problems of English life to be published with any success in French" (quoted in *ibid.*)⁴³, it is evident that these justifications betray the fact that, as noted by a French translator quoted by Marcus, "the interest of women is the last concern of men over here" (*ibid.*)⁴⁴. Under the guise of cultural relativism, Stock expressed its concern about more overtly political writings by Woolf like *Orlando* or *A Room of One's Own* which could risk being attacked in France – as a matter of fact, the same fate awaited *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949. As Rigeade has aptly noted in reference to *Une Chambre à soi*,

pour qu'un texte d'une littérature dominante soit reçu dans une autre littérature dominante, il faut que celle-ci puisse l'accueillir, que la tradition dans laquelle elle

⁴² "The comparison is weighted with gendered values (men are strong, women are delicate), and a hierarchy is established: the adjective 'incapable' betrays the judgment behind the description; the woman writer appears to have something less than her male models!"

⁴³ "trop spécial" in that it "tient trop exclusivement aux questions de la vie anglaise pour pouvoir être publié avec succès en français", as reported by Marcus in the article.

⁴⁴ "l'intérêt des femmes est le dernier souci des hommes de chez nous", as reported by Marcus.

s'inscrive soit constituée, que les lecteurs possèdent un cadre de compréhension dans lequel la situer. C'est pourquoi, si les romans modernistes de Woolf sont immédiatement traduits, les lecteurs français devront attendre 1951 pour lire *Une chambre à soi*. (Rigeade 2014: 72)⁴⁵

It is thus Woolf's fiction that is emphasised initially in France. This is very much in keeping with what Luckhurst has termed "the three-phase reception of Woolf throughout Europe":

she is known first as a novelist, a phase which coincides with her modernist reception; subsequently as an essayist, the author of [*A Room of One's Own*] and [*Three Guineas*] — this is the period of feminist reception; and, finally, as a diarist and letter writer, and, the subject of numerous biographies, as exemplary woman. (Luckhurst 2002: 17)

Indeed, the first translations of Woolf's works in French corroborate this pattern. In order to get a better sense of when Woolf's texts reached a French (monolingual) readership, a table is presented below. The collections of Woolf's short fiction have been excluded in order to favour the novels, the autobiographical writings (the two posthumously published *A Writer's Diary* and *Moments of Being*) and the two feminist polemics (*A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*). The main reasons for this choice have to do both with the scope of this thesis, where Woolf's short stories sadly have but a marginal place, and with the original circulation of the pieces, which at least initially appeared in periodicals rather than in book form, as the case of "Kew Gardens" above shows. This is also the reason why Mauron's translation of "Time passes" has been left out as well.⁴⁶ In other words, the table aims at gathering the first translations of Woolf's novels, feminist polemics, and autobiographical writings in book form, and is by no means intended to be exhaustive: highlighting the trajectory of these first translations in book form will be enough to illuminate some important points of contact between Woolf in France and Beauvoir. The volumes are listed in the chronological order of

⁴⁵ "In order for a text from one dominant literature to be received in another dominant literature, the latter must be able to welcome it, the tradition within which it will be inscribed must be constituted, and readers must have a framework of understanding in which to situate it. This is why, while Woolf's modernist novels were immediately translated, French readers must wait until 1951 to read *A Room of One's Own*."

⁴⁶ *Flush* was also first published as "Vie de Flush" in *La Revue des deux mondes* in 1934, but in the table reference is made to the *Flush* published in book form by Delamain et Boutelleau in 1935. As Marcus points out, this French practice of publishing parts of the translation just before the text in book form came out (what the French would call *bonnes feuilles*) was also criticised by the Hogarth Press (cf. Marcus 2002: 332f.).

appearance on the French marketplace rather than the original order in Woolf's literary production.

Date	French title	Translator	Publisher	Original title
1929	<i>Mrs Dalloway</i>	Simone David	Stock	<i>Mrs Dalloway</i> (1925)
1929	<i>La Promenade au phare</i>	Maurice Lanoire	Stock	<i>To the Lighthouse</i> (1927)
1931	<i>Orlando</i>	Charles Mauron	Stock	<i>Orlando</i> (1928)
1933	<i>Nuit et jour</i>	Maurice Bec	Catalogne	<i>Night and Day</i> (1918)
1935	<i>Flush</i>	Charles Mauron	Delamain et Boutelleau	<i>Flush</i> (1933)
1937	<i>Les Vagues</i>	Marguerite Yourcenar	Delamain et Boutelleau	<i>The Waves</i> (1931)
1938	<i>Années</i>	Germaine Delamain	Delamain et Boutelleau	<i>The Years</i> (1937)
1942	<i>La Chambre de Jacob</i>	Jean Talva	Stock	<i>Jacob's Room</i> (1922)
1944	<i>Entre les actes</i>	Yvonne Genova	Charlot	<i>Between the Acts</i> (1941)
1948	<i>La Traversée des apparences</i>	Ludmila Savitzky	le Cahier gris	<i>The Voyage Out</i> (1915)
1951	<i>Une Chambre à soi</i>	Clara Malraux	Gonthier	<i>A Room of One's Own</i> (1929)
1958	<i>Journal d'un écrivain</i>	Germaine Beaumont	Éditions du Rocher	<i>A Writer's Diary</i> (1953)
1977	<i>Trois Guinées</i>	Viviane Forrester	Des Femmes	<i>Three Guineas</i> (1938)
1977	<i>Instants de vie</i>	Colette-Marie Huet	Stock	<i>Moments of Being</i> (1976)

Table 1. First translations of Woolf's novels, autobiographical writings, and feminist polemics in book form in France.

There are three interesting points of contact between Woolf and Beauvoir, each of which, as I have argued elsewhere, may be broadly understood to fall in one of these categories: modernism, feminism, and life-writing (cf. Pinelli 2023). While the first stage is inaugurated by Beauvoir's reading of Woolf and of Anglo-American modernism in the late 1920s, thereby subscribing to a model of "synchronic" historicism, the other two are located after Woolf's death in 1941 and have more to do with what Wai Chee Dimock aptly termed "diachronic historicism", namely an approach that "tries to engage history beyond the simultaneous, aligning it instead with the dynamics of endurance and transformation that accompany the passage of time" (Dimock 1997: 1061). As will be shown below, Woolf's feminism is openly emphasised by Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949 as well as in her later Japanese conferences; Woolf's life-writing is received by Beauvoir in the late 1950s as Leonard's selection of Woolf's diaries reaches France in their first translation.

The first point of contact between Woolf and Beauvoir that may be observed is located at the beginning of Woolf's literary career in France: as Stock translates three novels by Woolf – *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Orlando* –, Beauvoir, as she recalls in *La Force de l'âge*, is reading "all of Woolf" (FA 69). Although Beauvoir hardly ever mentions specific years in her autobiography, a contextual analysis of the passage reveals that this reading of Woolf is located after the *agrégation*, but before, or possibly during, her teaching job at the lycée Victor-Duruy, which means that it could be located between 1929 and 1931 (and possibly after that, too). A closer look at her posthumously published *Cahiers de jeunesse* reveals a more precise periodisation for these two experiences: Beauvoir sat the written part of the *agrégation* on 17, 18, and 19 June 1929 (CJ 698-700) and the oral part between 19 and 30 July 1929 (CJ 732-742), while she seems to have taken up the teaching job on 4 November 1929 (CJ 817). In the whole volume gathering her *Cahiers de jeunesse*, there are many references to French literature (mainly Proust, Gide, Barrès, Rivière, Giraudoux, Stendhal, Claudel, Mauriac) and some references to English, Irish, and Anglo-American literature, but Woolf is never mentioned directly. Indeed, a Woolf scholar scanning the text for any occurrence of Woolf may feel like they are being lured, for, despite her conspicuous absence in the

text, several other authors and texts clearly connected with Woolf are referenced, and the next paragraphs will point to these citational networks.

In the first notebook available, the second one, Beauvoir writes on 17 August 1926: “Continuer peut-être Ramuz, Maurois, Conrad, Kipling, Joyce, Tagore, [...]” (*CJ* 65).⁴⁷ The most obvious connection to Woolf is represented by Joyce, whose novel *Ulysses* was published by Sylvia Beach in Paris in 1922 and whose literary fame will overshadow Woolf’s until the 1970s. Maurois is the other obvious connection, and we will see that Beauvoir eventually got to meet him and ask him about Woolf. Conrad’s relationship with the category of modernism is far from peaceful, although his work tends to be located within the temporal confines of even the most traditionalist understanding of the category itself; similarly, Kipling’s Victorian legacy and modernist subversion of metre, sound, and language have often been highlighted in recent scholarship.⁴⁸ What is perhaps more striking, however, within a highly European framework like that adopted in this thesis, is the relationship between Woolf, Beauvoir, and Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore. In contrast to a well-known diffusionist theory whereby the West created movements and notions which were then ‘exported’ to the Rest, Friedman has recently argued that a planetary understanding of modernism would help us to trace not only the “postcolonial afterlife” of Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare, but also “the pre-life of Woolf’s trope of Shakespeare’s sister in the colonies”, and in particular in the “brother-sister entanglements of Swarnakumari Devi and Rabindranath Tagore in their writing careers” (Friedman 2015: 276, 274). While her argument cannot be reported in full here, Friedman’s collage of Woolf, Devi, and Tagore manages to create a “space for theorizing fluid networks of relational and mobile modernisms” (*ibid.*, p. 281) which may help us to move beyond nationalist and monolingual frameworks. In her second notebook, Beauvoir transcribes a quotation from Tagore’s

⁴⁷ “Perhaps resume reading of Ramuz, Maurois, Conrad, Kipling, Joyce, Tagore, [...]”. The first notebook was lost, as Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir points out in her generous introduction (*Le Bon de Beauvoir* 2008: 15).

⁴⁸ In *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (1996), Kenneth Graham pointed out for instance how “Conrad may be a Modernist in his capacity to tear away the surface of things and to show certain of his characters hypnotized and fatally becalmed by the falling-away of physical appearances. But his partial attachment to a nineteenth-century tradition – confirmed by his admiration for Balzac, Flaubert, and Maupassant – is what allowed him to demonstrate how resistant the world is, for good as well as for bad, to the dangerous play of consciousness, and to express with intensity the tension between the two.” (Graham 1996: 204). Craig Rane similarly highlighted this tension between Victorian legacy and modernist experimentalism in Kipling’s poetry (cf. Rane 1992), and more recent contributions have argued to that effect, too (cf. Montefiore 2007).

Gītāñjali (*Song Offerings*, 1910), a collection of poetry in Bengali which was subsequently translated into English by Tagore himself in 1912 with an introduction by Yeats – a translation which would earn Tagore the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, thereby making him the first non-European author to receive this award – and was rendered by Gide in French in 1914, in the same first edition which Beauvoir read and referenced. Tagore, Yeats, Woolf, Gide, and Beauvoir are thus connected, whether directly or indirectly, through this (more than) European network of citations and references that seems to create room for further exploration.

The spectral presence of Woolf in Beauvoir's *Cahiers de jeunesse* may also be highlighted in the periodicals Beauvoir is reading. While Mauron's "Le temps passe", as was recalled above, was published in *Commerce* on 1 December 1926, Beauvoir writes on 6 October 1928: "je prends chez Adrienne Monnier les livres allemands, après avoir parcouru le numéro d'été de *Commerce* où il y a un Fargue et un Larbaud assez joli" (CJ 476).⁴⁹ She is referring here to the Summer issue, published on 1 June 1928, where Fargue published a piece titled "Souvenirs d'un fantôme. Fragments" ("Memories of a ghost. Fragments") and Larbaud an article titled "Actualité" ("Current events").⁵⁰ While she also reads "the latest issues of *Commerce*" at Monnier's bookshop on 26 March 1929 (CJ 597), it is interesting to notice how in 1928 she misses Woolf's first French translation by a couple of years – or perhaps more precisely, by only a few issues.⁵¹

Similarly, Blanche's interview with Woolf was published, as recounted above, in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* on 13 August 1927, but Beauvoir notes in her journal that she is reading the same periodical on 24 November 1928 (CJ 542), 7 December 1928 (CJ 553), and 21 April 1929 (CJ 621). This periodical, however, was a weekly, so, unlike what happened in the case of *Commerce*, this may hardly be regarded as a near miss. Moreover, while Beauvoir seems to read *Les Nouvelles littéraires* mostly in open spaces, it is clear from the passage in the diary reported above that she borrowed

⁴⁹ "I borrow the German books from Adrienne Monnier, after going through the summer issue of *Commerce* where two fairly nice pieces by Fargue and Larbaud are published."

⁵⁰ The issue is available on Gallica at this link: <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1523963g/f15.item.zoom>> [last accessed 14/12/2022 at 16.53].

⁵¹ "les derniers numéros de *Commerce*", in the original French. *Commerce* published four issues a year, which means that between "Le temps passe" (1 December 1926) and the 1928 Summer issue (1 June 1928) Beauvoir is reading, five issues were published in the space of one and a half years (although Beauvoir reads it in October).

Commerce from Adrienne Monnier's bookshop and lending library, one of the three main sources for books she quotes in *La Force de l'âge*. Of the other two – the Bibliothèque nationale and Shakespeare and Company – only the former is mentioned time and again in her journal, which perhaps suggests, as her reader's card from the Princeton Shakespeare & Co. Project shows, that her subscription to the latter would only come at a later stage.

In this sense, it could be argued that not relying on Shakespeare & Co. would perhaps discourage Beauvoir from reading novels originally published in English without the intermediary of translation. Her reading of several English, Irish, and Anglo-American authors in her *Cahiers de jeunesse* seems to point in the same direction: besides being very attentive to the latest arrivals on the French literary marketplace, especially when it comes to important literary awards like the prix Goncourt or the Nobel Prize (but sadly, not the Prix Femina Anglais), all her references to novels in English are discussed or even reported in the latest (and in some cases first) French translation available at the time. On 4 October 1928, Beauvoir notes in her journal, where she seems to be addressing her friend Madeleine Blomart directly: “Le soir j’ai lu *Légende* de Clémence Dane, bien imparfait, de valeur artistique médiocre, mais je comprends que vous l’aimiez, Madeleine ; et pour moi aussi Madala est une sœur très chère” (CJ 472).⁵² *Legend*, Dane's third novel, was published in 1919 in England, and Madala is the protagonist; the text was translated into French by Jeanne Scialtel in 1926, and Beauvoir goes on to cite the French rendition in the same 1928 entry. Dane was incidentally one of the modernist women writers whom Logé had numbered, with Woolf, among the “impressionists of English fiction”: although she is little known today, she was at the time recognised as a prominent and politically engaged writer whose work also reached a young Beauvoir in Paris.

Beauvoir's allegation of mediocrity is also extended to Rosamond Lehmann, whose novel *Dusty Answer* (1927) counts as one of the most important narrative texts in Beauvoir's youth, as she recalls in the 1965 interview with Gobeil, although she then candidly admits “it was rather mediocre” (Gobeil 1965: 24-5). On 12 July 1929, Beauvoir notes in her diary that she was reading “the admirable *Dusty Answer* by Rosamund [sic] Lehmann” while being driven by René Maheu to her aunt Lili (CJ 724),

⁵² “In the evening, I read *Legend* by Clemence Dane, an imperfect novel of mediocre artistic value, but I understand why you love it, Madeleine; for me, too, Madala is a very dear sister.”

a novel which she says she is re-reading a few months later, on 11 November 1929, while she is waiting for Sartre (cf. *CJ* 822).⁵³ While the novel originally appeared in England in 1927, it was translated by Jean Talva for Plon in 1929, the year in which Beauvoir was reading it. Interestingly, Talva would also be the first translator of *Jacob's Room* for Stock in the 1940s, and Rosamond Lehmann was the sister of John Lehmann, the manager of the Hogarth Press from 1930 to 1932 who would go on to become General Manager in 1938 before starting his own publishing company in 1946. Besides being close with members of the Bloomsbury Group, Rosamond Lehmann was also invited to become part of the Prix Femina Anglais committee: as Jones notes, "If a writer was considered too senior or successful to be any longer eligible for the prize she might be invited to join, as with Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamond Lehmann in the 1930s" (cf. Jones 2024: n6 21).

At any rate, what seems quite clear from this foray is that Beauvoir is reading the French translations of these works rather than the original versions and is, as a consequence, much more in dialogue with the French literary market than the English one, as is of course to be expected of any French reader – and especially one of her times. This also contributes to casting suspicion on her somewhat bold statement, in the 1965 Paris Review interview, that she always read Woolf "in English" (Gobeil 1965: 25), although she would of course have to read *A Room of One's Own* in the original, as she paraphrases the argument on Judith Shakespeare in *Le Deuxième Sexe* two years before *Une Chambre à soi* was published in Clara Malraux's translation. To be sure, some articles on *A Room of One's Own* appeared in French periodicals from 1930 onwards, but it seems that Beauvoir never read them; or if she did, she never recorded her reading them in her diaries – we will return to these early French reviews of *A Room* below.

Other frustratingly near misses of Woolf in Beauvoir's *Cahiers de jeunesse* are related to Margaret Kennedy, another woman writer mentioned by Logé in the closing of his article: on 25 May 1929, Beauvoir references *La Nymphé*, the short title for the French translation of *The Constant Nymph* (1924), translated into French by Louis Guilloux as *La Nymphé au cœur fidèle* in 1927.⁵⁴ More crucially, nonetheless, Katherine

⁵³ "l'admirable *Poussière* de Rosamund [sic] Lehmann".

⁵⁴ Incidentally, *The Constant Nymph* was also adapted as a play by Kennedy herself and Basil Dean for the London stage in 1926, and a French adaptation by Jean Giraudoux was staged in Paris in 1934.

Mansfield and Hope Mirrlees are referenced in Beauvoir's journals, two of the most important modernist authors to be published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. In both cases, it is not the texts published by the Woolfs that Beauvoir references – Mirrlees's *Paris: A Poem* (1920), a text which Julia Briggs, amongst others, has shown to have influenced Woolf (cf. Briggs 2006: 80ff), and Mansfield's "Prelude" (1918) – but Mirrlees's *The Counterplot* (1924), translated into French by Simone Martin-Chauffier in 1929, and Mansfield's *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920), translated into French by Germaine Delamain in 1928, the same translator who will go on to translate Woolf's *The Years* in 1938.⁵⁵

Thus, the first point of contact between Woolf and Beauvoir in France is declared by Beauvoir in *La Force de l'âge* but her diaries, which go up to 31 October 1930, do not seem to corroborate her periodisation or, at any rate, they suggest that her reading of Woolf may have happened after October 1930, that is after the first two novels by Woolf were translated into French in 1929. Perhaps part of the reason why Beauvoir does not mention Woolf directly in her *Cahiers de jeunesse*, if she has read her, is that she is not as emotionally attached to her characters or her style as she is to Mansfield's in *Bliss* – which she states is a "livre charmant qui me rend plus palpable cet intense bonheur que j'ai à être et à simplement prononcer les mots" (CJ 656)⁵⁶ –, George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver – the protagonist of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) whom Beauvoir terms her "sister" (CJ 749) and goes so far as to reference as a mirror to her own experiences with Sartre (cf. CJ 752f), before admitting in the Paris Review interview in 1965 that she "wanted terribly much to be, like her, someone whose books would be read, whose books would move readers" (Gobeil 1965: 24) – or even Judith Earle from Rosamond Lehmann's novel *Dusty Answer*, although she is unsparing in voicing her judgment of the aesthetic value of the text – in which she sees "cette petite fille aux passions profondes et calmes, d'une confiance insensée, d'une générosité grave, et si simplement amoral [...] petite fille tragique et simple, ma sœur Judith" (CJ 725).⁵⁷ While in some ways, as will be shown in the next section, Woolf may be regarded by Beauvoir as a 'mother' in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, it is clear that in the *Cahiers de jeunesse*

⁵⁵ For the reference to Mirrlees cf. CJ 846, for the references to Mansfield cf. CJ 656, 672.

⁵⁶ "a charming book which makes more palpable this intense happiness which I feel when I exist and simply pronounce words".

⁵⁷ "this little girl who is profoundly and calmly passionate, insanely trusting, seriously generous, and so simply amoral [...] tragic and simple little girl, my sister Judith is."

none of Woolf's characters or texts – provided Beauvoir had actually read any of Woolf's works by October 1930 – are looked up to as 'sisters', namely as important, emotionally charged symbols whose lives run parallel to hers.

Interestingly, in the 1965 *Paris Review* interview, Beauvoir mentions precisely Lehmann and George Eliot as the English writers she read growing up – although she also references children's literature like *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland* – before adding: “Later, of course, I read the Brontës and the books of Virginia Woolf” (Gobeil 1965: 25). Although this is clearly a statement she made in passing, this confirms our periodisation: Beauvoir read Woolf as a young adult rather than as a *jeune fille rangée*; while she was indebted to English authors like Louisa May Alcott, George Eliot, Margaret Kennedy, Rosamond Lehmann, and Mary Webb emotionally and creatively in a sort of “double debt”, in Cordet's words (“double dette” in Cordet 2019), her relationship with Woolf, despite being described as fundamental, was still in the making at the beginning of the 1930s.

By elaborating upon the theories of Vincent Descombes and Henri Meschonnic, Rigeade has recently argued that Nathalie Sarraute and the French *nouveau roman* group's understanding of Woolf as their contemporary attests to the first of three stages in the French reception of Woolf, which Rigeade terms “contemporaneity” (Rigeade 2021: 371ff). If we intersect this reading with Beauvoir, and especially a Beauvoir who is as yet neither a published author nor a feminist in the narrow sense, it becomes evident how Woolf was indeed a contemporary to Beauvoir, though not one she mentions directly or discusses in depth or feels emotionally connected to before the 1930s. It seems as if Beauvoir, unlike what she states in interviews or in her autobiographical writings, only discovered Woolf in the 1930s, at a time, that is, when her works began being translated into French and started circulating more widely in French literary circles. Before the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949, Beauvoir did not reference Woolf, and this brings us onto the second point of contact between the two authors, one that is not so bent on absence and textual hauntings.

The second point of contact may be seen as related to feminist history, as it concerns the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949 and that of *Une Chambre à soi* in 1951. To *A Room of One's Own* Beauvoir will return time and again during her career, not just in

these early stages but even later, during her lecture tour in Japan as well as in the 1965 Paris Review interview that was mentioned above. The fact that she cannot report a French translation of it in *Le Deuxième Sexe* encourages her to paraphrase the argument about Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*, a citation practice that is unique among the Woolf occurrences within *Le Deuxième Sexe*, as will be shown in the next section. Besides paraphrasing a part of the Woolfian text, Beauvoir and the overnight success of her 1949 feminist essay additionally paved the way for the translation of Woolf's feminist polemic, as several critics have already suggested (e.g. Villeneuve 2002; Rigeade 2014: 73). In a similar way to how Blanche, Mauron, and Maurois functioned as intermediaries for Woolf in the French literary market, Beauvoir may be regarded as a fundamental precursor for the translation of *A Room of One's Own*, a text which Stock refrained from publishing, as recalled above, and which will only appear in Clara Malraux's translation in 1951. As Luckhurst has aptly pointed out, "Regardless of whether this is viewed in a positive or negative light, the political climate which has done most throughout Europe to establish Woolf is feminism" (Luckhurst 2002: 12) – and Beauvoir seems to have played a fundamental role in bringing Woolf's feminism to France.

As early as 1930, *A Room* was included alongside Shakespeare's *King Lear*, part of Keats' poetry, and Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* in the list of set texts for the *Agrégation de l'enseignement secondaire des jeunes filles*, an exam that qualified graduates for secondary teaching in girls' schools – a sort of 'lesser' form of the more 'serious' *agrégation de philosophie* Beauvoir passed in 1929 (cf. Anon 1930). On 13 March 1930, Marguerite Yerta Méléra was the first to review *A Room* in a daily newspaper of nationalist sentiments and right-wing leanings, *L'Action française*, going so far as to translate some extracts from the text. The way she introduces the essay is worth reporting here:

Un jour, au bord d'une rivière, Mme Virginie [sic] Woolf pêchait. C'est elle qui le raconte. L'eau bleue coulait aux confins d'une ville britannique [sic] d'université. Mme Virginia Woolf, romancière minutieuse de la psychologie féminine, écrivain de cette école où Miss May Sinclair d'abord étudia les relations occultes de l'âme au corps, où Beresford plaida la continuité jamais interrompue de la vie, ne pouvait

faire moins que d'appliquer à la description du paysage le procédé d'impressionnisme qui lui est cher. (Méléra 1930)⁵⁸

This opening paragraph is supposed to introduce the famous passage in *A Room* where the narrator recounts the story of how she came to the conclusion that women need money and rooms of their own in order to be able to write. While in the original it is clear that it is not Woolf speaking – “Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought” (*AROO* 4) –, here Méléra, like many commentators after her, takes the narrative at face value, believing that she is reading nothing but a first-person account of Woolf’s lectures at Cambridge. She also takes quite literally the metaphor that the narrator uses in *A Room* whereby “Thought – to call it by a prouder name than it deserved – had let its line down into the stream” (*AROO* 4), misunderstanding the subject to be Woolf fishing in the river. Interestingly, Woolf is placed in the same “school” as May Sinclair, precisely as Logé had argued in her 1925 article: one may wonder whether Méléra had done some sort of ‘background reading’ before writing her piece and was thus familiar with Logé’s contribution; if that is not the case, this would point to the fact that Sinclair was in fact a beloved British writer in France, mostly associated with this sort of literary impressionism that is also highlighted by Méléra in *A Room*. Oddly enough, “Beresford” is presumably J. D. Beresford, a contemporary author who worked mostly within the genres of science fiction and the horror story and had also published the first study of H. G. Wells in 1915.

We do not have to wait long, however, to register Méléra’s negative view of the text. *A Room of One’s Own*, which she interestingly translates as “Une pièce à soi”, thereby offering, from our modern perspective, an alternative translation to Clara Malraux’s 1951 *chambre* (literally, “bedroom”) and to Marie Darrieussecq’s 2015 *lieu* (literally, “place”), is presented as dealing with “Woman and the Novel” (“la Femme et le Roman”), or, “to speak plainly: Feminism. With a capital F.” (“pour parler simple et

⁵⁸ “One day, on the banks of a river, Mrs Virginia [sic] Woolf was fishing. She is the one telling the story. The blue water flowed on the edge of a British university town. Mrs Virginia Woolf, a meticulous novelist of feminine psychology, a writer belonging to that school where Miss May Sinclair first studied the occult relations of the soul to the body, where Beresford pleaded the uninterrupted continuity of life, could do no less than apply to the description of the landscape the process of impressionism that is dear to her.”

net : le Féminisme. Avec une majuscule” ; *ibid.*). Despite Woolf’s stylistic bravado, the essay itself comes short of satisfying Méléra’s need for ‘truth’:

« Une pièce à soi » est écrit avec beaucoup de modération, dans un style plein de couleur et d’agrément. L’observation spirituelle ou la verve comique ne s’y démentent guère, l’érudition y évite la pédanterie ; l’habileté de l’écrivain y amène à point les anecdotes et les citations qui peuvent le mieux illustrer sa théorie. On y voit briller un raisonnement adroit, parfois faux, souvent tendancieux, il se faufile au flanc de la vérité dont il ignore toujours une partie. (*Ibid.*)⁵⁹

In what we would perhaps call today a ‘backhanded compliment’, Méléra highlights Woolf’s unmistakable formal merits while also suggesting that the essay would have done with a bit more work. To support this thesis, she quotes some data from “one of the greatest newspapers in the United States”, namely *The Christian Science Monitor*, which described how British women owned 30% of the country’s wealth: “Même en supposant que ces chiffres représentent une possession en partie plus nominale que réelle, il semble que la fortune des Anglaises leur permettrait, si elles en éprouvaient le désir, de supprimer les pruneaux dans les collèges de femmes et d’y multiplier les perdreaux” (*ibid.*).⁶⁰ Woolf’s narrator’s emphasis on the terrible food in the women’s college is taken once again quite literally, her tongue-in-cheek, materialist remark about not being able to “think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well”, for “The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes” (*AROO* 14) mistakenly considered to be a severe judgment on the women’s college. Although she casts Woolf as the person censuring women, Méléra does not hesitate in fact to reduce women’s poor access to education to a question of will, thereby lifting the responsibility for the oppression of women off the shoulders of a patriarchal society. Reading this early review, one cannot help feeling that Méléra is taking all too seriously the narrative parts of the essay without registering the irony she claimed she had appreciated.

What really irritates the reviewer, however, is the notion of matrilinearity proposed by Woolf, as well as the idea that the body of Judith Shakespeare, the ‘great

⁵⁹ “‘Une pièce à soi’ is written with great moderation, in a style full of colour and pleasure. Its witty observation and comic verve are unmistakable, its erudition avoids pedantry, and the writer’s skill brings to bear the anecdotes and quotations that best illustrate her theory. Skilful reasoning shines through, sometimes false, often tendentious, sneaking up on the truth, of which it always ignores a part.”

⁶⁰ “Even if we suppose that these figures represent a possession that is in part more nominal than real, it seems that the fortunes of English women would allow them, if they so wished, to do away with prunes in women’s colleges and increase the number of partridges there.”

woman writer', has to be brought back to life through a collective effort. Méléra refuses to believe that certain behavioural patterns can be inherited from one's mothers, thereby once again taking a much too literal approach to Woolf's fictionalised essay, and seems to misunderstand Woolf's (narrator's) clarion call to women writers and artists, thinking that the implication of this is that there are no great women writers in 1930. To sustain her counterarguments, Méléra provides evidence from evolutionary biology, accusing Woolf's (narrator's) matrilinearity of "biological heresy" ("hérésie biologique"):

Il n'est d'abord pas prouvé que le cerveau masculin se soit développé depuis trois mille ans, ni que M. G. B. Shaw ait la tête mieux faite que Platon. « Les caractères acquis, disent les savants, sont intransmissibles. » L'enfant, qu'il soit mâle ou femelle, en obéissance à des lois mystérieuses, hérite indifféremment de son père ou de sa mère, ou d'ascendants lointains, la forme de son cerveau et celle de son nez. (Ibid.)⁶¹

Opposing science to fiction, Méléra seems certain to have the upper hand over Woolf's theories, although she in fact clearly mistakes the tone and the subtle interplay of reality and fiction in the essay. While Méléra's reading can be seen as the first of a long sequence of contributions in its failure to grasp the tongue-in-cheek and fictional character of Woolf's essay, her allegations against feminism do not seem to fare well from our modern perspective. As a matter of fact, the French reviewer will go so far as to say that the essay was received well only because critics have contented themselves with seeing the "excellent" parts of the text – "the work's form, the author's brilliant verve" – without, however, "blaming what is less good": "they thought it unnecessary to give her an earful and so arouse that nervous daughter of the British lion: the suffragist cat." (ibid.).⁶² The French term for 'cat' used by Méléra here is *chatte*, the feminine form of *chat* (cat) and a derogatory term for women. The fact that Woolf was not exactly a suffragist and even went so far as to state, in the very text Méléra is reviewing, that "Of the two – the vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important" (*AROO* 29) seems to escape the reviewer. Voicing her anti-feminist

⁶¹ "First of all, there is no proof that the male brain has developed over the last three thousand years, or that Mr. G. B. Shaw has a better head than Plato. 'Acquired characteristics,' as scientists say, 'cannot be transmitted'. In obedience to mysterious laws, a child, whether male or female, can inherit the shape of his or her brain and that of his or her nose equally from his or her father or mother, or from distant ancestors."

⁶² The original reads: "Ces juges se sont contentés de louer ici l'excellent : la forme de l'ouvrage, la brillante verve de l'auteur, sans blâmer le moins bon. Ils trouvent inutile, en lui tirant une oreille, d'éveiller peut-être cette fille nerveuse du lion britannique : la chatte suffragiste."

sentiment, Méléra claims that feminism is “more dangerous than bolshevism” because, with its egalitarian ambitions, it has “thrown women into a bitter struggle in which their bodies go haywire; it loads them with work harder than the slavery of yesteryear” (ibid.).⁶³

On 23 October 1933, in a completely different newspaper which had become a daily by this time, namely *Notre temps*, Marcelle Auclair provided a much more positive take on *A Room* by making it communicate with current affairs: while the title “La femme a acquis le droit à la solitude” (“Woman has acquired the right to solitude”) has more than a Woolfian undertone, the sub-title “Ce sont les femmes et non les hommes qui ont inventé les vacances conjugales” (“It is women and not men who have invented conjugal holidays”) clearly points to more recent events (Auclair 1933). *A Room*, which Auclair interestingly decides to render as “Une chambre pour soi seule” (literally, “A room all for herself”), is an important text for the author of the article, as it asserts women’s right to solitude. As Auclair powerfully pleads:

Notre infériorité, notre malheur, prétend, dans sa défense, Virginia Woolf, c’est que nous autres pauvres femmes nous n’avons jamais une chambre pour nous seule, une chambre où travailler, une chambre où ne rien faire si le cœur nous en dit, mais où nous puissions demeurer seule [sic], en paix, un endroit respecté où l’on ne nous dérange pas... (Ibid.)⁶⁴

It is evident how the very notion of the room of one’s own has resonated with Auclair’s feminist demand for independent spaces inside and outside of the house. As she sees the continuation of Woolf’s thought in contemporary France, Auclair will conclude that French women need to draw inspiration from Britain, where, in her account, “conjugal holidays” are in vogue: man and wife go on separate holidays so as to come back home refreshed, with new topics to discuss. While a man travelling alone gets bored, Auclair concludes, a woman travelling alone “stretches and rests” (“s’étire et se repose”, ibid.).

A cursory look at these two reviews of *A Room of One’s Own* show how polarised the debate on feminism could be in France, too. While Méléra’s scathing review is proudly antifeminist and seems to be incapable of understanding the subtle textual

⁶³ “Mais que nous veut le féminisme moderne, plus dangereux que le bolchevisme ? En prétendant les faire égaux l’homme dans tous les domaines, il a jeté les femmes dans une âpre lutte où se détraque leur organisme ; il les charge de travaux plus durs que l’esclavage d’antan”.

⁶⁴ “Our inferiority, our misfortune, Virginia Woolf claims in her defence, is that we poor women never have a room to ourselves, a room in which to work, a room in which to do nothing if we feel like it, but in which we can remain alone, in peace, a respected place where we are not disturbed...”

strategies deployed by Woolf in her 1929 essay, thereby perceiving her tone to be too much on the side of fiction and the partiality of women's suffrage, Auclair provides a diametrically opposed example of how *A Room* could resonate with the experience of French women across the Channel, although she may be regarded to slightly stretch Woolf's arguments so as to make them more appealing to her specific necessities as French woman. On 11 May 1935, Maurois will also mention Woolf's 1929 essay in an article dedicated to the last 25 years of English literature in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, but he will refrain from voicing feminist or antifeminist concerns (cf. Maurois 1935).

Like Woolf in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924), Maurois sees in 1910 the watershed for a new era of English literature, but, unlike Woolf in "Modern Fiction" (1925), he does not feel any antipathy for Edwardian writers like H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett – and in Maurois' case, George Bernard Shaw is also numbered among this generation. As a matter of fact, Maurois goes so far as to hold these authors up as "iconoclasts" who have "called into question all certainty" (ibid.). Where Woolf's and Maurois' theses seem to dovetail is in recognising that Edwardian writers are staunchly reformist and thus, as Maurois aptly phrases it, "if they claim to be heretics with regard to ancient beliefs, it is because they proclaim themselves to be the followers of future religions" ("s'ils se disent hérétiques quant aux croyances anciennes, c'est qu'ils se proclament les fidèles des religions futures"; ibid.). In section c, which Maurois devotes to the "prodigious flowering of novelists" ("floraison prodigieuse des romanciers"; ibid.), he also mentions in passing some of the most important women writers of those times: "Virginia Woolf, May Sinclair, Victoria [sic] Sackville-West, Rose Macaulay, Dorothy Richardson, Rebecca West, Rosamund [sic] Lehmann, and naturally Katherine Mansfield" (ibid.). "On the causes of this astonishing abundance of female talent in modern England," Maurois quickly adds, "it is interesting to read Virginia Woolf's fine essay: *A Room of One's Own*"⁶⁵: far from being an 'arrantly' feminist essay as Méléra suggests, Woolf's 1929 text is representative of its time, articulating as it does the rise to prominence of English women writers. *A Room*, in Maurois' reference, is the voice of a generation, as it embodies in essayistic form the independent space which patriarchal ideology has denied women. Ironically, the fact that Maurois only reserves a small space to these 'important' women writers in an

⁶⁵ "Sur les causes de cette étonnante abondance de talents féminins dans l'Angleterre moderne, il est intéressant de lire le bel essai de Virginia Woolf : *A room of one's own*".

article surveying the last 25 years of English literature also shows how that independence could be a double-edged sword: by being created as a separate category, these “women”, as Maurois introduces them, may be deemed to be reduced to their sex and gender, thereby reinforcing Woolf’s and Beauvoir’s intuitions about the ‘second sex’.

Although much more work needs to be done on French periodicals and their reviews of *A Room* or other Woolf works, these three reviews in which *A Room* appears between 1930 and 1935 suggest that even before it was translated into French, the essay was able to travel – though not unaltered – across the Channel. Regardless of whether Beauvoir may have heard of it through the grapevine – perhaps through a friend who was preparing for the 1930 *agrégation de l’enseignement secondaire des jeunes filles* – or may have read about it in Maurois’ reference to it *Les Nouvelles littéraires* or in other periodicals in the next decade or so, she was still the first person to discuss it in more detail in a philosophical essay devoted to the subject of women. In fact, Beauvoir seems to be the first author or critic to discuss *A Room* at length *in book form* in France, as even Delattre’s 1932 monograph on Woolf will come short of devoting enough space to the 1929 essay.

As already noted by Rigeade, Delattre in his 1932 study had not even listed *A Room of One’s Own* among Woolf’s works: the essay was simply mentioned in Chapter 11, which turned on ‘contextual’ information so as to give a sense of her as a literary writer (cf. Rigeade 2014: 73). As Rigeade goes on to point out, Beauvoir plays a vital role in the French discovery of feminist Woolf, but what seems to be lacking in Rigeade’s contributions is the historical understanding that Antoinette Fouque’s *Psych et Po* and the publisher *des femmes* were far from being the ‘leaders’ of the MLF, as was suggested in Section 1.1. What Rigeade is right to point out, however, is the coincidence between Clara Malraux’s existential trajectory and Woolf’s feminist arguments in the text:

Épouse effacée de Malraux, vivant dans son ombre de 1921 à 1937, elle s’affirme dans la Résistance, puis avec ses premiers articles pour la revue *Confluences* en 1942, ses traductions de l’allemand et de l’anglais après la guerre et la rédaction de ses mémoires en six tomes [...]. La femme Clara Malraux devenait ainsi la garantie de la valeur de la traduction de cet essai ; s’étant émancipée de l’emprise d’un

mari, elle pouvait comprendre la thèse de Woolf et, par conséquent, bien la traduire. (Ibid., p. 73)⁶⁶

Indeed, Rigeade highlights how this biographical background informed Malraux's translation practice in that she "thus saturates Woolf's text with the feminine, translating [...] a context as much as a text, but this time to pull it towards the affirmation of the feminine against the masculine" (ibid., p. 74).⁶⁷ Like Auclair, then, Malraux chooses to amplify the contemporary resonances of the text she receives from Britain, perhaps at the expense of a more 'faithful' textual rendition.

This kind of translation practice, whereby texts are read and rendered as "stage[s] on which the war of the sexes rages" (Rigeade 2021: 374), will also be present in the first translation of *Three Guineas* by Viviane Forrester for the publisher des femmes, and similar starkly oppositional conceptions of the gender binary inform, in Rigeade's understanding, the plethora of biographical accounts of Woolf in France in the same period. For this reason, Rigeade defines this second stage not so much a feminist recovery and revision as a feminist "idolisation" which rests on "a religious adoration of Virginia Woolf's persona and work" and which may dangerously lead, as in the case of the protagonist of Cécile Wajsbrot's biofiction *Une Vie à soi* (1982), to a "deadly fascination" (ibid., p. 375f.) – one that, in Rigeade's reading, not only kills the protagonist but also all authorial ambitions to create 'a style of one's own'. Thus, feminist idolisation seems to instrumentalise Woolf to bring her closer to the ideological necessities of Psych et Po at a time when feminists were looking for 'mothers of thought' that could help them create a space for women's organisation as well as their discussion and deconstruction of patriarchy, and the contemporary Italian case of the Milan-based Libreria delle donne so perceptively expounded by Elisa Bolchi seems to go in the same direction (cf. Bolchi 2021).⁶⁸ That Woolf's feminism evades – or at any rate survives and surpasses – this attempt to instrumentalise it has been argued most

⁶⁶ "The self-effacing wife of Malraux, living in his shadow from 1921 to 1937, she asserted herself in the Resistance, then with her first articles for the journal *Confluences* in 1942, her translations from German and English after the war and the writing of her memoirs in six volumes [...]. The woman Clara Malraux thus became the guarantee of the value of the translation of this essay; having emancipated herself from the grip of a husband, she was able to understand Woolf's thesis and, consequently, to translate it well."

⁶⁷ "sature donc de féminin le texte de Woolf, traduisant [...] un contexte autant qu'un texte, mais pour le tirer cette fois du côté de l'affirmation du féminin contre le masculin".

⁶⁸ It ought to be noted, however, that in the Italian case, Woolf's fiction, unlike, say, Gertrude Stein's, was perceived to be far removed from a feminism of difference because of a patriarchal rendition of *To the Lighthouse* these Milanese feminists used in their reading group.

convincingly by Laura Marcus and Valérie Favre (cf. Marcus 2010; Favre 2020), and the next section will return to this issue in reference to Beauvoir's instrumentalisation – albeit in a completely different direction – of Woolf's feminism in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

What remains to be noted here is the third and last point of contact between Woolf in France and Beauvoir, namely their life-writing. As was hinted in the opening of this chapter, Woolf's posthumously published *A Writer's Diary* appeared in 1953, and a French translation was published for the Éditions du Rocher in April 1958, just a few months before Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* appeared in France. While the latter text was published on 6 October 1958, a look at Beauvoir's unpublished diary reveals, as was mentioned above, that on 25 May 1958 she was reading Woolf's diary, which means that Beauvoir may have been inspired by Woolf's autobiographical writings when she was finalising the draft of her first autobiographical volume. *Moments of Being*, published in England in 1977, came out in France in the following year, which shows how long a way Woolf's stature had come in the meantime, but Beauvoir's own autobiographical project had already come to a close by that date, as the last of her memoirs, *Tout compte fait*, was published in 1972.⁶⁹ Thus, the three points of contact between Woolf and Beauvoir stretch over modernism, feminism, and life-writing: first, Woolf's textual haunting of Beauvoir as a young philosophy student at the Sorbonne and possibly after her *agrégation* in the early 1930s; secondly, Beauvoir preparing France to welcome Woolf's feminism in the late 1940s; thirdly, their autobiographical projects coming paradoxically and even uncannily together in the late 1950s. Sadly, of the three points of contact, (Beauvoir's) life-writing will get short shrift in this thesis because my interest lies more firmly within an understanding of English literature from a transnational and transdisciplinary perspective, and given the material limitations imposed upon doctoral research, I have had to sacrifice the 'French literature' part of the thesis to better explore what is more evidently within the remit of 'English studies'.

⁶⁹ Although the Pléiade edition of Beauvoir's "mémoires" also includes *La Cérémonie des adieux* (1981) and *Une mort très douce* (1964) – the latter of which at any rate predates *Tout compte fait* – these two texts are not, strictly speaking, "mémoires" as each of them focuses on one specific person (Sartre and Beauvoir's mother respectively).

In order to better situate Beauvoir's reading of Woolf, some main tendencies in French Woolf scholarship will be highlighted, especially as they contrast to Anglo-American approaches. In her helpful 2002 commentary of the *état présent* of Woolf studies in France, Carole Rodier indicates where the cultural difference between Anglo-American criticism and French scholarship lies, namely "the [French] overuse of critical tools in a desperate attempt to grasp the meaning(s) of [Woolf's] works": "Whereas Anglo-American criticism emphasizes the historical and social contexts, the French reception of Woolf has historically taken the form of a quest for textual autonomy, whereby her works fly free of any deterministic notion of literature" (Rodier 2002: 39). An Anglo-French conference, "Virginia Woolf and the Body", held at the Maison Française d'Oxford in March 1999, confirms her intuition about the different critical stances of the French and the English:

The English give priority to contextual elements (whether political, the context of the World Wars, or cultural, the work of Woolf's contemporaries) whereas the French tend to focus more on textual elements (the representations of the body in Woolf's texts) and to depoliticize Woolf. (Ibid., p. 42)

She then points to a vast array of French intellectuals – besides Beauvoir, reference is made to Kristeva, Sarraute, Blanchot, Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – who have been (or were) in dialogue with Woolf's works, before suggesting that there is also a pervasive emotional – as opposed to intellectual – response to Woolf in France.

Interestingly, Rodier's view of the differences between Anglo-American Woolf criticism and its French counterpart turns on its head the thesis advanced by Rita Felski in relation to modernism and modernist studies whereby in countries like France, Germany, Italy, and Russia, "the formal experimentation of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century artistic movements was frequently linked to an explicit social agenda by both practitioners and critics: radical aesthetics was intimately intertwined with avant-garde politics" (Felski 1995: 23). In contrast, in Anglo-American criticism the prominence of the New Critics led to the idea that modernism was, in Felski's words, "in opposition to sociopolitical concerns, as critics have invoked the subtleties of modernist experimentation to defend an ideal of the autonomous, self-referential art object" (ibid.). Although this may have been true of the heyday of New Criticism, the previous section has shown how pivotal feminist reinterpretations of Woolf have been in the field, so much so that a reversal of tendency may now be seen in Anglo-American

criticism. French Woolf seems, in this sense, to have anticipated certain tenets of the revision of modernism as a radical, highly politicised time in literary history because its own national literature turned upon more radical ideas about the potential of (avantgarde) literature, only to succumb at a later stage to the supposedly universal – read patriarchal – idea of culture that New Critics promoted: while Anglo-American Woolf went from neglect to aesthetics to politics, French Woolf seems to go from politics to aesthetics and translation and finally, as will be shown below, back to politics. What unites these traditions, Felski goes on to argue, is “their largely uncritical reproduction of a masculine – and often overtly masculinist – literary lineage that has come under scrutiny from feminist scholars” (ibid., p. 24) since the 1970s.

The first major focal point for the academic reception of Woolf in France is the first international symposium on Woolf (and Bloomsbury), attended by scholars from France and the Anglosphere. The event took place at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1974 and was aptly titled “Virginia Woolf et le groupe de Bloomsbury” (“Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group”). Interestingly, the latter term was described, “like existentialism”, as a “vague, inconsistent term, that should be scratched from any serious critical vocabulary” (Caws 2002: 62; cf. Guiguet 1977: 17).⁷⁰ For obvious patriarchal reasons, at the time existentialism was seen to coincide with the theories of Sartre, Camus and Gabriel Marcel, while Beauvoir occupied, as is to be expected of the 1970s, an ancillary position in the existentialist canon.⁷¹ Existentialist philosophy was still discussed and, arguably, very much in vogue at the time in France, so much so that Beauvoir and Sartre were invited to a conference at the Mutualité Theatre in Paris in 1964 titled “Que peut la littérature ?” (“What can literature do?”), where, alongside the Spanish

⁷⁰ For a longer account of the symposium, cf. Caws 2002: 61-4.

⁷¹ As was pointed out above, Beauvoir came to have a less marginal role in the history of philosophy thanks to the work of feminist critics, who from the (late) 1980s onwards have explored her theories with a more generous and generative approach than their predecessors did. To mention but a few recent examples, Jonathan Webber in his *Rethinking Existentialism* (2018) also considers Beauvoir’s philosophy alongside Sartre’s, Fanon’s, and Camus’s, stating in no uncertain terms that at a later stage “Sartre had adopted Beauvoir’s [theories]” and these should be regarded as “definitive of existentialism” (Webber 2018: viii). Cf. Feron 2021, who anthologises and provides a useful commentary on Beauvoir’s philosophical essays within a series of Les éditions sociales, “Les propédeutiques”, dedicated to important (leftist) philosophers of the likes of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, and Rosa Luxemburg. Cf. also Kail 2006, who is the first French philosopher to dedicate a monograph to Beauvoir as a philosopher for the prestigious Presses Universitaires de France. Mickaëlle Provost’s more recent research also points to a ‘transatlantic existentialism’ which would expand the existentialist canon beyond national boundaries, to include the works of Richard Wright and W. E. B. DuBois (cf. Provost 2021).

expatriate writer Jorge Semprún, they embodied the ‘committed literature’ (*littérature engagée*) position facing the relatively new tendency of the New Novel (*nouveau roman*), represented in that context by Pierre Faye and Jean Ricardou, accompanied by writer and editor Yves Berger.⁷² Guiguet’s comparison between Bloomsbury and existentialism may also be explained by the fact that the critic had produced a Sartrean study of Woolf, *Virginia Woolf et son oeuvre. L’Art et la quête du Réel* (1962), which, as Rodier highlights, marked “a major turning-point in Woolfian criticism, inaugurating a series of outstanding and original studies” (Rodier 2002: 41). His monograph was so well received in France that it was published by Harcourt in an English translation by Jean Stewart in 1965. Needless to say, although Woolf’s feminism was very much acknowledged and examined by Guiguet, Beauvoir, unlike Sartre, does not feature in the text as a fundamental critical source. At any rate, this reference to existentialism within a symposium dedicated to Woolf and Bloomsbury in 1974, at a time when Beauvoir and Sartre were starting to lose their primacy in literary and philosophical circles, is certainly quite telling.

The second major focal point for an overview of the French reception of Woolf is to be found in the foundation of the Société d’Études Woolfiennes (SEW) in 1996 by Christine Reynier and Carole Rodier, then joined by Catherine Bernard and Catherine Lanone (cf. Rodier 2002: 41). The French society, unlike its British and Italian counterparts, is purely academic and does not traditionally engage in events that try to make Woolf more accessible for the general public. Even before the establishment of the SEW, the academic reception of Woolf by and large followed three critical tendencies, in Rodier’s understanding: “Woolf appears mostly to be read through the prism of narratology, psychoanalysis and phenomenology. They are today the principal contexts in which Woolf’s works are being most innovatively explored” (Rodier 2002: 43). As was suggested above in reference to Marie Allègre’s work as well as to the U.S. construction of ‘French feminism’, psychoanalysis in France has enjoyed a renewed surge of interest thanks to the work of Lacan and ‘French feminist’ philosophers like

⁷² A publication with the six interventions came out in 1965, and Beauvoir’s contribution is now available in the original French in Lecarme-Tabone and Jeannelle 2012: 335-9. An English translation may be found in *The Useless Mouths and Other Literary Writings*, edited by Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmermann for the Beauvoir Series of the University of Illinois Press (*OLW* 189-209), with an introduction and notes by Laura Hengehold. A retranslation by Chris Fleming was published in 2020 in *The Journal of Continental Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 17-27, and the translator also provided an ample and useful commentary on the text.

Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous, which has meant that, as Rodier aptly remarks, “Feminist or gender-orientated readings take place within and are subsumed into the psychoanalytical approach” (ibid.). As the critic rightly concludes, “All these readings reflect the widespread preoccupation with the nature of the human subject” (ibid.), a preoccupation which this thesis shares and will expand upon in Chapter 2.

While it may have been true in the early 2000s that France, unlike Britain or the United States, tended to refrain from politicising Woolf’s works, intent as it was on examining her ‘purely aesthetic’ quality, it could be argued that from 2002 the cultural climate in France started to integrate more political topics and methods like feminism and gender studies even beyond the long shadow cast by psychoanalysis. Frédéric Regard’s *La Force du féminin* (2002) certainly inaugurated a series of studies of Woolf’s feminism and feminism’s Woolf, so much so that twenty years later, during the annual SEW conference in Brest, a roundtable with the author was organised, with the participation of Olivier Hercend, Anne Besnault, and Marie-Dominique Garnier, in order to illuminate how that text and the feminist context it derived from – Hélène Cixous’s doctoral supervision of Regard’s thesis (on William Golding) at the Université de Paris VIII – came at a time when in France the spectre of gender studies as a discipline was far from being acknowledged and valued. That this path-breaking essay on Woolf’s feminism should appear under the (indirect) aegis of Cixous – despite her own resistance to Woolf, as recalled by Regard during the roundtable – is yet another welcome sign of the disruptive forces of time: by a sort of historical irony, ‘French feminism’ guaranteed, as was suggested earlier, the dismissal of Beauvoir’s thought as dated in France while at the same time it was being adapted in Britain and the United States to make room for the very feminist writer whom Beauvoir had contributed to introducing to France.⁷³

However, unlike what happened in the Anglo-American context, where Woolf was (partly) revised thanks to ‘French feminist’ theory, in France, as Nicolas Pierre Boileau pointed out in his introduction to the Feminist Woolf section of *Études britanniques contemporaines* in 2020, “the enduring influence of ‘écriture féminine’, psychoanalytical theory and close textual reading meant that the more powerfully

⁷³ It is not a coincidence, in this sense, that some of Cixous’s essays were translated into English, collected and commented on by a Woolf scholar and Woolfian writer, Susan Sellers, who subsequently specialised in Cixous’s theories in her scholarship.

political or gender-rethinking perspectives on Woolf’s writing [...] remained on the sidelines” (Boileau 2020a). The Feminist Woolf section of the journal welcomed the insightful articles already mentioned above by Marie Allègre and Valérie Favre (cf. Allègre 2020; Favre 2020), as well as Boileau’s own feminist analysis of *Night and Day* (cf. Boileau 2020b) and Claire Davison’s exploration of non-census feminism between Woolf and composer and militant feminist Ethel Smyth (cf. Davison 2020b). Even in a country so doting upon universal (patriarchal) culture like France – the inscription on the Panthéon in Paris reads “aux grands hommes la patrie reconnaissante” (“to the great men, the fatherland is grateful”)⁷⁴; the feminine form of ‘auteur’, ‘philosophe’ or ‘professeur’, largely in use until the 17th century (cf. Viennot 2014), is now often perceived to be too political a choice for publishers –, then, feminist Woolf seems now to have become an important object of interest.

Situating Woolf and Beauvoir in their respective national traditions and in the context of 20th-century France already shows how intricately linked their intellectual networks were, regardless of whether these connections are direct or mediated through other publishers, translators, authors or critics. The next section of this chapter will expand upon the occurrences of Woolf in Beauvoirian texts in order to shed light on what Beauvoir said or wrote about the English ‘mother’ of second-wave feminisms.

1.4 Virginia Woolf in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) and other Beauvoirian texts

Before delving into *Le Deuxième Sexe* and its reading of Woolf, it is important to map the trajectory followed by Woolf in other texts by Beauvoir. The previous section has shown that three crucial moments may be identified when Woolf is evoked in Beauvoir’s oeuvre: a first spectral phase between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, a

⁷⁴ Not to mention the fact that in the monument to French greatness that is the Panthéon in Paris, only six women (Sophie Berthelot, Marie Curie, Germaine Tillion, Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz, Simone Veil, Joséphine Baker) – out of 81 people – are now buried, i.e. around 0.7% of the total. While the first woman to be buried there was Sophie Berthelot in 1907 – solely as the spouse of a ‘great man’, Marcellin Berthelot –, the rest entered the Panthéon only in very recent times: Marie Curie in 1995, Tillion and de Gaulle-Anthonioz in 2015, Veil in 2017 and Baker in 2021. In a strange, cross-Channel coincidence, six is also the number of women writers who may be found memorialised in the Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey (Fanny Burney, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters who share one spot), but countless other women may be found memorialised elsewhere in the Abbey (Aphra Behn, for instance, as the narrator in *A Room of One’s Own* recalls, is buried “most scandalously but rather appropriately” elsewhere in Westminster Abbey (AROO 50)). This is not to say, however, that the vast majority of personalities remembered in this monument to Britishness are not men.

second feminist phase from the late 1940s to the early 1950s, and a third life-writing phase in the late 1950s. While one particular occurrence of Woolf in *La Force de l'âge* has already been discussed above, a closer look at the rest of Beauvoir's autobiography will reveal some interesting appearances of Woolf in Beauvoirian texts.

In keeping with the idea of a first spectral presence of Woolf in Beauvoir's life and oeuvre until the early 1930s, the first volume of Beauvoir's autobiography, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée (Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter)*, never mentions Woolf – despite, it ought to be recalled, Beauvoir noting in her private diary in 1958, as she was finishing the draft of that text, that she is passionately reading Woolf's posthumously published diary excerpts. The link between the two authors seems thus initially to be only hinted at, much in the same way as their intersections and resonances have been explored in recent scholarship but in broad strokes. It is only in 1960, in *La Force de l'âge (The Prime of Life)*, that Woolf starts to appear in Beauvoir's chronological recollection of her life and times: besides mentioning that she read “all of Woolf” (*FA* 69) probably around 1929-31, Beauvoir references Woolf three times in the second volume of her autobiography.

The first time Woolf is evoked in the text is located at the time when Sartre was doing his military service at the meteorological office in Tours, between 1930 and 1931, and is bound with a debate about the role of literature. In Beauvoir's summary of it, Sartre distanced himself from reality in order to render it in writing because in his view this was the only process whereby the real could be inscribed within the literary without losing its power over us: much in the same way as phenomenological reduction works, fixing reality in sentences entails, in Sartre's view, the production of a “disembodied form” (“forme désincarnée”, *FA* 54) of the experience that steers clear of the personality of the author. In contrast, Beauvoir is fondly described by Sartre – whose account is in turn related by Beauvoir in this text – as going into trances when she observes reality, so much so that she is then incapable of reproducing that reality faithfully in words. To Sartre's view, Beauvoir opposes the idea that “words retain reality only after they have assassinated it; they let escape what is most important in it: its presence” (“les mots ne retiennent la réalité qu'après l'avoir assassinée ; ils laissent échapper ce qu'il y a en elle de plus important : sa présence”; *FA* 54). It is for this reason, Beauvoir relates, that she was “very directly concerned by Virginia Woolf's reflections on language in general and

the novel in particular” (“très directement concernée par les réflexions de Virginia Woolf sur le langage en général et sur le roman en particulier”; *FA* 54):

Soulignant la distance qui sépare les livres de la vie, elle semblait escompter que l’invention de nouvelles techniques permettrait de la réduire ; je souhaitais la croire. Mais non ! Son plus récent ouvrage, *Mrs. Dalloway*, n’apportait nulle solution au problème qu’elle soulevait. (*FA* 54-5)⁷⁵

While her reference to *Mrs Dalloway* as the “latest work” by Woolf suggests that others have come before it, a statement which does not ring true if she was only considering the French translations of Woolf’s novels, *Mrs Dalloway* was by no means the latest novel published by Woolf in England in 1930. Neither was it the latest novel published in France or even by Stock, as *La Promenade au phare* came out right after *Mrs Dalloway*, as Table 1 shows.⁷⁶ There must be a mistake here, but it could be argued that this mistake hints at the fact that Beauvoir was probably referring to the French editions of Woolf’s novels rather than the Hogarth Press volumes, which confirms the suspicion that at least initially – and of course with the exception of *A Room of One’s Own* – she was reading Woolf in translation. The fact that she references Woolf’s reflections on language and on the novel alerts us however to Beauvoir’s awareness, perhaps, of Woolf’s essays, most of which had appeared in British periodicals rather than in book form by this time, with the notable exception of the first volume of *The Common Reader* (1925).⁷⁷ For the moment it seems as if Beauvoir definitely read Woolf’s novels in French translation but possibly had access to Woolf’s essays in the original, because of the lack of French renditions of these texts until the early 1960s.

Speculations aside, it is the question of form that preoccupies Beauvoir (and Sartre) in the passage where she references Woolf for the first time in her autobiographical writings. In this passage, it seems as if Beauvoir is dissatisfied with Woolf’s experimentation, as represented in particular by the novel *Mrs Dalloway*: if the

⁷⁵ “Pointing out the distance between books and life, she seemed to hope that the invention of new techniques would reduce it; I wanted to believe her. But no! Her most recent book, *Mrs. Dalloway*, did not solve the problem she was raising.”

⁷⁶ It is possible, however, that Beauvoir had just read *Mrs Dalloway* in Lanoire’s translation but *Promenade au phare* had not come out yet – sadly, the dates of publication are often very hard to ascertain, and it is even more difficult to deduce what month Beauvoir had in mind in her autobiography.

⁷⁷ By 1960, when *La Force de l’âge* was published, the second series of *The Common Reader* (1932) had come out, as well as three posthumous collections of essays selected by Leonard Woolf: *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), and *Granite and Rainbow* (1958). None of these collections had been published in French translation by 1960, so if Beauvoir had read any of these essays, she had done so in the original English, as she read *A Room of One’s Own*.

British author has perhaps asked the right questions about how best to represent reality in fiction and her novels may be regarded as some concrete possibilities of doing so, then, Beauvoir contends, *Mrs Dalloway* does not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem. One may wonder whether the rest of her novels could satisfy Beauvoir in her search for a better representation of reality, and this is the question that will form the background of Chapter 3, where three novels by Woolf – *Orlando*, *The Waves*, *Between the Acts* – will be examined in the light of the previous theoretical articulations.⁷⁸

The other references to Woolf in the same volume of her autobiography confirm that Woolf is equated in Beauvoir's mind with modernist experimentation. Apart from a quick mention of Woolf in one of Sartre's letters where he quotes Woolf in saying that the (chestnut) tree is 'something other than the real thing' ("autre chose que ce qu'il est", *FA* 139), a tree that will come to play an important role in *La Nausée*, the other reference to Woolf comes in the third chapter, when Beauvoir reports that she and Sartre are keeping up with the latest publications in France. She recounts that "two names stood out for us in the year" ("deux noms marquèrent pour nous l'année"; *FA* 240), Faulkner and Kafka – both of whom they read in translation. The literary innovations of these two writers were anticipated, in Beauvoir's view, by "Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway, and some others," who "had rejected the false objectivity of the realist novel to deliver the world through subjectivities" ("avaient refusé la fausse objectivité du roman réaliste pour livrer le monde à travers des subjectivités"; *FA* 240-1). This means that Woolf was at the centre – though clearly in a more marginal place than Faulkner and Kafka – of Beauvoir's preoccupation with the novel genre and its historical developments in the present. It is not, as emerged from a look at the *Cahiers de jeunesse* and *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, an 'emotional' attachment to Woolf that shapes Beauvoir's understanding of her and herself; on the contrary, it is the intellectual, creative potential of Woolf's experimentation that generates interest in Beauvoir as a reader and as a fiction writer in the making.

Indeed, in a foreword she wrote to Gisèle Freund and Verna B. Carleton's *James Joyce in Paris: His Final Years* (1965), Beauvoir states that she read *Ulysses* in

⁷⁸ As was pointed out above, Beauvoir mentions *Orlando* in the 1965 Paris Review but never really comments on it. *The Waves* is also mentioned in the same interview, and two passages are cited directly in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, but, unlike what happens with *Mrs Dalloway*, Beauvoir refrains from articulating a broader criticism of the novel itself. *Between the Acts* is never even mentioned by Beauvoir.

translation and that this novel paved the way for her reading of “a world of foreign writers: D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway. Dos Passos; Faulkner, who completely changed our conception of what a novel should be; and Kafka, who transformed our view of the world” (*ESdB* 418).⁷⁹ *Ulysses*, as is known, was originally published in English by Shakespeare & Company in Paris in 1922, but for its first translation French readers had to wait until 1929, when Auguste Morel, aided by Stuart Gilbert, rendered it in French, and Valery Larbaud and Joyce himself revised the translation completely before having it published by La Maison des amis des livres, Adrienne Monnier’s bookshop, library and publishing house. As Beauvoir recalls in the same foreword, this was a place very much in vogue among intellectuals and authors, whether French or Anglo-American, and she frequently borrowed books from Monnier’s lending library for her studies or to keep up with the latest publications of her time.⁸⁰

The emphasis on Woolf as an experimental writer of novels is confirmed in *Tout compte fait (All Said and Done)*, the final volume of Beauvoir’s autobiography, where a reference to Woolf closes the text. This passage is worth reporting in full here not only for the scope of this thesis but also for the sheer lyrical beauty of the extract. As Beauvoir thinks back on her identification with Jo March from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-9) and with Maggie Tulliver from George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) when she was 14, she concedes that, unlike Alcott and Eliot, she never wrote a *Bildungsroman* (“roman d’apprentissage”; *TCF* 513) because she was at a remove from her past when she was in her 20s. She then adds that later she tried to “tell my story, endowing my experience with a necessity” (“me raconter, dotant mon expérience d’une nécessité”; *ibid.*),⁸¹ before stating what follows.

⁷⁹ “un monde d’écrivains étrangers : D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway. Dos Passos ; Faulkner, qui modifia complètement notre conception de ce qu’un roman devait être ; et Kafka, qui transforma notre vision du monde”. I have translated this passage from French because it was collected and then translated into French by Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier in 1979.

⁸⁰ While Woolf’s fundamental contribution to the publishing world of her time has been the object of sustained critical attention, particularly in relation to The Hogarth Press (cf. Southworth 2010), Beauvoir’s role in the publishing industry has never quite been addressed in the existing scholarship. Besides writing forewords for books and directing with Sartre the French magazine *Les Temps modernes* until their death, Beauvoir also consistently read, commented on, edited, and introduced to publishers manuscripts penned by authors like Violette Leduc. For a collection of her contributions to periodicals as well as her forewords to other people’s texts in France and elsewhere, cf. *ESdB* 275-592.

⁸¹ It is important to notice that in French the text reads, literally, ‘tell myself’.

Sartre m'a dit un jour qu'il n'avait pas l'impression d'avoir écrit les livres qu'il souhaitait écrire à douze ans. « Mais après tout, pourquoi privilégierait-on l'enfant de douze ans ? » a-t-il ajouté. Mon cas est différent du sien. Certes, il est bien difficile de confronter un projet vague et infini avec une œuvre réalisée et limitée. Mais je ne sens pas de hiatus entre les intentions qui m'ont poussée à faire des livres et les livres que j'ai faits. Je n'ai pas été une virtuose de l'écriture. Je n'ai pas, comme Virginia Woolf, Proust, Joyce, ressuscité le chatoiement des sensations et capté dans des mots le monde extérieur. Mais tel n'était pas mon dessein. Je voulais me faire exister pour les autres en leur communiquant, de la manière la plus directe, le goût de ma propre vie ; j'y ai à peu près réussi. J'ai de solides ennemis, mais je me suis aussi fait parmi mes lecteurs beaucoup d'amis. Je ne désirais rien d'autre. (Ibid.)⁸²

That of Beauvoir is the position of an intellectual looking back on her life and realising that everything she wrote was not, all in all, too far from what she was hoping to do when, as a teenager, she fantasised – with Jo March and Maggie Tulliver by her side – about becoming a published author. However far removed one's goals and one's literary achievements may be from each other, Beauvoir comments, she is happy with the way things have worked out in her life as an author: she has made enemies and friends, she has reached the hearts and the houses of many readers, and that is all that she desired.

Woolf, along with Proust and Joyce, is only introduced here as an example of what Beauvoir never hoped to be: literally, a “virtuosa of writing”, where writing may perhaps be interpreted in this context as ‘narrative form’.⁸³ There is thus a difference that Beauvoir perceives between her own writing and that of Woolf: the question of literary form, of stylistic experimentation. Woolf's writing and Beauvoir's, as the latter author candidly admits here, may be distinguished in aesthetic, formal terms as a sort of

⁸² “Sartre once told me that he didn't feel he had written the books he wanted to write when he was twelve. ‘But after all, why should we favour the twelve-year-old?’ he added. My case is different from his. Of course, it is very difficult to compare a vague and infinite project with a completed and limited work. But I don't feel a gap between the intentions that led me to write books and the books I have written. I have not been a virtuosa writer. I have not, like Virginia Woolf, Proust, Joyce, resurrected the shimmer of sensations and captured the outside world in words. But that was not my aim. I wanted to make myself exist for others by communicating to them, in the most direct way, the taste of my own life; I have more or less succeeded. I have strong enemies, but I have also made many friends among my readers. I wanted nothing else.”

⁸³ Beauvoir will repeat this formula, speaking of herself and Woolf, verbatim in an interview with Sartre for a documentary about her life, directed by Josée Dayan, in 1979. Two extracts from the film as well as a presentation of it on French television, are now available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp4msXDd7eM&ab_channel=INASTars [last accessed 05/01/2023 at 18.22]; the sentence comes around 24:36.

well-wrought, experimental style (Woolf) versus a more linear and perhaps transparent one (Beauvoir); while Woolf was in search of the perfect word, the perfect sentence, the perfect way of representing life, or ‘the real thing’ as she often termed it, Beauvoir refrained from doing something similar and aimed instead at reaching readers in a more transparent and direct manner.

What Beauvoir fails to notice here is the fact that much like Woolf, she too was interested in representing subjectivity, in finding the plurality of one’s self in others and that of others in one’s self. While Beauvoir’s style may often read as far more traditionally realist than Woolf’s – with the exception perhaps of “Monologue”, where the syntax is broken up in a very (post)modernist fashion to mirror the protagonist’s mental breakdown –, in terms of ambition it could be argued that both authors – not only as feminists, but also and perhaps fundamentally as *intellectuals* – shared an interest in representing subjectivity more faithfully, more internally, as it were, than others – though of course their cases are not unique in literary history. Chapter 2 will elaborate on this suggestion and will attempt to read Beauvoir and Woolf together in their theories on literature as a site of intercorporeal communication, as a language of the body and of subjectivity, or, as Beauvoir would call it in 1964 echoing Proust, literature as “the privileged place of intersubjectivity” (*OLW* 194; “le lieu privilégié de l’intersubjectivité”, Lecarme-Tabone and Jeannelle 2012: 337).

In the second volume of *La Force des choses* (*Force of Circumstance*, 1963), Woolf only appears in passing. The first time, it is in an entry dated “Friday 13 June”, probably in 1959, as Beauvoir mentions Geneviève Gennari’s little book on her, published in that year, and because she is re-reading her *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* while considering writing “the sequel to this autobiography” (“la suite de cette autobiographie”; *FCII* 183). In the same entry, Beauvoir writes: “J’ai emprunté à V. Leduc le *Virginia Woolf* de Monique Nathan ; je voulais regarder de nouveau, après avoir lu son journal, les extraordinaires visages de cette femme – quel visage solitaire !” (*FCII* 183).⁸⁴ This same remark will be made by Beauvoir in the 1965 Paris Review interview, right after stating that she is one of the women writers who has interested her most. In both cases, it seems as if reading Woolf makes Beauvoir want to observe her through photographs, in order to establish perhaps a visual intimacy.

⁸⁴ “I’ve borrowed from Violette Leduc Monique Nathan’s *Virginia Woolf*; after reading her diary, I wanted to watch again the extraordinary faces of this woman – what a lonely face!”

This idea of a search for intimacy with Woolf is reinforced later on in *La Force des choses*, when she recalls meeting André Maurois, who, as we saw, was one of the very few French members of Bloomsbury and acted as a cultural mediator for the publication of Woolf's novels by Stock. As Beauvoir recalls: "Après le dîner, je me trouvais dans un coin du salon, avec Maurois. J'espérais qu'il me parlerait de Virginia Woolf qu'il a connue ; mais la conversation n'a pas pris" (*FCII* 272).⁸⁵ A similar interest in Woolf's intimate world is evidenced in Beauvoir's reading of Quentin Bell's biography of his aunt to Sartre when the latter's health was deteriorating in the 1970s, as she recalls in *La Cérémonie des adieux* (*Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, 1981): alongside more overtly political works like Antonio Gramsci's writings, a report on Chile, and the latest issues of *Les Temps modernes*, Beauvoir reads a study of surrealism and dreams, and Bell's biography to Sartre (*CDA* 98). This supports our view that Beauvoir was very much interested in reconstructing the existential details of Woolf's life and was very often attuned to the latest publications (in French) of or on Woolf.

Although the theoretical arguments advanced in the 1970 essay *La Vieillesse* (*Old Age*) lie outside of the temporal confines of this thesis, there is a reference to Woolf's suicide that is worth reporting here in order to give a complete overview of what Beauvoir made of Woolf throughout her life. After recounting H. G. Wells' experiences in old age, Beauvoir seems to reproduce the somewhat dated observations that were made by the British press about Woolf's suicide:

Un tel désespoir peut conduire au suicide. Virginia Woolf qui vivait en marge de la politique, dans un cercle de privilégiés, fut atterrée par la déclaration de guerre et par les bombardements de Londres : à 58 ans, elle ne put survivre à l'éclatement de son univers. À plus forte raison, si une vieille personne se sent menacée par la conjuncture, elle pensera que pour elle la partie est perdue, la lutte vaine, et que le mieux est d'en finir. En France, ce sont surtout des Juifs âgés qui se tuèrent quand le pays fut occupé. (*LV* 439)⁸⁶

⁸⁵ "After dinner, I found myself in a corner of the salon with Maurois. I was hoping he would talk to me about Virginia Woolf, whom he met, but the conversation didn't take off."

⁸⁶ "Such despair can lead to suicide. Virginia Woolf, who lived on the fringes of politics, in a privileged circle, was appalled by the declaration of war and the bombing of London: at 58, she could not survive the shattering of her world. Even more so, if an old person feels threatened by an historical conjuncture, he or she will think that the game is lost, the struggle futile, and that the best thing to do is to get it over with. In France, it was mainly elderly Jews who killed themselves when the country was occupied."

Depicted as a fragile, privileged intellectual detached from the political reality of her time, Woolf is described as resorting to suicide out of despair at the war and the bombing of London. Reduced to a classic example of an old person's dejection when faced with the threatening feeling that his or her world is coming to an end, Woolf is deprived of her agency as a suicidal woman who possibly found in death a liberating experience.⁸⁷ Although Beauvoir is quick to add, in a footnote, that "She had already had bouts of depression in which she had contemplated suicide" ("Elle avait déjà eu des crises de dépression où elle avait envisagé le suicide"; *ibid.*), the general representation of Woolf's suicide tips slightly towards the unsympathetic, suggesting between the lines – as many had done in a more overtly accusatory tone in Britain after getting wind of her suicide – that her choice was dictated by cowardice in the face of the war. In Beauvoir's account, Woolf commits suicide because she is no longer able to keep herself at a distance from the 'real world' of politics, a view which many Woolf scholars have attempted to dispel from the 1970s onwards, as we saw in Section 1.2.

As already noted by Villeneuve and briefly sketched out above, Beauvoir also mentions Woolf in her lecture tour in Japan. In a lecture titled "La femme et la création" ("Women and Creativity", 1966), Beauvoir elaborates on two main arguments from *A Room of One's Own*: the titular one, about authors needing a space of their own to write, and the one on Judith Shakespeare which Beauvoir had already paraphrased in *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949. Woolf's 'room of one's own', as Beauvoir emphasises, is at the same time a reality and a symbol ("une réalité et un symbole", *ESdB* 458-9): "pour pouvoir écrire, pour pouvoir accomplir quelque chose, il faut d'abord s'appartenir. Or, traditionnellement, la femme ne s'appartient pas. Elle appartient à son mari, à ses enfants" (*ibid.*).⁸⁸ In order to show this, Beauvoir recalls Woolf's example of Shakespeare's (fictional) sister, emphasising how Judith was altogether prevented from accessing the education and the profession of her brother. Woolf, as is known, stresses

⁸⁷ I do not intend to glamourise or romanticise suicide, but it is doubtless, as several intellectuals have noted since the 18th century, that there is an attempt to liberate oneself through suicide, so much so that in German one of the standard words for it is "Freitod", which literally translates as "free death". As a freely chosen death, suicide *can be* liberating, even if it derives from suffering and ends up generating grief in the people surrounding the suicide. I do understand why it is becoming ever more difficult to discuss this part of Woolf's life and I do sympathise with critics who want to detach her figure from that shadow; however, as somebody who has had first-hand experience of these issues, I do think that sweeping this topic under the carpet does not benefit anyone.

⁸⁸ "In order to be able to write and in order to be able to accomplish something, one must first belong to oneself. But traditionally, women do not belong to themselves. A woman belongs to her husband and her children." (*FW* 156)

the stark contrast between Judith's vocation as a writer – a quality which Beauvoir, too, regards as fundamental to any creative endeavour⁸⁹ – and the conditions within which that embodied gift has to manoeuvre.

While the gist of the parable may be similar, Woolf also politicises this story as a sort of founding myth of feminine creativity, as *A Room of One's Own* closes precisely on this clarion call to women (writers):

Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. [...] Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while. (*AROO* 86)

In this closing passage, the narrator suggests that Judith's life and work may be given a second chance in the future through the bodies and the works of women in the present. If it is true that genius or a poet's gift, when "caught and tangled in a woman's body", produces "heat and violence" (*AROO* 37) because of adverse material conditions (lack of space and money, patriarchal notions about women and creativity), if "genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes" "but certainly it never got itself on to paper" (*ibid.*), then women are called upon by Woolf and her narrator(s) to look back, research the past, re-create its presence in their time and breathe new life into it. Judith is resuscitated through a collective struggle for creativity: she is both an important pre-condition for women who want to write – her life an example of how a poet's gift is hampered when it finds itself in a woman's body, her suicidal body a lesson for posterity that women need to resuscitate –

⁸⁹ As Beauvoir states in the same lecture, "Écrire, c'est le résultat d'une vocation ; c'est la réponse à un certain appel, qui se fait entendre généralement quand on est très jeune" (*ESdB* 466). In Marybeth Timmermann's translation: "Writing is the result of a vocation; it is the response to a certain appeal, some-thing that generally is heard at a very young age." (*FW* 162)

and a collective, somewhat utopian – in the best sense of the term – goal. In this sense, the parable of Judith Shakespeare functions as a founding myth of women’s creativity in *A Room of One’s Own*, as each generation maintains its mythologem, its constituent core, while altering and negotiating its mobile significations according to new spatial and temporal categories.

In her lecture, Beauvoir does not seem to emphasise this utopian and mythical dimension in Woolf’s argument. She concurs with Woolf that “creation is an extremely complex process, conditioned by society as a whole” (“la création est un processus extrêmement complexe, conditionné par tout l’ensemble de la société”), that it is far from being a “natural secretion” (“sécrétion naturelle”) but is always in dialogue with “so many considerations that have nothing to do with literature” (*FW* 167, 166; “quantité de considérations extérieures à la littérature” *ESdB* 473, 472): Beauvoir, like Woolf, sees in the past the lack of concrete possibilities for women writers, who, as a consequence, have failed to produce great works of art because of these adverse (patriarchal) circumstances, but, unlike Woolf, Beauvoir does not erect the Judith Shakespeare parable as an inspiring tale for the present and the future, its temporality vitiated, in Beauvoir’s rendering, by an overpowering omnipresence of patriarchal ideology. To be sure, Beauvoir also gestures to a sort of call to arms at the end of her lecture, but her plea has quite a different ring to it:

Je voudrais qu’elles comprennent que les choses ne sont pas du tout ainsi ; c’est parce qu’elles n’ont pas eu leurs chances qu’elles n’ont pas fait davantage ; si elles luttent pour avoir leurs chances, elles luttent en même temps pour leurs accomplissements ; il ne faut pas qu’elles se laissent intimider par le passé, parce que d’une manière générale, dans ce domaine-là comme dans tous les autres, jamais le passé ne peut servir de démenti à l’avenir. (*ESdB* 474)⁹⁰

If women writers have not produced great works of art, Beauvoir maintains, it is because they were prevented from doing so by adverse material conditions of possibility. This does not mean, however, that this may never change; on the contrary, the past should never serve as a denial of the future. How this future may be articulated, however, is not clear in Beauvoir’s lecture, as her intention seems to be more geared

⁹⁰ “I would like for them to understand that things are not at all like that. It is because they have not had their chances that they have not done more. If they fight for their chances, they are fighting for their accomplishments at the same time. They must not let themselves be intimidated by the past because in general, in this domain as in all others, the past can never be used to deny the future.” (*FW* 168)

towards raising awareness of the past than prompting women to think of a different future. Unlike what happens in the “La femme indépendante” (“The Independent Woman”) section in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir is focusing here on women’s past and the present material impossibility of producing great works of art rather than the future, albeit perhaps utopian, possibility of subverting this paradigm. Thus, while it may be true, as Villeneuve has argued, that she is an original reader of Woolf in that she emphasises the materialist quality to Woolf’s arguments, it is also equally true – and perhaps slightly discouraging to see – that Beauvoir does not seem to pick up on the more idealist and inspiring clarion call echoing throughout Woolf’s text.

Unlike what Boileau has claimed, Beauvoir *did not* “famously [omit] to mention Woolf in her iconic *Le Deuxième Sexe*” (Boileau 2020a). Before delving into the Woolf occurrences in the text an interesting parallel ought to be drawn in reference to the definition of a supposed ‘feminist Bible’. While Jane Marcus famously – and aptly – referred to *A Room of One’s Own* as “the Woolf book that means most to feminist critics of [her] generation”, as their “literary feminist Bible” in that “it is the one most subject to critical exegesis, most quoted and argued over in feminist critical work” (Marcus 1987: 5), Mary Dietz felt a similar need to associate the expression ‘feminist Bible’ with *The Second Sex* but in a more negative understanding of the expression: “Like the Bible, *The Second Sex* seems to have been much worshiped, often quoted, and little read” (Dietz 1992: 78). As was pointed out above, this was due to the poor reception of *The Second Sex* in the United States, but its trajectory in Britain, as Dietz admits, tells quite a different story, with prominent feminist thinkers like Juliet Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham, and Michèle Barrett engaging with Beauvoir’s thought in a critical, productive manner from the early 1970s to the 1980s (cf. *ibid.*, p. 80).⁹¹ While it is true,

⁹¹ As early as 1966, Juliet Mitchell in her seminal essay “Women: The Longest Revolution” regarded *The Second Sex* as “to this day the greatest single contribution on the subject [of women]” (Mitchell 1966: 15). She never references the text directly, but she does quote Beauvoir’s *The Force of Circumstance* in English translation, so she probably read *The Second Sex* in Parshley’s translation despite her knowledge of French, as evidenced in the same essay by references to Althusser in the original. Sheila Rowbotham’s *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (1973) and Michèle Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today* (1980) also engage critically with Beauvoir’s theories, and Rowbotham even wrote a foreword to the British edition of the text. It ought to be mentioned that it is within the context of *socialist* feminism that British critics interacted with Beauvoir’s *magnum opus* productively, often finding her arguments on women and capitalist ideology more convincing than those of classic philosophers like Marx and Engels. A documentary aptly titled “Daughters of De [sic] Beauvoir” came out in 1990, with important authors of the likes of Kate Millet, Marge Piercy, Eva Figes and Ann Oakley contributing to this retrospective of

as was highlighted by Dietz and as was reinforced above, that “the renaissance in Beauvoir studies which began in the 1990s continues apace” today (Tidd 2008: 200), it could be argued that the sheer volume of a text like *Le Deuxième Sexe* often discourages people from reading it from cover to cover, thereby confirming Dietz’s intuition about its status as a ‘feminist Bible’ that is “much worshiped, often quoted, and little read” (Dietz 1992: 78). Chapter 2 will rely on this text to explore Beauvoir’s philosophy of the (sexed and gendered) body, but for the moment it is enough perhaps to say a few words about this oft-cited feminist text and its interesting intersections with *A Room of One’s Own*.

The first time Woolf is mentioned in the text, as was anticipated above, is when Beauvoir paraphrases the Judith Shakespeare argument, a paraphrase that was necessary as the French translation of *A Room of One’s Own* was not available yet. While the subject of Woolf’s polemic is “Women and Fiction” – which is incidentally the original title of the lectures Woolf gave at Girton College and Newnham College, Cambridge, in October 1928⁹² – Beauvoir’s research question in *Le Deuxième Sexe* was “What is (a) woman?”⁹³ As was hinted above, the fact that Beauvoir poses this question in the intersecting philosophical traditions of phenomenology and existentialism is an original endeavour, in Stella Sandford’s account, on two main levels: in phenomenological analysis, Beauvoir is the first thinker to gender the lived experience of the subjects she examines to see how that affects their existential trajectory; in existentialist ontology, Beauvoir is asking a question which the Sartrean tradition had curiously – and somewhat unsurprisingly – evaded. Thus, not only does Beauvoir inaugurate the field of feminist phenomenology, one that will have profound repercussions for the following generations of critical phenomenologists – beyond, that is, the philosophical tradition of

Beauvoir. Much more scholarly work needs to be done to address Beauvoir’s Anglo-American posterity in reference to these (mostly socialist) feminist philosophers.

⁹² Thanks to the Cambridge Digital Library, it is now possible to see a digitised version of the autograph manuscript of *A Room of One’s Own* at the following link: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-FITZWILLIAM-00001-01942/4> [last accessed 13/01/2023 at 16.34]. I thank Huw Jones for sending me this link in a private email.

⁹³ I have added brackets for the indeterminate article ‘a’, as the question of whether the English would need the article or not was raised in recent Beauvoir scholarship in reference to Borde and Malovany-Chevallier’s decision to render the famous “On ne naît pas femme, on le devient” as “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” while Parshley had plumped for “One is not born, but rather becomes *a* woman” (emphasis added). Their decision came from the fact that Beauvoir omitted the article in the original French in order to signify woman as determined by society as just described, as they explain in their translators’ note. For a critical assessment of this translation cf. Mann and Ferrari 2017.

existentialism which will go out of fashion between the 1960s and the 1970s –, but, as Sandford has cogently argued, “Beauvoir’s *philosophical* originality [also] had multi- and interdisciplinary conditions of possibility”, thereby making possible “a critical redefinition of the conception of philosophy such that it is able to take gender theory into account” (Sandford 2017: 16).

As early as 1989, Michèle Le Dœuff had convincingly shown how Beauvoir’s philosophy, unlike Sartre’s in *L’Être et le néant*, is not conceived of as a system, but as a *perspective*:

Très sommairement, on peut dire que lorsqu’on construit un système, les choses dont on parle sont là à titre d’exemples, d’appuis pour le raisonnement, de maillons pour la démonstration – le système produit lui-même les éléments nécessaires à son fonctionnement, et jusqu’aux historiettes chargées de soutenir son propos. [...] On a souvent remarqué que les « objets » qu’évoque une grande architectonique philosophique – l’œuvre d’art, la géométrie, la guerre – peuvent apparaître comme fictifs, parce qu’ils ne sont pas traités pour eux-mêmes, mais comme anneaux du système. La méthode d’une pensée qui se réclame seulement d’une *perspective* est sensiblement différente. Le « point de vue » n’est pas réputé créer ce sur quoi il porte ; certes, il a à construire des questions et des modes d’analyse du pan de réalité qu’il considère, de telle sorte que ses questions rencontrent des données : on peut donc dire seulement qu’il *pro-duit* des choses, au sens où c’est tout un art, et un acte, de faire apparaître quelque chose, de produire une pièce qui sera considérée comme un document, de faire sortir de l’ombre et de mettre en avant des « données » qui, finalement, ne sont jamais données. (Le Dœuff [1989] 2008: 100)⁹⁴

While a philosophical system entails a hierarchical logic whereby every constituent part of it supports of necessity a larger framework, the advantage of adopting a philosophical perspective is that the latter does not purport to create a supposedly objective reality;

⁹⁴ “Very briefly, we can say that when we build a system, the things we talk about are there as examples, as supports for the reasoning, as links for the demonstration – the system itself produces the elements necessary for its functioning, and even the stories responsible for supporting its purpose. [...] It has often been noted that the ‘objects’ evoked by a great philosophical architectonics – the work of art, geometry, war – can appear fictitious, because they are not treated for themselves, but as rings of the system. The method of a thought that claims only to be a *perspective* is significantly different. The ‘point of view’ is not deemed to create what it is about; certainly, it has to construct questions and modes of analysis of the part of reality it considers, so that its questions find data: it can therefore only be said to *pro-duce* things, in the sense that it is quite an art, and an act, to make something appear, to produce a piece that will be considered as a document, to bring out of the shadows and to the fore ‘data’ that, in the end, are never ‘given’.”

rather, its aim is only to describe a part of it, while at the same time acknowledging its relationality, namely its position in relation to that which is observed. What is generally called “data” in English – from Latin *datum*, literally “given” – cannot, within a philosophical perspective, be deemed objective, as the observer necessarily occupies a precise position in relation to what is being observed. Despite being often accused of being derivative precisely because of this partiality, Beauvoir’s philosophical perspective, in Le Dœuff’s perceptive account of it, offers not only the advantage of deconstructing and renewing philosophy as a discipline – from a system to a self-critical perspective –, but first and foremost it changes the very object it is reflecting upon: a perspective, as the figurative arts have acknowledged since the Renaissance, affects the way we perceive reality but it is also the only way in which that reality may be perceived altogether, namely through a subjective lens that necessarily distorts the object being examined. It is also perhaps for this reason that Beauvoir will feel the urge to write an autobiography, to see how the world is always already implicated in every attempt to describe oneself.

Beauvoir thus offers in *Le Deuxième Sexe* an anti-systematic view of philosophy which takes the discipline as a whole in new directions. Similarly, Woolf, who was not a philosopher despite being often interpreted in a very productive fashion according to different philosophical traditions (cf. Hussey 1986, Banfield 2000, Ryan 2012), did not locate her reflections within an overarching system, nor did she ever study philosophy in a systematic or institutional way – unlike Beauvoir, she was never a philosophy student *sensu stricto*. Rather, as has been acknowledged by Banfield, “Woolf, we might say, had a knowledge *ex auditu* of philosophy” (Banfield 2000: 30), one that depended on the table talk with philosophers like G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell or with her father, Leslie Stephen. In Italy, philosopher Liliana Rampello was amongst the first to take Woolf’s thought seriously, and in her 2005 monograph shows very well how Woolf “was a great thinker insofar as she was a great artist” (Rampello 2011: 12). Moreover, the pioneering work of Gillian Beer and the more recent monograph by Catriona Livingstone have shown how Woolf’s knowledge of key philosophical debates was mediated not only by her ‘table talk’ with men, but also by the BBC radio broadcasts on science she listened to from the 1920s onwards (cf. Beer 2000, Livingstone 2022). At any rate, as Benjamin D. Hagen has highlighted, philosophy lay

at the core of the Bloomsbury Group, and to research this aspect of the intellectuals' community is "to disclose the impact of specific disciplinary insights and interventions on the continuity and constitutive intimacies uniting these many nonphilosophers" (Hagen 2018: 135): although most of them did not identify, or indeed could not even qualify as philosophers from our modern perspective, the transdisciplinary ways in which they approached the complexity of reality and life is undoubtedly philosophical too.

But it is not just that Woolf did not study philosophy in a systematic way; very often, her philosophy has to be gleaned from her fiction, and even her essays, a genre which is sometimes understood to be more linear in its argumentation, are far from offering a clear thesis that can be summed up in a few words – and *A Room of One's Own* is no exception. Although its supposed conclusion may be regarded as opening the text – "But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction – what has that got to do with a room of one's own? [...] a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (*AROO* 3) –, there are several textual strategies that Woolf implements in order to deviate from this thesis: as Laura Marcus has aptly remarked, "Her 'conclusion' [...] is in no sense a neat summation of the text's arguments; *A Room of One's Own* both intrigues and frustrates critics and readers in large part because of its inconsistencies" and the text itself "reveals the productivity of departures from the straight and narrow" (Marcus [1997] 2004: 46). Indeed, Zwerdling rightly pointed in this direction when he suggested that, when viewed within the contemporary suffrage campaign, "Woolf's particular contribution to the women's movement was to restore a sense of the complexity of the issues after the radical simplification that had seemed necessary for political action" (Zwerdling 1989: 217). In reviewing the scholarship on *A Room of One's Own* produced in the last few decades, Favre cogently argued that "Woolf develops a textual strategy which both resists (feminist) direction and precludes any definitive feminist interpretations or appropriations of the essay, but she also openly, if partly ironically, disavows feminism, and sketches out an elusive *feminism of her own*" (Favre 2020: § 6).

Feminist Bibles though they may be perceived to be, both *A Room of One's Own* and *Le Deuxième Sexe* deploy some textual and philosophical strategies that deviate from a clearly identifiable feminist line. Because they provide a singular and yet

pluralised perspective – Woolf’s narrator(s), Beauvoir’s phenomenological analysis based on a plethora of historical and literary documents – on women, the two texts navigate the issue at stake through detours and impasses, thereby constituting what may be termed a poetics of detouring that complexifies feminist issues without necessarily providing a stable anchorage for the reader. Thus, although they were both considered by posterity as fundamental texts in feminist history (‘feminist Bibles’), their theories and the subtle textual strategies at work in both texts cannot be exhausted in any one reading – a demonstration of their complex literary and philosophical character and a guarantee of their status as ‘current’ texts even for the present day. As Michèle Le Dœuff rightly points out,

Pour prendre une comparaison : il y a des gens qui tirent l’Évangile ou la Bible à gauche, et d’autres qui les tirent à droite (et d’autres qui considèrent que ces textes parlent de tout autre chose) : c’est donc que la dogmatique contenue dans ces livres n’est pas absolument prégnante, univoque, ni catégorique ; elle peut rencontrer des valeurs et des vouloirs fort différents puisque antagonistes. Quand l’assimilation du texte avec tel point de vue politique se fait dans l’immédiateté, il n’y a pas là l’espace d’un travail philosophique. Mais quand des gens élaborent une « théologie de la libération » comme pensée développée, et qui décline ses attendus, il y a bien travail de synthèse, effort pour faire se rencontrer une tradition et des préoccupations actuelles. Notre lecture de S. de Beauvoir pourrait plaider en faveur de cette manière de voir. (Le Dœuff [1989] 2008: 130)⁹⁵

Our reading of Woolf is also in keeping with this perspective, and Chapter 2 will elaborate on these issues by drawing on other essays by Woolf and Beauvoir. Before we move on to Beauvoir’s (partial) reading of Woolf in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, it is fundamental to emphasise that the discrepancy between Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* and Beauvoir in her *magnum opus* ought to be located in their awareness of what I have called a poetics of detouring in their argumentation: while Woolf encourages this perspective in a very conscious manner, Beauvoir, as Le Dœuff amply documents,

⁹⁵ “To draw a comparison: there are people who pull the Gospel or the Bible to the left, and others who pull them to the right (and others who consider that these texts are about something else): this means that the dogma contained in these books is not absolutely prevalent, univocal, or categorical; it can meet with very different values and intentions, since they are antagonistic. When the assimilation of the text with a given political point of view is done in its immediate wake, there is no space for philosophical work. But when people elaborate a ‘theology of liberation’ as a developed thought, and which declines its expectations, there is indeed a work of synthesis, an effort to make a tradition and current concerns meet. Our reading of S. de Beauvoir could argue in favour of this way of seeing things.”

embarks upon a feminist journey with the critical tools provided by a patriarchal philosophical tradition (existentialism, phenomenology) without necessarily subjecting it to close inspection and only ends up deconstructing and subverting her own categories in the process – another indication of why it is essential to read Beauvoir in counterpoint rather than take her arguments at face value.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Virginia Woolf is mentioned twelve times. Table 2 maps the Woolf occurrences in the text and traces these quotations back to the original English edition – in this case, the Oxford World’s Classics edition – of her works. Reference is also made to the page number in the folio essais edition of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which is made up of two volumes: the first volume is referred to, as is customary, as “a”, the second as “b”. Moreover, the table shows what type of reference it is: a paraphrase, a complete or partial quotation, or a reference. As was pointed out above, Beauvoir always quotes Woolf in the French translation available at the time, so the quotations from *The Waves* are culled from Marguerite Yourcenar’s 1937 translation, the one from *To the Lighthouse* from Maurice Lanoir’s 1929 *Promenade au phare*, and those from *Mrs Dalloway* come from Simone David’s 1929 version.

No.	Section	Sub-section	Reference	Type	DS	Woolf
1	History	IV	<i>AROO</i> (Judith Shakespeare)	Paraphrase	a 182-3	N/A
2	Formative years	The Girl	<i>TW</i> (Jinny as coquette)	Selective quote	b 140	81-84
3			<i>TW</i> (Susan as country girl)	Selective quote	b 141	79-80
4	Situation	The Married Woman	<i>TW</i> (Susan as housewife)	Selective quote	b 259	142
5			<i>TL</i>	Whole quote	b 260	79-80
6			Woolf’s heroines	Reference	b 319	N/A

7		Social Life	<i>MD</i>	Whole quote	b 402	88-89; 144f
8			<i>MD</i>	Selective quote	B 402-3	103
9			<i>MD</i>	Selective quote	b 403-4	148
10		Woman's Situation and Character	<i>MD, TL</i>	Reference	b 507	N/A
11	Toward	The Independent	<i>AROO</i>	Reference	b 623	N/A
12	liberation	Woman	Woolf's writing	Reference	b 626	N/A

Table 2. Woolf occurrences in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

Rather than follow the order in which they appear, the rest of this section will argue for a typology of Woolf as a presence in the Beauvoirian text. In fact, Woolf is presented here as three different, though of course intersecting, personae: a fundamental precursor for *Le Deuxième Sexe* (item 1), a writer who faithfully represented women's lived experience (items 2 to 10), and a successful woman writer who was able to see what paths were to be taken by other women writers in the twentieth century (items 11 and 12).

In item 1, Beauvoir looks back to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* as a text articulating how dismal the material conditions of women were in Britain and how much hatred women writers both exhibited in some of their writings and generated in (male) readers. Here, Beauvoir sums up parts of Chapter III and IV of *A Room of One's Own*, in particular: the Judith Shakespeare parable, although she alters some details; the hostility that women writers garner from the (male) reading public; Lady Winchilsea's poetry, of which Beauvoir translates three lines that Woolf reports from the collection *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* (1713); the Duchess of Newcastle's furious statement about how women are treated; Aphra Behn as the first middle-class woman who was able to "make her living by her wits" for the first time in women's history

(*AROO* 48); and the argument about the room of one's own as a space of economic and material independence.

There are a few differences between *A Room of One's Own* and Beauvoir's two-page summary of it. The first one is in relation to Samuel Johnson's notorious comparison between women preachers and dogs marching upright: Beauvoir claims here that Johnson was talking about women *writers*, although Woolf references Johnson's statement correctly in the text on two occasions. Once, it is voiced, albeit in relation to women acting, by the theatre manager when Judith aspires to become an actress and write for the stage ("The manager [...] guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting – no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress"; *AROO* 37); the same statement is referenced a few pages later, but this time in relation to women composers and Germaine Tailleferre in particular ("Of Mlle Germaine Tailleferre one can only repeat Dr Johnson's dictum concerning a woman preacher, transposed into terms of music [...]"; *AROO* 42). Thus, while Woolf relied perhaps on her audience's and readership's understanding of the original reference, Beauvoir did not have access to the same collective imaginary and seems to have misunderstood Woolf's variation on Johnson's disdainful statement about women preachers, choosing instead to keep her focus on women writers.

A second difference is Beauvoir's addition of a reference to Daniel Defoe's novel *Moll Flanders* (1722) to the Judith Shakespeare story. While Woolf only hints at the fact that Judith may have ended up "roam[ing] the streets at midnight" in order to "seek her dinner in a tavern" (*AROO* 37), Beauvoir gives a more explicit twist to the story by writing "On peut aussi l'imaginer devenant une joyeuse prostituée, une Moll Flanders telle que la campa Daniel De Foe [sic] : mais en aucun cas elle n'eût dirigé une troupe et écrit des drames" (*DSa* 182-3).⁹⁶ In this case, it could be argued that Beauvoir is trying to show her knowledge of English literature by referring to a canonical work of fiction, thereby establishing a prior literary tradition that complements Woolf's parable. At the same time, however, we cannot help seeing in Beauvoir's renegotiation of the myth a rather maladroit attempt to further victimise Judith to engender a sense of scandal in the reader.

⁹⁶ "She could also be imagined as a happy prostitute, a Moll Flanders, as Daniel Defoe portrayed her: but she would never have run a theatre and written plays." (*SS* 124)

A third and final difference in the Judith Shakespeare story is the ending: while Woolf writes that “at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman” and ended up “kill[ing] herself one winter’s night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle” (*AROO* 37), Beauvoir suggests that “ou elle eût été reconduite à sa famille qui l’eût mariée de force ; ou séduite, abandonnée, déshonorée elle se serait tuée de désespoir” (*DSa* 182).⁹⁷ Once again, Beauvoir is making more explicit statements than Woolf, but she is also suggesting here *two* possible endings to the story: one that sees her being forced back to her family in order to be married off, and another that is more compatible with Woolf’s ending, though with a more poignant twist, namely that she is seduced and *abandoned* by Nick Greene. That she is “dishonoured” only confirms our thesis that Beauvoir is trying to amplify the victimising elements of the tale in order to adapt it to the ‘scandalous’ *Deuxième Sexe*.

These variations on the original myth, as was suggested above, testify to Beauvoir’s original handling of the story received from Woolf as well as to the story’s productivity in the hands of subsequent generations. As a matter of fact, Woolf is not the first author to think of this sort of parable: as Anna Snaith notes in a note to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of the text, “Woolf was not the first woman writer to speculate on the idea of a female Shakespeare: see Cicely Hamilton’s *Marriage as a Trade* (1909) and Olive Schreiner’s *From Man to Man* (1920): ‘what of the possible Shakespeares we might have had [...] stifled out without one line written, simply because, being of the weaker sex, life gave no room for action and grasp on life?’” (Schreiner 1929: 219; *AROO* 261, note to p. 36).⁹⁸ This common misconception that “no woman” in the Renaissance and the seventeenth century “wrote a word” was contrasted by several (feminist) critics at the end of the twentieth century, most notably by Margaret J. M. Ezell, a scholar who specialises in early modern women writers. In a 1990 journal article clearly drawing on New Historicism, Ezell argued that

⁹⁷ “either she would be brought back to her family and married off by force; or seduced, abandoned, and dishonoured, she would commit suicide out of despair.” (*SS* 123-4)

⁹⁸ The original manuscript, a transcription of it, and the typescripts of Schreiner’s *From Man to Man* have been digitised and are now available at this link: <https://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/man-man> [last accessed 17/01/2023 at 10.05]. The original text of Hamilton’s *Marriage as a Trade* is now out of copyright and is available online at this link: <http://www.digital.library.upenn.edu/women/hamilton/marriage/marriage.html> [last accessed 17/01/2023 at 10.06]. It is not clear what part of the text Snaith has in mind, but the only time Shakespeare is referenced in Hamilton’s text it is *not* in relation to a ‘female’ Shakespeare.

the twentieth century's perceptions of works by women writing in the Renaissance and seventeenth century are based on a set of anachronistic and deforming presumptions about literary practice, production, and genre, bolstered by an outdated "Whig" interpretation of English society. (Ezell 1990: 580)

In Ezell's account, Woolf is shown to be "bound by the limitations of the historiography of her day" (ibid., p. 587), but subsequent feminist critics who compiled critical anthologies of women's literature in English – Ezell mentions the volumes edited by "[Katherine M.] Rogers, [Joan] Goulianos, [Louise] Bernikow, [Angeline] Goreau, [Fidelis] Morgan, [Sandra M.] Gilbert and [Susan] Gubar, and [Germaine] Greer", published between 1979 and 1985 (ibid., p. 580, 592) – also fall prey to Woolf's misconception. The critic ultimately argues for "a new concept of women's literature" that accepts "manuscript and coterie authorship and nontraditional literary forms as part of the female tradition" so as to better explore these women writers' texts before Aphra Behn (ibid., p. 591).

In Ezell's understanding of the term the 'myth' of Judith Shakespeare as "the isolated, self-destructive female artist" (ibid., p. 585) has been foundational for subsequent generations because they have tended to look for similarities in women's literature rather than highlight potential differences: feminist literary criticism, both in its Anglo-American inflection of gynocriticism *à la* Elaine Showalter and in its French counterpart of *écriture féminine* deriving from Hélène Cixous, has often failed, Ezell argues, to foreground the differences underlying the production and circulation of texts across historical periods, intent as feminist critics were on finding new critical tools that could supplant the patriarchal assumptions inherent in literary criticism. While their work is of course to be praised in some respects, Ezell shows through her New Historicist approach that in this particular regard it has failed to go beyond certain impasses underlying Woolf's knowledge of, and consequently her discussion of, early modern women writers: this part of the myth has been reproduced all too faithfully without questioning the problematic categories Woolf may have brought to bear on previous centuries. Of course, it could also be argued that Ezell, perhaps like Méléra, is taking all too seriously Woolf's narrative persona in the essay, thereby falling into the trap of mistaking the 'I's of *A Room* with the author: far from representing the 'truth' of life in a matter-of-fact way, the essay revels in fabulation and fictionalisation.

While Ezell uses the term ‘myth’ in this article in the sense of a fantasy or an illusion, a fiction fabricated and believed, it could be argued that Judith Shakespeare as a story is also a myth in the first sense listed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, namely “A traditional story [...] which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon”.⁹⁹ In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir famously employs the term either as a synonym for ‘misconception’ or in its original sense, with the first volume of the text bringing together the two interpretations in its subtitle, “Facts and Myths”: the two terms are complementary both in the sense that there is a factual reality about women and then there are patriarchal misconceptions about them *and* in the sense that there is rigorous documentation about women’s history and then there are fictional stories – which are not necessarily ‘false’ – fabricated about and by them. The ‘myth’ of Judith Shakespeare participates of this very ambiguity: it is at the same time a misrepresentation of early modern women writers, as Ezell cogently demonstrates, and a fiction that was well received and consequently reproduced by subsequent feminist critics, Beauvoir included, who found in it a tale with a potentially liberating function.

Because the first volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* closes on the “myths” – often in both senses of the term¹⁰⁰ – produced by men in their literary endeavours, the second volume is deliberately dedicated to women’s “lived experience”. This was the French translation of a notion derived from Husserl’s phenomenology, which in the original German was *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung*. “By using this specific term,” as Sara Heinämaa has argued, “Beauvoir made clear that her aim was to develop a philosophical description of women’s experiences and the world as experienced by women” (Heinämaa 2003: 1).¹⁰¹

Moreover, as Manon Garcia has amply demonstrated in her work, Beauvoir also retains from Husserl the centrality of the first person: “Phenomenology in every shape

⁹⁹ “myth, n. 1a”, *OED Online*, December 2022, Oxford University Press: <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.unibg.it/view/Entry/124670?rskey=jG2hyL&result=1> [last accessed 17/01/2023 at 17.10].

¹⁰⁰ Among the male writers she considers in this part of the text (Montherlant, D. H. Lawrence, Claudel, Breton, Stendhal), only Stendhal is not found wanting in terms of (decent) representation of female characters. In the 1966 lecture, “La femme et la création”, Beauvoir will go on to reiterate this point, suggesting in no uncertain terms that Stendhal was “un grand féministe” (“a great feminist”, *ESdB* 459).

¹⁰¹ As recalled by Heinämaa, Moi, and others, the first translation of *Le Deuxième Sexe* by Parshley rendered “l’expérience vécue” as “woman’s life today”, thus demonstrating the translator’s inability to understand Beauvoir’s references and consequently his inaptitude as a cultural mediator (cf. Heinämaa 2003, Moi 2002).

and form is interested in consciousness and experience insofar as they are experiences in the first person – experiences made by a subject and analysed from the point of view of this subject” (Garcia 2021: 93). A subject, it ought to be recalled, that is also a “living body” (ibid.) – and Chapter 2 will explore how the notion of an intercorporeal subject intersects with reflections on literature. At any rate, it is clear how Le Dœuff’s understanding of Beauvoir’s philosophical perspective ought to be understood in this sense, too: as Heinämaa aptly comments, Beauvoir struggles to identify as a philosopher not so much because she cannot be one – after all, she was the youngest person to pass the challenging *agrégation* and came second in the exam – but mostly because she rejected the notion of philosophy as a system “both in her practice of thinking and in explicit statements” (Heinämaa 2003: 4), as we saw in the Introduction. Her recourse to phenomenology, a philosophical tradition that was also, for the first time, gendered, is part of this anti-systematic project of bringing philosophy closer to first-person accounts of life, whether they be produced in novels or narrated in diaries and letters.

Within the varied selection of documents Beauvoir draws on to reconstruct what (a) woman is and how she becomes one, three novels by Woolf help her identify some common traits in the phenomenological figures of the little girl (Jinny and Susan in *The Waves*, items 2-3 in Table 2), the married woman (Susan in *The Waves*, Mrs Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*, and Woolf’s “heroines” more generally, items 4-6 in Table 2), and the socialite (Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*, items 7-9 in Table 2), to which some broader comments on woman’s situation and character are added in reference to Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* as well as to Katherine Mansfield (item 10 in Table 2). While a close textual analysis of all these occurrences would be way too ambitious, the remainder of this section will address two interesting aspects related to Woolf as a writer capable of capturing the lived experience of women in her novels: first of all, Parshley’s expunction of the passage from *To the Lighthouse* (item 5 in Table 2) will be problematised; then, a Beauvoirian analysis of *Mrs Dalloway* will be proposed, one based not only on items 7 to 9 in Table 2 but also on other points Beauvoir makes about parties as rituals and as celebrations of the present moment in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 1947). The passages from *The Waves* which

Beauvoir mentions and briefly comments on will be addressed in Chapter 3, where a Beauvoirian analysis of the characters in the novel will be offered.

As was mentioned above, Parshley's translation excised around 10-15% of the original text. Although recent scholarship has convincingly argued that Parshley was not alone in the translation process and some of the translational and editorial practices affecting the target text have to be ascribed to the team at Alfred Knopf (cf. Bogic 2009-10), the translation he penned consistently – and quite ironically, considering it is a volume titled *The Second Sex* – excluded not only “just about every reference to socialist feminism” – interestingly, the very tradition which, in Britain, will look back on Beauvoir as a fundamental interlocutor – but also “seventy-eight women's names” from the history section alone (Moi 2001: 1008).

Beauvoir draws on a plethora of sources, most of which, at least in the second volume, are texts written by women, but Parshley's excision of these documents, as cogently shown by Fallaize, makes the text seem like a dogmatic expression of Beauvoir's idiosyncratic views on women (cf. Fallaize 2002). In the original French, a passage from *To the Lighthouse* is framed by Beauvoir in these terms (item 5 in Table 2): after drawing attention to a passage from *The Waves* where Susan observes the cycle of the seasons from within her house (item 4 in Table 2), Beauvoir argues, echoing Bachelard, that “The home becomes the centre of the world and even its own one truth” (SS 483; “Le foyer devient le centre du monde et même son unique vérité”, DSb 259) and in order to support this view of a “reality concentrated in the house, while the outside space collapses” (SS 483; “réalité se concentrant dans la maison, tandis que l'espace du dehors s'effondre, DSb 260) she quotes a few lines from Lanoire's *La Promenade au phare* which, in the original English, read as

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, *for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily.* (TL 79-80; emphasis added to Beauvoir's selection)

The fact that Beauvoir is able to isolate the section in italic shows that she was relying on the French translation and never problematised it:

La nuit était maintenant tenue à l'écart par les vitres et celles-ci au lieu de donner une vue exacte du monde extérieur le gondolaient d'étrange façon au point que l'ordre, la fixité, la terre ferme semblaient s'être installés à l'intérieur de la maison ; au-dehors au contraire, il n'y avait plus qu'un reflet dans lequel les choses devenues fluides tremblaient et disparaissaient. (*DSb* 260)

The passage in French clearly breaks one long English sentence, connected by a typically Woolfian “for”, and makes some more explicit claims than the original, for instance in adding “fixité” to “order and dry land” and “au contraire” to the last part of the sentence. In Parshley’s translation – and edition – of the text, all that is left of Beauvoir’s argument and chosen example from *To the Lighthouse* is “Reality is concentrated inside the house, while outer space seems to collapse” (Beauvoir 1953: 450). As Moi has aptly remarked, “There is no trace of Woolf here. The sentence is no longer a commentary foregrounding the powers of observation of an admired woman writer but a dogmatic proclamation of dubious validity” (Moi 2002: 1010). In restoring all the original references to Woolf, and for all the problematic aspects of their rendition, Borde and Malovany-Chevallier have shown how Beauvoir’s argument relies on authoritative literary sources that are based on women’s lived experience, thereby showing for the first time how nuanced – and sometimes, as we saw, problematic – Beauvoir’s reading of documents can be.

As far as *Mrs Dalloway* is concerned, the first part of this section has shown how Beauvoir engaged with the text as an example of modernist experimentation. In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, she quotes passages from the text several times (items 7 to 9 in Table 2), besides referencing it either explicitly (item 10) or implicitly (item 12). Item 6 points to Beauvoir’s argument that “Tous les écrivains féminins qui sont sincères ont noté cette mélancolie qui habite le cœur des « femmes de trente ans » ; c’est un trait commun aux héroïnes de Katherine Mansfield, de Dorothy Parker, de Virginia Woolf” (*DSb* 319)¹⁰², so, while it may initially appear as if *Mrs Dalloway* is not a good candidate – Clarissa is way past her 30s –, Beauvoir goes on to add, echoing a study of suicide by Maurice Halbwachs, how this melancholy in married women grows as they move into their mid-to late-30s:

¹⁰² “All sincere women writers have noted this melancholy that inhabits the heart of ‘thirty-year-old women’; this is a characteristic common to the heroines of Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Parker, and Virginia Woolf.” (*SS* 531)

Il est remarquable que si l'on compare le nombre des suicides féminins perpétrés par des célibataires et par des femmes mariées, on trouve que celles-ci sont solidement protégées contre le dégoût de vivre entre vingt et trente ans (surtout de vingt-cinq à trente) mais non pas dans les années suivantes. (*DSb* 319)¹⁰³

In this sense, it could be argued that, considering that Septimus's suicide features prominently in *Mrs Dalloway* and Clarissa herself is shocked when she gets wind of (his) death "in the middle of [her] party" (*MD* 156) and then comes to contemplate the mirror image of the old lady "in the room opposite" staring back at her (*MD* 157), Beauvoir may have had this novel at the back of her mind.

Just before *Mrs Dalloway* is mentioned for the first time in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir emphasises how flowers embody "expenses and luxury" ("dépense et luxe"), how, "blooming in vases, doomed to a rapid death, flowers are ceremonial bonfires, incense and myrrh, libation, sacrifice" (*SS* 596; "épanouies dans les vases, vouées à une mort rapide, elles sont feu de joie, encens et myrrhe, libation, sacrifice", *DSb* 402). Her insistence on the sacrificial and temporary character of flowers, it could be argued, is partly derived from the famous sentence opening *Mrs Dalloway* ("Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself", *MD* 3): while this connection is not made by Beauvoir directly, this discussion of flowers in *Le Deuxième Sexe* comes just before *Mrs Dalloway* is introduced as an example in support of Beauvoir's theory, thus suggesting that this connection is not far-fetched. Before we look at these few pages where Woolf's 1925 novel is discussed by Beauvoir, it is essential to look back on Beauvoir's previous philosophical essay to find some interesting theories about the role of parties in existentialist terms.

In *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Beauvoir advances the notion of ambiguity as fundamental to better comprehend the human condition: in her view, human beings are torn between immanence, a state where past and present are perpetuated and remain unaltered, anchored as they are to what she terms 'facticity' or 'the given' (*le donné*), and transcendence, a movement that allows individuals to go beyond one's past and present in order to open up new horizons of possibility. While human beings always ought to transcend their 'situation' – their position within spatial and temporal

¹⁰³ "It is noteworthy that the number of single women who commit suicide, compared with married women, shows that the latter are solidly protected from revulsion against life between twenty and thirty years of age (especially between twenty-five and thirty) but not in the following years." (*SS* 531-2)

categories, a position that is heavily influenced, for better or worse, by other individuals with similar capacities and ambitions –, Beauvoir also discusses all those cases where people fall short of this expectation and end up perpetuating their current situation. In *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, this discussion is not exactly gendered yet – although some cases of women not living up to this (rather high) standard do feature in her discussion – but two years later, *Le Deuxième Sexe* will take this project further.

Within this philosophical framework, parties serve a particular, though equally ambiguous function: “arrêter le mouvement de la transcendance”, “poser la fin comme fin” (*PMLA* 155).¹⁰⁴ As she goes on to argue, pursuing transcendence in perpetuity is problematic because it risks becoming “an escape toward nothingness” (*EA* 135; “un échappement vers le néant”, *PMLA* 155), a term which she borrows from Sartre and which implies a lack, a void within the subject: ‘nothingness’ represents the opposite of ‘being’. As Beauvoir argues,

C’est là le sens moderne de la fête, aussi bien publique que privée, l’existence tente de s’y confirmer positivement en tant qu’existence. C’est pourquoi [...] elle se caractérise par la destruction; la morale de l’être, c’est la morale de l’épargne [...]; l’existence, au contraire, est consommation: elle ne se fait qu’en défaisant. (*PMLA* 156)¹⁰⁵

Parties, then, embody this ambiguous tendency of existence towards destruction, towards the exaltation of the instant through “consumption” rather than “saving”, because living entails consuming time, space, and energy: if human beings confined themselves to simply ‘being’, they would never attain transcendence, they would always be stuck in an endless, immutable state.

Another fundamental quality of parties is the fact that they attempt to “[establish] a communication of the existants” (*EA* 136; “établir une communication avec d’autres existants”, *PMLA* 156), as Clarissa herself observes in *Mrs Dalloway*:

¹⁰⁴ “stop the movement of transcendence, to set up the end as an end” (*EA* 135). The English translator Bernard Frechtman chooses to translate “fête” as “festival” throughout, although Beauvoir does indicate in the text that the term may stand for a private or a public event.

¹⁰⁵ “That is the modern meaning of the festival, private as well as public. Existence attempts in the festival to confirm itself positively as existence. That is why [...] it is characterized by destruction; the ethics of being is the ethics of saving: [...], existence, on the contrary, is consumption; it makes itself only by destroying.” (*EA* 136) It is important to note that in the original French, Beauvoir is using the capaciousness of the language to point out, in a clearly oxymoronic fashion, that life can only be ‘made’ by being ‘unmade’, something which Frechtman completely transforms in his English rendition.

But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgments, how superficial, how fragmented they are!) in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing called life? Oh, it was very queer! Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; someone up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? (*MD* 103)

In this passage, Clarissa seems to articulate quite clearly the notion that parties bring people together who would otherwise be stuck in their own separate lives. If existence implies living with others, being part of networks of individuals, then people need to be brought together from all the disparate boroughs of London – although in this case, these boroughs tend to be very central and quite wealthy, an index of Clarissa’s position within British society. At any rate, what she hopes to accomplish with her party is this “offering”, this attempt “to combine, to create”, to make something of these separate existing fragments so they can gather around a centre and possibly be, albeit provisionally, connected. After all, as Beauvoir remarks, without this sense of “complicity with other men” (*EA* 136; “complicité avec les autres hommes”, *PMLA* 157), humanity cannot prosper.¹⁰⁶ The question closing the passage quoted above, however, tinges this ambition with a sense of defeat, or perhaps disillusion, a feeling that Clarissa probably derives from Peter Walsh’s nagging question “What’s the sense of your parties?” (*MD* 103) and her husband Richard’s doubts about the meaning of these social events. To their perplexities, she responds that parties are “an offering for the sake of offering, perhaps” (*MD* 103) – she is not expecting anything in return, it is a “gift”.

Perhaps in keeping with these accusations, Beauvoir also points to the “pathetic and disappointing character” (“caractère pathétique et décevant”) of parties: “la tension de l’existence réalisée comme pure négativité ne saurait se maintenir longtemps ; il faut qu’aussitôt elle s’engage dans une nouvelle entreprise, qu’elle s’élance vers l’avenir”

¹⁰⁶ Although Beauvoir will go on to point out in the first volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* that the very word “man” (*homme*) in French conflates the two distinct Latin terms “homo” (“human being”) and “vir” (“male human being, man”) (*DSa* 16), she consistently resorts to this gendered word in French, in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* as well as in subsequent texts. It is clear, however, that she generally takes “man” to mean “human being” rather than “male human being”.

(*PMLA* 157).¹⁰⁷ If Clarissa bases her own existence on throwing parties, on building a complicity with other people while at the same time celebrating the moment, it is likely that, as Richard and Peter seem to suggest, she will never amount to much and, perhaps more importantly, she will delude herself into thinking that her happiness lies in these social events. It is not a coincidence, in this sense, that Clarissa comes to contemplate the transient character of life and the imminence of death after suggesting that her party is a gift:

Nothing else had she of the slightest importance; could not think, write, even play the piano. She muddled Armenians and Turks; loved success; hated discomfort; must be liked; talked oceans of nonsense; and to this day, ask her what the Equator was, and she did not know.

All the same, that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses; it was enough. After that, how unbelievable death was! – that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant... (*MD* 103-4)

Here, Clarissa is very critical of herself, of the meaninglessness of her daily business, of running errands and bumping into people. Although she may have been happy while walking in London – a sensation that quickly makes way, once again, to her own defeat as “Mrs Dalloway, not even Clarissa anymore”, just “Mrs Richard Dalloway” (*MD* 9), the patronymic erasing her identity and subsuming her name into her husband’s –, nothing of these moments will remain. The transience of the instant, the sense of an ending leads her to think about death, a death that leaves no mark of her because, it seems, she feels perhaps misunderstood by those around her. While all these topics are thematised throughout the narrative, Beauvoir’s discussion of the flowers as symbols of fleeting joy is apt in this regard, and the fact that Clarissa gets out of her house to buy flowers already anticipates some of these concerns.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir remarks that, although parties are potentially moments of communication and of fruitful destruction, what happens very often in the case of socialites like Clarissa is that parties are institutionalised, that they become part

¹⁰⁷ “But the tension of existence realized as a pure negativity can not [sic] maintain itself for long; it must be immediately engaged in a new undertaking, it must dash off toward the future.” (*EA* 136)

of a ritual for social life: “S’il y a dans cet hommage rendu à autrui pure générosité, la fête est vraiment une fête. Mais la routine sociale a vite fait de changer le potlatch en institution, le don en obligation et de guinder la fête en rite” (*DSb* 403).¹⁰⁸ This institutionalisation of the party only makes it, Beauvoir argues, “one more chore” (*SS* 597; “une corvée parmi d’autres”, *DSb* 403), just another task a woman has to accomplish as part of her unpaid labour in the house. As Kate McLoughlin has remarked, modernist parties are also based on a “bourgeois, industrialised, urbanised, lay” market economy (McLoughlin 2012: 17), and this economic structure cannot be overlooked even in the case of Clarissa, as Beauvoir seems to suggest. It is perhaps for this reason, too, that Clarissa perceives the “hollowness” of “these triumphs”, “these semblances” (*MD* 148) that fall short of guaranteeing any sort of lasting happiness to her.

In a “classic gesture” that is typical of party narratives (Ames 1991: 96), Clarissa goes up to a private room to reflect on her life, but she shockingly finds herself to contemplate a mirror image of herself, namely the old lady going to bed, arguably a prefiguration of her own death. She thinks then of Septimus, this man whom the Bradshaws were talking about, and muses, in a strikingly paradoxical vein:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he [i.e. Septimus] had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (*MD* 148)

Death serves here the function that was previously ascribed to parties, namely to communicate. It brings solitary people closer together for some reason, it gives them a warming welcome, as it were, while in life they may well have been alone and despondent, misunderstood, as Septimus was, as Clarissa feels now. Parties, Clarissa seems to think here, are a prefiguration of death. Soon, however, the call on Clarissa to “assemble” is heard, and she will have to go back to her party to be “the perfect hostess”: as Beauvoir comments, “La vie mondaine exige qu’elle ‘représente’, qu’elle

¹⁰⁸ “If there is pure generosity in this homage to others, the party is really a party. But social routine quickly changes the potlatch into an institution, the gift into an obligation, and the party hardens into a rite.” (*SS* 597)

s'exhibe, mais ne crée pas entre elle et autrui une véritable communication. Elle ne l'arrache pas à sa solitude" (*DSb* 404).¹⁰⁹

The paradoxical, even oxymoronic character of the party is reinforced if we consider the power structures at work in the narrative: not only, as aptly remarked by McLoughlin, modernist parties partake in a specific market economy, but, we could add, Clarissa's gender gives the whole performance a more poignant colouring. As argued by Beauvoir, there is a sort of expectation that women *will* perform for others, much in the same way as Peter Walsh glorifies Clarissa throughout the narrative through his "For there she was", thinking she is the perfect hostess and there is no effort on her part. As the narrative takes us closer to Clarissa, however, we see how Peter's view is nothing but a patriarchal construct, an illusion projected onto women, who, as a consequence, would have to 'donate' themselves to others in the hopes of bringing people together, even though they realise, as Clarissa does, that there is something quite not right with the whole situation.

In a brilliant monograph, Beauvoir scholar Manon Garcia recently argued that female submission, if discussed in rigorous philosophical terms precisely via Beauvoir's theories, may yield interesting insights. As Garcia rightly argues,

comme tous les êtres humains, les femmes sont prises en tension entre le désir et l'angoisse de la liberté, entre la volonté de se projeter dans le monde et la tentation de l'abdication. À la différence des hommes, cependant, la soumission est une conduite socialement prescrite aux femmes. Elles ont donc des choses à gagner à se soumettre. (Garcia 2018: 228)¹¹⁰

Her argument is of course not to be understood as an *invitation* to submit, as she is not proposing it in a normative way; on the contrary, Garcia is attempting to *describe* a process that is clearly at work in patriarchal societies, one that is often overlooked or not discussed in earnest because of fears that it may end up reinforcing the subaltern position of women.

¹⁰⁹ "Social life demands that woman 'represent,' that she show off, but does not create between her and others real communication. It does not wrest her from her solitude." (*SS* 598)

¹¹⁰ "Like all human beings, women are caught in a tension between the desire and the anxiety of freedom, between the will to project themselves into the world and the temptation to abdicate. Unlike men, however, submission is a socially prescribed behaviour for women. They therefore have something to gain by submitting." The American edition of the work (Garcia 2021) is not simply a translation of the French text, so not all the passages in the original have a one-to-one equivalent. For this reason, a translation is provided here instead.

What emerges from Garcia's subtle discussion of the topic is the notion that for women in a patriarchal system, sometimes submitting to certain norms is the only way for them to attain the status of subjects, though with some limitations. By submitting, a woman "will no doubt appear as an object, but this object she has made herself" ("sans doute apparaîtra-t-elle comme un objet, mais cet objet elle l'a elle-même fabriqué"; *ibid.*, p. 203): precisely in virtue of what Garcia terms "se faire objet" ("making oneself into/as an object"), women may, in certain contexts, subjectivise themselves when they submit to other people's demands or to social norms. In a similar vein, Clarissa can only conceive of herself as a subject by making herself into a "gift" for others. Thus, *Mrs Dalloway*, when observed through a Beauvoirian lens, becomes a novel mapping the trajectory of an upper-middle class woman who attempts to make something out of the social norms governing her life, torn as she is between wanting a freedom which belongs to the past (Bourton, Sally) and a present which constantly calls upon her to perform, to "se faire don" ("making oneself into/as a gift") so that others may be brought together and perhaps be saved from their solitude. If, as Liliana Rampello aptly phrases it, Clarissa "makes herself the flesh of a keeping together, of a binding that is her supreme worldly wisdom" (Rampello 2011: 80), her body becomes a fleshed gift that the party dismembers, leaving behind not much of a subject.¹¹¹

The third and final persona that Woolf incarnates in *Le Deuxième Sexe* is an exemplary woman writer: not only does she offer some insights into womanhood which Beauvoir looks back on, as argued above, nor does she only offer some interesting perspectives on some specific situations that women embody in her novels; for Beauvoir, Woolf is also one of those great – but few – women writers who "approach nature in its inhuman freedom, who try to decipher its foreign meanings and lose themselves in order to unite with this other presence" (*SS* 764; "abordent la nature dans sa liberté inhumaine, qui tentent d'en déchiffrer les significations étrangères et qui se perdent afin de s'unir à cette présence autre", *DSb* 626). As Beauvoir goes on to argue,

À plus forte raison peut-on compter sur les doigts d'une main les femmes qui ont traversé le donné, à la recherche de sa dimension secrète : Emily Brontë a interrogé

¹¹¹ The original quote, in Italian, is: "La forza tenace e sottile di Clarissa non cerca il superamento o la sintesi felice di queste coppie, si fa carne di un tenere insieme, di un legare che è la sua suprema sapienza mondana" (Rampello 2011: 80). As my discussion has shown, I do not agree with Rampello's more optimistic interpretation of Clarissa's creation.

la mort, V. Woolf la vie, et K. Mansfield parfois – pas très souvent – la contingence quotidienne et la souffrance. (*DSb* 626)¹¹²

Going through reality, Woolf has been able to question life, explore its depths and decipher its strange meanings. The fact that Beauvoir does not ascribe death to Woolf but life is quite striking, considering that in 1949, only eight years after Woolf committed suicide, she was still perceived to be an ethereal, snobbish madwoman who had looked for a quick and supposedly painless way out of the war – not to mention that Quentin Bell's biography would insist on this representation of Woolf in 1974, thus solidifying this misconception into an historical truth. Compared to this critical framework, as well as to Beauvoir's subsequent portrayal of Woolf's suicide in *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir's perception of Woolf in *Le Deuxième Sexe* is somewhat paradoxically far closer to our contemporary sensibility.

A few pages earlier (item 11 in Table 2), Beauvoir also references Woolf when she suggests that women have not been able to produce some literary masterpieces: “Elles n'ont pas eu non plus la richesse d'expérience d'un Dostoïevski, d'un Tolstoï : c'est pourquoi le beau livre qu'est *Middlemarch* n'égale pas *Guerre et Paix* ; les *Hauts de Hurlevent* malgré leur grandeur n'ont pas la portée des *Frères Karamazov*” (*DSb* 624).¹¹³ This is because *some* women writers at least still have to act like “the women insurgents who have indicted this unjust society” (“insurgées qui ont mis en accusation cette société injuste”) because they have produced “protest literature” (“littérature de revendication”) which “can give rise to strong and sincere works” (*SS* 762; “des œuvres fortes et sincères”, *DSb* 623), but all in all, their writing does not compare to men's. As Beauvoir goes on to argue,

George Eliot a puisé dans sa révolte une vision à la fois minutieuse et dramatique de l'Angleterre victorienne ; cependant, comme Virginia Woolf le fait remarquer, Jane Austen, les sœurs Brontë, George Eliot ont dû dépenser négativement tant d'énergie pour se libérer des contraintes extérieures qu'elles arrivent un peu essoufflées à ce stade d'où les écrivains masculins de grande envergure prennent le départ ; il ne leur reste plus assez de force pour profiter de leur victoire et rompre

¹¹² “And to an even greater extent we can count on the fingers of one hand the women who have traversed the given in search of its secret dimension: Emily Brontë explored death, Virginia Woolf life, and Katherine Mansfield sometimes – not very often – daily contingence and suffering.” (*SS* 764)

¹¹³ “Nor have they had the wealth of experience of a Dostoevsky, a Tolstoy: it is why the great book *Middlemarch* does not equal *War and Peace*; *Wuthering Heights*, in spite of its stature, does not have the scope of *Brothers Karamazov*.” (*SS* 763)

toutes leurs amarres : par exemple, on ne trouve pas chez elles l'ironie, la désinvolture d'un Stendhal ni sa tranquille sincérité. (*DSb* 623-4)¹¹⁴

To anyone who has worked on *A Room of One's Own*, especially in relation to the second-wave feminist literary criticism that emerged out of, and elaborated on, it, this may sound like a very peculiar statement at best, a misreading of the text at worst. On the one hand, it is true that the narrator in *A Room of One's Own* suggests that 19th-century women writers lacked "integrity" (*AROO* 56) – a quality associated with good novels – because they were too afraid of their potential readership and thus ended up either using a conciliatory tone or an aggressive one, their novels lying "scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard, about the second-hand book shops of London" because they "had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others" (*AROO* 56). But on the very same page, the narrator goes on to argue that, on a closer look, Jane Austen and Emily Brontë were to be praised because they tried to "hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking" (*AROO* 56), because they "wrote as women write, not as men write" (*AROO* 56) even though in a later passage in the text the narrator clearly states that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (*AROO* 78).

There is an odd tension in the text between what we would now call gender essentialism and cultural constructivism, and the narrative perspectives employed by Woolf in her essay destabilise any attempt to solidify her (narrators') arguments into one contradiction-free whole. In this sense, Beauvoir is too intent on acknowledging and praising Woolf's emphasis on the adverse material conditions preventing women from writing 'well' – however we may interpret the latter term – and thus ends up silencing those parts of *A Room of One's Own* that are not in line with what Beauvoir understands to be the overarching argument of the text. In this sense, Beauvoir is very much aligned with those "more recent feminisms" that, as Laura Marcus has aptly suggested, "have often found it difficult to accept" the contradictions in Woolf's thought, "tending to opt for one pole rather than another, instead of recognising and

¹¹⁴ "George Eliot drew from her revolt a detailed and dramatic vision of Victorian England; however, as Virginia Woolf shows, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot had to spend so much negative energy freeing themselves from external constraints that they arrived out of breath at the point where the major masculine writers were starting out; they have little strength left to benefit from their victory and break all the ties that bind them: for example, they lack the irony, the nonchalance, of a Stendhal or his calm sincerity." (*SS* 762-3)

negotiating inconsistencies” (Marcus 2010: 144). While a part of second-wave feminist literary criticism would instrumentalise *A Room of One’s Own* to emphasise the need for a gynocriticism or in order to find the critical tools required to reconstruct what *écriture féminine* may mean, Beauvoir instrumentalises the text in the opposite direction in that she highlights the materialist angle of Woolf’s essay while at the same time neglecting those parts of the text that move towards more essentialist arguments.

Later in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir reinforces her argument that women have not written great masterpieces, thereby showing the same ignorance of literary history later attributed to Woolf – and in fact extending it to the present day:

Aucune femme n’a écrit *Le Procès*, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysse* ou *Les Sept Piliers de la Sagesse*. Elles ne contestent pas la condition humaine parce qu’elles commencent à peine à pouvoir intégralement l’assumer. C’est ce qui explique que leurs œuvres manquent généralement de résonances métaphysiques et aussi d’humour noir ; elles ne mettent pas le monde entre parenthèses, elles ne lui posent pas de questions, elles n’en dénoncent pas les contradictions : elles le prennent au sérieux. Le fait est d’ailleurs que la majorité des hommes connaît les mêmes limitations ; c’est quand on la compare avec les quelques rares artistes qui méritent d’être appelés « grands » que la femme apparaît comme médiocre. Ce n’est pas un destin qui la limite ; on peut facilement comprendre pourquoi il ne lui a pas été donné – pourquoi il ne lui sera peut-être pas donné avant assez longtemps – d’atteindre les plus hauts sommets. (DSb 626)¹¹⁵

Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1914-5, pub. 1925), Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), and T. E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) all count, in Beauvoir’s view, as literary masterpieces which women could never write because of the limitations imposed upon them by patriarchal ideology. It is strange to say the least that Beauvoir should reach the conclusion that women do not challenge the human condition because they have not assumed it yet; just to mention a few examples from her reading as a philosophy student, surely the characters of Jo March

¹¹⁵ “No woman ever wrote *The Trial*, *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses*, or *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Women do not challenge the human condition because they have barely begun to be able to assume it entirely. This explains why their works generally lack metaphysical resonance and black humour as well; they do not set the world apart, they do not question it, they do not denounce its contradictions: they take it seriously. The fact is that most men have the same limitations as well; it is when she is compared with the few rare artists who deserve to be called ‘great’ that woman comes out as mediocre. Destiny is not what limits her: it is easy to understand why it has not been possible for her to reach the highest summits, and why it will perhaps not be possible for some time.” (SS 764)

and Maggie Tulliver did not only challenge humanity but patriarchal ideology too, as did Jane Eyre. But even if we limit our selection to Woolf's novels, it is quite evident that there are, in fact, metaphysical resonances – Beauvoir herself quoted passages from *Mrs Dalloway* that are far from describing a factual reality – and humour, although perhaps in the latter case this was not something that readers perceived in Woolf's works at the time.

In the following paragraph, Beauvoir ties this in with her view of literary theory:

L'art, la littérature, la philosophie sont des tentatives pour fonder à neuf le monde sur une liberté humaine : celle du créateur ; il faut d'abord se poser sans équivoque comme une liberté pour nourrir pareille prétention. Les restrictions que l'éducation et la coutume imposent à la femme limitent sa prise sur l'univers ; quand le combat pour prendre place dans ce monde est trop rude, il ne peut être question de s'en arracher ; or, il faut d'abord en émerger dans une souveraine solitude si l'on veut tenter de s'en ressaisir : ce qui manque d'abord à la femme c'est de faire dans l'angoisse et l'orgueil l'apprentissage de son délaissement et de sa transcendance.

(*DSb* 627)¹¹⁶

Because of their social conditioning, women are prevented, in Beauvoir's view, from accessing the freedom that is a prerequisite for all intellectual endeavours. In view of the negative influence exerted over women by the current education and by custom, no woman could ever hope to have a grasp of the world firm enough to make literature, philosophy, or art of the first magnitude out of it. What seems particularly problematic in this passage when compared to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is Beauvoir's insistence on the notion of artistic creation as a solitary undertaking: while Woolf would argue that “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (*AROO* 49), Beauvoir is perhaps more pragmatic at best, more individualistic at worst in her emphasis on the “sovereign solitude” required of any writer desiring to make something of him- or herself.

¹¹⁶ “Art, literature, and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom: that of the creator; to foster such an aim, one must first unequivocally posit oneself as a freedom. The restrictions that education and custom impose on woman limit her grasp of the universe; when the struggle to claim a place in this world gets too rough, there can be no question of tearing oneself away from it; one must first emerge within it in sovereign solitude if one wants to try to grasp it anew: what woman primarily lacks is learning from the practice of abandonment and transcendence, in anguish and pride.” (*SS* 764-5)

It could be argued, however, that Beauvoir is in part voicing the common imaginary of her time in saying that there are no great women writers, and this may be interpreted as a strategic move to bring attention back to the material conditions impeding women in their access to the world. For Beauvoir, the world and intellectual achievements go hand in hand, so as long as women do not have access to education and to all the possibilities guaranteed to men, they will always fall short of anyone's expectations. In this sense, Beauvoir is undermining the authority of all the women writers she has rested her arguments upon for more than 600 pages here, but she is doing so with a precise goal in mind: to ask for better material conditions for women. As a matter of fact, what she says in the last two passages that have been quoted runs counter to the very foundations of her second volume: there *are* women writers worth reading, regardless of whether they write novels, poetry, diaries or letters; their voices are worth listening to even if some of their writings did not live up to patriarchal standards, as their situations only enabled them to have a limited grasp on the world.

To take the argument further, we could also point to the fact that, for all her accusations of mediocrity and for all the insistence on patriarchal notions of the solitary intellectual, through a gendered phenomenological lens Beauvoir is in fact drawing attention precisely to "the experience of the mass behind the single voice" which Woolf mentions, so that women writers are finally given space within a rigorous philosophical framework, albeit with questionable results. Thus, based on Beauvoir's treatment and discussion of Woolf, we may also conclude, somewhat provocatively, that there *are* great women writers and Woolf is shown to be one of them in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. She may not have written *The Trial* or *Ulysses*, but she wrote a text to which Beauvoir returned time and again throughout her career: *Mrs Dalloway*. A one-day novel that shows how paradoxically interconnected certain realities are, a text that excavates the daily life of an upper-middle-class wife and mother in order to make a metaphysically resonant space out of her house.¹¹⁷ That this can be argued in relation to Woolf in particular is dictated by the scope of this thesis, but similar arguments could be put forward in relation to Katherine Mansfield, George Eliot, or other women writers whose

¹¹⁷ Of course, I do not mean to suggest that *Mrs Dalloway* is the *only* novel by Woolf that could be considered an example of great writing; rather, if we look at Beauvoir's reading of Woolf, it is quite clear that *Mrs Dalloway* was often at the back of her mind. Chapter 3 will show how three other novels by Woolf can be explored in original ways through a Beauvoirian lens.

texts accompanied Beauvoir throughout her life and work. Bearing this in mind while reading her disavowal of the greatness of women's writing is what reading Beauvoir in counterpoint means. It is not a critical act that discourages readers and critics from acknowledging her authorship and authority over her own work; rather, reading her in counterpoint means questioning the reliability of her own narratives about herself: as several feminist critics have done in the past, giving Beauvoir's statements about herself as a literary writer rather than a philosopher the benefit of the doubt, as it were, allows us to listen to her philosophical production with a fresh pair of ears, so that previously unheard resonances may be heard even where no one ever thought to look – or perhaps more aptly, where no one ever thought to *prick up one's ears and listen*.

Chapter 2.

Intercorporeal identities in Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir

As Chapter 1 has shown, Beauvoir's three-phase reception of Woolf principally encompassed three literary and philosophical traditions: modernism, feminism, and life-writing. In all of these, the notion of identity or subjectivity – whether conceived as a fixed and stable quality or as an oscillating aspect of oneself that is always in flux – is of paramount importance. Both philosophy and literature have long been concerned with the question of what it means to be a human subject and how this subjectivity may be represented or described faithfully in writing. Woolf's and Beauvoir's responses to literature and philosophy and the different traditions in which they inscribed themselves – or were inscribed by subsequent generations of critics, feminists, and readers – ought to be understood in their original framework, so this chapter will be an attempt to reconnect not only Woolf's literary production to Beauvoir's philosophy, but also their relationship to (some of) the various sources and inspirations they drew on.

Before delving into the notion of intercorporeal identities in Woolf's late fiction, this Chapter will examine how reading and writing are tied up, in Woolf's essays as well as in Beauvoir's philosophy, with notions of identity and intercorporeality that, despite obvious differences, share a common objective: offering literature as a privileged locus for embodied intersubjectivity. The expression 'intercorporeal identities' itself requires more than a brief commentary. For this reason, the rest of this introduction will attempt to better describe the two terms involved by drawing attention to their trajectories in the humanities more broadly. The obvious focus of this Chapter is literature, but philosophy as a discipline will also be examined in order to reach a better understanding of the complexities and stratifications mobilised by the notion of intercorporeal identities. Although it may well be objected that these two disciplines are hard to reconcile, this Chapter – and this thesis – is premised upon the importance of transdisciplinarity to create a better understanding of Woolf's works. This does not mean that disciplinary constraints will be flouted; on the contrary, the specificities of each discipline will also be addressed in each section so as to produce a global analysis of the problems their discrete works and their connections pose to the relationship between identity and the body.

The first term we need to dwell on is ‘identity’. In what has become a canonical study aptly titled *Against Identity (Contro l’identità)*, Italian cultural anthropologist Francesco Remotti drew attention to how “a search for identity implies two diametrically opposed operations which nonetheless refer back to each other: *a*) an operation of *separation*; *b*) an operation of *assimilation*” (Remotti 2001: 8).¹ On the one hand, subjects – but the argument may be extended to things, phenomena, etc. – are *separated* from one another because of their differences; on the other hand, they are *assimilated* to one another, within the same category, because of their common characteristics.

In more schematic terms, Remotti goes on to highlight how identity is made up of three different but interrelated levels:

“C) *identity constructions*

B) *connections and alternatives*

A) *change and flux*” (ibid., p. 11).²

The lowest level, A, manifests itself as “a continuous, obscure and magmatic change, radically ‘de-structive’”; level B is “that of *connections*, and is characterised by potentialities, namely alternative elements”; the highest level, based on the other two, is made up of the different identity constructions that may change over time and against similar possibilities (ibid., p. 9).³ As Remotti argues, “Identity is construction; but it also entails an effort to differentiate from the two preceding levels: identity is in fact constructed (level C) by differentiating itself from, or opposing itself to both alterity (level B) and alterations (level A)” (ibid.).⁴ As a result, Remotti concludes, “Deciding on identity is thus violence against the cobwebs of connections; but it is also a sometimes heroic attempt (which cannot be renounced) at salvation in the face of the inexorability

¹ The essay has never been translated into English, so all references are to the original Italian text and the translation provided is my own. The original quote will be provided in footnotes: “la ricerca dell’identità implica due operazioni diametralmente opposte e che tuttavia si richiamano l’un l’altra: *a*) un’operazione di *separazione*; *b*) un’operazione di *assimilazione*”.

² “C) *costruzioni dell’identità*”, “B) *connessioni e alternative*”, “A) *flusso e mutamento*”.

³ “Esso [il livello più basso] si presenta come un mutamento continuo, oscuro e magmatico, radicalmente ‘de-struttivo’. Il secondo livello, intermedio (B), è quello delle *connessioni*, ed è caratterizzato da potenzialità ovvero da elementi alternativi. Da ultimo, il livello più alto (C), sovrapposto ai primi due, è quello delle *costruzioni* dell’identità.”

⁴ “L’identità è costruzione; ma essa implica anche uno sforzo di differenziazione, che si esercita nei confronti dei due livelli precedenti: l’identità è infatti costruita (livello C) differenziandosi od opponendosi sia all’alterità (livello B), sia alle alterazioni (livello A).”

of flux and change” (ibid., p. 10).⁵ Martial lexicon notwithstanding, Remotti’s schematic representation of identity helps us to see it as a mobile construct, a matter for subjects to decide over time by differentiating themselves from others (alterity) as well as from different variations of the same over time (alterations). It ought to be noted that, because of the stratifications of identity constructions, which are premised on levels A and B, we are never unconditioned in the way we conceive of ourselves or of others, a view which distances identity from a voluntaristic, even solipsistic act that does not take account of the complexity of such a term. As Remotti concludes, identity, far from being set in stone, is “erected in spite of the flux and beyond alternatives”: “*A* and *B* are not immovable foundations; on the contrary, they resemble quicksand that swallows (*A*) or diversifies (*B*)”. For this reason, “One gets the impression that underneath the structures of *C* there are no foundations but rivers (continuous flux) and mechanisms of alteration and differentiation (discontinuity)” (ibid., p. 11).⁶ If there are any foundations from which identity is constructed, then, these are not solid and stable but rather mobile and living.

This anthropological view of identity helps us to move beyond the essentialist-vs-constructivist dichotomy set up by binary understandings of concepts – understandings which even feminist theory has often struggled to distance itself from, despite acknowledging how problematic they may be. An essentialist would see identity as something to be *unveiled* rather than decided or constructed, thereby failing to do justice to levels *B* and *A* in Remotti’s useful schema. On the opposite side of the binary, constructivists would argue for each and every subject’s ability to identify as *X* in spite of the constraints placed upon her by external conditioning: according to them, identity constructions (*C*) rule unimpeded by connections and alternatives (*B*).

As will be shown in Section 2.2, Beauvoir has sometimes been understood to be a constructivist because of her emphasis on the process of becoming, but it will be argued that this view has more to do with the spirit of the times – especially the rise of constructivism in (Anglo-American) feminist theory in the 1980s, as the work of Judith

⁵ “Decidere l’identità è dunque violenza contro le ragnatele delle connessioni; ma è anche tentativo talvolta eroico (e irrinunciabile) di salvazione rispetto all’inesorabilità del flusso e del mutamento.”

⁶ “Le strutture dell’identità non sono costruite sulla ‘roccia’; sono erette invece nonostante il flusso e al di là delle alternative. *A* e *B* non sono basi inamovibili; al contrario, sembrano quasi sabbie mobili, che inghiottono (*A*) o diversificano (*B*). Si ha l’impressione che sotto alle strutture di *C* non vi siano fondamenta, ma fiumi (flusso continuo) e meccanismi di alterazione o differenziazione (discontinuità).”

Butler testifies (cf. Butler 1986) – than with her own arguments about how womanhood is a construction. Because of the indeterminacy and instability of the theses on womanhood presented in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf has sometimes been understood to be an essentialist feminist theorist or, alternatively, a constructivist, both theses, as has been argued above, reducing the complexity of the text to a set of arguments Woolf was clearly building upon but ultimately departing from. As our reading of Woolf in *Le Deuxième Sexe* has shown, Beauvoir interpreted Woolf to be more of a materialist constructivist than anything else, while second-wave feminist literary critics – especially proponents of *écriture féminine* – attempted to rescue Woolf as a gynocritic *avant la lettre*. Of course, if we extend our discussion to *Three Guineas*, a more materialist Woolf will emerge, one who sees women as a *class*. Section 2.1 will build on this discussion in order to better explore Woolf's and Beauvoir's theories of the subject.

Much like the category of man requires its complementary opposite, woman, in order to function as a patriarchal concept, the notion of identity constantly calls into play that of difference. As is known, Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that “elle [i.e. la femme] se détermine et se différencie par rapport à l'homme et non celui-ci par rapport à elle ; elle est l'inessentiel en face de l'essentiel. Il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolu ; elle est l'Autre” (*DSa* 17).⁷ The man-woman dichotomy is predicated on the broader identity-alterity dichotomy, Beauvoir argues, to the effect that in order to posit himself as a subject, man has to cast woman as the Other. This perceptive argument is one of the most important parts of Beauvoir's legacy in subsequent feminist theory, as the theorists of sexual difference will build on it even though they will disagree with Beauvoir on how women's liberation ought to be achieved.

In an article originally published in French in 1979 and translated into English for *Signs* two years later, Julia Kristeva famously theorised two “generations” or “phases” of feminisms. Although she does not refer to any specific political or geographical context, it is clear from the way she describes these two generations that they may be derived from – or at any rate assimilated to – the French context. In Kristeva's account, the first generation was “universalist in its approach” and “globalise[d] the problems of

⁷ “she [i.e. woman] determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (*SS* 6).

women of different milieux, ages, civilizations, or simply of varying psychic structures, under the label ‘Universal Woman’” in the interests of women’s political demands, such as “equal pay for equal work”, equal access to professions and institutions as men, and the “rejection [...] of the attributes traditionally considered feminine or maternal” (Kristeva 1981: 18-19). As was highlighted in Section 1.1, this strand of feminism was militant and formed the core of the MLF in France, spearheaded and/or represented in philosophical terms by feminist materialist thinkers or socialist feminists like Beauvoir, Delphy, Guillaumin, Wittig, and Mathieu, with the periodical *Questions féministes* (from 1981, *Nouvelles questions féministes*) promoting their work.

What Kristeva terms the “second generation” was made up instead of “younger women who came to feminism after May 1968” as well as “women who had an aesthetic or psychoanalytic experience” (ibid., p. 19): in France, these women, represented by Psych et po, rejected the idea of linear temporality that was the basic assumption of the first generation, “and as a consequence there [arose] an exacerbated distrust of the entire political dimension” (ibid.). While the portrayal of the second generation as being influenced by psychoanalysis still seems accurate, the implication that they had an “aesthetic” experience which the first generation did not have seems to be at odds with Beauvoir’s and Wittig’s interest in literature as a site of political commitment and symbolic – to borrow Kristeva’s own term – revolution. At any rate, Kristeva goes on to argue that

by demanding recognition of an irreducible identity, without equal in the opposite sex and, as such, exploded, plural, fluid, in a certain way nonidentical, this feminism situates itself outside the linear time of identities which communicate through projection and revindication. (Ibid., pp. 19-20)

As was shown in Section 1.1, this *brand* of feminism would go on to acquire international resonance through its translation and circulation in Anglo-American criticism as ‘French feminism’ while registering the trademark of, and thus commercially appropriating, the MLF in France. Unlike the materialist, militant strand of the French women’s movement, this second generation was predicated upon the belief in a fundamental sexual difference between men and women, one that is constitutive of their sense of womanhood. In this sense, from our perspective, while materialist and socialist feminists insisted on what we would now term *gender* as the territory of feminist contestation, Psych et po operated on the plane of *sex*, suggesting in

no uncertain terms how *being born* – rather than *becoming* – a woman constitutes an “irreducible identity”, as Kristeva states here.⁸ That this identity should be, as a consequence, “exploded, plural, fluid, in a certain way nonidentical” and thus disrupt the notion of linear time seems to be very much at odds with the historical analysis proposed by Delphy and Moses in Section 1.1.

This French *clivage*, to borrow again Chaperon’s useful term, is indicative not only of differing views as to what womanhood is and how to contrast patriarchal ideology more effectively, but also points to how different languages and traditions in feminist discourse worked in order to theorise or mobilise feminism. As Rosi Braidotti aptly remarked, “the notion of ‘gender’ is a vicissitude of the English language, one that bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages”, as “it has found no successful echo in the French, Spanish, or Italian feminist movements” (Braidotti 1994: 150). Although her subsequent example – “le genre” pointing to humanity as a whole, as in “le genre humain” (“humankind”) – seems to me to be far-fetched, my experience in Italy and France does corroborate this observation, as both countries have clearly *imported* the language of “gender studies” or “gender theory” from the Anglo-American context in recent decades, as a result of a clear cultural hegemonic process initiated by U.S. and British academic discourses.⁹ This is not to say that gender as a concept has not been useful to articulate feminist theories or to mobilise feminist practices, however: on the contrary, I would go so far as to argue that being critical of gender as a useful hermeneutic category for historical inquiry normally results in being, in fact, transphobic, as I will point out below.

Before moving on to this argument, however, it is important to dwell on the notion of difference as theorised by women of colour and queer women. Both of these marginalised groups struggled to find room among the ranks of white feminist movements in the United States and in France, where from the 1970s onwards, new generations of feminists censured in no uncertain terms how the collective struggle

⁸ As will be shown in Sections 1.1 and 1.2, the Beauvoirian notion of becoming does not coincide with the notion of gender as performance, despite what Butler argued; rather, it informed Butler’s re-elaboration of Beauvoir’s philosophy.

⁹ “Gender”, despite having a one-to-one translation in Italian (*genere*), is often used as an Anglicism in Italian both by gender theory scholars and by bigoted detractors, with the latter insisting on how this is a construct of Anglo-American origin. Interestingly, the German language still does not have a translation of “gender”, as the word “Geschlecht” can either mean sex or gender, thereby signalling how even Germanic languages may differ widely in terms of the adoption and assimilation of English lexemes.

against patriarchy perpetuated racist and queerphobic stereotypes, thereby showing that this sexual difference was predicated on white supremacist and heterosexual assumptions. Black feminists like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker or bell hooks, for instance, showed in their work how biased some (white, bourgeois) political theories and practices can be. Just to mention one example of this, bell hooks famously recovered Sojourner Truth's 1851 polemical question "Ain't I a woman?" and highlighted how

Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because we did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialisation had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. [...] Consequently, when the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, we argued that sexism was insignificant in light of the harsher, more brutal reality of racism. (hooks 1981: 1)

Feminism was often perceived by women of colour in the United States and elsewhere to be a white, bourgeois movement, and this discouraged racialised women from taking part in the collective struggle against patriarchy. This placed Black women in "a double bind", hooks goes on to point out, because fighting against patriarchy meant "that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism" whereas fighting against racism implied "endorses[ing] a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice" (ibid., p. 3).

While in France the situation was clearly different, some (white) materialist feminists like Colette Guillaumin dedicated part of their theoretical and political work to unveiling the intersection between sex and race under patriarchy. In the meantime, 'French feminism' – or what Kristeva refers to as the "second phase", in some ways implying an underlying logic of progress – theorised womanhood without questioning its white, bourgeois, anti-political assumptions, to the extent that subsequent generations of women could no longer turn a blind eye to this neglect: even a seemingly staunch supporter of sexual difference like Braidotti, for instance, notes that "Irigaray fails to account for multiplicity of differences among women, especially on the ground of culture and ethnic identity" because the Belgian thinker overemphasises a direct link

between female identity and feminist subjectivity (Braidotti 1994: 170).¹⁰ In 2019, decolonial feminist Françoise Vergès rightly asked herself – and her readership – “Comment sommes-nous passées d'un féminisme ambivalent ou indifférent à la question raciale et coloniale dans le monde de langue française à un féminisme blanc et impérialiste ?” (Vergès 2019: 11).¹¹ That she poses the question in these terms implies that the neglect of race issues in (white) French feminisms has directly contributed to making feminist theory subservient to a logic of imperialist domination, and in fact Vergès goes on to refer to the notion of femonationalism as the evidence of this.¹²

As is to be expected, Woolf and Beauvoir have been criticised and revised by women of colour in their work precisely because of their reliance on a white imaginary. Suffice it to mention here Alice Walker’s insightful work of resignification on *A Room of One’s Own* in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1972), where Walker intersperses quotations of the Woolfian text with the experience of African-American enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley. After summing up the core thesis of *A Room of One’s Own* as “in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself”, Walker goes on to ask: “What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself?” (Walker 1972: 404). In a truly palimpsestic rewriting of the English ‘feminist Bible’ by means of square brackets, Walker shows how Woolf took for granted certain privileges because of her specific location in a white supremacist country and thus unveils the white, bourgeois assumptions informing the theories expounded in the text:

Virginia Woolf wrote further, speaking of course not of our Phillis, that “any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [insert “eighteenth century,” insert “black woman,” insert “born or made a slave”] would certainly have gone

¹⁰ I describe Braidotti as a “staunch supporter of sexual difference” because she emphasises that the first of the levels of difference under patriarchy resides precisely in the man-woman binary, a concept which strikes me as deeply problematic, as I will argue below. It is essential to note, however, that Braidotti also builds on the materialist feminist tradition and will go on to insist precisely on a posthuman feminism in later years.

¹¹ “How did we move from a feminism that was indifferent or ambivalent to racial and colonial issues in the Francophone world, to a white and imperialist feminism?” (Vergès 2021: 4).

¹² “Femonationalism” is a recent coinage pointing to the kind of feminism which, while struggling for the liberation of women, perpetuates, and directly contributes to, the oppression of women of colour in favour of nationalistic (read white supremacist) sentiment. In a seminal article, Sara R. Farris encapsulated this phenomenon as “the contemporary mobilisation of feminist ideas by nationalist parties and neoliberal governments under the banner of the war against the perceived patriarchy of Islam in particular, and of migrants from the global South in general” (Farris 2012: 184-5).

crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert “Saint”], feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts [add “chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's body by someone else, submission to an alien religion”], that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.” (Ibid., the square brackets are Walker’s)

If what Woolf offers is a perspective on the subject of women and fiction, this reappropriation of the narrative by Walker clearly illustrates what Edward Said famously termed “contrapuntal” reading, namely a process whereby colonial texts are shown to be predicated upon the radical exclusion of the colonised from the literary imaginary, even though this imaginary is founded precisely on imperial(ist) domination (cf. Said 1994). Woolf’s (narrator’s) perspective is of necessity partial and situated, but the unsaid and overlooked aspects of her location are made explicit here by Walker, who thus contributes to revising Woolf, and with her the foundational myth of Judith Shakespeare, the poet women are called upon to resuscitate through their creative endeavours.

In a similar vein, several Black scholars have returned to Beauvoir’s theories on and representations of womanhood. Kathryn Sophia Belle (formerly Gines), for instance, argues that *The Second Sex* sets up racism and sexism as comparative frameworks of oppression – in the sense that the text initially draws a parallel between these two forms – but then goes on to interpret them instead as *competing* frameworks of oppression, thereby decreeing quite problematically that sexism overrides racism (cf. Belle 2014). As hooks showed, Black women initially felt as if racism was more important than sexism, which shows how Beauvoir’s underlying logic is flawed and predicated upon a neglect of Black women’s voices and perspectives. For this reason, Belle has also recently made a contrapuntal analysis of Beauvoir’s white feminism in a monograph that juxtaposes and contrasts Beauvoir with the theories of a plethora of women of colour, thereby showing how intricately linked the two traditions can be in spite of Beauvoir’s unacknowledged neglect (cf. Belle 2023). A similar contrapuntal reading is provided by Janine Jones, who has recently drawn attention to how in *L’Invitée* and *The Second Sex* White subjectivation is predicated upon the othering of Black female presence (cf. Jones 2019).

These examples show how productive Woolf's and Beauvoir's texts are for the attempts on the part of subsequent generations of racialised feminists to re-direct the two authors' perspectives on womanhood so as to make them more perceptive to different axes of oppression. The texts that seem to attract more criticism seem to be the two 'feminist Bibles', namely *The Second Sex* and *A Room of One's Own* – one may wonder what would happen if these contrapuntal readings were extended to include, say, *Three Guineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. If we interpret these alterations by adapting Remotti's useful schema to the historical developments of feminist theory, the magmatic difference which runs through identity finds ever new ways to undermine the foundations upon which Woolf's and Beauvoir's identity constructions rest, thereby altering our own understanding of who Woolf and Beauvoir were and what assumptions their theories were based upon. This kind of alterity and this sort of alterations through time are precisely what risks being excluded from an account of patriarchal oppression that does not foreground women's material conditions of existence, as we will see.

Because every construction of womanhood is necessarily dependent upon a difference from others who are not represented, and because time may allow previously (more) marginalised subjects to find a voice, insisting on an inherent sexual difference between men and women risks perpetuating the patriarchal notion that the sexes are two and, perhaps more crucially, risks encouraging trans-exclusionary, if not transphobic, perspectives to find fertile ground in a liberation movement. In 1980, Monique Wittig famously and somewhat provocatively argued that "lesbians are not women", "for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems" (Wittig 1980: 110): if a feminised subject is not attracted to men and does not provide them with free emotional and domestic labour, then this subject cannot paradoxically qualify as a woman within patriarchal ideology. She was responding at the time to one of the impasses of the white, bourgeois, heterosexual feminism in the United States rather than in France, namely the exclusion of lesbians from the women's movement, but it could be argued that her intuition about the exclusionary implications of the political and theoretical category of woman is relevant to Kristeva's second phase, too.

Braidotti's insightful representation of 'difference' in feminist theory according to three levels helps us to see the complexity of the issue. In Braidotti's account, which she

invites us to see as “an exercise in naming different facets of a single complex phenomenon” rather than “a categorical distinction”, difference comprises three separate but interdependent “layers of complexity”: “difference between men and women”, “differences among women”, and “differences within each woman” (Braidotti 1994: 158). While the last two seem to go in the right direction of adding complexity to the issue of feminist subjectivation, the first difference strikes me as being predicated upon a somewhat naïve – if not patriarchal, binarist, even trans-exclusionary – understanding of sex. As the work of U.S. biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling has shown, sex ought to be interpreted as a spectrum rather than a binary, as it relies on complex factors (genetic, hormonal, physiological) which may change during the development of embryos, children, and teenagers and which we ultimately interpret according to socially determined categories and expectations (cf. Fausto-Sterling 2020). Fausto-Sterling’s insightful foray into human sex not only explains why there is such a thing as intersexual people – namely individuals whose genitalia, chromosomes, or genetic apparatus cannot be neatly categorised as either male or female – but should also inform our understanding of the sex binary more broadly.

In a similar vein, the work of Judith Butler in the 1990s showed how sex is always already gender. As they explain by referring to Beauvoir’s notion of becoming woman,

If “the body is a situation,” as she claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along. (Butler [1990] 1999: 12)

Because sex, as Fausto-Sterling’s research shows, is determined by having recourse to social and cultural criteria, the way we perceive and attribute sex to newborn bodies is always already inscribed with cultural significations. Far from possessing a set of biological, anatomical, genetic or hormonal qualities that precede language, the sexed body ought to be understood as already implicated in heteropatriarchal discourse. As Butler encapsulates it,

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as

“prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts.

(Ibid., p. 11)

Outside of a context in which male and female are understood to be mutually exclusive categories, sex ceases to signify: there is nothing purely ‘biological’ or pre-discursive about sex, as the category itself is one we have created to make sense of (certain) specific characteristics within a cultural field. Claiming this is not to deny the potential differences inherent in disparate bodies in the name of a supposed universality; on the contrary, suspending, albeit for a moment, our belief in sexual dimorphism may help us to gain a better understanding of what specific bodies are like, as Fausto-Sterling’s research on intersexual individuals shows.

In the wake of these scientific and philosophical observations, believing in a supposed difference between two sexes, male and female, turns out to rest on a somewhat naïve understanding of identity. Even if this dimorphism had nothing to do with bodies – a thesis that is clearly refuted by a cursory look at Irigaray’s metaphors, which tend to insist on labia or other parts of traditionally (read cisgender) ‘female’ genitalia –, resorting to the notion of a female psyche strikes me as an attempt to reinscribe these supposed sexual differences within the brain. In contrast to the received patriarchal notion that sex and gender differences are ‘hard-wired’, U.S. philosopher of mind Cordelia Fine has drawn attention to the fact that the self is always dependent upon context, and the sort of expectations we associate with one sex or another come from nurture rather than nature (cf. Fine 2010). Identity, as Remotti argues, is based upon alterity and alteration, to the effect that the subject-object distinction is far less neat and clear-cut than we normally make it out to be – an intuition which, as we will see, phenomenology as a philosophical tradition advanced a century ago.

Within this framework, understanding sex or gender to follow intrinsically from a specific set of anatomical parts is not only scientifically inaccurate and, to be blunt about it, somewhat outmoded, but also runs the risk of neglecting, and thus positively excluding, the existence of transgender individuals. By insisting on the *sexual* dimension to womanhood, feminists of sexual difference may be considered to be furthering the idea that all women have always been identified and socialised as such and that, as a consequence, the feminist movement ought to be reserved for cisgender women. This is not to say that feminism should *not* be about cis women, of course, and

the notion of intersectionality comes to our rescue whenever previously marginalised voices in the feminist movements decide to speak up, as the case of Black feminists above shows. However, it can be quite alarming to see how, with the rise of trans visibility in the United States and Europe, some trans-exclusionary feminists have closed ranks to protect (cis-)women-only spaces against the perceived intrusion on the part of queer and trans women. This feeling of being under attack even by those who should be their sisters is certainly understandable considering the ever-present spectre of violence against women in patriarchal societies like ours; however, depicting womanhood as being utterly dependent upon having a functioning reproductive system risks excluding not only trans women but even an important percentage of cis women.

What is more, even in academic discourse, theories have been promoted that are actively and often aggressively transphobic. What is today called “gender-critical feminism” amounts very often, in academic as well as in everyday discourse, to trans-exclusionary theories and practices: these theories tend to regard gender as a useless interpretive category and go back to dated notions of sexual dimorphism. In recent times, Oxford University Press (OUP), one of the leading academic publishers worldwide, has been taken to task by feminists and academics for platforming anti-trans discourse for the sake of ‘free speech’ or, what seems to me even worse, ‘scholarship’. In particular, Australian gender-critical feminist philosopher Holly Lawford-Smith published two monographs with OUP, *Gender-Critical Feminism* (2022) and *Sex Matters* (2023), both of which have caused quite a stir not only on Twitter, but first and foremost among OUP authors, 800 of whom decided to sign a letter to contrast the Press’s endorsement of transphobic views.¹³ To better understand this debate, we ought to remember that the gender-critical movement in the United States has recently been accused of “furthering a specifically genocidal ideology that seeks the complete eradication of trans identity from the world” by the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, at a time when U.S. legislation is increasingly hostile to trans forms of subjectivation and relation.¹⁴ This controversial debate also extends to Britain, where

¹³ An account of what happened and Eugenia Zuroski’s decision to pull her monograph under contract with OUP can be read here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YKtcU7glSiQ045ZOcdJfWH4K2ekufPxo7zyivbq1AqU/edit> [last accessed 05/05/2023 at 15.42].

¹⁴ Cf. <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/statements-new-page/statement-on-the-genocidal-nature-of-the-gender-critical-movement%E2%80%99s-ideology-and-practice> [last accessed 20/04/2023 at 08.35].

the case of former philosophy professor Kathleen Stock stands out as one of the clearest signals that even (some) universities are starting to take notice of the alarming rise of transphobia in academic circles.¹⁵ While the merit or lack thereof of these trans-exclusionary feminists is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, it ought to be noted how these debates inform the current feminist situation in the Anglosphere, a situation to which philosophy and literature, perhaps, may contribute a few interesting insights.

The notion of sexual difference, then, is not necessarily harmless, excluding, as it does, trans women from the participation in feminist liberation. After all, as Beauvoir and phenomenologists before and with her argued, the body “is not a *thing*, but a situation” (*DSa* 75; *SS* 46), namely a curious alloy of nature and culture which functions as the basis for our existence – and Section 2.2 will return to the issue of the body by looking at what different disciplines can tell us about it. This notion of the body as situation has been extremely important to the development of critical phenomenology, a tendency in philosophy which attempts to situate any discourse on lived, bodily experience, with important trans theorists like Gayle Salamon, Susan Stryker, and Paul B. Preciado actively contributing to the philosophical debate, as we will see. Interestingly, the Beauvoirian notion of ‘becoming woman’ is often misunderstood to support trans women’s rights, especially by those women or feminists who feel threatened by such an idea: needless to say, Beauvoir never mentions transgender individuals in her work although these had already been at the centre of sexological debates between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (cf. Funke 2016).

The second term we introduce in this Chapter is ‘intercorporeality’, and as has emerged so far, this concept is intimately linked to notions of subjectivity, not least because, in the phenomenological tradition Beauvoir was relying on, a subject is constituted insofar as it is an *embodied* and *relational* entity. By drawing parallels between Beauvoir’s

¹⁵ Despite being appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2020, Stock was encouraged to resign from her position at the University of Sussex because of her gender-critical (transphobic) views, with an open letter signed by over 600 academic philosophers stating in no uncertain terms how her ‘scholarship’ promoted the marginalisation and exclusion of trans women from the feminist movement as well as from society more broadly. Some 200 people signed another open letter protesting for the recognition of Stock’s ‘free speech’. Stock’s speech at the Oxford Union on 30 May 2023 was also contested by trans activists, who used their bodies to protest against her right to voice transphobic views in a prestigious institution.

philosophy, Woolf's essays, technology, and scientific discourse, Section 2.2 will explore the meaning and function of the relational body in Woolf and Beauvoir. If a subject coincides with their body, this puts to rest some oft-cited binaries like mind vs body, or nature vs culture – binaries in which not only literature and philosophy, but also academic knowledge clearly participates. In 2008, transgender historian and activist Susan Stryker was asked to contribute to an issue of the U.S. journal *Radical History Review*, but her article was envisaged to be part of the “Reflections” or the “Radical History” sections instead of the portion of the journal reserved for more formal, academic feature articles. In her contribution, Stryker shows how this disciplinary and regulatory act presupposes a series of (neo)liberal, humanist, (hetero)patriarchal prejudices that equate the personal and the bodily with informality and popularisation rather than supposedly ‘neutral’ knowledge. As she explains:

The most basic act of normativising disciplinarity at work here is [...] rooted in a more fundamental and culturally pervasive disavowal of intrinsically diverse modes of bodily being as the lived ground of all knowing and of all knowledge production. In an epistemological regime structured by the subject-object split, the bodily situatedness of knowing becomes divorced from the status of formally legitimated objective knowledge; experiential knowledge of the material effects of one's own antinormative bodily difference on the production and reception of what one knows consequently becomes delegitimated as merely subjective. This in turn circumscribes the radical potential of that knowledge to critique other knowledge produced from other bodily locations, equally partial and contingent, which have been vested with the prerogatives of a normativity variously figured as white, masculinist, heterosexist, or Eurocentric — as feminism, communities of colour, and third world voices have long maintained, and as the disabled, intersexed, and transgendered increasingly contend. (Stryker 2008: 154)

Because of her position as a transgender historian who acknowledges and even at times emphasises the partiality and situatedness of her knowledge, Stryker has been shunted to an inferior position in the hierarchy of knowledge production, her scholarship being implicitly accused of not contributing to a supposedly universal discourse according to (neo)liberal, heterosexist standards. Because talking about one's bodily experiences – or anybody else's, really – is reduced, within this epistemic regime, to counterfeited facts obfuscated by what is self-evidently an object (the body as *res extensa*) rather than a

Cartesian subject (the mind as *res cogitans*), what lived experience amounts to is nothing short of an illegitimate form of knowledge which blurs the boundaries between the sacred (academic scholarship) and the profane (the lived experience of particularly situated individuals).

In what has become a classic study of mind/body dualism, Portuguese-American neuroscientist António Damásio famously argued that rationality, from Descartes' philosophy onwards, has been mistakenly understood to be based on the elision of emotion and the body, an error which has resulted in inaccurate interpretations of a plethora of clinical studies. Confronted with several patients whose brain lesion had a negative impact on those parts of the brain that were normally connected to emotion rather than rationality, Damásio found these patients to be terrible decision-makers: even though we tend to associate reason with this skill, the neuroscientist quickly realised that the Cartesian mind/body dualism led to a flawed understanding of human subjectivity. As he comments in his Foreword, "Flawed reason and impaired feelings stood out together as the consequences of a specific brain lesion, and this correlation suggested to me that feeling was an integral component of the machinery of reason" (Damásio 1994: xii).

More recently, German neuroscientist Thomas Fuchs has pointed out how reducing subjectivity to one isolated organ – the brain – produces a flawed understanding of how the human body works. Instead of insisting on a form of scientific reductionism whereby science is the only discipline that is able to see the truth of reality in an impartial manner, Fuchs argues for a phenomenology and ecology of the brain as the mediator of our relationship with the world, with other people, and with ourselves:

The brain is the mediator making the world accessible to us, and the transformer connecting our perceptions and movements. But in isolation, the brain would be just a dead organ. It is only animated in connection with our senses, nerves, and muscles, with the internal organs, our skin, our environment, and in relation to other human beings. [...] an adequate understanding of the human brain has to start from the phenomenology of our self-experience in the lifeworld, where we do not notice a mind-body division, but rather exist as embodied, animate, and mental beings, that is, as *human persons*. (Fuchs 2017: xvii-xviii)

As we will see, this mind/body dichotomy based on science, philosophy, and patriarchy was censured by Woolf and Beauvoir, too, along with other critics and philosophers. Phenomenology as a specific philosophical tradition will also be the object of analysis, in particular as it informed Beauvoir's theoretical work and as it may help us better understand some of Woolf's essays. By using an interdisciplinary lens, Section 2.2 will try to do justice to the complex stratifications that bodies have come to assume in theoretical discourse.

While the first two sections could safely be regarded as more philosophical and theoretical, Section 2.3 will return to the subject of literature in preparation for Chapter 3. If Section 2.1 looks at the self through a philosophical filter, Section 2.3 contributes to this analysis from a more literary angle: the notion of character as a narrative embodiment of subjectivity. This will enable us to explore issues connected to Woolf, Beauvoir, and literary theory so as to better locate their arguments on literature's role in the history of literary criticism.

2.1 Theorising the subject: philosophy and essay-writing

Literature and philosophy are not always regarded as compatible with each other. In "The Novels of George Meredith" (1928), published in revised form in *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932), Virginia Woolf famously drew attention to how Meredith's work had not aged well by 1929:

His teaching seems now too strident and too optimistic and too shallow. It obtrudes; and when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both. (E5 550)

In this novel-vs-philosophy dichotomy she sets up, Woolf suggests that fiction should never have a specific didactic aim or a precise political agenda because that risks watering down both fiction and its philosophy. Interestingly, Woolf refers here to philosophy as a "system", a view that Beauvoir and her time also shared, as we saw in Chapter 1; in this sense, because Woolf and Beauvoir offer perspectives rather than fully fledged systems, this also indicates that they were perhaps able to "consume" philosophy within other genres, thus creating hybrid generic wholes within the neat

categories of the novel, the short story, and autobiography.¹⁶ At any rate, Woolf maintains that Meredith's writing cannot be seen as great at her time because it is ruled by specific theories which are at odds with the form of the novel in the 1920s: while the Victorian age had a higher tolerance for morality encroaching upon the novel, the early twentieth century finds such a model too limiting in that it distorts the perspectives of both fiction and philosophy.¹⁷

In one of her Japan lectures, "Mon expérience d'écrivain" ("My Experience as a Writer", 1966), Simone de Beauvoir seems to corroborate Woolf's argument when she points out that

si j'écris un roman je peux très bien soutenir ces deux thèmes [i.e. joy and melancholy, or life and death] à la fois, comme on soutient plusieurs thèmes à la fois dans une symphonie, dans une sonate, en contre-point, en les mêlant et en les faisant exister ensemble et en appuyant l'un sur l'autre. (*ESdB* 444)¹⁸

Because of its symphonic quality, fiction can easily accommodate different voices and instruments within its whole, whereas essays and philosophy are supposed to produce more linear arguments governed by the principle of non-contradiction: because it operates in counterpoint, fiction is free to explore even contradictory theses without necessarily losing coherence, a liberty which philosophy cannot afford to take.

In order to better explore this dichotomy, Beauvoir also distinguishes between three types of novels which seem to be placed at a lower level of literary hierarchy than this notion of symphonic novel: *roman à clef*, *roman documentaire*, and *roman à these* (*ESdB* 445-7). The novel, Beauvoir notes, cannot be imagined as something to be unlocked by a key, as there is no singular message that can be transmitted through the novel nor are characters, scenes and places to be decrypted through one specific code. Documentary fiction similarly explores something that is too singular to become general or universal in the act of reading, so a documentary novel is necessarily a "survey

¹⁶ As we will see, Beauvoir argued for the importance of what she termed the "metaphysical novel" in her essays, and Ursula Tidd offered some insightful analyses of how her auto/biographical project is an extension of her philosophical work rather than simply something generically or disciplinarily 'different' (cf. Tidd 1999).

¹⁷ It ought to be noted here that what Woolf understands as 'philosophy' in this essay is clearly something more assimilable to a clear-cut moral message or an oversimplified political agenda, a concern, as we will see, Beauvoir also shares in her critique of the thesis novel.

¹⁸ "if I am writing a novel I can very well sustain these two themes at the same time, as one sustains several themes at the same time in a symphony or sonata, in counterpoint, by mixing them and making them exist together and by having them support each other" (*OLW* 286).

novel” (“roman de survol”, *ESdB* 446) which consists in passing on information about a specific event or setting. The last of the three genres discussed by Beauvoir, the *roman à thèse*, contradicts the very meaning of the novel, as a thesis cannot be supported by fiction and the novel ought to be tasked with representing the very ambiguity of existence instead (*ESdB* 447). As Beauvoir concludes, in order to write a novel “One must construct a novel which will truly be a multifaceted object that can never be summed up, which does not put forth any definitive word” (*OLW* 289; “il faut bâtir un roman qui sera véritablement un objet aux multiples facettes, qu’on ne pourra jamais résumer, qui n’énonce aucune parole définitive”, *ESdB* 447).

In both of these accounts, then, fiction and philosophy may be mixed together, but at the risk of reducing the novel to documentary evidence, didactic goals, or a mystery we need to decipher; on the contrary, the novel has to retain its ambiguous, irreducible complexity and heterogeneity, otherwise it ceases to be (good) fiction. An exploration of the philosophical subject in literature, especially but not necessarily just in novels – Beauvoir clearly suggests that essays are generically appropriate for arguments, Woolf would not necessarily agree with her, as we will see –, seems thus to be a slippery slope. For this reason, this section will attempt to sketch out some important trajectories in Woolf’s essays and in Beauvoir’s philosophy which may help us to understand what their view of the subject is without necessarily having the ambition to see these theories play out in Woolf’s fiction at the cost of sacrificing its inherent ambiguity.

Because Woolf, despite many attempts to bring her into dialogue with different philosophers, is after all not a philosopher, we will attempt to focus on notions of subjectivity as they are articulated in her essays on fiction. As the perceptive work of Eric Sandberg has shown,

While Woolf is never inattentive to the ultimately textual nature of character, she proposes an intimate bond between character and self. For Woolf, character exists simultaneously as a literary structure and as a reference to the real world of selves. Thus a discussion of character in Woolf blends inevitably into a discussion of subjectivity in Woolf. To neglect either element is to distort the whole. (Sandberg 2014: 277-8)

There is a constitutive continuity in Woolf’s essays and fiction between subject and character, a continuity on which this Chapter builds in its attempt to discuss the notion of subjectivity from three different angles: the philosophical notion of the subject

(Section 2.1); the scientific, technological, and phenomenological understanding of the subject as a body (Section 2.2); and the narrative idea of character, as elaborated by Woolf in her essays on fiction and by Beauvoir in her essays on literary theory (Section 2.3). Although it may sometimes feel like a bit of a stretch in terms of linguistic conventions, I will be using ‘subject’ as a gender-neutral term through recourse to the third-person singular ‘they’ and the reflexive pronoun ‘themselves’, both of which, in spite of what detractors may want to believe, have been used in the English language since at least the 15th century (cf. *OED*, ‘they’, I.2 and ‘themselves’, I.2).

The starting point for this foray into Woolf’s essays is offered by *A Room of One’s Own*, where the notion of the subject becomes crucial to an understanding of the text. As Section 1.4 showed, Beauvoir read this text in English and offered an overview of its arguments both in *Le Deuxième Sexe* and in one of her Japan lectures, “La femme et la création”. In both cases, she reduces the narrative to a set of mostly materialist theses which Woolf, in her view, supported; a close reading of these passages in Section 1.4 revealed how Beauvoir created a ‘Woolf of her own’ in summarising the content of *A Room*: far from being a mere outline of the original text, this reinterpretation actively rewrites – or even *overwrites* – the source text by adapting it to a new *Erwartungshorizont* (“horizon of expectation”), to borrow Hans Robert Jauss’s oft-cited term. In this sense, Beauvoir not only receives *A Room*, but also contributes to creating the material and ideological circumstances that would enable its first French translation to appear in 1951, as was argued in Section 1.4.

Her reading of Woolf thus displays positive and negative sides: on the one hand, Beauvoir silences those parts of the text that insist on a supposed sexual difference between men and women as articulated in their writing, thereby solidifying only those theses in *A Room* that serve the tone and the purpose of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, sometimes even at the expense of specific textual elements such as the myth of Judith Shakespeare, which in her hands acquires a different function; on the other hand, in her active rewriting of, and renegotiation with, the source text, Beauvoir manages to bring the text to a French readership in volume form for the first time, altering as she does the horizon of expectation of the French literary marketplace so as to make room for what was earlier perceived to be too ‘English’ (read political) a text for France.

A specific focus on the issue of subjectivity in *A Room* complements Beauvoir's partial reading of the text both in *Le Deuxième Sexe* and in "La femme et la création". As was argued in Chapter 1, this thesis is not only devoted to unveiling the direct link between Woolf and Beauvoir but also intends to bring the two authors into dialogue with each other so as to create an echo chamber in which their works can resonate across generic and disciplinary distinctions. This means that, besides listing and analysing all the references to Woolf which Beauvoir made during her lifetime, this thesis also sheds light on what Woolf can – somewhat paradoxically – help us understand about Beauvoir by reading her in counterpoint. That is, reading Beauvoir not only in her public statements and her conscious efforts, but also in relation to the textual strategies and the philosophical imaginary her works sometimes hide in their recesses. That Woolf can help us better explore this underside of Beauvoir derives from the potentialities that resonance can bring forth when two separate authors and traditions are aligned and brought together like vibrating tuning forks.

As was argued in Section 1.4, Beauvoir appropriated and amplified the materialist undertones of *A Room* at a time when the materialist slant of Woolf's polemic was far from being appreciated by scholars and readers in France and elsewhere. After the publication of the text, Woolf responded to a review by literary writer Lyn Lloyd Irvine published in *The Nation and Athenaeum* on 9 November 1929 in order to rebut her criticisms.¹⁹ In the closing lines, Woolf stressed the importance of the material conditions under which women live:

And my argument was that if we wish to increase the supply of rare and remarkable women like the Brontës we should give the Joneses and the Smiths rooms of their own and five hundred a year. One cannot grow fine flowers in a thin soil. And hitherto the soil – I mean no disrespect to Miss Smith and Miss Jones – has been very starved and very stony. (*E5* 122)

As she had written in a previous version of the essay titled "Women and Fiction", "The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman" (*E5* 29), to the effect that in order for 'better' women authors to emerge, ordinary women more broadly have to be liberated from the material strictures imposed upon their existence. Their lives are

¹⁹ As any Woolf scholar will know, this was one of a kind event for Woolf, who never really responded directly to positive or negative reviews. This renders the points she makes in this response all the more important.

embedded in a “very starved and very stony” soil, as she points out in her response to Irvine’s review, a situation which nips their potential growth in its bud. It could be argued that here Woolf is building on the patriarchal parallel between women and flowers only to show how it is important to look at the roots rather than just the petals: if the latter appear to be malnourished, it is probably because the former have been prevented from absorbing water and nutrients from the soil. Thus, if women writers do not possess the ‘gift’ of beautiful writing as patriarchal ideology claims is the case, we should look at the roots of the problem rather than point to its imperfect appearance, Woolf argues. This vegetal image has a twofold purpose: it serves to reinforce the importance of a materialist understanding of women’s oppression, as we saw earlier; at the same time, it draws attention to how class has an impact on the meaning and the function of woman within (patriarchal) society, as the soil of the flowers is likened to the “Joneses” and the “Smiths” – so much so that Woolf feels compelled to preemptively ask for forgiveness (“I mean no disrespect”) – whilst the petals are equated with the gifted woman writer.

This intuition about the interrelatedness of women’s struggles along the class axis is indicative of Woolf’s perceptive anticipation of the importance of an intersectional understanding of women’s liberation. As a matter of fact, in a previous essay, “Two Women” (1927), a review of the biography of Girton College co-founder Emily Davies and of a new edition of the letters of Lady Augusta Stanley, Woolf somewhat prophetically envisaged the emergence of “some astonishing phoenix of the future” from “that union of the middle-class woman and the court lady”, a mythological creature “who shall combine the new efficiency with the old amenity, the courage of the indomitable Miss Davies and Lady Augusta’s charm” (*E4* 424). Because of their different locations within the social ladder, the two women Woolf is writing about here had different weapons at their disposal to fight that “negative education” which “decrees not what you may do but what you may not do” thereby “cramp[ing] and stifl[ing]” women (*E4* 419): while Davies is seen by Woolf as courageous and austere in her attempt to found the first women’s college in Cambridge, Lady Augusta received a classic aristocratic education, her life was mostly devoted to spending time with aristocrats, and her writing is “all personal, emotional, and detailed as one of the novels which were written so inevitably by women” (*E4* 423). As her attention towards

“magnify[ing] the common and illumin[ing] the dull” testifies, Lady Augusta, too, had to undergo “a very arduous education of some sort” (E4 423), and her charm became a way for her to navigate the social scene unconstrained. Because of the different material conditions under which they lived, Davies and Lady Augusta developed different strategies to improve their situations as women as well as to provide access to an education that was (mostly) barred to them. It could be argued that this essay shows in practice what Woolf proposed as a theoretical and political statement in *A Room* as well as in her response to Irvine’s review, namely that the soil can have a positive or negative impact on the appearance of a flower just like the material circumstances under which women live can create or impede opportunities for growth, political struggle, and access to education. By showing the stem connecting the petals to the roots, Woolf is showing how women can become a collective entity despite their inherent, material differences.

This kind of materialist argument is echoed by Beauvoir not only in her reference to *A Room* in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, but even in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 1947). Although at this point in her philosophical production she still has not tackled the specific issues regarding women’s liberation in a more sustained way, her second philosophical essay focuses on what oppression is and how best to dismantle oppressive systems. In order to discredit the conservative’s potential doubts as to whether one can intervene on behalf of somebody else’s freedom, Beauvoir emphasises how liberation must be universal:

Seulement la cause de la liberté n’est pas celle d’autrui plus que la mienne : elle est universellement humaine. Si je veux que l’esclave prenne conscience de sa servitude, c’est à la fois pour n’être pas moi-même tyran – car toute abstention est complicité, et la complicité est ici tyrannie – à la fois pour que des possibilités neuves s’ouvrent à l’esclave libéré et à travers lui à tous les hommes. Vouloir l’existence, vouloir dévoiler le monde, vouloir les hommes libres, c’est une seule volonté. (*PMLA* 108)²⁰

²⁰ “But the cause of freedom is not that of others more than it is mine: it is universally human. If I want the slave to become conscious of his servitude, it is both in order not to be a tyrant myself – for any abstention is complicity, and complicity in this case is tyranny – and in order that new possibilities might be opened to the liberated slave and through him to all men. To want existence, to want to disclose the world, and to want men to be free are one and the same will.” (EA 93)

By stressing the importance of fighting for other people's rights and freedom, Beauvoir is suggesting that subjectivation is predicated upon relation: in order for the subject to be constituted as a moral agent, they have to bear the responsibility for all of humankind and commit to its liberation. The Beauvoirian triad of existence, unveiling or disclosure (*dévoilement*), and liberation points to how interdependent these different processes are: in order to exist, we must also be willing to show the internal mechanisms regulating the oppressive machinery and fight for its dismantling, as "freedom realises itself only by engaging itself in the world" (*EA* 84; "la liberté ne se réalise qu'en s'engageant dans le monde", *PMLA* 99). Beauvoir's philosophy is one of freedom, where subjects can only be deemed to be ethical if they commit to a broader project of universal liberation. Withdrawing from reality and claiming to be 'apolitical' results in effectively being complicit in oppression and tyranny, to the extent that existing without striving for the freedom of all coincides with supporting the machinations of power: in order to truly exist as ethical subjects, we must be actively engaged in the world, which means that we must fight for everyone's freedom.

This concern with collectivity and the liberation of all is also famously proposed by Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938), where she devotes her second guinea to "help[ing] women to enter the professions" only on the condition that "You shall swear that you will do all in your power to insist that any woman who enters any profession shall in no way hinder any other human being, whether man or woman, white or black [...] from entering it; but shall do all in her power to help them" (*TG* 149). If only one woman or specific individuals are allowed to enter the professions without suffering from marginalisation and discrimination, this guinea, as Beauvoir points out, only serves to buttress the oppressive machinery. This idea is echoed in the third guinea Woolf donates to the cause of "the rights of all – all men and women – to the respect in their persons of the great principles of Justice and Equality and Liberty", and especially when she emphasises how "we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure [of the Tyrant or Dictator] but are ourselves that figure": as Woolf aptly remarks, with more than a Beauvoirian tone in her voice, "we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life" (*TG* 180-1, 214-5).

Freedom, however, is not unconstrained by material circumstances. On the contrary, Beauvoir is very attentive to the ways in which the given (*le donné*) or facticity (*facticité*) encroach upon a subject's capacity to develop. As she explains in the same essay,

La vie s'emploie à la fois à se perpétuer et à se dépasser ; si elle ne fait que se maintenir, vivre c'est seulement ne pas mourir, et l'existence humaine ne se distingue pas d'une végétation absurde ; une vie ne se justifie que si son effort pour se perpétuer est intégré dans son dépassement, et si ce dépassement n'a d'autres limites que celles que le sujet s'assigne lui-même. (*PMLA* 104)²¹

Within Beauvoir's binary framework, the subject has two tendencies: one towards the perpetuation of the given, namely the preservation of their material existence (immanence), and the other oriented towards overcoming the present situation in order to build a different future (transcendence). A life can only be deemed to be such if the subject is allowed – and is able – to continue to exist while creating something new without being impeded in this forward movement. Oppression happens when the subject is prevented from re-creating themselves and cannot but hope to subsist without being given the opportunity to change the material conditions under which they live. What Woolf called the “negative education” of women, a concept she will elaborate upon in *Three Guineas*, where she states that “one of the qualities that the Victorian woman praised and practised” was a “negative one” because it intimated “not to be recognised; not to be egotistical; to do the work for the sake of doing the work” (*TG* 157), Beauvoir calls here in no uncertain terms oppression, thereby politicising the phenomenon and signalling it as something obstructing societal progress. To build on both authors' metaphors, a subject's facticity, if reduced to a barren ground (a “very starved and very stony soil”, in Woolf's words), renders existence nothing but “an absurd vegetation”, as Beauvoir calls it: an existence which continues in a meaningless manner, producing decorative greenery that only serves the broader oppressive system within which it grows. As Woolf concludes, “one cannot grow fine flowers on thin soil”, for subjectivation needs to be nurtured within a favourable environment in order to strive for the freedom of all and reject its presumed complicity in tyranny, as Davies and Lady

²¹ “Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation; a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing and if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns himself.” (*EA* 89)

Augusta tried to do in different, though not always successful and certainly not unimpeachable ways.

This materialist understanding of the subject is reinforced by Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* well before she first references Woolf in the text. As she is deconstructing the notorious patriarchal myth that sees women as inferior to men, Beauvoir remarks that we need to concur on what ‘being’ means.

On connaît la boutade de Bernard Shaw : « L’Américain blanc, dit-il, en substance, relègue le Noir au rang de cirer de souliers : et il en conclut qu’il n’est bon qu’à cirer des souliers. » On retrouve ce cercle vicieux en toutes circonstances analogues : quand un individu ou un groupe d’individu est maintenu en situation d’infériorité, le fait est qu’il *est* inférieur ; mais c’est sur la portée du mot *être* qu’il faudrait s’entendre ; la mauvaise foi consiste à lui donner une valeur substantielle alors qu’il a le sens dynamique hégélien : *être* c’est être devenu, c’est avoir été fait tel qu’on se manifeste ; oui, les femmes dans l’ensemble *sont* aujourd’hui inférieures aux hommes, c’est-à-dire que leur situation leur ouvre de moindres possibilités : le problème c’est de savoir si cet état de choses doit se perpétuer. (DSa 27)²²

As the famous Shaw dictum suggests, a situation of inferiority is predicated upon the vested interests of hierarchically superior subjects – in Beauvoir’s argument, men. The latter create a vicious circle whereby oppressed subjects cannot access different forms of subjectivation and this becomes proof of their intrinsic inferiority. ‘Being’ inferior, for Beauvoir as for Woolf, means ‘having been made’ inferior by a set of material circumstances and by the vested interests of those – in this case, men – who are in the position to alter them. Far from describing a static ontological quality, the verb ‘to be’ ought to be understood as a dynamic verb that depends on the material history of the subject: being means *having become*, with the present perfect tense inscribing, much as happens at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, a past action within the present of the subject, thereby imparting an ambiguous sense of temporality to it. That one has become inferior

²² “The familiar line from George Bernard Shaw sums it up: ‘The white American relegates the black to the rank of shoe-shine boy, and then concludes that blacks are only good for shining shoes.’ The same vicious circle can be found in all analogous circumstances: when an individual or a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they *are* inferior. But the scope of the verb *to be* must be understood; bad faith means giving it a substantive value, when in fact it has the sense of the Hegelian dynamic: *to be* is to have become, to have been made as one manifests oneself. Yes, women in general *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation provides them with fewer possibilities: the question is whether this state of affairs must be perpetuated.” (SS 12-3)

does not mean that one should forever be inferior, as this present contingency is founded upon a set of circumstances that is bound to change. A subject can thus be understood as a temporary, dynamic formation that has come to be what they are by virtue of not only their own will and agency, but also the context conditioning their material existence.

This tension between materiality and futurity, between perpetuating and overcoming, is what gives humanity a distinctly ambiguous colouring: all human beings, Beauvoir argues, live in this ambiguity and have to make decisions based on this existential contingency. However, it is clear that being oppressed contributes to this ambiguity substantially, in that some forms of subjectivation are barred to women, as Woolf points out in “Two Women”. In *A Room*, Woolf’s narrator will realise, after leafing through volumes of history and poetry, that woman is “a worm winged like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet” (*AROO* 34). The pungent irony and the stark difference between such lofty ideals as life and beauty on the one hand and the material subsistence enabled by women’s unremunerated labour on the other further reinforce Beauvoir’s human ambiguity and push it towards the side of oppression. As the narrator muses in *A Room*:

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (*AROO* 33-4)

Woman as a historical subject is given no agency, whereas as a muse she can inspire the most ambitious volumes of literature: she is, historically, a worm, but one which can soar high in the sky like an eagle because of men’s imaginative – or arguably even self-deceiving – capabilities. Not only does this create a stark contrast between materiality and ideality, but it also reinforces the idea that woman is a relative, inessential ‘Other’ whose very alterity constitutes the basis for men’s subjectivation – as was mentioned earlier, any subjectivation depends on casting other subjects as ‘Others’, for the process of identity constitution is predicated upon separation and assimilation, as Remotti points out and as Beauvoir famously argued in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

This Beauvoirian dichotomy between subject and Other, essential and inessential, universality and relativity is similarly discussed in *A Room* in relation to mirrors. In a long passage that provides a cursory look at human history, the narrator argues that

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. We should still be scratching the outlines of deer on the remains of mutton bones and bartering flints for sheep skins or whatever simple ornament took our unsophisticated taste. [...] Whatever may be their use in civilised societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge.
(*AROO* 28)

All of human history is dependent upon the power of mirrors, as they enlarge the figure of man through the diminished figure of woman, and history narrates the gestures of important men only at the cost of sacrificing supposedly ‘inferior’ subjects – in this case, what Beauvoir aptly terms the ‘second sex’. In order to act, man needs to access an imaginary where he reigns as a sovereign and woman is subservient to him, a fiction which he fabricates in order to constitute himself as a subject: in order to become a man, one must cast woman as Other thereby excluding her from the rank of subject. Within this framework, subjectivity ought to be understood as an historical, political concept, dependent as it is upon the agency of those in power who can decree who can become a subject and how. Through their own enlarged image in the mirror, men can wage war on other countries, set out to pillage and expropriate other nations, or simply go to work convinced that they are worthy individuals. In the moment of self-reflection, then, it is the Other that constitutes the subject, or better perhaps, it is by preventing other individuals from accessing the status of subject that people in power can come to see themselves as absolute, essential, even universal subjects. As Woolf will poignantly comment in *Three Guineas*, “The sex distinction seems [...] possessed of a curious leaden quality, liable to keep any name to which it is fastened circling in the lower spheres” (*TG* 131): this fiction of women’s inferiority that men have fabricated for centuries results in a historical truth which, through its own self-legitimation, erases its own material origins and thus succeeds in passing itself off as a biological reality.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, this self/Other dichotomy is reinforced in the sections dealing with men's literary representations of women, which, as was hinted above, only save Stendhal from the scathing criticism Beauvoir levels at men's myths. In Chapter 1 of the "Mythes" section, Beauvoir remarks that 'having a woman' has a double meaning, as the function of object and that of judge of men's merits cannot be separated (*DSa* 303, *SS* 207). She then reproduces a passage from André Malraux's *La Condition humaine* (1933, translated as *Man's Fate*) – a novel which incidentally won the Prix Goncourt in the same year – in which one of the main characters, Kyo(shi) Gisors reflects on his relationship with his lover, May, who, in his view, is different from other people because she can see him for who he truly is. What Beauvoir foregrounds in this somewhat moving passage from Malraux's novel is that May is asked to love Kyo "in his authenticity, not to send back an indulgent reflection of himself" (*SS* 208; "dans son authenticité, non de lui renvoyer de lui un reflet complaisant", *DSa* 304). Although this may seem to be in contrast to Woolf's account of women acting as magnifying mirrors of men's stature, Beauvoir goes on to note how what Kyo aspires to often ends up in a search for oneself in the absolute Other, Woman:

Chez beaucoup d'hommes cette exigence se dégrade : au lieu d'une révélation exacte, ils cherchent au fond de deux yeux vivants leur image nimbée d'admiration et de gratitude, divinisée. Si la femme a été si souvent comparée à l'eau, c'est entre autres parce qu'elle est le miroir où le Narcisse mâle se contemple : il se penche sur elle avec bonne ou mauvaise foi. Mais ce qu'en tout cas il lui demande, c'est d'être hors de lui tout ce qu'il ne peut pas saisir en lui, parce que l'intériorité de l'existant n'est que néant et que, pour s'atteindre, il lui faut se projeter en un objet. La femme est pour lui la suprême récompense puisqu'elle est, sous une forme étrangère qu'il peut posséder dans sa chair, sa propre apothéose. C'est ce « monstre incomparable », soi-même, qu'il étreint quand il serre dans ses bras l'être qui résume pour lui le Monde et à qui il a imposé ses valeurs et ses lois. Alors, s'unissant à cet autre qu'il a fait sien, il espère s'atteindre lui-même. (*DSa* 304-5)²³

²³ "For many men, this demand is diluted: instead of a truthful revelation, they seek a glowing image of admiration and gratitude, deified in the depths of a woman's two eyes. woman has often been compared to water, in part because it is the mirror where the male Narcissus contemplates himself: he leans towards her, with good or bad faith. But in any case, what he wants from her is to be, outside of him, all that he cannot grasp in himself, because the interiority of the existent is only nothingness, and to reach himself, he must project himself on to an object. Woman is the supreme reward for him since she is his own apotheosis, a foreign form he can possess in the flesh. It is this 'incomparable monster', himself, that he embraces when he holds in his arms this being who sums up the World and onto whom he has imposed

Like Narcissus looking at himself in the pool, man looks for his own divinised image in woman, and thus reduces her own subjectivity to a springboard for his own agency, precisely as Woolf's narrator remarks in *A Room*. Because subjectivity, in Beauvoir's Sartrean formulation, is nothingness in its core, the woman's support is fundamental to man's sense of himself, so what he cannot find inside himself he needs to project onto an external object, woman, who thus grants him the "magic and delicious power" – to borrow Woolf's narrator's phrase – of finding himself outside of himself, in a form which he can "possess in the flesh" and which he can thus elevate to "his own apotheosis". The "incomparable monster" that is the self, a phrase Beauvoir borrows from Malraux's passage, is ultimately the only thing man (Kyo) can embrace in woman (May), as he has reduced her own subjectivity to silence thereby preventing any form of reciprocity.

Trésor, proie, jeu et risqué, muse, guide, juge, médiatrice, miroir, la femme est l'Autre dans lequel le sujet se dépasse sans être limité, qui s'oppose à lui sans le nier ; elle est l'Autre qui se laisse annexer sans cesser d'être l'Autre. Et par là elle est si nécessaire à la joie de l'homme et à son triomphe qu'on peut dire que si elle n'existait pas, les hommes l'auraient inventée. (*DSa* 305)²⁴

"A very queer, composite being thus emerges", as Woolf's narrator remarks: woman is a subject who is an absolute Other, who never ceases to serve as the Other even when she is "annexed" to a subject; she is precisely the kind of mirror that Woolf's narrator suggests is necessary "for all violent and heroic action", for all forms of transcendence, as Beauvoir would term it. For this reason, if woman did not exist, men would have had to invent her – and as a matter of fact, Beauvoir poignantly adds, they did ("Ils l'ont inventée", *DSa* 305; "They did invent her", *SS* 209). What they do not realise, however, is that "she also exists without their invention": "This is why she is the failure of their dream at the same time as its incarnation" (*SS* 209; "elle existe aussi sans leur invention. C'est pourquoi elle est, en même temps que l'incarnation de leur rêve, son échec", *DSa* 305).

his values and his laws. Uniting himself, then, with this other whom he makes his own, he hopes to reach himself." (*SS* 208-9)

²⁴ "Treasure, prey, game and risk, muse, guide, judge, mediator, mirror, the woman is the Other in which the subject surpasses himself without being limited, who opposes him without negating him; she is the Other who lets herself be annexed to him without ceasing to be the Other. And for this she is so necessary to man's joy and his triumph that if she did not exist, men would have had to invent her." (*SS* 209)

If being a subject means having been allowed to be, and having become a subject, as Beauvoir explains through her reference to Hegel, this also means that existing entails a constant process of material becoming. Although in *Le Deuxième Sexe* Beauvoir clearly appropriated Hegel's teaching about the master-slave dialectic and readapted it to her discussion of womanhood, in previous essays she also distanced herself from the German philosopher's abstract systematisation of thought. Towards the end of *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Beauvoir recalls how consoling and yet different from life Hegel's system was as she was reading about it in the Bibliothèque nationale in 1940:

Dès qu'on considère abstraitement et théoriquement un système, on se situe en effet sur le plan de l'universel, donc de l'infini. C'est pourquoi la lecture du système hégélien est si consolante : je me souviens d'avoir éprouvé un grand apaisement à lire Hegel dans le cadre impersonnel de la Bibliothèque nationale, en août 1940. Mais dès que je me retrouvais dans la rue, dans ma vie, hors du système, sous un vrai ciel, le système ne me servait plus de rien : c'était, sous couleur d'infini, les consolations de la mort qu'il m'avait offertes ; et je souhaitais encore vivre au milieu d'hommes vivants. (*PMLA* 196)²⁵

Although we tend to think of 1940 as of a desperate time today, with the war raging on in Europe and with Paris occupied by the Nazis, the stark contrast Beauvoir emphasises here between life as experienced on the streets and Hegel's philosophy as read in a library signals that the latter is more representative of death and stagnation than even an occupied city at war. If one wishes to live among human beings, if one wishes to look up at the sky and feel part of a whole, a philosophical system like Hegel's clearly strikes one as deadly, for it abstracts what it purports to call the 'essence' of things from reality, thereby rendering the latter flat and one-dimensional. In spite of the obvious parallels between Hegel writing his *Phenomenology of Spirit* "under conditions of practical and psychological duress while his city was besieged by the French" and Beauvoir "reading it under the equivalent and yet opposite condition" – both conditions incidentally emphasising that "death' was more than just a metaphor, for both of them"

²⁵ "As soon as one considers a system abstractly and theoretically, one puts himself, in effect, on the plane of the universal, thus, of the infinite. That is why reading the Hegelian system is so comforting. I remember having experienced a great feeling of calm on reading Hegel in the impersonal framework of the Bibliothèque [sic] Nationale in August 1940. But once I got into the street again, into my life, out of the system, beneath a real sky, the system was no longer of any use to me: what it had offered me, under a show of the infinite, was the consolations of death; and I again wanted to live in the midst of living men." (*EA* 172)

(Altman 2007: 69) –, Beauvoir does not hesitate to ascribe to Hegel’s systematic and abstract philosophy a deadly, though consoling quality.

In “Littérature et métaphysique” (“Literature and Metaphysics”, 1946), Beauvoir similarly reflects upon the differences between literature and metaphysics but clearly distances the latter from systematic philosophy. Looking back on Plato’s notorious statement that poets ought to be banned from his idea of Republic, Beauvoir highlights how this claim rested upon the Greek philosopher’s need to make himself a poet in a material reality in order to deliver his theories about how the world is nothing but a “deceptive degradation” (“dégradation trompeuse”, *ESN* 80). As Beauvoir concludes, “Il situe dans les prairies en fleurs, autour d’une table, au chevet d’un mourant, sur terre, les entretiens qui montrent le chemin du ciel intelligible” (*ESN* 80).²⁶ This earth-vs-sky dichotomy illustrates Plato’s theory that abstract Ideas are what humans have to go after in order to better understand what reality is like: for him, only by abstracting Ideas from material reality and projecting them onto an atemporal sky can humankind hope to attain the ontological truth about reality, as appearances are nothing but a deceptive distraction from this larger system. As Shannon M. Mussett argues in her chapter on Beauvoir and Plato, for Beauvoir “much systematic thought, although a viable and valuable explication of metaphysical reality, virtually annihilates the ambiguity of experience”: as Mussett rightly emphasises, this kind of philosophy is “both seductive – in that it provides clarity, univocity, and authority – but also myopic” (Mussett 2012: 19-20).

After Plato, Beauvoir also discusses Hegel’s systematic philosophy in the same paragraph. As she points out,

De même, chez Hegel, dans la mesure où l’esprit ne s’est pas encore accompli mais est en train de s’accomplir, il faut, pour raconter adéquatement son aventure, lui conférer une certaine épaisseur charnelle ; dans la *Phénoménologie de l’esprit*, Hegel recourt à des mythes littéraires tels que *Don Juan* et *Faust*, car le drame de la conscience malheureuse ne trouve sa vérité que dans un monde concret et historique. (*ESN* 80)²⁷

²⁶ “He situates his dialogues that show the path to an intelligible heaven amidst blooming fields, around a table, at a deathbed, that is, on earth” (*PhW* 274).

²⁷ “Likewise, when spirit [*l’esprit*] has not accomplished itself but is only in the process of accomplishing itself, Hegel must confer on it a certain carnal thickness in order to recount adequately its adventures. In *La phénoménologie de l’esprit* [The Phenomenology of the Spirit] [1807], Hegel resorts to literary myths

Without the “carnal thickness” provided by tangible, though fictional experiences in the material world, Plato’s and Hegel’s systems cannot be upheld: abstract and atemporal though they may strive to be, these systems rest upon the lived experience of their authors as well as the characters and stories they use as examples. Without a “concrete and historical world” inhabited by subjects, Beauvoir argues, there can be no such thing as an abstract system.

What is more, abstraction not only requires materiality as a precedent in order to exist, but it also creates a view of the world that is far from faithful. The risk associated with abstraction is for Beauvoir that it insists on the importance of “desiccated essences” (“essences desséchées”) and thus delivers a “dead universe” (“un univers mort”), one that is “as foreign to the one we breathe in as an X-ray picture is different from a fleshed body” (*PhW* 275; “aussi étranger à celui que nous respirons qu’une photographie aux rayons X est différente d’un corps de chair”, *ESN* 82). The insistence not only on the world we ‘breathe’ but also on the ‘flesh’ of the living body (“corps de chair”) points to how materially embedded human existence is and how any form of abstraction is bound to dry it up in essences that are far from universal. The subject is in fact material and corporeal, they are situated in a tangible world which cannot be reduced to theoretical abstraction without losing its material characteristics: although schematic thought may help us to look at the bigger picture, a consideration of the final product also entails losing our sense of the materiality of the world while trying to promote specific theories that are actually predicated upon a specific individual’s perspectives.

In contrast to this philosophical tradition, Woolf offers, in *A Room of One’s Own* and other essays, a series of overtly *unsystematic* perspectives that create an intricate network of characters, voices, and theories where the principle of non-contradiction, as was pointed out above, is never really observed. Even the beginning of *A Room* is quite telling in this regard, as it opens by producing a conclusion rather than an introduction, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”, a view which is introduced as “an opinion upon one minor point” whilst the narrator acknowledges that “the first duty of a lecturer” is “to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the

such as *Don Juan* and *Faust*, because the drama of the unhappy consciousness finds its truth only in a concrete and historical world” (*PhW* 274).

mantelpiece for ever” (*AROO* 3). The latter statement is clearly loaded with irony from our contemporary perspective, as *A Room* now stands precisely as an important volume in intellectual history and in women’s history, its very title reminding anyone passing by “the mantelpiece” precisely of the “nugget of pure truth” Woolf’s (narrator’s) “opinion upon one minor point” delivered and immortalised.

And yet, the text, while inviting us to welcome this view, at the same time resists from the outset the very notion that this truth exhausts the potentialities inherent in the topic of “women and fiction”: as the narrator admits, “I have shirked the duty of coming to conclusion upon these two questions – women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems” (*AROO* 3). Far from delivering her truth on women and fiction to an audience all too eager to assimilate it, the narrative persona here declares that, after giving the matter much thought, these issues are still unsolved, so the only thing she can provide us with is a journey from the proposed topic of the talk, “women and fiction”, to this point about money and a room of one’s own. In this sense, even the abstract thought so succinctly summed up in that phrase loses its importance and the process that led to this formulation becomes the real centre of attention of the narrative.

Interestingly, this process is introduced as something the unsuccessful lecturer provides “in order to make some amends” (*AROO* 3): the essay opens not only with a statement characterised by epistemic humility and a clear rejection of authority (“women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems”), but also with an invitation to resist hierarchically connoted lecturing and neat arguments so as to embrace the uncertainty and join the narrative persona in her puzzling over this issue. As Favre concisely put it, “At the diegetic level of the text, Woolf’s *persona* thus enjoins her audience to find their own directions” as they listen to where this process took her (Favre 2020: § 12). It is no coincidence that the text opens with the word “But”, after all, “as if Woolf has intervened in the middle of a discussion with an apparent digression”, as Marcus aptly phrased it (Marcus [1997] 2004: 45).

That this is achieved thanks to the “use of all the liberties and licences of the novelist” does not, however, detract from the truth contained in these pages, as “Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact” (*AROO* 4). This statement is proposed in a straightforward, even offhand manner, but it is in fact counterintuitive if not outright paradoxical: how can fiction, the very opposite of fact, contain more truth? This idea

plays once again with the readerly expectations whereby essays are supposed to give us access to some kind of factual truth we can then keep on our mantelpiece – expectations which, as was mentioned earlier, Beauvoir shares in her distinguishing between essay and fiction in these terms. In clearly and deliberately not meeting those expectations, the narrative persona in *A Room* invites us to embrace fiction as the only place or genre where truth about these difficult issues can be found, in a collaborative process of going back through one's story to see what provisional theories may be mobilised in this search for truth. As the narrator points out,

I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; 'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste-paper basket and forget all about it. (*AROO* 4)

The scene is thus set: the lecturer was invited to consider the topic “women and fiction” but failed to produce a “nugget of pure truth” – at least, that is what she declares – which she could deliver to her audience; instead, what she can offer by way of “amends” for this supposed incompetence or failure to do the task at hand is a fictional tale of how she came to a “minor point” about women, money, and rooms of their own.

It is the reader's task, then, to “seek out this truth” and “decide whether any part of it is worth keeping”: from the outset, this supposed monologue is actually a dialogue with whoever is willing to read or listen to this tale, as the latter meanders from one point to the next, from one potential theory to another without ever settling upon a truth. It is only through the liberties afforded by fiction that we may be able to follow this process and attain some kind of knowledge of the topic, as we move from the age of Shakespeare to the present moment of the (fictional) lecture. That this lecture is fictional is not only pointed out by the narrator at a diegetic level, but is also further reinforced by the existence of the original essay based on the two lectures Woolf delivered at Girton and Newnham in October 1928, titled “Women and Fiction”: Woolf never pronounced the words contained in *A Room* in public and the text clearly plays with the instruments and scope of fiction in order to invite readers to find their own path through the meandering trajectory traced by the author. From the outset, the reader is asked to believe a sort of unreliable, even non-existent narrator who states in no uncertain terms

that she is going to lie by fabricating stories about how she or other similarly named characters got to a tangential truth about women and fiction: *A Room* provides a series of contradictory arguments while at the same time offering a kind of meta-reflection on what it means to be a woman and a fiction writer.

This elusive quality of *A Room* can be understood better if we consider Woolf's own dismissal of lecturing as a hierarchical activity in a famous essay she wrote for a magazine founded by women undergraduates at Somerville College, Oxford, a magazine aptly titled *Lysistrata*. In "Why?" (1934), Woolf points out through a series of questions how lecturing "incites the most debased of human passions – vanity, ostentation, self-assertion, and the desire to convert" and asks her readers to ponder why we still need experts to lecture us from their platforms:

Why encourage your elders to turn themselves into prigs and prophets, when they are ordinary men and women? Why force them to stand on a platform for forty minutes while you reflect upon the colour of their hair and the longevity of flies? Why not let them talk to you and listen to you, naturally and happily, on the floor? Why not create a new form of society founded on poverty and equality? Why not bring together people of all ages and both sexes of all shades of fame and obscurity so that they can talk, without mounting platforms, or reading papers, or wearing expensive clothes, or eating expensive food? Would not such a society be worth, even as a form of education, all the papers on art and literature that have ever been read since the world began? Why not abolish prigs and prophets? Why not invent human intercourse? Why not try? (*E6 33*)

These questions clearly point to the verticality of lecturing as opposed to the horizontal cooperation of human beings Woolf wishes for, a verticality which effectively reproduces power structures while at the same time encouraging "the most debased of human instincts" thereby elevating them to a position of prestige. This view also reinforces the notion of literature as an anti-hierarchical place where people can gather in order to think about something together, without being taught or lectured about how to perceive reality and what to make of it.

In "Littérature et métaphysique", Beauvoir concludes that the only form of thought worth investing time and resources on is the metaphysical novel. In contrast to abstract, systematic thought, this genre for which existentialism will become famous allows the reader to see human reflection in action, thereby granting them a liberty

which the philosophy of Hegel does not really enable. Just as happens at a diegetic level in *A Room*, Beauvoir argues in that essay that the process is more important than the result, that identifying with and following characters who ponder the meaning of life or how to navigate specific (fictional) situations is what effectively produces knowledge and truth, even if these are provisional and situated: as she points out, by appealing to the freedom of the reader, which is the “proper stuff of novels” (“le propre du roman”, *ESN* 84) – or, as Woolf put it in “Modern Fiction”, the “proper stuff of fiction” (*E4* 164) – the metaphysical novelist presents reality “in its integrity, as it is disclosed in the living relation that is action and feeling before making itself thought” (*PhW* 275; “dans son intégrité, telle qu’elle se dévoile dans la relation vivante qui est action et sentiment avant de se faire pensée”, *ESN* 81). Fiction has the capacity to admit reality in its material becoming, whereas systematic thought, despite offering the advantages of simplification – “clarity, univocity, and authority”, in Musset’s words –, can only offer a dead and deadly representation of it that is static and lectures readers instead of appealing to their freedom. Because lecturing presupposes a vertical relationship between the lecturer and the audience and thus requires precisely those values both Woolf and Beauvoir distance themselves from, *A Room* veers away from these generic expectations and, in its zigzagging through history, literature, and lived experience, shows precisely the “living relation that is action and feeling before making itself thought” at work: despite normally being categorised as an essay, *A Room* thus seems at least in part to be aligned with Beauvoir’s notion of the metaphysical novel.

In this sense, we could revise Beauvoir’s claim in her Japanese lecture that essays offer space for linear argumentation whereas fiction cannot afford to do so. We saw, in Chapter 1, how Beauvoir and Sartre were enthused by the discovery of Anglo-American modernists such as Joyce, Woolf or Hemingway, as they “had rejected the false objectivity of the realist novel to deliver the world through subjectivities” (*FA* 240-1). What escaped Beauvoir in her perceptive reading of modernism – and, arguably, literature in general – was the form of the essay, which since its very origins has always insisted on the importance of meandering (self-)reflection in opposition to the rigid authority of systematic philosophy or to the evangelism of religious preachers. Clearly, what Beauvoir understood an essay to be was more in line with the tradition of the philosophical essay, as her educational background would suggest, but from its

inception, the genre of the essay has always revelled in non-systematic, self-reflexive thought. As Paolo Bugliani has recently argued, essay-writing in the English tradition has always been regarded by critics – with all due exceptions, as the 18th century would suggest – as a lesser genre because of the lack of clear classical origins prior to the first (Western) collection of essays and because there was never a clear manifesto detailing the purview and the intent of the genre; as Bugliani concludes, it could be argued that it is precisely the meta-reflective quality of the essay that the majority of authors share, Woolf included (cf. Bugliani 2018). Although the origins of the genre are clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, the originator was very much present in Woolf’s own understanding of what the essay and perhaps literature in general is supposed to do. Critics concur in saying that Michel de Montaigne inaugurated this tradition with the publication of his *Essais* in 1580, for, as Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy aptly remarked, “Before him, the word ‘essay’ was not used in print for a kind of literary composition; after him, essays proliferated” (Karshan and Murphy 2020: 3).

Montaigne’s essays were first translated into English by John Florio as early as 1603, with a retranslation by Charles Cotton coming out in 1686. In 1877, William Hazlitt revised and edited the text for a new publication and in 1923, a new edition of Cotton’s translation, edited by Hazlitt, came out, privately printed for the Navarre Society. It is this edition that Woolf reviewed for the *Times Literary Supplement* on 31 January 1924. In the following months, she revised this contribution for inclusion in the *Common Reader* (1925), where a final polished version titled “Montaigne” appeared as the sixth essay in the collection. A cursory look at the final essay reveals that Woolf was clearly familiar with Montaigne’s original version as well, as testified by her extensive quotations from the French. Early on in the essay, Woolf refers to a new edition being published in France, namely the *Œuvres complètes de Michel de Montaigne*, based on the Bordeaux manuscript and edited with an introduction and notes by Arthur Armaingaud, published from 1924 to 1927 by Parisian publisher Louis Conard. In all likelihood, however, in 1924 Woolf had at her disposal a preceding edition of the essays edited by Henri Moteau and Damase Jouaust and published by Librairie des Bibliophiles between 1886 and 1889.

Philological questions aside, Woolf was very appreciative of Montaigne’s unsystematic and self-reflexive essays. In “Montaigne”, Woolf emphasises how “To tell

the truth about oneself, to discover oneself near at hand, is not easy”, although it is normally believed to be a simple task, and only “Montaigne and Pepys and Rousseau perhaps” have succeeded in this attempt, with the titular writer gaining the upper hand over the other two (*E4* 71). The difficulty is twofold: on the one hand, there is the “difficulty of expression”, as between “thinking” and “saying” there is a gaping abyss, to the effect that “The phantom is through the mind and out the window before we can lay salt on its tail”; on the other hand, there is also “the supreme difficulty of being oneself”, as “This soul, or life within us, by no means agrees with the life outside us” (*E4*, 72). Here, Woolf refers to the “phantom” within us, thereby implying that our interior life is impalpable and immaterial, though in some way visible; and yet, as the metaphor continues, our search for it has to be extremely material and even corporeal, as we try to grasp it and “lay salt on its tail” as one would do, according to superstition and folklore, with birds so as to prevent them from taking flight. The rest of the sentence similarly compares this “phantom” to a deep-sea creature “slowly sinking and returning to the profound darkness which it has lit up momentarily with a wandering light” (*E4* 72). In both images, our very human soul is an evasive creature on the run, and we are invariably shown to be unsuccessful hunters in our chase for it.

What Woolf calls ‘soul’, echoing the French essayist, is in fact shown by Montaigne to be “so complex, so indefinite, corresponding so little to the version which does duty for her in public, that a man might spend his life merely in trying to run her to earth” (*E4* 73) – yet another image of a hunt for the shape-shifting, slippery creature inhabiting and representing us. Within this understanding of subjectivity as a protean being, writing about oneself is no easy job because “the pen is a rigid instrument; it can say very little; it has all kinds of habits and ceremonies of its own” and, on top of that, it is “dictatorial too: it is always making ordinary men into prophets, and changing the natural stumbling trip of human speech into the solemn and stately march of pens” (*E4* 72). It could be argued that here Woolf is aligning herself with Beauvoir’s critique of Hegel and Plato: in contrast to the variability and elusiveness of life in all its complexity, writing – like lecturing – may entail solidifying and even fossilising phenomena and the self so as to make sense of it all, as the two philosophers’ systems demonstrate. The risk, for Woolf/Montaigne as well as for Beauvoir, is to make something mutable and ever-changing (life, subjectivity) into something that is too solid

and rigid (systematic philosophy, writing) for it to capture the complexity of it: abstract thought positively kills the vitality of life in its attempt at capturing it, much as a hunter has to kill prey in order to catch it.

However, as Woolf would argue in another essay in *The Common Reader*, “Modern Fiction”, “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (E4 160), and the writer’s task – whether in essays or in fiction – is to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” and to “trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (E4 161). It is in this “stumbling trip”, in “the journey” (the process of writing, the history of a specific view) rather than the destination (the abstract system) that life resides (E4 74), and, although we may need order, as Montaigne teaches Woolf, anti-dogmatic thinking is at the very core of any attempt not only to live and exist in such a complex world, but also to transcribe these thoughts and experiences on a blank page – or, more aptly for Montaigne as well as for Woolf’s understanding of Montaigne, on a blank *canvas*.

In his classic study of Montaigne’s *Essais*, Jean Starobinski noted how the author’s retreat to the famous tower was an attempt to search his own self: as Montaigne famously phrased it in a sort of proto-Woolfian way, “Il se faut reserver une arriereboutique toute nostre, toute franche, en laquelle nous établissons nostre vraye liberté et entretien de nous a nous mesmes” (Montaigne 1967: 235).²⁸ While the Woolfian room of one’s own was an attempt to create a gendered space for self-reflection and intellectual labour unimpeded by the domestic labour expected of women, Montaigne’s “backshop”, as articulated in Chapter 38, “On Solitude”, is a space where the self does not have to “[do] duty for her [i.e. the soul] in public”, as Woolf puts it in her essay, a backroom where the subject can explore their self without the intrusion of the public sphere, where they can “sequestrer et r’avoir de soi”, as Montaigne will phrase it in Chapter 39 (Montaigne 1967: 234). As Stephen Leach has only recently argued, “Woolf’s point about the necessity of a room of one’s own is essentially the

²⁸ In Cotton’s translation, “we must reserve a backshop, wholly our own and entirely free, wherein to settle our true liberty, our principal solitude and retreat”; the whole translation is publicly available on Project Gutenberg, at <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm>> [last accessed 03/07/2023 at 11.58].

same as Montaigne's" – namely the idea that physical space is fundamental in order to think independently – “but, by transplanting it into a new context, she highlights its implications with regard to women’s unequal opportunities” (Leach 2022: 104): if for Montaigne solitude and self-reflection are almost taken for granted, Woolf re-politicises this concept by measuring the (masculine) ideal against the material reality of women’s lived experience.²⁹ At any rate, what Woolf and Montaigne share is a dynamic sense of self-reflection, one which consists, in Starobinski’s account, in a movement from a search for stability and immutability, two qualities resulting in a static understanding of identity, to a constant questioning of fixed and stable categories. As he observed,

Le mouvement dont je tente ici la description n’est rien d’autre que l’effort qui, commençant par penser l’identité comme constance, stabilité, conformité à soi-même, reconnaît qu’il ne peut atteindre ce qu’il a d’abord visé, mais reste suffisamment fidèle à l’appel de l’identité pour chercher à lui donner un autre contenu, une autre signification. (Starobinski 1993: 42)³⁰

For Montaigne as for Woolf, then, knowing oneself implies moving towards a dynamic understanding of identity, a lesson which Beauvoir derives from Hegel’s dynamic sense of ‘being’. For the four authors, however, freedom does not come unburdened by constraints, as subjectivity can only be captured in this interplay between facticity and freedom (Beauvoir/Hegel), or between order and freedom (Woolf/Montaigne).

This need for order within freedom is something prescribed to us by what Montaigne terms “un patron au dedans” and which Woolf translates as “an invisible censor within” who “knows the truth” and thus approves of, or rejects, whatever action or thought we may exhibit: “This is the judge to whom we must submit; this is the censor who will help us to achieve that order which is the grace of a well-born soul” (*E4* 75). In Woolf’s interpretation, however, this censor and judge does not crystallise being, does not fossilise it for the sake of ‘order’; on the contrary, by “act[ing] by his own light” and by virtue of “some internal balance”, he “will achieve that precarious and everchanging poise which, while it controls, in no way impedes the soul’s freedom to

²⁹ Oddly enough, other commentators before Leach did not take notice of the Woolfian undertones of Montaigne’s ‘backshop of our own’, as Leach himself highlights. At any rate, Woolf is far from noting this specific phrase in Montaigne, and, as happened in the case of Woolf’s ‘thinking back through our mothers’ for Beauvoir, the influence is indirect rather than openly acknowledged.

³⁰ “The *movement* that I shall try to describe is nothing other than the effort of a man who, starting from a concept of identity based on the principles of constancy, stability, and self-consistency (a goal that turns out to be impossible to achieve), begins to develop a new concept of identity without abandoning the original one, but nonetheless altering its content and meaning.” (Starobinski 1985: 14)

explore and experiment” (E4 75). The quasi-oxymoronic “precarious and everchanging poise” encapsulates this odd combination of mutability and constraint, freedom and order that is so characteristic of human subjectivity for Montaigne as well as for Woolf.

As a result, this soul is not autonomous in its agency but has to respond both to external stimuli and to this “invisible censor within”, as Woolf terms it following Montaigne. In order to accommodate “all these wayward parts that constitute the human soul”, it is essential for both authors to acknowledge how “the soul is all laced about with nerves and sympathies which affect her every action” and recognise “one’s self” as “the greatest monster and miracle in the world” (E4 78). Materially entangled with the circumstances of their emergence, the human subject is thus both freedom and constraint, a monster composed of “wayward parts” who has to act according to internal as well as external elements conditioning their agency and requiring their response. If in *A Room* Woolf would go on to discuss the monstrous appearance of woman in men’s texts (“a worm winged like an eagle”) as the result of her material insignificance coupled with her ideal, fictional forms, in “Montaigne” Woolf concludes that it is the self itself that is a shape-shifting, monstrous and miraculous creature which we as writers of our own stories can only capture provisionally and have to treat with gentleness and care.

In this fluid theorisation we can see the central tenets of Beauvoir’s philosophy: much as a soul for Woolf/Montaigne ought to be understood in its freedom and its need for order, a human subject for Beauvoir is always a freedom constrained by the material conditions of their emergence, so much so that the liberation of the oppressed can only be achieved when subjects are allowed to overcome their present facticity in search of a different future to build, both for themselves and for the whole of humankind. As hinted above, this movement of freedom is called, in existentialist terminology, transcendence, whereas oppressed subjects who cannot attain transcendence are reduced to immanence, the complementary opposite which Beauvoir will explore in an original, though at times confusing manner in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.³¹ As we saw earlier, Hegel and traditional philosophy, despite providing Beauvoir with some important insights into the human

³¹ I say confusing because I concur with Toril Moi that a closer look at immanence in *Le Deuxième Sexe* reveals how this concept, despite being the central and distinguishing focus of Beauvoir’s theorisation of woman, is in fact vague and quite mobile. As Moi argues, “Most precisely defined as *non-transcendence*, ‘immanence’ in *The Second Sex* would seem to include everything from the state of thing-like facticity sought by the for-itself to bad faith and various kinds of unfree situations” (Moi [1994] 2008: 174).

condition, have also failed to do justice to the complexity of reality by means of their schematic abstraction, which reduces multiplicity and heterogeneity to a set of clear-cut, self-identical categories. The important lesson Beauvoir learns from Hegel, however, concerns the self-Other relationship, and it is one that will positively shape her own understanding of womanhood.

Besides choosing the classic Hegelian dictum whereby each consciousness pursues the death of another (“chaque conscience poursuit la mort de l’autre”) as the epigraph for her first novel, *L’Invitée* (1943), Beauvoir also looks back on, and appropriates, the master-slave dialectic developed by the German philosopher in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, as anticipated above. As a matter of fact, there is no critical consensus concerning Beauvoir’s view of Hegel, as several critics have seen in her interpretation of Hegel either a reflection of his main French mediator, Alexandre Kojève, or, as is to be expected, her supposedly acritical summary of Sartre’s Hegelian theorisation. The most complete and up-to-date overview of the studies of Beauvoir and Hegel suggests, however, that “For Beauvoir, Hegelian ideas formed an important part of her philosophical vocabulary, but they did not limit her capacity to think against and beyond a[s] well as with Hegelian insights” (Hutchings 2017: 196). Altman rightly stressed that, contrary to our contemporary sense of Hegel as a canonical philosopher, he was never included in the philosophy syllabi of the Sorbonne in the 1920s, to the extent that Beauvoir acquainted herself with Hegel only at a later date – in Nazi-occupied Paris in 1940, as we saw – and this interest was mediated mostly by “earlier encounters during her student days with eccentric, idealist, and literary readings of Hegel, exemplified by the Philosophies group and by surrealists such as Louis Aragon” (Altman 2007: 67). In contrast to the scholarship that distanced Beauvoir from the long shadow of Sartre, Karen Green and Nicholas Roffey have recently argued for a comparison between the two existentialist philosophers with regard to their negotiation of Hegelianism: in their view, “The intellectual relationship between Beauvoir and Sartre must be read as dialectical” (Green and Roffey 2010: 377) – yet another example of how recent Beauvoir scholarship has returned to the “Sartrébeauvoir” issue so as to better explore it without recourse to patriarchal strategies.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir quotes Claude Lévi-Strauss's contemporary, and now canonical study *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 1949) and aligns herself with Lévi-Strauss's view that human life is organised, in a state of culture, in a series of dichotomous relationships such as duality, alternance, opposition, and symmetry (*DSa* 19).³² To better explain this result of the anthropologist's enquiry, she has recourse to Hegel:

Ces phénomènes ne sauraient se comprendre si la réalité humaine était exclusivement un *mitsein* basé sur la solidarité et l'amitié. Ils s'éclairent au contraire si suivant Hegel on découvre dans la conscience elle-même une fondamentale hostilité à l'égard de toute autre conscience ; le sujet ne se pose qu'en s'opposant : il prétend s'affirmer comme l'essentiel et constituer l'autre en inessentiel, en objet. (*DSa* 19)³³

In order to be able to become a subject, any individual must oppose themselves to another. In contrast to Heidegger's notion of a *Mitsein* (literally, "being-with"), namely of a harmonious co-existence with other subjects, human consciousness is predicated upon opposition and a self/Other dichotomy. This Hegelian understanding of subjectivity, however, would naturally lead to the fact that women, too, as subjects, would have to cast men as Other in order to exist and operate in the world. This is why Beauvoir argues that the notion of reciprocity is fundamental to an understanding of the self: subject constitution is premised on the idea that each subject ought to be recognised by another, so much so that the relation between different subjects is what actually defines selfhood; to rephrase a famous existentialist dictum, relationality precedes individuality.

What ensues is that women ought to oppose themselves to men, an event which Beauvoir is quite problematically suggesting here that never really happened. In her introduction to the British edition of the work, British socialist feminist theorist and historian Sheila Rowbotham rightly emphasises how, reading *The Second Sex*, "It is as if association and collective action by women in movements had never occurred", and

³² Although it ought to be noted that "Beauvoir's association with Lévi-Strauss [...] spanned the course of her philosophical maturation", in the July 1949 edition of *Les Temps modernes* Beauvoir published a review of Lévi-Strauss's study of structural anthropology, which came out in the same year (*FW* 51, cf. *FW* 58-66). *Le Deuxième Sexe* draws heavily on Lévi-Strauss's argument about exogamy as a homosocial exchange of women, as will emerge in Beauvoir's engagement with Hegel's master-slave dialectic.

³³ "These phenomena could not be understood if human reality were solely a *Mitsein* based on solidarity and friendship. On the contrary, they become clear if, following Hegel, a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself; the subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object" (*SS* 7).

concludes that Beauvoir's "modern historical material is scrappy and at times inaccurate" because these topics run counter to her theoretical approach as well as her political agenda, both of which insist on the fact that "Patriarchy is boss; women are losers" (SS xvi). This is precisely one of the reasons why Beauvoir was taken to task by subsequent generations of feminists, but, as Rowbotham concedes, "Beauvoir's ingenious strategy" was "entering male culture in order to undermine it", a feat that is "comparable to the difficulty John Milton encountered with his heroic Satan in *Paradise Lost*": ultimately, "While Beauvoir's work contained evident flaws, her mode of enquiry also suggests opposing perceptions of what might be" (SS xvi, xvii), an intuition on which this thesis, as has been pointed out time and again, rests.

In stark contrast to other oppressions based on race or class, all of which, in Beauvoir's reading of history, took place at a certain point in time, the submission of women "is not the consequence of an event or a becoming, it did not *happen*" (SS 8; "n'est pas la consequence d'un événement ou d'un devenir, elle n'est pas *arrivée*", *DSa* 20). While some may argue that this is because of a natural essence inherent in womanhood which would decree in no uncertain terms how she must be a dependent, inessential, relative being with no hope for change, Beauvoir is quick to point out that "In truth, nature is no more an immutable given than is historical reality" (SS 8; "En vérité pas plus que la réalité historique la nature n'est un donné immuable", *DSa* 21): the nature-culture divide is one fabricated by philosophy, as the next Section will stress, and Beauvoir's work will do much to show how woman is not just a natural concept, but a historical, relational, and embodied one premised upon the combination of different ineliminable factors. Entering male culture means, for Beauvoir in 1949, exploring the pre-conceived notion that women ought to be reduced to their biological body and turning it on its head by declaring that humanity should be understood instead in its historical relationality, in its underlying logic of self and Other, in its negotiation with the given and with transcendence.

What remains problematic for Beauvoir, at any rate, is the fact that, unlike the proletariat or racialised people, "Les femmes – sauf en certains congrès qui restent des manifestations abstraites – ne disent pas 'nous' ; les hommes disent 'les femmes' et elles reprennent ces mots pour se désigner elles-mêmes ; mais elles ne se posent pas

authentiquement comme Sujet” (*DSa* 21).³⁴ Although this view may naturally raise quite a few eyebrows, as Rowbotham points out, especially when situated in a more international context than the author seems to have in mind here, Beauvoir is trying to argue that women do not identify as an autonomous collectivity, they do not yet possess, in her interpretation, a self-awareness that would point to a larger whole they are part of based on their sex or gender: other parts of women’s identity such as class or race normally override their sense of belonging to their sex or gender – and as we saw, this was definitely true for Black women until the 1970s, in hooks’ account. And yet, the heterosexual couple is the foundation of society, Beauvoir goes on to argue, and this is the salient aspect of their oppression, namely their economic and ontological dependence upon their direct oppressors, men: “elle [la femme] est l’Autre au coeur d’une totalité dont les deux termes sont nécessaires l’un à l’autre” (*DSa* 22).³⁵

In a corrective reinterpretation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic as applied to men-women relations, Beauvoir points out how

Le maître et l’esclave aussi sont unis par un besoin économique réciproque qui ne libère pas l’esclave. C’est que dans le rapport du maître à l’esclave, le maître ne *pose* pas le besoin qu’il a de l’autre ; il détient le pouvoir de satisfaire ce besoin et ne le médiate pas ; au contraire l’esclave dans la dépendance, espoir ou peur, intériorise le besoin qu’il a du maître ; l’urgence du besoin fût-elle égale en tous deux joue toujours en faveur de l’opresseur contre l’opprimé [...]. Or la femme a toujours été, sinon l’esclave de l’homme, du moins sa vassale ; les deux sexes ne se sont jamais partagé le monde à égalité ; et aujourd’hui encore, bien que sa condition soit en train d’évoluer, la femme est lourdement handicapée. (*DSa* 22-3)³⁶

In a strategic reappropriation of the Hegelian dialectic, Beauvoir observes that women are materially dependent upon men and have thus never had access to an autonomous

³⁴ “Women – except in certain abstract gatherings such as conferences – do not use ‘we’; men say ‘women’ and women adopt this word to refer to themselves; but they do not posit themselves authentically as Subjects” (*SS* 8).

³⁵ “she [woman] is the Other at the heart of a whole whose two components are necessary to each other” (*SS* 9).

³⁶ “Master and slave are also linked by a reciprocal economic need that does not free the slave. That is, in the master-slave relation, the master does not *posit* the need he has for the other; he holds the power to satisfy this need and does not mediate it; the slave, on the other hand, out of dependence, hope or fear, internalises his need for the master; however equally compelling the need may be to them both, it always plays in favour of the oppressor over the oppressed [...]. Now woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped” (*SS* 9).

form of subjectivation. Unlike the Hegelian consciousness, which is ontologically self-determining, women never really gained the right to be independent of men because of the material machinations of patriarchal ideology. As a result, women are also a poorer and ‘inferior’ class to that of men, who are for all intents and purposes a “superior caste”: “L’homme-suzerain protégera matériellement la femme-lige et il se chargera de justifier son existence : avec le risque économique elle esquivé le risqué métaphysique d’une liberté qui doit inventer ses fins sans secours” (*DSa* 23).³⁷ The metaphysical status of woman is inextricably linked to the economic situation of a subject who does not have access to labour and capital on an equal footing with men; this allows – and arguably, forces – women to abstain from an intervention in a material reality shaped and directed by men, to the effect that submitting to the latter’s regulations is the only possible way – other than outright rebellion – for them to posit themselves as subjects. As we saw in relation to Clarissa Dalloway, women have all sorts of interests in submitting to patriarchal ideology and to men, first and foremost for ontological and material purposes – an intuition which Manon Garcia has recently elaborated upon in her monographs starting precisely from Beauvoir’s philosophy (cf. Garcia 2018, 2021). If women do not rebel against men, Beauvoir concludes, it is for three interdependent reasons: “parce qu’elle n’en a pas les moyens concrets, parce qu’elle éprouve le lien nécessaire qui la rattache à l’homme sans en poser la réciprocité, et parce que souvent elle se plaint dans son rôle d’Autre” (*DSa* 24).³⁸

Although this emphasis on women’s complicity in their oppression could understandably – and as a matter of fact, *did* – raise quite a few eyebrows among feminist scholars, as we saw in Chapter 1, it could be argued that by seeing this complicity as intimately bound up with material conditions and with heterosexual women’s intimate need for men, Beauvoir is not reducing oppression to women’s deliberate choice to submit to men: what results from her introduction is precisely that the picture is much more nuanced than that, and, possibly, that submission ought to be seen as an understandable choice rather than something to be censured. In this sense, *Le*

³⁷ “Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence: along with the economic risk, she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help” (*SS* 10).

³⁸ “because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as *Other*” (*SS* 10).

Deuxième Sexe is clearly a philosophical text in its attempt to speak to *men* – the owners of property as well as of language, as Beauvoir registers – in order to make a case even for those women who decide, whether fully aware of the consequences or not, to adjust their subjectivity to a pre-conceived notion of womanhood because that is the safest option for a feminised subject. By dissolving the patriarchal notions encroaching upon Woman – the immovable essence of womanhood fabricated by men, embodied in the text as the eternal feminine and the myths of femininity – Beauvoir is effectively showing men how philosophy can help us better navigate reality in a critical way while attempting to create a collective sense of what womanhood is by exploring its multiple material manifestations. As Manon Garcia has aptly noted,

In *The Second Sex*, for the first time, women appear as a multiplicity of subjects. To accomplish this, Beauvoir is a phenomenologist insofar as she relies on first-person experiences, but she is an original phenomenologist because she multiplies the sources of first-person narratives. [...] Her work, then, does not display the shortcomings of a subjectivist and particular analysis nor of the masculine analysis that freezes the diversity of experiences in the assumption of a feminine essence. (Garcia 2021: 96, 98)

Coupled with the phenomenological method that Beauvoir applies in an original manner to womanhood, this pluralistic understanding of womanhood effectively produces the ‘we’ which, in Beauvoir’s interpretation, has never really been much on the lips and in the minds of women, in the hope that this may generate self-awareness. Much as *A Room* ends with a clarion call to women writers who are invited to resuscitate the body of Judith Shakespeare, *Le Deuxième Sexe* strategically insists on a plurality of women’s voices in order to mobilise a sense of belonging to this ‘second sex’, an attempt which was in fact successful, as registered by the thousands of letters Beauvoir received from her ‘common readers’ and which, as the work of Marine Rouch has shown, actively shaped her understanding of womanhood and of the feminist struggle (cf. Rouch 2019). Her mixed readership – men and women – certainly received the text differently, but it is clear that Beauvoir is not only speaking to men or reproducing their own patriarchal biases and prejudices, as the text managed to create a moving sense of belonging in ordinary women – the roots of the flowers – which, in the “trough of the waves” (“creux de la vague”, Chaperon 2000: xiii), found some space to

think about themselves as women, effectively preparing for the next ‘wave’ of feminism a couple of decades later.

As Anna Snaith has pointed out in her archival work related to the letters received by Woolf after the publication of her works, Woolf received – or at any rate kept – only 14 letters from ‘common readers’ in response to *A Room*, whereas the number reaches 82 (of which 58 are by ‘common readers’) when we consider the “more urgent” text that was *Three Guineas* – a text incidentally structured precisely as a series of letters (Snaith 2000b: 3). Coming from different backgrounds, these readers effectively extend Woolf’s text beyond its premises, assumptions, and original scope, thereby renewing and renegotiating Woolf’s theories on women. Although Woolf for instance does not include the voices of working-class women, her correspondence with Agnes Smith and other working-class women, as Snaith argues, “in part, fill[s] in the silences left by Woolf’s consciously limited perspective” (ibid., p. 4). In both cases, Woolf and Beauvoir responded to the letters they received from ordinary readers not only through written correspondence, but also by integrating other women’s perspectives and voices into their understanding of patriarchal ideology: these ordinary women’s impressions and stories fed into their own understanding of feminism, thus stretching their texts beyond their original boundaries and showing that Woolf/Beauvoir were not intellectuals far removed from the ‘masses’. Through their work and mobilisation, women become more conscious of themselves as political subjects and can thus aspire to become part of the current or next ‘wave’ of feminisms.

The first step in this mobilisation of women is the notion of the subject, an ontological and material status to which women have to regain access precisely by their collective thinking and activity. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that *Le Deuxième Sexe* as an essay opens precisely with the first person singular (“J’ai longtemps hésité à écrire un livre sur la femme”, *DSa* 13; “I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman”, *SS* 3) and ends on the notion of reciprocity (“pour remporter cette supreme Victoire, il est entre autres nécessaire que par-delà leurs différenciations naturelles hommes et femmes affirment sans équivoque leur fraternité”, *DSb* 652; “to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and above and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood”, *SS* 782), though clearly with a more patriarchal undertone – we ought to recall in this context that

fraternité was and still is a central tenet of French culture to which Beauvoir is clearly appealing in her plea for women's rights. In this "stumbling trip" from a personal, (auto)biographical self to the notion of reciprocity, *Le Deuxième Sexe* deviates towards all sorts of documents, disciplines, and lived experiences, for, as Woolf/Montaigne teach us, what matters, really, is the journey.

This journey, while having a fixed destination in the notion that women are oppressed by patriarchy in dismal ways, starts precisely by saying 'I', which, as Woolf's narrator in *A Room* reminds us, is nothing but "a convenient term for somebody who has no real being"— "call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of importance", as the narrator interjects in brackets (*AROO* 4). Although this understanding of the 'I' rests on the fictional quality of the narrator and of the "stumbling trip" of the narrative essay, later in the text the narrator picks up "a new novel by Mr A"³⁹ which received extremely positive reviews and observes:

All this was admirable. But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I'. One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was hailed to the letter 'I'. One began to be tired of 'I'. Not but what this 'I' was a most respectable 'I'; honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding. I respect and admire that 'I' from the bottom of my heart. But – here I turned a page or two, looking for something or other – the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist. (*AROO* 75)

This gigantic 'I' hides from view anything contained in the pages of the book but itself: the author's subjectivity is here understood to be that of an egomaniac who cannot write about anything but himself, to the detriment of – and the reference is of course not coincidental – "a tree or a woman walking" behind it. To the static 'I' that obscures everything behind and around itself, Woolf's narrator opposes here the image of a natural element – a tree or a landscape, both representing connection and material

³⁹ It could be argued that "Mr A" may refer to Arnold Bennett, the author and reviewer Woolf took to task in "Modern Fiction" for his "materialist" representation of reality in fiction as well as for his negative review (and poor understanding) of *Jacob's Room*; we will return to this debate in Section 2.3 through the notion of character.

relationality – as well as the dynamic figure of a woman walking, arguably a doubling of the narrator whose meandering physical as well as mental trajectories we are following as we read *A Room*. The shapeless mist in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ prevents us from following the character development of Phoebe – so she calls this woman walking – precisely because the author’s ‘I’, his “self-consciousness” as a man, dominates and “casts within its shade” some form of “aridity” (*AROO* 76). In stark contrast to the mutability of the elusive creature within us, then, patriarchal subjectivity takes the form of a towering ‘I’ which prevents the full fertilisation of the mind that only androgyny can engender (cf. *AROO* 74).

Within this context, it becomes clear that subjectivity, when gendered, results in very different manifestations: on the one hand, we have a patriarchal ‘I’ who is incapable of making room for anything but himself, a state which is the product of men’s inability to become subjects without casting women and nature as Other; on the other hand, we have a feminine, even feminist subjectivity which is plural, disjointed, in many ways disorienting and meandering – *nomadic*, Braidotti would say (cf. Braidotti 1994) –, one that is produced through the androgynous fertilisation of our mental capacities. If women, as Beauvoir put it, cannot use ‘we’, this may also result in a more subtle and loose understanding of subjectivity as well as in a form of writing that does not necessarily involve continuously drawing attention to oneself, Woolf and Kristeva seem to suggest in chorus (cf. Minow-Pinkney 2010). If Beauvoir will go on to insist on this ‘I’ in her autobiography in order to weaponise it, Woolf perceives in the same first-person singular pronoun the risk of turning the ground into a “very starved and very stony soil” which leaves no room for the Other. In one of her Japanese lectures, Beauvoir will state in no uncertain terms how this ‘I’ for her is always already a ‘we’: “Le « je » dont je me sers est très souvent en vérité un « nous » ou un « on », qui fait allusion à l’ensemble de mon siècle plutôt qu’à moi-même” (*ESdB* 450).⁴⁰ In her attempt to speak of herself, she is not just being a narcissist, as many commentators suggested; rather, this ‘I’ serves as a stand-in for any human being and any woman, as it

⁴⁰ “The ‘I’ that I use is actually very often a ‘we’ or a ‘one’ which refers to the whole of my century rather than to myself” (*OLW* 291). I do not think that the French ‘on’ and the English ‘one’ have a one-to-one correspondence but I understand why the translator chose to use the closest approximation to render the two possibilities in English.

has the ambition to pose as “a concrete and singularised universal” (*OLW* 292, “un universel concret, un universel singularisé”, *ESdB* 451).

A few decades later, second-wave feminists of difference saw precisely in Hegelianism this patriarchal ‘I’ which purports to abstract meaning from reality without enacting a self-reflexive and self-critical process. Italian second-wave feminist philosopher Carla Lonzi, for instance, looked back on Hegel in the 1970s in a more critical way than Beauvoir did in 1949. In what has become a classic of the Italian feminist theory of sexual difference, namely the text provocatively titled “Sputiamo su Hegel” (“Let’s Spit on Hegel”, 1970), Lonzi sees in Hegel precisely the patriarch because of whom even revolutionary Marxist theory ended up contributing to marginalising and silencing women.

With Beauvoir, Lonzi argues that the oppression of women “does not start in history, but is hidden in the darkness of origins” (Lonzi 1974: 19)⁴¹ – Beauvoir, as we saw, noted that oppression did not *happen* (“elle n’est pas *arrivée*”) – but, unlike Beauvoir, she does not find in Hegel a suitable interlocutor for the liberation of women. In Lonzi’s view, “The master-slave dialectic is a settling of accounts among groups of men: it is not intended for the liberation of woman, the great oppressed of patriarchal civilisation” (ibid., p. 17).⁴² The problem of the man-woman divide is one based in history although it purports to be based in nature, Lonzi goes on to argue, and Hegel is actually responsible for naturalising the oppression of women. Understanding the sexes as classes, with men being equated with bourgeois masters and women with proletarian slaves, is for Lonzi “an historical mistake” (“errore storico”) precisely because it is one generated within the male, patriarchal framework that can only conceive of a male subject (ibid., p. 24). Even from these few remarks it is clear how Lonzi clearly had in mind Beauvoir’s critical reappraisal of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, as *Le Deuxième Sexe* was translated into Italian in 1961 – the Vatican’s decision to place it in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (List of Forbidden Books) in 1956 contributing to its delayed Italian reception – but many Italian women had heard of, and subsequently acquired the French original because of its *succès de scandale*, and Lonzi was one of them (cf.

⁴¹ “L’oppressione della donna non inizia nei tempi, ma si nasconde nel buio delle origini.” The translation is my own.

⁴² “La dialettica servo-padrone è una regolazione di conti tra collettivi di uomini: essa non prevede la liberazione della donna, il grande oppresso della civiltà patriarcale.”

Rampello 2016). In a deliberate, though unacknowledged commentary on Beauvoir's reappropriation of Hegel, Lonzi concludes that

If Hegel had recognised the human origin of the oppression of woman, as he recognised that of the oppression of the slave, he should have applied the master-slave dialectic in her case, too. And in this he would have encountered a serious obstacle: if the revolutionary method can capture the stages of a social dynamic, the liberation of women can undoubtedly never fit the same schemata: on the woman-man plane there is no solution that can eliminate the other, so *the ultimate goal of seizing power is nullified*. (Ibid., p. 24; emphasis in the original)⁴³

Contrary to Beauvoir's critical discussion of Hegel, Lonzi discounts here Hegelianism in one fell swoop by showing how it is premised upon the exclusion of woman from the rank of the subject (what Hegel calls consciousness). While Beauvoir salvages Hegel's master-slave dialectic and re-adapts it to her discussion of sex and gender, thus operating a form of "mythic transformation" of Hegelianism, Kojève's re-reading of it, and Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology (cf. Montanaro and Renault 2020), Lonzi dispenses with the patriarchal theorist altogether on the grounds that he equates woman with nature and not with culture, thereby barring her access to the rank of subject. For the Italian philosopher, the woman-man divide is so intrinsically true that it can be abstracted from the material, bodily differences even among women: as she sharply – and quite problematically – summarises it, "A Black man is equal to a white man, a Black woman is equal to a white woman" (ibid., p. 21).⁴⁴ Needless to say, a plurality of Black feminists – bell hooks, Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, to mention but a few – would disagree vehemently.

This difference in their treatment of feminine and feminist subjectivity not only emphasises once again the gap existing between the form of feminist theory proposed by Beauvoir and that advanced by second-wave feminists, but also suggests in no uncertain terms how the Hegelian philosopher may be assimilated to a patriarchal 'I' who impedes the meandering, stumbling trip of the self in order to fossilise it in a sterile

⁴³ "Se Hegel avesse riconosciuto l'origine umana dell'oppressione della donna, come ha riconosciuto quella dell'oppressione del servo, avrebbe dovuto applicare anche al suo caso la dialettica servo-padrone. E in questo avrebbe incontrato un serio ostacolo: infatti se il metodo rivoluzionario può cogliere i passaggi della dinamica sociale, non c'è dubbio che la liberazione della donna non può rientrare negli stessi schemi: sul piano donna-uomo non esiste una soluzione che elimini l'altro, quindi *si vanifica il traguardo della presa del potere*." The phrase in italics is in bold in the original.

⁴⁴ "L'uomo nero è uguale all'uomo bianco, la donna nera è uguale alla donna bianca."

position. In this context, a critical re-examination of the meaning and use of the body will allow us to better articulate how subjectivity is necessarily relational and expansive, a view which Woolf and Beauvoir seem to share.

2.2 Inscribing the body: literature, philosophy, science, and technology

As we saw in the previous section, the self/Other dichotomy is the product of a liberal humanist, even patriarchal understanding of subjectivity. It is a false dichotomy, as Beauvoir shows through her recourse to Hegel, as there is no such thing as subjectivation without relation: in order to constitute themselves as a subject, a human being necessarily differentiates themselves from others and connects themselves with other similar subjects. As Remotti argues, subject constitution is founded upon the quicksand of alterity and alteration.

Beauvoir's original reinterpretation of Hegel has also helped us to see how materially entangled in time and history subject constitution is: a subject is such only insofar as they have become a subject thanks to their agency as well as that of the material conditions impinging upon them. If becoming a subject is a material process, it is clear from the outset that there must be something intrinsically corporeal about subjectivation. In *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Beauvoir opens her discussion of human ambiguity by tracing a brief history of the subject in the main Western philosophical traditions: in her view, human beings distinguish themselves from other non-human animals because of their self-awareness, more specifically their awareness of being tragically ambiguous, torn as they are between life and death, the status of subject and the rank of object, the condition of culture and the materiality of nature. As she goes on to point out, however, philosophy has very often failed to do justice to this intrinsic ambiguity of human beings:

Depuis qu'il y a des hommes et qu'ils vivent, ils ont tous éprouvé cette tragique ambiguïté de leur condition ; mais depuis qu'il y a des philosophes et qu'ils pensent, la plupart ont essayé de la masquer. Ils se sont efforcés de réduire l'esprit à la matière, ou de résorber la matière dans l'esprit, ou de les confondre au sein d'une substance unique ; ce qui ont accepté le dualisme ont établi entre le corps et l'âme une hiérarchie qui permettait de considérer comme négligeable la partie de soi-même qu'on ne pouvait pas sauver. Ils ont nié la mort soit en l'intégrant à la vie, soit en promettant à l'homme l'immortalité ; ou encore ils ont nié la vie, la

considérant comme un voile d'illusion sous lequel se cache la vérité du Nirvâna. Et la morale qu'ils proposaient à leurs disciples poursuivait toujours le même but : il s'agissait de supprimer l'ambiguïté en se faisant pure intériorité ou pure extériorité, en s'évadant du monde sensible ou en s'y engloutissant, en accédant à l'éternité ou en s'enfermant dans l'instant pur. (*PMLA* 12)⁴⁵

As Alexandre Feron has noted, Beauvoir is here distancing herself from monism as well as from dualism: in her view, it is incorrect to think of the human subject as of pure matter (materialist reductionism) or pure spirit (idealist reductionism), but it is equally inaccurate to create a hierarchy between body and mind, as Descartes did for instance, by suggesting that one is more important than the other (cf. Feron 2021: 29). From Beauvoir's perspective, human beings, as we saw earlier, are intrinsically ambiguous beings whose existence is balanced between body and mind, between matter and spirit without necessarily seeing in either of these or in their unity a pre-eminent component of humanity. There is nothing 'pure' about human subjectivity, as everything is mixed and alloyed into a composite amalgamation of disparate, even contrary elements. Hegelianism, though consoling, does not provide a suitable reflection on humanity, as she reiterates just after this passage, concluding: "Ainsi peut-on se reposer dans un merveilleux optimisme où les guerres sanglantes elles-mêmes ne font qu'exprimer la féconde inquiétude de l'Esprit" (*PMLA* 13).⁴⁶

If philosophy has failed to do justice to human ambiguity, literature has similarly insisted on the fundamental role played by the mind, thereby dismissing the body as unimportant when it comes to reading and writing. As Woolf wrote in "On Being Ill" (1926), published in slightly revised volume form in 1930:

But no; with a few exceptions – De Quincey attempted something of the sort in *The Opium Eater*; there must be a volume or two about disease scattered through the

⁴⁵ "As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance. Those who have accepted the dualism have established a hierarchy between body and soul which permits of considering as negligible the part of the self which cannot be saved. They have denied death, either by integrating it with life or by promising to man immortality. Or, again they have denied life, considering it as a veil of illusion beneath which is hidden the truth of Nirvana. And the ethics which they have proposed to their disciples has always pursued the same goal. It has been a matter of eliminating the ambiguity by making oneself pure inwardness or pure externality, by escaping from the sensible world or by being engulfed in it, by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment." (*EA* 6)

⁴⁶ "One can thus repose in a marvellous optimism where even the bloody wars simply express the fertile restlessness of the Spirit." (*EA* 7)

pages of Proust – literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe; the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. (*E5 195*)⁴⁷

Although the Western tradition has tended to think of literature as the product of intellect and soul, reading and writing are actually material activities which are inevitably affected by the position and the state of our bodies: as circumstances change, so do our bodies and, as a result, the literature they produce or absorb. The “creature within” which in “Montaigne” is shown to be an elusive shape-shifter that writers have to represent in its vitality and in all its protean manifestations without ever crystallising it in one definitive form, is described here as though it were encased in a glass cage, the body: this transparent material can in fact be affected by changes in temperature or situation and thus our own view of it may be obfuscated or simply altered by the very fact that the intellect is always embodied. Unlike “the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea”, the body is one with the intellect, so that when the former experiences a specific situation or feeling, the latter is also affected by it. What we tend to think of as a perennially transparent glass cage which does not have a direct impact on what it contains is described by Woolf here as a material which actively shapes its contents: body and mind are irreducible and unassimilable to one another, their constitutive differences preventing them quite paradoxically from being separated. When the body “smashes itself to smithereens” as a result of “the inevitable catastrophe” that is death,

⁴⁷ I have chosen to use the last version of the text Woolf prepared for publication, namely the 1930 volume *On Being Ill*, rather than the earlier text. Only minor alterations were made to the 1926 text, but it is clear that the last published version is more in line with Woolf’s philosophy than the earlier version, as will be argued below.

the soul is said to escape, Woolf's brackets suggesting here a position of epistemic humility which reports – rather than prescribes – a commonsensical or religious view.

As she goes on to argue:

But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record. People write always about the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how it has civilised the universe. They show it ignoring the body in the philosopher's turret; or kicking the body, like an old leather football, across leagues of snow and desert in the pursuit of conquest or discovery. Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. Short of these, this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism. (*E5* 195-6)

Woolf draws attention here to how philosophers ignore the body in their “turrets”, this space clearly recalling the lofty, abstract ideals of thinking as opposed to the grounded materiality of the body. In the same sentence, she then emphasises how bodies are mobilised for war and discovery, before suggesting that there are other perhaps more internal or intimate battles that the body “wages with the mind a slave to it”, not out on the battlefield but rather “in the solitude of the bedroom”. While a philosopher's turret may be described as an elevated space dedicated to reflection, this bedroom creates an intimate atmosphere where a war against illness can rage on undiscussed by literature and philosophy – a room which in its very name contains a place for horizontal rest, the bed, as opposed to the vertical thinking embodied by the turret.

The reason for this neglect is to be found, as she argues, in the fact that what is needed in order to address our corporeality is not only “the courage of a lion tamer”, as the beast that is our body both in its materiality and as a subject matter must be mastered, but also “a robust philosophy” and “a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth” rather than, as is implied, in the ‘turret’ of the body, namely our heads. Underneath the textual surface, Woolf is already suggesting that there exists a profound gap between the horizontal rest required by the body's suppleness and susceptibility and the supposed vertical mobility – both physical and mental – that the mind is generally

regarded to represent, with the latter possibly being associated with the patriarchal ‘I’ that was discussed above.

Interestingly, in her final revision of the 1926 essay, Woolf slightly altered one of these sentences: while in the first version she had written “Those great wars which it [i.e. the body] wages *by itself*, with the mind a slave to it” (E4 318, emphasis added), here she chose to redact “by itself” and made the subject explicit: “Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it” (E5 196). This slight change clearly signals how Woolf does not intend to imply that the body, like the mind, can be conceived of as a solipsistic construct, namely as an entity existing in a vacuum, in isolation from the world: there are no wars that the body fights ‘by itself’, as there is always something it is responding to that is paradoxically both external and internal. This slight edit by Woolf already points to the fact that the body is not an object commanded by reason but rather represents the embodied, relational subject every human being is despite all (patriarchal, liberal, humanist) efforts to claim otherwise.

These dichotomies between private and public, external and internal are best understood through recourse to Beauvoir’s re-elaboration of phenomenology. One of the main tenets of this philosophical tradition is the dismissal of the subject-object dichotomy, so that the subject, as we saw earlier, can never truly be separated from the context in which it operates, the Other from which it differentiates itself, or from the objects it establishes relationships with. Existing, for Beauvoir as for Woolf, entails dealing with other people, committing to the materiality of the world and pursuing what Beauvoir, following Heidegger, calls projects, which overcome our present situation in search of a future we can build in cooperation and/or conflict with the world and with other people. Within this context, thinking of the body as of an entity isolated from the world is a flawed thought experiment which reinforces the presuppositions one brings to it.

In view of this awareness of our pre-conceived notions about subjectivity, the body, and the world at large, phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger in Germany or Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in France attempted to practise what they called “epoché”, namely a process whereby the observing subject – the philosopher – distances themselves from the object of their study in order to suspend their judgment and thus prevent prejudices and biases from informing their observation, with an eye to distilling the

truth about everyday life in a form of practical philosophy. In the case of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir is clearly applying this notion to her study of womanhood by simply asking herself a seemingly banal question – “what is (a) woman?” – and then moving on to look for an answer in a plethora of volumes belonging to different disciplines, concluding that none of these answers can be deemed adequate for they all clearly reduce womanhood to a set of biological data, to a psychoanalytic development, or to an historical process connected to the evolution of capitalism. For this reason, the second volume of the essay moves on to consider the manifestation of womanhood as represented in texts penned by women, in an attempt to return to the original sources which patriarchal ideology has marginalised or outright silenced. Similarly, in *A Room of One's Own*, the narrator ponders the relationship between women and fiction, advances a thesis by way of introduction, and then moves on to narrate how she got to this particular view and why, realising soon enough during her reading that “It was impossible to make head or tail of it all” (*AROO* 24) because of the disparate understandings of women’s character and nature that men provided in their books. Her solution is similar to Beauvoir’s, as she moves swiftly between men’s volumes and women’s texts, encouraging in the meantime the readers and auditors to fill in the gaps of women’s history through their own research and creativity.

In *On Being Ill*, this *epoché* is provided by illness, which functions as a distancing device from the world because it relegates the human subject to the sickroom – the horizontal rest represented by the bedroom, as opposed to the vertical turret of reason. When we are ill, Woolf suggests, we become outspoken like children – “things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals” – and we realise that we do not simply live in harmony and “sympathy” with other human beings (*E5* 198). On the contrary, “Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way”, even though we live in the “illusion of a world so shaped that it echoes every groan, of human beings so tied together by common needs and fears that a twitch at one wrist jerks another” (*E5* 198). In this sentence, Woolf seems to be building on the Hobbesian idea of the body politic, namely the received notion that the state is a sort of hyper-body made up of the people, with the head coinciding with the ruler and other

anatomical parts being equated with different social strata.⁴⁸ Unlike what Hobbes claimed in his *Leviathan* (1651), however, for Woolf we are all part of a collective body only as long as we do not experience illness or any other form of alienation, both states contributing to our distancing ourselves from pre-conceived notions of reality and, as a consequence, to a better, less illusory sense of our connection to the world: illness nudges us to realise that we are not just part of a collectivity, we are also individuals with specific bodily functions and needs. If a liberal, humanist, patriarchal understanding of humankind reduces us to thinking reeds *à la* Pascal or to body-and-soul compounds characterised by a Cartesian *cogito*, Woolf sees in illness the potential to overthrow this commonsensical feeling as poor health brings us back to our own individual bodies.

As a matter of fact, Woolf concludes,

There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. But in health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed – to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky. (E5 198)

This health/illness dichotomy is one that also seemingly reinforces different expectations as to our actions: when we are well, we are “soldiers in the army of the upright”, once again the verticality of the expression stressing the utter violence this state may engender; when we are ill, “we become deserters” and we are thus free to explore reality through a different, horizontal perspective, our gaze cast both “round” us and “up” at the sky. On the one hand, we have health, which comes with responsibility, a stately march, a collective body of people; on the other hand, we have illness as a

⁴⁸ Cf. Rudan 2020 (Sections 1.2-1.3), who emphasises how early modern women philosophers like Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell distanced themselves from Hobbes to articulate a proto-feminist political philosophy.

liberating experience which helps us to take a fresh look at the world around us as well as within us and at our part in it.

In a recent and long overdue reappraisal of *On Being Ill*, Sarah Pett has convincingly argued that a close examination of the essay reveals how the “rashness” which Woolf sees in the experience of illness “signifies both a sense of detachment, even liberation, from social norms and an unmediated, profoundly phenomenological engagement with the world and its inhabitants” (Pett 2019: 33). As this altered state shapes our position in the world, we are invited by Woolf to regard illness as an opportunity to “approach literature without inhibition and with an openness to interpretive potential that exceeds the constraints of tradition” (ibid., p. 34). Following from James Fenton’s argument that Woolf was suggesting a thesis – literature and illness are generally regarded to be mutually exclusive categories – which she did not in fact subscribe to because she was familiar with many texts dealing with illness (cf. Fenton 2003), Pett invites us to see the opening lines as “an exercise in reverse psychology”: “a strategy that prompts readers to think first of exceptions to the rule with which they have just been presented, and then, through these exceptions, to begin reflecting on the status of illness in the literary texts with which they are familiar” (Pett 2019: 36), in a similar way as the invalid re-discovers the sky thanks to the difference in what Beauvoir would term their situation.

From a phenomenological perspective, this opening may be deemed to amount to a distancing device which is supposed to generate a form of *epoché* in the readers, who, much as happens in illness, are invited to take a fresh look at literature and the presuppositions they bring to it. From the outset, then, *On Being Ill* draws readers in and distances them from their own commonsensical understanding of literature and the body, alienating them, as it were, from the situation they are familiar with whilst inviting them to follow the stumbling trip of the invalid essay. In this journey, Woolf shows how illness is “coextensive with, rather than distinct from, lived experience more generally” (ibid., p. 42), calling upon readers and writers alike to bridge the gap between life and literature, much as phenomenologists attempted to do with their form of practical philosophy based on everyday life.

As *On Being Ill* shows, the state of a body determines the perspective from which we observe the world, how we process information through reading and writing. As was mentioned earlier, Beauvoir famously described the body as a situation in the Biology chapter of *Le Deuxième Sexe*: “dans la perspective que j’adopte – celle de Heidegger, de Sartre, de Merleau-Ponty – si le corps n’est pas une *chose*, il est une situation : c’est notre prise sur le monde et l’esquisse de nos projets” (*DSa* 75).⁴⁹ Because it cannot be reduced to the mere rank of object, the body in Beauvoir’s philosophy becomes the basis for existence, a sort of springboard allowing for, and conditioning, the upward and forward movement inherent in human transcendence: if subjectivity for Beauvoir is highly ambiguous in that it is an odd amalgamation of nature and culture, facticity and freedom, then the body is precisely the situation incarnating this irreducible totality.

In contrast to the widespread idea that the body is an object that is substantially different from the intellect, where subjectivity is generally claimed to reside, phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty emphasised how humanity cannot be reduced to the status of species but must be inscribed within history: as he argues in *La Phénoménologie de la perception* (*The Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945), “L’homme est une idée historique et non pas une espèce naturelle”; as a result, “Tout ce que nous sommes, nous le sommes sur la base d’une situation de fait que nous faisons nôtre et que nous transformons sans cesse par une sorte d’échappement qui n’est jamais une liberté inconditionnée” (Merleau-Ponty 2001: 199; emphasis in the original).⁵⁰ This passage is echoed by Beauvoir in the Biology chapter, where, after exploring specific biological data, she argues that

C’est seulement dans une perspective humaine qu’on peut comparer dans l’espèce humaine la femelle et le mâle. Mais la définition de l’homme, c’est qu’il est un être qui n’est pas donné, qui se fait être ce qu’il est. Comme l’a dit très justement Merleau-Ponty, l’homme n’est pas une espèce naturelle : c’est une idée historique. La femme n’est pas une réalité figée, mais un devenir ; c’est dans son devenir qu’il faudrait la confronter à l’homme, c’est-à-dire qu’il faudrait définir ses *possibilités* : ce qui fausse tant de débats c’est qu’on veut la réduire à ce qu’elle a été, à ce

⁴⁹ “in the position I adopt – that of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – [...] if the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects” (*SS* 46)

⁵⁰ “Man is a historical idea and not a natural species”; “All that we are, we are on the basis of a *de facto* situation which we appropriate to ourselves and which we ceaselessly transform by a sort of *escape* which is never an unconditioned freedom” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 198).

qu'elle est aujourd'hui, cependant qu'on pose la question de ses capacités ; le fait est que des capacités ne se manifestent avec évidence que lorsqu'elles ont été réalisées : mais le fait est aussi que lorsqu'on considère un être qui est transcendance et dépassement, on ne peut jamais arrêter les comptes. (*DSa* 75)⁵¹

As Shaw's dictum reminds us, the oppressed are relegated to specific functions and this in turn becomes, in the oppressors' view, a justification for the perpetuation of their current situation – a notion aptly encapsulated by Woolf in *Three Guineas* as “a curious leaden quality” (*TG* 131). Just because women were prevented from accessing certain professions or positions, this does not mean that they are incapable of carrying out some intellectual or complex tasks, Beauvoir argues: within an understanding of subjectivity as becoming, it makes no sense to think that what was and what is would have to stay the same in the future. What women are capable of cannot be considered without consideration of their material possibilities.

This is famously echoed by Woolf in “Professions for women”, an essay based on a lecture Woolf gave at the London and National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931 and revised by Woolf in 1933, published by Leonard Woolf in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942). After the oft-cited passage on the importance of killing the Angel in the House in order to become a successful woman writer, the narrator muses:

The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what remained was a simple and common object – a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but what is ‘herself’? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill. That indeed is one of the reasons why I have come here – out of respect for you, who are in process of showing us by your experiments what a woman is, who are in process

⁵¹ “Only within a human perspective can the female and the male be compared in the human species. But the definition of man is that he is a being who is not given, who makes himself what he is. As Merleau-Ponty rightly said, man is not a natural species: he is an historical idea. Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming; she has to be compared with man in her becoming, that is, her *possibilities* have to be defined: what skews the issues so much is that she is being reduced to what she was, to what she is today, while the question concerns her capacities; the fact is that her capacities manifest themselves clearly only when they have been realised: but the fact is also that when one considers a being who is transcending and surpassing, it is never possible to close the books.” (*SS* 46)

of providing us, by your failures and successes, with that extremely important piece of information. (E6 481)

The Beauvoirian tinges in this passage are hard to miss: not only does the narrator phrase exactly the research question driving *Le Deuxième Sexe* (“what is a woman?”), but she also equally stresses the importance of opportunity. If in *A Room of One’s Own* the narrator continually invited her readers and her audience to complete the research she could not possibly complete because of the sheer amount of books on the topic or because of a blatant dearth of material about women’s history, here she is emphasising how the very notion of woman depends on the future and original manifestations that will unfurl thanks to their agency. Once external or formal obstacles are set aside, it is up to ordinary women to decide what the meaning of ‘woman’ is by exploring different possibilities and capacities. This also shows how Woolf’s notion of womanhood can be easily aligned with Beauvoir’s phenomenological understanding of it: unless we look at the different manifestations embodied by women, we cannot possibly know what kind of subjects they are; in order for them to become subjects, however, any formal constraints encroaching upon their agency have to be removed.

While Woolf in her essays often insists on the notion of the room or the bedroom, as we see here as well as in *A Room* and *On Being Ill*, Beauvoir chooses a similarly spatial term, situation, as the privileged lens through which we can observe women. Because woman as a subject is not a fixed essence but an historical becoming, as Woolf and Beauvoir seem to concur, her body must be interpreted as a situation, not as *in* situation. As Toril Moi aptly pointed out in “What Is a Woman?” (1999), what many commentators misunderstood about Beauvoir’s philosophy in the following decades is precisely this subtle distinction between being *a situation* and being *in a situation*, the latter being a more familiar idea to anyone exhibiting a sociological understanding of phenomena. “For Beauvoir”, Moi remarks, “these are different claims, equally important and equally true, but not reducible to one another”: “My situation is not *outside* me, it does not relate to me as an object to a subject; it is a synthesis of facticity and freedom. [...] We are always in a situation, but the situation is always part of us” (Moi 1999: 59, 65). While saying that we are always situated means operating a *sociology* of the world, relying on the idea that the body is a situation produces a *phenomenology* of the world, arguably even an existentialist one. As we saw in the

previous Section, for Beauvoir subjectivity ought to be understood in its material entanglement of facticity and freedom; this results in conceiving of the body as precisely the foundation of subjectivity, conditioning and enabling as it does any kind of agency – an argument which inaugurated the branch of critical phenomenology, and feminist phenomenology in particular, of thinkers like Iris Marion Young in the United States (cf. Young 1980) and even informed the notion of situated knowledge elaborated by Donna Haraway in the late 1980s (cf. Haraway 1988) and that of standpoint theory proposed by Sandra Harding in the early 1990s (cf. Harding 1992).

Despite the importance – and as we saw, the negative example – Beauvoir incarnated for subsequent generations of feminist philosophers, thinking of Beauvoir as a social constructionist is to misunderstand her philosophy. Unlike what Judith Butler argued in her commentary on (Parshley’s truncated, unphilosophical version of) *The Second Sex* (cf. Butler 1986, [1990] 1999), Beauvoir did not think in terms of sex and gender: for her, as for Woolf, the term ‘sex’ was sufficient to explore women’s oppression in original ways. As Moi amply demonstrated in the essay mentioned above, the 1960s sex-gender division and the 1990s revision of those categories looked back on a strange version of Beauvoir’s philosophy, one certainly affected by Parshley’s poor rendition as well as by feminist commentators’ projections of their own categories. While even now we tend to think of sex and gender as two complementary categories, Woolf and Beauvoir did not have at their disposal these two terms and only worked with sex, clearly meaning by it some odd combination of both: ‘becoming a woman’ for Beauvoir cannot be equated to our own contemporary notion of gender, although this is generally a very commonly held belief.

In Beauvoir’s phenomenological interpretation of the body, the latter cannot be reduced to a set of biological data – what we would now call ‘sex’ – precisely because, like Merleau-Ponty, she opposes the idea that human beings are nothing but a natural species that can be studied by science. In contrast to this notion of the body as an object, both Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir propose the notion of the body as a situation made up of both facticity (biological data) and freedom (agency), to the effect that, as Moi encapsulated it, “The body is a historical sedimentation of our way of living in the world, and of the world’s way of living with us” (ibid., p. 68). Not only is the body “our perspective on the world”, it is also “engaged in a dialectical interaction with its

surroundings, that is to say with all the other situations in which the body is placed”, to such an extent that the subject/object dichotomy, the nature/culture divide, and the mind/body dualism are no longer tenable (ibid.). From Beauvoir’s perspective, differentiating between sex – the body and its biological data – and gender – the way we construct our identity according to pre-established categories – results in excluding the body from feminist theory, as happened from the 1960s through to the 1990s according to Moi and as our present situation would confirm according to other contemporary feminists such as Silvia Federici (2020) and Camille Froidevaux-Metterie (2021).

As Sara Heinämaa showed, French phenomenologists like Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty recovered the Husserlian distinction between the body-object (*Körper*) and the living body (*Leib*): in the first case, we relate to bodies as to “mere physical things”, namely as to “pieces of inert matter, stone, or metal”, whereas vegetable, animal, and human bodies fall in the second category (Heinämaa 2002: 26). What really distinguishes the two terms, for Husserl as for Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, is our own attitude (*Einstellung*) to the body. In the case of the body-object, we experience the body as a “natural scientist” would, namely we “abstract all meaning, value, and purpose away from the bodies that we study” in order to “try to explain and predict their behaviour by subsuming them under some general laws”; in the second case, we experience living bodies “as meaningful and purposeful agents”, as “*persons*”, and “our own activity and interest is not in explaining or predicting the behaviour of others, but in responding to their movements and gestures” (ibid.). Thus, the naturalistic attitude insists on the physical, inert qualities of the body-object, while the personalistic attitude considers the body and the soul to be so intimately and inextricably connected that, precisely as Woolf suggested in *On Being Ill*, the soul “cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant” (E5 195). As Heinämaa aptly summarises it, “The soul binds bodily functions and parts together into a spiritual unity that cannot be broken up or divided into autonomous parts. Thus, the organs and movements of our bodies form a similar stylistic unity as chapters, paragraphs, and sentences of a book” (Heinämaa 2002: 32).⁵²

From this phenomenological perspective, the body is not simply an object to be studied; rather, it is a materially entangled, intrinsically ambiguous situation which

⁵² We will return to this comparison between the human body and the body of the text in Section 2.3.

forms the basis and the limits for our own agency. As Ruth Groenhout summarises Beauvoir's philosophy of the body,

Her account focuses on the lived social situations of people who exist as sexed beings in the midst of complex social structures, people whose bodies are always simultaneously biological, social, and imbued with value, and whose experiences respond to and shape the meaning of human existence. (Groenhout 2017: 76)

Taken alone, biology, society, or ethics cannot exhaust the complex ambiguity of our bodily subjectivity: only a global consideration of this irreducible totality can help us better understand life, humankind, and the world in their materially entangled existence. This is why in *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Beauvoir had already drawn attention to the danger of scientism:

La science se condamne à l'échec lorsque, cédant au vertige du sérieux, elle prétend atteindre l'être, le contenir et le posséder ; mais elle trouve sa vérité si elle se considère comme un libre engagement de la pensée dans le donné, visant à chaque découverte non la fusion avec la chose, mais la possibilité de découvertes neuves ; alors ce que projette l'esprit, c'est l'accomplissement concret de sa liberté. (PMLA 99-100)⁵³

Science, much like intercorporeal subjectivity, must be understood as – and more importantly, must *understand itself* as – “a free engagement of thought in the given” which cannot possibly exhaust facticity or be fused with it: knowledge is situated and partial, it is based on specific perspectives which of necessity cannot account for the complexity of the world. As was suggested above, this intuition had an important impact on Harding's and Haraway's reappraisal of the presumed neutrality of science from the 1980s onwards.

The notion of situation was articulated by Beauvoir in a previous philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 1944), where she observes that it is wrong to assume that giving life is in itself a gift for one's children, as the fact of being born and raised is nothing but a part of the situation that the child's freedom transcends: “il [i.e. l'enfant] ne coïncide pas avec sa situation puisqu'il est toujours *ailleurs*” (PC 274; “he [i.e. the child] does not coincide with his situation because he is always

⁵³ “Science condemns itself to failure when, yielding to the infatuation of the serious, it aspires to attain being, to contain it, and to possess it; but it finds its truth if it considers itself as a free engagement of thought in the given, aiming, at each discovery, not at fusion with the thing, but at the possibility of new discoveries; what the mind then projects is the concrete accomplishment of its freedom.” (EA 85)

somewhere else”, *PhW* 122). This sense of constantly being elsewhere is something Beauvoir borrows from Heidegger, as she states in the same essay:

« L’homme est un être des lointains », dit Heidegger ; il est toujours *ailleurs*. Il n’existe aucun point privilégié du monde dont il puisse dire : « c’est moi » avec sécurité ; il est constitutivement orienté vers autre chose que lui-même : il n’est soi que par relation avec autre chose que soi. « Un homme est toujours infiniment plus qu’il ne serait si on le réduisait à ce qu’il est dans l’instant », dit Heidegger. Toute pensée, tout regard, toute tendance est transcendance. (*PC* 219-20)⁵⁴

This dynamic notion of subjectivity ties in, of course, with Beauvoir’s Hegelian use of the verb ‘to be’ in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, as we saw in the previous section, but here it also acquires a spatio-temporal quality whereby a subject is of necessity ‘outside’ of themselves, the boundaries of their identity constantly attaching themselves to other times, places, and situations. It is, after all, what Woolf observed in “Montaigne” when she stated that “the soul is all laced about with nerves and sympathies which affect her every action” (*E4* 78), a view to which Federici also subscribes in her recent essay where she argues for a consideration of the body ‘beyond the periphery of the skin’ (cf. Federici 2020). This theorisation results in an understanding of identity as intercorporeal, as a negotiation between facticity and freedom, between oneself and others, and, perhaps more importantly, between one’s self and the Other.

Within this dynamic context of material becoming, even a supposedly objective discipline like science – in a broad sense – must be revised in its attempt to capture the ‘truth’ of reality, as in fact this truth must continually be reconsidered and can never be truly regarded as an exhaustion of the countless meanings that any form of being can take on or shed depending on their situation: it is not only human subjectivity that is in this perpetual state of becoming, but matter and reality more broadly. Science, like abstract philosophy, is a system which purports to dissect and classify reality through categories and tools that ought to be understood as provisional and historical instead.

⁵⁴ “‘Man is a being of faraway places,’ says Heidegger; he is always *somewhere else*. There exists no privileged spot in the world about which he can safely say, “This is me.” He is constitutively oriented toward something other than himself. He is himself only through relationships with something other than himself. ‘Man is always infinitely more than he would be if he were reduced to what he is in the instant,’ says Heidegger. Every thought, every look, every tendency is transcendence” (*PhW* 97-8).

This intuition chimes in with the connections between modernist literature and new developments in science in the 1930s, as explored by much Woolf scholarship in the last few decades. In her field-defining work, Gillian Beer argued that “for Woolf in the 1930s the language and ideas of the new physics helped to provide pathways out of the impasse of realist fiction” and that, in contrast to the oft-cited notion of the ‘two cultures’, science and the humanities actually shared a language as well as some theories about reality to such an extent that “their [the physicists’] insights and their language coalesced with hers” (Beer 1996: 113).⁵⁵ This idea prompted critics like Michael Whitworth to focus on the metaphors used by modernist writers and contemporary scientists alongside one another to better understand the fluid exchanges between literature and science (cf. Whitworth 2001). What literature and science critics like Beer and Whitworth have highlighted, in relation to new physics, is how Woolf was responding to some of the most burning questions raised by scientists and science popularisers at the beginning of the twentieth century: the notion of relativity advanced by Einstein between 1905 and 1919, that of wave/particle duality proposed by Louis de Broglie in France in the 1920s, and the similar idea of wave/particle complementarity suggested by Niels Bohr in 1927 all contribute to a shift in the perception of, and the debate around reality broadly conceived, a debate in which, in differing ways and capacities, many modernist writers also took part.

More recently, Rachel Crossland and Catriona Livingstone have built on Beer’s and Whitworth’s arguments to better explore Woolf’s relationship with contemporary scientific theories – and, in Livingstone’s case, with the establishment of the BBC Radio in 1922. In Crossland’s account, Woolf participates in the duality and complementarity models advanced by scientists and reproduced in popular science books of her time, more specifically through the notion of a self as a “discrete yet changing entity, a particle surrounded by a permeable membrane which allows for the

⁵⁵ The oft-cited 1959 Rede Lecture by Charles Percy Snow, titled “The Two Cultures”, insists precisely on how in the twentieth century science and the humanities have come to be understood as two separate fields, with people specialising in one and as a consequence not being able to understand the other (cf. Snow 1993). This, for Snow as for many literature and science scholars after him, is a challenge to a global understanding of reality and, as a result, to solving the world’s issues. Gillian Beer emphasised how this dichotomy was not valid in the 19th century, as scientists shared “a common language with other educated readers and writers of their time”, a sort of unspecialised “literary, non-mathematical discourse” everyone had access to (Beer 1983: 6-7). It is easy to see, however, how Snow’s understanding of science and the humanities as entailing irreconcilable skill-sets and toolkits still informs our conception of education and culture.

expansion and contraction of the self, enabling it both to merge with other selves and to remain separate within a cluster” (Crossland 2018: 22). As Crossland summarises it:

The scientific problem of wave-particle duality, as introduced by Einstein, elaborated by de Broglie, and refined by Bohr, required the development of an inclusive ‘and’ which would express a new complementarity between ideas which had previously been understood to be antagonistic. Woolf’s writings of wave/particle models, of dualistic images, and of an attempt at ‘both/and’ situate her, then, not in advance of the physicists, but in parallel with them, at the very forefront of some of the key scientific and philosophical questions of her day. (Ibid., p. 44)

Livingstone takes this argument one step further, showing how Woolf’s preparatory reading for *Three Guineas* also drew on philosophical-scientific texts – Julian Huxley’s *What Dare I Think?* (1933), Bertrand Russell’s *The Scientific Outlook* (1931), amongst others –, and many other books of this kind can be found in the Woolfs’ library (cf. Livingstone 2022: 33). Besides further substantiating the idea that “despite her lack of a formal scientific education, Woolf was an active, critical reader of science”, Livingstone reconnects these scientific interests with Woolf’s political and feminist stances, thereby demonstrating that, like Beauvoir, Woolf was “conscious of the limitations of scientific knowledge” as she employs science “as one perspective among many”, ultimately subordinating it “to Woolf’s own feminist argument” (ibid., p. 34, 36).⁵⁶

To quote one of the most famous science popularisers of this time, English astrophysicist James Jeans, “the tendency of modern physics is to resolve the whole material universe into waves, and nothing but waves” to the effect that “it no longer seems surprising that the fundamental particles of which matter is built should exhibit many of the properties of waves” (Jeans 1930: 69). In stark contrast to the solid world which traditional physics investigated, one predicated upon the notion of Newtonian cause and effect, Woolf’s ‘real world’, to borrow Zwerdling’s title, was one made up of particles and – or even *as* – waves, one in which the ontological status of matter came

⁵⁶ In a previous article, Livingstone had already drawn attention to how Woolf in *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts* “makes use of Huxley’s works of popular biology, specifically their discussions of secondary sex characteristics, the mutability of biological sex, and the function of hormones in human identity and behaviour, in order to envision a way out of the repeating cycle of violent domination that she traces in contemporary society, and to conceive of a future in which society is not built upon a binary model of sex or gender.” (Livingstone 2020: 317f.)

under scrutiny and was quite suddenly discovered to be less stable than previously conceived. It is not a coincidence, in this sense, that Woolf should puzzle in her diary over the substance of matter in January 1929:

Now is life very solid, or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever: will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world – this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive, & continuous – we human beings; & show the light through. But what is the light? (*D3*: 276)

In this passage, Woolf voices a concern for the nature of reality that occupied centre-stage among her contemporaries, regardless of the discipline(s) in which each operated. On the one hand, there is the received notion of a reality that is material and solid, one based on a continuity with the past, so much so that “this moment I stand on” seems in fact to have “gone on for ever” and to be going to “last for ever”; on the other hand, there is also the sense of being “transitory, flying, diaphanous”, with selves being shed as we go. The two seemingly contradictory realities seem to be reconciled here in the notion that we are, after all, “successive, & continuous” precisely in spite of this constant alteration, our quickly changing, translucent dresses “show[ing] the light through” – a light which possibly represents here a stable and yet varying substance, the nature of which Woolf is pondering in the closing question. It is easy to see how Woolf’s diary passage can map onto Beauvoir’s understanding of subjectivity as facticity and freedom, with the “transitory, flying, diaphanous” garments standing in for the Beauvoirian body-as-situation.

At any rate, this passage is clearly located at an important historical moment, when the advances in physics of Einstein, de Broglie, and Bohr (among others) became more readily available to the general public thanks to popular science books like those of James Jeans, Arthur Eddington, or Julian Huxley and the BBC radio broadcasts (cf. Crossland 2018, Livingstone 2022). Louis de Broglie’s and Niels Bohr’s theories amounted to the notion that, as Rachel Crossland encapsulated it, “both waves and particles are present at all times but we can only be directly aware of one of the possibilities at a particular moment, and the one that we see will depend on the one for which we look” (Crossland 2018: 19). This not only reinforces the notion that reality is “very shifting”, as Woolf asks herself in the 1929 diary passage, but also suggests that

there is a clear epistemological limit which even a hard science like physics struggles to overcome: even scientific truth is shown to be dependent upon the tools one uses and the specific goal one pursues in the experiment.

This clearly resonates with Beauvoir's discussion of science as a "free engagement of thought in the given" that is very much founded upon the instruments it employs and the purposes it wishes to achieve. Thus, it is not just philosophy that needs to be revised in relation to an elusive material reality, but also physics, as the tools that mediate knowledge start to gain the upper hand over what they are supposed to approach and describe, thereby aligning the discipline with the philosophical understanding that reality is not just hard to grasp but also a living thing which we can fix only if we make it pay the price of death. Traditional physics, as a consequence, is no different from abstract philosophy, which delivers a "dead universe" ("un univers mort", *ESN* 82) that is "as foreign to the one we breathe in as an X-ray picture is different from a fleshed body" (*PhW* 275; "aussi étranger à celui que nous respirons qu'une photographie aux rayons X est différente d'un corps de chair", *ESN* 82). It is no coincidence, of course, that Beauvoir chooses the image of an X-ray picture of a body as representative of the Husserlian *Körper* or body-object, in stark contrast to the "fleshed body" (*Leib*) which phenomenology seeks to investigate: the technology and tools we bring to knowledge co-determine the outcome of our enquiry, as the new physics teaches us.

This scientific, technological background also informs Woolf's oft-cited essay "Modern Fiction", published in the first *Common Reader* (1925). In the opening, Woolf voices some concerns over whether we can assume that there is "an analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making motor cars" because technological progress and literature do not actually go hand in hand: "It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature" (*E4* 157). Although material and economic progress, as measured by science and technology, may suggest we are an advanced civilisation, this does not necessarily map onto literature and culture broadly conceived, as the instruments one discipline uses cannot be extended beyond its boundaries. In opposition to "the historian of literature" who may perhaps occupy a "sufficiently lofty pinnacle" to examine the overall movement of literary history, "we

make no claim to stand, even momentarily, upon the vantage ground”; rather, we are located “On the flat, in the crowd, half-blind with dust” and, as a consequence, we cannot see clearly where we are going or what the ‘bigger picture’ might look like (*E4* 157-8). Once again, this introduction serves to emphasise that there is no ‘nugget of pure truth’ Woolf’s narrative persona is proposing, her essay opening precisely with a relativisation of her own stature as a common practitioner and observer of, not an expert on, modern fiction, a stance which helps to create the collective identity of common readers through Woolf’s own epistemic humility.

And yet, the essay moves on to consider a few examples of past and contemporary literature to see whether it could be argued that there have been some interesting developments in fiction that have somehow moved closer to faithfully depicting reality or, as Woolf prefers to call it here, life. As is known, Woolf censures writers like H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy because they are “materialists”, a statement which may seem very much at odds with our emphasis on Woolf as a materialist thinker and writer. In her own usage, this word comes to refer to the fact that these authors insist too much on specific details of the settings, the characters and the stories they create and thus lose sight of ‘life’: “If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word materialists,” Woolf explains, “we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (*E4* 159). Interestingly, in this essay Woolf also suggests that “It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us” (*E4* 158), a statement which again may seem to be in stark contrast to our interest in Woolf’s theory and narrative practice of (inter)corporeality.

However, a closer look at the notions of materialism and the body in this essay quickly reveals that Woolf is actually aligned with our previous discussion as well as with Beauvoir’s critical phenomenological understanding of the living body. In the case of Bennett, who, as will be discussed in the next Section, is also an important interlocutor on the subject of character, Woolf regards him as “perhaps the worst culprit of the three, inasmuch as he is by far the best workman” (*E4* 158). Precisely because of his “craftmanship” as a writer, he is able to construct such tangible realities in his fiction that “There is not so much as a draught between the frames of the windows, or a

crack in the boards”; “And yet”, Woolf wonders, “if life should refuse to live there?” (E4 158-9). For Woolf, what is of paramount importance is not simply to recreate a materially tangible fictional world that is so carefully crafted that there is no “chink or crevice”; for her, as for Beauvoir in philosophy, what really matters is the idea that fiction is a living organism that can incarnate life in its dynamic, material becoming without trying to capture it in some “trivial” and “transitory” frames (E4 158-9). “Can it be that,” Woolf asks herself and her readers, “Mr Bennett has come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side? Life escapes; and perhaps without life nothing else is worthwhile” (E4 159). The medium or mode of representation Bennett uses, though “magnificent”, is too mechanical in its attempt to catch life and thus ends up being incapable of transposing it onto the page. For this reason, “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (E4 160). In Beauvoir’s philosophical understanding of the body, Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy are not simply “materialists” but, to be more accurate, materialist *reductionists*, who live under the illusion that paying attention to detail is what produces sound knowledge and good literature.

In “Mon expérience d’écrivain” (“My Experience as a Writer”, 1966), Beauvoir will connect the new physics with her literary-theoretical arguments, showing how the two may communicate. By drawing a distinction between fiction, which has to give back a “meaning” (“sens”) of reality, and autobiography, which has to represent “the facticity of the real, its contingency” (“la facticité du réel, sa contingence”), Beauvoir seems to participate in this discourse on literature and science, though in surprisingly different terms at times:

Dans l’autobiographie, je saisis la facticité du réel, sa contingence ; mais alors je risque de me perdre en détails oiseux, de manquer le sens du vécu ; décrire un vécu privé de sens, ce n’est rien dire. D’autre part quand j’écris le roman, je dégage un sens, mais alors je risque de faire quelque chose de trop nécessaire, et de manquer la facticité. C’est un peu comme en physique : on nous dit que pour décrire la lumière, d’après les nouvelles théories, il faut la décrire à la fois en terme de corpuscule et en terme d’onde. Mais si l’on fixe la situation du corpuscule, alors la longueur de l’onde est incertaine ; si l’on fixe au contraire la longueur de l’onde,

la place du corpuscule n'est plus déterminée. C'est un peu pareil. Il faut choisir.

Jamais une œuvre ne pourra donner à la fois le sens et la réalité. (*ESdB* 454-5)⁵⁷

Here reconnected to the question of genres, physics provides an example that should demonstrate the human and literary impossibility of reconnecting two dualistic and complementary understanding of reality: on the one hand, autobiography is supposed to reproduce reality in its minute, unnecessary details – a view which clearly clashes with Beauvoir's own practice, as she clearly eliminates parts of her life from her autobiography, candidly admitting she has done so in interviews as well as in the last volume, *Tout compte fait* (cf. Gobeil 1965; *TCF* 512f.) –; on the other hand, a novel has to select some more meaningful elements in a strategic way so as to render the ultimate sense of the lived experiences it represents. This dualistic framework is clearly at odds not only with Beauvoir's own 'experience as a writer', but first and foremost with Woolf's attempt to capture life as a living organism in her writings. The "materialists" censured by Woolf are such precisely because they are too much on the side of what Beauvoir calls the "facticity of the real, its contingency", the corpuscular nature of light; in Woolf's understanding, and in a way, even in Beauvoir's, if we read her in counterpoint, despite the human impossibility of capturing both particles and waves, fiction must have the ambition to do so, otherwise it risks sliding into materialist reductionism.

Despite her initial resistance to the analogy between literature and technological progress, then, Woolf clearly suggests here that literature *is* a technology that authors mobilise in their search of a better representation of life. This reality, however, besides being material, is also in a process of constant becoming, so the role of fiction is to provide it with "vestments" ample and "diaphanous" enough for them to show the shifting, varying substance underneath: materiality, for Woolf as for Beauvoir, means being aware of the underlying structure of a changing reality and not focusing simply on tangible representations or mobile appearances. If ordinary life is "an incessant shower

⁵⁷ "In an autobiography, I grasp the facticity of the real, its contingency; but then I risk getting lost in trivial details, missing the meaning of the lived. To describe a lived experience stripped of meaning is to say nothing. On the other hand, when I write a novel, I draw out a meaning, but then I risk making something too necessary and missing the facticity. It is a little like physics; they tell us that to describe light, according to the new theories, one must describe it both in terms of particles and in terms of waves. But if one determines the position of the particle, then the wavelength is uncertain; if, on the contrary, one determines the wavelength, the position of the particle is no longer determined. This is somewhat the same. One must choose. A work will never be able to give both the meaning and the reality at the same time." (*OLW* 295)

of innumerable atoms”, then our purpose is not so much to order them in “a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged” but to show how “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end”, we need to be able to “convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display” in its material becoming (E4 160). What Woolf calls “custom”, namely the prescriptive literary tradition of realism, prevents us from seeing that “the proper stuff of fiction” can be found even where we would be encouraged not to look, as it tends to insist that “life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (E4 161): although the tradition we have inherited may encourage us to use old instruments and apparatuses, Woolf is here suggesting that we should reinvent our tools and allow them to shape our own vision and representation of life, as the technology and purposes we bring to reality co-determine the outcome of our investigation. Eventually, even if this means proposing a life that is “hazarded rather than affirmed”, “the result, difficult or unpleasant as we may judge it, is undeniably important” (E4 161).

In order to better explore these theoretical views as related to materiality and the body, a close reading of a lesser-known hybrid text like “Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car” will be valuable. This narrative essay was first published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942) by Leonard Woolf, and the manuscript draft bearing this title, dated June 1930 in Woolf’s notebook, was not the version Leonard used, so it is not clear whether Woolf revised the text in later years. What is evident is that this hybrid essay belongs to Woolf’s late literary production, if we take the latter to mean anything written after 1928, as argued in the Introduction. Like the famous driving scene in *Orlando*, “Evening over Sussex” explores what it means to be a human subject materially conditioned by the technological advances of modernity, in both cases the invention and commercialisation of the motor car.

Just to give some context to the essay, the Woolfs first bought their second-hand Singer car for £275 on 15 July 1927, and over the following years they changed a couple of models of car (D3: 185; cf. Kore Schröder 2007: 132). Woolf writes on 23 July of the same year in a very optimistic vein that “Since making the last entry I have learnt enough to drive a car in the country alone” (D3: 186), an experience which will

never truly become part of her daily life: as Leena Kore Schröder points out, Woolf, despite several attempts, remained a terrible driver and so “Leonard became the regular chauffeur, and for the rest of her life Virginia appears to have sat happily in the passenger seat” (Kore Schröder 2007: 136). Interestingly, on 8 August 1927, Woolf writes: “We have motored most days. We opened one little window when we bought the gramophone; now another/ opens with the motor – I was going to say, but stopped”; in the following entry, written on the next day, Woolf opens by stating that “Yes, the motor is turning out the joy of our lives, an additional life, free & mobile & airy to live alongside our usual stationary industry” (D3: 191).⁵⁸

Even from these few diary entries, it is evident how the use of a car implies for Woolf a more “free & mobile & airy” understanding of subjectivity, and indeed our phenomenological lens would clearly indicate as much. As Laura Marcus aptly remarked in reference to *Orlando*, “forms of transport are primary vehicles for the exploration of identity” (Marcus [1997] 2004: 124), to such an extent that in her diary Woolf goes so far as to write that “All images are now tinged with driving a motor. Here I think of letting my engine work, with my clutch on” (D3: 188): in line with our previous discussion of how new physics emphasised that the instrumentation we use co-determines the outcome of our enquiry, Woolf’s new-found freedom in driving a car, her access to this particular technological medium, also shaped her own way of understanding and colouring the world. If even using public transport can amount to a different relationship with the world, the car, like the bedroom, embodies a more intimate relationship with oneself: as Kore Schröder argued, “to travel in any moving vehicle is already to be introduced to altered complexities of time, space and perception. To travel in one’s own car, however, is to embody these complexities at the most intimate and private level of self” (Kore Schröder 2007: 132). In Beauvoirian terms, because the body as situation has changed its location in time and space, this ‘tinges’, to use Woolf’s word, any reflection with different, varying colours.

This scholarship on “Evening over Sussex” already indicates quite clearly how this narrative essay, much like the driving scene in *Orlando* or the famous *flânerie* of “Street Haunting”, is concerned with the idea of the multiplication of selves through time as well as with their re-assemblage towards the end of the text. As Livingstone’s

⁵⁸ For a recent overview of the meaning and significance of the motor car in modernity and especially in relation to the Bloomsbury Group, cf. Adair and Martin 2018.

work has shown, this multiple, expansive sense of identity is one that literature shares with other disciplines such as physics, biology, psychology, and, of course, technology (Livingstone 2022). Although Livingstone is mainly concerned with the radio, Robin Adair and Ann Martin have similarly emphasised the tensions animating the invention and commercialisation of the motor car in Britain: this new element of modernity has been affiliated in fact

with mechanical innovation, with new experiences and perceptions, with modernist experimentation, with early twentieth-century commodity culture, with performed identities, with the feelings that arise at driving and being driven, with the affective dimensions of advertisement and patriotic landscapes. (Adair and Martin 2018: 76)

In “Evening over Sussex”, the narrative persona identifies as many as four selves other than herself, and she then goes on to re-organise the information they bring to her in order to make sense of a drive in the country at dusk. After being absorbed in the sheer beauty of the countryside in the early evening, the narrator is prompted to think of her own “impotency”, namely her inability to capture this sublime state in writing: “I cannot hold this – I cannot express this – I am overcome by it – I am mastered” (E6: 454), the dashes interjecting between similar I-statements that go from active verbs of inability (cannot) to passive verbs of submission (am overcome, am mastered), thereby reinforcing, in different ways, her impossible task. Being surrounded by this awe-inspiring beauty, the narrator also feels as if “one was wasting one’s chance; for beauty spread at one’s right hand, at one’s left; at one’s back too; it was escaping all the time; one could only offer a thimble to a torrent that could fill baths, lakes” (E6: 454). The humble, human-made “thimble” encapsulates perfectly our human inability to render faithfully in writing – or arguably even in words – the sensations we feel as we are caught in the natural beauty of a sunset over the countryside filtered through the technological medium of a car, this latter situation enclosed here in the “torrent that could fill” not only human-made “baths” but also larger “lakes”: this inability seems to be predicated upon a difference in scale.

Because of this intrinsic impossibility, the narrator also invites herself – or better perhaps, her *selves* – to give up on the idea altogether:

But relinquish, I said (it is well known how in circumstances like these the self splits up and one self is eager and dissatisfied and the other stern and philosophical), relinquish these impossible aspirations; be content with the view in

front of us, and believe me when I tell you that it is best to sit and soak; to be passive; to accept; and do not bother because nature has given you six little pocket knives with which to cut up the body of a whale. (*E6*. 454)

Faced with one's inability to perform the task at hand, the self splits up into different parts – one “eager and dissatisfied”, the other “stern and philosophical” – with the narrator remaining in a central position. The decision here seems to be to simply give up on “these impossible aspirations” and thus to content oneself with what is immediately perceptible around the subject: from an active attempt at understanding and transposing this beauty, the selves move on to a sense of passive acceptance. The last part of the sentence is interesting and puzzling: why – and how – would “nature” provide the selves with “six little pocket knives with which to cut up the body of the whale”? While the message seems to be quite clear, namely the fact that we only have imperfect tools to perform the task of ‘dissecting’ the large, whale-like body of a sublime reality, we may wonder where this specific number comes from, or indeed why Woolf would produce such an analogy to describe the impossible task of understanding and transcribing beauty.

In the next paragraph, two more selves are conjured up: “While these two selves then held a colloquy about the wise course to adopt in the presence of beauty, I (a third party now declared itself) said to myself, how happy they were to enjoy so simple an occupation” (*E6*: 454). While the first two selves, though different in their approach, ponder what to make of this beauty and how to describe it, a third self appears, one who is “somewhat different” and who “sat aloof and melancholy” as the car speeds through the countryside: while the first two selves sit in the car “matching every colour in the sky and earth from their colour box, rigging up little models of Sussex barns and farmhouses in the red light that would serve in the January gloom”, the third “I said to myself: Gone, gone; over, over; past and done with, past and done with”, stressing the transience of the impressions they receive instead: “windows were lit by our lamps for a second; the light is out now” (*E6*: 454). “Then suddenly a fourth self (a self which lies in ambush, apparently dormant, and jumps upon one unawares. Its remarks are often entirely disconnected with what has been happening, but must be attended to because of their very abruptness) said: ‘Look at that’” (*E6*: 455). This fourth self embodies what phenomenologists would call ‘intentionality’, namely “this pointing-beyond-itself proper to consciousness”, as Dan Zahavi summarises it: “In being intentional,

consciousness is not self-enclosed, but primarily occupied with objects and events that, by nature, are utterly different from consciousness itself” (Zahavi 2019: 16, 17). Intentionality is the ‘about’ of consciousness, an ‘about’ which prompts the subject to look beyond themselves.

For the moment, it seems that we have five selves: the first, “eager and dissatisfied”, debates with the second, “stern and philosophical”, the issue of beauty and the potential, yet seemingly impossible, transcription thereof; a third self, “aloof and melancholy”, sits back and revels – or possibly wallows – in the passing of impressions and time; a fourth self, open onto the world, beckon them to look beyond themselves, to admire a light over the hill, initially interpreted to be a star but eventually turning out to be “the headlight of a car”; finally, we have the narrator, who acts as a fifth – or better perhaps, *first* – self, who is tasked, in the following paragraph, with “making up our accounts” (E6 454-5). In the terms suggested by the biographer in *Orlando*, the narrator acts here as “the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all” (O 179): as the narrator states, “Now we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self”, “Now I, who preside over the company, am going to arrange in order the trophies which we have all brought in” (E6: 455). These “trophies” are three, in this final “reckoning”: “that beauty; death of the individual; and the future” (E6: 455). After all the selves concur in this description, suddenly the body appears:

And then the body who had been silent up to now began its song, almost at first as low as the rush of the wheels: “Eggs and bacon; toast and tea; fire and a bath; fire and a bath; jugged hare,” it went on, “and red currant jelly; a glass of wine; with coffee to follow, with coffee to follow – and then to bed; and then to bed.”

“Off with you,” I said to my assembled selves. “Your work is done. I dismiss you. Good-night.”

And the rest of the journey was performed in the delicious society of my own body. (E6: 456)

Because of its silence, compared here to the “rush of the wheels”, the body seems to act as an inert object which does not participate in the phenomenological *Sinngebung*, or meaning-giving, but simply functions as a background from which the other selves emerge. This may point to the fact that Woolf is here reinforcing the mind-body dichotomy that is an integral part of the Cartesian tradition. What the “song” of the body expresses here are only the bare physical necessities associated with an embodied

life, namely food, shelter, and rest. When the narrator starts to hear the body's song, she dismisses her "assembled selves" who have made sense of their surroundings in order to spend "the rest of the journey [...] in the delicious society of [her] own body".

We may wonder, however, whether this separation between the four selves, the narrator, and the body, is something to be taken at face value. After all, if the fourth self can re-direct the other selves' attention to the light on the hill, it is only because that self is clearly *perceiving* something through the eyes; if the third self can contemplate how *tempus fugit*, it is only because it can see how "windows were lit by our lamps for a second; the light is out now"; if the first two selves emerge from the observation of the sublime beauty of the country, their very being is founded upon, once again, bodily perception: the body, far from emerging only at the end in order to beckon the narrator to attend to her physical needs, was always already part of the narrative, its song going unnoticed until it was finally able to rise above the "rush of the wheels" thanks to hunger and fatigue. As John Cage famously realised during his experience in an anti-echo chamber, our bodies constantly produce sounds that are hardly audible in everyday life because of the noises and sounds surrounding us at all times, especially with the onset of modernity.

This arbitrary division into six parts (four selves, the narrator, the body) may help us to understand the puzzling sentence mentioned above: "do not bother because nature has given you six little pocket knives with which to cut up the body of a whale" (E6: 454). Despite its narratively convenient atomisation, this six-part subject is still far from being able to understand reality, as the multiplication of the selves and the division from the body do not aid the dissection of "the body of a whale", a body so large and unfathomable that the mere thought of cutting it up with "six little pocket knives" is nothing short of a naïve and laughable attempt to apprehend something incommensurable. Only by reintegrating the body as the basis of the amalgamation of selves can the subject hope to achieve a better interpretation of life, an interpretation which nonetheless ought to be conceived of as a living relation with the world rather than the imperfect autopsy of the body of a whale by means of inadequate tools.

For Woolf as for Beauvoir, an attempt to capture life cannot be made at the expense of life itself: understanding the body, both at the microscopic level of corpuscles and waves and at the macroscopic level of the visible world, entails a living,

intercorporeal relationship with a world that co-determines the meaning we assign to it. Dissecting the body of a whale may help us to see what its constituent parts are like, but this process also entails that that body has ceased to function as a living organism, and thus our understanding of its organs is, as a matter of fact, incomplete, our knowledge of it being “as foreign to the [world] we breathe in as an X-ray picture is different from a fleshed body” (*PhW* 275; “aussi étranger [au monde] que nous respirons qu’une photographie aux rayons X est différente d’un corps de chair”, *ESN* 82). The instruments of science and technology, while helping us to apprehend the world, end up abstracting the world into “desiccated essences” (*PhW* 275; “essences desséchées”, *ESN* 82) just as Hegelian or Platonic philosophy does. The splitting of the subject into different parts amounts to a technology of the self which fails to do justice to the incommensurable complexity of life, surrendering it as it does to the abstract, imperfect, ultimately deadly knowledge of scientism.⁵⁹

As we saw, Woolf emphasises, in “Professions for Women”, how “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (*E6*: 481). After wondering what a woman is, Woolf moves on to discuss a second challenge in her becoming a woman writer:

These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful – and yet they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against. (*E6*: 483)

This chimes in, as we saw, with Beauvoir’s understanding of women’s oppression as dependent upon the economic and professional obstacles placed on their path toward liberation; but, at the same time, this passage also insists on the fact that, by the time

⁵⁹ Obviously, the division into six parts already gestures to *The Waves*, but this novel will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Woolf pronounced a preceding version of this essay in 1931 and revised it for publication in the following years, many more professions had become open to women too, but this was not in itself sufficient to declare that their oppression ended, as “inwardly” she is still affected by “ghosts” and “prejudices”, “phantom[s]” she has to kill and “rock[s]” she has to dash against. Beyond suffrage and formal rights then, women were still – and continue to be – confronted with challenges that threaten(ed) their wellbeing. All these inward obstacles intimate to women writers that they cannot possibly tell “the truth about [their] experiences as a body”, as men will be shocked by the unconventionality of this choice – indeed, this is precisely the kind of hostile reaction *Le Deuxième Sexe* garnered in France, as will be reiterated below.

In the previous, rather long paragraph, Woolf describes the experience of encountering these inward obstacles in these terms:

Be that as it may, I want you to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl’s fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist’s state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. (E6: 482-3)

Here, the woman writer is imagined to be “in a state of trance” as she is sitting at the desk, trying to think of something to write. This “state of unconsciousness” seems to be aligned with the narrator’s statement, in *A Room*, that “the first great lesson” to be a

successful woman writer is to write “as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself” (*AROO* 70). However, as soon as she feels the need to write about “the passions” of her body, she dashes against this obstacle which prevents her from voicing certain needs and desires, precisely because, as we saw, “Men [...] would be shocked”. This latter assertion once again ties in with *A Room*, where the narrator not only disparages all the volumes written by men on women because “They had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth”, but she also registers how many books by women exhibit “a flaw in the centre of [them]” because “she was thinking of something other than the thing itself” (*AROO* 25, 56): writing is an intellectual, bodily activity which can only happen when all the formal obstacles, all the “negative education” Woolf referred to in “Two Women”, have been removed, otherwise it amounts to pleasing the readership or to reinforcing one’s prejudices.

As we saw in Section 1.4, Beauvoir shares this concern over how women’s writing has still not reached the status of great literature precisely because of the formal constraints placed upon the ‘second sex’, although, as was argued above, she does not register Woolf’s narrator’s somewhat contradictory account of authors like Jane Austen and the Brontës. Interestingly, Beauvoir’s *succès de scandale* was also partly due to the fact that she resisted and in fact countered the unconventionality incarnated by a woman who is writing about the experiences of her own, and other women’s bodies, an unconventionality which resulted in her male contemporaries commenting on how out of place her discussion of women’s corporeality was in their view. While *A Room* similarly received somewhat mixed reviews, especially by men, as a text that was too specific and ‘feminine’ – whatever this word may have meant for them –, it seems that it did not attract the same kind of *ad feminam* attacks that Beauvoir did in the wake of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (cf. Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 255-62).

These attacks clearly have something to do with the strategies men could implement in order to reduce thinking women to silence: as Kate Kirkpatrick has correctly summarised it in her biography of Beauvoir, “If [her] readers could reject her as an unoriginal thinker, a failure of a woman, or an immoral person, then they could rest untroubled by her account of human suffering in ‘the feminine condition’” – “They

could tell the silence to shut up again” (Kirkpatrick 2019: 265). In order to contrast this silence on women’s bodies, Beauvoir, despite building on the phenomenological tradition of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, also departs from their somewhat universalist interpretation of the body: although they perceptively insisted on the importance of the body in subject constitution and thus counteracted the liberal, humanist understanding of the subject as a *res cogitans*, they eventually subscribed to a patriarchal notion of subjectivity in that they did not consider how sex – or what we would now call gender – can impinge upon one’s bodily situation. Or if they did, as Le Dœuff’s work on Sartre’s *L’Être et le néant* shows (Le Dœuff [1989] 2008), they nonetheless reproduced all sorts of patriarchal biases in their representations of women.

In a recent contribution, French philosopher Raphaël Ehram has drawn attention to the parallels between Merleau-Ponty’s theorisation and Beauvoir’s, thus showing how she was more indebted to his phenomenology than to Sartre’s, while perceptively pointing to the constitutive differences in their thought. Among the “elective affinities” between Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, Ehram mentions the importance of childhood in subject development, the dismissal of biology as the only element determining subjectivity, the active conditioning that situations perform on a subject’s freedom, a sense of the social sphere which Sartre did not share, and the notion that history co-determines situations and freedom (Ehram 2020: 14-21). What distinguishes Beauvoir’s thought from Merleau-Ponty’s, in Ehram’s account, is the socio-political origin of the notion of situation in Beauvoir (as opposed to Merleau-Ponty’s at least initial psychological understanding of the term), Merleau-Ponty’s somewhat Sartrean sense of transcendence as all-powerful in its overcoming or denying of facticity (as opposed to Beauvoir’s attention to oppression and the limits it places upon freedom), and finally Beauvoir’s more sociological and critical understanding of corporeality (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 22-30).

In fact, it is this critical understanding of corporeality that emerges as a distinguishing feature of Beauvoir’s theorisation in her *magnum opus*. After acknowledging her debt to Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* describes in meticulous detail what happens to a female body when it has to go through menstruation and concludes:

C'est dans cette période qu'elle éprouve le plus péniblement son corps comme une chose opaque aliénée ; il est la proie d'une vie têtue et étrangère qui en lui chaque mois fait et défait un berceau ; chaque mois un enfant se prépare à naître et avorte dans l'écroulement des dentelles rouges ; la femme, comme l'homme, *est* son corps : mais son corps est autre chose qu'elle. (*DSa* 68-9)⁶⁰

In a critical reappraisal of the phenomenological equation between the body and the subject, Beauvoir sees in menstruation – and later in the text, in pregnancy and menopause – the period in a (cis, able-bodied) woman's life when this identity collapses: the body from being the foundation of the subject's freedom becomes an opaque creature with a will of its own, orchestrating as it does a series of physiological mechanisms which escape comprehension. Although it could understandably be argued that Beauvoir is once again resorting to a victimisation of women for a broader political purpose – as we saw she did in her re-adaptation of the Judith Shakespeare myth –, there is no denying that she is also refuting her male contemporaries' theories and showing how even their phenomenological understanding of the subject was mainly concerned with (cis) male bodies.

While Woolf suggested that the subject broadly conceived is a shape-shifting creature on the run in "Montaigne", that the body is a "monster" in *On Being Ill*, and that women have become "very queer, composite being[s]" in *A Room* because of the paradoxical patriarchal representation they receive in men's books, Beauvoir sees in the physiological processes of (cis, able-bodied) women a justification for the alienation they experience in their everyday life, highlighting how all these natural processes are far from being perfectly understood and explained by science without having recourse to biological reductionism. This current situation in which the biological data are inextricably linked to social stigma, ideological prejudices, and stifling material conditions, makes women paradoxical creatures who are prevented from accessing the freedom that would be their lot as human beings. As she observes in the Introduction:

Or, ce qui définit d'une manière singulière la situation de la femme, c'est que, étant comme tout être humain, une liberté autonome, elle se découvre et se choisit dans un monde où les hommes lui imposent de s'assumer comme l'Autre : on prétend la

⁶⁰ "This is when she feels most acutely that her body is an alienated opaque thing; it is the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that makes and unmakes a crib in her every month; every month a child is prepared to be born and is aborted in the flow of the crimson tide; woman *is* her body as man *is* his, but her body is something other than her." (*SS* 42)

figer en objet, et la vouer à l'immanence, puisque sa transcendance sera perpétuellement transcendée par une autre conscience essentielle et souveraine. Le drame de la femme, c'est ce conflit entre la revendication fondamentale de tout sujet qui se pose toujours comme l'essentiel et les exigences d'une situation qui la constitue comme inessentielle. Comment dans la condition féminine peut s'accomplir un être humain ? (DSa 34)⁶¹

As Camille Froidevaux-Metterie has recently argued, Beauvoir creates in *Le Deuxième Sexe* a “dialectic of alienation and liberation” which was often received by subsequent generations of feminists in negative, normative terms rather than in the accurate, though sometimes – as we saw in the case of Judith Shakespeare as overwritten by Beauvoir – overdramatised description it intended to be (Froidevaux-Metterie 2021: 80ff.). It is for this reason, Froidevaux-Metterie goes on to argue, that subsequent feminist theory has often refrained from discussing corporeality as an important part of womanhood, as it seemed that doing so would either end up reinforcing biological determinism (woman = her body) or would portray the female body as a mysterious creature over which women can have no control.

By distancing herself from French feminist philosopher and author Élisabeth Badinter's suggestion that Beauvoir's feminism upholds “a politics of men-women egalitarianism [*mixité*] founded upon a philosophy of resemblance” (“une politique de la mixité fondée sur la philosophie de la ressemblance”; Badinter 2008 : 158), Froidevaux-Metterie emphasises how Beauvoir's intention was instead to “reveal the alienating implications of corporeality to then think of some paths towards a fully incarnated emancipation” (“révéler les implications aliénantes de la corporéité pour penser ensuite les voies d'une émancipation pleinement incarnée”; Froidevaux-Metterie 2021: 84-5), an attempt which subsequent feminist theory, in her view, has spectacularly failed to build on. In her account, subsequent feminist theory and feminist militancy have endeavoured to remove the body as though it were an obstacle to liberation instead of finding in it precisely a Beauvoirian amalgamation of facticity and freedom, a view

⁶¹ “But what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential. How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself?” (SS 17).

which Italian-American feminist philosopher Silvia Federici has also recently advanced (cf. Federici 2020). Reclaiming the feminine body, for Beauvoir, Froidevaux-Metterie, and Federici alike, is the first step towards liberation from exploitative systems like patriarchy and capitalism, but for all of them it is vital that this act of reappropriation be not cast in a negative, anti-corporeal light: liberation cannot happen unless the body is reintegrated into the feminist struggle.

In a 2019 monograph intended for the general public, Jude Ellison Sady Doyle argued that women under patriarchy have tended to be conflated with the monstrous in many texts, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to present-day horror films, especially when they threaten existing power structures (cf. Doyle 2019). In a 1986 article, Barbara Creed similarly drew attention to what she terms the "monstrous-feminine" myth not only in mythology but also in horror films, in particular through the Kristevan category of the abject, revealing the ways in which the label of monster and that of woman have often been conflated in patriarchal ideology (cf. Creed 2020). Coupled with Beauvoir's intuition that a woman's body within patriarchal ideology is caught in a dialectic of liberation and alienation, this argument sheds new light on Woolf's statement of the body as a monster in *On Being Ill*. As we saw, Woolf suggested that

To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth. Short of these, this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism. (E5 195-6)

Precisely because it is a monster who is suffering because of illness or, as Beauvoir argued in reference to the (cis, able) female body, because of menstruation, pregnancy, or menopause, the body risks being discarded by humankind in the interests of "mysticism" or "transcendentalism", a risk which describes well what happened within a liberal, humanist, and patriarchal understanding of human subjectivity. Hence the need for "the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth" which can venture to expound and explore the complex ambiguities of a living body without dissecting it *post rem* – as we saw, and as several present-day feminists seem to concur, feminist phenomenology is best equipped to produce precisely this kind of nuanced, though at times contradictory understanding of the living body.

Interestingly, as we saw in Section 2.1, the monster-miracle couple had already appeared in “Montaigne” in reference to the self, which Woolf described in that essay as “the greatest monster and miracle in the world” (E4 78). As Timothy Beal has suggested, “‘monster’ derives from the Latin *monstrum*, which is related to the verbs *monstrare* (‘show’ or ‘reveal’) and *monere* (‘warn’ or ‘portend’)”; *monstrum*, at least for the ancients, was thus “a message that breaks into this world from the realm of the divine” (Beal 2002: 6-7) – an intuition which seems to be in keeping with Woolf’s association of the word with the divinely sanctioned ‘miracle’. That monster and miracle are connected in these essays by Woolf should not come as a surprise then, as both words, at least in their etymological sense, incarnate a sign of divine intervention, one (monster) pointing to impending evil, and the other (miracle) signalling the salvific or merciful intervention of the divine.⁶²

However, in the passage from “Montaigne” to *On Being Ill*, the monster and the miracle are separated: while in the earlier essay the self represented both, possibly by virtue of its shape-shifting quality, in the later essay the body is termed “that monster” while it is the pain caused by illness that comes to represent “this miracle” (E5 195-6), with the demonstrative adjectives contributing to the distance between them. If illness-induced pain is described as a miracle in *On Being Ill* it is because, as was suggested above, this generates a new sense of one’s embodied subjectivity, a subjectivity which is finally liberated from the strictures of social codes and can thus revel in the surrounding beauty. It could be argued that if the body comes to be represented as a monster, it is precisely because it plays a central role in the Beauvoirian dialectic between liberation and alienation, especially when reference is made to a sexed and gendered body under patriarchy. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggested in his field-defining article, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” (1996):

The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always

⁶² ‘Miracle’ comes from Latin *miraculum*, ‘object of wonder, which in turn comes from *mirari*, ‘to wonder at, to marvel’, and in its religious inflection the term acquired the meaning of a ‘marvellous event caused by God’. Cf. *OED*, “miracle”, Etymology.

inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. (Cohen 2020: 38)

Although this notion of “pure culture” clashes with Beauvoir’s understanding of the body as a curious, irreducible combination of nature and culture – indeed, as “natureculture” to borrow Donna Haraway’s subsequent coinage (cf. Haraway 2007) –, the idea of the body as situation insists precisely on the fact that as a material support of, and boundary for freedom, the body “inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again”: we become our bodies, we re-invent them as we live and experience them at every step of the way.

In the article, Cohen moves on to consider other theses on monstrosity. Just to give a sense of his wide-ranging account, which is sadly beyond the scope of this thesis, Cohen argues what follows: besides arguing that (1) “The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body”, the critic suggests that (2) “The Monster Always Escapes”, a quality which Woolf/Montaigne also find in the self, as we saw; (3) “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis” because of its “ontological liminality”, an argument advanced by Woolf and Beauvoir alike in relation to womanhood in their feminist works and a thesis we can easily approximate to the ambiguity of the living body, which makes us challenge received dichotomies such as mind/body, nature/culture, and subject/object; (4) “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference”, a view equally supported by Woolf and Beauvoir in their feminist theory, though with sometimes diverging inflections; (5) “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible”, a thesis that is in keeping with Beauvoir’s sense of the body as the foundation as well as the limit of freedom; (6) “Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire”, as the monster always comes back to haunt reality, much as the body does at the end of “Evening over Sussex”; and, last but not least, (7) “The Monster Stands at the Threshold... of Becoming”, the latter term being extremely Beauvoirian, as we saw (Cohen 2020: 38-52). In this sense, the monstrosity of the body merits a closer look within Beauvoir’s philosophy and Woolf’s works, as to my knowledge this kind of framework has never really emerged in the existing scholarship on the two authors.

While the next Chapter will look at the manifestations of a monstrous intercorporeality in three of Woolf’s novels, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, doubtless thanks to the work of Cohen and many others, the category of monster

has been reclaimed by several marginalised social categories. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock explains, “the exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrosity has always served as an essential preliminary step toward domination” (Weinstock 2020b: 25), and, as we saw, Cohen similarly stresses the importance of monstrosity not only in crossing or straddling boundaries thanks to its liminality, but also in *policing* them.

The first trans theorist to reclaim the category of monstrosity was Susan Stryker, who, in an article published in *GLQ* and titled “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” (1994), drew a parallel between the Creature’s existence and rage in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and her own existence and rage as a trans woman in the United States:

Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker 1994: 238)

At the time, she was responding to the feminist backlash against trans women that was burgeoning in women’s liberation movements, so her ‘enemy’ was not just patriarchal ideology but also trans-exclusionary feminists such as Mary Daly and Janice Raymond. As was argued in the introductory paragraphs of this Chapter, a continuation of these tendencies may be registered in what is now called “gender-critical feminism”; Stryker’s transgender rage is far from being a thing of the past.

In 2019, trans* theorist and activist Paul B. Preciado’s speech at the *École de la cause freudienne* in Paris became notorious because of his attempt to speak precisely *as* a monster, appropriating and re-adapting for his purpose the nonhuman protagonist of Franz Kafka’s “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie” (“A Report to an Academy”, 1917).⁶³ In the short story, *Rotpeter*, translated as *Red Peter* in English and *Pierre le Rouge* in French, is an ape who was captured by European expeditioners in West Africa with the intention to bring him back to Europe; during this voyage, the protagonist and speaker realises he has to learn how to be human in order to survive and escape the cage in which he is enclosed: as Preciado emphasises, “Une fois capturé, le singe dit ne pas avoir eu de choix: s’il ne voulait pas mourir enfermé dans une cage, il devait passer à la

⁶³ In line with common parlance, I choose to use trans* (with an asterisk) to emphasise that I am here referring to a broader understanding of the term which also includes non-binary people.

« cage » de la subjectivité humaine” (Preciado 2020: 16).⁶⁴ By building on this parallel, Preciado draws attention to how psychoanalysis has functioned as a stifling epistemological framework in relation to non-normative genders and sexualities, policing as it does the borders between health and illness, between masculine and feminine: as the title of his speech and its subsequent publication reads, *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* – literally, “I am a monster who speaks to you”, although the English translator Frank Wynne plumped for a more original title, *Can The Monster Speak?*, in resonance with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay “Can The Subaltern Speak?” (1988).

The parallel between Red Peter and Preciado, between Spivak’s postcolonial theory and Preciado’s indictment of psychoanalysis runs deep in the text.

Moi, en tant que corps trans, en tant que corps non-binaire, à qui ni la médecine, ni le droit, ni la psychanalyse, ni la psychiatrie ne reconnaissent le droit de parler avec un savoir expert sur ma propre condition, ni la possibilité de produire un discours ou une forme de connaissance sur moi-même, j’ai appris, comme Pierre le Rouge, la langue de Freud et de Lacan, celle du patriarcat colonial, votre langue, et je suis là pour m’adresser à vous. (Preciado 2020: 18)⁶⁵

Just like the nonhuman protagonist of Kafka’s story who not only *apes* humans but learns to speak and live like them, even going so far as to become an alcoholic despite the difficulty of doing so, Preciado has forced himself to learn the dominant language of psychoanalysis, which in his view reproduces all too faithfully the “colonial patriarchy” that a critic like Spivak censures and deconstructs, a language which sanctions – in both antonymous senses of the word – the possibility of being recognised as a trans* person. By reporting his own experience as a trans man and a non-binary body, Preciado highlights the processes – rather than the destination – that took him from being a Spanish (presumed cis) woman to inhabiting a non-binary, transnational body speaking and reading different languages, with the B. in his name signalling what is left of this previous identification. Unsurprisingly, Woolf’s *Orlando*, as is often the case, figures

⁶⁴ “Once captured, the ape says he had no choice: if he did not wish to die locked up in a cage, he had to accept the ‘cage’ of human subjectivity” (Preciado 2021: 18).

⁶⁵ “As a trans body, as a non-binary body, whose right to speak as an expert about my condition, or to produce a discourse or any form of knowledge about myself is not recognized by the medicinal profession, the law, psychoanalysis or psychiatry, I have done as Red Peter did, I have learned the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy, your language, and I am here to address you” (Preciado 2021: 19).

among the texts which have brought him to where he is – and I say unsurprisingly because of the novel’s incredible queer purchase in our times, as evidenced for instance in the recent theatre adaptation of the novel by Neil Bartlett for the Garrick Theatre in London, with non-binary performer Emma Corrin representing the titular character on stage. Preciado also devised an audiovisual re-writing of *Orlando* himself, with the telling title *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, produced by Arte TV France and first screened at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2023, and he also went so far as to provocatively ‘reclaim’ Woolf as the first nonbinary author of the canon (“Virginia nonbinaire”) in an article published on 10 June 2023 on French newspaper *Libération*.⁶⁶

In a rather long passage, Preciado argues that his living body can be configured as a Greek city which conserves and builds on – rather than eliminates – the traces of past lives and civilisations:

Non seulement les souvenirs de ma vie passée en tant que femme n’ont pas été effacés, mais ils restent vivants dans mon esprit de sorte que, contrairement à ce que la médecine ou la psychiatrie croit et préconise, je n’ai pas complètement cessé d’être Beatriz pour ne devenir que Paul. Mon corps vivant, je ne dirais pas mon inconscient ou ma conscience, mais mon corps vivant qui englobe tout dans sa mutation constante et ses multiples évolutions, est comme une ville grecque, où coexistent, avec des différences des niveaux énergétiques, des bâtiments trans contemporains, une architecture lesbienne post-moderne et de belles maisons Art déco, mais aussi des vieilles bâtisses champêtres, sous les fondations desquelles subsistent des ruines classiques animales ou végétales, des fondations minérales et chimiques volontiers invisibles. Les traces que la vie passée a laissées dans ma mémoire sont devenues de plus en plus complexes et reliées, formant un amas de forces vives, de sorte qu’il est impossible de dire qu’il y a encore six ans j’étais *simplement* une femme et que désormais je suis devenue *simplement* un homme. Je préfère ma nouvelle condition de monstre à celle d’homme ou de femme, car cette condition est comme un pied qui avance dans le vide en indiquant la voie vers un autre monde. Je ne parle pas ici du corps vivant comme un objet anatomique, mais comme ce que j’appelle « somathèque », une archive politique vivante. De la même manière que Freud évoquait un appareil psychique plus large de la conscience, il est aujourd’hui nécessaire d’articuler une nouvelle notion de

⁶⁶ For a contextualisation of Preciado’s early work, as well as for an overview of the body in queer French thought, cf. Evans 2020.

l'appareil somatique pour prendre en compte les modalités historiques et externalisées du corps, celles qui existent médiatisées par les technologies numériques ou pharmacologiques, biochimiques ou prothétiques. La somathèque est en mutation. (Preciado 2020: 47-9)⁶⁷

The notion of *somathèque* combines the understanding of the body as the *soma*, the sort of matter that the body represents in opposition to the mind or the psyche, with the notion of archive or collection (*-thèque* as in *bibliothèque*, library, for instance). Understanding the body means for Preciado excavating its various and varied stratifications, namely going back in time to the previous sedimentations of facticity and freedom – to use Beauvoirian terms – that the subject has created in their engagement with the world and with other people. Instead of identifying with normative masculinity, Preciado chooses to inhabit the “ontological liminality” that monstrosity allows for, seeing in this category a liberating possibility of existence outside of the colonial taxonomy offered by psychoanalysis and the system of sexual difference it upholds and perpetuates. This sense of corporeality is both relational, premised as it is upon the objects, subjects and matter the subject engages with, and historical, in that new technologies of the self – Preciado cites here the digital realm, pharmaceuticals, biochemical substances, and prosthetics – effectively produce new understandings of subjectivity and of the body.

As a matter of fact, this notion of *somathèque* is very Beauvoirian, representing as it does precisely, as Moi phrased it, the body as “a historical sedimentation of our way of living in the world, and of the world’s way of living with us” (Moi 1999: 68). By

⁶⁷ “Not only have the memories of the life I spent as a woman not been expunged, but they remain vivid in my mind such that, contrary to what medicine and psychiatry believe and promulgate, I have not completely ceased to be Beatriz to become solely Paul. My living body, I will not say my unconscious or my consciousness, but my living body, which encompasses all its constant mutation and its multiple evolutions, is like a Greek city in which, at varying levels of energy, contemporary trans buildings, postmodern lesbian architecture and beautiful Art Deco houses coexist with ancient rustic buildings beneath whose foundations lie classical ruins both animal and vegetal, mineral and chemical substrates that tend to be invisible. The traces of past life left in my memory have become more and more complex and interconnected, creating a collection of living forces, such that it is impossible to say that only six years ago I was *simply* a woman and today I have become *simply* a man. I prefer my new condition as monster to that of man or woman, because his condition is like a foot stepping forward into the void, indicating the path to another world. Here, I am not speaking of the living body as an anatomical object, but as what I call ‘somatheque’, a living political archive. In the same way that Freud spoke of a psychic apparatus greater than consciousness, so today it is necessary to postulate a new notion of the somatic apparatus to take into account the historic and externalized modalities of the body, those that exist and are mediated through digital, pharmacological, biochemical and prosthetic technologies. The somatheque is mutating.” (Preciado 2021: 34-5)

opposing institutional psychoanalysis, Preciado reclaims for himself the category of monstrosity for political purposes, a category which is founded upon a body that exceeds the prevailing and colonial taxonomy of science and psychoanalysis: in contrast to French philosopher Dominique Lestel's somewhat dated warning about the increasing appeal of monstrosity in contemporary discourse (cf. Lestel 2012), Preciado sees in the border-crossings – or, better perhaps, the border-*straddling* – enabled by the category a liberating experience, one which Woolf seems to share in *On Being Ill*.

After suggesting that becoming ill frees us from the duties connected to the “march of the upright”, Woolf goes on to observe in *On Being Ill* how this new-found liberty helps us “to live and live till we have lived out those embryo lives which attend about us in early youth until ‘I’ suppressed them”: “Left to ourselves we speculate thus carnally” (E5 200-1). Within these few lines, Woolf articulates a sense of constant and (inter)corporeal becoming that is enabled precisely by the leisure and the liberties afforded by illness, a becoming that is predicated upon the highly imaginative potential of literature. What she terms carnal speculation, as we will see in the next section of this Chapter, is very much in keeping with Beauvoir's own understanding of what literature is supposed to do – suffice it to recall here the “*épaisseur charnelle*” (ESN 80; “carnal thickness”, *PhW* 274) which Beauvoir ascribes to life in her counterargument to Hegel's systematic and all-too-abstract philosophy. In this sense, the fact that these “embryo lives” are “suppressed” by an “I” is little surprise within our understanding of Woolf/Beauvoir's opposition to liberal, humanist, and patriarchal dualisms like mind/body, subject/object, and nature/culture.

As Livingstone has argued, the phrase “embryo lives”, once connected to the broader scientific context of the late 1920s and early 1930s, may point to recapitulation theory, namely “the strand of evolutionary discourse which held that the development of the individual organism mirrored the evolutionary development of its species”: on her reading, Woolf has recourse in various texts – *The Waves*, *Flush*, *On Being Ill*, to mention but a few – to this idea in order to propose an expansive notion of the subject, a subject who comes in some way to embody their own hereditary past while extending in all sorts of directions in their present and future (Livingstone 2022: 170ff.). It could be argued that, although recapitulation theory was dismissed even in Woolf's time from the

status of scientific truth and only continued to gain traction in popular science books and radio broadcasts, this resonance reinforces the link between Preciado's technologies of the body and Woolf's understanding of the body as historically, socially situated, conditioned by the material circumstances of its emergence.

In her discussion of biology in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir never has recourse to recapitulation theory, and we may be tempted to deduce from this that this intuition had ceased, by the late 1940s, to figure among the views expounded by the scientific communities Beauvoir reads up on in her preparation of the first draft of the essay. However, David M. Peña-Guzmán has perceptively drawn attention to how Beauvoir's reading of biology, besides being perhaps the least explored aspect of her *magnum opus*, is in fact reproducing all too faithfully some of the preconceptions informing biology well before the turn of the twentieth century. As the critic points out, Beauvoir's summary of biological theories is premised upon three organising principles: "The Principle of Mounting Individuality" which distinguishes between 'high' and 'low' species on the basis of how 'individualised' they are, with humans occupying the highest position in this hierarchy; "The Principle of the Sexual Monopolisation of Individuality in 'Higher' Animals", whereby higher species despite being more individualised are also more subject to the sexual domination of the male; and "The Principle of Sex Functionalism" which holds that the two sexes in the species embody two different tendencies – continuation (female) and rupture (male) – whose "dialectical interplay" supports the species (Peña-Guzmán 2016: 267-8). If recapitulation theory is never mentioned, it is only because Beauvoir believes in what Sonia Kruks has defined a "modest human exceptionalism" (Kruks 2019) whereby humans are placed on a higher point in the hierarchy of the animal kingdom – a perception which Woolf does not seem to share, despite writing before her.

Moreover, although we may be led to believe that, because of her rejection of the biology-as-destiny equation, Beauvoir anticipates a feminist understanding of epistemology whereby science is subjected to scrutiny according to socio-cultural – and therefore ideological – categories, Peña-Guzmán convincingly shows how her approach may be aligned, rather, with immanent critique. The latter expression, as he explains, "refers to a method of critiquing an object – be it a theory, a worldview, a situation, a practice, or an institution – in light of the object's own claim to normativity, which is to

say, in light of the aspirations, values, and commitments of the object itself” (ibid., p. 272). In this sense, Beauvoir does not simply reject biology’s claim to scientific objectivity *per se*; rather, whilst confirming that biological facts are such, she censures biologists for cherry-picking data so that they fit their pre-conceived notions about sex and for turning these facts into ideological arguments. As Peña-Guzmán aptly concludes,

For her, scientific programmes falls [sic] from epistemic grace when they refuse to accept their limits, gaps, and ambiguities; when they become so attached to specific interpretations of phenomena that they cannot change, evolve, or adapt in light of new evidence, new circumstances, or new situations; when they apply concepts outside their proper domain or claims [sic] for themselves concepts that their own formal and empirical methods are unable to accommodate. (Ibid., p. 276-7)

As she had already argued in *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* two years earlier, science needs to think itself as a “free engagement of thought in the given, aiming, at each discovery, not at fusion with the thing, but at the possibility of new discoveries” (EA 85; “un libre engagement de la pensée dans le donné, visant à chaque découverte non la fusion avec la chose, mais la possibilité de découvertes neuves”, PMLA 100). Much like existential projects, science is an open-ended process of discovery, a way of disclosing the world which can sometimes hit the mark a bit too low.

The truth of a body’s being can thus never really be settled but should constantly be *unsettled* even by science and philosophy, as they should strive to capture life in its living relation and its constant becoming. In the second chapter of his 2013 monograph, Derek Ryan juxtaposed Braidotti’s aforementioned three levels of difference in women with Woolf’s understanding of sex as it emerges in *A Room of One’s Own*. After providing a useful chronological account of the reception and interpretation of the notion of androgyny as elaborated by Woolf’s narrator in *A Room*, Ryan moves on to argue that the diverging perspectives provided by the text which have often been interpreted to be contradictory and mutually exclusive are in fact complementary. In his reading,

where Braidotti maintains level 1 of her model – differences between men and women – as a category seemingly undisturbed by the multiple differences between women (level 2) and within women (level 3), Woolf’s androgyny points the way to

more complex levels and combinations which challenge models that privilege differences of women against men. (Ryan 2013: 68)

Woolf's theory of androgyny, in this sense, is not so much "an unproblematic celebration of a subjectivity which dispenses with differences between men and women"; rather, this theory "multiplies difference to create a subject that is more complicated and that is not defined by an oppositional relation", thereby helping us to "redraw the lines of asymmetry through collaboration" (ibid.). Because the subject cannot be reduced to a binary understanding of sexual difference, the narrative strategy of *A Room* itself insists on multiplying the 'I's and on revelling in the various forms of difference – sexual and otherwise – it can take on and then shed, thereby showing how a textual becoming of characters is necessary to the political and critical mobilisation of the reader.

The view of the body that emerges in *A Room* resonates with Beauvoir's – and Preciado's – understanding of it as a monstrous configuration, a shape-shifting creature which inhabits different subject positions at different points in space and time, with the narrative voice incarnating this indeterminate, dislocating plural on the page. It is a phenomenologically singular *and* plural understanding of intercorporeal identity which operates not so much on the basis of *one* irreducible sexual difference, but rather of *different sexual differences* coexisting and collaborating within any *one* subject. As Butler asks in *Undoing Gender*, "must the framework for thinking about sexual difference be binary for this feminine multiplicity to emerge? Why can't the framework for sexual difference itself move beyond binarity into multiplicity?" (Butler 2004: 196, quoted in Ryan 2013: 70).

As was anticipated in the opening of this Chapter, Fausto-Sterling's research into human sex has produced precisely the understanding that the sexes are not simply two. Although in her famous (or even notorious, for certain people) 1993 article "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough" she went so far as to list five sexes instead of two, she admits in her latest, revised monograph, *Sexing the Body* that she had "intended to be provocative" and that she "had also been writing tongue in cheek" (Fausto-Sterling 2020: 83). For her, the matter does not so much amount to multiplying the number of sexes to include every single configuration one can imagine; rather, as Suzanne Kessler argued in reference to her "five sexes" thesis, "men and women would

come in a wider assortment” without there emerging the need for “discrete categories” (ibid., p. 112), with a legal framework dispensing with the necessity of a sex or gender indication on passports and other forms of identification while at the same time protecting people from discrimination and violence based on sex and gender.

Trans theorist Gayle Salamon has similarly argued that the insistence on the materiality of trans bodies – either on the part of trans activists or on that of anti-trans feminists, lesbians or people more broadly – should be overcome as a dated paradigm. By juxtaposing Freud’s psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and photographs and memoirs produced by the trans and queer communities themselves, Salamon shows how the emphasis on genitality fails to do justice to the complex interplay between sex and gender in contemporary discourse. After censuring Irigaray’s clearly homophobic theory of sexual difference – one whereby the heterosexual couple is the only possible way of bridging the distance between the two, and only two, sexes – and after deftly drawing attention to the unabashed transphobia voiced by Elizabeth Grosz in her work on corporeality, Salamon calls upon feminism and women’s studies to open themselves up to the proliferation of gender identities rather than constantly return to – and thus re-entrench and legitimise – a presumed sexual difference based on a dated understanding of sex. If non-normative gender identities and expressions have been at the centre of feminist studies since at least the 1990s because of the challenges they pose to the very categories mobilised by this field, then, Salamon concludes, “it would seem crucial for feminism to reconcile itself to modes of gender that are differently lived, to take that difference seriously, rather than relegating it to the realm of abjection and pathology” (Salamon 2010: 168).

In her recovery and revision of Merleau-Ponty’s sexual schema and of his intuition that “sexuality *is* proprioceptive” – i.e. located in body tissues, hence more than just ‘visible’ – rather than simply genital, Salamon draws attention to how an individual understanding of the sexual – in a broad sense – can help us escape the impasse produced by theorists of sexual difference: by disarticulating identity within our current categorical paradigm – one based on “sexed identity (male or female), gendered identity (man or woman, femme, butch, or trans), and sexuality (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual)” –, Salamon’s argument invites us to see how “an embodied response to desire is, through its radical particularity, unpredictable and impossible to

map onto the morphology of the body”, thereby locating sex “in one’s intentionality toward the other and toward the world” (ibid., p. 48-50). It is precisely this openness to the other and to the world which Beauvoir sees as paramount in the liberation of women and men – and, we may add, of anyone not conforming to the roles, characteristics or presuppositions of either category –, a liberation that has to be premised upon the notion of intercorporeal reciprocity: as she phrases it in the Conclusion of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, each human being “lives the strange ambiguity of existence made body in his or her own way” (SS 779; “ils vivent chacun à sa manière l’étrange equivoque de l’existence faite corps” DSb 648). “La femme n’est victime d’aucune mystérieuse fatalité ; les singularités qui la spécifient tirent leur importance de la signification qu’elles revêtent ; elles pourront être surmontées dès qu’on les saisira dans des perspectives nouvelles” (DSb 647; “Woman is the victim of no mysterious fate; the singularities that make her different derive their importance from the meaning applied to them; they can be overcome as soon as they are grasped from new perspectives”, SS 779) – new perspectives which are not only dependent upon legislation and political mobilisation but, as will be argued in the next section, by the imaginative potential of literature.

2.3 Reading and writing literature: character, subject, and voice

In the first two sections of this Chapter, we saw how Woolf/Beauvoir’s understanding of intercorporeal identity is at once materially conditioned, socially and politically situated, and constantly becoming: constructed and constructing, the relational body as the primary locus of intersubjectivity is what lies at the core of their literary theory as well as their readerly/writerly practice.

Before we close this Chapter with a closer investigation of their literary theory, it is important to return to the ontological differences between (literary) character and (philosophical) subject. As was anticipated above, in order to produce a transdisciplinary investigation of Woolf/Beauvoir, it was fundamental to leave generic and disciplinary distinctions to the side for a while, even though formal categories and specific disciplines were in fact considered in the two preceding Sections. Because Beauvoir had a philosophical background and clearly had a more rigorous understanding of what the (philosophical) essay was supposed to do, we have had to read Woolf as a literary writer who had her own philosophy, although this philosophy

had less to do with any traditional, or even institutional, understanding of the word than is normally implied. In this sense, it could be objected that literature and philosophy are two distinct disciplines for a reason, and while their theories or intuitions may work well together, at the end of the day, they are in fact irreconcilable perspectives in that they operate on different levels, with different instruments and/or with different texts and traditions. While philosophy deals with reality, literature engages with fiction, the disciplinary scholar may expostulate.

As emphasised by Eric Sandberg, Woolf's notion of character clearly derives from her own engagement with subjectivity and with what she very often termed 'life' (cf. Sandberg 2014). For her, writing fiction was a way of capturing on the page this living, protean, even elusive entity that is life and transmitting it in all its vitality to her readership. To build on Sandberg's reading, experimenting with character is, for Woolf, a way of adjusting the technology of literature to the necessities and purposes of life, more specifically of living, breathing subjects. Although she may not have been interested in French *philosophie*, Woolf clearly had a broadly philosophical understanding of reality and fiction.

While this intuition has been the foundation of this Chapter so far, I think some clarification is in order: I side with Sandberg in using 'character' as a philosophical category and not just a purely literary one, precisely because I see in Woolf's search for a better representation of life a sort of philosophy of literature which can only become such when it is placed in resonance with the theories and instruments of philosophers. While I am not alone in trying to bridge the gap between these two disciplines in relation to Woolf (cf. e.g. Hussey 1986; Minow-Pinkney [1987] 2010; Ryan 2013), I will try to show in a more sustained manner the ways in which the intersections and resonances between Woolf's literary production and Beauvoir's philosophy produce a novel understanding of both – an endeavour which seemed almost too obvious from the outset, and yet one which has proven to be much harder than anticipated partly because Beauvoir never wanted to be labelled as a philosopher in the first place (at least after she met Sartre) and because her theories are still perceived to be dated after the so-called linguistic turn.

As is known, with the emergence of post-structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, language started to take centre stage in any sort of theory produced in those times – or at

least in those arguments that buttressed this historically specific view. As we saw, Beauvoir was perceived to be a dated feminist thinker by the 1970s despite her being an integral part of the French Women's Liberation Movement (a 'mother' of sorts who even went so far as to host the movement's meetings in her own living room), her theories being reinterpreted, even rewritten as anticipating the sex/gender distinction by Butler while Anglo-American scholars were translating and circulating the exoticised 'French feminism' which critics like Delphy and Moses then deconstructed. In the same period, Woolf was recovered and revised by feminists as an important 'mother' to look back upon in their search for a women's space in universities and institutions as well as in their private reading practices, and sometimes her theories were rejuvenated thanks to the brand-new 'French feminism' Anglo-American scholars were producing and promoting.

In this context, while Woolf's work lent itself to the emergent approaches provided by post-structuralism, Beauvoir's theories were perceived to be anchored to a humanist understanding of subjectivity which was starting to crumble under the weight of Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and a Foucauldian emphasis on discursivity. While these three 'schools' would require a broader commentary than the scope of this thesis can admit, it is important to emphasise this paradigm shift – to borrow philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn's expression – before we look at the discussion of character in literary theory from the age of Woolf to that of Beauvoir and beyond.

In a recent trio of essays published by the University of Chicago Press, literary critics Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi set out to explore the meaning of 'character' and its development in the intellectual history of the last hundred years or so. As the three scholars argue in their Introduction,

understandings of character have long been shaped by specific critical norms that arose with the professionalization of literary studies and continued into the era of New Criticism, poststructuralism, ideological criticism, and cognitive literary studies, and [...] these norms are ripe for reassessment. (Anderson, Felski, Moi 2019: 3)

As Terry Eagleton encapsulates it in the very first lines of his Chapter on Character in *How to Read Literature* (2013), although this is "almost impossible to avoid", "One of

the most common ways of overlooking the ‘literariness’ of a play or novel is to treat its characters as though they were actual people” (Eagleton 2013: 45) – a statement most (if not all) literary scholars will approvingly nod at. As the critic points out, “To describe Lear as bullying, irascible and self-deluded is inevitably to make him sound like some modern-day newspaper mogul”; this similarity notwithstanding, “The difference between Lear and the mogul [...] is that the former is simply a pattern of black marks on a page, whereas the latter, more’s the pity, is not”: “The mogul had an existence before we encountered him, which is not true of literary characters” (ibid.).

Although this character/person distinction sounds like a truism in our modern ears, the notion of character was central to Woolf’s understanding of literature as a site of formal and political experimentation, and for her this distinction may have been – albeit at times only playfully – more blurred. As Laura Marcus convincingly argued,

In “The Mark on the Wall”, “An Unwritten Novel”, and, most strikingly, her third novel, *Jacob’s Room*, there is an undercurrent of play on ‘character’ as a printing term and on the history of the word character as stemming from the Greek *kharratein*, to engrave. One of the subtexts of Woolf’s early short stories is a definition of ‘character’ as (punctuation) mark and print type, a subversion of the received definitions of ‘character’ as psychological ‘type’ (often masquerading as a complex subjectivity) that runs throughout *Jacob’s Room* and is largely responsible for its experimentalism and its complexity. (Marcus [1997] 2004: 18)

In her early short stories as well as in what is traditionally defined as her first experimental novel, *Jacob’s Room* (1922), Woolf sets out to explore, both lightheartedly and more seriously, the resonances between typographical ‘character’ and psychological and literary ‘character’, regenerating both in the process.

It is quite telling, in this context, that she resorts to the polysemy inherent in this word precisely at a time when she is starting to work as a publisher – as is known, Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press was founded in 1917 and “A Mark on the Wall” inaugurated this new enterprise as the first title, published within the collection *Two Stories*, which also contained Leonard’s “Three Jews” – and thus when she has a clearer sense of what it means to typeset texts herself, as she did not only in the case of some of her texts but also in that of more experimental poems like Hope Mirrlees’s *Paris: A Poem* (1920) and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). Interestingly, in her letter to Barbara Bagenal on 8 July 1923, Woolf wrote: “I have just finished setting up

the whole of Mr Eliots [sic] poem with my own hands: You see how my hand trembles” (L3: 56). Because she typeset the whole of *The Waste Land* by herself between 23 June and 8 July, Woolf’s body suffered from the physical and mental strain; as a consequence, Barbara Bagenal may have been able to perceive how her hand-writing was affected by it: although we tend to think of writing and reading as intellectual activities, as Section 2.2 has attempted to show from a more philosophical angle, for Woolf these were extremely bodily and even intercorporeal activities – and publishing was no exception.

As is known, Woolf responded to Bennett’s scathing remark that “the characters [in *Jacob’s Room*] do not vitally survive in the mind” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 113) in the essay aptly titled “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (1924, with a 1923 version preceding this publication generally referenced as “Character in Fiction”), where she points out how fiction should not, *pace* Bennett, simply offer “convincingness of character” (ibid., p. 112): in her view, the task of the new generation of Georgian writers is to go after the elusive character of Mrs Brown in order to “create solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown” “from the gleams and flashes of this flying spirit” that is her character (ibid., p. 119). As is clear from our previous discussion of subjectivity in Woolf/Montaigne, Mrs Brown embodies precisely the kind of shape-shifting creature that is the ‘soul’ of the subject which both authors attempted, in different ways, to capture in their meandering essay-writing: as Woolf argues in this 1923 essay, “when we cease to believe what we are told about her, and begin to search out her real meaning for ourselves” we realise that

her solidity disappears; her features crumble; the house in which she has lived so long (and a very substantial house it was) topples to the ground. She becomes a will-o’-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window, lighting now in freakish malice upon the nose of an archbishop, now in sudden splendour upon the mahogany of the wardrobe. The most solemn sights she turns to ridicule; the most ordinary she invests with beauty. She changes the shape, shifts the accent, of every scene in which she plays her part. (Ibid., pp. 118-9)

Elusive and immaterial though character may seem to be, it can contribute materially to the situations and rooms it inhabits, much as subjects in Beauvoir’s philosophy are both conditioned by the circumstances of their emergence and produce certain material effects on them through their freedom. Character-searching is ultimately what Woolf’s

Jacob's Room attempts to achieve: in her very bodily search for Jacob, the narrator in the novel finds nothing but the rooms he has inhabited and the objects that belong(ed) to him, with other characters commenting on, and corroborating, the fleeting impression of distinction and shyness – even awkwardness – Jacob has made on them.

This notion of character as a philosophical subject helps us to better understand Woolf's oft-cited statement that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (E3 421). Although this dictum is extrapolated and mentioned as a sententia in its own right, it is important to contextualise it so as to better understand the import of the statement as it appears in the essay.

My first assertion is one that I think you will grant – that every one in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practiced character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help. And now I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disputable perhaps, to the effect that on or about December 1910 human character changed. (E3 421)

"While the 'disputable' nature of Woolf's second claim has been taken up in modernist studies, and has often been appropriated as a defining maxim for modernism," as Amy Bromley has recently observed, "the preceding assertions [...] are just as crucial to Woolf's suggestive discussion and deployment of character in this essay" in that "she encourages us to dwell on the word 'character' and foregrounds the sense in which it is a site of inscription, representation, and interpretation" (Bromley 2021: 149). I would like to push this claim a bit further and argue that here Woolf is asking us to see how "character-reading" is a way for us to think about subjectivity and collectivity, about the presuppositions we bring to the complexity of reality in order to change them – and it, and us with them. But what does 'character' stand for, exactly, in Woolf's literary theory?

In her recent survey of "Character, Form, and Fiction" in Woolf, Bromley highlights the tension between surface and depth that the notion of character as a visual mark on the page plays with, concluding that "The brevity of the character sketch provides an opportunity to isolate surface impressions, to read them in detail, but also to take these signs as a starting point for further creative re-contextualization" (ibid., p. 162). In a similar vein, Makiko Minow-Pinkney explored the relationship between

Woolf's oft-cited statement ("on or about December 1910 human character changed") and the geometrical fourth dimension which started to gain wider currency in the early twentieth century in several disciplines (literature, geometry, physics, the pictorial arts), emphasising how "it was this spatial fourth dimension, or at least the cultural desire symbolised by that concept, which formatively contributed to the emergence of early modernism, generating its utopian and even euphoric impulses": in her account, the appeal of this notion resided in the fact that "It gave the *Zeitgeist*, which was deeply dissatisfied with the materialistic world, a concrete and scientific form in which to express its utopian desire for higher truths" (Minow-Pinkney 2012: 201, 200). This, in Minow-Pinkney's reading, is why Woolf finds the fiction produced by 'materialist' writers like Bennett, Wells, or Galsworthy to be wanting: their investigation of reality stops at the threshold of a further, more essential truth.

If "on or about December 1910 human character changed", it is because the material, social, cultural and historical situation in which subjects lived evolved, Beauvoir would argue. The date has been interpreted as defining a watershed moment because of specific developments in the pictorial arts (the Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London was organised by Roger Fry in November and December 1910) or in British history (the funeral of King Edward VII, which took place in May 1910, put an end to the 'Edwardian' age Woolf was distancing herself from in "Modern Fiction") or in Woolf's voluntary work for the Suffrage campaign (cf. Jones 2016: 65-107).⁶⁸ In his foundational survey of 1910 in relation to Woolf and the early Bloomsbury group, Peter Stansky argued that by 'character' Woolf meant "not the mere externals on which in her view the realist Edwardian novelists [...] had depended, but something deeper and different", although he also mentions that "She was concerned with the more conscious manifestation – character rather than innate nature" (Stansky 1996: 2). Stansky seems to side with Bromley and Minow-Pinkney in his emphasis on the tension between surface and depth which character produces, a tension which seems nonetheless to be based on a perhaps dated notion of the outside (visible character) as opposed to the inside (innate nature). A Beauvoirian understanding of subjectivity would insist precisely on the deconstruction of the inside/outside border, as this false dichotomy presupposes a

⁶⁸ Other events in that year include the *Dreadnought* hoax, another of Woolf's nervous breakdown and a subsequent move to Studland, Dorset, with some of the Bloomsbury set, and the beginning of Clive Bell's career; for a complete overview of the year cf. Stansky 1996.

liberal, humanist, even patriarchal view of a unitary subject which neither Woolf nor Beauvoir subscribed to. For Woolf/Beauvoir, the body is, as we saw, a moving agent, conditioned and conditioning, which extends well beyond the periphery of the skin, and thus a character, as a living textual subject, is more than simply a tension between psychology and appearance.

In that “human character”, different meanings of the word are condensed, and critics struggled to understand what Woolf’s proposition means even after some sort of consensus was reached over the reason for 1910 as the watershed date: the notion of character, it could be argued, has proven to be just as elusive as Woolf/Montaigne’s ‘soul’ and Woolf’s Mrs Brown. Even beyond Woolf studies, the polysemy of ‘character’ in English has been explored not only by Eagleton but also by Australian scholar John Frow. In the former’s simplified account intended for undergraduate students, ‘character’ embraces the following meanings: (1) a literary figure who has an ontological status that is profoundly different from that of real-life people; (2) “a sign, letter or a symbol”, as found on a printed page; (3) “the peculiar mark of an individual, rather like his signature”; and, through a synecdochic process, (4) “the man or woman as such” who has a peculiar, even eccentric quality (Eagleton 2013: 48). In Frow’s more ambitious, well-informed monograph, character is shown to “[enter] English from French *caractère*, derived from Latin *character*, which derives from the Greek *kharakter* (χαρακτηρ), an instrument for marking or stamping a distinctive mark”, and, through “a series of metonymic transfers from the more concrete to the more abstract” acquires the modern meaning of “the external, physiognomic traits of an inwardly figured personality” (Frow 2016: 7-8).⁶⁹ In all these accounts, ‘character’ stands out as something riddled with contradiction, animated by a tension between inside and outside, between surface and depth, between the textual and the real: Mrs Brown is a woman sitting on a train, but she is also, more importantly, a ‘character’ in search of an author *à la* Pirandello, an embodied personality who is waiting for a writer to claim her as their

⁶⁹ Although any etymology of the English ‘character’ will list the French ‘caractère’, it ought to be noted here that while the English conflates the two meanings of typographical character and narrative or literary character, the French, like many other languages, distinguishes between *caractère* (typographical character, quality or nature) and *personnage* (narrative or literary character). Beauvoir’s writings on literary theory, as will become clearer later, do not insist on the polysemy of this word, as the language she is articulating her theory in would not allow her to hear those resonances that are so central to Woolf’s polysemic notion of character in fiction. However, the two different theories share an interest in how best to represent human subjectivity through character and plot, and that is what this Chapter sets out to highlight across linguistic barriers.

own. In this sense, it could be argued that ‘character’, in its ontological liminality, is a sort of monstrous configuration that polices the borders between inside and outside, between reality and fiction, between surface and depth.

In the novel which initiated this back-and-forth between Bennett and Woolf on the nature of character from which the latter’s essay “Character in Fiction” emerged, namely *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf attempts precisely to vacate the central position of the protagonist, Jacob Flanders, without necessarily settling for a less accurate characterisation. As the title itself suggests, what the novel offers is not so much a meticulous portrait of its protagonist as a fragmentary survey of the spaces and times he inhabited and the people who got to meet him. His conspicuous absence cannot simply be reduced to a reflection of his elusive, silent, even awkward nature, but is also, philosophically speaking, an interesting perspective on what it means to write a human subject into a fictional world. This act, for Woolf, implies deconstructing a monolithic notion of identity in order to show it instead as a mobile, living network of intercorporeal relations, where the edges between the different elements override the nodes themselves: material relationality, in *Jacob’s Room*, acts as the real protagonist of the novel, with the genitive of the title representing it even on the title page. Woolf’s third novel, then, exhibits what may be termed an ecology and phenomenology of character, one that insists on the living network the protagonist mobilises even beyond his own life.

On 26 July 1922, Virginia Woolf noted in her diary the positive impression her third novel had produced in its first reader, her husband Leonard, concluding that “There’s no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice” (*D2*: 232). Here, ‘voice’ clearly stands for something characteristic of her as an author, it is the recognisable feature of her writing, her aural signature, as it were. Much like the visual ‘character’, the au/oral notion of ‘voice’ is something specific to her as an author, but it is also something she has had to actively find rather than something she has passively inherited, in a Beauvoirian process of becoming with the world and with her body. Although the novel has consistently (and understandably) been interpreted according to visual categories related to (post-)impressionism, it could be argued that the text is also a moving account – in both senses (affective and kinetic) of the word – of how a (female) narrator attempts to

capture the character and voice of an elusive (male) protagonist. Though fragmentary, this attempt alludes to something vaster, gestures to an incommensurable whole (“the body of a whale” in “Evening over Sussex”) which a more realist approach (“six little pocket knives”) would inevitably fail to render on the written page without killing it first.

What the novel manages to do is to re-create some of the spaces Jacob gravitates around and across, picking up on some stray sentences and impressions his vacant place leaves behind and laying them out in a fragmentary form on the blank page. As our eyes move down each page of the novel, they have to cross these sometimes considerable blank spaces; although this has understandably been described as a sort of ‘framing’ of the text that is in line with the figurative arts (cf. Roe 2000), these blank spaces also leave the reader some space to let the preceding words and impressions sink in and settle, the vacant textual room, much like Jacob’s, functioning here as an echo chamber where silence and voice intermingle through time.

This echo is what accompanies our discovery – as well as the narrator’s – of the main character from the beginning of the text to the end. As we read of Archer’s search for Jacob on the beach in the opening of the novel, his calling him rings in our ears – “Ja—cob! Ja—cob!” (*JR* 4-5) –, with the lines separating and connecting the two syllables drawing out the sound and the blank space surrounding these utterances materialising on the page this solitary attempt at projecting one’s voice through the silence around oneself. When we get to the closing paragraphs, we are haunted by two passages we have read before in the same novel, which return here like a voice beyond the grave. The closing section is worth reproducing in its entirety.

‘He left everything just as it was,’ Bonamy marvelled. ‘Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for anyone to read. What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?’ he mused, standing in the middle of Jacob’s room.

The eighteenth century has its distinction. These houses were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago. The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorways a rose or a ram’s skull is carved in the wood. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction.

Bonamy took up a bill for a hunting-crop.

‘That seems to be paid,’ he said.

There were Sandra’s letters.

Mrs Durrant was taking a party to Greenwich.

Lady Rocksber hoped for the pleasure...

Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there.

Bonamy crossed to the window. Pickford's van swung down the street. The omnibuses were locked together at Mudie's corner. Engines throbbed, and carters, jamming the brakes down, pulled their horses sharp up. A harsh and unhappy voice cried something unintelligible. And then suddenly all the leaves seemed to raise themselves.

'Jacob! Jacob!' cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again.

'Such confusion everywhere!' exclaimed Betty Flanders, bursting open the bedroom door.

Bonamy turned away from the window.

'What am I to do with these, Mr Bonamy?'

She held out a pair of Jacob's old shoes. (*JR* 246-7)

As Bonamy and Betty Flanders enter Jacob's room, they find it just as he left it, even though he was enlisted and thus knew he was going to fight in a war which may possibly kill him – and which in fact eventually did kill him. His room was depicted as empty several times in the novel, with the space being haunted by Jacob's spectral presence, but while earlier his absence-made-presence was only temporary, now it is sealed as permanent, with Jacob's mother wondering what she is supposed to do with Jacob's old shoes now that there is no one who can wear them. Much as Archer called his brother on the beach in the opening of the novel, here Bonamy calls out Jacob's name, prompted as he is by a sudden stir in the leaves just outside the window, as if his friend – or homosexual lover, according to Eileen Barrett (cf. Barrett 2014), or bisexual lover, according to Christopher Wells (cf. Wells 2022) – suddenly showed himself in the space around his old room. All his letters and documents are still there, and these stand for signs of his absence-made-presence in the room, with the notion of 'character' – both typographical and psychological – and that of 'voice' – written and read aloud – intermixing on the page into a singular amalgamation in which its constituent parts can no longer be told apart.

What is particularly striking about this closing passage, however, is the repetition of two passages which we found earlier in the text. One is the description of the house –

the paragraph starting “The eighteenth century...” –, which is repeated here with one sentence originally placed towards the end of the passage in Chapter 5 now being moved to the first position (cf. *JR* 93-4).⁷⁰ Then the paragraph beginning “listless is the air” is copied from Chapter 3 with no variation (cf. *JR* 49). These echoes from previous chapters reflect the almost impalpable, but certainly uncanny presence of Jacob’s silence in the room, as the wicker armchair creaks and the leaves on the street “seemed to raise themselves”, with a “harsh and unhappy voice cr[ying] something unintelligible”: it is as if Jacob is conjured up by a series of mysterious echoes, like dead letters – in both senses of the word – sitting around the room waiting for Jacob’s friends and family to pick them up and recognise them as their own.

As was anticipated at the beginning of Section 2.1, Beauvoir argued in one of her lectures in Japan that a good novel has to be symphonic. As expounded earlier, Beauvoir finds three sub-genres wanting, because for her fiction cannot possibly have one ‘key’ which can decrypt its real-life referents (as in the case of the *roman à clef*), nor can it be reduced to a matter-of-fact report with an anthropological or historical appeal (which a documentary novel would provide) or to a specific argument that the author wants to put forward (as the so-called thesis novel erroneously does). In her lecture, Beauvoir expands on Sartre’s preceding speech, in which he observed that literature is “a form of communication *beyond language*” in that it “rests on the non-signifying silence enclosed by the words” (Sartre 2008: 272), and argues that a novel has a symphonic quality: it can keep different melodic themes “in counterpoint” even though they are contradictory, “by mixing them and making them exist together and by having them support each other” (*OWL* 286). “That is the advantage of the novel”, Beauvoir concludes, “one can put forth two opposing points of view, keeping them in balance in this silent whole which is the finished novel” (*OWL* 286). A silent whole which, in the original French, is an “ensemble silencieux” (*ESdB* 444), translated here by J. Debbie Mann correctly as “silent whole”, but I would like to propose a slightly different rendition that seems to me to be more in keeping with Beauvoir’s imagery: a

⁷⁰ The passage in Chapter 5 reads: “These houses (Mrs Garfit’s daughter, Mrs Whitehorn, was the landlady of this one) were built, say, a hundred and fifty years ago. The rooms are shapely, the ceilings high; over the doorway a rose, or a ram’s skull, is carved in the wood. The eighteenth century has its distinction. Even the panels, painted in raspberry-coloured paint, have their distinction...” (*JR* 93-4). In the transition from Chapter 5 to Chapter 14, the statement in bracket and the final ellipsis (...) are lost, and the penultimate sentence is moved to the first position.

novel is not just a silent whole, it is also, clearly, a silent *ensemble* in which the author's voice is made silent so that the Woolfian image of "the body of the people [...] behind the single voice" can emerge (*AROO* 49). The author orchestrates the different voices composing her narrative and provides readers with a silence-made-voice that is both singular and plural.

As we read *Jacob's Room*, we are invited by the narrator to revel in the plurality of voices, in the deafening silences surrounding the protagonist's existence as a narrative subject, as a character. In her search for his presence, the narrator not only finds his absence-made-presence, but also comes up with broader philosophical theories about what it means to see another human being in front of us, for instance when she muses that "The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other's faces" but only "few took advantage of it", intent as they are on thinking about their own business:

Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, James Spalding, or Charles Budgeon, and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all – save 'a man with a red moustache', 'a young man in grey smoking a pipe'. (*JR* 85)

Here we find Husserl's suggestion that the living body of a person could be assimilated to a book with a stylistic unity constituted by the inextricable relationality of its constituent parts. The characters mentioned in this passage condense in their names the polysemy of the word 'character' that was mentioned above, as the novel plays with the different stratifications that the meaning of the word has accumulated over time: the characters are at the same time visual, typographical marks on the page, signifying little or even nothing, and what Beauvoir and other existentialists would call existents endowed with a singular life. In this sense, it could be argued that *Jacob's Room* not only helped Woolf to 'find her voice' as a writer, but also pointed her to the pluralised singularity of 'character' in fiction.

Once placed in this context, the notion of 'character' invites readers to engage with fiction in a way that may be assimilable to life: deriving *from* the material of life and leading *back to* life, 'character', as the examples of Mrs Brown and Jacob show, acquires a mobile, relational complexity which it did not exactly have in Edwardian

fiction, according to Woolf.⁷¹ In its combination of the philosophical subject and of narrative, au/oral voice, ‘character’ seems thus to offer a vantage point from which the evolution of fiction can be observed.

This intuition that character is an important aspect of reading and writing fiction, however, has often been accused of naiveté by literary critics. Moi argues that this dismissal of character is tied up with the emergence of New Criticism and its (for the most part successful) attempt to professionalise literary criticism by distancing itself from the ordinary reading of what Woolf famously called ‘common readers’. In her essay titled “Rethinking Character”, Moi shows how this institutionalisation of reading and criticism led to literary professionals disparaging any form of emotional response – what we would rather term *affective* response today – the text may elicit in readers. As Moi argues through a close reading of one of the foundational texts of New Criticism, namely Lionel Charles Knights’ essay *How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?* (1933), “the taboo on treating characters as if they were real originally had far more to do with a specific aesthetic and professional agenda than with philosophical arguments” (Moi 2019: 29). Because Knights’ (and others’) approach to literature was premised upon the incorporation of modernism – or better perhaps, *one way* of understanding modernism, which incidentally did not think twice about excluding women writers from the canon, as was observed in Chapter 1 – and had the ambition to turn literary criticism into a profession, the “resulting ‘modernist-formalist’ ethos encouraged literary critics to privilege form over subject matter, prefer ‘literariness’ to ‘literature,’ and reject thematic and moral analysis as the expression of naïve realism and equally naïve humanism” (ibid., p. 30). After 1945, this approach “hardened into a dogma” and was elevated to the status of a “fundamental axiom” of literary criticism without necessarily questioning the assumptions it brought to bear on the function and goals of criticism (ibid., p. 29). A closer look at this dogma shows, however, that, as Moi aptly phrases it, “The taboo turns out to be a veritable iceberg of unexamined theoretical assumptions” (ibid., p. 39).

⁷¹ This observation should not be taken to mean that I subscribe to a biographical analysis of Jacob Flanders; although his character – and Percival’s in *The Waves* – may have been inspired by Woolf’s brother Adrian, this real-life referent is not sufficient to exhaust the meanings of Jacob in the novel precisely because *Jacob’s Room* is a symphonic novel, not a *roman à clef*, a thesis novel or a documentary novel.

One of these theoretical assumptions is the idea that exploring character – what Woolf calls the fundamental act of “character-reading” – cannot be reconciled with more formalist approaches to literature, and that while the former is something ordinary readers may well do in the privacy of their homes, the latter is a superior form of critique in that it unveils the inner mechanisms of literary texts. Even those critical schools which have tried to better explore the politics of literature – feminism included – fell into the trap of formalism by suggesting that a certain form of realism, for instance, was conducive to a more conservative understanding of reality; “As a result they [i.e. feminist critics] entirely failed to do justice to one of the most radical feminist texts to come out of the nineteenth century, *A Doll’s House*” (ibid., p. 32). For Moi and the other two critics of the collection, “the question is not whether character criticism should exist but how to create intellectually sophisticated character criticism” (ibid., p. 63).

In her cogent survey of character criticism, Moi does not spare the so-called linguistic turn from censure either, as she sees even in what we would now call ‘theory’ an acritical perpetuation of the ‘modernist-formalist’ assumptions inherent in New Criticism, to the effect that “Literary studies today [...] are dominated by a two-headed troll: formalism and theory”, as “Both draw on and incorporate the pro-modernist agenda that inspired the first generation of professional academic critics” (ibid., p. 48). In her reading, French critics belonging to the *Tel Quel* group, for instance, not only aimed to “produce a theory that could do justice to the most avant-garde forms of modernism”, but also effectively “produce[d] a theory that would itself be modernist” (ibid.). From the 1930s to the early 2000s, then, the “character-reading” which Woolf found essential in the 1920s continued to be dismissed as an amateurish way of reading, analysing, and theorising literature.

In stark contrast to these developments in literary criticism, Woolf’s and Beauvoir’s literary theory may provide a much-needed original take on the function of literature. Although Beauvoir in particular is hardly ever considered to be an innovative literary theorist, this could be interpreted as yet another example of what Moi termed the “modernist-formalist ethos” dominating literary criticism from the 1930s until even now. In a 2009 article, Moi had already drawn attention to how Beauvoir’s literary

theory in the 1960s stressed the importance of “speech acts, voice, and identification” and these at the time were clearly “three features bound to alienate the rising generation of poststructuralists” (Moi 2009: 191). What happens, however, if we read Beauvoir’s literary theory alongside Woolf’s essays at a time when New Criticism was still emerging – an emergence which, as Moi has shown, had more to do with specific institutional and professional interests than we normally care to admit?

In order to answer this question, we will have to return to the end of Section 2.2, where it was noted that Woolf finds in the liberating experience of ‘rash reading’ a way to finally imagine different lives and play different roles from those imposed by the ‘I’ that controls us. Starting from this idea of carnal speculation enabled by literature, we will see how Woolf’s and Beauvoir’s phenomenological and ecological literary theory can help us come out of the impasses into which New Criticism and poststructuralism have pushed us.

As was mentioned above, in Woolf’s *On Being Ill*, relinquishing the first-person singular pronoun allows human beings to finally be able to connect to ‘other’ worlds and different existences, all of which are mediated through literature. In “A Letter to a Young Poet” (1932), literature – beyond generic distinctions – is described as becoming obscure and difficult when one limits oneself to describing one’s own position in the world; on the contrary, Woolf advises her reader, John Lehmann, to take part in a collective dance dictated by the sense of rhythm in the body:

All you need to do is to stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open, and shut, boldly and freely, until one thing melts in another, until the taxis are dancing with the daffodils, until a whole has been made from all these separate fragments. [...] How can you learn to write if you write only about one single person? (E5 315, 317)

Reading, after all, Woolf argues, “is rather like opening the door to a horde of rebels who swarm out attacking one in twenty places at once”, affecting different “senses” among which she interestingly names not only “the reason” and “the imagination”, but also – and perhaps more crucially – “the eyes, the ears, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet” (E5 317).

More than thirty years later, in the autumn of 1964, Beauvoir was asked to give a lecture on the role of literature at the Mutualité theatre in Paris. A communist magazine, *Clarté*, organised a debate under the title “Que peut la littérature ?” (“What can

literature do?") and invited two sides of the French literary scene as it was developing at the time: on the one hand, Beauvoir, Sartre, and Spanish self-exiled author Jorge Semprún defended the idea of "committed literature" (*littérature engagée*); on the other, Yves Berger, Jean-Pierre Faye, and Jean Ricardou defended the burgeoning New Novel (*nouveau roman*) tendency, which owed much to the concomitant paradigm shift inaugurated by poststructuralist theory. The event was well attended and even televised, as Beauvoir recalls in her autobiography, and served to replenish the funds of *Clarté*. The contributions to this debate were subsequently published in a volume with the same title in 1965, edited by Yves Buin, the organiser.

It is in this conference that Beauvoir anticipates some of the theories that she would expand upon during her lecture tour in Japan in 1966. In particular, she draws attention to how literature is "the privileged site of intersubjectivity" ("la littérature est le lieu privilégié de l'intersubjectivité", Lecarme-Tabone and Jeannelle 2012: 337) – a notion she borrows from Proust – in these terms:

Il y a de l'irréductibilité dans le fait de la singularité de notre situation. Mais en même temps il y a une communication dans cette séparation même. Je veux dire que je suis un sujet qui dis « je », je suis le seul sujet pour moi qui dis « je », et c'est la même chose pour chacun de vous. Je mourrai d'une mort qui est absolument unique pour moi, mais c'est la même chose pour chacun de vous. Il y a un goût unique dans la vie de chacun, qu'en un sens personne d'autre ne peut connaître. Mais c'est la même chose pour chacun de nous.

Et je pense que la chance de la littérature c'est qu'elle va pouvoir dépasser les autres modes de communication et nous permettre de communiquer dans ce qui nous sépare. Elle est – si c'est de la littérature authentique – une manière de dépasser la séparation en l'affirmant. Elle l'affirme parce que quand je lis un livre, un livre qui compte pour moi, quelqu'un me parle ; l'auteur fait partie de son livre ; la littérature ne commence qu'à ce moment-là, au moment où j'entends une voix singulière. (Ibid., p. 336)⁷²

⁷² "The singularity of our situation is an irreducible fact. But at the same time there is a communication in this very separation. I mean that I am a subject who says "I," I am the only subject for myself who says 'I,' and it's the same thing for each one of you. [continues below]

I will die a death that is absolutely unique for myself, but that is the same for each of you. Each person's life has a unique flavour that, in a sense, no one else can know. But it's the same thing for each of us.

And I think that literature's good fortune is that it can surpass the other modes of communication and allow us to communicate in what separates us. Literature – if it is authentic – is a way of surpassing the separation by affirming it. It affirms the separation because when I read a book – a book that counts for

Because reality for Beauvoir “is not a fixed being; it is a becoming”, that is “a swirling of singular experiences that envelop each other while remaining separate” (*OLW* 200; “la réalité n’est pas un être figé ; c’est un devenir, c’est, je le répète, un tournoiement des expériences singulières qui s’enveloppent les unes les autres tout en restant séparées”, Lecarme-Tabone and Jeannelle 2012: 336), literature becomes the only way we can paradoxically bridge the gap between our experience and other people’s while at the same time reinforcing this separation, as our bodies become aware of their own relationality to the materiality of the world and of other people. Although the voice we can hear when we read an author’s work is singular, it also opens up to the world and embraces all sorts of different experiences, so much so that, as has already been mentioned, Beauvoir will stress in one of her 1966 Japanese lectures that good novels have to be symphonic: the text and the author may be one in their appearance, but their existence, because it is a situation in a constant state of becoming, is to some extent plurally inflected. If Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin found Dostoevsky’s fiction to be polyphonic and went on to argue that novels are constructed as dialogic, Beauvoir seems – however unknowingly – to take this theory further: it is not simply a matter of there being different voices that are engaged in dialogue; what is crucial is that out of these separate, distinct voices a collective sense of harmony (*sym-phony*) is produced which nonetheless does not simply neutralise the individual voices.

The notion of singularity is of paramount importance here: we are singular in both senses of the word, that is we are both individual and unique, and yet we all share this quality and in this sense we are already connected to one another, as Beauvoir remarks. Gillian Beer emphasised how this tension between singularity and plurality – what the critic terms “the communal” – animates Woolf’s fiction, too, to the effect that “How to discover the communal in this singularity is the poet’s and, her work suggests, should be the fiction writer’s task” (Beer 1996: 60). Interestingly, one of the pieces of advice Woolf gives to the young poet is “Never think yourself singular, never think your own case much harder than other people’s” (*E5* 308). It is clear that here she is using ‘singular’ in the sense of remarkable or unique, but at the same time if we keep this dialogue with Beauvoir’s essay in mind, we could take Woolf’s term much further, seeing in the singular voice which for Beauvoir inaugurates literature as an embodied

me – someone is speaking to me; the author is part of his book. Literature only starts at that moment, the moment when I hear a singular voice.” (*OLW* 199-200)

experience the Woolfian “body of the people” and “experience of the mass behind the single voice” (*AROO* 49). In the same letter to Lehmann, Woolf points out how any young poet should feel part of a long tradition, one that guides them in their writing:

Think of yourself rather as something much humbler and less spectacular, but to my mind, 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 – stir in your blood and sometimes move your pen a little to the right or to the left. In short you are an immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character [...]. (*E5* 309)

This passage sheds light on how central time is in this view of literature: it is not just with our contemporaries that we share our existence, our situation, and our bodies, but also with our ancestors and predecessors – and it is easy to see, as Livingstone has argued, how this notion of the writing subject may owe something to recapitulation theory. The intercorporeal quality of writing is here represented in the “touch” of different authors who “stir in your blood and sometimes move your pen a little to the right or to the left”: if in *On Being Ill* Woolf theorised how literature and (inter)corporeality are far from being mutually exclusive aspects of humanity, here she is providing a material example of how this intercorporeal communication across spatial and temporal separation may happen. As she will encapsulate it in “The Leaning Tower” (1940), “Even the simplest story deals with more than one person, with more than one time” (*E6* 259).

In this sense, it could be argued that any human subject who reads is in fact, as Woolf suggests, “an immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character”, too, one whose very existence depends on the sometimes tenuous connections with other human beings, past and present. In this spirit, *A Room of One’s Own* famously closes with the future resurrection of Judith Shakespeare’s body, an event that will only take place when women finally have access to money and rooms of their own:

She [i.e. Judith Shakespeare] lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. (*AROO* 85-6)

These “continuing presences” are such because they have left us with some remains of their existences. They are not just spectral presences, they are not immaterial or evanescent; first and foremost, Woolf and Beauvoir seem to say in unison, they are embodied subjects whose works are stamped with their singular voices, waiting for readers to provide them with “the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh” even from beyond the grave. To quote Woolf in the last version of “How Should One Read a Book?”:

Every literature, as it grows old, has its rubbish-heap, its record of vanished moments and forgotten lives told in faltering and feeble accents that have perished. But if you give yourself up to the delight of rubbish-reading you will be surprised, indeed you will be overcome, by the relics of human life that have been cast out to moulder. (E5 577)

The reader’s task is thus to collect these “relics of human life” from the past, absorb them, make them part of their own world through this “rubbish-reading” – a process which is clearly reminiscent of the narrator’s attempt to give a fleeting sense of Jacob’s character in *Jacob’s Room*.

It is easy to see how this practice can be defined as cannibalistic in a way: if literature offers us parts of other people’s worlds and bodies, when we read we are in fact phagocytising them. Although Woolf referred to the novel as “the cannibal” in “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” (1927) because of its tendency to ‘devour’ other art forms (E4 435), this dialogue between the English author and Beauvoir has shown that this idea of cannibalism can be extended beyond the generic to include the literary *tout court*. Reading consists in bridging the gap that separates us from one another while reaffirming its existence; it implies the continuing presence of our predecessors, whose relics we go through and possibly take possession of; in annexing these ‘other’ worlds, we are also relinquishing our own sense of identity in favour of a more collective and embodied sense of our existence.

In opposition to the “elderly nekrophilist” Mr Peabody “and his like” who are censured by Woolf in “A Letter to a Young Poet” for their decreeing the death of the art of letter-writing and of poetry (E5 307, 314) – a comment which is clearly reminiscent of our previous discussion of abstract philosophy and scientism as dead(ly) knowledge –, literature ought to be understood as a living, embodied relationship with other experiences across time and space, experiences which are clearly anchored to specific

bodies with singular voices who are cannibalised in the intercorporeal act of writing as well as in the subsequent but equally intercorporeal act of reading. While Mr Peabody and the “large and highly respectable society of nekrophils” insist that “Keats is dead, Shelley is dead, Byron is dead” (E5 314), for Woolf these bodies are still living among us, they are Husserlian *Leiber*, Beauvoirian bodies in becoming ambiguously stamped with singularity and collectivity. As Gillian Beer perceptively remarked, “The deep values which she [i.e. Woolf] accords to communality is not a matter only of her sincerely learnt and practised socialism or her forcefully written (if not always practised) solidarity with other women”; rather, “It has to do with her practice of writing out of the mass and out the body” (Beer 1996: 50). It could be argued that the monstrosity of the body resides precisely in its appropriating other bodies, other experiences, other narratives; it is a monster whose confines are not clearly set but are in fact constantly expanding in all directions in the attempt to annex otherness and make it part of itself. Contrary to our own perception of corporeality, our body does not simply end where we think it does: like a cannibal monster, it takes possession of the materiality around us, it phagocytises otherness and thus transforms our own constitution beyond the strictures imposed by a towering ‘I’.

In “Professions for Women”, Woolf observes, as we saw, that the acquisition of formal rights is only the first step towards liberation, for the signifier ‘woman’ has not exhausted its potentialities until “she [i.e. the living woman] has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill” (E6: 481). For this reason, “this [newfound] freedom is only a beginning; the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared” (E6 484). Now that women have rooms of their own, they still need to decide what to make of these spaces, as “for the first time you are able to decide for yourselves what the answers should be” (E6 484). It is interesting to notice here that she does not simply suggest that these rooms have to be furnished and decorated, but she also states that this space has to be *shared*, perhaps because, as she wrote in “The Patron and the Crocus” (1925), “the crocus is an imperfect crocus until it has been shared” (E4 213). Literature as a method of communication serves precisely this purpose: it enables a writer to convey their own already plural, materially becoming, monstrously cannibalistic situation to somebody else and in doing so, it creates a continuity in time and space between different people,

bodies, and worlds. In the spirit of sharing things, impressions, matter, we could say, literature may be regarded as a continuous ritualised trade of embodied experiences that never cease to exist in that they manage, through the admittedly imperfect medium of language, to transcend time and space, ensuring as it does that even the dead authors of the past continue to have a living, bodily relationship with the present.

In this context, reading does not simply amount to performing literary criticism; rather, it is a material becoming with the author, the text and the situation that are separated from us by time and space. As Woolf writes in the last version of “How Should One Read a Book?”,

Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice. If you hang back, and reserve and criticise at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read. But if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other. Steep yourself in this, acquaint yourself with this, and soon you will find that your author is giving you, or attempting to give you, something far more definite. (*E5* 573-4)

That is, I would add, they are giving you access to their very material world, they are stimulating not just your mind, but your monstrous, shape-shifting body, a body that is constantly in the state of becoming, Beauvoir would suggest. Through this becoming-other, we abandon our monolithic identity in favour of different embodied experiences that help us better understand the world we inhabit, the body we generally neglect, the past tradition that sustains us. In this embodied genealogy, in this state of becoming, our identity becomes monstrous and cannibalistic, perhaps, but it is only through this process that we can come to see literature as an intercorporeal act that overcomes separation and saves us from the despair of our own singularity. “Never think yourself singular,” Woolf said to the young poet (*E5* 308); for you are always already plural, collective, protean when you read or write, we should add.

Before we close this section, there are still a few observations to make. I have tried to show how returning to Woolf/Beauvoir’s literary theory helps us to overcome some of the obstacles placed by what Moi aptly termed the “modernist-formalist ethos” to the liberating, intercorporeal activities of reading and writing. If literary criticism has

insisted on a presumed difference from ordinary reading in order to elevate itself to a professional category, it is easy to see how this attempt has come at the expense of marginalised groups of writers and critics – Woolf and Beauvoir included. The two authors' insistence on the importance of a singular voice in fiction has shown how dense and complex this singularity can be in its recalling of past authors and traditions and in its beckoning to the mobilisation of present and future bodies in the very act of reading.

In “A Sketch of the Past”, the autobiographical sketch begun in 1939 and left unfinished at the time of her death, Woolf offers some interesting insights into what it means for her to remember and to create. Towards the beginning of the text, Woolf depicts some of her earliest childhood memories at St Ives, Cornwall, before remarking that “The strength of these pictures – but sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word – the strength anyhow of these impressions makes me again digress. Those moments [...] can still be more real than the present moment” (*MB* 67). The synesthetic scenes offered by Woolf's recollection still seem to be very present to her “I now”, as she will aptly term it, a subject she distances from the “I then” of her memories and who at the same time is so intimately linked with that previous subject that, Woolf realises, “this past is much affected by the present moment” (*MB* 75). It seems that Woolf is here encouraging a more phenomenological understanding of subjectivity, one that is bound to, and shaped by the moment of its emergence, as well as the place it takes up in the world: remembering means going back through one's body to the sensory perceptions and the emotions it once felt in other times, places, and environments, effectively producing an ecology and phenomenology of the living body.

This feeling is so strong that Woolf muses whether in fact “I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there. That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen” (*MB* 67). In this sentiment, we can clearly discern how the borders of the body are extended beyond the physical self, a self which seems to be aligned with that image in “Montaigne” of the soul as “all laced about with nerves and sympathies which affect her every action” (*E4* 78). This extension challenges the inside/outside dichotomy in relation to the body and gestures

towards a sort of independent existence of these sensations outside of the bodies that initially produced them. As Woolf goes on to ponder,

Now if this is so, 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? And if so, will it not be possible, in time, that some device will be invented by which we can tap them? I see it – the past – as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. 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 shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start. (*MB* 67)

Here, Woolf describes the past as something that continues to live on in the present, attached to it through tenuous connections we need to restore in order to connect to it. Technology would mediate these connections: perhaps a motor car would be able to revert its direction in order to rush back to previous scenes and emotions through this “avenue lying back” which is never really closed off by time or even forgetfulness; alternatively, perhaps technological progress will bring “some device [...] by which we can tap them”. But, as she had already suggested, remembering does not necessarily engage only sight, but, perhaps more importantly, sound, as the immediacy of the aural can take us back instantly to places and times our brain may have forgotten but our body still remembers. This auditory interest in her past suggests a more (inter)corporeal engagement with it than the commonly held belief in memory as a ‘purely mental’ process: remembering, for Woolf, is also a sort of auscultation of her body as a living *somathèque* conserving the successive sedimentations of her way of relating to the world. The body still exhibits the traces of the experiences it has had with the surroundings, and listening in to the past means pricking up our ears and take notice of the voices and echoes from previous times, spaces, and people so that they may direct our monstrous presence.

If we build on our previous discussion of literature as the privileged site of intercorporeality, we may even go so far as to argue that literature can be seen precisely, as was mentioned in Section 2.2, as a technology of the self which helps us to reconnect to previous situations. Although Woolf is here discussing the specific conventions

connected to autobiography and life-writing, it could be argued that her theorisation erodes the borders between fact and fiction in its attempt to restore some distant memories she is trying to write down. Ryan's chapter on 'digging granite and chasing rainbows' in Woolf has convincingly shown how the (supposedly) irreconcilable categories of fact and fiction are not stable and fixed; on the contrary, "Whilst Woolf's 'granite and rainbow' is often seen as having a dualistic, symbolic or emblematic quality, her various usage of these terms instead exposes the limitations of binary, and totalising, models of language and thought that are often upheld by symbolic understandings" (Ryan 2013: 31).

Even in a text like *Three Guineas*, which foregrounds a stronger pact with factuality than most of Woolf's essays, Woolf has to admit in no uncertain terms, after relying on different types of sources (photographs, newspaper articles, biographies) for different purposes, that "the literature of fact and the literature of opinion, to make a crude distinction, are not pure fact, or pure opinion, but adulterated fact and adulterated opinion" (*TG* 174-5): although in some passages she may seem to reinforce and re-entrench a clear-cut boundary between fact and fiction in order to demystify – to use a Beauvoirian term – the myths produced by patriarchal ideology, as she consults these documents she agrees that these are never really only one thing, as Clarissa Dalloway would say. In this sense, even as she was writing texts belonging to different genres – after *The Years*, Woolf started work on her biography of Roger Fry, her own autobiographical sketches, the essay "Anon" or "The Reader", and what would become *Between the Acts* – and was clearly aware of the different efforts each specific genre required of her, writing functioned for her as an interrogation of the material presence of the world through specific tools – or technologies – which attempted to capture life from different angles.

In our modern times, which are even more devoted to this kind of intergeneric contaminations than the modernist period would allow, as evidenced for instance by the emergence of the new categories of autobiografiction or autofiction, several critics have been trying to re-trace the boundaries of fact and fiction. As we saw, Eagleton reinforced the 'modernist-formalist ethos' of literary criticism in his assumption that treating characters as if they are real people is an erroneous endeavour – although, quite

ironically, he then proceeds to offer an interesting ‘character-reading’ of Sue Bridehead of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (Eagleton 2013: 70ff.); it is not clear where he would draw the line between legitimate character criticism and an erroneous way of reading texts, thus confirming Moi’s argument that this dogma is often passed down unquestioned. Frow’s monograph, whilst informative, is based upon the observation that “characters and persons are at once ontologically discontinuous (they have different manners of being) and logically interdependent” and intends to solve this problem “by viewing persons as somewhat similar to fictional characters” in order to “understand persons not as ontological givens but as constructs, which are in part made out of the same materials as fictional characters” (Frow 2018: vii) – a conclusion which strikes me as too similar to the premise itself. In France, comparative literature specialist Françoise Lavocat has recently argued for re-entrenching a boundary (*frontière*) between fact and fiction at a time when unprecedented technological and literary advancements have made border-crossings ever more possible in films, texts, and videogames (cf. Lavocat 2016).

While this ontological difference between fact and fiction has some political, theoretical, and practical importance I do not wish to discount so easily – suffice it to think here of the rise of misinformation and ‘fake news’ in recent times –, from a literary theoretical point of view it is evident how Woolf/Beauvoir’s understanding of literature not only points to the sometimes labile borders between the two, but first and foremost it gestures towards the potential and productive border-crossings that reading and writing enable and encourage. From this perspective, literature contributes to producing a kind of ontological leap between reality – the factual field investigated by the philosophy of the phenomenological subject and the living body – and fiction – the stories we create and read in our everyday life – precisely through the monstrous notions of character and voice.

In “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf proposes a sort of philosophy of life which builds on this ontological separation and yet logical interdependence of fact and fiction. After stating that “the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer”, Woolf provides an explanation or even exploration of this phrase which is worth reporting in full here:

I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. 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, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. 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. (*MB* 72)

The sense of elation and wholeness Woolf experiences after a shock in the moment of literary creation is what effectively makes her a writer. If the shock produces some kind of laceration in her body, intent as it is on experiencing this moment of being, her subsequent attempt to make something out of it is a recollection of the “severed parts” which is aimed at reconstructing a whole. This sense of rapture happens, as Woolf tells us, when she “seem[s] to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together”.

After this explanation lands on the centrality of getting character right, Woolf goes on to make an observation that has become well-known among Woolf scholars:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden 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. *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. And I see this when I have a shock. (*MB* 72)

In this oft-cited passage, the last sentence of the paragraph and the sentences preceding it are often omitted, as if they had nothing to do with this philosophy. In Chapter 1, I have tried to show how Woolf/Beauvoir’s shock-*giving* capacity made them the women writers subsequent generations of women looked up to, though this did not happen without some reservations about some parts of their lives or some aspects of their theories. In “A Sketch of the Past”, it becomes evident how for Woolf writing and living are two such intimately linked activities that it is sometimes impossible to extricate one from the other. In the passage reported, it could be argued that Woolf is moving from

the plane of the fictional or artistic (“*Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet”) back to the plane of life (“there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; [...] we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself”), an intuition brought about by the “shock” that certain core memories had produced in her body, which she then reconstitutes through the literary creation of scenes and characters that come together. From this philosophy, it becomes evident how life itself is a sort of amalgamation of fact and fiction where the contaminations between the two separate categories are more important than their boundaries. As Laura Marcus has rightly emphasised in her survey of biography and autobiography in Woolf, “For Woolf, to live and to write were one and the same” (Marcus 2021: 224).

Literature comes to represent for Woolf a form of life-writing, not primarily in a generic sense, but first and foremost in a philosophical sense. As she writes in the opening of “The Leaning Tower” (1940),

What is his [i.e. the writer’s] object – his model? Nothing so simple as a painter’s model; it is not a bowl of flowers, a naked figure, or a dish of apples and onions. Even the simplest story deals with more than one person and more than one time. Characters begin young; they grow old; they move from scene to scene, from place to place. A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words alone cover all that a writer looks at – they are, human life. (E6 259)

In contrast to the subject of a still life for an artist, the subject of a writer’s work is constantly moving “from scene to scene, from place to place”, so much so that it may be argued that the object “is not one object but innumerable objects”, precisely because, as we saw in relation to “Evening over Sussex”, moving entails a continuous change of spatial and temporal coordinates and that engenders a variation of the subject itself. Human life is never still but is always already implicated in a constant process of material becoming, as Beauvoir’s philosophy suggests; as a result, literature has to adapt to the changing circumstances, appearances and even substances of a moving reality in order to capture “human life”. As Woolf notes in the same essay, “That is why literature is always changing, like the weather, like the clouds in the sky” (E6 260) – a statement which cleverly combines the variability of nature with the incessant developments which literature produces, suggesting precisely, as was hinted above, an ecological understanding of literature.

Across all the different genres Woolf and Beauvoir worked with, which they always perceived to come with their own set of expectations and conventions, Woolf was interested in capturing life and keeping it alive on the page, much in the same way as Beauvoir dedicated her whole career to producing a philosophy of life that could do justice to the complexities of the everyday without fossilising it into an abstract system. For Woolf/Beauvoir, the notion of ‘character’ as a singular voice and as an ontologically liminal, constantly moving subject, had the potential to show precisely, as Beauvoir aptly put it, “the living relation that is action and feeling before making itself thought” (*PhW* 275; “la relation vivante qui est action et sentiment avant de se faire pensée”, *ESN* 81). This contrasts starkly with our inherited notion of literature as a ‘purely’ intellectual and mental activity, as for Woolf/Beauvoir reading and writing meant placing the living freedom of the subject – the character, the philosophical subject, the voice, the reader – within specific fictional universes that were in a constant state of material becoming. If “character-reading” becomes an important task for Woolf from the early 1920s onwards, it is because an ecology and phenomenology of character is what has the potential to shock readers into action, to mobilise their intercorporeal freedom to create less tenuous relationships with the world, to engage with the complex materiality of reality instead of escaping it.

Within this understanding of literature as a living organism appealing to the readers’ freedom, the notion of ‘character’ represents a singularity not only from the perspective explored above, namely because it has a unique voice, but also, when placed within the context of the history of literary criticism, because it maintains the mathematical and physical meaning of a breakdown of an established system which shows that there is something we have been incapable of understanding in all its complexities with our present tools. As Derek Attridge remarked in his study of the singularity of literature, a singularity is generated

by a configuration of general properties that, in constituting the entity (as it exists in a particular time and place), go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture’s norms, the norms with which its members are familiar and through which most cultural products are understood. (Attridge 2004: 63)

As Anderson, Felski and Moi show in their recent trio of essays, ‘character’ serves precisely this purpose: it shows how we have become incapable of treating character in fiction in its complex stratifications and mobile configurations because of the

historically contingent forms of literary criticism that have emerged in the last century. A return to Woolf/Beauvoir's literary theory has shown how an ecology and phenomenology of character may help us to overcome this stalemate – and Chapter 3 will build on this argument to show what this ecology and phenomenology of character in three of Woolf's novels may look like.

Chapter 3.

Reading Woolf with/beyond Beauvoir: *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), *Between the Acts* (1941)

As was shown in Chapter 1, Beauvoir considered Woolf to be one of the most interesting women writers she read, to the extent that the latter's work proved to be an important basis for the French philosopher's theorisation about women and fiction in *Le Deuxième Sexe* and beyond. That we tend to associate their names and works today within a feminist framework is thus not without cause. However, Chapter 2 has clearly shown how beyond this shadow cast by Woolf on Beauvoir there are interesting insights worth exploring which have nothing to do with the workings of what Wai Chee Dimock aptly termed "synchronic historicism"; if Woolf's essays and autobiographical sketches are brought closer together with Beauvoir's philosophy and literary theory, previously unheard echoes and resonances perfectly in keeping with Dimock's "diachronic historicism" (Dimock 1997: 1061) may emerge and new theories may be generated about their relationship, well beyond, that is, a linear understanding of chronological time and immediate reception.

This final Chapter is an attempt to articulate a different form of retrospective diachronic resonance whereby Beauvoir's theories can shed new light on Woolf's fiction too. As was anticipated, three novels by Woolf will be analysed through the methodological and theoretical framework set up in Chapter 2. In particular, it is with the period going from *Orlando* onwards that this Chapter engages, both because Beauvoir's reception of Woolf seems to begin around that time, as Woolf's first novels began being translated into French, and, perhaps more importantly, because Woolf's 1928 novel insists on certain aspects of subjectivity that are central to Beauvoir's understanding of intercorporeal identities. The second novel under scrutiny will be *The Waves*, as was anticipated in Chapter 1, and not just because it is one of the recurring novels by Woolf in *Le Deuxième Sexe*; as will become clearer in this Chapter, the 1931 novel is a fundamental text for a better understanding of the Woolfian and Beauvoirian notion of intercorporeality in becoming. The third and final novel will be Woolf's first posthumously published text, *Between the Acts* (1941), because of its insistence on the notions of unity and dispersal, or perhaps even better, on the notion of unity *in* dispersal. The novels that appeared between *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* have been

deemed to be not quite so emphatic on the aspects of intercorporeal subjectivity as the chosen texts: *Flush*, for instance, integrates an understanding of subjectivity well beyond Beauvoir's framework, aptly defined by Kruks as a "modest human exceptionalism" (Kruks 2012: *passim*); *The Years*, with its emphasis on history, family, and peace, seems to go in quite different directions that are not so easily placed alongside my angle on Beauvoir's theories.¹ At any rate, this thesis has already pointed to other texts by Woolf, such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *Jacob's Room*, because of the interesting perspectives these novels offered for Beauvoir or for our interpretation of Beauvoir's philosophy and literary theory. The choice is clearly subjective, but it is hoped that my work and the work it may inaugurate will be able to embrace other novels by Woolf as well as other parts of Beauvoir's transdisciplinary oeuvre.

Because the view of temporality this thesis subscribes to is centrifugal and disruptive rather than linear and chronological, this last Chapter will not consider the three novels in the order in which they appeared. Rather, three separate and yet interdependent themes will be addressed which may be able to shed new light on the three novels together. The risk of treating Woolf's literary production in a strictly chronological fashion consists in considering her oeuvre as naturally moving towards a progressively more 'authentic' style or subject matter, thereby reproducing teleological narratives which Woolf's work in fact constantly questions. If Woolf has been mostly associated with the high experimentalism of modernist literature, for instance, it ought to be noted that some of her novels are not formally experimental or fragmentary in any explicit sense; suffice to think here of *Night and Day* (1919) and *The Years* (1937), which are located at the opposite ends of Woolf's writing career, to see how her experimentalism was not the only defining criterion of her writing nor was it something she 'strove towards'. We may also think of *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Between the Acts* (1941) to insist on the fragmentation of narrative as a representative aspect of Woolf's oeuvre, but other texts, albeit experimental, do not share this emphasis on the fragmentary, as shown by the cases of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. This goes to show that any attempt to reduce Woolf's writings to a clear parable of increasing

¹ This is not to say, of course, that these novels – and especially *The Years* – may not benefit from a Beauvoirian reading. The 1937 novel would help us historicise the *devenir femme* ("becoming woman") so perceptively theorised by Beauvoir, a dimension which is not covered here but is definitely worthy of future scholarship.

experimentation or fragmentation can only be a helpful first point of reference for a non-specialist readership. As Mark Hussey cogently argued in his 1986 monograph on the philosophy of Woolf's fiction,

The constant echoing back and forth of perennial themes and events throughout the novels, and the many descriptive homologies [...] lend credence to a view of Woolf's art as dynamic, in constant flux, rather than linear. She herself [...] was explicit about the "circularity" of her own methods; indeed, the image of circle and circumference appears in myriad forms in everything she wrote. (Hussey 1986: xii)

In view of this circularity and the recurrent themes underlying her literary production, a more thematic approach to her novels will be preferred.

In some of the most authoritative collections of essays on, or introductions to Woolf intended for students and scholars, specific temporal categorisations have been imposed upon her work in order to make it more easily navigable for readers. While Jane Goldman's *Cambridge Introduction* (2006) dedicated one section to each of her works and *Virginia Woolf in Context* (2012) treated Woolf's writings thematically rather than chronologically, other publications have attempted to divide her fiction into different phases – while of course acknowledging how arbitrary this division ultimately is. The best example of this tendency is provided by the recent *Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf* (2021), where, before other more thematic sections are introduced, a chronologically-defined, four-part 'Texts' section is proposed: "Early Novels and Stories (1915-1923)" by Jocelyn Rodal, "Mature Works I (1924-1927)" by Gabrielle McIntire, "Mature Works II (1928-1932)" by Elsa Högberg, and "Late Works (1933-1941)" by Alice Wood.

This tripartite structure – early (1915-1923), mature (1924-1932), and late (1933-1941) – is a convenient way to divide Woolf's literary career in 8-year periods which more or less coincide with 'phases' of her work. While the four scholars writing the sections are quick to emphasise the differences inherent in the texts yoked together in the arbitrarily, even arithmetically determined period, the very act of placing each novel side by side with that which precedes it and that which follows it ultimately manages to highlight their resonances as well as their dissonances. So for instance Jocelyn Rodal emphasises how this 'early' period "saw Virginia Woolf searching for new forms of fiction" – and here the sternest of critics may object that this is something she kept doing throughout her lifetime – but quickly moves on to specify that the three 'early'

novels' styles "could hardly be more different": "The unifying factor can be found in the determined but often stumbling efforts of a new generation: these three novels are all, haltingly, about young people striving to move forward into a new era" (Rodal 2021: 76). In the first section dedicated to the mature works (1924-1927), Gabrielle McIntire argues that "across all of her disparate genres during these years we find a remarkably persistent return to an animating ethical problem: how best to render, within the confines of language and textuality, what is most true and real about how we exist and relate to both ourselves and the world", an issue which "led her to infuse her novels, stories, essays, and even her journalism with poetry as she sought to do justice to the complexities of what she persistently called the soul" (McIntire 2021: 89-90). This preoccupation with the "prosaic and poetic impulses of fiction" in Woolf's 'mature' period is echoed by Elsa Högberg, who also stresses how "her aesthetic experiments undermine such distinctions between poetic and committed writing" as voiced by critics in the early phases of reception (Högberg 2021: 102) – and some of these (mis)readings of Woolf were addressed in Chapter 1. Finally, Alice Wood chooses to emphasise how "During 1933-1941, in the context of the Great Depression, fascism, and war, Woolf's urge to document and analyse the society around her [...] energized and directed her writing in new ways", while acknowledging that "This chapter's use of 'late' to identify a distinct and final phase in Woolf's oeuvre is shaped of course by a retrospective viewpoint and knowledge of her death on 28 March 1941" (Wood 2021: 117). In all of these accounts, then, Woolf seems to be always in search of novel ways of portraying a socio-political reality without losing sight of the Montaignesque soul that was discussed in Chapter 2 – an intuition which this thesis attempts to elaborate upon by looking more closely at Woolf's oeuvre as placed alongside Beauvoir's philosophy and literary theory.

Because of the limitations – temporal, financial, bureaucratic, material, personal – imposed upon what would potentially be an endless, monumental work like one on Woolf/Beauvoir, this last Chapter cannot but offer a modest reading of three of Woolf's novels. In Section 1.4, a Beauvoirian analysis of *Mrs Dalloway* was offered that took as a starting point the references to the 1925 novel in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. In a similar vein, Section 2.3 provided an admittedly short reading of 'character' in (and beyond) *Jacob's Room* in order to show how productive Beauvoir's philosophy and literary theory can be

when placed alongside Woolf's essays on fiction. This Chapter intends to build on these readings by focusing on three novels belonging to the period more easily associated with Woolf's parallel 'life' in France, which as we saw was inaugurated by her winning of the Prix Fémina – Vie Heureuse in 1928, the same period in which Beauvoir started reading all of Woolf's works as they became available in French translation, or, in the case of *A Room of One's Own*, as they started circulating more widely in Paris in the early 1930s. Limited though this selection may appear, it is clearly a good starting point to better explore the relational, embodied subject in Woolf's fiction from a philosophical and theoretical angle mediated by Beauvoir.

In order not to reproduce teleological arguments about Woolf's literary production, the next three sections will be organised thematically rather than chronologically. Because this is after all a doctoral thesis intended for a specialist audience, the convenience of arithmetically determined compartments does not seem to apply. Rather, three central elements of Woolf/Beauvoir's theories on human subjectivity will be analysed in reference to three novels: rooms and situations, self-reflection, and becoming. It is hoped that, as we weave in and out of Woolf's (mature-to-late) novels, a better understanding of the intercorporeal subject in Woolf's fiction will be produced. Because of the risks associated with projecting another philosopher's theoretical categories onto Woolf's work, the basis for our discussion will be provided by the theories elaborated upon in Chapter 2: Beauvoir's philosophy is not to be taken as a 'filter' that isolates specific aspects of Woolf's work without acknowledging what does not fit that precise framework; rather, her thought is meant to sustain our reading of Woolf without limiting it. In this sense, this Chapter will attempt to read Woolf *with* but also *beyond* Beauvoir, so as to gain a better sense of Woolf's fiction from a transdisciplinary perspective.

Section 3.1 will build on the Woolfian concept of 'room' and on the similar but not assimilable Beauvoirian notion of 'situation' in order to explore the characters' relationship with space, time, and materiality. As was argued in Chapter 2, both Woolf's 'room' and Beauvoir's 'situation' insist on the material conditions from which any sort of agency may be acquired and deployed in the world. Both concepts seem to be tied up not just with materiality, but also with a politically and socially inflected view of the body as a monstrous, cannibalistic entity where disparate sedimentations of 'difference'

proliferate, well beyond, it ought to be reminded, a dated understanding of sexual dimorphism and the gender binary which simplifies and separates, rather than complexifies and connects, subjectivities. As we saw in relation to recent developments in biology and neuroscience, bodies acquire a number of differences both in their psychosexual evolution and in the process of acculturation to which human subjects are exposed. If we intend to pursue a phenomenology of living characters in a text, the first step will be to situate them spatially, temporally, and materially in order to see how the socio-historical circumstances of their emergence shape their own subjectivation. As will be shown below, *Orlando*, *The Waves*, and *Between the Acts* pose different challenges to this philosophical framework, and weaving in and out of these three novels does not amount in any way to dismissing their constitutive differences. Precisely because the different characters populating the texts are brought together, the formal divergences in the three novels will be highlighted and analysed: departing from the ‘modernist-formalist’ ethos does not coincide with throwing the baby out with the bath water; on the contrary, a granular attention to character and form can produce novel insights into Woolf’s modernist novels.

While Section 3.1 attempts to provide the spatio-temporal coordinates of the characters as well as their material existence in the fictional world, Section 3.2 will be an attempt to build on Amanda Anderson’s insightful work on rumination in order to see the different possibilities that the category of ‘self-reflection’ can raise. Understood in its constituent ambiguity, ‘self-reflection’ encompasses both the simple act of *thinking about oneself* – Anderson’s rumination, in this sense, is one of its possible inflections – and the act of *seeing oneself* in a reflecting surface. Both manifestations of the hermeneutic category help us to consider the act of self-reflection as a materially embedded, even intercorporeally oriented one, in stark contrast to the received Cartesian mind/body dichotomy which Chapter 2 has attempted, however briefly, to refute. As we saw, in *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf(’s narrator) somewhat provocatively argued that “mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action” (AROO 28) and this mirroring effect is similarly emphasised by Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* from an ontological and political point of view in reference to women-men relations. However, Woolf’s Montaignesque attempt to capture the ‘soul’ has also drawn attention to how this search for an elusive, shape-shifting self may – and in most cases has to – go through an

autonomous sphere (the room of one's own, or the backshop of one's own) which is nonetheless not to be misunderstood as a materially and ideologically independent space of solipsistic soul-searching. When we look at characters as embedded and embodied subjectivities within the texts, we will hopefully be able to see how fiction complements both philosophy and reality in its attempt to imagine different but all too similar worlds, as it provides an existential foundation to the former while pointing to the strictures and the potentialities of the latter.

After Sections 3.1 and 3.2 set the scene, Section 3.3 will emphasise the material and intercorporeal becoming of characters within the text. Once situated and self-reflecting, the characters will be shown to be constantly and materially 'becoming' with the fictional world – with other characters, objects, even with 'matter'. Once again, the similarities as well as the constitutive formal differences of the three novels will emerge, so as not to produce a reading of Woolf which obfuscates the specific challenges that each text posed to her writing. Much as the scholars writing the 'Texts' section of the *Oxford Handbook* did, I will attempt to bring a number of novels together in an admittedly arbitrary way to highlight the dis/continuities between them and thus produce new ways of reading Woolf's fiction. The three hermeneutical categories are not to be understood as successive 'phases' in the novels, however. As will become clearer from the outset, 'rooms and situations', 'self-reflection', and 'becoming' are not different stages in the characters' fictional lives; rather, they ought to be regarded as ontologically interdependent parts of their subject-constitution within the text.

3.1 Rooms and situations

In Section 1.4, all of Beauvoir's references to Woolf in and beyond *Le Deuxième Sexe* were listed and some of them analysed. As was anticipated, all the passages from *The Waves* which Beauvoir includes in her *magnum opus* will be analysed in this Chapter, so as to produce a continuation of – or better perhaps, an expansion on – Beauvoir's own reading of Woolf. As Table 2 illustrated, three selective quotes from *The Waves*, and in particular from Susan's and Jinny's soliloquies, were included in the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe*: the first two pertain to Beauvoir's analysis of the formative years in women's lives, in particular the phenomenological figure she terms "The Girl" (*la jeune fille*) in the text; the third occurrence is found in the Chapter

“Situation”, more specifically in the Section “The Married Woman” (*la femme mariée*), which Susan here shares with Mrs Ramsay and Woolf’s heroines more broadly, as well as of course with characters from other novels or with life-writing by disparate women writers. While these occurrences are an ideal starting point, they are not intended to limit our analysis but to enrich it. As a consequence, they will be made to communicate with other aspects of *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*.

Towards the end of the Section on the *jeune fille*, Beauvoir emphasises how age does not determine one’s situation in a direct way, as there are women who remain child-like or even childish throughout their lives. However, Beauvoir goes on to point out, there are important distinctions to be drawn between what she calls “le ‘tendron’ de quinze ans” and “une ‘grande jeune fille’” (*DSb* 138; “there is a big difference between the girlish fifteen-year-old and an older girl”, *SS* 389). After supporting her argument with examples from 19th-century Russian émigrée artist Marie Bashkirtseff’s journal, from French journalist and writer Irène-Carole Reweliotty’s diary, titled *Journal d’une jeune fille* and published posthumously in 1946, and from French psychologist Maurice Benesse’s study of identity crisis among adolescents, *La Crise d’originalité juvénile* (1937) – a title misreferenced as *La Crise d’originalité de l’adolescence* in *Le Deuxième Sexe* –, Beauvoir introduces Jinny’s soliloquy during the oft-cited party scene in *The Waves* as “les impressions d’une jeune fille coquette au cours d’une soirée” (*DSb* 140; “the impressions of a young coquette during a party”, *SS* 390). As was noted in Section 1.4, Beauvoir does not hesitate to select even single sentences or phrases from different parts of the Woolfian texts she uses, effectively disregarding the English syntax in favour of the French rendition, which in the case of Simone David’s translation of *Mrs Dalloway*, as we saw, was often sensitively – and understandably – different from the original. Here, Beauvoir does something similar with Marguerite Yourcenar’s rendition of *The Waves*, a version of the text which has become famous and even notorious among French Woolf scholars because of the poetic licence Yourcenar uses in her translation process.²

In the first selective quote from *The Waves*, Beauvoir then corroborates the thesis that she used the first French translation of the text without questioning its faithfulness to the original – as is to be expected of anyone writing in the 1940s and very often even

² For an overview of Yourcenar’s 1937 translation in comparison with more recent translations by Cécile Wajsbrot (1991) and Michel Cusin (2012), cf. Davison 2013.

today – and she freely extracted different passages from the text to foreground some aspects of the narrative which would support her thesis. In particular, in my Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Waves*, Beauvoir’s selective quotation encompasses pages 81 to 84, with the referenced sentences being mostly short passages intended to buttress Beauvoir’s thesis that the girl “accepts her femininity in the end” and that “as she is not yet bound to any duty, irresponsible, available, for her the present seems neither empty nor disappointing since it is just one step” (SS 390). Interestingly, the oft-cited phrase “I am rooted, but I flow” pronounced by Jinny here was rendered by Yourcenar as “J’ondoie au-dessus de mes profondes racines”, literally “I undulate over my deep roots”, a clear example of the original contribution the French author and translator made to the text. While the English original’s sparing use of mono- or disyllabic words etches this sentence into the reader’s memory and thus becomes a perfect and pithy encapsulation of Jinny’s characterisation in the novel, Yourcenar’s French rendition elegantly suggests a parallel with the movement of algae, thereby anticipating the image of Jinny “flutter[ing]”, “ripp[ing]”, “stream[ing] like a plant in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way, but rooted” (TW 83). This latter passage is only partially included by Beauvoir, as after “I flutter. I ripple” – “Je frémis, j’ondule”, in Yourcenar’s rendition – she moves on to reference the passage where Jinny asks “Are we not lovely sitting together here, I in my satin; he in black and white?” (TW 83) which occurs a couple of paragraphs later. Beauvoir’s use of Yourcenar’s creative translation, then, allows her to omit the clearer metaphor of the plant in the river here because the translator had already allowed the text to be more direct than the English original. In this sense, Yourcenar’s mediation clearly has a productive relationship with *Le Deuxième Sexe* in that it allows Beauvoir to be more sparing in her references to *The Waves* without losing the imagery evoked by Jinny’s soliloquy.

As was argued in Chapter 1, reading Beauvoir’s reception of Woolf must be considered to be only the first step in better understanding their relationship and the potential resonances that are generated by placing their works side by side. Reading Beauvoir in counterpoint implies not only a more critical approach to her public statements, whether in writing or in interviews; first and foremost, it means being more generous to her philosophy than she was during her lifetime. For this reason, it is essential to build on the theoretical foundations she laid in *Le Deuxième Sexe* in relation

to Woolf's novels in order to better explore the slow rippling out of ideas and textual echoes which Woolf/Beauvoir constantly engender. If Beauvoir only refers to pages 81 to 84 of *The Waves* to support her understanding of Jinny as a paramount example of the girl's formation as a coquette, any reader of the novel will be able to trace the development of this characterisation in the text. A good place to start is provided by the end of the protagonists' school days: as Jinny wakes up, she overhears and observes the morning bustle in the house, commenting "Here is another day, here is another day, I cry, as my feet touch the floor" (*TW* 42). After drawing attention to how this sense of fluid movement is counteracted by Miss Matthews' potential stern scolding of her behaviour, Jinny considers the prospect of leaving school in a paragraph that is worth reproducing in full.

'Now, too, the time is coming when we shall leave school and wear long skirts. I shall wear necklaces and a white dress without sleeves at night. There will be parties in brilliant rooms; and one man will single me out and will tell me what he has told no other person. He will like me better than Susan or Rhoda. He will find in me some quality, some peculiar thing. But I shall not let myself be attached to one person only. I do not want to be fixed, to be pinioned. I tremble, I quiver, like the leaf on the hedge, as I sit dangling my feet, on the edge of the bed, with a new day to break open. I have fifty years, I have sixty years to spend. I have not yet broken into my hoard. This is the beginning.' (*TW* 43)

Her position in the room, on the edge of the bed, clearly forms the material background from which her thoughts and her anticipations of the future emerge. A sense of new beginnings instils in Jinny a sort of prescience of what is going to happen at the party Beauvoir refers to in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, or indeed even beyond that, as Jinny suggests she still has fifty or sixty years left in her life. If the sense of rootedness and flow in the later scene is connected to the image of a plant in the river, here the dangling position of her body on the bed conjures up the similitude of a "leaf on the hedge": the sense of precarity and departure from sameness is encapsulated here in Jinny's sense of herself as different from Susan or Rhoda, or indeed from any other woman her future man will distance himself from in order to "tell [her] what he has told no other person". And yet, Jinny does not wish to "let [herself] be attached to one person only", or "to be fixed, to be pinioned" by her or somebody else's feelings; she wants to participate in this new life that is dawning for her as she is getting out of bed without at the same time

solidifying into an all too rigid posture that would prevent her from continuing her flowing or quivering movement.

This sense of a new beginning is also present in the passage from which Beauvoir extracts her sentences offering an understanding of the girl as coquette. While in the earlier passage Jinny thought of her incipient specificity as that of “the leaf on the hedge”, encouraged to do so by the end of school and the beginning of her adulthood, both materialised in the very position of her body on the edge of the bed in the morning, in this part of the novel, the protagonist finds the idea “that people should sleep, that people should put out the lights and go upstairs” “strange” because, although “the day is over”, “night is beginning”: this sense of anticipation is encapsulated here in the image that “The fiddlers have lifted their bows” (*TW* 81-2). When she arrives at the party, Jinny is prepared for all the possibilities opening up in front of her, her gaze ready to be directed here and there in different modes: “I glance, I peep, I powder”, Jinny thinks, offering her coquettish version of Caesar’s “veni, vidi, vici” (“I came, I saw, I conquered”) in Plutarch’s account, with the tripartite, paratactic sentence foregrounding the quick succession of brief actions her body carries out in its social performance. The three actions encapsulate the character’s sense not only of herself, but more importantly perhaps of her own body’s intentionality, its being open to the world and to other people, the furtive glances and the quick powdering equally connecting it to a materially embedded world, one where, as Jinny states, “Our bodies communicate” (*TW* 82). Because of her own constitution as a coquettish character, Jinny reminds herself and the readers that “This is what I have dreamt; this is what I have foretold. I am native here” (*TW* 82): she belongs to parties and sociability in a way in which other characters do not, more evidently perhaps Rhoda, whose soliloquy closes this party section on a more negative note. Jinny’s situation as a coquette thus colours her own experience of the social world from the early years of school onwards, her sense of flowing being mostly directed towards the men she seems to be interested in without intending to be pinned down by them; her rootedness is only necessary “so that he may come to me” (*TW* 83), her actions at the party have to be performed furtively and quickly, so that she may come across as ready for social interaction and for new, albeit at times only potential beginnings.

Rhoda's situation is quite different. Although Jinny and Rhoda are both present at the party, their bodies are differently situated within the same rooms. As we saw, Jinny occupies a stable position and invites through her rapid glances and her fully 'armed' body a plurality of men to engage with her without however letting them tie her down. As she says 'Come' to another man and he happily assents, Rhoda opens her soliloquy in a starkly different tone:

'I shall edge behind them,' said Rhoda, 'as if I saw someone I know. But I know no one. I shall twitch the curtain and look at the moon. Draughts of oblivion shall quench my agitation. The door opens; the tiger leaps. The door opens; terror rushes in; terror upon terror, pursuing me. Let me visit furtively the treasures I have laid apart. Pools lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns. The swallow dips her wing in dark pools. But here the door opens and people come; they come towards me. Throwing faint smiles to mask their cruelty, their indifference, they seize me. The swallow dips her wings; the moon rides through the blue seas alone. I must take his hand; I must answer. But what answer shall I give? I am thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body, to receive shafts of his indifference and his scorn, I who long for marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings.' (*TW* 85)

Although it may be argued that Rhoda and Jinny share not only an environment or an event but also a situation as girls at a party, the way their bodies inhabit the rooms of the house and the manner in which they engage with potential partners are substantially different. Jinny flows among different men, drawing them in thanks to her appealing and prepared body; Rhoda feels uneasy and even uncomfortable about navigating this situation, her body turning out to be "clumsy" and "ill-fitting" as a result of "his indifference and his scorn". For this reason, the inherent intentionality of her body directs her thoughts and yearnings towards far-flung places with classical echoes, like the pools "on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns" in which "The swallow dips her wing". The imagery associated with, and in fact actively produced by Jinny allows her to live in the moment, to engage with the social and sexual world without being engulfed in it; the metaphors evoked by Rhoda encroach upon her sense of freedom and agency in the present, they in fact oppose her own situation in the social world, perhaps gesturing towards the future suicide that will be revealed in Bernard's final soliloquy while constantly feeding this undertow of self-destructive, dark thoughts

in Rhoda herself. This juxtaposition, which Beauvoir chooses not to comment on, shows how intercorporeality may be manifested in starkly different ways even when the rooms and situations in which it emerges are in fact very similar. Within a narrative so characteristically made up of refrains and repetitions of imagery, Rhoda and Jinny are held up as different manifestations of the phenomenological figure of the girl in their different engagement with the materiality and sociality of the world.

If *The Waves* helps us to consider similarly situated subjects who come to constitute themselves in their engagement in the space around them more or less at the same time, a novel like *Orlando* offers an opportunity to think about what happens when one subject is made to navigate different historical periods, inhabit different sexes and genders, and thus traverse disparate rooms and situations. The oft-cited opening of the text sees the male protagonist “in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor” in an attic room in his mansion (*O* 11). A sense of historical tradition is encapsulated not only in that very room, as will emerge later, but even in the act and the object themselves: “Orlando’s father, or perhaps his grandfather,” the fictional biographer informs us, “had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa; and now it swung, gently, perpetually, in the breeze which never ceased blowing through the attic rooms of the gigantic house of the lord who had slain him” (*O* 11). Orlando’s class position is made clear from the outset, and the privileges it brings with it are shown in this freedom of movement, even in the aggressive act of using another (racialised) human being as a sort of toy to play with in one’s leisure. Because of Orlando’s young age, in fact, he cannot ride “in fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by strange rivers” as his “fathers” did; all his limited situation as a sixteen-year-old of means allows him to do is “steal away from his mother and the peacocks in the garden and go to his attic room and there lunge and plunge and slice the air with his blade” (*O* 11). Partly like Jinny at the end of her school days, there is a sense of potential, even of anticipation of great deeds in the very body of Orlando, as the biographer states in no uncertain terms:

His fathers had been noble since they had been at all. They came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads. Were not the bars of darkness in the room, and the yellow pools which chequered the floor, made by the sun falling through the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the window? Orlando stood now in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard. When he put his hand on the

window-sill to push the window open, it was instantly coloured red, blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing. Thus, those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself. A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of a novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career. (*O* 11-12)

With a combination of humour and earnestness, the biographer here draws attention to how privileged Orlando's background is. The "symbol" we are invited to decipher points to how the aristocratic lineage of the protagonist invests even his body with "heraldic light", while his head is illuminated by the sun, an element often associated with aristocratic or even monarchical power. Because of this semi-divine light, Orlando clearly appears as the ideal inheritor of a long tradition of heroic characters, and thus he is described as "cut out precisely for some such career".

What the biographer does not seem to understand, however, is the freedom that characterises Orlando as a human being: it is as if here the protagonist is only cast as a natural heir to his privileged background, without realising that this may also turn out to limit his agency rather than sustain it. A Beauvoirian understanding of subjectivity would point to the fact that Orlando is not just the product of his background but also an active contributor to the life he leads. Rather than follow in his ancestors' footsteps, Orlando may well choose to dedicate himself to different sorts of actions; if the first scene in which he appears is intended to impart a certain colouring to his existence, at the same time, in retrospect, it has more than an ironic tinge in its representation of an ideal inheritor of, and a natural contributor to heroic actions, as the biographer himself will later complain about Orlando spending so much time thinking, reading, and writing that it becomes impossible for the narrator to produce a story about him.

In a paragraph describing all the different changes brought about by the cycle of seasons, the biographer suggests that this conclusion "might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that 'Time passed' (here the exact amount could be

indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened” (*O* 59). While this statement and the preceding reference to the “little dust” and the “few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour” clearly and playfully points to the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, this passage also shows how difficult it is for the biographer to narrate the activities of thinking and reading which Orlando conducts in the middle of, and in spite of his aristocratic situation. This is not to say that literature and aristocracy are mutually exclusive activities; making this argument would result in neglecting a fair amount of English literature from its origins until at least the twentieth century – and as is known, Woolf(’s narrator) was quick to point out, in *A Room of One’s Own*, how writing and ‘genius’ depend on material circumstances, a lesson which is repeated in *Orlando* through the example of Nick Greene in the sixteenth century, as will be emphasised in Section 3.3.³ Through Greene as well as through his own description of the titular character, *Orlando*’s biographer sets up a clear dichotomy between the aristocracy and intellectuals, maintaining that some of Orlando’s characteristics “proved that he himself belonged to the sacred race rather than to the noble – was by birth a writer, rather than an aristocrat” (*O* 51). Although Beauvoir would certainly object that ‘one is not born a writer’, the biographer’s all too rigid framework leads them⁴ to make this argument in reference to Orlando, who is perhaps, in a different understanding of subjectivity, born an aristocrat but becomes a writer – and Section 3.3 will return to this issue.

If the initial scene emphasises the nobility of the protagonist, arguably even reducing him to his background, later in the novel the biographer cannot but state how Orlando “was a nobleman afflicted with a love of literature” (*O* 45). Because he, like others, was “infected by a germ said to be bred of the pollen of the asphodel and to be blown out of Greece and Italy”, he was led to “substitute a phantom for reality, so that Orlando, to whom fortune had given every gift – plate, linen, houses, men-servants,

³ The potential sources of inspiration for this character are, besides of course the Elizabethan playwright Robert Greene (1558-1592), the critic Edmund Gosse (1849-1928) – a resemblance immediately recognised by Vita Sackville-West – as well as the essayist Logan Pearsall Smith (1865-1946), whose essay *The Prospects of Literature* was published by The Hogarth Press in 1927 (cf. Whitworth 2004).

⁴ Although the biographer in *Orlando* is generally taken to be a man, there is an unrelenting sense of becoming in the novel that does not exempt even the narrative voice. For this reason, the gender-neutral singular ‘they’ will be preferred in reference to the biographer. After all, Rachel Bowlby already drew attention to the fact that “The masculinity of the narrator might [...] be another pose on which to cast a feminine ‘sidelong glance’. But this hardly settles anything about the sex, or immunity from it, of the playfully serious pseudo-biographer” (Bowlby 1997: 52).

carpets, beds in profusion – had only to open a book for the whole vast accumulation to turn to mist”: “So it was, and Orlando would sit by himself, reading, a naked man” (*O* 45-46). In the act of reading, Orlando goes from being the natural inheritor of aristocratic privilege to “a naked man” deprived of any possessions. The future that was meant to follow seamlessly from his lineage takes an unexpected turn here, as the “fields of asphodel” of his “fathers” play a different role in Orlando’s life: if they provided his ancestors with a battlefield, with an unknown territory they traversed in search of conquest, here they only provide Orlando with a “love of literature” which makes him transition from heroic deeds to fantastic words, from the reality of ‘fearless’ colonial subjugation to the world of fiction. From being a marker of class and colonial power, perhaps in line with the mythological imaginary that sees in the asphodel the flower of the Elysian fields of the underworld, the signifier ‘asphodel’ becomes more easily associated with the “sacred race” of writers, thereby elevating it to an ideal of poetic ambition.

Retrospectively, the protagonist’s face in the sun may be interpreted as a different symbol, embodying as it does the freedom to look for a future that is not pre-determined by his past: while the biographer chooses to focus on what Beauvoir terms ‘situation’ in his first introduction of the protagonist, it is Orlando’s freedom that erupts in the following pages, thereby correcting the trajectory envisaged by the narrator. It is not a coincidence, perhaps, that in the first few pages of the novel the biographer had already had to draw attention to Orlando’s susceptibility to the natural and human environment around him: “and so, mounting up the spiral stairway into his brain – which was a roomy one – all these sights, and the garden sounds too, the hammer beating, the wood chopping, began that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests” (*O* 12). Here we find a metaphor of the body as a building, with the head representing a sort of attic room that is slightly detached from the rest of the body. Despite this vertical distance from the ground, the head is in fact far from being unresponsive to the surroundings: although we too, like the biographer, tend to subscribe to the idea that the head is the repository of rationality and intellect, when we are fantastically allowed to enter this “roomy” space, we realise that it is animated by “that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests”. In line with Damásio’s and Fuchs’ theorisation of the brain, and perhaps even

with the thesis proposed in “On Being Ill” (1926), the biographer has a first-hand experience of Descartes’ error in severing the head from the body; although these “passions and emotions” are not easily captured in prose, hence the biographer’s contempt for them, they nonetheless inform Orlando’s way of living with the world and the world’s way of living with him. From the outset, the biographer seems to be incapable of pinning down Orlando in his multi-faceted subjectivity – well before, that is, his sex change and the difficulties connected with telling its fantastic story.

Towards the end of the novel, after Orlando has come back as a woman to her mansion, has settled the legal disputes concerning her right to own property and has thus become once again the rightful heir(ess) to, and sole proprietor of the house, the protagonist “began a perambulation of the house” and the rooms “stirred, opened their eyes as if they had been dozing in her absence” (*O* 182-3). The inherent plurality of these rooms is not only numerical, as the narrative emphasises time and again with more than a humorous tinge in its tone, but also temporal and situational:

They, too, knew her in all her moods and changes. She had hidden nothing from them; had come to them as boy and woman, crying and dancing, brooding and gay. In this window-seat, she had written her first verses; in that chapel, she had been married. And she would be buried here, she reflected, kneeling on the window-sill in the long gallery and sipping her Spanish wine. Though she could hardly fancy it, the body of the heraldic leopard would be making yellow pools on the floor the day they lowered her to lie among her ancestors. She, who believed in no immortality, could not help feeling that her soul would come and go forever with the reds on the panels and the greens on the sofa. For the room – she had strolled into the Ambassador’s bedroom – shone like a shell that has lain at the bottom of the sea for centuries and has been crusted over and painted a million tints by the water; it was rose and yellow, green and sand-coloured. It was frail as a shell, as iridescent and as empty. No Ambassador would ever sleep there again. Ah, but she knew where the heart of the house still beat. [...] The heart still beat, she thought, however faintly, however far withdrawn; the frail indomitable heart of the immense building. (*O* 183)

Because of the long history of the building as well as the life Orlando has lived in its rooms, the house is animated by her presence and her memories: like a living body, it conserves the traces of its past sedimentations and communicates with the bodily movements of the protagonist. Even though much has changed since the beginning of

the narrative, the house still has a beating heart concealed in its recesses, one that Orlando can hear and feel as she strolls down the corridors and as she paces around the 365 rooms – and the number is naturally no coincidence, recalling as it does the number of days in a year. Indeed, there is a sense that the house will outlive Orlando despite her longevity, and the heraldic leopard will continue to colour the floor of the room and the bodies that will populate it. Rooms are compared to shells that have “lain at the bottom of the sea for centuries” and, as a result, have acquired and shed different appearances because of their interaction with water and time. Iridescent, frail, and empty, the house bears testimony to time passing, to subjectivities becoming, to space preserving and changing. If we subscribe to a Beauvoirian and Woolfian understanding of subjectivity and becoming, no subject, time or place is ever truly “single and entire”, to borrow Louis’ phrasing in *The Waves*: “I have lived a thousand lives already. Every day I unbury – I dig up. I find relics of myself in the sand that women made thousands of years ago, when I heard songs by the Nile and the chained beast stamping”; “What you see beside you, this man, this Louis, is only the cinders and refuse of something once splendid” (*TW* 104).

This layered sense of intercorporeal identity as a sedimentation of time, place, and materiality is similarly evidenced in *Between the Acts*. The Barn in which the pageant may take place if the weather is inclement comes to represent a place where, as Catriona Livingstone has argued, a “decentring occurs, with significant evolutionary resonances” (Livingstone 2022: 164). After the place is vacated of all the props necessary for the pageant in the wake of Miss La Trobe’s decision to “risk the engagement out of doors” (*BA* 57), the narrative reinforces the Barn’s similarity with “a Greek temple” for “some people”, with “the middle ages” for “others”, at any rate with “an age before their own” for “most people”; “scarcely anybody” is reminded “of the present moment” (*BA* 90). Thus, although the main sentence closes, after these incidental clauses, by stating that “The Barn [...] was empty” (*BA* 90), the relative clauses interrupting this description insist on the different echoes of past times this present moment leans on. This deferral of the end of the sentence through a plurality of relative clauses anticipates the idea that the characteristic note of emptiness on which the sentence closes has already been counteracted by the imagination and the living bodies of the people who have inhabited that space and have thus imparted a certain colouring to it.

The paragraph that follows similarly draws attention to how this supposedly empty space has become a living ecosystem:

The great doors stood open. A shaft of light like a yellow banner sloped from roof to floor. Festoons of paper roses, left over from the Coronation, drooped from the rafters. A long table, on which stood an urn, plates and cups, cakes and bread and butter, stretched across one end. The Barn was empty. Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. Minute nibblings and rustlings broke the silence. Whiffs of sweetness and richness veined the air. A bluebottle had settled on the cake and stabbed its yellow rock with its short drill. A butterfly sunned itself sensuously on a sunlit yellow plate. (*BA* 90)

Different stages of history are represented here, from the Coronation of George VI in 1937 to the evolution of animal species who come to make this Barn their home, however briefly. The instant contradiction between the Barn being described as empty (“The Barn was empty”) and the “Mice” opening the following sentence foregrounds the human world and life: if the former is vacated, life still manages to animate it. As Livingstone has argued, the reference to the eyes “adapted to light” or “to darkness” may point to the oft-cited evolutionary theory of adaptation descending from Darwin, thereby revealing that “An apparently human structure” like the Barn is in fact shown to be “an ecosystem that is created, in part, by animal activity”: “An assumed human universality gives way to the recognition that human beings coexist with and depend upon other organisms” (Livingstone 2022: 164). In this interspecies coexistence, the sense of time is no longer linear; rather, as happens in the pageant, where present and past are juxtaposed, in the text itself there is an active intercorporeal co-creation of space, time and materiality which may even be deemed to exceed and counteract a position of human exceptionalism like that of Beauvoir: as Gillian Beer encapsulates it, “The novel is a spatial landscape, not a linear sequence” (Beer 1996: 20), a landscape that is reliant on the characteristic cohabitation of human and nonhuman entities in the countryside.

This idea is reinforced even within the ‘human’ framework of the pageant, as the surrounding natural elements or the animals in the pastures interrupt or continue human activities. The weather itself has of course quite an important impact on the success of the pageant, generating as it does some doubts as to the place where the pageant will be performed. Once Miss La Trobe has plumped for the outside stage, the pageant becomes co-created by the weather and by the nonhuman animals surrounding this all too human performance: suffice to think here of how “The cows, making a step forward, then standing still, were saying the same thing to perfection” (BA 121), as if they too participated in this collective performance, using their bodies like actors on a stage in order to reinforce the gramophone’s statements. A more negative but equally productive engagement with the pageant is then exemplified by the wind rising during the pageant and making “even the great words” “inaudible”: “the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came” (BA 125). Through the countryside and the nonhuman entities that animate it, *Between the Acts* offers a more expansive notion of space, as the primeval, the historical, and the present co-exist and co-participate in the sedimentation of new meanings. As Beer insightfully suggests, “The captious pastiche of the pageant’s language presents snatches of English history as a series of linguistic gestures and tropes. But the remote past of prehistory crowds the everyday present in its untransformed actuality” (Beer 1996: 23).

Even beyond the evidently posthuman context of *Between the Acts*, the countryside offers further insights into human subject-constitution, as the case of Susan in *The Waves* will show. The first part of this Section has already highlighted how Beauvoir’s reading of Jinny-as-coquette may be expanded upon both by looking at other passages on Jinny in the text and by providing a useful contrast to her coquettish character in the way Rhoda inhabits and transforms the same situation.⁵ Before the party scene as lived by Jinny and Rhoda is introduced, the narrative explores the thoughts of Susan, who serves, for Beauvoir, as an example of “a rich country girl” (SS 391; “une riche jeune fille campagnarde”, *DSb* 141). The seamless, and somewhat rapid transition from Jinny-

⁵ On a side note, Jinny would not be seen necessarily as a ‘coquette’ by today’s standards; rather, she seems to incarnate a model of sexually and bodily autonomous woman. Whether Beauvoir is to blame for her reading of Jinny or not, this testifies precisely to the socio-cultural basis of the meaning of ‘coquette’, a notion which, like most others, more crucially that of ‘woman’, has evolved with the societal expectations connected to it.

as-coquette to Susan-as-country-girl in *Le Deuxième Sexe* is brought about by Beauvoir through a reference to how growing up means for the girl subjecting herself to maternal authority and thus looking forward to marriage as the only way out of the strictures of her current family life. “Moins romanesque que naguère,” Beauvoir argues, “elle commence à songer beaucoup plus au mariage qu’à l’amour. Elle ne pare plus son futur époux d’une auréole prestigieuse : ce qu’elle souhaite, c’est d’avoir en ce monde une situation stable, de commencer à mener sa vie de femme” (*DSb* 141).⁶ The passage Beauvoir reproduces, in Yourcenar’s translation, follows the oft-cited statement “I think sometimes (I am not twenty yet) I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn” (*TW* 79). Susan’s sense of herself in the country reinforces that sort of commonality and communion on which *Between the Acts* is predicated, but here this feeling also seems to lead Susan to distinguish herself from other human beings:

I cannot be tossed about, or float gently, or mix with other people. [...] What I give is fell. I cannot float gently, mixing with other people. I like best the stare of shepherds met in the road; the stare of gipsy women beside a cart in a ditch suckling their children as I shall suckle my children. For soon in the hot midday when the bees hum round the hollyhocks my lover will come. He will stand under the cedar tree. To his one word I shall answer my one word. What has formed in me I shall give him. I shall have children; I shall have maids in aprons; men with pitchforks; a kitchen where they bring the ailing lambs to warm in baskets, where the hams hang and the onions glisten. I shall be like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards. (*TW* 79-80)

Of this long paragraph, Beauvoir only reproduces the section starting from “For soon in the hot midday...”. Her interpretation of Susan-as-country-girl reduces her “imaginings” (*imaginations*), as she terms them (*SS* 391; *DSb* 141), to fantasies about finding a man who can make her life stable and complete. While Susan’s ideal life is far from ambitious, her sense of finding an equal echo in her future husband may strike some as similar to Beauvoir’s own utopian closing paragraphs in *Le Deuxième Sexe*: as we saw in Chapter 2, Beauvoir maintains that the heterosexual couple needs to state its constituent parts’ “fraternity” (*fraternité*) and “reciprocity” (*reciprocité*) in order to

⁶ “Less romantic than before, she begins to think much more of marriage than love. She no longer embellishes her future spouse with a prestigious halo: what she wishes for is to have a stable position in this world and to begin to lead her life as a woman” (*SS* 391).

create a more just world where women and men can love each other without engendering oppression and inequality. It could be argued that transposing this closing scene in *Le Deuxième Sexe* in more lyrical, poetic language may result in something not too dissimilar from the sentiment Susan voices in the passage quoted by Beauvoir, where her man's "one word" is echoed by her own "one word", in a marital communion which the countryside encourages. Beauvoir casts this passage in a more negative light, however, highlighting as she does the potential annihilating effect marriage has on women, an effect which, in Beauvoir's reading, will also be reinforced later in the novel, in a passage included in "The Married Woman" chapter.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, one of the theses proposed by Beauvoir about marriage is that it forces women into the domestic sphere, into what she terms immanence, while ensuring that men be able to access a broader, public, political world through their transcendence. As we saw in Chapter 2, Beauvoir goes so far as to highlight how marriage is a form of vassalage or even prostitution whereby women's bodies are subjected to the control of men in exchange for money and (sometimes) protection. In order to reinforce this idea of the domestic as stifling women's agency, Beauvoir calls Susan-as-married-woman to her rescue:

Mais pour trouver en soi un foyer, il faut d'abord s'être réalisé dans des œuvres ou des actes. L'homme ne s'intéresse que médiocrement à son intérieur parce qu'il accède à l'univers tout entier et parce qu'il peut s'affirmer dans des projets. Au lieu que la femme est enfermée dans la communauté conjugale : il s'agit pour elle de changer cette prison en un royaume. Son attitude à l'égard de son foyer est commandée par cette même dialectique qui définit généralement sa condition : elle prend en se faisant proie, elle se libère en abdiquant ; en renonçant au monde elle veut conquérir un monde.

Ce n'est pas sans regret qu'elle referme derrière elle les portes du foyer ; jeune fille, elle avait toute la terre pour patrie ; les forêts lui appartenaient. À présent, elle est confinée dans un étroit espace ; la Nature se réduit aux dimensions d'un pot de géranium ; des murs barrent l'horizon. Une héroïne de V. Woolf murmure: [...] (*DSb* 259)⁷

⁷ "But to find a home in oneself, one must first have realised oneself in works or acts. Man has only a middling interest in his domestic interior because he has access to the entire universe and because he can affirm himself in his projects. Woman, instead, is locked into the conjugal community: she has to change this prison into a kingdom. Her attitude to her home is dictated by this same dialectic that generally

Interestingly, the idea of “finding a home in oneself” (“trouver en soi un foyer”) that opens this passage resonates with the material independence emphasised in *A Room of One’s Own*. The rest of the sentence, however, seems to slightly raise the bar, pointing to how this sort of internal ‘room of one’s own’ must be earned through one’s agency: while Woolf suggested that the room was only the beginning of a woman’s independence, so much so that once some formal rights were granted, rooms still needed to be furnished, Beauvoir seems to imply here that this autonomous sphere can only be reached through hard work. The ‘room’ in which housewives find themselves are prisons rather than sites of independence and freedom, and this makes visible the changes in women’s situation that had occurred between 1929 and 1949 as well as the potential cultural differences existing between late 1920s Britain and late 1940s France.

The insistence on the stifling conditions of marriage and housework is evident in this passage, and this emphasis may arguably be deemed to anticipate U.S. second-wave feminist Betty Friedan’s discussion of the problem with no name in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Susan would be the obvious choice for Beauvoir’s argument because of the sense of communion with nature that was foregrounded above; at the same time, however, it is quite evident how a comparison with the original passage in *The Waves* dramatically puts Beauvoir’s take on the character into perspective, thereby making explicit the subtle textual strategies of the ‘scandalous’ *Second Sex*. Beauvoir’s extract from *The Waves* reads as follows, in the original English:

Whether it is summer, whether it is winter, I no longer know by the moor grass, and the heath flower; only by the steam on the window-pane, or the frost on the window-pane. [...] I, who used to walk through beech woods noting the jay’s feather turning blue as it falls, past the shepherd and the tramp [...] go from room to room with a duster. (*TW* 142)

It is easy to see how this selection may support Beauvoir’s thesis: in contrast to her previous life as a country girl, Susan may seem to be voicing, albeit indirectly, some concerns over her change of scenery and competences. However, if we look at the

defines her condition: she takes by becoming prey, she liberates herself by abdicating; by renouncing the world, she means to conquer a world.

She regrets closing the doors of her home behind herself; as a girl, the whole world was her kingdom; the forests belonged to her. Now she is confined to a restricted space; Nature is reduced to the size of a geranium pot; walls block out the horizon. One of Virginia Woolf’s heroines murmurs: [...]” (*SS* 483)

passage in the original position, a starkly different view will emerge, one that will benefit from a reproduction of the longer paragraphs around Beauvoir's selection.

'I have lost my indifference, my blank eyes, my pear-shaped eyes that saw to the root. I am no longer January, May or any other season, but am all spun to a fine thread round the cradle, wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of my baby. Sleep, I say, and feel within me uprush some wilder, darker violence, so that I would fell down with one blow any intruder, any snatcher, who should break into this room and wake the sleeper.

'I pad about the house all day long in apron and slippers, like my mother who died of cancer. Whether it is summer, whether it is winter, I no longer know by the moor grass, and the heath flower; only by the steam on the window-pane, or the frost on the window-pane. When the lark peels high his ring of sound and it falls through the air like an apple paring, I stoop; I feed my baby. I, who used to walk through beech woods noting the jay's feather turning blue as it falls, past the shepherd and the tramp, who stared at the woman squatted beside a tilted cart in a ditch, go from room to room with a duster. Sleep, I say, desiring sleep to fall like a blanket of down and cover these weak limbs; demanding that life shall sheathe its claws and gird its lightning and pass by, making of my own body a hollow, a warm shelter for my child to sleep in. Sleep, I say, sleep. (*TW* 142)

What Beauvoir proposes as a mother's lament about her former life in the natural, public world, turns out to be, upon a closer look, Susan's own sense of motherly love and protection for her baby. While she clearly states that she is no longer connected to the cycle of the seasons, she then suggests she is "all spun to a fine thread round the cradle, wrapping in a cocoon made of my own blood the delicate limbs of my baby", recalling the protection of a placenta well beyond the gestation period. This protection of her baby's sleep reaches such an intensity that Susan is ready to "fell down with one blow any intruder, any snatcher, who should break into this room and wake the sleeper", thereby altering her previous statement as a country girl that "What I give is fell" (*TW* 80) to adapt it to the new necessity of protecting her baby: while in the previous scene 'fell' was connected to her being grounded in nature and her preference for the solitary countryside – while, it ought to be reminded, Jinny and Rhoda are at a party, albeit in starkly different capacities –, here all the aggression of the verb threatens to be unleashed should anyone come near her sleeping baby.

In the previous passage, her dream of finding a man culminated in her comparison with her mother, “silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards” (*TW* 80); here, we find out that her mother “died of cancer”, and, in a way, Susan’s own life becomes a way of contributing to her mother’s legacy by inhabiting the domestic sphere and nourishing her baby, by adapting her own body to the new exigencies of the baby. Although this may sound to some – like Beauvoir – as a negative, even nightmarish description of how a woman’s life may be lived, there is no sense in the original novel that Susan is dissatisfied with her life as a country mother. On the contrary, as she pays attention to the minute details of this domestic life, she states in no uncertain terms “So life fills my veins. So life pours through my limbs. [...] I am glugged with natural happiness” (*TW* 143).

As happened in the case of Judith Shakespeare which was examined in Section 1.4, then, Beauvoir here actively rewrites the framing of the original Woolf passages in order to adjust them to the ‘scandalous’ *Second Sex*. Once again, she instrumentalises the original narrative in order to re-adapt it to different purposes while at the same time victimising women to show the oppressive machinations of patriarchal ideology in full swing. Although some (feminist) scholars in the 1970s and 1980s reproached Beauvoir for some of her rhetorical strategies in *The Second Sex*, in particular in reference to motherhood, they often resorted to biography-based approaches to better sustain their argument, thus falling into the pitfall of psychoanalysing Beauvoir. As a public intellectual who invested a considerable part of her career in autobiographical writing, Beauvoir provided her readership with unparalleled access to her own life, to her relationship with her mother and her father, as well as with Sartre and other philosophers and authors; this, however, should not so easily convince us that her autobiographical writing is an unmediated reflection of her life. And even if there was such a thing as a truthful rendition of any person’s life, whether by themselves or by others, reducing Beauvoir’s interpretation of motherhood to the negative relationship she had with her own mother up until the latter’s death – so beautifully narrated and philosophically expounded in *Une Mort très douce (A Very Easy Death, 1964)* – risks producing a partial and biased understanding of her philosophy.

What seems to be a better way of tackling this issue is to locate Beauvoir within her time, thereby showing what kind of concerns she had when she was drafting *Le*

Deuxième Sexe. In the context of 1940s France, bent as the country was on natality and forced motherhood, Beauvoir was emphasising how being a mother is not per se a positive experience either for the woman who comes to play this role or for the child being reared. In contrast to a national policy promoting higher birth rates without guaranteeing any enabling material conditions and in opposition to an upsurge in essays by women and for women which glamourised the patriarchal role of women and/as mothers (cf. Chaperon 2000), Beauvoir systematically draws attention to the gaps in these narratives, ultimately demonstrating how women ought to be given the choice to become (house)wives and mothers in the circumstances and modalities of their own choosing. Precisely because it was going to be published so close to the period which Sylvie Chaperon has aptly defined the “trough of the waves” of feminism (“le creux de la vague”; *Ibid.*, p. xiii), namely the 1950s and 1960s, Beauvoir’s text was bound to shock her readership regardless of the latter’s political leanings – and indeed, this is precisely what happened. Her instrumentalisation of motherhood is thus to be understood within this historical framework, without necessarily resorting to facile analyses of Beauvoir’s biases – present though they may well be.

In order to produce a more generous approach to Beauvoir’s philosophical intuitions, *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* will also be considered through a Beauvoirian lens. In both novels, marriage appears to be an important aspect of some characters’ situations. In the 1941 text, Isa and Oliver are central characters within the economy of the novel, although their marriage may strike any reader as an unimportant, definitely underexplored aspect of the narrative. Like Susan, Isa lives as a mother in the countryside, but unlike Susan, she does not seem to be satisfied with her position, and especially with her capacity as wife. After her father-in-law inadvertently scares her son and the former drowns for a while re-imagining “youth and India” with the “Afghan hound” at his feet (*BA* 16), Isa enters the room and announces that she has ordered the fish. As her gaze falls on the dog, she asks ““What’s *he* been doing?””, but, the narrative tells us, “His tail never wagged. He never admitted the ties of domesticity. Either he cringed or he bit. Now his wild yellow eyes gazed at her, gazed at him. He could outstare them both” (*BA* 17). Despite his status as house pet, the Afghan hound does not seem to recognise the domestic community he is supposed to be part of, refusing to give his love and affection to his presumed masters. In contrast, as Bartholomew

“scornfully” says that Isa and Giles’ son is “a cry-baby”, Isa cannot help sighing, “pegged down on a chair arm, like a captive balloon, by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity” (*BA* 17): the dog escapes the domestic bonds, perhaps in virtue of a nonhuman status which does not necessarily recognise this kinship in the same way; Isa, however, as the boy’s mother, cannot escape the grip of domesticity even though she may not like it.

When Bartholomew goes so far as to say that the boy is “a coward”, Isa “frowned. He was not a coward, her boy wasn’t. And she loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal. And he knew it and did it on purpose to tease her, the old brute, her father-in-law” (*BA* 17). In this short scene, we find the supposed responsibility of a mother for her son’s behaviour and sensitivity, a responsibility which a previous generation so doting on colonial enterprise sees as inherently maternal, thus reinforcing patriarchal expectations about women’s domestic role. The narrative tells us that Isa is bound by “domesticity” against her will, “like a captive balloon”. While Susan’s example may point in the opposite direction, in Isa’s situation, especially as articulated in this passage, we do find an illustration of Beauvoir’s argument that the house may constitute for women a prison: here, Isa clearly feels “locked into the conjugal community: she has to change this prison into a kingdom” (*SS* 483) in order to show a colonially-minded patriarch that she is more than capable of ‘controlling’ her ‘subjects’, namely her son. Realising that her father-in-law is teasing her, Isa, however, once again unlike the Afghan hound, “look[s] away” and decides to direct her gaze towards the library (*BA* 17).

While Bartholomew re-entrenches some patriarchal, even colonial notions of parenthood and thus only garners a sigh from her daughter-in-law, Isa’s relationship with her husband is more complicated. From the outset, we learn that she is torn between her love for Rupert Haines, the “romantic gentleman farmer”, and Giles, “her husband, the stockbroker” (*BA* 13). “‘The father of my children’, she added, slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table” (*BA* 13). Because marital love is legitimised and recognised by the bonds of matrimony, it has had the time to be deposited on the external world – “outside, on the washstand, on the dressing-table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes” (*BA* 13) – thereby effectively producing a materiality whose existence is

somewhat paradoxically guaranteed by clichés and fiction. Within this domestic sphere, Isa does not feel completely at ease, as we learn later that she writes poetry “in a book bound like an account book lest Giles might suspect” (*BA* 46) – a fact which perhaps preserves an echo of the historical myth whereby “Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper”, that she was “glad that a hinge creaked, so that she might hide her manuscript before anyone came in” (*AROO* 50, 51). Like this mythical Jane Austen, Isa has to hide her writing in an account book so that her husband does not get suspicious, as though poetry does not suit her role as mother and wife. This may even go to show that Isa does not have access to that space of material independence that is a room of her own, with her domestic environment reminding her at every turn of her conjugal bond instead of offering a sedimentation of her freedom.

Later in the novel, we also learn that Giles may have a tendency towards infidelity, as his relationship with Mrs Manresa ‘between the acts’ of the pageant seems to suggest, at least to Isa, that there might be more to their rapport than a simple acquaintance. While Mrs Parker deplores to Isa “in a low voice the village idiot”, she “was immobile, watching her husband. She could feel the Manresa in his wake. She could hear in the dusk in their bedroom the usual explanation. It made no difference; his infidelity – but hers did” (*BA* 99-100). Mrs Manresa represents here for Isa a sort of spectral presence attached to Giles, their understanding threatening to become infidelity precisely because her husband has a history not only of unfaithfulness, but of justifying adultery by bringing double standards to bear on his marriage. This suspicion is corroborated later in the novel, when Isa, “Turning the corner”, sees “Giles attached to Mrs Manresa. She was standing at the door of her car. Giles had his foot on the edge of the running board. Did they perceive the arrows about to strike them?” (*BA* 187). Whether they realise this understanding is going in a different direction or not, we are left with Isa’s perspective: “‘Jump in, Bill,’ Mrs Manresa chaffed him. / And the wheels scurred on the gravel, and the car drove off” (*BA* 188). Because we are never given Giles’ account of this relationship, we are encouraged perhaps to trust Isa’s (possibly biased) view of it.

Whether Giles is in fact unfaithful or not, it is clear that Isa’s status as wife engenders a tension between love and hate: “‘Our representative, our spokesman,’ she sneered. Yet he was extraordinarily handsome. ‘The father of my children, whom I love

and hate.’ Love and hate – how they tore her asunder!” (BA 194). Here it becomes evident how her reliance on fiction and clichés was not just a way to ridicule her own feelings for her husband, but was in fact much more attuned to his attitude towards other women: their marriage is, at least in part, a story they tell themselves and others so that it may continue to be true, a sort of societal myth that keeps being fed by the credulity of people under patriarchy – indeed, as Beauvoir suggests. The ‘love and hate’ relationship clearly has classical resonances, recalling as it does Catullus’ oft-cited poem “Odi et amo” – interestingly, one of the refrains associated with the character of Susan in *The Waves*. It is perhaps partly for this classical echo that Isa closes the paragraph thinking “Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out from the bushes...” (BA 194): as she realises that her relationship with her husband is nothing particularly strange in their society, that it in fact turns out to be a trite stereotype, Isa is more bored than enraged by this and wishes, in a metafictional manner, that her own story were more original or that the author revealed themselves, like Miss La Trobe, by coming out from behind the scenes. Like the pageant, her marriage, too, is a scripted play, a performance of historical and primeval truths that loom large on her capacity and freedom to change her life. It is, Beauvoir would argue, a myth which her existence as woman and wife is perpetuating in a patriarchal society that is more than happy to sustain it.

It is no coincidence, in this sense, that the novel closes precisely with what sounds like another play, one that takes place between Isa and Giles while at the same time recalling Miss La Trobe’s imagined play:

The old people had gone up to bed. Giles crumpled the newspaper and turned out the light. Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had thought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (BA 197)

In this short lyrical passage, Isa and Giles come to interpret their primordial role of enemies and lovers who come together, united perhaps in what is announced as a reproductive act (“From that embrace another life might be born”). The biological side of the matter resonates with other nonhuman animals, in particular foxes, who, so the narrative tells us, “must fight” before being reunited in the copulative act. Besides pointing to Joseph Conrad’s classic novella from 1899, the emphasis on “the heart of darkness” and “the fields of night” anticipates the primeval time that the second paragraph introduces, recalling H. G. Wells’ *Outline of History* (1919-20) which Lucy Swithin reads in the novel. What may appear to be yet another night in the marital life of Isa and Giles is charged with nonhuman, even primordial resonances, their material existences abstracted as exemplary and yet all too common. In this other play, Isa and Giles have been reading from a well-established script, but now, as the narrative closes, it is perhaps their time to speak, to finally exercise their freedom within a pre-determined relationship: “They spoke”, we are told, as the silence closing the novel entrusts this negotiation and reconfiguration of holy matrimony to the words and bodies of Isa and Giles.

If *Between the Acts* insists on the entanglement of human and nonhuman subjects, (distant and recent) past and present, fiction and reality, *Orlando* conserves the interest in fictionality but perfectly shows how dependent on time, space, and materiality subject-constitution is. It is interesting to notice how, despite his/her – but, “for convention’s sake” (*O* 83), we may use ‘they’, ‘them’, and ‘their’ to refer to Orlando throughout the novel, and ‘he’ or ‘she’ to refer to specific passages – despite their love of literature and romance, then, Orlando never feels the pressure to get married before they become a woman and before she starts living in the nineteenth century. While she is trying to write but ends up spilling her ink over her manuscript, Orlando starts feeling “a ring of quivering sensibility about the second finger of the left hand” to the effect that she “felt positively ashamed of the second finger of her left hand without in the least knowing why” (*O* 139). Although she never really felt this burning need for a husband, especially when they were writing – their motto being ‘Life and a lover’ –, the biographer tells us that “it would seem – her case proved it – that we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver” (*O* 141). This notion, which

the biographer derives from a close observation of Orlando, reinforces the arguments that were made in Chapter 2 in reference to Woolf's essays and Beauvoir's philosophy: writing, like reading, is an intercorporeal act that creates a collective ritualised trade of embodied experiences to the effect that even authors and texts belonging to the distant past can never truly be said to be 'dead' for the present, as long as they keep affecting reading bodies. Here, we see how writing is for Orlando a bodily activity which invests the totality of his material existence.

Because of this new-found need, Orlando feels "poisoned through and through"; as a consequence, she is "forced at length to consider the most desperate of remedies, which was to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband" (*O* 141). In deference to the nineteenth century's *Zeitgeist*, her motto thus becomes "'Life! A Husband!': "Whom', she asked, casting her eyes upon the revolving clouds, clasping her hands as she knelt on the window-sill, and looking the very image of appealing womanhood as she did so, 'can I lean upon?'" (*O* 141, 142). From being a well-rounded, independent, and dynamic individual, Orlando yields to the pressure of the nineteenth century and thus becomes a woman according to the rigid taxonomy of her time. In a tripartite reinforcement of her celibacy, Orlando thinks to herself, "'I, who am mistress of it all, [...] am single, am mateless, am alone'" (*O* 142): while they had always been alone to some extent, it is the first time that Orlando has suffered because of their being single, a suffering that is emphasised by the use of 'mateless', a term easily applied to humans and nonhuman animals alike, thereby suggesting that there is a certain biological reductionism at work in the spirit of the age.

Initially, Orlando turns to nature and believes to be "nature's bride" (*O* 143) as she is walking on the moor. This scene, as has been suggested time and again, playfully alludes to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), thereby contributing to the metafictional aspect of the novel in its attempt to renegotiate the meaning and significance of the past in the present of early twentieth-century Britain. To build on this metafictional quality which (jokingly) destabilises the reality/fiction dichotomy, the narrative sees Orlando abandoning her own evolving character in order to adhere to a pre-scripted part of damsel in distress on the moor, a part which will help her secure a husband, Shelmerdine. Much as Isa sees herself interpreting a role determined by a societal 'myth', to use a Beauvoirian term, Orlando is here forced into the straitjacket of

normative gender roles typical of the Victorian age and thus she, too, becomes a contributor to this ‘myth’.

In contrast to Isa and Giles’ marriage, however, the ‘holy matrimony’ of Orlando and Shel is based on a reciprocity which perfectly mirrors Beauvoir’s ambitious, even utopian ideal. Several times in the narrative, Orlando will find in Shel a woman and Shel will find in Orlando a man (*O* 146, 150), “For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once” (*O* 150). This image of equality, this act of the self’s mirroring itself in the other and of the other’s mirroring itself in the self, is the ideal which *Le Deuxième Sexe* holds up as the goal of feminist liberation, as was shown in Chapter 2. Within a patriarchal system so bent on sexual dimorphism and the gender binary, Orlando and Shel, regardless of how ‘fantastic’ their story is, show that a reciprocity and even an intermingling of male and female, masculine and feminine may be possible, thereby proving one of Beauvoir’s theses in *Le Deuxième Sexe*: as recently encapsulated by Toril Moi, “Sexism [...] exists as a tension between the ideological insistence on absolute otherness [of women] and the constant possibility that ordinary, practical acknowledgment of reciprocity will nevertheless arise in local and specific circumstances” (Moi 2023).

This ideal is clearly at odds with the conception of marriage that was dominant in nineteenth-century Britain, as the narrative quickly adds with more than an ironic note:

She was married, true; but if one’s husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts. (*O* 153)

The institution of marriage in the nineteenth century, we are encouraged to believe, prescribes cohabitation, despising each other, disliking other people, and extinguishing one’s hobbies and passions besides love. Marriage must be exclusive and central, all-encompassing and totalising in one’s life, otherwise it may cease to be such, Orlando thinks. Perhaps, if we consider Orlando and Shel alongside Isa and Giles we may see why Beauvoir, too, had some reservations about the institution of marriage in its contemporary form, striving instead to create her own relational path in a world so determined to yoke her to *one* life-long companion.

3.2 *Self-reflection*

In order to better explore ‘self-reflection’ as a useful hermeneutic category, an analysis of one of Virginia Woolf’s short stories will be provided. Although it was never published during Woolf’s lifetime or posthumously by Leonard, the concise narrative offered in “The Fascination of the Pool” (1929) will help us situate our reading of self-reflection in Woolf’s oeuvre, thereby showing how this very notion is far from being a concept of our own making. Like most of Woolf’s narrative texts, this short piece does not have plot as its primary centre of interest; rather, the story seems to be informed by a desire to illustrate or perhaps even explain what the fascination of pools is. For this reason, it may be read as a theoretical text that explores the foundations of ‘self-reflection’.

Although the pool would not normally catch anyone’s eye per se, the narrative voice, after describing the setting – mainly made up of natural elements and a white placard stating in red and black letters that the farm Romford Mill a mile off is to be sold –, explores what would happen if one were to sit “down among the rushes and watched the pool” (CSF 226). The reflection of the letters on the placard “seemed to lie very thinly on the surface, while beneath went on some profound under-water life like the brooding, the ruminating of a mind” (CSF 226). This, perhaps, explains why it is so fascinating, as the narrator observes: “it held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but in a liquid state, floating one on top of another, almost disembodied” (CSF 226). Much like what would be called, to borrow a more popular term from J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter saga, a “Pensieve”, the pool seems able to store individual thoughts; in contrast to the magical instrument, however, the Woolfian pool is a *collective* receptacle that preserves the traces of passers-by and bystanders. As the narrator explains, “The charm of the pool was that thoughts had been left there by people who had gone away and without their bodies their thoughts wandered in and out freely, friendly and communicative, in the common pool” (CSF 226). The pool functions as a locus of intercorporeal communication of thoughts, both past and present, it is a living and liquid archive of the bodies who have stopped to think and reflect (themselves), leaving traces of their passing, of their existences in the depth of a primeval pool.

As the short story closes, the narrative insists on the endlessness of the voices and faces which may be seen or heard if one looks into the pool – “There was always another face, another voice” (*CSF* 227) –, as the activity of self-reflection seems to be able to extend beyond this time and place, beyond the materiality of the water, engulfing as it does the surroundings as well as the lives of various human subjects whose faces and voices linger on. As Christine Reynier has argued in relation to the category of ‘recycling’ in Woolf, this little-known short story insists on the value of a common pool of thoughts and experiences which are opposed to canonical figures and landmark historical events – and one may think here of the essay question in *Jacob’s Room*, “Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?” (*JR* 48) as well as of Woolf’s essay “The Lives of the Obscure” (1925) –, thereby showing that “if recycling operates on literature defined as ‘common pool’, it is not related with property any longer but with the ‘pooling’, the putting together and sharing of literary resources” (Reynier 2022: 30). This means, Reynier goes on to point out, that “the concept of the common pool operates as a radical vision of literature as collectively owned”, thus suggesting a potential anticipation of the notion of ‘knowledge commons’ as expounded by Charlotte Hess and Elinor Omstrom (*ibid.*, p. 31).

While I have some reservations about Reynier’s association of Woolf’s ‘common ground’ with “enclosures” and her idea of a ‘common pool’ with “openness and inclusiveness” (*ibid.*), it is clear that the fascination of pools resides for Woolf and her narrative voice in the text precisely in ‘pooling’ the resources of existents, as Beauvoir would call them, who decide to leave their thoughts in a liquid, ever mobile archive of ‘common thinkers’. Although Reynier rightly emphasises how disembodied these thoughts in the pool are in the narrative, I take issue with the notion that “the water of the pool is connected with [...] intangible immaterial elements” (*ibid.*, p. 29) precisely because it is clear that the very act of self-reflection, of seeing one’s reflection in the pool, is what allows these thoughts to continue their common life, dematerialising and rematerialising in a constant process of material becoming through the element of water. After all, this latter element is far from being immaterial: even if the thoughts seem “almost disembodied” because they are “in a liquid state” (*CSF* 226), this does not

detract from their inherent materiality; liquid is one of the four states of matter.⁸ In this sense, self-reflection is at the same time the activity of contemplating oneself in a reflecting surface *and* the capacity to think about oneself through the materialisation of one's thought. Seeing oneself in a looking glass or a pool often generates a different perspective on the body which may help characters to better focus on what a specific room or situation signifies for them.

As was reported above, the short story draws a parallel between this 'common pool' and the processes of "the brooding, the ruminating of a mind" (*CSF* 226). Amanda Anderson's pioneering work on the hermeneutical category of 'rumination' has already suggested that this kind of slow thinking process is "nonteleological and yet somehow necessary to moments of punctual decision or processes of eventual acceptance and resignation", characterised as it is by "persistence and repetition and a kind of attachment" (Anderson 2019: 133, 134). Although her interpretation is inflected in a moral way, I find the notion itself useful for theorising and approaching a plethora of moments in Woolf's novels in which characters are engrossed in contemplation without ever reaching what Anderson calls "deliberation" (*ibid.*, p. 134). In contrast to Anderson's framework, my interest also lies in this convergence between the observation of one's material body from a more 'external' perspective through a mirroring surface like a glass or a pool, and the process of rumination itself, prompted by – and often centred around – the first moment of material self-reflection. This section will attempt to sketch out some possible trajectories in the three novels by Woolf, in the hope that this framework may help to shed new light on certain aesthetic, political, and material categories that animate Woolf's fiction.

As was argued above, the biographer in *Orlando* proves to be incapable of capturing their subject's silent ruminations and often complains about the impossible task he is confronted with when Orlando, from the promising aristocrat inheriting a world of colonial power and heroic deeds he is introduced as, becomes an unruly, thinking subject with a love of literature. Towards the end of the narrative, as we approach the present day of the novel's publication, this gap between biographer and subject becomes even more evident. After visiting the carpenter's shop and being shocked to see a thumb without a fingernail, Orlando experiences a sort of "darkness,

⁸ Personally, I was always taught that matter has three states – solid, liquid, gaseous –, but I have only recently found out that 'plasma' is a fourth state.

when her eyes flickered”, which relieves her “of the pressure of the present” (*O* 187). Although she seems to quickly recover from this moment’s darkness, she then starts perceiving things differently around her.

For the shadow of faintness which the thumb without a nail had cast had deepened now, at the back of her brain (which is the part furthest from sight), into a pool where things dwell in darkness so deep that what they are we scarcely know. She now looked down into this pool or sea in which everything is reflected – and, indeed, some say that all our most violent passions, and art and religion, are the reflections which we see in the dark hollow at the back of the head when the visible world is obscured for the time. She looked there now, long, deeply, profoundly, and immediately the ferny path up the hill along which she was walking became not entirely a path, but partly the Serpentine; the hawthorn bushes were partly ladies and gentlemen sitting with card-cases and gold-mounted canes; the sheep were partly tall Mayfair houses; everything was partly something else, as if her mind had become a forest with glades branching here and there; things came nearer, and further, and mingled and separated and made the strangest alliances and combinations in an incessant chequer of light and shade. (*O* 187)

In that “part furthest from sight” that is the back of her brain, there exists a pool “in which everything is reflected” to such an extent that “the visible world is obscured for the time”. As she looks into it, everything around Orlando seems to become part of a process of collective, even synaesthetic metamorphosis whereby “the strangest alliances and combinations” are made. This process may call to mind Freud’s notion of the unconscious, of course, with which Woolf was definitely familiar.⁹ Although this moment of shocked self-reflection leads in fact nowhere in terms of deliberation – “Canute, the elk-hound, chased a rabbit and so reminded her that it must be about half past four” (*O* 188) –, this internal contemplation brings her to the oak tree, that locus of self-reflection, recollection, and writing to which she owes her award-winning book. It is at this moment that, after considering burying the poem under the oak tree as a sort of symbolical celebration, she ponders what the ultimate meaning of writing is: “What has

⁹ As is known, The Hogarth Press would go on to publish all of Freud’s oeuvre in the *Standard Edition* from 1953 onwards. Before meeting Freud in person in 1939, Woolf read (at least part of) Freud’s works as they became available in English from 1925, published in the so-called *Collected Papers* by The Hogarth Press. As early as 1920, Woolf had complained in the essay “Freudian Fiction” that Freud’s “vulgar followers”, in Perry Meisel’s expression (Meisel 2012: 332), yielded to the temptation of using his theories as a “patent key that opens every door” (*E3* 197). For a fairly recent overview of Woolf’s relationship with Freud and Klein, cf. Meisel 2012.

praise and fame to do with poetry? What has seven editions (the book had already gone into no less) got to do with the value of it? Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?" (*O* 188).

In *Orlando*, this double meaning of self-reflection creates a space where the differences between inside and outside, between subject and other, between ideas and materiality cease to matter. As Bernard will say in *The Waves*, "To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are for ever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities" (*TW* 97): in contrast to a supposedly neutral, scientific knowledge, self-reflection leads to a form of circular, collective thinking that threatens vertical hierarchies and clear-cut distinctions. Even if reality could be perfectly quantified, the nature of these quantities is sometimes unknown, as any distinction between self and other, inside and outside, mind and body crumbles in its engagement with life. If Beauvoir recognised in the 1940s how science must be a free engagement of thought in the given without having the ambition to exhaust the meaning of the visible and invisible world, Woolf offers, through her characters' self-reflection, a form of anti-hierarchical, subjective, material thought that leads to a sense of becoming with the textuality of the narrative. While this notion of material becoming will be better explored in the next Section, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* have more to tell us about the importance and meaning of self-reflection.

If we return to Isa's situation, we find a moment of self-reflection early on in the novel, when she stands "in front of the three-folded mirror", a "heavily embossed silver brush in her hand" (*BA* 12). As she is looking at her reflection in the mirror, she sees not only "three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face", but also, "outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops" (*BA* 12). The fact that she shares the mirrored space with a part of the environment she is not exactly aware of already points to the fact that seeing oneself in a reflecting surface by itself may change our perspective not only on ourselves but on the world as well: far from being an act of vain narcissism and solipsistic soul-searching, self-reflection places our bodies and the materiality of the world in a different context, thereby putting them into perspective. The paragraph that follows reinforces the idea that looking at oneself in a mirror may engender a better understanding of one's feelings, as Isa realises here that she is torn between the

‘internal’, new-found love for the gentleman farmer and the ‘external’, sedimented love for her husband, “the stockbroker” (*BA* 13), as we saw in the previous Section.

After directing her gaze to the garden outside and “the innocent island” of people “float[ing] under her window”, Isa returns “to her eyes in the looking-glass” (*BA* 13):

‘In love’, she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating – she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon. Faster, faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away... (*BA* 13-14)

Much like the experience of witnessing an aeroplane take off in Croydon, a simple action like handing Isa a teacup or a tennis racket has managed to create a rippling effect in the past that still has reverberations in the present. It is quite telling that this moment of self-reflection does not allow the reader or the supposedly ‘seeing’ subject to access a visible plane, but one which can only be rendered through an association with the “infinitely quick vibrations” of an aeroplane “she had seen once at dawn”. There is a sense of hidden materiality evoked here, one which ocularcentrism fails to capture. This tenuous relationship between Isa and Rupert Haines moves beyond time, space, and materiality, resonating with the fibres of her body rather than going through her optic nerves, attached to her “like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating”. As Livingstone has rightly pointed out, Woolf often “employs metaphors of connectivity – threads, wires, and veins – to depict a vast aerial nervous system that stretches between her characters, incorporating them as a collective entity” (Livingstone 2022: 88). This ties in with contemporary scientific discourses connected with neurology, biology, and radio, as Livingstone demonstrates in her work: this varied, transdisciplinary background comes to constitute a sort of technology of the self which stretches the individual into the community, thereby reinforcing a more expansive and intercorporeal notion of subjectivity.

In a similar vein, it could be argued that reflecting surfaces also serve as (sometimes only potential) technologies of the self in that they challenge the presumed individuality of the character by showing them that their subject-constitution is in fact

predicated upon a relational, embodied sense of identity. In the passage reported above, Isa can feel in her body the vibrations of the aeroplane as well as those generated by the tenuous physical relationship with Rupert Haines, and this bodily sense of relationality is engendered precisely by this moment of self-reflection: like a portal to an inner and yet externally directed reality, the mirror offers Isa the opportunity to reconsider her position in the world, to observe the repercussions of past actions on her current material existence, however quotidian they may have been. Past and present, surface and depth, mind and body, self and other come to coincide in this bi-dimensional image that is her reflection, imparting a different colouring to all of them and thus showing their constitutive interdependence.

Besides this act of individual self-reflection, *Between the Acts* also offers an example of collective and metafictional self-reflection. As is known, the pageant culminates in ‘the present moment, ourselves’, a scene in which the villagers use a plethora of reflecting surfaces – “hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors” (*BA* 166) – so as to allow the audience to see themselves in ‘orts, scraps and fragments’. Unlike Isa’s contemplation in the looking glass, this lengthy, fast-paced, somewhat fragmentary self-reflection is for the audience an unexpected turn of events which even generates panic among the spectators, except perhaps for Mrs Manresa, who, “facing herself in the glass, used it as a glass; had out her mirror; powdered her nose; and moved one curl, disturbed by the breeze, to its place” (*BA* 167). The rest of the audience is, on the contrary, dishevelled and baffled by this impromptu scene of fragmentary self-reflection to such an extent that they cannot even articulate – let alone understand – what is happening: as the fictional world of the pageant reaches the present moment, even the monolithic subjectivities of the people in the audience come to be ruffled by the metatheatrical game conceived by Miss La Trobe.

As happens in *Orlando* when the protagonist reaches the present-day world and thus starts multiplying her self, the pageant precipitously accelerates the unstable particles of the audience when it gets closer to the present moment, making them vibrate with the surrounding matter. Much in the same way as “Louis de Broglie, Schrödinger, and others” realised that “the behaviour of an electron or proton is found to be too complex to permit of explanation as the motion of a mere particle” and, as a

consequence, “founded the branch of mathematical physics which is now known as ‘Wave-Mechanics’”, as explained by James Jeans (1930: 36), *Between the Acts* invites us to think of a new discipline, namely a wave-mechanics of *characters*: as they are united and dispersed, their speech is interrupted and overlaps, their agency is disrupted and fostered by the nonhuman world, their identities occupy such unstable positions that they can only be located by the narrative in areas of probability. Even if there are individual characters with specific names, histories, and features, their representation in the novel seems to integrate the understanding that, as helpfully summarised by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “The atom is a smeared field of distributed charge whose subatomic particles are less like planets in a solar orbit than they are like flashes of charge that emerge from and dissipate in the empty space from which they are composed” (Coole and Frost 2010: 11). Once they are ‘self-reflected’, the members of the audience scatter in disparate directions, their bodily, mental and verbal movements can only be rendered on the page through ellipses and half-muttered, overheard utterances which create “cloudlike, three-dimensional wave[s] of spinning [characters]” (Ibid.).¹⁰ ‘Dispersity’ is the word that the malfunctioning gramophone keeps gurgling, a sort of crisis of ‘unity’ and ‘dispersal’ that perfectly encapsulates the significance of disruptions and indeterminacy within the present-day world, two important features which the New Physics introduced into the previously “substantialist Cartesian or mechanistic Newtonian accounts of matter” (Ibid., p. 12-3). In *Between the Acts*, metafictional self-reflection shocks the audience into an awareness of their collective position in a world whose solidity is threatened by new scientific discoveries as well as by an impending war. This new world, although perhaps not ‘brave’ in any traditional sense of the word, is one which they will only be able to see and experience in the ‘orts, scraps and fragments’ of their materially embedded, profoundly interdependent existences.

The Waves is concerned with self-reflection in the broadest sense possible, as the six speaking characters engage with the world and with a developing and evolving sense of

¹⁰ Located after a summary of Einstein’s discovery of the atom in 1905, which generates a less ‘substantialist’ notion of the cosmos, the original sentence reads: “For the microscopic atom consists of a positively charged nucleus surrounded by a cloudlike, three-dimensional wave of spinning electrons” (Ibid.)

themselves. However, there are moments in the narrative when some characters are confronted with the ‘magic and delicious power’ of mirrors, to borrow the (ironic) phrase from *A Room of One’s Own*, and thus gain a better sense not only of themselves, but first and foremost of their bodies. As we saw, Jinny and Rhoda occupy almost diametrically opposed positions in terms of personality: while Jinny is a coquettish character who happily ‘flows’ while staying ‘rooted’ in parties, prompting men to ‘come’ towards her, Rhoda is much more evasive in the social world and comforts herself by thinking of distant places and times, often lapsing into bleak thoughts. Towards the beginning of the text, Jinny and Rhoda happen to pass in front of a mirror on the stairs leading up to the rooms where they can “change into white frocks to play tennis”, as Susan’s speech informs us (*TW* 30). Introduced by Susan as a joyful, dancing character, Jinny confesses that she hates “the small looking-glass on the stairs” as it “shows our heads only; it cuts off our heads”, a sight which leads her to list her face’s defects (*TW* 31). “So I skip up the stairs past them [i.e. Susan and Rhoda], to the next landing,” Jinny quickly adds, “where the long glass hangs and I see myself entire. I see my body and head in one now; for even in this serge frock they are one, my body and my head” (*TW* 32). Once reunited in one reflection, Jinny can keep leaping and dancing, her bodily presence allowing her to revel in constant movement.

Rhoda, on the other hand, will “duck behind [Susan] to hide” her face as she passes in front of the smaller looking-glass, “for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second” (*TW* 32). This lack of materiality which Rhoda perceives leads her to evade self-reflection in the mirror, as she does not seem to want to recognise herself in that image; she wants to revel in change and never solidify into an observable, material body. This tendency towards evasion, however, risks leading her to “nothingness”: “Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body” (*TW* 33). Because of her continual flight, Rhoda’s existence is constantly threatened by nothingness: in her character we may perceive an attempt to ‘save’ (*épargner*) being rather than ‘consume’ it, to borrow Beauvoir’s existentialist theorisation of the party

(*PMLA* 156; *EA* 136), a tendency which may lead to a form of existential lassitude and, ultimately, death. By forgetting her body, by perceiving herself as materially insignificant or even non-existent, Rhoda tends to live on the margins of life, daunted by the prospect of engaging with the world and with others in a material way.

This sense of elusiveness and marginality in Rhoda is reinforced in a later passage. As the summer holidays are beginning, Rhoda looks back on June and July, drawing conclusions about recent events. It is in particular a seemingly unexciting event like carrying an envelope that generates a form of self-reflection in Rhoda:

Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard, when, holding an envelope in my hand, I carried a message. I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and fell. I was blown like a feather, I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is life then to which I am committed.

So I detach the summer term. 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. (*TW* 50)

In this passage, a potentially insignificant obstacle like a puddle in the courtyard becomes for Rhoda impossible to cross. She loses any sense of herself, of the reality around her, much as Woolf reports happened to her in “A Sketch of the Past”, “when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something... the whole world became unreal” (*MB* 78). In Rhoda’s account, however, her uncertain determination to cross it manages to carry her body across the puddle, her hand “against a brick wall”, as if she needed something solid to hold on to in order to be sure of the materiality of the world. The fact that the puddle is defined as “cadaverous” suggests that it may be considered to be a materialisation of that nothingness Rhoda’s elusiveness constantly threatens to throw her into; her reference to “push[ing] my foot across” recalls the previous passage where it stood for her attempt to escape the grip of nothingness; while earlier she used the image of “bang[ing] my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body”, here a hand on the brick wall seems to suffice to bring her back to the presence of her body.

In the following paragraph, Rhoda imagines life to be a sort of sea monster, emerging from the water “heaving its dark crest”. In this image, there is a sense of constant immersion into and emergence from life, but at the same time Rhoda sees life as a driving force to which “we are attached” and “bound”, not only *like* bodies to wild horses, but “*as* bodies to wild horses”, that is *in our capacity as* bodies. There is something monstrous, beastly about life, which keeps dragging our bodies – the image clearly pointing to *dead* bodies – behind it, as if we were some defeated enemy it is trying to put to shame. This image is made all the more poignant when we consider that it comes right after Jinny’s sense of herself as gained through an unexpected self-reflection “on the shining glass which lines the tunnel”: in contrast to Rhoda’s debilitating immateriality, Jinny’s body seems to “[live] a life of its own” because a gentleman “smiles at my reflection in the tunnel” and her body “instantly of its own accord puts forth a frill under his gaze” (*TW* 49). “There is then a great society of bodies, and mine is introduced” (*TW* 49), Jinny concludes, thinking of any social situation as a sort of party where her beauty must be acknowledged and her attention needs to be called.

This self-coincidence and self-confidence in Jinny only seems to receive one of Rhoda’s “intermittent shocks” when the former gets older. As she is observing the crowd in a Tube station, Jinny suddenly catches a glimpse of herself in a mirror:

But look – there is my body in that looking-glass. How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. I am no longer part of the procession. Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent. Great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards. Millions have died. Percival died. I still move. I still live. But who will come if I signal?

Little animal that I am, sucking my flanks in and out with fear, I stand here, palpitating, trembling. But I will not be afraid. I will bring the whip down on my flanks. I am not a whimpering little animal making for the shadow. It was only for a moment, catching sight of myself before I had time to prepare myself as I always prepare myself for the sight of myself, that I quailed. (*TW* 160-1)

Within the collective catabasis that going to catch the Tube symbolises, Jinny complains about the aged appearance of her body in the mirror. There is a sense of alienation at work here, as she is initially unwilling to recognise herself in that “solitary”, “shrunk”, “aged” body despite feeling “no longer part of the procession”, perhaps slightly on the

margins, as Rhoda feels throughout her life. Her feeling lost, however, does not last long: like Clarissa Dalloway trying to “assemble” after seeing the mirror image of the old lady opposite (*MD* 158), Jinny recomposes a unitary sense of herself for the social world, but it is through an acknowledgement and a subsequent dismissal of her animality, as it were, that she manages to do so. If she prepares for the social world, precisely like Clarissa, if she can “[make] deliberately in front of the glass those slight preparations that equip me, I will not be afraid” (*TW* 161): the bi-dimensional surface of the mirror helps her to solidify into her social role, to ‘fix’ – both in the sense of ‘repair’ and in that of ‘determine’ – her sense of herself so as to be ready to engage with the world.

As in the case of Clarissa, Jinny seems to be negatively affected by the ageing process to which her body is subjected. To the intersection between womanhood and old age Beauvoir famously dedicated some passages in *Le Deuxième Sexe* and a late essay, *La Vieillesse (On Old Age)*, 1970): while in the Biology chapter of the 1949 text she suggested that menopause can liberate women “from the servitudes of the female” and thus older women may be said to constitute “‘a third sex’” (*SS* 43), in the late text, armed with a first-hand experience of the oppression older people are exposed to, she will articulate a scathing critique of a capitalist society that tries to extract value from able bodies while discarding older and ‘less than able’ bodies and leaving them to rot in an ideological and material pit. If we were to extend our analysis of Beauvoir’s philosophy beyond 1966, then, even more theoretical resonances would be produced in her juxtaposition with Woolf’s fiction.

To sum up, whilst the ‘common pool’ of “The Fascination of the Pool” and the dark pool at the back of Orlando’s mind seem to generate a sense of synaesthetic commonality through the gaping abyss they open up within the self-reflecting subject, mirrors, when unfragmented, lead characters to a more solid and rigid sense of themselves by turning the complexity of reality into a bi-dimensional image which fixes it. Besides the examples provided above, we may also think of “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection” (1929), another of those “little sketch[es]” Woolf wrote “to amuse myself” as she is putting off work on what at the time was still called “The Moths” (*D3* 293). In this story published in *Harper’s Magazine* in December 1929,

Isabella Tyson unexpectedly catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she is working in the garden, and as she gets closer to the reflecting surface a light “seemed to fix her”, it “seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and leave only the truth” (*CSF* 225). From a blissful life spent dining with friends, her existence suddenly strikes her and us as hollow, unadorned, impoverished, as if everything that the narrative had described before that moment was nothing but an attempt to embellish a vacuum. As the story closes with the same words that opened it – “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms” (*CSF* 225) – our interpretation of the message leaves a bitterer taste in our palate: the shock of self-reflection can become deadly.

In contrast to this binary between a solidifying mirror and a liquefying pool, however, the final act of fragmentary and yet collective self-reflection in *Between the Acts* provides an example of how self-reflection, especially in a metafictional sense, may prompt characters to become represented as waves of probability in the text, with the formal aspects of the narrative integrating the sense of ‘dispersity’ of the characters. Once situated and locally analysed, then, the hermeneutical category of ‘self-reflection’ seems to be a useful conceptual tool to think about the inherent inextricability of content and form, of materiality and ideology in – and perhaps beyond – Woolf’s fiction.

3.3 *Becoming*

The most iconic motto deriving from *Le Deuxième Sexe* is undoubtedly “On ne naît pas femme : on le devient” (*DSb* 13; “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman”, *SS* 293). Although this has often been interpreted according to the sex/gender dichotomy especially in the wake of Judith Butler’s work (cf. Butler 1986, [1990] 1999), Chapter 2 has already described how, as Braidotti aptly phrases it, “the notion of ‘gender’ is a vicissitude of the English language” (Braidotti 1994: 150). In France, other traditions existed alongside the emergence of Anglo-American gender and sexuality studies, and Chapter 1 has attempted to sketch out some of the main trajectories that the French feminist movement followed from 1970 onwards. At any rate, saying that being a woman entails a constant process of material and ideological becoming does not simply equate the Anglo-American notion of ‘gender’, and this (mis)conception of Beauvoir’s sentence has proved to be hard to debunk.

In view of this association between Beauvoir's becoming-woman and the notion of 'gender' as elaborated upon by U.S. scholars like Joan W. Scott and Judith Butler in the 1980s, many critics have mistakenly recognised in Beauvoir the 'inventor' of the category of gender, although she never uses such a term in her oeuvre. Scott and Butler clearly looked back on Beauvoir's work because of the importance of *Le Deuxième Sexe* for an historical and ideological account of womanhood, but they just as evidently took her theories in different directions. Although Margaret Mead's ethnographic work in the 1930s already pointed to patterns of behaviour unrelated to sex and yet characteristically 'masculine' and 'feminine' in so-called 'primitive' societies (cf. Mead 1935: 279-80), the scholar who is usually credited with the first use of the term is U.S. psychologist Madison Bentley, who in a now famous 1945 article referred to 'gender' as "the socialised obverse of sex" (Bentley 1945: 228) to discuss the socialisation of children and the perils associated with it. In this sense, not only is 'gender' a vicissitude of the English language, but its origin also predates Beauvoir's *magnum opus*. Moreover, as we saw, Beauvoir conceives of identity itself as a process of constant, material becoming with the world, and the body is in this sense caught in a tension between freedom and facticity which the two separate planes of sex and gender would be hard put to resolve, as Moi and Froidevaux-Metterie show in their more recent work.

Despite *Orlando*'s commercial success even at the time of publication, the novel itself suffered from the ironic, playful – and yet disarming – subtitle "A Biography" as well as because of its fantastic elements, two characteristics which decreed its poor critical reception until the 1980s. Thanks to the work of critics in gender and sexuality studies as well as to its filmic transposition by Sally Potter in 1992, *Orlando* was revised as a serious text which had much to say to a society that was finally (more) interested in exploring all the different facets of sex, gender, and sexuality which being human encompassed. Thus, it so happened that *Orlando* and gender and sexuality studies came (back, in the novel's case) to prominence around the same time – a fortunate coincidence that produced a vast amount of scholarship precisely on the categories of sex and gender. In view of this proliferation of studies of *Orlando*, anyone hoping to say (or read) something original about the novel in terms of sex, gender, or sexuality is bound to be disappointed. In what follows, I will attempt to sketch out some textual trajectories that may help us better understand Beauvoir's theoretical framework

without necessarily resorting to the category of gender. As we saw, precisely *because of* the obvious feminist connection between Woolf and Beauvoir, many critics have contented themselves with considering them from afar, or with saving one but not the other – with Beauvoir clearly getting the short end of the stick. While I do not have the ambition to say anything truly original about *Orlando* by situating it in Beauvoir’s framework, my intention nevertheless is to shed new light on Beauvoir’s philosophy in relation to Woolf’s fiction.

To declare that Orlando ‘becomes’ a woman amounts to stating the obvious. After all, unlike what happens to many cisgender women today, Orlando *was* a man in the past until he suddenly wakes up in a female body – a smooth, unwitting transition which should suffice to distance the protagonist from any comparison with transgender women within a (cis)heteropatriarchy so bent on their annihilation. As has been noted in the existing criticism, Orlando has to ‘learn’ her gender when she is returning to England and decides, as a consequence, to don “the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank” “on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady*”, the ship bound for England (*O* 91). Orlando quickly learns that gender is a sort of pre-scripted performance to which she has to adapt in order not to make sailors fall off the ship’s mast (*O* 93) or in order to make conversation with a man – like the Archduke (*O* 106) – or, indeed, even with a woman like Nell when Orlando is cross-dressing as a man (*O* 126f.). There is thus a sense that her own gender is in a constant state of material becoming: she learns, by becoming a woman, how being part of ‘the second sex’ marks her as different – Beauvoir would say ‘other’ – and, as a result, her own way of engaging with the world is much more limited, especially in the Victorian period, than it used to be. Becoming a woman, as Beauvoir argues, means for Orlando subscribing to certain patriarchal myths about womanhood which feminised bodies have to perform and thus perpetuate through their own material existence.¹¹

¹¹ Although Beauvoir never uses such a term, I prefer to use the term ‘feminised’ to emphasise the process of acculturation to which women’s bodies are subjected. This also helps us to get out of the impasses generated by a trans-exclusionary feminism that poses a false dichotomy between cis, ‘female’ bodies and trans, ‘still male’ bodies as though a feminist liberation movement could not fight for both. It is clear that, however far along a trans woman is in her transition – indeed, regardless of whether she *chooses* to go along with that transition – her body is subjected to forms of control and appropriation that will undoubtedly resonate with the experience of cis women. In this sense, cis and trans bodies belonging to women may be said to be ‘feminised’.

A sentence similar to the oft-cited Beauvoirian motto appears towards the end of the History section, long before the former appears at the beginning of the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. As Kate Kirkpatrick often reminds her audience in her book presentations, Beauvoir wrote in that chapter that “À vrai dire, on ne naît pas génie : on le devient ; et la condition féminine a rendu jusqu’à présent ce devenir impossible” (*DSa* 228; “If truth be told, one is not born, but becomes, a genius; and the feminine condition has, until now, rendered this becoming impossible”, *SS* 154). This statement resonates with Woolf’s deconstruction of ‘genius’ in *A Room of One’s Own*, of course, especially through the fictional example of Judith Shakespeare; Beauvoir, besides paraphrasing Woolf’s example for the first time in a French philosophical essay, also provides her own examples, drawing on the life of Van Gogh and Kafka and showing how parts of their becoming would have been materially impossible if they had been women (cf. *DSb* 629; *SS* 766). This goes to show that the idea of becoming was central to Beauvoir’s philosophy and could not be confined to the notion of gender: as we saw in Chapter 2, for Beauvoir subjectivity is torn between facticity and freedom, caught as it is in a broader social and personal history which opens certain paths while (fore)closing others.

The question we may ask of Orlando, then, is how does Orlando become a published woman writer? How does she access the universal and yet situated status of human being that, for Beauvoir as for Woolf, enables subjects to publish good literature? But perhaps more importantly, considering Beauvoir’s stern dismissal of most women’s writing, can we – albeit paradoxically – take Orlando’s poetry to be an exemplary case of ‘good’ literature written by a woman? In order to answer these questions, the ideological and material becoming of Orlando-as-author will be traced in the novel.

In the first few pages of the novel, as we saw, Orlando is introduced as nothing more or nothing less than a young aristocrat with dubious pastimes. Long before the biographer emphasises his subject’s “love of literature” (*O* 45) and thus, long before the textual transformation of the asphodel from flower of the underworld connected to colonial subjugation into the medium of classical and Renaissance poetry, we are informed that the protagonist produces reams of poetry. “He was fluent, evidently, but he was abstract”, the biographer comments, adding that Orlando struggles to reproduce

on the page what Woolf would call 'life', as "Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another" (*O* 13). Considering his 16 years of age, his attempts at poetry "were remarkable enough" (*O* 13), but Orlando was not born a poet or a genius, clearly. After being represented as unexemplary, Orlando reaches "a place crowned by a single oak tree" that is "very high, so high indeed that nineteen English counties could be seen beneath" (*O* 13). A paragraph provides us with the lie of the land, but then a more introspective passage is introduced:

He sighed profoundly, and flung himself – there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word – on the earth at the foot of the oak tree. He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be; or, for image followed image, it was the back of a great horse that he was riding; or the deck of a tumbling ship – it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt the need of something which he could attach his floating heart to; the heart that tugged at his side; the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales every evening about this time when he walked out. To the oak tree he tied it and as he lay there, gradually the flutter in and about him stilled itself; the little leaves hung, the deer stopped; the pale summer clouds stayed; his limbs grew heavy on the ground; and he lay so still that by degrees the deer stepped nearer and the rooks wheeled round him and the swallows dipped and circled and the dragon-flies shot past, as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer's evening were woven web-like about his body. (*O* 14)

In this passage, we have a steady transformation from the passions of youth – "the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales" – to a more (quite literally) 'grounded' understanding of life. As soon as Orlando reaches the oak tree, his "floating heart" initiates a process of constant, and yet fruitless metamorphosis of his situation, as all the images follow one after another without ever altering the ultimate significance of the tree: "it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt need of something which he could attach his floating heart to"; instead of transposing it in literary terms, the rapid fire of metaphors he comes up with expresses a desperate need to reconnect to the real world. The oak tree provides Orlando with the stillness that may generate a more productive relationship with life and hence with literature. Only after quieting his manic tendency towards metaphorisation can Orlando see his own body connected to the web of nature around him: his ideological poeticising is severed from the material

situation his body is not just a part of, but effectively constitutes, as Beauvoir's philosophy of the body suggests. Here, Orlando goes from an understanding of the body as an instrument and medium for his "floating heart" to a potential – because interrupted by the Queen's arrival – material and ideological, inextricably ambiguous situation which produces his way of engaging with the world. It will take centuries before this understanding is truly integrated, as we will see, but from the outset, despite the biographer's inability to recognise it, there is a potentiality lying dormant in Orlando's body that does not simply align him with the colonial exploits of his ancestors.

In order to become a writer or an artist, however, it is not enough to have a 'gift' for poetry, as Woolf and Beauvoir emphasise through their reference to Judith Shakespeare and a female counterpart to Van Gogh and Kafka. If there is such a thing as a natural flair for literature, this needs to be enabled and nourished by the material and ideological conditions affecting it – and women, both authors stress, were always prevented from putting their intellectual predispositions to good use. As a young nobleman, Orlando does not seem to have any considerable material conditions working against him: not only does the Queen visit his mansion, but she is also visibly smitten with him; as the protagonist makes his way to the banqueting hall, he happens to see a young William Shakespeare "sitting at the servants' dinner table with a tankard beside him and paper in front of him" (*O* 15); finally, the famous writer Nick Greene is invited by Orlando to his mansion and he gladly accepts the invitation. Orlando is disappointed to see that Greene does not present himself as the important poet he is considered to be: "There was none of that stately composure which makes the faces of nobility so pleasing to look at; nor had it anything of the dignified servility of a well-trained domestic's face; it was a face seamed, puckered, and drawn together" (*O* 52). His appearance does not easily situate him in terms of class, as he seems not to belong to nobility or to the working class, his wrinkled face showing perhaps the way he has had to struggle to get his poetry published and recognised without effectively gaining any sort of material reward for this.

This lack of material recompense is also emphasised and (seemingly) glamourised by Greene himself, who insists on a form of glory – "La Gloire (he pronounced it Glawr, so that Orlando did not at first catch his meaning)" (*O* 54) – which used to be the aspiration of every good writer in the past. Every author in the present, even the

prestigious names boldly advanced by Orlando, is regarded by Greene as pursuing his literary career – and the masculine form is well intended here – “for pay” and not “for Glawr”: “Had I pension of three hundred pounds a year paid quarterly, I would live for Glawr alone”, Greene remarks (*O* 54). Of course, this statement is clearly ironic, highlighting as it does that the ideal proposed by the writer can only be kept up by a substantial pension of which Greene interestingly specifies not only the sum but even the periodicity of the payment: more than an impartial description of what a good writer needs in order to publish ‘great’ literature, this is a not-too-implicit request Greene submits to Orlando, who happily assents to it.

After spending an unspecified period of time living at Orlando’s mansion, Greene realises that all the comforts and the riches of the house are stifling his writing: “he thought that unless he could somehow make his escape, he should be smothered alive” (*O* 56). Orlando attempts and manages, however, to “press his play upon the Death of Hercules upon the poet and ask his opinion of it” (*O* 56), and Greene returns to Fetter Lane, where “he could write, and write he did” (*O* 57), drawing as he now could on his experience with Orlando. Greene produces a satire “so done to a turn that no one could doubt that the young Lord who was roasted was Orlando”: publicly ridiculed, the protagonist declares, “I have done with men” (*O* 57). He resolves to burn “in a great conflagration fifty-seven poetical works, only retaining ‘The Oak Tree’, which was his boyish dream and very short” (*O* 58). He then returns to nature and thinking, finally realising that

Every single thing, once he tried to dislodge it from its place in his mind, he found thus cumbered with other matter like the lump of grass which, after a year at the bottom of the sea, is grown about with bones and dragon-flies, and coins and the tresses of drowned women. (*O* 60)

In this short passage, we see how Orlando has come to see that his ideals are bound to the materiality of the world. Much as the “lump of grass” changes in its engagement with a different environment, effectively showing that the distinction between subject and object is labile, Orlando finds his own ideas “cumbered with other matter”, so that it becomes impossible to wrench them from the materiality of the world.

There are, however, different ways in which Orlando may engage with the world, and, as we saw, metaphorising reality is bound to produce illusions and distance him from the ‘truth’ of the matter: “Why not simply say what one means and leave it?” (*O*

61). In a paragraph reflecting on the relationship between poetry and truth, the two planes are so confounded that, even though Orlando states the obvious (“The sky is blue”, “the grass is green”), “Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing the embraces of hairy satyrs from enchanted woods” (*O* 61). In an ironic, metafictional overturn of the relationship between reality and representation, the narrative suggests here that Orlando can no longer have an unmediated access to the world; on the contrary, he can only perceive it as a materialisation of the textual becoming of the spirit of the age, as the collective imaginary of the Renaissance becomes the very way in which Orlando can engage with the qualities of matter. There is thus an inherent sense of (admittedly fantastic, even light-hearted) becoming-text in the novel, one which insists on the specific situatedness of Orlando’s existence as well as their readerly and writerly practices.

Although we may be tempted to see this as a metafictional element specific to *Orlando*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts* similarly reflect on the relationship between reality and fiction, between the world and writing. As we saw in relation to Isa’s marriage, and as the very plot would indicate, the 1941 novel explores, amongst other things, how human subjectivity is produced from a pre-scripted social narrative which literature interrogates and provokes, thereby opening up future possibilities that are not necessarily a mere perpetuation of the existing material and ideological conditions. As was argued in the previous Section, the final, collective act of self-reflection may be regarded to produce a sort of dispersal of unitary characters, who, as a consequence, are captured on the page only in ‘waves’ of probability. When the audience starts realising that the pageant is over, “a voice asserted itself”: “Whose voice it was no one knew”, but “It came from the bushes – a megaphonic, anonymous, loud-speaking affirmation” (*BA* 167-8). This anonymous voice is clearly reminiscent of the “Anon” Woolf(’s narrator) had already drawn attention to in *A Room* (*AROO* 38) and was expanding upon in an essay that she was writing in the same years – and even on the same sheets of paper – as the ones in which she was writing *Between the Acts*, as the recent work of Joshua Phillips has shown. Anon is the unnamed poet-singer who predates and, in a sense, makes possible the emergence of English literature.

To better situate the “megaphonic, anonymous, loud-speaking” voice in *Between the Acts*, a passage from the manuscripts for “The Reader”/“Anon” will be provided here, as transcribed and commented on by Phillips. Typographical errors have not been amended.

But if we cease to consider the plays separately, but scra, ble them together as one common attempt; then we are able to make them serve as sketches for one masterpiece. And the darkness in which these plays lie helps the endeavour to convey of that many nameless workers ; and many private people were pressing their weight were discharging their emotion into that vast cauldron of seething matter which at last Shakespeare struck out into his plays. (M.111, reproduced in Phillips 2022: 204)

As Phillips remarks, Shakespeare is present as “the only proper noun in this paragraph”, but “his name is invoked not as fundamental or authoritative; rather, he appears ‘at last’, as a culmination or summation of a long process of anonymous and coactive creation” (ibid., p. 204). In contrast to the passage in *A Room* which anticipated the notion that “masterpieces are not single and solitary births” (*AROO* 49), labour is represented here, Phillips rightly emphasises, as “both authorial and readerly”: while the former is “rendered in terms that are sensuous, bodily, and sexual” (“pressing their weight”, “discharging their emotion into that vast cauldron of seething matter”), the latter invites readers “to disabuse themselves of a model of authorship that celebrates the author as a singular writing subject and the play as a singular dramatic object” (Phillips 2022: 204-5). In the essay, Woolf is trying to show precisely how a collectivity of ‘common readers’ may impart a different colouring to the English canon by returning to the “seething matter” from which great names originally emerged. Like *Between the Acts*, then, “The Reader”/“Anon” emphasises the importance of the primordial in the readerly and writerly practices of the present. This reinforces the notion that, as Rossana Bonadei aptly put it, writing for Woolf is ultimately “an endless process of excavation unearthing ties to deep-seated recesses where the individual loses substance, crumbles under the pressure of the ancient collective, and plunges into a stage that precedes the self and envisages its chaos” (Bonadei 2011: 29).

In the pageant, the “megaphonic, anonymous, loud-speaking” voice cannot be attributed to one person although it is said to come “from the bushes” (*BA* 167). When this speech ends, attention is redirected to the gramophone, but “A hitch occurred here”,

as “The records had been mixed” (BA 169). The paragraph closes with the anonymous, but evidently focalised sentence: “Anyhow, thank Heaven, it was somebody speaking after the anonymous bray of the infernal megaphone” (BA 169). As happens often in Woolf’s more experimental texts, here it would be difficult to locate who the speaker or thinker of this sentence is, but it is obvious enough that it is somebody who found the preceding “anonymous *bray* of the *infernal* megaphone” irritating. In this sense, from the situated anonymous speech an equally anonymous observation ensues, possibly deriving from the “body of the people” of the audience. What follows is worth reporting in full.

Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united. The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. The whole population of the mind’s immeasurable profundity came flocking; from the unprotected, the unskinned; and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder: To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united. And some relaxed their fingers; and others uncrossed their legs.

Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, ort and fragments, are we, also, that? The voice died away. (BA 170)

The quick succession of impressions, actions, and metaphors in the first paragraph reported here is rendered through a preference for parataxis, which creates a sense of fragmentation of thought, movement and utterance that a more elaborate syntax would have been incapable of transposing. The references to scientific phenomena that open the passage (“quicksilver sliding”, “filings magnetized”) seem to be in line with our understanding of this final scene in the pageant as conducive to a wave-like movement of characters: mercury is one of the very few metals that can be found in a liquid state at standard temperature and pressure – hence its figurative meaning as an adjective (quicksilver) describing a rapid, even unpredictable movement; the meaning of ‘small particles rubbed off by a file when smoothing a metal’ (filings) seems to converge with

the meaning of people ‘filing’ in the audience, with the ‘metallic’ characters being represented as attracted to specific magnetic poles (“the distracted united”). The scientific vocabulary is also evidenced in the “force” being “born in opposition; then another”, as if the characters were now electrically charged atoms behaving according to the laws of physics. This clearly creates different energy “levels” that are reminiscent of those surrounding the positively charged nucleus of an atom: regardless of where the characters are located in this scale from nucleus (positive, meaning) to the outer energy levels (more and more negative, “flower gathering”), “all” are in some way “comprehending; all enlisted”. The final scene of the pageant has engendered a magnetic field in the audience, who, as a result, find itself located on different energy levels depending on their intention to get to the ‘core’ of the ‘matter’.

If the first part of the paragraph resorts to scientific imagery, the second part returns to a primeval world, integrating perhaps a sense of the origin of things that may have a scientific, arguably even Homeric undertow (“and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder”). It is as if the last scene in the pageant had reset the world, had returned it to its original state in the blink of an eye, and everything had happened in such quick succession that time and space were no longer capable of providing coordinates to understand what is happening: “Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united”. Within this rich imagery, the question that continues to waft through the air is materialised on the page in the last paragraph reported above: “Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, orts and fragments, are we, also, that? The voice died away”.

There is a sense of deep temporality and yet of precarity here, as if the world were so replete with meaning and significance to risk crumbling at any moment now. The present is represented by reflecting fragments, by an anonymous, even irritating voice coming from the bushes, trying to make sense of it all, and yet soon dying away. In this division provoked by the shock of collective self-reflection, fields of attraction are nonetheless generated which may help these wave-like formations to aggregate, to find a sense of community in a broken world. In this constant state of movement and becoming, characters are arranged and re-arranged in precarious groupings, like the

perpetual movement of the waves breaking on the shore. Ultimately, *Between the Acts* shows how individual characters can be brought together, torn apart, and broken up in a constant remaking of their textuality. The novel thus exhibits what it may mean to become textual matter, both in its narrative sense of *subject matter* and in its scientific meaning of *physical matter*: the two categories are reunited and reintegrated into a more complete, though precarious, understanding of the “seething matter” of the present world.

Our reference to the wave-mechanics of characters and to a primeval world recalls *The Waves* and its sense of rhythm. As was briefly suggested in Section 3.1, Louis in *The Waves* comes to represent an ancient world which continues to have reverberations in the present, thereby highlighting the sense of historical and material becoming so perceptively theorised by Beauvoir and so intuitively imagined by Woolf in her fiction. From the outset, Louis perceives his “roots going down and down till they wrap themselves round some hardness at the centre”, a metaphor which allows him to express how he “recover[s] [his] continuity” through this sense of history (*TW* 26). The image of the roots reaching down into the different layers of the earth imparts a sense of historical and material becoming to his existence, as if he were able to go back in time through the different sedimentations of human – and possibly nonhuman – history. This linear conception of history, however, is also complemented by the metaphor that follows in the same paragraph: “I become a figure in the procession, a spoke in the huge wheel that turning, at last erects me, here and now. I have been in the dark; I have been hidden; but when the wheel turns [...] I rise into this dim light where I just perceive, but scarcely, kneeling boys, pillars and memorial brasses” (*TW* 26). From a linear procession of existents, the world becomes a wheel which alternates different spokes, in a circular movement which gives an equal place (and time) in the sun to every discrete component. It is perhaps this sense of circular time that shapes characters in *Between the Acts*, as the pageant manages to recreate a sense of historical, linear time, while life continues to exist in the sometimes unlikely overlaps and matchings between different – and yet, precisely by virtue of these juxtapositions, similar – materialities.

As we saw, this sense of intercorporeality through time, which we may venture to term ‘temporal intercorporeality’, is complemented by one that stretches across space, a ‘spatial intercorporeality’ (our being “for ever mixing ourselves with unknown

quantities”, to borrow Bernard’s phrasing), and both contribute to a broader sense of intercorporeal communication of individual experiences and, ultimately, matter. In “The Reader”/“Anon”, as we saw, this primeval matter from which the world is shaped would be imagined as “a vast cauldron of seething matter”, but Bernard’s soliloquy at the end of *The Waves* proposes a similar notion:

But we were all different. The wax – the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us. [...] Louis was disgusted by the nature of human flesh; Rhoda by our cruelty; Susan could not share; Neville wanted order; Jinny love; and so on. We suffered terribly as we became separate bodies. (*TW* 202)

Here refigured as a “virginal wax that coats the spine”, as a substance enveloping the backbone of human existence, the primeval sense of being first and foremost active matter permeates Woolf’s fiction in its engagement with subjectivity, the body, and the world at large. From this original Big Bang, the discrete bodies were created, which still conserve the traces of all the past sedimentations of humanity, precisely as Preciado suggests through his notion of *somathèque*: each body is a living political archive that is reconfigured according to the contingent categories produced by any given time and any given place. As Bernard aptly phrases it, “We exist not only separately but in undifferentiated blobs of matter” (*TW* 205).

The Waves integrates this sense of characters as coactive creators in the very form of their speeches: as Louis, Neville, Bernard, Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda take turns to speak, their words and styles are initially hard to differentiate, their lived experiences pooled in a sort of intercorporeal archive to which each seems to be able to have access. The narrative follows the rhythms of their bodies and assigns to each of their individual existences specific refrains that help readers find their bearings within this collective trade of embodied experiences. Behind the single voice of Bernard, the body of the people may be discerned: not just Jinny, Rhoda, Susan, Neville, Louis, and Percival, but the whole history of humanity, the whole vast cauldron of seething matter as it has come to solidify, however briefly, in specific times, places, and characters. It is no coincidence that this precise image is found in Bernard’s speech:

The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron

bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers. Faces recur, faces and faces – they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble – Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole – again like music. What a symphony with its concord and its discord, and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up! (*TW* 214)

For somebody like Bernard who had always prided himself on his ability to make phrases, to capture life in words, this part of the final soliloquy may sound like a defeat. And yet, there is no sense of resignation here, only an acknowledgement of the limitations imposed upon any account of human experience. Like a director, Bernard has had to orchestrate the different instruments of his six-person ensemble (seven, if we include the absent Percival) into a capacious, rhythmic narrative. If Beauvoir considered a good novel to be a symphony closing on silence so that different melodies and voices can be held in counterpoint without being reduced to one overarching theory, in *The Waves* we find the sense of commonality and communion which six different individual characters may share during a lifetime, pooling as they do their distinct lived experiences, their sense of time and rhythm, and finally, their individual voices. “Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again”, Bernard will conclude (*TW* 247), highlighting how, like the waves breaking on the shore, life is a constant rearrangement of primeval matter which (good) writing can organise into specific and precarious unities.

Thanks to this slight detour through *Between the Acts* and *The Waves*, we gain a better sense of how *Orlando* may be considered to inaugurate a period of particular fecundity for Woolf’s experimentation. In particular, the metafictional, light-hearted quality of the 1928 novel seems to open up new possibilities that encourages her to reconsider – and thus reconfigure – the relationship between life and literature, a sometimes tenuous connection to which Woolf was attracted throughout her life.

After her sex change in Constantinople, Orlando joins a group of gypsies and thus learns new ways of perceiving reality through language and the body. After Rustum el Sadi, “the old man who had brought Orlando out of Constantinople on his donkey”, realises that their values and beliefs are not in fact the same, Orlando is led to ponder the meaning of such concepts as “Nature”, “beauty”, “the nature of reality”, “truth”,

“Love, Friendship, Poetry” (*O* 86-7). These “meditations”, we are informed, “made her long, as she had never longed before, for pen and ink”: in the absence of the material support for her writing, “she made ink from berries and wine” and started writing in “a few margins and blank spaces in the manuscript of ‘The Oak Tree’” (*O* 87). The poem, which she started as a young nobleman in Elizabethan England, becomes a sort of palimpsest which preserves the different sedimentations of Orlando’s way of living with the world and of the world’s living with Orlando, in a textual becoming which mirrors the bodily becoming of the protagonist. Throughout the novel, writing is represented as the defining, quintessential activity of the protagonist, who engages with the changing world around them in different capacities, as their attitude to literature (and nature) evolves, worsened or ameliorated by the material and ideological conditions affecting their verbal and physical movement in the world. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that Orlando suddenly realises her celibacy during the Victorian period precisely at the moment when she sits down to write, a social status which, as we saw, incapacitates her poetic activity. The narrative seems to suggest that, as an unmarried individual, Orlando could lead a more or less peaceful life in any period but the Victorian age: because the ‘myths’ have changed in the nineteenth century, the protagonist feels an overwhelming urge to conform to these narratives, thereby altering the ‘facts’ of her existence in order to fit a specific model of existence.¹²

Once she has found a husband, Orlando is able to finish her centuries old poem after reflecting on the nature of reality. As she always keeps her manuscript in the bosom of her dress, there is a clear sense of physical vitality in it that the narrative emphasises time and again.

At length she was revived in a singular way. The manuscript which reposed above her heart began shuffling and beating as if it were a living thing, and, what was still odder, and showed how fine a sympathy was between them, Orlando, by inclining her head, could make out what it was that it was saying. It wanted to be read. It must be read. It would die in her bosom if it were not read. (*O* 159)

Almost magically activated, the manuscript begs her author to be read by other human beings. Precisely because it is like “a living thing”, its life depends on the circulation

¹² Of course, this is part of Woolf’s tongue-in-cheek social commentary on the Victorian period. As her essays show, she was well aware of the fact that there were many exceptions to this norm, so this particular choice needs to be placed within the lighthearted, satirical tone of *Orlando* and its earnest joking.

and the reading performed by other living subjects. In a way, the manuscript almost seems to be a prosthesis which becomes part of Orlando's somatheque: as an extension of her body, it constitutes a part of the living, ever mobile archive so perceptively described by Preciado. Because of this request, Orlando "ordered the carriage to take her to London at once" (*O* 159).

Because of the more dynamic city London has become, Orlando, like Clarissa, risks becoming engulfed in the traffic and the chaos around her, concluding that "there was neither rhyme nor reason in any of it. Each man and each woman was bent on his own affairs. And where was she to go?" (*O* 160). "So she walked and walked along pavements between houses until she felt very hungry, and something fluttering above her heart rebuked her with having forgotten all about it", the narrative continues: "It was her manuscript, 'The Oak Tree'" (*O* 161). In this passage, the indexical quality of the third-person singular 'it' makes the referent of the pronoun uncertain. Although it may be easily reduced to 'something fluttering above her heart', namely 'her manuscript', there is nonetheless an ambiguity in the phrasing which combines this possibility with the hunger she feels: the material demands of her body are thus tenuously associated with the 'living thing' that rests in her bosom. Besides representing an extension of her body, the manuscript also seems to be attuned to her physiological mechanisms. The result of the (supposedly) intellectual activity of writing, the manuscript is in fact shown to be a thing of the body, co-participating as it does in Orlando's material situation.

Now that this moment of coactive creation has been covered, what remains to be explored is how Orlando becomes a published woman writer. Shortly after this passage, the protagonist happens to meet Nick Greene, who, unlike her, has aged considerably and has acquired an important intellectual status in Victorian England:

For she was made aware intuitively by something in his bearing that the scurrilous penny-a-liner, who had lampooned her and many another in the time of Queen Elizabeth, was now risen in the world and become certainly a Knight and doubtless a dozen other fine things into the bargain.

[...]

With another bow, he acknowledged that her conclusion was correct; he was a Knight; he was a Litt.D.; he was a Professor. He was the author of a score of volumes. He was, in short, the most influential critic of the Victorian age. (*O* 161)

From a “scurrilous penny-a-liner”, Greene has become “a Knight”, has received a ‘Doctor of Literature’ award, and is now “a Professor”, the three titles solidifying into the prestigious status of “most influential critic of the Victorian age”.

Despite these changes in appearance and titles, Greene remains a nostalgic at heart. If in Elizabethan England he found his contemporaries mediocre and looked back on classical antiquity, in the Victorian age he similarly despises present-day authors and idolises past authors – ironically, the same Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson he scorned in the sixteenth century, as well as Dryden, Pope, and Addison. All the younger writers, like Tennyson, Browning, and Carlyle, are said to be “in the pay of booksellers” and thus in his view, they “turn out any trash that serves to pay their tailor’s bills” (*O* 162). As the biographer interjects, “The names were different, of course, but the spirit was the same. Nick Greene had not changed, for all his knighthood” (*O* 162). “And yet,” the narrator hastily adds, “some change there was”: besides having grown “plump” and “sleek”, now “verging on seventy”, Greene’s “old restless, uneasy vivacity had gone” somehow and “an air of respectability” had established itself in its stead (*O* 162-3). Needless to say, Orlando is disappointed to find that “literature was an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about duchesses” (*O* 163): now part of the establishment, Greene is no longer an eccentric personality who can regale Orlando with tales and curiosities connected with the great poets of their age. It is precisely through this chance encounter and the disappointment it generates in Orlando’s breast that the manuscript she stored in her dress unexpectedly fell upon the table, thereby catching Greene’s eye.

Of course, the nostalgic intellectual is enthusiastic about this old manuscript, and is happy to realise that “There was no trace in it, he was thankful to say, of the modern spirit” (*O* 163). The poem is thus published and garners quite an important commercial success, mirroring in this sense Vita Sackville-West’s book-length, award-winning poem *The Land* (1926). There is more than a fantastic and ironic tinge in this representation of Orlando becoming a woman writer, of course: although there is certainly merit in her poem at this point, it is by sheer happenstance that her poem reaches publishers. Chance seems to play a much more prominent role in this becoming a published author than the quality of the writing. If Orlando had not met Greene, if Greene had not become part of the establishment of his age, if they had not previously

met three centuries earlier, if Orlando had not been disappointed with Greene's lack of vitality, if he had not remained a nostalgic at heart, "The Oak Tree" may have remained in the bosom of Orlando's dress for ever. Although the quality of writing is by all means necessary, the narrative seems to suggest in a light-hearted manner that it is by no means sufficient: without opportunity and luck, good writing will never be recognised as such.

Although it may be tempting to reduce this story to the lessons of *A Room of One's Own* and to the similarly reworked theses proposed by Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, the 1928 novel seems to offer a counterpoint to these essays. 'Good' writing is not only a matter of enabling ideological and material conditions at the time of creation; rather, the quality of the literary product also needs to respond to the demands of the marketplace and to the particular 'myths' which each society wants to see reproduced in the mirrored realm of fiction. As was briefly shown in the opening of this Section, even the reception of *Orlando* itself, by a sort of historical irony, depended upon the chance encounter with gender and sexuality studies, as the field inaugurated, through the 1928 text, new ways of theorising the present through the reflection of/on the past. In a similar vein, as was shown in Chapter 1, Woolf was not recovered and revised as an important modernist author until the 1970s, and even after that, it has taken time to solidify her figure into her current status as "token woman of 1922", to borrow Valérie Favre's apt phrasing (Favre 2022). Even though Woolf now enjoys this canonical status, her reception varies widely, even wildly, across different countries and languages, and her being elevated to this prominent position, as Favre shows, has often entailed an exclusion and dismissal of other supposedly 'minor' women authors: "As many celebrate the centenary of that year's literary wonders, it seems only fair [...] to repeat, or rather update and expand, Julia Hedge's request: to make room for a Cather, a Mansfield, a Sinclair, a Sitwell, a Stein, a von Arnim, a West... and a Woolf" (ibid., p. 342).

Thus, Beauvoir's 'error' – if it can be seen as such – in her discussion of women writers consists in focusing all too closely on the stifling material and ideological conditions of possibility which contributed to the emergence of the very act of creation; this went to the detriment of a potential recognition of the contingent, historical categories that actively shaped the reception, and hence the perception of the quality of,

women's writing. If women did not produce 'masterpieces' like those penned by Kafka, Melville, or Dostoevsky, it is not simply because they have not had the chance to access the 'universal' position of writers, but because of the perpetuation precisely of those 'myths' Beauvoir so deftly deconstructs in her essay well beyond the time of creation.

Conclusion

As one of the first sustained academic studies of Woolf/Beauvoir, this thesis has shown how Beauvoir's reception of Woolf stretched from the late 1920s to the late 1970s, from Simone David's first French translation of *Mrs Dalloway* (1929) to Quentin Bell's biography of Woolf as translated into French in 1973 (interestingly, both published by Stock). Three main tendencies have been identified in Beauvoir's reception of Woolf: modernism, feminism, and life-writing. While the obvious feminist connection between Woolf and Beauvoir has been central to a better understanding of their relationship and has often been mentioned in the existing scholarship even beyond Woolf/Beauvoir studies, the other two categories have not been explored yet. This thesis has worked on Woolf's modernist writings through Beauvoir's critical-phenomenological philosophy by focusing on the notion of intercorporeality. Beyond these theoretical resonances between Woolf's essays and Beauvoir's philosophy, a close reading of three novels by Woolf has been proposed which foregrounds the notion of character and voice in fiction.

Chapter 1 situated our reading of Woolf/Beauvoir within a transnational context, emphasising how different countries have sometimes resorted to different critical lenses to discuss the two authors. All the Woolf occurrences in Beauvoir's transdisciplinary oeuvre were listed and analysed: what emerges as a distinguishing aspect of Beauvoir's reading of Woolf is a search for intimacy across times, places, and languages, an intimacy which sometimes – if not often – resulted in a strategic appropriation of parts of Woolf's theories, characters, and even her persona for the political and polemical purposes of Beauvoir's theories. In this sense, besides being a perceptive reader of Woolf's materialist feminism as already noted in the existing scholarship, Beauvoir did not hesitate to create a 'Woolf of her own' for her own textual and political goals. A specific focus on *Le Deuxième Sexe* enabled us to substantiate this claim and brought a more nuanced understanding of Woolf's subtle textual strategies in *A Room of One's Own* closer to Beauvoir's reading of women writers in order to produce a contrapuntal interpretation of the French philosopher's all too stern conclusions about women's writing. A phenomenology of the party in *Mrs Dalloway* built on Beauvoir's feminist analysis of it in *Le Deuxième Sexe* and extended it beyond both feminism *sensu stricto* and the *magnum opus* to which Beauvoir's oeuvre is all too often reduced, generating a

more nuanced understanding of the character of Clarissa and the ‘sense’ of her parties. In a more provocative manner, Chapter 1 closed on an invitation to counter Beauvoir’s argument that women have never written ‘great’ literature, arguing that *Mrs Dalloway* is in fact even by Beauvoir’s standards an excellent novel, as her own philosophy helps us to see.

Chapter 2 built on this situated reading of Woolf and showed the productivity of the transdisciplinary notions of subject, body, and character/voice through the lens of Woolf/Beauvoir’s essays. Despite their clear differences not only in terms of feminism but also in terms of theory and fiction, Woolf/Beauvoir share a fundamental interest in the philosophical subject and the material body as relational entities in becoming. In particular, by associating Woolf with her own reading of Montaigne’s *Essais* and Beauvoir with her own active reinterpretation of Hegelian philosophy, Chapter 2 argued that for both authors, the subject is an elusive, shape-shifting, but ultimately materially entangled entity which the technology of writing – both philosophy and literature – may risk killing. What Woolf/Beauvoir invite writers and philosophers to do is to capture the material and ideological state of becoming that animates the intercorporeal subject without crystallising it in rigid and often abstract categorisations. The body has been shown to be a central element of their theories, and if examined in the light of more recent developments in biology and transfeminist philosophy, it generates productive resonances which show how Beauvoir’s argument of the body-as-situation may help us overcome current binary dichotomies in feminist theory while at the same time reinforcing a materialist understanding of Woolf’s notion of the body as a site of proliferation of differences – sexual, textual, and otherwise.

In the light of this sometimes dense theorisation, the essentially literary category of ‘character’ was discussed in Section 2.3, in particular in relation to contemporary and subsequent developments in literary criticism to which Woolf/Beauvoir’s theories ran counter. In fact, Woolf/Beauvoir may be seen as anticipating some of the most interesting insights of postcritique concerning the importance of ‘character-reading’ at a time when New Criticism was emerging (in Woolf’s 1930s) and poststructuralism was solidifying a dismissal of character criticism as a naïve undertaking in literary studies (in Beauvoir’s 1970s). As Woolf/Beauvoir show, ordinary reading practices deserve to be taken into account so that the ritualised trade of embodied experiences that reading

and writing are can be seen in a more expansive – and frankly less snobbish – understanding of the two activities. This does not amount to flattening literary criticism; rather, it means going beyond certain inherited, dogmatic categories in order to produce a nuanced, phenomenological and ecological analysis of character as a living organism caught in a constant process of textual becoming. A becoming, it ought to be noted, that stretches across times, places, and languages, and thus plays an active role in shaping reality. At a time when the boundary between reality and fiction must be openly acknowledged for political purposes, Woolf/Beauvoir's theories show us how productive it may be to suspend these boundaries, co-participate in the textual becoming of living characters, and thus engage with our own material world in a more political fashion.

Chapter 3 used the previous theorisations to show what shape this different character criticism may take. Rather than treat the three novels in a chronological fashion, thereby potentially subscribing to teleological understandings of Woolf's literary production, the Chapter worked with three different, interdependent categories: rooms and situations, self-reflection, and becoming. Although the Woolfian notion of 'room' and the Beauvoirian notion of 'situation' are not assimilable, Chapter 2 showed how productive their resonances could be: both are intended as spatial, material and ideological categories that are central to a better understanding of subjectivity. Section 3.1 thus showed the rooms and situations represented in Woolf's fiction by building on Beauvoir's discussion of Jinny-as-coquette in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

Instead of reading Woolf only *with* Beauvoir, this Chapter made a point of reading her also *beyond* Beauvoir, in the recognition that limiting our reading to what Beauvoir said or would have said of Woolf would filter out what are in fact essential aspects of her fiction. Our previous thesis whereby Beauvoir creates a 'Woolf of her own' in her theories is substantiated by a closer look at the French philosopher's analysis of the characters of Jinny and Susan in *The Waves*: reduced to examples that buttress her theses on oppressed women, the two characters in fact constantly question Beauvoir's analysis of them, and thus, a broader discussion of their living relationship with rooms and situations ought to be foregrounded. Both *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* show the material and ideological interdependence between a sense of place (the Woolfian room) and the character as an intercorporeal subject (the Beauvoirian situation): both

constructed and constructing, these subjectivities derive their own meaning and purpose from their particular bodily location while at the same time actively shaping both their own existences and the spaces they traverse. The situation of the married woman is also discussed here in relation to the three novels, showing how Beauvoir's reading of Susan forces her character into a theory that would be better suited in fact to an analysis of Victorian marriage as represented and criticised in *Orlando* and to a close reading of Isa and Giles' situation in *Between the Acts*.

Section 3.2 introduces a new hermeneutical category which may shed new light on Woolf's fiction as well as potentially even on the novels produced by other writers. Understood as a combination of matter (the body, the environment) and ideology (introspection, societal expectations), self-reflection is both the act of looking at oneself in the mirror, which often results in a different reading of the material body, and the 'mental' contemplation of one's self through that material support. By drawing inspiration from, and ultimately extending beyond its original boundaries, Amanda Anderson's theorisation of rumination as a useful hermeneutical and ethical category, self-reflection encourages criticism to go beyond the material/ideological, body/mind dualisms that are still often inherent in its own make-up. In the three novels, the reflecting surfaces seem to shape a different understanding of subjectivity: while mirrors often 'solidify' characters by removing the unessential, pools are generally conducive to a more 'fluid' understanding of temporality, space, and self. As often happens in Woolf's fiction, however, these clear-cut and binary distinctions are questioned and subverted, as other examples clearly point to the interdependent coexistence of the two aspects, thereby further substantiating Woolf's engagement with new physics as expounded in Chapter 2.

Section 3.3 is devoted to the Beauvoirian notion of becoming. Although this term is today more reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy and thus of a more posthuman understanding of subjectivity as articulated for instance by Rosi Braidotti, Beauvoir made much of it long before these more recent developments, although she proposes a human exceptionalist framework which Woolf's fiction clearly destabilises. The characters of the three novels are shown to be caught in a constant state of material and ideological becoming that is shaped and encouraged by the times, places, and situations they gravitate around and across. Certain fixed boundaries, like self/other,

human/nature, and reality/fiction are clearly subverted in Woolf's fiction, regardless of whether we are following the phenomenologically inflected subjectivity of one character (*Orlando*), the collective becoming of six friends (*The Waves*), or the 'dispersity' of a group of people before, during, and after a pageant (*Between the Acts*). Section 3.3 closes on an examination of Orlando's becoming a woman writer, and thus the thesis comes full circle.

If the three tendencies uniting Woolf and Beauvoir are modernism, feminism, and life-writing, this thesis has shown how productive it is to engage with English modernism from a philosophical and outspokenly feminist perspective that favours marginality and border-crossings. Life-writing has been reinterpreted as a cross-generic, philosophical category, namely as one that does not insist on the inherent coherence of diaries, letters, and auto/biographies as a genre but rather insists on the theoretical resonances this has in Woolf/Beauvoir's oeuvres. Both authors, it has been argued, are concerned with how best to capture 'life' in writing, thereby destabilising the reality/fiction dichotomy towards a more expansive understanding of subjectivity in becoming. The reason why Beauvoir's autobiography, diaries and letters were excluded from our discussion – other than in terms of reception – resides mainly in the academic conventions which this thesis has to observe: because Beauvoir never wrote in English, discussing her life-writing next to Woolf's would result in my thesis being categorised as belonging to the field of comparative literature. Although this field is clearly productive and a reading of Woolf/Beauvoir's life-writing side by side would clearly contribute to a better understanding of both, this thesis pursued the (admittedly limited) goal of reading Woolf with Beauvoir's philosophy instead. It is hoped that this work will encourage other scholars belonging to different disciplines – or operating in countries where these disciplines are not so rigid – to take a more comparative approach to the two authors.

A potential future avenue this thesis identified but had to distance itself from regards the resonances between Woolf's novels and short stories and Beauvoir's. For instance, one may wonder whether our approach to *Orlando* would not perhaps benefit from a juxtaposition with Beauvoir's novel *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (*All Men are Mortal*, 1946), where the protagonist is offered an elixir of immortality which allows him to experience different times, places, and situations (though sadly not a sudden sex

change), from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. This kind of parallel reading would of course be beneficial even in the case of other novels or short stories, especially if a specific thematic or formal concern is foregrounded. To my knowledge, precisely for the reasons outlined in Chapter 1, this kind of comparative work has never been done, and Woolf/Beauvoir have all too often been reduced to their obvious feminist connection. Exploring other aspects of their works would clearly build and expand on this connection rather than dismiss it as dated, as this thesis has shown.

As was argued in the Introduction, this study did not mean to focus on the ‘big names’ of Woolf/Beauvoir to the detriment of all the other women writers and philosophers; by insisting on the margins delineating this thesis, it has been possible to draw attention to other potential theoretical resonances, to the ‘active off-screen space’ on which this particular gaze is predicated. What has emerged from our discussion of Woolf/Beauvoir is first of all that modernism can no longer be understood as a monolithic category that reinforces canonical works, years, and authors, as Beauvoir’s reception has clearly pointed to the institutions and collective entities that contributed to Woolf’s transnational travels, such as the libraries and bookshops Beauvoir went to and the literary prizes she based her reading on, or even the prizes, like the Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais, with which she does not seem to have been familiar which nonetheless inaugurated and actively shaped ‘French Woolf’.

More research ought to be devoted to these institutions, as Lawrence Rainey showed in his pioneering monograph *The Institutions of Modernism* (1998), as well as to the periodicals that inaugurate and shape the reception of different modernist works, like *The Criterion* explored by Jason Harding in 2002 or the plethora of modernist magazines discussed in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, edited in three volumes by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker between 2009 and 2013. Clara Jones’ forthcoming article, as was suggested above, has uncovered the archival material related to the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais, thereby pointing to the necessary recovery and revision of the role played by women’s collectives in a transnational understanding of modernism.

My personal research interests have benefitted from the margins of this thesis as much as from the core of Woolf/Beauvoir. In view of this, future scholarship may be devoted, for instance, to mapping the connections and the resonances between

Woolf/Beauvoir and other modernist women writers, such as Rosamond Lehmann, Olive Schreiner, Clemence Dane, Hope Mirrlees, Dorothy Richardson and May Sinclair, all of whom are today perceived to be less important than those ‘big names’ despite their active participation in the modernist and often feminist networks of their time. Literary history, as Woolf suggested and reinforced time and again throughout her life, is not made up simply of canonical authors; as she suggests in, amongst other texts, *A Room of One’s Own* and “The Reader”, we ought to look at the canon as originating from the vast cauldron of seething matter that the body of the people constitutes rather than solely focus on the subsequent crystallisations of Shakespeare, Milton, or Woolf/Beauvoir. This thesis is thus intended to be only a first step towards the common life upon which literature is predicated, a step which may take us in disparate directions.

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